

## THE “ENCHANTING BACKGROUND” OF THE SHORT FORM LITERATURE

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**Abstract.** To revalorize the “enchanted background” of the enigmatic and fascinating Antiquity, which he re-elaborates from its scattered and fragmented remains, the French writer Pascal Quignard proposes *anaggiornamento* of some ancient literary short forms. His *Little Treatises* therefore represent an unconventional assemblage of fragments that condense the reflection by endowing it with the sparkliness and the fugacity of fireworks; that search for the deep meaning of discourse by playing with its latent connotations; that translate the stream of thought by fractioning the storytelling. This singular *narratio brevis*, which wanders through ages, contexts and literary genres, corresponds to a world view as a fragmented space and to a writing view as a discontinuous and unfinished discourse.

*Keywords:* fragment; Little Treatises; *narratio brevis*; short form; Pascal Quignard

L’aphorisme, l’adage, le proverbe, la sentence, le dicton, la devinette, l’apophtegme, la formulation gnomique, l’énoncé paradoxal, le haïku, le précepte, l’énigme, l’épigramme à Paris au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, le trait d’esprit à Rome au I<sup>er</sup> siècle, etc., ces tours sont anciens et divers, et difficilement perméables les desseins poétiques qui les portent, et autonomes leurs techniques, et singulières les histoires qui les ont dispersés. (Quignard, 1986: 38)

To revalorize the “enchanted background” (Quignard, 1997a: 73) of an enigmatic and fascinating Antiquity, which he re-elaborates from its scattered and fragmented remains, Pascal Quignard proposes *anaggiornamento* of some ancient literary genres. His *Little Treatises* represent, indeed, an unconventional assemblage of short forms that condense reflection, by endowing it with the sparkliness and the fugacity of fireworks, that search for the deep meaning, by playing with the hidden connotations of discourse, that translate the stream of thought by fractioning the storytelling. Their reading gives the feeling of constantly cross-spacing between Scylla (the lazy renunciation of meaning) and Charybdis (the ideological confinement in itself) of our own convictions and pre-established knowledge.

The interest in topics such as terror, *taedium vitae* and diving into the abyss pushes the author of the *Little Treatises* to adopt a regressive approach. So, if he sees writing as a interworld, he considers fragment as a trace and a negation of a particular memory, a kind of sediment settled by the movement of thought (Kristeva, 2008: 46). The fragment refers to the absence as a organizing principle of Quignard's literary essays. By witnessing the failure of every attempt to fill the emptiness, to escape from the nothing and to cheat the death, the fragment allows an appropriate entry in their structure.

Side by side with the generic transversality and the passion for the origin, the Grecisms (like *alètheia*, *anagnôsis*, *artifex*, *érotikoi*, *noësis*, *orthographia*, *prosôpa*, *zôgraphos*, etc.) and Latinisms (like *augmentum*, *castitas*, *domina*, *fascinus*, *matrona*, *obsequium*, *pietas*, *potentia*, *servus*, *taediumvitae*, *voluptas*, etc.), to which Quignard systematically resorts to extract surprising semantic effects, reveal his antimodern attitude. At the same time, these anachronistic effects distinguish a writer, conscious of his modernity because, as he himself remarks, in the essay *Une gêne technique à l'égard des fragments*: "At least in modern art, the effect of the discontinuous has replaced the binding effect" (Quignard, 1986: 20).

The fragment could then be defined as the trace of a quest, the mark of a search for meaning. It turns out to be the most appropriate form to express today the mythic thought, the instantaneous verbal gesture, the manifestations of the heterogeneous, the arguments that raise questions, the recovery of already exploited patterns, but which are treated from a different angle, in parallel to other units. In this perspective, the Quignard's little treatises represent a shaping of *grámmata* which are well suited to develop and envelop. The problem that arises at this point would be the following: will the interpretative process be sufficient to cross the abyss and absorb the original content through the quasi-magic transmutation of the signifier or is it not rather a question of unbinding between the signifier and the referent?

However, we cannot speak of an ontological or non-referential unbinding, because the feeling of radical strangeness that is triggered by these "heretical" treatises does not come from the absence of referents, but from the distorted relation to the reference, from the twist, the contamination, the condensation, the mutual perversion of the primary text and the treatment that the author reserves for it.

Ni Jean de La Fontaine ni Claude Lévi-Strauss ne se sont astreints à recopier servilement les textes sources des contes qu'ils multipliaient. Ni, à strictement parler, ils ne les ont traduits. Ils ont procuré une forme plus pure aux histoires qu'ils avaient recensées et qu'ils aimaient. (Quignard, 2005: 32).

