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Introduction

A LINE

This is a short book on the shortest of genres—the aphorism. As a basic unit of intelligible thought, this microform has persisted across world cultures and histories, from Confucius to Twitter, Heraclitus to Nietzsche, the Buddha to Jesus. Opposed to the babble of the foolish, the redundancy of bureaucrats, the silence of mystics, in the aphorism nothing is superfluous, every word bears weight.

Its minimal size is charged with maximal intensity. Consider Heraclitus' "Nature loves to hide"; Jesus' "The kingdom of God is within you"; Pascal's "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me"; or Nietzsche's "If a temple is to be erected, a temple must be destroyed." These aphorisms have an atomic quality—compact yet explosive. Yet in comparison to the rich theories and thick histories of the novel, lyric, or drama, the aphorism—this most elemental of literary forms—has been curiously understudied, a vast network of literary and philosophical archipelagos that has so far been thinly explored. At a time when a presidency can

be won and social revolutions ignited by 140–character posts (now 280), an analysis of the short saying seems to be as crucial as ever.

This book's focus, however, will not be on the political rhetoric of the aphorism (though I will touch upon it in the epilogue). It will rather take a step back from the noise of digital minutiae and explore the deep life of the aphorism as a literary form.

The theory this book advances is that aphorisms are before, against, and after philosophy. Heraclitus comes before and against Plato and Aristotle, Pascal after and against Descartes, Nietzsche after and against Kant and Hegel. The philosopher creates and critiques continuous lines of argument. The aphorist, on the other hand, composes scattered lines of intuition. One moves in a chain of discursive logic; the other by arrhythmic leaps and bounds. Much of the history of Western philosophy can be narrated as a series of attempts at the construction of systems. My theory proposes that much of the history of aphorisms can be narrated as an animadversion, a turning away from grand systems through the construction of literary fragments. I will shortly offer definitions of the aphorism, the fragment, and the system, but for now, let us heed the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel's elegant formulation: "A fragment ought to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world like a little work of art and complete in itself like a hedgehog" (*Athenaeum Fragments* §206).

As aphorisms have been for millennia anthologized and deanthologized, revived and mutilated, quoted and misquoted, they constitute their own cultural network. As such, a philological understanding of aphorisms is as necessary as a philosophical one: that is to say, one must examine not only their internal meaning but also the circumstances of their material production, transmission, and reception in history. It is no accident that when Schlegel compares an aphorism to a hedgehog (*ein Igel*), the most famous hedgehog in Western thought comes from nowhere else but that fragment of Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" (fr 201 West). In Schlegel's Ger-

many, the poetic production of modern fragments went hand-in-hand with the scholarly editions of ancient fragments. As we shall see, the aphorisms of the ancients are some of the most problematic—but also the most generative—specimens in the laboratory of textual criticism.

Though an aphorism by definition is succinct, it almost always proliferates into an innumerable series of iterations. By nature the aphorism—like the hedgehog—is a solitary animal. Striving to cut out all verbiage, its not-so-secret wish is to annihilate its neighbor so that its singular potency would reign supreme. Yet aphorisms also have a herd mentality. Indeed, from the wisdom literature of the Sumerians and Egyptians onward, they find strength in the social collective of anthologies. Each aphorism might very well be "complete in itself," as Schlegel claims, but it also forms a node in a network, often a transnational one with great longevity, capable of continuous expansion. And the best modern aphorists never wrote just one aphorism but almost always a great many—La Rochefoucauld, Goethe, and Lichtenberg had notebooks upon notebooks filled with them and often had trouble finishing them. So I find it ironic that although a *single* aphorism may be a hegemonic hedgehog, a *collection* of aphorisms tends to morph into a multitude of cunning little foxes.

At the same time, the very minimal syntax of an aphorism gives it a maximal semantic force. The best aphorisms admit an infinitude of interpretation, a hermeneutic inexhaustibility. In other words, while an aphorism is circumscribed by the *minimal* requirements of language, its interpretation demands a *maximal* engagement. Deciphering the gnomic remarks of the early Greek thinkers, Jesus, or Confucius marks the birth of hermeneutics. For Friedrich Schleiermacher, a friend of Schlegel and a founder of modern hermeneutics, interpretation is "an infinite task," because there is "an infinity of past and future that we wish to see in the moment of the utterance" (*Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 23). The interpretation of one aphorism thereby opens a plurality of worlds. This is what I mean when I say that an aphorism is

"atomic": it is without parts, but its splitting causes an explosion of meaning. The hedgehog must be dissected.

