

**Andreea Tereza Nițșor** is PhD Junior Lecturer at The Department of English of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, in Iași, Romania, where she teaches seminars (American Drama, Victorian Literature, and Gender Studies) and practical courses of literary texts analysis (American ars poeticas and American 19th-century short stories, with elements of narratology). She has held doctoral research grants at the Library of the John F. Kennedy Institute for North-American Studies in Berlin and at Albert Ludwigs Universität in Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany), and teaching mobilities at Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland (CEEPUS), and Nottingham Trent University, England (Erasmus). She has published academic articles in national and international journals and volumes, including *(Re)Reading Taslima Nasrin: Context, Contents & Constructions* (Shrabon Prokashani, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2009), edited by Ali Riaz (Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics and Government la Illinois State University).

Andreea Tereza Nițșor, *A Poetics of the Fragment*  
© 2012 Institutul European, Iași

[www.euroinst.ro](http://www.euroinst.ro)

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN  
Iași, str. Grigore Ghica Vodă nr. 13  
[euroedit@hotmail.com](mailto:euroedit@hotmail.com)

**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**  
**NITȘOR, ANDREEA TEREZA**

**A poetics of the fragment** / Andreea Tereza Nițșor ; pref.: Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru. - Iași : Institutul European, 2012

Bibliogr.

Index

ISBN 978-973-611-921-7

I. Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu (pref.)

82.09

Reproducerea (parțială sau totală) a prezentei cărți, fără acordul Editurii, constituie infracțiune și se pedepsește în conformitate cu Legea nr. 8/1996.

Printed in ROMANIA

ANDREEA TEREZA NIȚȘOR

## A POETICS OF THE FRAGMENT

With a Foreword by CODRIN LIVIU CUȚITARU

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN  
2012

*For Ștefan*

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements / 9

Foreword / 11

Chapter 1. **The Paradoxical Status of the Fragment** / 19

Chapter 2. **On the Fragment** / 29

2.1 The Fragment in Romantic Thought / 29

2.2 Critical Studies on The Fragment(ary) / 53

2.2.1 The 1980s / 60

2.2.2 The 1990s / 73

2.2.3 After 2000 / 102

2.3 The Fragment as Recurrent Concept in Postmodern Theories / 112

Chapter 3. **Elements of a Poetics of the Fragment: Taxonomies** / 123

3.1 A Descriptive Taxonomy of the Fragment / 123

3.2 A Functional Taxonomy of the Fragment / 130

Chapter 4. **Fragmentary Genres: Literary Combinatorial Games with Fragments** / 141

4.1 The Anti-novel / 141

4.2 The Pseudo-Dictionary / 152

4.3 The Notebook; or the Omnitextual Fragment / 166

4.4 The (Fictive) Autobiography / 176

4.5 The Diary / 186

Chapter 5. **The Praxis of the Fragment** / 195

5.1 *Montages* / 195

5.2 Successions of dazzles / 213

5.3 Islands of Invention / 228

5.4 Irrational Cuts / 239

5.5 Peaks of Present and Sheets of Past / 250

Chapter 6. **The Paradox Revisited** / 259

Résumé / 265

Zusammenfassung / 271

List of Abbreviations / 277

Selected Bibliography / 279

Index / 297

*These fragments I have shored against my ruins.*  
(T. S. Eliot)

of the existence of a phenomenological infrastructure, at the level of its cultural, psychological (psychoanalytical), and ideological manifestations. It is above all motivated by its condition of annex to postmodernity. It follows that the only explicit poetics of the phenomenon can only be a cultural one. Paradoxically though, this remains the one most rejected by theorists, on Freudian rather than on aesthetic grounds. As postmodernism verifies its historicity, its cultural dimension will become increasingly more articulated.

CODRIN LIVIU CUȚITARU

## Chapter 1

# The Paradoxical Status of the Fragment

*[T]he finished work is, in our times and climate of anguish, a lie...*  
(Theodor W. Adorno)

*Isn't it a paradox to speak of a poetics of the fragment?*  
(Pierre Garrigues)

*[T]he fragment does not exclude systematic exposition.*  
(Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy)

For Shakespeare "fragment" was a term of abuse.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Johnson observed that "fragmentary" was "a word not elegant, nor in use."<sup>2</sup> For Adorno, as the first epigraph shows, the fragment is an honest avowal. Compelling, seductive and elusive, the fragment is an incontestable presence in literature, film, and the visual arts, indeed in all areas of human thought and existence, and yet it frustrates attempts to pin it down or to provide a clear (and comprehensive) definition.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matthew Bell, "The Idea of Fragmentariness in German Literature and Philosophy, 1760-1800," *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (April, 1994), p. 373. Bell quotes the *OED* references: *Troilus and Cressida*, V. i. 9 ("From whence, Fragment?") and *Coriolanus*, I. i. 226 ("Go get you home, you Fragments").

