

# Some Aphoristic Reading Effects: The Experience of an Apparent Disproportion between Textual Size and Meaning

**Efectos de la lectura aforística: la experiencia de una  
desproporción evidente entre el tamaño textual y el significado**

**Certains Effets aphoristique de la lecture: L'expérience d'une  
apparente disproportion entre la longueur d'un texte et son sens**

---

Marco Aurelio Ángel-Lara   
Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro – México

Recibido: 2013-07-01

Envío a pares: 2013-07-03

Aprobado por pares: 2013-10-15

Aceptado: 2013-10-15

Pensamiento y Cultura | ISSN: 0123-0999 | eISSN: 2027-5331  
pensam.cult | Vol. 16-2 | Diciembre de 2013 | pp. 122-143

## Some Aphoristic Reading Effects: The Experience of an Apparent Disproportion between Textual Size and Meaning

**Abstract:** Many contemporary readers have identified such a reading experience of aphorisms as an exceptional *experience of a disproportion between textual size and meaning*. Such an experience has been associated intrinsically with the genre and several have proposed their models of explanation for it. These models are mainly based on the ideas of text as container and meaning as content; in this essay I propose an alternative explanation relying on another set of concepts.

**Key words:** Aphorism, Genre Theory, Disproportion, Textual Size, Meaning

## Efectos de la lectura aforística: la experiencia de una desproporción evidente entre el tamaño textual y el significado

**Resumen:** Muchos lectores de aforismos han identificado cierta experiencia de la lectura de aforismos literarios como la de una inusitada *desproporción entre la extensión del texto y el significado*. Esta ha sido asociada intrínsecamente al género y muchos expertos han propuesto modelos de explicación para la misma. Estos modelos están basados en las ideas de *texto como continente y significado como contenido*; en este ensayo propongo un modelo alternativo basado en otro juego de conceptos.

**Palabras clave:** aforismo, teoría de géneros, desproporción, extensión, significado

## Certains Effets aphoristique de la lecture: L'expérience d'une apparente disproportion entre la longueur d'un texte et son sens

**Résumé:** Beaucoup de lecteurs contemporains ont identifié dans la lecture d'aphorismes une inhabituelle *disproportion entre la longueur d'un texte et son sens*. Cette situation a été intrinsèquement liée au genre et des nombreux experts ont proposé des modèles d'explication pour cette question. Ces modèles sont basés sur les idées du texte comme continent et le sens comme contenu; cet essai propose un modèle alternatif basé sur un autre ensemble de concepts.

**Mots-clés:** Aphorisme, théorie du genre, disproportion, extension, sens.

The *too much* and the *enough* must be united, there must be abundance and economy. The narrow and the wide, the little and the much, must be mingled. The sound must be brief and the meaning infinite.

*Joseph Joubert*

## Introduction

I will speculate on a reading effect of aphorisms. I aim to propose a hypothesis to explain what I have called *the experience of an apparent disproportion between textual size and meaning*. Probably linked with the general acceptance of concision as a feature of the aphoristic genre, is the opinion that aphorisms carry a surprisingly vast quantity of meaning, and that such a quantity is proportionally much larger than that carried by other texts. There is a common tendency to attribute this feature to the whole genre that also needs to be commented on, in order to limit this paper's subject: not all aphorisms produce the same reading experience (the mere existence of Hippocratic and medical aphorisms proves this point).

Although the last statements help narrow down the scope of this paper to aphoristic texts that cause *the experience of an apparent disproportion between textual size and meaning*, the idea that such a scope should be restrained within the group of texts that can produce such effects, takes one into the slippery terrain of speculating on subjectivity. Thinking about the experience of quantity of meaning, seeming to surpass its linguistic form, inevitably implies an interaction between texts and those who read (or experience) them as highly meaningful. We are not only dealing with objective features of texts, but also with a subjective experience of them. It is not, however, my intention to develop a thorough explanation of this subject; but instead, to suggest that it is more important to understand the relations between elements of the aphoristic communication (text, context and users included) than it is to focus (as has been done quite often) on the study of one single element –such as the text itself.

## Identifying an aphoristic reading experience

### Container-content solutions

When discussing a reading effect, the first difficulty is finding evidence that confirms the existence of similar experiences in other readers. Such evidence will not necessarily validate that kind of experience as *the* experience of reading, but it will justify it as a subject of discussion: the account of somebody else witnessing a similar subjective occurrence will indicate that one is not simply talking about an individual delirium. Once such a validation has been found, one has, to, nevertheless, avoid jumping too quickly from basic agreements to theoretical conclusions. We need to be careful, not to claim that consensus about the existence of a subjective experience proves something other than mere consensus about the existence of such an experience, and equally, not to claim the discovery of an unmistakable mark of texts which belong to this genre.