These three methodologies, then—the philosophical, the philological, the hermeneutical—will be the intersecting vectors that guide this book. Taken together, my theory reveals that the aphorism is at times an ancestor, at times an ally, and at times an antagonist to systematic philosophy.

Toward a definition

Now let us try to define the aphorism. Turn to any reference work and it would read something like "a concise expression of doctrine or principle or any generally accepted truth" (here, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). This formulation is problematic. First, it presupposes that an aphorist has a "doctrine" behind such concision. Much of this book will be spent trying to figure out whether such intellectual systems exist or not. Second, most of the aphorisms I'm concerned with are not "generally accepted truth," for they are often enigmatic statements that defy convention.

There are many names for the short saying: *gnōmē, paroimia, proverb, sententia, precept, maxim, commonplace, adage, epigram, apothegm, apophthegm*. Their meanings vary across languages and histories. Sometimes they overlap. "Generally accepted truths" should be more properly called *proverbs* or *sententia*, and they are usually anonymous. Thus "there's no place like home" is a proverb, whereas Kafka's "A cage went in search of a bird" (*Zürau Aphorisms* §16) is not. And for every proverb there is an equal and opposite proverb: "out of sight out of mind," "absence makes the heart grow fonder." An *epigram* contains something clever with a sarcastic twist and is associated with great wits such as Alexander Pope or Oscar Wilde. Here is one from Martial, the Ogden Nash of antiquity: "A work isn't long if you can't take anything out of it, / but you, Cosconius, write even a couplet too long" (2.77). A *maxim* is usually a pithy moral instruction, such as those inscribed in the Temple of Delphi: "Nothing in excess" or "Know thyself." La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, however, are

more reflections on human nature than prescriptions on how to live: "Mediocre minds usually [*d'ordinaire*] condemn what they don't understand" (V:375).[1] For Kant, the maxim assumed a metaphysical reach: "Act only according to that maxim [*Maxime*] whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law [*allgemeines Gesetz*]" (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 30). Whereas the German philosopher is binding and absolute, the French moralist loves exceptions: "most often," "most men," "few people," "usually" (*le plus souvent, la plupart des hommes, peu de gens, d'ordinaire*) are his favorite qualifiers.

Next let us plot the numerous terms for short sayings along various points on a spectrum: proverbs, folk wisdom, platitudes, and bromides are close to the banal extreme; maxims and epigrams are somewhere in the middle; the aphorism is close to the philosophical or theological end. The first class is easy to understand ("Absence makes the heart grow fonder"); the second contains a sharp aperçu ("An almost universal fault of lovers is failing to realize when they are no longer loved," La Rochefoucauld, V:371); the third is more recondite ("If Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have been different," Pascal, *Pensées* §32, Sellier ed.).

These categories, of course, are fluid. For instance, folk proverbs in some cultures are opaque and even have magical powers. Before he became the editor of the leading journal of French intellectual life, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, Jean Paulhan stayed in Madagascar from 1908 to 1910 to study its oral culture. He observes that the everyday proverb of the Malagasy, *hain-teny*, "is rather like a peculiar secret society: it does not hide, it operates publicly, and its passwords—unlike other magic words—are banalities. Nonetheless, it remains secret, and everything takes place as if an undefinable difficulty, providing sufficient defense against indiscretion, would protect the proverbs" ("Sacred Language," 308).[2] Conversely there are also aphorisms by rarified authors that are completely crystalline and understood instantaneously. To explain their wit is only to state the obvious. For my purposes, however, I define the aphorism simply as *a short saying that requires interpretation*.

The aphorism condenses. It is the *punctum*, the monad, the *kairos* that arrests the welter of our thinking. Italo Calvino writes, "I dream of immense cosmologies, sagas, and epics all reduced to the dimensions of an epigram" (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 51). Joseph Joubert is even more concise: an aphorist must put "a whole book into a page, a whole page into a phrase, and a phrase into a word" (*Carnets,* 2:485). Conversely, interpretation must dissolve this atomic density. To understand the aphorism, one must translate the figural, witty, and intuitive into the logical, explicable, and demonstrable. One must unfold its multidimensional complexes into the flat plane of clarity, render its fulgurating blot (or rather bolt!) into lucid insight. A philological exegesis would carefully examine the authorship, text, language, culture, sources, and receptions of the aphorism; a philosophical analysis would evaluate its logical or normative truth claims; an ethical reading would end in action; a spiritual meditation would lead to an apophatic epiphany, an emptying of words. "People find difficulty with the aphoristic form," Nietzsche writes; "this arises from the fact that today this form is *not taken seriously enough.* Aphorism, properly stamped and molded, has not been 'deciphered' when it has simply been read; rather, one has then to begin its *exegesis,* for which is required an art of exegesis" (*On the Genealogy of Morals,* preface §8, emphasis in the original). The irony is that the aphorism—this shortest of forms to read—actually takes the longest time to understand.

