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### **“Why Write in Fragments”**

Camelia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (European University Studies: Series 18; Comparative Literature, vol. 112), Bern: Peter Lang, 2004.

The fragment is defined by the questions that one asks.

*Camelia Elias*

The recently published study by Camelia Elias, entitled *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (Peter Lang, Bern, 2004) deals, as the title suggests, with the fragment's function throughout history. As the author points out, the fragment is a performative concept best understood within the intersection of the poetics of perspective, marked by history and typology, and that of genre, whose dominant function is the aesthetic.

From the introduction of the book the reader is led along a clear and logical path. *Part I* is diachronically organized and addresses the question of the fragment's constitution throughout history, the fragment as something that *is* (static mode of *being*). *Part II* has a synchronic focus on postmodernist fragments. It deals with the aesthetic dichotomy between the fragment (form) and the fragmentary (content), pondering on the fragment as what *becomes* (*becoming* traced as an active mode, a process).

For Camelia Elias it is essential to mark the importance of understanding the fragment functioning within a poetics of cross-perspectives, a poetics of intersection. She proposes an analysis of two types of texts: those in which fragments are texts in their own right and those in which fragments are the object of critical discourse. Ten key concepts, constituting a taxonomy of ten

different types of fragments, are employed in this study. *Part I* of the book discusses the coercive, the consensual, the redundant, repetitive and resolute fragments. *Part II* concentrates on the ekphrastic, the epigrammatic, epigraphic, emblematic, and the epitaphic fragments. The presentation of the first five types of fragment follows a horizontal axis, concentrating on agency, starting with ancient times, going through the Romantic and Modern periods and ending in the postmodern era. The last five are set on a vertical axis focusing on transformations within aesthetic systems constructed by critics.

The examples are carefully chosen. Starting with Heraclitus's fragments (c. 500 B.C.), the question revolves around determining the intended or unintended nature of these fragments. Insofar as it creates its own form and performs its own definition, within a context and manifesting a history, the fragment can be said to be coercive. According to the author of this study, the first theorization of the fragment only occurs, however, in the Romantic period. In *The Athenaeum Fragments* (1798-1800), Friedrich Schlegel acknowledges the fragment's nature and the significance of fragmentary writing. Wit becomes central in understanding the fragmentary mode. It is not bound to any particular genre or work, it has a double and a counter-side, it is possible only in plurality. This is also the case with the fragment (from *fragmentum*). Indeed, its Latin root, *frangere*, means to break into fragments and from this Camelia Elias infers that it is impossible to break a whole into one single fragment. Therefore, in its plurality the fragment consents to different forms of interpretation, forever *becoming*.

For modernists, such as Louis Aragon, Gertrude Stein and Emil Cioran, the fragment exhibits other key features. Aragon demonstrates that the fragment is redundant, always re-iterating the already written, always engaged in the process of self-definition, always incomplete. Stein elaborates further on the notion of repetition and redundancy, experimenting with language in her book *How to Write* (1927-1931). Cioran, better known for his aphorisms than his fragments, is nevertheless chosen by the author and included in the present study primarily because his fragments exhibit a universal resoluteness. As Camelia Elias points out, these interpretations dismiss the distinction between fragment and fragmentary, but posit a stylistic potential.

In the second part of this study, the author concentrates on postmodern writing, establishing a link with its baroque correlative. Both periods emerge

against the background of what precedes them. However, they assimilate the same elements they seem to want to renounce, they reconsider them and ultimately rewrite them. In postmodernism special attention is drawn once more to the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary, to the dichotomy between form and content. Beginning with the assertion of Mark C. Taylor in *Deconstructing Theology* (1982): "Form is content", Camelia Elias reflects on the ekphrastic fragment. Ekphrasis becomes the verbal (literal) representation of the fragment's visual (graphic) representation. Therefore, the ekphrastic fragment relies on imagination to create images of form – the fragment's form - which ultimately *become* content.

Furthermore, the fragment disclaims the authority of the writer. Marcel Bénabou's "nonbook", *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* (trans. 1996), apparently rejects his own authorship. As Camelia Elias points out, this is the first stage in deconstructive thinking. The epigram exemplified in Bénabou is representative of a performative writing that finds a parallel in the idea of *mise-en-scène*. The second stage of deconstructive thinking is illustrated by the epigraphic fragment and the idea of *mise-en-abyme*. The fragment becomes a variation theme to the text, a paratext, as depicted by Gordon Lish's novel *Epigraph* (1996), and Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* (1987). Finally, one reaches the meta-level of deconstruction via the emblem and the idea of *mise-en-abyme-éclatée*. The emblematic fragment is best represented in works by Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book* (1989) and Nicole Brossard's novel *Picture Theory* (1991). Both works situate themselves at the junction between theory and literature, in the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary, for the first is presented as theory and the second is clearly a novel. The fragment *becomes* emblematic because it breaks its symbolic frame.

What is a fragment then? The author of this study answers the question stating that it is essential to look at the fragment in relation to its predicate, since the constant is not the fragment but its modifier, which indeed governs the relation between the fragment and the fragmentary. Having reached this point of her study, Camelia Elias ends with considerations on the epitaphic fragment. She refers to the work of David Markson to assert that the fragment is plural, eluding definition and the whole text – it is part of a kenotic strategy (*kenosis* meaning the voiding out, emptying). The writing process is based on gathering fragments with which the writer's imagination engages.

The fragment is therefore universal, representing a whole voice that goes beyond the text, offering endless perspectives of *becoming*.

Camila Elias's conclusion is brief but extremely incisive, reiterating the arguments she developed throughout the book and displaying the ten key concepts analysed in her study as theses. As she points out: "Like truth and beauty the fragment's point is in its proving, not its own *being* or *becoming* state, but in proving its power to generate theses about itself in the discourse of others." (371)

This study, with its detailed exposition, its account of the treatment the fragment receives, over the centuries, according to each period and culture, together with a wealth of links to different fields and a consideration of critical approaches will indeed prove to be not only an essential read, but also a very inspiring one.