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Feelings Sustaining Text: Aphorisms and Inspiration

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Inspiration for writers is a regular occurrence – regular enough that it can be relied on. Yet in all instances such directed enthusiasm is not sustained indefinitely. When finally expended, the burst of speed lost, what follows such moments is a reappraisal, a thematic development by way of the cut, an abstraction directed at one’s own material. The resultant pieces are unified only in a latticework of slowly-evolving supportive writing. Texts can in fact be perused for this sort of stop-and-go motion. Extended prose uses the device of dynamic variation to compensate for its inability to wilfully arrest its readers’ attention: successive sections accelerate until interrupted by a climactic development of the theme. This is not to say that narrative development is entirely continuous. Rather, a text attends to the development of its subject-matter with certain techniques: the deliberate interruption of a narrative arc, which resets concentration; barring the full break is the foreshortening of content into smaller sections, like dialogue set into expository or descriptive passages in novels; finally, the extended description provokes association and skimming. The powers of these techniques are no different when applied within the scholarly treatise or verse. Verse, of course, displays much more open willingness to undergo drastic variation to achieve its effects; but the scholarly treatise, with the insertion of figures and tables, the organization of chapters and subsections, the setting of paratextual footnotes and appendixes, is no less devoted to such matters.

Historically offsetting these tactics is another form of writing, that of the aphorism. If the writer of aphorisms had some characteristic mark upon his face which would identify him to a public, he would often and easily be mistaken for the philosopher. Indeed the aphorism lends itself more to philosophy than to any other genre. An ideal philosophical statement compresses an insight of enormous significance into a condensed tincture, which in reading is drawn out only with great effort. While the philosophical art of staggering and arranging propositions culminates often in the short, sharp statement, it must also be said that the significance of these statements would be close to nil if not for the context of their development. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” says Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* (38a). While here the criterion for philosophical exposition is quite plain, in the claim of the good life to lie on only one side of the difference between the examined and the unexamined life, another statement, much more enigmatic but no less aphoristic and no less kin to the notions expressed above, is the epigram to Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, Ferdinand Kürnberger’s, “Life does not live” (21). Much more work is required to get at its meaning. Where the short passage explains, incites, and elucidates, every attempt to explode its meaning into its significance will necessitate a much longer investigation. In the philosophical treatise this necessity shapes the preambles and summations of larger claims. Yet where the aphorism appears it appears in isolation, set off from its neighbours; its meaning can emerge only in reference to a context where the aphorism is the sole item of intelligible significance.

Writers like F.H. Bradley, Nietzsche, and La Rochefoucauld show that the aphorism takes a common form. This form is the reversal. A selection of aphorisms from their works follows. By Bradley, from *Aphorisms*:

“‘Everything comes to him who waits’ – among other things death” (§1);

“Love is so much the habit of, and the need for, a certain tone of sentiment, that with some persons unfaithfulness in absence may be a species of fidelity” (§13);

“Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived’. It is a pity that this is still the only knowledge of their wives at which some men seem to arrive” (Bradley §94).

By Nietzsche, from *Beyond Good & Evil*:

“Who has not, for the sake of his good reputation – sacrificed himself once?–” (§92);

“Even when the mouth lies, the way it looks still tells the truth” (§166);

“In men who are hard, intimacy involves shame – and is [for that reason] precious” (§167).

And by La Rochefoucauld, from his *Maxims*:

“Gravity is an attitude of the body intended to conceal the short-comings of the mind” (§265);

“Lazy men are the hardest taskmasters. They seek to appear diligent when they have satisfied their sloth” (§84);

“Death and the sun! Who can outstare them?” (§26).