A short history of the short saying

Aphorisms are transhistorical and transcultural, a resistant strain of thinking that has evolved and adapted to its environment for millennia. Across deep time, they are vessels that travel everywhere, laden with freight yet buoyant. Terse sayings form a rich constellation in the Sanskrit, already found in the *Rig-veda* and

the *Brāhmaṇas*.[3] Didactic wisdom literature in Egypt extends from the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period. The fragments or the entirety of some seventeen anthologies survive. It is well attested that the Hebrew Book of Proverbs derives in form and content from the New Kingdom *Instruction of Amenemope* (ca. 1000 BCE).[4] We are told that Solomon "spoke three thousand proverbs" (1 Kings 4:32).

How and why did the aphorism develop and mutate under certain cultural conditions? How did it acquire such longevity? Spherical and solitary, the hedgehog is believed to have been around for fifteen million years, making it one of the oldest mammals on earth. Friendlier and smaller than the porcupine, rather than shooting quills when threatened, this teacup-sized creature rolls up into a ball. The tiny aphorism is also one of the oldest and smallest literary genres on earth. What "affordance," to employ a term from design theory that Caroline Levine has recently used to rethink literary forms, does the aphorism offer? For Levine, affordance is "used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs . . . allow[ing] us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space" (*Forms,* 6). My theory is that at least in Chinese and European cultures, the aphorism's affordance developed alongside philosophy, either in anticipation of it, in antagonism with it, or in its aftermath. As such, it oscillates between the fragment and the system.

In early China, the teachings of charismatic "masters" (*zi*, 子) circulated in oral traditions long before their establishment as eponymous texts. Though Confucius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi are considered the ancestors of Chinese philosophy, their received doctrines seem to resemble gnomic wisdom and parables more than well-developed doctrines.[5] The *Analects*, for instance, is an assemblage of textual units gathered from a variety of sayings and anecdotes that range from the fifth century BCE to possibly even

as late as the first century CE. In the Warring States and Qin periods, the compilation of fragmentary texts began as opposition to the state. By the Han period, however, the systematization of the Confucian canon served as the foundation of imperial authority. Hence the individual "masters" became collective "schools" that required voluminous commentary (chapter 1).

Before the birth of Western philosophy proper, there was the aphorism (chapter 2). In ancient Greece, the short sayings of the Presocratics, known as *gnōmai*, constitute the first efforts at philosophizing and speculative thinking, but they are also something to which Plato and Aristotle are hostile because of their deeply enigmatic nature. (*Gnōmē,* cognate with *gnosis*, "knowledge," ironically became *gnomic* in English—obscure, impenetrable, difficult, with even the connotation of *un*knowable—by way of Anglo-Saxon riddles and kennings.[6]) The *dicta* of Anaximander, Xenophanes, Parmenides, or Heraclitus often elude discursive analysis by their refusal to be corralled into systematic order. No one would deny that their pithy statements are philosophical; but Plato and Aristotle were ambivalent about them, for they contain no sustained ratiocination, just scattered utterances of supposedly wise men.

One account of the history of ancient philosophy might divide it into three ages: first, a brilliant, motley group of speculative thinkers around 585 to about 400 BCE inquired into the origins and nature of things.[7] Then came the grand schools of Plato and Aristotle as well as the Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics, in which architectonic arguments arose. The last period, after 100 BCE, might be characterized as a derivative, epigonic era: anthologies, handbooks, and exegeses summarized and elucidated the achievements of the past. One of our largest sources of the Presocratic writings, for instance, survives in the assiduous commentaries of Simplicius, a sixth-century CE late Platonist.[8] In other words, the first age creates aphorisms; the second age argues with and against them; the third age preserves them.

