

“The swearword, the telegram, the epitaph”

The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre.

By Camelia Elias

Bern: Peter Lang, 2004. 397 pp.

ISBN 3-03910-470-5. Paperback. \$73.95.

Review by Costica Bradatan

One of the most remarkable accomplishments, though a somehow paradoxical and (self-)ironical one, of Camelia Elias in *The Fragment. Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* is that in this book she manages to talk about the topic of the fragment in the most comprehensive, systematic and non-fragmentary manner: she almost “exhausts” the topic, covers everything, every aspect of it, nothing is left untouched, no fragments of the fragment, so to speak, are left aside. And in this process of exhaustion a whole range of methodological approaches and interdisciplinary perspectives are employed: the fragment is being treated from the complementary angles of literary history and criticism, history of ideas, history of philosophy, critical theory, art history, philology and theology. Yet, I should add, even this paradox itself is not an accident: the fragment always attracts paradoxes. In an essential way, the fragment has a problematic nature, an ever-fleeing and “untamable” character. As Camelia Elias notices several times in her book, there is something profoundly fluid, plurisemantic and dynamic about the fragment, which makes it scholarly fascinating and puzzling at the same time: what “defines the fragment is ultimately its own dynamics, its own ability to mediate between its state of *being* and its state of *becoming*” (356)

It is precisely within the epistemic framework delineated by these two fundamental notions of the Western philosophy (*being* and *becoming*) that Camelia Elias chooses to place her philosophizing about the fragment:

the fragment forges two positions: it *is* and it *becomes*. Whereas the fragment’s manifestation as text throughout history is a question of constitution (*being*), in critical discourse the fragment’s manifestations are most often related to the question of function (*becoming*), which is to say that as a text in its own right the fragment is conceptualized in terms of content, whereas in critical discourse the fragment is conceptualized in terms of form. (353)

The body of Camelia Elias' work unfolds progressively along the lines of a systematic analysis of these two major categories of fragments: a) "fragments (from different periods) as texts in their own right" and b) "the growing body of critical discourse on the fragment as literary genre." (3-4) What Elias' analysis aims at is mapping out the vast territories of the fragment and the fragmentary writings from Heraclitus to Derrida. Camelia Elias's major ambition is to offer a comprehensive taxonomy of the various types of fragment one comes across in the Western tradition. She ends up with ten different types of fragment, "which goes against the idea that a fragment: (1) only exists insofar as it originates in a 'whole' text, whose loss of totality is marked by such words as incomplete, inconclusive, inconsequential...; or (2) only exists as a construction whose constitution is labeled by such words as unfinished, unstable, unaccountable..." (20) For each individual type of fragment a relevant individual author or book is presented in detail. The first five types of fragment (the object of *Part I*) "constitute themselves in a perspective which renders them as concepts characteristic of a static mode of *being*." (355). These "being-types" are: the coercive fragment (with a discussion of Heraclitus), the consensual fragment (Friedrich Schlegel), the redundant fragment (Louis Aragon), the repetitive (Gertrude Stein) and the resolute (Emil Cioran). All of these types are, in Elias' view, "labels which point to agency" (20). The five "becoming-types" (which are discussed in the book's *Part II*) are: the ekphrastic fragment (with a detailed and very interesting discussion of Mark C Taylor's *Deconstructing Theology*), the epigrammatic (Marcel Bénabou, especially his *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*), epigraphic (Gordon Lish and Derrida), emblematic (Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book*), and epitaphic (Nicole Brossard's *Picture Theory*). These latter types "point to the fragments' representational functions." (20) What is remarkable about Camelia Elias' taxonomy is that the ten types of fragment are not seen as the result of a process of mechanical reproduction, of bureaucratic juxtapositions so to speak, but as the unfolding of a sophisticated dialectical progression. The matrix generating this progression is to be found, according to Camelia Elias, in the dynamics of the form/content dichotomy: "This dichotomy relates to the static mode of *being* of the fragment and the active mode of *becoming* of the fragment by intersecting perspective and genre, thus engaging all ten types of fragments in exhibiting performativity." (24) "Performativity" plays a central notion throughout the book, and, in the author's view, "is best understood within the intersection of the poetics of perspective and poetics of genre." (24) At this juncture, let

it be added in passing, the interdisciplinarity of the project proves crucial: it functions as an epistemic guarantor, as something that can account for the always-multifaceted character of any given fragment. A Heraclitian fragment, for example, “is never itself, but either a text (of philological interest), a context (of philosophical interest), a history (of critical interest), or a story (or literary interest). . . .the construction of the fragment as fragment begins in fact as an interrelation between these four positions” (36).

