

'Fragmentary Writing in Contemporary British and American Fiction' Conference Report

On 22–23 September 2017, an international conference on literary fragmentation was held in Wrocław. It was organized by Prof. Vanessa Guignery from École Normale Supérieure in Lyon and Dr Wojciech Drag from the Institute of English Studies at the University of Wrocław. The event attracted 34 speakers from eleven countries – mostly from Poland, France and the United Kingdom.

The aim of the conference was to examine the legacy of what is known in French criticism as *l'écriture fragmentaire* in the light of the recent revival of experimental fiction. The last decades have brought a number of acclaimed novels in Britain and the US that illustrate their authors' interest in fragmentary and multimodal structures. David Mitchell constructed *Cloud Atlas* (2005) out of six stories with different settings, characters and generic features. David Markson produced an 800-page-long tetralogy, culminating in *The Last Novel* (2007), which juxtaposes several thousand succinct anecdotes and quotations with metafictional references to the elusive authorial figure. The year 2014 saw the publication of three notable fragmentary novels: Will Eaves's *The Absent Therapist* – an amalgam of the voices of 150 speakers, Richard McGuire's *Here* – a graphic novel created out of over 150 images (non-chronologically arranged) of the same location throughout several million years, and Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* – an account of a marriage crisis narrated with the use of several hundred loosely connected paragraphs. As the example of *Cloud Atlas* – alongside those of Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015) and, most recently, Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* (2016) – demonstrates, fragmentation is not only the domain of niche, 'experimental' writing.

Although it has much earlier origins, fragmentation has been a vital aspect of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. Several canonical novels of modernism – such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Waves* (1931) – could be classified as fragmentary, since they are constructed in parts do not fully cohere. More radical examples of fragmented novels were written in the 1960s and 70s by authors sometimes associated with postmodernism: J. G. Ballard,

John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, B. S. Johnson and Gabriel Josipovici, among others. Despite the fact that many renowned novelists have contributed to fragmentary writing, the term itself is rarely used in Anglophone criticism. One of the goals of the conference was to postulate a renewed engagement with fragmentary literature. The scope was restricted to British and American fiction published after the year 1966. The call for papers encouraged participants to examine the typical ingredients of the fragmentary mode (such as enumeration, non-linearity and the unconventional layout of the page), the mechanics of organizing the disparate parts, and the various rationales for writing in fragments. Among the numerous critical notions that speakers were advised to consider in relation to the fragment were modernism and postmodernism, multimodality and multimediality, collage, montage and bricolage, card-shuffle texts, forking-path narratives, altered fictions and genre mash-ups.

The highlight of the conference were the keynote talks by three invited speakers. The first of them was Merritt Moseley – Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and author of critical monographs on David Lodge, Kingsley Amis, Julian Barnes, Michael Frayn, Pat Barker and Jonathan Coe. The inaugural lecture took place in Oratorium Marianum, one of the historic halls of the University of Wrocław, following the official opening by the Vice Dean of the Faculty of Letters Prof. Igor Borkowski. Entitled 'What Is Fragmentary Fiction? And How Is It Fragmentary?', Prof. Moseley's talk was an attempt to classify fragmentary fiction by proposing three categories: the braid, the mosaic and the bricolage. Each of them was discussed with reference to a separate novel from the last year's Man Booker Prize shortlist.

The second keynote lecture was by Dr Alison Gibbons – Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University and the author of the widely cited *Multimodality, Cognition, and Multimodal Literature* (2011) and the co-editor (with Joe Bray and Brian McHale) of *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012). The title of her talk was 'Multimodality and Aesth-Ethics, or, Fragments and Spirals.' It was an investigation of Lance Olsen's novel *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) through the critical framework of Robert Smithson's notion of 'entropology' (a blend of entropy and anthropology) with the aim of outlining the relationship between fragmentation, multimodality and ethics.

The final plenary talk, on the second day of the conference, was delivered by Assistant Professor of English and American Literature at The John Paul II

Catholic University of Lublin – Prof. Grzegorz Maziarczyk, who is the author of *The Narratee in Contemporary British Fiction* (2005) and *The Novel as Book: Textual Materiality in Contemporary Fiction in English* (2013). Entitled 'Singularity, Multimodality, Transmediality: Fragmentary Future(s) of the Novel?', Prof. Maziarczyk's lecture gave an overview of the recent departures from the supposedly transparent printed codex in response to the impact of other media. The aim of his presentation was to assess, within the theoretical framework of transmedial narratology, to what extent the new medial formats are inherently fragmentary. Among his examples were J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013) and Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro's *Pry* (2015).