Though the sayings of Jesus are best known from his New Testament sermons and parables, in the early years of the Common Era there existed a genre of *logoi sophon,* "sayings of the sages," that circulated from Jewish wisdom literature to the Nag Hammadi writings (chapter 3). Biblical scholars posit that one collection of Jesus' sayings—dubbed Q—were the basic, oral units of tradition that served as the source text for Matthew and Luke. Eventually Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John were sanctioned as the orthodox Gospels by the early church fathers, but beneath their continuous narratives there still remain the vestiges of Jesus' primitive aphorisms.

The *sententiae* (brief moral sayings) of late antiquity and the Middle Ages were the distillations of biblical truths and theological doctrine.[9] The church fathers urged the faithful to ruminate on the verses of scripture like morsels of spiritual food. The ascetic virtues of the Desert Fathers—self-control, devotion, hospitality, obedience, charity—circulated widely in anecdotal sayings (*Apophthegmata Patrum*). The Eastern Orthodox collection *Philokalia* contains the "Gnomic Anthology" of Ilias the Presbyter. The *Distichs of Cato*, a collection of ancient proverbs, were the basis of the Latin schoolboy curriculum. Both Isidore of Seville and Peter of Lombard composed *Libri sententiarum,* compendia of quotations from scripture and the church fathers. Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum Maius* sought to encapsulate the known world's knowledge in the form of a mosaic of quotations from Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic in 3,718 chapters. These massive assemblages—the many made one—became the textual pillars that supported the mighty architectonics of the Christian faith.[10]

It is no exaggeration to say that during the Renaissance, commonplaces constitute the very synapses of the humanist mind (chapter 4). In retrieving the fragments of antiquity, the humanists shattered the well-ordered medieval cosmos by their new philological science. In reconstituting the corpus of classical and Christian aphorisms, they forged new epistemological galaxies—the

one became the many again. Philologists like Polydore Vergil, Filippo Beroaldo, and Erasmus collected Greek and Latin adages. Guicciardini and Gracián offered their instruction manuals in the form of maxims to help the courtier navigate the vicissitudes of political life. The plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, Calderón, and Ariosto would be unthinkable without *sententiae.* I call the "Polonius Effect" uttering wise words without knowing what they really mean; I call the "Sancho Panza Effect" uttering wise words at the wrong place and the wrong time. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus in the eponymous play brags to himself: "Is not thy common talk sound aphorisms? / Are not thy bills hung up as monuments?" (1.1.19–20). Matteo Ricci attempted to engage in intercultural East/West dialogue by composing a treatise on friendship (*jiaoyou lun,* 交友論) in one hundred maxims and also translated the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus into Chinese.[11] Francis Bacon wrote his *Novum organum* announcing the birth of a new science in aphorisms.

In seventeenth-century France, the famed moralists' concision was chiseled on the Cartesian foundations of clarity. La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Sablé, Pascal, La Bruyère, and Dufresny all diagnosed the human condition by means of *le bon mot*. Alain Badiou observes that La Rochefoucauld had the ability to "fuse the aphorism and to stretch the electric arc of the thought between poles distributed ahead of time by syntactic precision in the recognizable symmetry of French-style gardens" ("French," 353). Yet Pascal ultimately rejected this classical insistence on order: for the author of the *Pensées*, it is the halting, broken fragment, not the elegant green enclosures of Versailles, that is the only viable form of expression for a philosophy that grapples so deeply with an absent God (chapter 5). For Pascal, the aphorism is instead the tightrope flung between the "two abysses of the infinite and nothingness" (Sellier §230). The aphorism becomes not so much a distillation of doctrine as an expression of the impossibility of any formal systems.

The dialectic between aphorisms and philosophy reaches its apex in eighteenth-century Germany. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy argue in their seminal *The Literary Absolute*, the production of the self-conscious fragment of the Jena circle is a response to Kant's relentless system-building (27–58). On one hand, as an *Athenaeum Fragment* holds, "All individuals are systems at least in embryo and tendency" (§242). On the other, "a dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments" (§77). Hence, "it's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two" (§53).

In the struggles against German idealism, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche all used the microform to grapple with how to do philosophy after Kant. "I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity," Nietzsche declares (*Twilight of the Idols,* "Maxims and Arrows" §26). "The aphorism, the apothegm, in which I am the first master among Germans, are the forms of eternity. My ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book—what everyone else *does not* say in a book" (*Twilight of the Idols,* "Expeditions of an Untimely Man" §51). His aphorisms, then, from the middle-period *Human, All Too Human* to the late *Ecce Homo*, become his way of training readers not to subscribe to a particular Nietzschean program but rather to craft their own philosophy of life (chapter 6).