One of the major merits of *The Fragment* is that, beyond its admirable treatment of the literary fragment *stricto sensu*, it also offers a sample of philosophizing about the various “cultures of the fragment” in the Western tradition. Fragments are not only about literature and literary productions, but they can also be, as Camelia Elias excellently shows in her book, about our understanding(s) of the world around, of our history and of ourselves. Fragments are sometimes about cultures as a whole. In a certain sense, then, this book can be seen as offering the outlines of a broader theory of culture, one clustered around the notions of fragment and fragmentary. A “culture of the fragment” articulates itself around a specific metaphysical (not just literary) sensibility. Expressions of such a sensibility can be found in several authors Camelia Elias discusses in her book. Friedrich Schlegel’s remarks, for example, that “the fragment is the real form of universal philosophy” (111) or that “I can give no other ‘echantillon’ of my entire ego than such a system of fragments because I myself am such a thing” (112) are poignant admissions of this specific sensibility. Similarly, Emerson’s confession “I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me” (112) betrays a like state of mind. Some of the most “systematic” expressions of this metaphysical sensibility though come from Emil Cioran, which Camelia Elias discusses extensively in her book:

To define nothing is among the skeptic’s obligations. . . .To definite is one of the most inveterate of our madnesses, and it must have been born with the first word. (117)

A distinct idea is an idea without a future. Beyond their virtual status, thought and action degrade and annul themselves; one ends up as system, the other as power; two forms of sterility and failure. Though we can endlessly debate the destiny of revolutions, political or otherwise, a single feature is common to them all, a single certainty: the disappointment they generate in all who have believed in them with some fervor. (150)

According to such a line of thought (sensibility), there is something indecent about the “grand systems,” their pretentious claims to wholeness and their ambition to grasp the ultimate nature of things; one needs a certain degree of shamelessness to be able to claim, seriously, that one can capture the whole truth about the world in one’s *oeuvre*. Moreover, if one is to stay creative and remain tuned to the richness of being, one has to admit it is the fragment that offers an “opening onto potential meaning” (118) rather than a perspective of wholeness; only through the fragment can one have access to a way of being that is dynamic, pluralistic and self-regenerating. At the very least, the grand systems betray a lack of style. Cioran again: “Models of style: the swearword, the telegram, the epitaph.” (150)

It is within the context of the “cultures of the fragment” that Camelia Elias advances a very tempting parallel between the baroque and the postmodern cultures. The difference between the two is only a matter of where the emphasis is placed: “whereas the baroque is a history of forms, the postmodern is a theory of forms.” (28) Walking in the footsteps of Wölfflin, José Antonio Maravall, Louis Marin, and Deleuze, Camelia Elias analyzes in detail the development of the late Renaissance into the baroque world, and points to some of the lessons we should learn from this historical process for a better understanding of our own historical situation:

In the case of the baroque, we see a clear break with what characterizes that Renaissance: most specifically linearity, the importance of surface, unity, coherence, symmetry, closeness, clarity in form. . . . the baroque constitutes itself at the opposite pole: it concerns itself with multiplicity, the importance of depth, perspective, openness, and obscurity in form. What is at stake however is a paradox: the baroque does not constitute itself merely as the opposite of the Renaissance mode, but incorporates all the latter’s elements and ultimately uses them to its own ends. (28)

As cultures of the fragment, the baroque and the postmodern share above all “a taste for mixing, palimpsesting, hybridization and discontinuity.” (29) Self-irony, even self-parody, the rejection of any static definition that would arrest their fluid essence once and for all is what nears the postmodern to the baroque. One of the distinct features of both the baroque and the postmodern is a constant crisis of identity they have to go through; it is always difficult to point to “defining” characteristics in both the baroque and the postmodern: “the ambiguities of definition are core issues for both

the baroque and the postmodern... What attracts the postmodern to the baroque if the fact that the baroque never fully engages in explaining itself, either as a period or as an aesthetic program.” (29)

As if secretly contaminated from its subject-matter, Camelia Elias’ book displays throughout a superior playfulness and a wonderful sense of humor. It is as if Camelia Elias cannot help playing with the books, ideas, and notions she is quoting and working on, just as the authors populating her book cannot help being ludic and “unserious.” For example, the Heraclitean fragment is, for her, “neither metaphysical, nor cosmic, nor anthropological (thematic levels), but surprising and (other)wise.” (41) Elias praises imagination and places it at the very foundation of any fragment writing: “Heraclitus’ oracular, cosmic, wise and otherwise fragments are definitions of how imagination begins, what imagination is, how it changes and what it performs.” (64) Seeing imagination as the chief philosophical faculty must be the sign of a very healthy ludic instinct. Then, there is humor in Camelia Elias’ book, occasionally devastating humor. She quotes, for example, David Markson’s reading of Harold Bloom’s confession that he can read five hundred pages per hour. There is, in the very choice of this quote, a certain complicity with Markson’s not-so-innocent amazement at Bloom’s feat, which she chooses to quote extensively, thus happily joining the laugh:

Harold Bloom’s claim to *The New York Times* that he could read at a rate of five hundred pages per hour.

Writer’s arse.

Spectacular exhibition! Right this way ladies and gentlemen! See Professor Bloom read the 1961 corrected and reset Random House edition of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in one hour and thirty-three minutes. Not one page stinted. Unforgettable!

[...] What’s this? Can’t spare an hour and a half? Wait, wait. Our matinee special, today only! Watch Professor Bloom eviscerate the Pears-McGuinness translation of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* – eight minutes and twenty-nine seconds flat! Guaranteed. (350)

This playfulness, the deep sense of irony and self-irony that pervades the book, the fine praise to imagination and unfettered creativity that one comes across again and again throughout it, are in fact what gives this book a sense of superior scholarly accomplishment: it proves that one can write systematically and comprehensively about the fragment without at the same time betraying the free and playful spirit of the genre of the fragment.