I will start by quoting extensively from two texts about aphorisms. One is from the essay 'La Rochefoucauld: *Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes*' by Roland Barthes, who wrote:

Dans la maxime, **l'intellect perçoit** d'abord des substances pleines, non le flux progressif de la pensée. Si je lis : « *Tout le monde se plaint de sa mémoire, et personne de son jugement* », mon esprit est frappé par la plénitude de ces termes solitaires : mémoire, jugement, se plaindre ; et comme, malgré tout, ces mots-vedettes s'enlèvent sur un certain fond plus modeste, j'ai le sentiment (d'ailleurs profondément esthétique) d'avoir affaire à une véritable économie métrique de la pensée, distribuée dans l'espace fixe et fini qui lui est imparti (la longueur d'une maxime). [Bold mine], (Barthes 1972, 72)

I should emphasize that, beside reticence about the metaphysical aura of words such as “essences” and “substances”, the focus of my main concern is the difficulty of clearly understanding the concept of *intellectual perception* applied to such things.<sup>1</sup>

The other text is “The Craft of Aphorism: Philosophy above the Book” by Dustin Atlas, in which one reads:

With most philosophical texts, one need only learn the author’s ‘voice’, or style, and one is ‘ushered into the truth’ and can coast along the surface of their work, ‘absorbing’ meaning. [...] But the aphorism makes this impossible: there is always more, for in the spaces cut between, a labyrinth inevitably opens.

Much like montage, the reader/viewer is ‘shocked’ with every cut, and it is perhaps for this reason that the aphorism is able to promote thought in even the most overstimulated times, to cut into the sleeping consciousness. [...] there are relations between our thoughts –often impossible to articulate– that are greater than any individual thought. [...] Meaning originates in the spaces between our thoughts, not the thoughts themselves.

---

1 On the other hand, some lines of the text provide clues about the character of those *essences* and *substances*:

Lorsqu’un langage – et c’est le cas de la maxime – propose quelques termes de sens fort, essentiel, il est fatal que la relation s’absorbe en eux : plus les substantifs sont forts, plus la relation tend à l’immobilité. C’est qu’en effet, si l’on vous présente deux objets forts (j’entends des objets psychologiques), par exemple la *sincérité* et la *dissimulation*, le rapport qui s’instaure spontanément entre eux tend toujours à être un rapport immobile de manifestation, c’est-à-dire d’équivalence [...] il s’agit en somme par l’état même de la structure, d’une relation d’essence, non de faire, d’identité, non de transformation. (Barthes 1972, 74)

Barthes also wrote some few pages after:

Cet amour-propre a à peu près les propriétés d’une substance chimique – on pourrait presque dire magique – puisque cette substance est à la fois vitale et unitaire : [...] c’est un Protée ; comme puissance de désordre, la passion (ou l’amour-propre, c’est la même chose) est un dieu actif, tourmenteur. (Barthes 1972, 83)

It seems that the assumption of a substratum of meaning as the ground of aphoristic structures, which communicates them essentially, would explain the idea of structures that are « coupée du discours » but not « coupée du signifiante » (Barthes, 1972: 71 and ss.)

Of course, montage, external contradiction, inevitably leads to ‘misunderstandings’, but this only if to be ‘understood’ is to have one’s own thought copied into the mind of the reader. The aphorism does not ‘disseminate’ or ‘communicate’ meaning, it pushes us to generate meaning ourselves. (Atlas 2005, 40-41)

It is difficult to know exactly what Barthes refers to when he informs us of an *intellectual perception* of “substances pleines” inside the maxim; however, if such an experience was obtained through reading, then one could simply think that Barthes’ mention of the aesthetic feeling of dealing with «une véritable économie métrique de la pensée» distributed within the maxim’s space is, basically, an account of the effects of such reading experience. On the other hand, Dustin Atlas’ metaphorical style attempts to portray the contrast between what happens in “the mind of the reader” when dealing with aphorisms, as opposed to reading other philosophical texts.<sup>2</sup> He claims that reading aphorisms produces more meaning than reading most philosophical texts –when reading the latter “(one) can coast along the surface [...], ‘absorbing’ meaning. [...] But the aphorism makes this impossible: there is always more.”

Both testimonies describe the experience of a seeming disproportion between the size of these texts and their ‘content’ or ‘meaning’ - which can

---

2 Atlas believes that metaphors can account for the aphoristic techniques (“access to aphoristic *techné* must take place via metaphor” (Atlas 2005, 36)) and he uses metaphors such as ‘the knife’ and ‘the mirror’ to this end. Comparing his concepts to some of Barthes and Derrida’s metaphors (‘spur’, ‘thorax’ and ‘hard skeleton’), he gives some characteristics of ‘the knife’:

The hard, sharp, and cutting aspects of the aphorism are often noticed. Barthes employs images similar to Derrida’s spur: the “thorax” and the “hard” skeleton. However, while one metaphor might possibly exhaust the style of a single writer, it is clearly inadequate for the aphorism as such. Thus to access aphoristic *techné*, I employ two metaphors: the knife and the mirror; for the *epistémé* that aphoristic *techné* exists in relation to, I employ the labyrinth and the hall of mirrors.