Indeed, at the end of one account of Western philosophy, it is Wittgenstein's suspicion of philosophy as dogma that causes him to employ the aphoristic form in both his early and late works. While his early *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* follows the logic of propositions, there are also many moments when his remarks are completely unconnected to their surrounding argument. Its last dictum, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," is oft repeated. In the posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes in the preface, "I have written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, of which there is sometimes a fairly long chain about the same subject, while I sometimes make a

sudden change, jumping from one topic to another" (viii).[12] Meanwhile, Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace,* E. M. Cioran's *Syllogismes de l'amertume* (punningly translated by Richard Howard as *All Gall Is Divided*), and Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* are attempts to write *petite prose* during and after Auschwitz.

Fragments and systems

Central to my theory, then, is that the aphorism is a dialectical play between fragments and systems. This is inspired by Schlegel's opposing statements that "aren't there individuals who contain within themselves whole systems of individuals?" (*Athenaeum* §77) and "even the greatest system is merely a fragment" (*Literary Notebooks* §930). The first definition is found in the *Athenaeum*, a journal founded by Schlegel, his brother August, Novalis, and Schleiermacher. In a series of dazzling essays, reviews, dialogues, and manifestos published over just three years—1798 to 1800—the *Athenaeum* established German Romanticism as a unified aesthetic reaction and a viable philosophical alternative to German idealism. The fault lines between Romanticism and idealism can be ascribed to the differences between their understanding of "fragments" and "systems."[13]

In the section "Transcendental Doctrine of Method," a methodological reflection in the final, hard-won parts of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes: "By an *architectonic* I mean the art of systems. Since systematic unity is what first turns common cognition into science, i.e., turns a mere aggregate of cognition into a system, architectonic is the doctrine of what is scientific in our cognition as such; and hence it necessarily belongs to the doctrine of method. . . . Now the system of all philosophical cognition is *philosophy*" (A832/B860; A838/B866). The notion of a system for Kant forms the foundation of scientific knowledge. Indeed, it is this "systematic unity" that makes knowledge possible at all, and such a system would necessarily exclude aphorisms. In the closing pages of the first *Critique*, Kant narrates the history of

Western philosophy from Plato to Aristotle to Locke to Leibniz to himself as a series of attempts to construct such architectonic systems (A854/B882).

What about the fragment? It is from the Latin *fragmen,* which comes from *frangō:* to break, shatter, defeat. In Greek it is *klasma, apoklasma,* or *apospasma*, a potsherd or bits of things, and related to the violent senses of *sparagmos*—convulsion, dislocation, dismemberment. According to A. C. Dionisotti, *fragmenta* in antiquity almost exclusively referred to material objects, not texts ("On Fragments in Classical Scholarship," 1). And if one were to define classical philology as "the systematic search through the works by those authors that survive and information about them and their authors with the aim of reconstructing these latter as far as possible," then, as Glenn Most argues, this scholarly practice in antiquity is "virtually nonexistent" ("On Fragments," 13).

For our purposes, it is crucial to draw a tight nexus between aphorisms, fragments, and classical scholarship. So many of the material remains of antiquity are frustratingly incomplete, and the works of so many Greek and Latin authors (say, Sappho or Publilius Syrus) and the voluminous anthologies and florilegia of late antiquity (Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*, or the fourteenth-century *Palatine Anthology*) are aphoristic and epigrammatic. Much of classical scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany, from Schleiermacher to Boeckh to Nietzsche to Diels, was devoted to gathering the remains of the early Greek thinkers. My point is that the genre and its fragmentary state of transmission cannily reflect and refract each other.

The Romantic cult of the fragment is a confluence of the classical philology, poetic spirit, and philosophical idealism of the time: "Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written," *Athenaeum Fragments* no. 24 states. This distinction began as early as the fourteenth century when Petrarch, arguably the first modern poet, entitled his poetic collection *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* and wept as he encountered for the first time the mutilated

manuscripts of Quintilian, likening them to a dismembered body. Textual criticism's greatest desire is the reconstitution of the whole, yet as I have argued elsewhere, the wholeness of an artifact—whether it be a text, painting, sculpture, or building—is in fact nothing but a fantasy.[14] For Kant, a "mere aggregate" of aphorisms would not a coherent unity make.