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Anne Janowitz, "Coleridge's 1816 Volume: Fragment as Rubric," *Studies in Romanticism*, Issue 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), p. 28.



This is partly due to the paradoxical status of the fragment: part of a whole or an autonomous entity, a “whole” in itself, or “fragment proper,” as some critics have labeled it. For the first (and more usual) acceptance of the term *fragment*, its etymology seems to support the idea of plurality, discontinuity, residue, lacunary, and essential incompleteness: the word derives from the Latin *fragmentum*, “remnant, splinter,” whose root is *frango*, -ere, *fregi*, *fractum*, meaning “to break in pieces,” “to splinter,” “to sunder,” “to fracture,” “to divide,” “to shatter.” In his 1975 *Roland Barthes*, the celebrated French critic likens the fragment to “the musical idea of a song cycle” but notes that “each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbors.”<sup>1</sup> In consonance with Barthes, other influential critics and theorists maintain that the fragment (in literature) “involves an essential incompleteness”<sup>2</sup> and “does not properly constitute a genre,”<sup>3</sup> or that “the fragment, or better, the fragmentary work, is always to be understood in the plural, as constituted by at least two or more fragments.”<sup>4</sup> Lawrence D. Kritzman’s much-cited definition of fragmentation goes as follows:

Fragmentation implies breakage (*frangere*), a part detached, separated, or isolated from a whole – an incomplete work or a portion of a writing or composition that appears to be disconnected or disjointed, an interruption of the so-called aesthetic unity of an artifact. Recognizing fragmentation requires us to imagine that the work in question is sustained by an underlying, albeit sometimes invisible, ideal order. The product or work of art is perceived as

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, Translated by Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1994, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *TLA*, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher A. Strathman, *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 43. Hereafter abbreviated as *RPFI*.

being detached from this conceptual framework and manifests itself as the embodiment of breakage.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Kritzman contends that the fragment may well “be an aesthetic aberration”<sup>2</sup> and it always implies a totality from which it is a shard. In a similar vein, Pierre Garrigues argues, in *Poétiques du fragment* (1995) that

... the fragment presupposes the prior existence of a whole, integral or itself a product of a fragmentation. Or, if we except the techniques of *découpage* of texts, a poetics of the fragment signifies, for most of the contemporary poets and writers, the direct creation of fragments, without passing through a stage of totality.<sup>3</sup> (my translation from French)

Analogously, Bernard Roukhomovsky describes “under the generic term *fragmentary forms*”: “the forms which are simultaneously characterized by their incompleteness (in that they are fragmentary) and by their brevity (in that they are short forms)”<sup>4</sup> (my translation from French).

The conceptual framework within which the fragment is usually perceived in relation to a whole presupposes a contextual bias, that is, the fragment is automatically seen as a textual part comprised by an absent or present contextual whole. For instance, Cleanth Brooks’ interpretation of textual wholeness is grounded precisely in this framework: “The total meaning was a complex built out of partial meanings. Not only that: that parts of the work, including the individual words that made it up, had their individual meanings,

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Fragments,” in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Fragments: Incompletion and Discontinuity*, New York: New York Literary Forum 8-9, 1981, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Garrigues, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Roukhomovsky, *Lire les formes brèves* (2001), Paris: Armand Colin, 2005, p.89.

altered by the pressure of the whole context" (Italics mine).<sup>1</sup> Lee Rust Brown correlates Brooks' "dictum on textual wholeness" with the literary fragment and maintains that:

... the whole is a "context" that alters the meanings of every textual part. When the textual whole (the "context") is pointedly and dramatically absent, as is the case with literary fragments, every figure actually found on the page will be of the same kind as that formed by the entire fragment: no matter how minutely specified, all "remains" of the absent text are synecdoches, parts signifying a whole.<sup>2</sup>

The first theorists to draw attention to a fundamental distinction between the fragment that "is struck by incompleteness" (which they call "piece" and not "fragment") and the fragment that "aims at fragmentation for its own sake" (non-dependent on a whole, "a determinate and deliberate statement") are Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>3</sup> In their seminal work *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (1978), the French critics trace the origins of the literary and philosophical fragment to the "tradition" of English and French moralists, particularly Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury<sup>4</sup> and La Rochefoucauld, and assign its incipient popularity to Chamfort's *Pensées, Maximes et Anecdotes* (posthumously published in 1795).<sup>5</sup> The favourable reception of Chamfort's work triggered a reevaluation