Besides keynote lectures, the conference programme included ten sessions of individual papers, which comprised 31 presentations. The first two parallel sessions were devoted to examining the relationships between the fragment and realism, and between fragmentation and identity. The former session featured contributions from Wojciech Drąg (University of Wrocław), Jarosław Hetman (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń) and Corina Selejan (Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu), who focused on the uses of fragmentation in the works of David Markson, David Shields, David Foster Wallace and Tom McCarthy. The latter session contained contributions from Dominika Ferens, Paulina Pająk (both from the University of Wrocław) and Caroline Magnin (University Paris 4 – Sorbonne), and was devoted to the diaries of Virginia Woolf and Susan Sontag, contemporary Korean American writers and the representation of trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). The first parallel session on the contemporary British novel centred on some of the most recent works of Ali Smith, Jeanette Winterson and Zadie Smith. The respective speakers were Alicia J. Rouverol (University of Manchester), Maria Antonietta Struzziero (Independent Scholar) and Trung Nguyễn-Quang (University Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle). At the same time, the fiction of Robert Coover and J.G. Ballard was discussed by Lech Zdunkiewicz, Marcin Tereszewski (both from the University of Wrocław) and Tristan Ireson-Howells (Canterbury Christ Church University) during a session on the literature of the 1960s and 1970s. In the last session of the first day of the conference Hilary White (University of Manchester), Gerd Bayer (University of Erlangen) and Paweł Wojtas (University of Warsaw) focused on the fragmentary aspects of the novels by Ann Quin, David Mitchell and J. M. Coetzee, respectively.

On the second day, another five sessions of individual papers took place. In the second session on the contemporary British novel Magdalena Sawa (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin) explored the aesthetic theory and artistic practice of Gabriel Josipovici, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz (University of Łódź) analyzed Michèle Roberts's *Impossible Saints* (1997), Bartosz Lutostański (independent scholar) compared B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) and Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), and Vesna Ukić-Košta (University of Zadar) examined Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989). The parallel session on contemporary American fiction concentrated on the works by Gilbert Sorrentino, Harry Mathews, Richard Powers and Thomas Ligotti. The respective speakers were Saloua Karoui-Elounelli (University of Tunis), Iain McMaster (University of Edinburgh), Anne-Catherine Bascoul (University of Nice Sophia Antipolis) and Deborah Bridle (University of Nice Sophia Antipolis). In the next session – on the short story – Teresa Bruś (University of Wrocław) examined fragmentary lives in three collections of Julian Barnes's short fiction, David Malcolm (University of Gdańsk) considered the relationships between individual short stories in selected collections by Alan Garner, Lydia Davis, Michèle Roberts and Lucia Berlin, while Alessandro Guaita (Universities of Lisbon, Guelph and Perpignan) analyzed short fictions by J. D. Salinger, John Cheever and Raymond Carver with reference to the notions of the explicit and the implicit. At the same time, in the adjacent room, Alison Gibbons chaired a session on multimodality, which featured contributions from Katarzyna Bazarnik (Jagiellonian University), Mariano D'Ambrosio (University Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle) and Côme Martin (Paris Est – Créteil University/Sorbonne). The speakers focused on the relationship between fragmentation and the notions of liberature, polyphony and the shuffle narrative. In the closing session of the conference Zofia Kolbuszewska (University of Wrocław) discussed Suzanne Treister's *Hexen 2.0* (2012) as an autopoietic Wunderkammer of alternative history, whereas Ioannis Tsitsovits (University of Leuven) investigated the relationship between critical theory and the autobiographical in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009).

After the proceedings, the participants took part in several social activities, including a conference dinner in the historic hall of Klub Uniwersytecki, an evening out in the pub called 'Szajba' and a walking tour of Wrocław with art historian Anna Jezierska. The conference was made possible thanks to the financial help from the Faculty of Letters and the Institute of English

Studies at the University of Wrocław and from Institut d'Histoire des Représentations et des Idées dans les Modernités at École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. The scientific committee included Prof. Guignery, Dr. Drąg and Dr. Tereszewski, while the organizing committee was constituted by all of the above with the addition of five doctoral students from the University of Wrocław: Ewa Błasiak, Krzysztof Jański, Paulina Pająk, Agata Słowik and Angelika Szopa.

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