In this legacy, Pascal Quignard tells stories, which have come from elsewhere, that he often accompanies with an extra-narrative commentary that remains however intra-textual since it makes perceivable the effect produced by these stories on the narrator himself. He resumes fragments of myths or literary works, disarticulates them and then rearticulates them as other myths or texts, associating them freely with yet other myths or

texts that bear their own symbolism or condense his own ideas. His narratives are usually succinct, often unfinished.

The *aggiornamento* of the original text undertaken by Quignard rules out the possibility of making a copy or an accurate translation. The *epitome*, that is to say the condensed recovery of a story already told, goes hand in hand with *ekphrasis*, which means namely the precise description woven in the story. Their interference seems at first sight paradoxical, given the fragmentary writing, if we do not take into consideration the fact that *ekphrasis*, which “is in its principle synechdotic and fragmentary”, “arouses from an isolated and cut organ, the fantasized body” (Lestringant, 2000: 155).

As a part of a whole, the detail is by definition fragmentary. Let’s look at the detailed description of Concino Concini’s assassination:

Le lundi 24 avril 1617 Concini fut tué. Vêtu de hauts-de-chausses de velours gris brun à grandes bandes de Milan ; un pourpoint de toile noire brodée d’or ; un manteau de velours noir à passementeries italiennes, il franchit la porte du Louvre, lisant une lettre. Après qu’il eut franchi la porte de Bourbon, on referma la porte derrière lui aussitôt sur le pont dormant. Cinq coups de feu furent tirés.

Une balle entre les deux yeux ; une à la joue droite ; une à la gorge.

Sarroque piqua son épée dans le flanc. Taraud planta la sienne dans le cou.

Tous accourent, s’acharnent. Du Buisson arrache la bague où brille le diamant de six mille écus. La face de Concini tournée vers le pont est noire de poudre et du sang qui a déjà séché. La fraise est rouge et brûlée.

On enveloppe le corps dans un drap de cinquante sols et on l’enterre à minuit dans l’église de Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois sous les orgues.

Le mardi 25 avril, le jour se levant, la foule s’attroupe sous l’orgue, crache sur les dalles. On gratte avec les ongles autour des pierres. On met à nu les pieds du corps. On attache les pieds avec la corde des cloches, et on arrache tout le cadavre. [...]

On tire Concini hors de l’église Saint-Germain. [...] Alors on traîne le corps jusqu’au Pont-Neuf et on le pend par les chevilles à une des potences que le mort y avait fait mettre. On lui crève les yeux. On lui coupe le nez. On tranche les oreilles. On dénoue l’aiguillette, on rit, on arrache le sexe et les couilles avec la main.

On coupe les mains. On dépèce les bras. On tranche la tête. A chaque quartier de Paris est attribué un morceau du corps de Concini (Quignard, 1997b: 405 – 406).

The remake of the death of Marie de Medici’s favorite, narrated in the early 17th century (Mathieu ou Thévenin, 1618), is rather representative for Quignard’s storytelling. The description is characterized by a meticulousness with regard to the dynamics of the events, the appearance of the victim, the names of the killers. The phantasmatic presentation of the details seems quite real, as if the narrator had witnessed the murder. Short and sharp, the impersonal sentences announce the dismemberment of the corpse of Concini. Excessively violent, the *ekphrasis* inevitably leads to “dazzling rags” that blow up the narrative. The mutilated body indirectly refers to the disarticulation of the

text. Thus, the story told is transformed into an allegory of the method of writing which consists in textual cutting.

Quignard's strategy thereby consists in the establishment of a correlation between the marginal and the sublime. But instead of reconciling them, he seeks to move them into new spaces, to combine them in an unusual way by operating the "intellectual bricolage" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962: 26) typical for the mythical thought to quote Lévi-Strauss. This metaphorical bricolage requires disarticulation, disjunction, fragmentation, tearing, and dismemberment. Its enchanting background involves both transformational and regenerative power.

The fragmentary form of *Little Treatises' narratio brevis* that wanders through ages, contexts and literary genres, corresponds to a world view as a fragmented space and to a writing view as a discontinuous and unfinished discourse. The fragmentary writing materializes Quignard's conception of language as a partial object that must be metaphorized. It is perceived as a stunning writing (which strikes by the effect of unexpected), desiring (which desires and enjoys its object), fascinating (which seduces and frightens). It fills the space of the interworld that separates the original world – incompletely reached by the fragment, and the imaginary world – incompletely created by the fragment.

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