Thus the aphorism is against the architectonic systems of philosophy. Confronted with the problem of *Darstellung*—how to construct an adequate representation of transcendental knowledge—the Romantics insist that the only possible manner of doing so is in parts, hence the apotheosis of the fragment as a privileged genre.[15] The fragment (the thing) and fragmentation (the process) are what enable Schlegel to realize the idea of the absolute in a singular, individual object (hence the hedgehog, the self-sufficient work of art). "The fragment," Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, "functions as the exergue in the two senses of the Greek verb *exergazōmai*; it is inscribed outside the work, and it completes it. The Romantic fragment, far from bringing the dispersion or the shattering of the work into play, inscribes its plurality as the exergue of the total, infinite work" (48). In other words, the fragment's incompletion expresses an impossible desire for endless signification. In this sense the fragment is both a philological contingency of history as well as a philosophical exigency of the system.

In light of this discussion, we can now reread the aphorism of Schlegel that launches this book: "A fragment ought to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world like a little work of art and complete in itself like a hedgehog" (*Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel*). Encapsulated in the modal *muß* is the tension between the poles of German Romanticism: on one hand, the notion of aesthetic unity, expressed in almost every word: *kleinen Kunstwerke, umgebenden Welt, ganz abgesondert, in sich selbst, vollendet*; and on the other, the insis-

tence that any aesthetic work is but part of a larger whole, expressed simply by the subject itself: *Ein Fragment*. Art is a repository of the world that gave birth to it—but it must be severed from it to achieve autonomy. In this act of rupture the fragment comes into being.

One can now easily see how this is related to another aphorism we've seen: "Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written" (*Athenaeum Fragments* §24). The Romantics distanced themselves from Winckelmann's famed idealization of classical art as the apotheosis of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" and stressed instead the obsolescent grandeur of antiquity and all its estrangement and ruination and decay. On one hand, the recovered fragments of antiquity express the pathos of historical distance; on the other, the invented fragments of Romanticism express the pathos of aesthetic impossibility. That is to say, no work of art can ever be finished—its perfection lies in its imperfection.[16] And the fact that Schlegel composed these two perfectly polished fragments on the nature of the fragment bespeaks the metapoetic self-consciousness of his project.

How then does one adduce meaning from an aphoristic fragment? For the Romantics, the disciplines of philosophy and philology must converge in order to construct a totality of knowledge. Schleiermacher, who contributed to Schlegel's *Athenaeum* journal as well as translated Plato and produced an exegesis of the New Testament, states that whereas *criticism*, "the art of judging correctly and establishing the authenticity of text," should come to an end, *hermeneutics*, the "art of understanding particularly the written discourse of another person correctly," is endless (*Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 3–4).[17] In August Boeckh's conception, philology is "an infinite task of approximation.... The philologist's task is the historical construction of works of art and science, the history of which he must grasp and represent in vivid intuition" (Güthenke, "Enthusiasm Dwells Only in Specialization," 279–80).

In this Nietzsche follows the tradition of Schleiermacher and Boeckh. For him, philology is above all "that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of the *word* which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*" (*Daybreak,* preface §5).

Hippocratic horizons

Etymologically, "aphorism" is composed of the Greek *apo-* "from, away from" + *horizein* "to bound." A horizon is defined as "*a*: the apparent junction of earth and sky; *b*: the great circle on the celestial sphere formed by the intersection of the celestial sphere with a plane tangent to the earth's surface at an observer's position" (*Merriam-Webster*). You can't ever arrive at the horizon; it is infinitely receding, both immanent and imminent. Ever transcendent, as a line it is without beginning or end, cutting the visible and invisible.

The horizon beckons the promise of hope. It guides and orients us. In the authoritative Greek lexicon of Liddell and Scott, the connotations of *aphorizô* lean toward limiting, end-stopping, pronouncing a halt. An aphorism makes a definitive statement, sets boundaries, establishes property. Yet any good definition is aware of its own limits, what is within and without. To *define* anything, after all, is to *delimit* it. The curvature of the globe, like the shape of thinking, means that there is always a limit to our field of vision. An aphorism, in this sense, is a mark of our finitude, ever approaching the receding horizon, always visible yet never tangible. It pushes us to the edge of what can be grasped; it reaches for the *je ne sais quoi*. Beyond the horizon of language, thinking can go no further. A vector that simultaneously points within and without the boundary—*horos*—of discourse, the short saying limns the very boundaries of thinking itself.