The knife is more versatile than either the spur or the thorax: it attacks, parries, slices food, opens letters... It is, after the club, one of the most primitive technologies we have, and yet, one of the most delicate. [...] but my primary interest is in the knife that *reveals*: opening a veil with a single cut – but more immediately, we must examine the knife that turns back on the aphorism itself, severing its copula. (Atlas 2005, 36)

be taken as an equivalent to the reading experience about which I want to hypothesize. However, to back up this claim, it may be necessary to make a clarification about Dustin Atlas' argument.

Atlas claims: "I have chosen to define the aphorism through its *techne*" (2005, 34). To avoid a possible confusion, he acknowledges the complexity of the concept *techne*:

The specific meaning of *techne* is debatable. Following one interpretation of Aristotle's delineations of knowledge, *techne* is translated as 'craft' and defined in opposition to *episteme* (typically translated as 'knowledge') (Parry 1). This division is, however, problematic and simplistic, especially if one draws one's terms from Plato instead of Aristotle (Parry 3); Plato, because of his dialectical (or, arguably, dialogical) approach, rarely defines a term or concept to the exclusion of its opposite—they always intermingle and inform each other. (2005, 34)

And he is keen to claim that he has chosen to define a type of writing by the technical knowledge related to its *creation*:

Regardless, **it is clear that any craft or technique involves some sort of (technical) knowledge, and knowledge is acquired through, and thus involves, craft** (such as research); each shapes and is inextricably bound to the other. The craft of aphorism allows an access to thinking, facilitates a certain type of thought, which other techniques of writing do not and can not; **it is, for this reason, truly a technology of writing: a creation** that allows for the saying of things otherwise unsayable. Therefore, I define the aphorism as a **type of writing that allows this possibility through its particular techne**. (Atlas 2005, 34, Bold is mine)

Nonetheless, it could be argued that if a) Atlas is talking about aphorisms only based on his reading experience and, as a reader, b) he is *receiving* and *interpreting* a *crafted* written product after its production process has been finished, then c) the *techne* of production or craft knowledge is far from his experience.

Atlas' statements seem to be based on a basic confusion between *the techne of crafting an aphorism* and *the effect produced by an (crafted) aphorism in a reader*. It could be argued that an impression that a reader gets from reading aphorisms (or any text) is not about the crafting process (or *techne*), but an effect caused by the final product of such a process. If a reader thinks or feels that aphorisms are like a knife which cuts veils revealing something, then the most one can concede is that he is entitled to his impression of (reading) aphorisms, but it would be too much to attribute the technical knowledge of the writing of aphorisms to their readers. Assuming intentionality in the design of a text, the most one may say about a reader's impression of such a text is that it is an effect that a writer has attempted to produce. Quite simply, Atlas is talking about aphoristic reading effects, but equating such effects with some possible 'technical' causes. This is why his article can be used to discuss a reading experience, rather than -as he may prefer- writing technicalities of aphorisms.

At this point, it may be necessary to stress that a difference exists between an experience and the way we conceptualize it. As with Barthes and Atlas' attempts, my translation of a subjective occurrence, when reading certain aphoristic texts, into conceptual terms, should be taken only as a model for discussion - one which, at its best, could help to orientate us (but no map should be taken as the territory).

When reading some aphorisms, I have felt as if there were a noticeable disproportion between the size of the texts and the effects that they produce in me. The time it takes me to decipher the letters of some aphoristic texts does not seem to correspond with the duration of a thorough understanding and/or an emotive effect. It would be understandable to think, along with Barthes, that there is so much thought (*pensée*) within so small a space.<sup>3</sup> However, his conception of the maxim as a super-compact container of thought is hardly believable, if one does not accept a concept such as 'substances pleines.' Dustin Atlas, on the other hand, suggests another container-content relation for aphorisms and meaning.