<sup>1</sup> Cleanth Brooks, "The Organic Theory of Poetry," in M. H. Abrams (ed.), *Literature and Belief: English Institute Essays*, 1957, New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Rust Brown, "Coleridge and the Prospect of the Whole," in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer, 1991), p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *TLA*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> In *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1723), for instance, Shaftesbury reckons that "The most ingenious way of becoming foolish, is by a system" (quoted in Matthew Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 376).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *TLA*, p. 40.

of Pascal's *Pensées* and, more significantly, of Montaigne's *Essays*, which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy deem as the "paradigm" of the fragment as "genre," "established for all modern history."<sup>1</sup>

The distinction made by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy between the fragment connoting incompleteness ("piece") and the fragment as "determinate and deliberate statement" is further refined by Rodolphe Gasché, who emphasizes the philosophical stake inherent in the German concept of Romantic fragment:

Whether the very concept of the fragment, as well as its history, is indeed sufficient to describe the form of the more significant literary experiments from the late nineteenth century up to the present, as well as to conceptualize the intrinsic difference(s), heterogeneity, plurality, and so forth, of the text, has to my knowledge never been attended to explicitly. What should be obvious is that if the fragment, or rather its notion, is to bring out the radical notion of atotality of writing, or the text, it must be a notion of fragment thoroughly distinct from its (historically) prevailing notion(s). A concept of the fragment that merely emphasizes incompleteness, residualness, detachment, or brokenness will not serve here.<sup>2</sup>

The German and English Romantics raised the fragment to an unprecedented popularity to the extent to which, until postmodernism (which exalted fragmentariness and conferred on it the "prestige" of defining characteristic), Romanticism became inextricably linked with it. However, if the critical reception of the Romantic fragment was deeply divided (some saw it as indicative of a congenital inability to finish a work once started, other critics perceived it as works of genius<sup>3</sup>), that of the postmodernist fragment is relatively consensual in

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, "Ideality in Fragmentation," *Foreword* in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> I enlarge upon these issues, with all necessary references, in the next chapter.



positive appraisal. Hugh Roberts, for instance, in an excellent article on Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, explicates:

Poetic fragmentation may prompt us to attempt a reconstitution of the "whole" of which the text is a "part," but our inability to decide upon which "whole" we are to reconcile the text with neither eliminates the possibility of finding meaning in the text nor makes the text seem more intractable to interpretation. As Foucault suggests, meaning proliferates in the absence of imposed "whole"; it does not dissipate.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Roberts also draws attention to the inescapable bias of judging or examining the fragment in relation to the notion of "whole," a bias that has inherently shaped the critical discourse on the fragment until the 1990s, as I will show in the next chapter.

Given the complexities of the fragment as "genre," or rather anti-genre,<sup>2</sup> its semantic field has come to encompass an immense and

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Roberts, "Spectators Turned Actors: *The Triumph of Life*," in Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (eds.), *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Second Edition, New York and London: Norton & Company, 2002, pp. 760-768, p. 760. This article was originally published in Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Although a much-debated notion, as I show in my discussion of autobiography as *fragmentary genre* (in the subchapter on (fictive) autobiographies), the *literary genre* is defined as "a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind" (Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 90). Baldick also points out that the „confusion surrounding the term arises from the fact that it is used simultaneously for the most basic modes of literary art (lyrics, narrative, dramatic), for the broadest categories of composition (poetry, prose, fiction), and for more specialized sub-categories, which are defined according to several different criteria including formal structure (sonnet, picaresque novel), length (novella, epigram), intention (satire), effect (comedy), origin (folktale), and subject-matter (pastoral, science fiction)" (Baldick, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91). Since none of the criteria listed by Baldick apply to the fragment when considered generically, but *fragmentary*