The Greek origin of aphorisms surely predates even Homer, though he did not use the word as such. In the epics, precepts are often doled out for life's myriad experiences.[18] But the first attestation of the word *aphorismos* is actually from the title of the Hippocratic corpus (430–330 BCE). Comprised of some 457 pithy sayings, the *Aphorisms* open as follows:

> Life [βίος] is short, science [τέχνη] is long; opportunity [καιρὸς] is elusive, experiment [πεῖρα] is dangerous, judgment [κρίσις] is difficult. It is not enough for the physician to do what is necessary, but the patient and the attendants must do their part as well, and circumstances must be favorable. (I.1)

As far as insights go, this first aphorism contains some basic truisms, and today they seem somewhat clichéd. Yet as the *incipit* of a medical treatise, its parallel syntactic constructions are remarkable for the precision and intensity of their expressive force. All the subjects of the opening sentence are major keywords of Greek thought that admit of inexhaustible glosses: *bios, tekhnê, kairos, peira, krisis.* As soon as Hippocrates praises human science (*tekhnê*) in opposition to human life (*bios*), he undercuts it: biopower, as it were, is marred by the same contingencies as the thing that it tries to control.

Yet as the Hippocratic aphorisms unfold one by one, they reveal their epistemological functions: "Desperate cases need the most desperate remedies" (I.6, ethical); "Menstrual bleeding which occurs during pregnancy indicates an unhealthy foetus" (III.60, diagnostic); "Dysuria is cured by bleeding and the incision should be in the inner vein" (VI.36, prescriptive); "Hard work is undesirable for the underfed" (II.16, commonsensical); "Everything is at its weakest at the beginning and at the end, but strongest at its height" (II.33, theoretical and observational). In medicine—as in any scientific inquiry—there must be at least some

sort of stable correlation or correspondence between theory and observation. To diagnose a disease, a doctor must believe that phenomena are repeatable, predictable, and ultimately rational. Moreover, since it is not possible to observe the operations of the inner body, one must draw inferences from external symptoms.[19] The doctor is above all an interpreter of maladies: "The power of exegesis is to make clear (*saphê*) everything that is unclear (*asaphê*)," writes Galen in his *Commentary on Hippocrates'* On Fractures (18b318).

As exercises in probing the invisible through the visible, ancient medicine posits the epistemic values of aphorisms—bounded, finite words—in circumscribing the endless permutations of the somatic body.

What I am doing

My interest in aphorisms grew from my first book, *The Poetics of Ruins in Renaissance Literature*. From ruins I started to think about fragments, and fragments led me to think about aphorisms. I then became interested in the architectonics of culture and how literary texts were transmitted through time. I am now interested in the dissolution of architectonic thought and its atomization in a literary form. In other words, how systems dissolve into fragments.

Not every aphorism, of course, can be pinned down to my theory that it comes before, against, and after systematic philosophy. It is too elastic to be captured this neatly. But in what follows I show how this framework can be applied to the short sayings of Confucius, Heraclitus, Jesus, Erasmus, Bacon, Pascal, and Nietzsche. These canonical figures anticipate the pivotal stages of epistemic development or reflect on their aftermath. Their aphorisms constitute a constellation of thoughts, all the while resisting the architectonic impulse of systems. For all their irreducible differences, each author uses aphorisms not to disseminate a closed doctrine but rather to open up fresh lines of inquiry.

In chapter 1 I explore how the *Analects* of Confucius is an assemblage of the master's sayings that, while not offering a systematic account of the good, virtue, or just governance, nevertheless propelled the commentarial tradition of China that sought to codify it. In chapter 2, Heraclitus' insistence on the primacy of the *logos* anticipates the philosophizing of Plato and Aristotle, who nonetheless reject their predecessor on account of his enigmatic style. Chapter 3 explores how the *Gospel of Thomas*, like the *Analects*, is also the posthumous collection of a charismatic teacher. Obscure like Heraclitus, its apocryphal fragments rub against the smooth narratives of the sanctioned Gospels. Taken together, the first part of the book shows that the open-ended nature of the charismatic teacher's sayings inspires readers to take a multitude of interpretive approaches.

Whereas the first three chapters are on antiquity, the latter three are on modernity. The Renaissance serves as the Janus-faced turning point. Chapter 4 investigates how Erasmus looks backward in retrieving the fragments of classical culture; Bacon looks forward in forging a modern system of natural history. In chapter 5, Pascal, standing at the threshold of early modernity, rejects the system of Cartesian philosophy and embraces a Christian poetics of the fragment. Chapter 6 argues that in the aftermath of the soaring systems of Kant and Hegel, Nietzsche clears the rubble from the ruins of German idealism by composing sharp aphorisms that puncture the very soul of European philosophy. Method, order, and systems are basically anticoncepts for Bacon, Pascal, and Nietzsche. The aphorism captures the contingent truths and elusive experiences of modernity.