---

3 In his *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism*, James Geary expresses the same idea in these words:

I was amazed at how such a compact statement could contain so much significance. (Geary 2005, 4)



Instead of Barthes' idea of thought-inside-text, Atlas places thought out of texts; more exactly between them: "the external cut forces us to look between aphorisms for meaning, just as, in montage, meaning is formed between the shots. This is why, despite their seeming simplicity, reading aphoristic texts is such hard work." (Atlas 2005, 40)

## Importance of context

As an alternative to these two solutions to explain this apparent disproportion between size and meaning of some aphoristic texts, my hypothesis will draw on relations between aphoristic texts and their context. It has to be added that although the peculiarity of the aphoristic context has been noticed, I have not come across an explanation that explores (or develops with certain detail) its role as part of a plausible solution. However, I strongly believe that such a path of research is worth pursuing. To explain the experience of an apparent disproportion between textual size and meaning, this proposal will not rely on the container-content metaphor – at least not proposing texts as containers and meaning as content. However, I will introduce concepts of an undeniable metaphorical quality (for instance, *access device* and, it can be argued, *context* itself), which is to say that, as a model of explanation, this proposal -as all the others I know- cannot aim to achieve anything more than consistency.

It has to be said that in his article, Dustin Atlas mentions explicitly the concept of *context*. However, he does not give it particular importance when finding meaning:

A good aphorism should be capable of standing alone; the longevity of certain aphorisms is due almost entirely to this **independence, their ability to function in countless contexts**. On the other hand, the aphorism is at its best only within the context of other 'related' aphorisms. The internal contradiction of the solitary aphorism causes the reader to move beyond it, **to look outwards**. External contradiction between aphorisms causes the reader to look *between*. It is here that the knife reaches perfection, cutting both within the aphorism, and without. (Atlas 2005, 40. Bold is mine)

In the first two lines of this quotation, he suggests for aphoristic texts an independence of context (in bold); though, later on, he suggests a group of related aphorisms as the most favourable context of utterance for an aphoristic text. However, he does not further develop this idea.

The importance, or at least the exceptionality, of the text-context relations of certain aphorisms has been directly addressed before; for instance, Déchery writes:

- Une maxime a-t-elle un contexte? Elle n'en a pas et elle les a tous : un événement, une personne, une autre maxime, toutes les autres maximes, la tradition aphoristique... C'est son ambigüité mais c'est aussi sa position première.
- Dans le système de la langue tout a du sens. Même le silence. Dans celui de l'écriture, le blanc aussi signifie.
- Le contexte de la maxime est ce blanc dans lequel viennent résonner toutes les autres.
- C'est dans l'oubli du savoir antérieur qu'une connaissance se forme ; c'est sur fond d'absence qu'une perception se forme. Sur quelles absences la maxime et l'aphorisme s'appuient-ils ? (Déchery 1995, 8)

Déchery's astonishment shows a certain awareness of context's complexity and of the complexity of relations that aphoristic texts can establish with it. In this sense, his answer to the question « Une maxime a-t-elle un contexte ? » is significant: « Elle n'en a pas et elle les a tous. »

If I am to use text-context relations to explain the size-meaning disproportion, it is necessary to overcome Déchery's surprise at the complexities of aphoristic context, by clarifying them conceptually. To this end, it will be useful to recall Fowler's three categories about context:

- *Context of utterance* is “the physical surroundings or ‘setting’; the distribution of the participants vis-à-vis one another [...]; the channel employed.” (112)
- *Context of culture* is “the whole network of social and economic conventions, all the institutions and the familiar settings and relationships, constituting the culture at large, especially in so far as these bear on particular utterance contexts, and influence the structure of discourse occurring within them.” (114)

- *Context of reference* is “the topic or subject-matter of a text. (The subject-matter which is referred to is often known in linguistics as the field or domain of a text.)” (Fowler 1996, 114)

In the next paragraphs, these categories will be applied to the analysis of Déchery’s words, softening the reasons for such bewilderment.

Déchery’s idea that a maxim does not have context, yet has all of them, could be explained in these terms: a maxim has not an ordinary context of utterance made by more text (its visual surrounding seems to be empty and it can produce the impression that a maxim has no context). However, the relations that such a kind of text can establish with other types of context (of reference and of culture) are so numerous that they would seem to allow all possible relations between a text and the existent contexts. Thus, although maxims visually seem to be isolated from any context, they are able to establish relations with context of reference such as « *un événement, une personne, une autre maxime* » or with context of culture « *toutes les autres maximes, la tradition aphoristique.* »<sup>4</sup>

Déchery also senses the communicative importance of the blank space for aphoristic texts: « *Dans le système de la langue tout a du sens. Même le silence. Dans celui de l’écriture, le blanc aussi signifie.* » The analogy *silence-blank* is useful, but requires clarification. In my opinion, the blank has a very important semiological function: even before the act of recognizing the written words that the blank surrounds, it acts as a signal to trigger a generic reading. At this point of the reading process, if the blank signifies something, it would be no more than a mere signal, something like: ‘attention here, there is a text which needs a particular decoding.’ Thus, in an aphoristic system of communication, the blank is designed to cause a visual impression that prepares the reader to start an appropriate textual interpretation.