quasi-heterogeneous conceptual/terminological assortment: ruin, disintegration, dismemberment, *coupure*, project, unfinished(ness), unfinishable, incomplete(ness), incompletion, irresolution, inconclusive/inconclusiveness, non-linearity, episodicity, digression/digressive, undecidable/undecidability, indeterminate/indeterminacy, disordering, discontinuity, disjointed(ness), formless(ness), openness/openability, open-ended(ness), anti-closure/anti-closural, worklessness [*désouevrement*], etc. Although each of these concepts is directly related to the fragment, they do not overlap; in effect, some of these terms form binary oppositions, entering antonymic relationships. For instance, *indeterminacy* in *Tristram Shandy* is, more often than not, inseparable from fragmentariness, digressiveness and disintegration, whereas *indeterminacy* in *What Maisie Knew* stems from hermeneutic blanks and gaps (slippages and delays), *oratio obliqua*, and problematical closure.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, between the fragment as *ruin* (say, The Parthenon or "P52 recto" – the oldest known manuscript fragment of the New Testament) and the fragment as *project* (Chapters 5-9 and 12-13 of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, usually referred to as the "philosophical chapters," were "the philosophical vestibule"<sup>2</sup> of Coleridge's most ambitious but never-realized project, which was to be his *magnus opus*, *Logosophia*) there is an unambiguous antagonism.

writing has been used, in critical discourse, to accommodate various literary works whose common denominator was either "incompleteness," "unfinishedness" or "indeterminacy," the fragment may be viewed as an *anti-genre*.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Frank Kermode's observations on the indeterminacy of *What Maisie Knew* in his essay "Recognition and Deception" in *Essays on Fiction* (1971-1982) (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, pp. 92-113).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, "Editors' Introduction" in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, Edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bates, Bollingen Series LXXV, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. lvii.



An essential theoretical clarification must be made between fragmentation and discontinuity. In this respect, a good starting point is the definition provided by Ross Chambers, applicable to fragmentation and discontinuity in the narrative:

“discontinuity” names the way texts harbor heterogeneity and disparateness, partly revealed and partly concealed by what Barthes calls “figures of contiguity,” and [...] “fragmentation” is the product of textual disordering of which discontinuity is the principle.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Before I begin my examination of the fragment, I should make some methodological specifications as well. Throughout this book I use the word “fragment” to refer both to an individual piece of writing and, when preceded by the definite article, to a general type of writing that presupposes fragmentariness; the word “fragmentary” is employed both as an adjective, referring to the distinctive characteristic of a work that is either a fragment or made up of fragments, and as a class / genre (again, preceded by the definite article: *the fragmentary*); finally, I use the term “fragmentariness” both in the sense of the intrinsic quality of a fragmentary work, and to refer to the direct result of the process of fragmentation.

Since my aim is to identify the elements of a poetics of the fragment and delineate a comprehensive taxonomy, I shall dwell only on the aspects related to the fragment(ary) in a number of philosophical and literary texts and films. A full-length analysis of each of these works is beyond the scope of this volume.

A rather long and dense second chapter on the theories of the fragment(ary) formulated so far was necessary in order to outline my own theoretical framework and also to justify the need for such an enterprise. The first subchapter deals with the Romantic theory of the

<sup>1</sup> Ross Chambers, “The Etcaetera Principle: Narrative and the Paradigmatic”, in G. Henry Freeman (ed.), *Discontinuity and Fragmentation*, French Literature Series Volume XXI, Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994, p. 1.

fragment (particularly in Germany and England), the second presents, from a critical standpoint, the academic works on fragmentariness as manifested and employed in literature, film, and the visual arts, and the third subchapter examines the extent to which the postmodernist, feminist and postcolonialist theories are grounded on fragmentation as the defining feature of the contemporary *Zeitgeist* (and, implicitly, *Weltanschauung*), of otherness, and of subjectivity.

In the third chapter I endeavour to formulate a theory of the fragment viewed both as part of a present or absent discursive whole (which I term the *coalescent fragment*) and as self-sufficient, deliberate form (the *non-coalescent fragment*). Premised on the notion that a poetics of the fragment cannot rely only on the traditional dichotomy form/content, but it must equally broach the pragmatic issues – the functions, uses and effects – of fragmentation, the taxonomy I outline covers both descriptive and functional aspects. In the first subchapter I propose a *descriptive taxonomy* (consisting of four types of coalescent fragment and seven types of non-coalescent fragment) and a *functional taxonomy* (comprising four types of fragment – *organizing principle/tactic*, *aesthetic principle*, *ontological principle*, and *psychological mechanism*).

The fourth chapter deals with fragmentary genres (the anti-novel (self-subversive novel) – Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; the pseudo-dictionary; the notebook – Coleridge’s *Notebooks*; the (fictive) autobiography – Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*; and the diary – Virginia Woolf’s *A Writer’s Diary*) in which multiple types of fragment collude and collide.

In the fifth chapter, “The Praxis of the Fragment,” I offer an in-depth investigation of five works – three novels (William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* and Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* – and two films (Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *21 Grams*) that address, to various extents and from multiple perspectives, all types of fragment. As I suggest, both these novels and