If in Buddhist metaphysics "form is emptiness and emptiness is form," in the aphorism form is content and content is form. There are thematic similarities across the authors I study: *A deep concern for the hidden*: in Heraclitus nature loves to hide; in *Thomas*, God is hidden; in Bacon nature has secrets; in Pascal, God is also hidden; in Nietzsche our deepest impulses are hidden from ourselves. *The infinite*: either the aphorism's meaning

is inexhaustible or its subject of inquiry—be it God or nature or the self—is boundless. The finite words of Confucius and Jesus convey infinite meaning. For Heraclitus, *logos* is so deep that "You could not in your going find the ends of the soul, though you traveled every road." For Pascal, man is "nothing compared to the infinite." For Nietzsche, "there is nothing more awesome than infinity." Because what aphorisms talk about is often concealed or interminable, by the principle of transference, they themselves take on the quality of obscurity, thus the necessity for hermeneutics. "All aphorisms must therefore be read twice," Deleuze advises (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 31).

They also share certain morphological similarities. *The discontinuous as condition of the work*: Fragmentary aphorisms—either by design or accident—obviously mean a lack of structure, links, connectives. The disconnected affords more fluid and expansive hermeneutic possibilities. In a way, it is the necessary interval between a dialogue—the author's silence can filled by the reader's voice. Nietzsche writes that "an aphorism [*eine Sentenz*] is a link in a chain of thoughts; it demands the reader to reconstruct this chain on his own: this is a lot to ask" (*Kritische Studienausgabe* 8:361). Floating free of any continuous discourse, interpretations of fragments and configurations of their collection can therefore be potentially unlimited. *A high degree of repetition:* In trying to compress the maximal into the minimal, aphoristic writing can become a recursive exercise of saying the same thing in many different ways. Its concision invites repetitions and modulations. But this repetition is never sterile—as Deleuze would argue in *Difference and Repetition*, it functions as an intensification of the problems at hand, affording discovery and experimentation.

Finally, *the aesthetics of the unfinished:* Bacon's *Instauratio magna*, Pascal's *Apology for the Christian Religion,* Nietzsche's alleged *Will to Power* are all incomplete. Erasmus' catalog of the *Adages* can go on forever. The reason for this seems to be less due to the author's limitations than the ambitious nature of their projects—their fragments resist containment into a final system.

"There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). The discontinuous, the repetitious, the unfinished—these all express the ever iterative process of infinite becoming.

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In our short-attention-span age of tweets, memes, and GIFs, the aphorism is the most enduring microform of all. For all the ubiquity of the aphoristic form as a medium of communication and method of thinking—or precisely because of its pervasive presence—the genre has escaped sustained critical attention. The existing scholarship, which is substantial, either consists of descriptive surveys or is very narrow (see my bibliographic essay at the end of the book). There are simply very few unified theories of the aphorism out there. And a history of the aphorism (which this book is not) would be long and tedious. Some might even say that it is too protean, too amorphous to write coherently about. Or perhaps to explain an aphorism evacuates its pungency or mystery: "We undermine any idea by entertaining it *exhaustively*; we rob it of charm, even of life," E. M. Cioran says (*All Gall Is Divided*, 31). For Paul Valéry, "Obscurity, a product of two factors. If my mind is richer, more rapid, freer, more disciplined than yours, neither you nor I can do anything about it" (*The Art of Poetry*, 179). *Pace* Cioran and Valéry, my hope is to demonstrate that to read aphorisms transhistorically and transculturally, selectively, carefully, with *lento*, as Nietzsche recommends, is to begin to discover something about their infinite horizons and inexhaustible depths.

The power of the aphorism is something we are only beginning to explore. An ancient Chinese saying goes, "The tip of an [animal's] autumn hair [proverbial for the smallest possible thing] can get lost in the unfathomable. This means that what is so small that nothing can be placed inside it is [the same as] something so large that nothing can be placed outside it" (Liu An, *Huainanzi*

16.17). In laying out my argument, I try to look into the small and large, inside and outside. I strive not only to write to the specialist but also for wider readers in the humanities. I hope that the reader of Confucius might find something illuminating in Bacon, and the expert on Pascal might find something interesting in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Needless to say, what I'm proposing is only *a*, not *the,* theory of the aphorism. It imagines one of many possible theories.

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