In other words, it is not within that signal that one finds ‘resonances’ as Déchery believes (« *Le contexte de la maxime est ce blanc dans lequel viennent résonner toutes les autres* »). When decoding a maxim, it is the

---

4 Problems of Fowler’s categories have been addressed in my article “Aphorisms and Philosophy” published by the *Journal of English Studies*; but, here, the fuzziness between contexts of reference and of culture can be easily noticed.

reader who can make the appropriate connections between the text and its contexts; it is the reader who finds appropriate contextual references for a particular text. And, previously, it was an aphoristic author, of course, who encoded the clues for such a decoding process.

The blank, in the aphoristic context of utterance, is simply signalling the importance of certain text-context relations. It is only our confusion, between different types of context that leads to the production of over-sophisticated explanations, in which (a visual impression of) nothingness becomes the origin of meaning: « *C'est dans l'oubli du savoir antérieur qu'une connaissance se forme; c'est sur fond d'absence qu'une perception se forme. Sur quelles absences la maxime et l'aphorisme s'appuient-ils?* »

Resuming my position, I share Déchery's feeling about the remarkable qualities of aphoristic context, but I believe that more clarity can be achieved by applying categories of context to different stages of an aphoristic reading process. First, the visual surrounding of a maxim (its context of utterance) is not mere nothingness, but a signal to trigger a generic decoding from a reader; then the reader searches for an appropriate context (of reference or of culture) to complement the (particular) text in order to produce the full sense of it. It is only by considering the whole group of contexts and the group of texts as indivisible unities that, in the first impression, one could think that maxims have no context and, in the following one, that they also have all (« Elle n'en a pas et elle les a tous »).

The necessity of applying these categories of context to the (aphoristic) reading process implies the addition of a diachronic dimension, which allows us an easy division of the analysis. The main importance of *context of utterance* can be allocated within the first stage of such a reading process, which is previous to the interpretation of texts. *Context of utterance* functions mainly as a semiotic signal, i. e. a generic convention which reminds us to read aphorisms properly. It is not a mere oblivion of previous knowledge (*l'oubli du savoir antérieur*), but a reminder for using our knowledge of generic codes. On the other hand, the role of *context of reference* (and of culture) becomes important within a second stage, in which the reader has to make sense of the text. I believe that it is by linking the text with its context(s) of reference that readers can interpret some types of aphorism. From this perspective, it

is not on the basis of an oblivion or of an absence that aphoristic readers achieve knowledge or perception («*une connaissance se forme ; c'est sur fond d'absence qu'une perception se forme*»), but through an interpretative process of relating texts with fields of reference.

## Producing meaning by linking texts with context

### Defining the question: Importance of relations between elements of the system

To deal with the experience of the aphoristic size-meaning disproportion, any attempt at an explanation that leaves aside context and users would be forced to look only within the text itself for a solution. That is why Barthes proposes the existence of amazing but very controversial internal elements such as *substances pleines*. While, Atlas' attempt does not only focus on the texts themselves, it does, nonetheless, somehow unfortunately dismiss the input of context for an explanation, and focuses (perhaps too much) on the importance of the individual reader for the production of (misunderstood) meaning:

Much like montage, the reader/viewer is 'shocked' with every cut, and it is perhaps for this reason that the aphorism is able to promote thought in even the most overstimulated times [...] Of course, montage, external contradiction, inevitably leads to 'misunderstandings', but this only if to be 'understood' is to have one's own thought copied into the mind of the reader. The aphorism does not 'disseminate' or 'communicate' meaning, it pushes us to generate meaning ourselves. (Atlas 2005, 40-1)

By describing the matter of this speculation *as a reading experience of an apparent disproportion between the size of aphoristic texts and their 'content' or 'meaning'*, I am determining the problem in a way in which its explanation cannot be searched for within the internal structure of the text –as in Barthes' attempt. Thus, the question is described as a reader's experience; *i. e.*, the effect is relative to somebody's subjectivity:

in talking about such a disproportion there should be a subject to whom a small sized text becomes highly meaningful. Nonetheless, to place too much importance in only another element of the reading process, such as readers' subjectivity (as Atlas does by isolating the reader as the touchstone for the production of meaning), would be counterproductive, seeing as I want to discuss the reading effects of *a type of text*. What is more, drawing from the perspective of a communicative system, (aphoristic) texts cannot be understood by only studying the texts themselves as isolated elements, but by understanding them as part of a process of communication, in which their relations with other elements such as context and users (*i. e.* readers and authors) are very important as well. From this perspective, the concept of meaning as *the* content of aphorisms loses consistency, its limits become fuzzy and it begins to arise as part of a linguistic interaction.