In these selections, coherence need not take the form of continuity. Enumeration is the means by which the theme of each writer is developed, even if only incrementally. In contrast to strict logical development, each new aphorism shows no intensive difference, no specific derivative motif. Its mark is instead the uncommon observation of common matters, which through compilation complete the reference to the context of surrounding life. Yet, in content, each aphorism has already accomplished this: the reversal staged at its heart is an outburst of significance connecting its wisdom to a wider situation. It shows life appearing in two great sections: the said, the typical, the common, and its underside: the concealed, the hidden, the small. The theme constantly underlined by aphoristic compression is captured in the attention to details which escape the everyday, not without a certain wilfulness on our part. Such malevolent intent is indeed difficult to break. The aphorism pulls its material from the substance of the regular and expected, and then subjects it to a sudden overturning. That aphoristic energy, contained by means of compression, is directed such that it can pinpoint the smallest moments and then burst them into visible significance. If it can be shown that the truth of life is an invariance of certain features, the aphorism shows that this invariance resides in everything that remains habitually unrevealed: that which one can't bear to say to another, that which, out of politeness and selfishness, one buries as inessential. The consequence of such activity is that, if the inessential aspect of life is the precisely that portion suffering concealment, then the essential can only be that radiant surface making up all conviviality, all affability and social grace. Perhaps for this reason aphorisms should be read through inner vocalization to achieve their greatest effect. Like the knowledge of the cynic, they are to be read surreptitiously from their negative form in ordinary life. Ordinary life denies these maxims, and so they sidle in through peripheral vision, their words setting aflame the most fragmentary and ephemeral phenomena, so that, if perhaps only for a moment, they appear to common sight.

For instance, in an aphorism on greed, Adorno has remarked that the miser follows a certain habit of thought in which “every good deed is accompanied by an evident ‘is it necessary?’” (§15). Adorno thus condemns that thinking, making up a good portion of one's daily experience, which remains entirely unvoiced. Such secret thoughts, out of a type of social deference, are voiced only in works of art, perhaps rendered in symbols or during moments of interior monologue. This makes concrete a claim he has made elsewhere, that “art is the negative knowledge of the actual world” (“Reconciliation” 175, 179): art is negative only as a

locative gesture, because it says those things forming the counterpoint to regular discourse. These are miserly thoughts, kept unspoken, as though precious. In merely noting them down one enacts a form of their expulsion; they thus become objects open to criticism.

To determine the significance of philosophical works involves close attention to the mode by which they weave their claims together. Yet for aphorisms, language converges. It is as if the same hand wrote all of them.¹ Their strength of assertion breeds a unity of voice. It is in this way that the writer of aphorisms shows that existing within common life is a commonality of intelligence whose stunted products are the ultimate target of his wit. He is also aware of his part in the situation as it exists. His own writings are not safe from his attentions: thus the final aphorism of La Rochefoucauld quoted above is reversed by Bradley in the following way: “Death and the sun! Who can outstare them?” It is well, then, that our life should [be] set in clouds” (§2).

The specific history of aphorisms puts forward these examples. The material chosen for aphoristic elaboration has no special status, and neither does the aphorism as a means of conferring intelligibility, which is to say that there is no specific reason that would mire the aphorism in contradiction once it started to regard and comment on its past material. The material it uses for insight resolves ultimately into the context of life, and that certain history of the aphorism includes its own attempts. That self-commentary implies that its form can perhaps bear no distinct limits – no specific criteria determining size or the content of the reversal. But the history of the aphorism is concentrated in its laconism. The more powerfully it can direct and organize the reversal, even if its content is its own tendencies, the more clearly each aphorism becomes marked with a morphological strain of compression. In its effort to refer generally to the entire context of life, the citational history of the aphorism falls away.² This is why it relies on the reversal to articulate the context of its assertions in the smallest possible space. This resolution is more evident in another form of writing, to which the aphorism bears the closest incidental relationship: the fragment.

Written in the nineteenth century, the magnum opuses of Hegel and Marx are marked by incompleteness. Both oriented logical expression to the description of history and in so doing unfolded new significances from older philosophical works. What is rendered by logic is the obligation to deduce a specific claim, which also guarantees the general applicability of its concepts. The modification logic undergoes in its form as system transforms the original imperative into the obligation to deduce from any single element the others necessary for its meaning. If this is followed through to the end, the system would be complete. For Hegel as well as Marx this came to mean that any form of causation must ultimately be captured in the course of its transformation. Confronting the concrete object will thus cause it to relate a notion of its past as well as future development. However, just as a single object is in no sense capable of rendering the total intelligibility of the system without referral to other objects as well, no system demonstrates full elaboration in its initial moments – and this condition is carried through to the end in the impossibility of completing grand schemes: Marx’s *Capital* is a part of a much larger project, the full scope of which is rendered in the introduction to his *Contribution to a Critique of*

¹ “The great writers of aphorisms read as if they had all known each other well,” writes Elias Canetti (quoted in Sontag 191).

