

### Generic Inquiry 3 - Aphorisms

Due: Tue, Mar 27

Now that we have looked at a poetic genre (i.e., the sonnet) and a prose genre (i.e., the grotesque), we will now turn our attention to a set of related non-fiction prose genres—the *aphorism* and the *essay*. Our anthology, curiously, contains very little non-fiction prose even though the essay, as well as some works of social and literary criticism are typically regarded as literature (see for example, Volume 2 of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which contains William Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, selections from Thomas De Quincey's autobiographical *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, a selection from T. H. Huxley's philosophical *Agnosticism and Christianity*).

No writing assignment; but ...

Extra Credit: After reading the following, find one example of aphorism (*not* included in this handout) that you like. Your example may come from literature or popular culture. Or, write your own aphorism.

#### The Idea of Aphorism

The Harmon-Holman *Handbook to Literature* defines *aphorism* as "A concise statement of a principle or precept given in pointed words." The aphorism is similar to the proverb, except that aphorisms are attributed to individuals while proverbs, instead, are regarded as anonymous and attributed to cultural groups. The *Handbook* offers only one example, from the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates: "Life is short, art is long, opportunity fleeting, experimenting dangerous, reasoning difficult." But aphorisms can be found throughout history; and in our own time, a popular type of aphorism is "the one-liner," for example, Steven Wright's "I feel like I'm diagonally parked in a parallel universe"; or, if you prefer old-school, Groucho Marx's "I'm not crazy about reality, but it's still the only place to get a decent meal."

#### Medical Origin of the Aphorism

The English word *aphorism* comes from the ancient Greek *aphorismos*, which literally means "a boundary, a delimitation, a determination." The Greeks also used it to mean "a succinct statement"; and the oldest surviving aphorisms are nearly 2500 years old, found in *The Aphorisms* (ΑΦΟΡΙΣΜΟΙ) by Hippocrates (yes, the Hippocrates of the Hippocratic oath; c. 460–c. 370 BC). This medical origin suggests that the purpose of the aphorism is to offer advice for the care of others, very literally "advice to live by." Here are a few examples from that work; as you can see these early aphorisms concern health and disease:

Life is short, and Art long; the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.

- The "Art" that Hippocrates refers to is the "art of medicine"; and his point appears to be that a physician will find himself in the position of having to make a medical decision without complete knowledge of the "art of medicine." In ancient Greek, the word *krisis* refers to the decision a doctor must make either to intervene or to let the body heal itself.

The changes of the season mostly engender diseases, and in the seasons great changes either of heat or of cold, and the rest agreeably to the same rule.

South winds induce dullness of hearing, dimness of visions, heaviness of the head, torpor, and languor; when these prevail, such symptoms occur in diseases. But if the north wind prevail, coughs,

affections of the throat, hardness of the bowels, dysuria attended with rigors, and pains of the sides and breast occur. When this wind prevails, all such symptoms may be expected in diseases.

### **Development of the Aphorism in Modern English and European Literature**

Early English Examples: The earliest usage of the English word *aphorism*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is during the mid-sixteenth century, when it meant "a 'definition' or concise statement of a principle in any science." Later in the century, it acquires the meaning of "any principle or precept expressed in few words; a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import; a maxim." Here are some examples:

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), English philosopher and statesman. From *Novum Organum* (1620), Basil Montague, ed. and trans. *The Works of Francis Bacon*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Parry & MacMillan, 1854), 3: 343-71.

1. MAN, as the minister and interpreter of nature, does and understands as much as his observations on the order of nature, either with regard to things or the mind, permit him, and neither knows nor is capable of more.
2. The unassisted hand, and the understanding left to itself, possess but little power. Effects are produced by the means of instruments and helps, which the understanding requires no less than the hand. And as instruments either promote or regulate the motion of the hand, so those that are applied to the mind prompt or protect the understanding.
3. Knowledge and human power are synonymous, since the ignorance of the cause frustrates the effect. For nature is only subdued by submission, and that which in contemplative philosophy corresponds with the cause, in practical science becomes the rule.
4. Man, whilst operating, can only apply or withdraw natural bodies; nature, internally, performs the rest.
5. Those who become practically versed in nature, are the mechanic, the mathematician, the physician, the alchymist, and the magician; but all (as matters now stand) with faint efforts and meagre success.
6. It would be madness, and inconsistency, to suppose that things which have never yet been performed, can be performed without employing some hitherto untried means.
7. The creations of the mind and hand appear very numerous, if we judge by books and manufactures : but all that variety consists of an excessive refinement, and of deductions from a few well known matters; not of a number of axioms.

German Development: The aphorism was fully developed into a literary form by nineteenth-century German writers, especially Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Nietzsche.

**Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel** (1772-1829), German philosopher. From "Aphorisms from the *Athenaeum* (1798)," translated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1968).

Aphorisms are the true form of the universal philosophy.

The whole history of modern poetry is a continuous commentary on the short text of philosophy: every art should become science, and every science should become art; poetry and philosophy should be united.

Irony is a clear consciousness of an eternal agility, of the infinitely abundant chaos.

Beauty is that which is simultaneously attractive and sublime.

Poetry can be criticized only through poetry. A critique which itself is not a work of art, either in content as representation of the necessary impression in the process of creation, or through its beautiful form and in its liberal tone in the spirit of the old Roman satire, has no right of citizenship in the realm of art.

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900), Prussian-born philologist and philosopher. Nietzsche is the most influential writer of aphorisms. From *Human, All Too Human* (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches, Ein Buch für freie Geister*), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University press, 1996).

494

Destination and paths.— Many people are obstinate about the path once it is taken; few people about the destination.

495

The infuriating thing about an individual way of living.— People are always angry at anyone who chooses very individual standards for his life; because of the extraordinary treatment which that man grants to himself, they feel degraded, like ordinary beings.

497

Unwittingly noble.— A man's behavior is unwittingly noble if he has grown accustomed never to want anything from men, and always to give to them.

499

Friend.— Fellow rejoicing [*Mitfreude*], not fellow suffering [*Mitleiden*], makes the friend.

501

Delight in oneself.— "Delight in an enterprise," they say; but in truth it is delight in oneself, by means of an enterprise.

502

The modest one.— He who is modest with people shows his arrogance all the more with things (the city, state, society, epoch, or mankind). That is his revenge.

503

Envy and jealousy.— Envy and jealousy are the private parts of the human soul. The comparison can perhaps be pursued further.

504

The most refined hypocrite.— To speak about oneself not at all is a very refined form of hypocrisy.

505

Annoyance.— Annoyance is a physical illness that is by no means ended simply by eliminating the cause of the annoyance.

506

Representatives of truth.— The champions of truth are hardest to find, not when it is dangerous to tell it, but rather when it is boring.

508

Out in nature.— We like to be out in nature so much because it has no opinion about us.

513.

Life as the product of life.— However far man may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself—ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography.

515

From experience.— That something is irrational is no argument against its existence, but rather a condition for it.

516

Truth.— No one dies of fatal truths nowadays: there are too many antidotes.

518

Human lot.— Whoever thinks more deeply knows that he is always wrong, whatever his acts and judgments.

520

Danger of our culture.— We belong to a time in which culture is in danger of being destroyed by the means of culture.