### Finding shared References: the role of users of the genre

In an article published by the *Journal of English Studies*, I argued that the widespread belief that *aphorisms are philosophical*, a convention that specially aids the process of contextualization of certain types of aphorism (which I called there *type c1*) texts). If I am right, it can be inferred that these aphorisms (being considered a type of text that refers to the context of philosophical wisdom -as characterized in my paper) have an assumed quality: in users' hands, they become an *access device* into such a philosophical context. On the other hand, such a context is a domain of knowledge that offers a vast quantity of unstated information to complete the production of meaning. From this point of view, the metaphor *text-meaning as container-content* does not work anymore; instead, the metaphor *texts as tools to parasite (or freeload) contexts (or external meaning stores)* would seem to be a more accurate one.

Changing one metaphor for another will suggest a different problem: without the image of a small container and a vast content, it cannot be proposed that there is a seeming disproportion between a small text and the meaning contained in it. Instead, the new metaphor suggests a highly functional text for teasing out meaning from somewhere else. The dynamic aspect of this metaphor should be highlighted: aphorisms

appear as things (designed) to be inserted (by a user, i.e. the reader) within certain contexts shared with another user (the text's maker), *i. e.* they are only one element of a process of construction of meaning; thus, from this understanding of aphoristic communication, roles of authors and readers are essential for the functionality of texts. A comprehensive explanation from this perspective should be opposed to those explanations which reduce such reading effects to the qualities of elements isolated from other elements of such a process.

At this point, the role of users (authors and readers) of the system can be emphasized: linking texts and context requires the participation of competent agents, those who can play by the conventions of the system to encode and/or to decode the texts. The ability of aphoristic makers to provide, in only a few words, enough clues to hint at a major framework of meaning has to be complemented by the readers' ability to understand allusions, find shared references and retrieve complementary contexts, to make full sense of texts. Henri de La Chapelle-Bessé, friend of La Rochefoucauld, highlighted the readers' role in this way:

The obscurity... is not always the writer's fault. *Les Réflexions ...* must be written in a compressed style [...] clever eyes will indeed see here all the subtlety of the painter's art and the beauty of his thought; but this beauty is not made for everyone [...]. One must then take the time to penetrate the meaning and the force of the words, the mind must move across the whole spectrum of their meaning before settling down to the formation of a judgment. (quoted by Lewis 1977, 43)<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, the skills of hinting at and manipulating contexts by using small texts and, on the other hand, the skills of providing appropriate contexts to decode them are fundamental for this communicative process. In the following statement, Nietzsche attempts to defend his books of aphorisms against the bad reception they got –I do not pretend

---

5 The text of Henri de La Chapelle-Bessé is "Discours sur le *Réflexions ou sentences et Maximes morales*."

that Nietzsche is speaking about exactly the same thing as I am, but I think his text helps to enhance my point, that a shared background is a condition *sine qua non* for certain aphorisms:

Ultimately, no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows. What one has no access to through experience one has no ear for. Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events which lie outside the possibility of general or even of rare experience –that it is the *first* language for a new range of experiences.<sup>6</sup> (Nietzsche 1977, 22)

It can be said about the decoding process of these texts that it is not particularly common among the field of literary genres; we are used to reading within somehow clearly specified contexts. Customarily, one expects that sentences within a book will make sense in relation to a chapter, to the plot of the book or even in relation to another sentence of the same page. That is why, for instance, when reading a novel, the beginning is quite often the most difficult part: it is not until one picks up enough information (for instance, becoming familiar with the frame constituted by its characters, understanding their goals and their situation), one can feel how the plot is being developed by the sequence of sentences of the text, one can feel that narration flows. In contrast, from the point of view of the aphorist, there is no time to build up a frame to interpret these types of aphorisms; on the contrary, the context is assumed as a reference and hinted at by the text, in such a manner that some readers might get the same impression as Clifton Fadiman: “Aphorisms supply their own context” (Fadiman 1962, 7). My proposal is that it is the reader who infers the field of reference and who supplies it. Only then can she interpret the text in the light of a (an appropriate) context,

---

6 In a somewhat over-emotional tone, Nietzsche also wrote:

When it wants to communicate itself, every nobler spirit and taste also selects its audience; in selecting them it also debars ‘the others.’ All the more subtle rules of style have their origin here: they hold at arm’s length, they create distance, they forbid ‘admission,’ understanding – while at the same time they alert the ears of those who are related to us through their ears. (Nietzsche 1977, 18)



be able to make full sense of it, and, that being the case, experience the effect acknowledged by Barthes and Atlas. Thus, an important part of the decoding process of some aphoristic texts, is the work of providing an appropriate context that I have pompously identified as *evoking* context. I think that these next words, written by P. E. Lewis about La Chapelle-Bessé's defense of the *Maxims*, refer to such process:

Staking La Rochefoucauld's claim to an initiated audience [...] of kindred spirits, Bessé also contends that [...] *the reader must not simply perceive the picture passively in its broad outlines; his task as reader is **supplemental** to the author's task, involves an active contribution to the completion of the maxim's meaning.* [My emphasis] (quoted by Lewis 1977, 44)

Lewis also writes supporting that point:

The maxim clearly makes special demands upon the reader, requiring a search for meaning. (Lewis 1977, 42)

If this is right, as readers actively participate in the process of making full sense of texts, their background provides the main frame of references in which texts will be somehow allocated. Those who write this kind of aphoristic text rely on guessing the knowledge that they share with their readership. It is by referring to a shared background that this type of aphorist can leave many things unsaid; this is why, when designed skillfully, some aphoristic texts will achieve the meaningful brevity that is currently taken as one of their finest attributes:

Something said briefly can be the fruit of much long thought: but the reader who is a novice in this field, and has as yet reflected on it not at all, sees in everything said briefly something simply embryonic, not without censuring the author for having served him up such immature and unripened fare. (Nietzsche 1977, 15)

The French aphorist Joseph Joubert even describes the process of achieving textual brevity as a torment:

Tourmenté par la maudite ambition de mettre toujours tout un livre dans une page, toute une page dans une phrase et cette phrase dans un mot. C'est moi. (Gallimard 1994, 485)

It is necessary to remark that this hypothesis is suggesting that the skills of alluding and managing such background, through a single textual trace, are crucial for the making of aphorisms, because the idea that meaningful brevity is not a limitation, but an achievement of the aphorist's dexterity, is not always taken for granted. In this sense, it is interesting to notice how for a writer such as Nietzsche, who knows aphorisms as a creator, brevity stands as a potency of the genre and, in contrast, for a writer such as Clifton Fadiman, who talks without an insider's knowledge, brevity is a defective and, even, unintended characteristic of some writers' texts:

Certain *inability* to develop an idea, to decorate or modulate it helps the aphorist. [...] The aphorist is a miser of words. If he could have spoken more tersely, he has failed. Sometimes an aphorism's whole life vibrates in a single word. [...] Thoreau and Emerson, our finest aphorists, never really mastered the structure of the paragraph, much less the essay; and this weakness meshes with the power of their islanded insights. (Fadiman 1962, 12)

This idea of the failings in writing aphorisms leads Fadiman to make the witty suggestion that fine prose writers are definable by certain *inability* to write good aphorisms:

The born aphorist views from a height, scanning men not as unique souls but as social masses. That is why the greatest novelists, such as Dickens or Dostoyevsky, are not usually great aphorists. Too keen an eye for the concrete detail tends to work against the grain of the aphorism. (Fadiman 1962, 11)

In an age in which the word count is an indispensable working computer tool, these kinds of opinions may currently receive a warm reception from most audiences: standard literary knowledge is determined

by elements from other genres and the scarcity of aphorists has produced an understandable lack of information about their writing intentions, skills and so on. In this context, when the typical aim is to write long texts or (using a biased word) to ‘develop’ them, it is not exceptional to find attempts at understanding aphorisms that use other generically aimed features as if they were the standard for the creation of brief texts. Only in this way, can brevity be conceived as the state in which the text has not realized its potential – being the writer’s (failed) job to bring it forth from its latent, elementary or defective condition. The popularity of this way of seeing aphoristic brevity has compelled explicit clarifications, such as that of Ulrich Horstmann, who writes in his article “The Aphorist as Go-Between”:

For the aphorist is not, as many critics would have it, the product of a congenital inability to think logically and coherently, hence symptomatic of a mental deficiency that prevents the writer from competing with the systematic reasoner and his arsenal of truth-testing devices. (Horstmann 1997, 154)

In contrast, seeing certain aphorisms as access devices to unstated information from shared backgrounds implies a function that cannot be tested by the same means used with other genres, but instead, by their success in reaching such information. This being the case, in their brevity, there is a fully developed design, “the fruit of much long thought”, not a mere limitation.

In other words, the aphorist of this kind of text is not distilling or compressing wisdom, but relying on the knowledge that his audience has, of a set of beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, dispositions, preferences, commonplaces, stereotypes, etc. He expects that his readers will properly use his texts<sup>7</sup> in order to recognize fields of reference, in order to

---

7 It is risky to fully accept Nietzsche’s ideas about the aphorist’s expectations of his readership; however, his words on the matter put forward the peculiarity of the process of reading aphorisms:

An aphorism, properly stamped and moulded, has not been ‘deciphered’ when it has simply been read; one has then rather to begin its exegesis, for which is required

“download” complementary information from such contexts, making full sense of the texts and, that being the case, accomplish the size-meaning disproportion effect.

## Final Thoughts

The attempts at understanding how certain aphoristic texts can produce highly meaningful reading effects has generally relied on the use of concepts pointing to two elements, *form* and *content* (or *text's size and meaning*). I have, alternatively, argued for the importance of the context of reference to explain reading effects and I have also highlighted the importance of the users' role (aphorists and readers who, respectively, hint at and provide that context for the texts). In this sense, the proposed image of texts as *access devices* implies that their function is to be used as tools by someone (to access supplementary background's information to that provided in the text). From this perspective, if they are to be understood, texts should be seen as part of the complex relations in a process of communication, rather than things to be defined in isolation.

There is another point worth noting: all this speculation has been constructed to provide a consistent model of explanation for an (*a subjective*) experience (*of reading aphorisms*) that has strongly interested critical studies. It could be argued that the importance that many

---

an art of exegesis. [...] To be sure, to practise reading as an art in this fashion one thing above all is needed, precisely the thing which has nowadays been most thoroughly unlearned – and that is why it will be some time before my writings are 'readable' – a thing for which one must be almost a cow and in any event *not* a 'modern man': *rumination...* (Nietzsche 1997, 20)

In the mountains the shortest route is from peak to peak: but for that you must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks: and those to whom they are addressed should be big and tall of stature. (Nietzsche 1997, 16)

One is a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading: -in the end one also writes slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it also my taste – a malicious taste, perhaps? – no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is 'in a hurry.' For philology is 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...* (Nietzsche 1997, 17)

contemporary readers (and critics) put on a reading effect, determines the current understanding of the genre. The centrality of subjectivity as a point of departure for some textual research is significant. This is not only because the methodology of trying to produce a speculative explanation for an effect, suggests that we have not succeeded when studying the cause instead, but also because personal inclinations may bias our inquiries. For instance, it can be thought that the pleasure provided by *the experience of an apparent disproportion between textual size and meaning* has determined the focus of certain research, leaving aside other types of aphoristic text, that do not aim to produce such an experience. It can be argued that much modern research on aphorisms has been reduced to a discussion of the type of texts that we like to read (to experience).

It has to be noted that, on the other hand, the chosen experience for research defines us as much as the texts. We are often discussing aphoristic texts that we (like to) read as if they were the only kind of aphorisms that exists. It is understandable: if we were living in a world of practitioners of Hippocratic medicine, *the* aphorism would probably be defined by the functions and features we were used to finding in them (mnemonic and technical), erasing all other possibilities.<sup>8</sup> But, since we live in a society with literature (and those who write and think about aphorisms are usually close to such activity), it is not strange that, for us, *the* aphorism is that which produces such a peculiar experience of meaning through the use of the words. A suggestion therefore follows: if there is something like “literary functions”, it could be argued that producing that peculiar experience of meaning, might be the function of certain kinds of aphoristic texts. In other words, it would be difficult to accept as true that aphorisms *convey ‘wisdom’ in a nutshell*; instead, it can be thought that the literary function of producing such an impression (though it may be more difficult to give the impression of being intelligent than actually being so) appears to have been successful, judging by currently held beliefs on the genre.

---

8 See my article “Aphoristic brevity: towards a critique of the common theoretical approach”.

## Bibliography

- Angel-Lara, Marco Aurelio 2011. "Aphorisms and Philosophy: Contextualizing Aphoristic Texts – Assumptions about Subject-Matter". *Journal of English Studies* 9: 29-54.
- Angel-Lara, Marco Aurelio. 2011. "Aphoristic brevity: towards a critique of the common theoretical approach". *Pensamiento y Cultura* 14.1: 79-93.
- Atlas, Dustin. 2005. "The Craft of Aphorism: Philosophy above the Book". *Skandalon. Journal of Theory* 1.1: 50-72.
- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Le degré zéro de l'écriture, 1953; suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Déchery, Laurent. 1995. «Réflexions sur l'aphorisme et la maxime à l'âge classique.» *Romance Quarterly* 42.1: 3-17.
- Fadiman, Clifton. 1962. "Introduction" in Lec, S. Jerzy. *Unkempt Thoughts*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fowler, Roger. 1996. *Linguistic Criticism*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fruchtl, Josef. 1997. "The Aphorism as a Stylistic and Epistemological Ideal: Theodor W. Adorno and Botho Straus". *REAL* 13: 161-73.
- Geary, James. 2005. *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism*, 1st U.S. ed. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Horstmann, Ulrich. 1997. "The Aphorist as Go-Between". *REAL* 13: 149-59.
- Joubert, Joseph. 1983. *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert: A Selection*. Translated by Paul Auster. San Francisco: North Point Press. (The epigraph of this chapter can be found in page 94).
- Lewis, Philip E. 1977. *La Rochefoucauld: The Art of Abstraction*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1977. *A Nietzsche Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Stern, Joseph Peter. 1963. *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions, Reconstructed from His Aphorisms and Reflections*. London: Thames & Hudson.