² “Our live experiences, fixed in aphorisms, stiffen into cold epigram. Our heart’s blood, as we write with it, turns to mere dull ink” (Bradley §25).

Political Economy; Hegel's *Science of Logic* was published in full, but its later version featured extensive revisions which Hegel was unable to complete before his death. These form fragments of enormous size. Necessarily, their completion would mean the elaboration of their significance across the entire recognized field of knowledge. And so the system remains incomplete because it cannot relate shortly all the vision it is weighed with. Yet the initial moment leading one to embark on this endeavour is that potential of displaying how far any notion can be stretched, such that at its extreme limits its contortion is that of life itself. Said in another way, any notion can be made to become so ubiquitous that it comes to stand as a context for life's happenings rather than being enumerated partially as one of its aspects. This corresponds to a great faith in the capacities of the person to work and to achieve. In result the smallest impression one can come to gains immense significance. It is by being able to stand notice that the individual fragment begins to inspire the construction of the systematic work.

What of other incomplete opuses like Pascal's *Pensées*³ and Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, which do not follow the dialectical schema explicitly? There is a tendency for fragments to constrain themselves and to converge around a thematic center. However, even where the method is dialectical, the lack of specifics which would direct the fragment towards its kin is evident. We can only speculate how the distinct projects would have appeared in full. But the need for speculation, rigorous or otherwise, is far more evident in fragments than in other forms of writing simply because the elaboration of their significance is much more difficult to articulate.

In sight of the systematic work – fragments are opuscles weighed down by immense visions. If compressed into a single image utterable in a short sentence, the aphorism would be surest form of completion a system could take. But fragments are not constructed such that at their center is the chief formal feature identified above, that of the reversal.

The completion an aphorism displays as the result of the reversal has a corollary for the fragment, which is the possibility of commentary. The work of commentary invokes the mode of completion produced by the reversal. This capacity of a work for development received a philosophical description from Feuerbach, who designated it with the name *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*. Agamben, in an analysis of this concept, has said that the *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* is the work's philosophical element, "be it a work of science or art or scholarship [which] has some value... It is something which remains unsaid within the work but which demands to be unfolded and worked out" ("What is a Paradigm?"). The explosion of this principle implies that every work of writing contains conscious embryonic elements which the author has not developed himself. Seen in this way, the work of an author cannot be the abridgment of a single task into an opus because that work itself is created in a context of fragmentation, centering on notions that the author has formed despite himself, inadvertently,

³ T.S. Eliot has written in his essay on Pascal's *Pensées* that the only way in which this book can be understood is if at every moment each fragment is directed at its summation in a larger work, "the first notes for a work ... left far from completion" (145). It has this passage on the subject of inspiration as well, "A piece of writing meditated, apparently without progress, for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch. I have no good word to say for the cultivation of automatic writing as the model of literary composition; I doubt whether these moments *can* be cultivated by the writer; but he to whom this happens assuredly has the sensation of being a vehicle rather than a maker" (142).

through the effects of his activities. These specific effects are captured every time a work undergoes quotation and commentary.

Commentary involves complementing the texts addressed by selecting from them articles of value – and that latter act, called in philosophical language *abstraction*, is quotation, or the emptying of the historical context such that it can be repeated. In this way the quality of newness manifested potentially by every piece of writing is substituted for that of continuity, of time thematized by repetition. Any text constructed in awareness of this paradigm takes the form of ubiquitous fragmentation – stitching, suturing, compilation and arrangement. All is fragmented, but not contradictory. The capacity of a text to be ruptured by quotation, and then cited in another, expands the chosen fragment’s subject-matter such that it coincides with others, if only in potential. In the long act of writing such wilful dislocations appear as the locations of small breaks in text.

In quotation, a phrase part of a larger elaboration is cut and displayed. The aesthetic quality of this display culminates in the short passage which imitates the fragment, but ends by completing it – this short passage being the aphorism. Cited at the beginning of this essay, neither of the phrases, by Socrates or Kürnberger, are properly aphorisms (they are taken from larger texts). Yet they take on an aphoristic quality precisely due to quotation – an activity which since Descartes has been privileged with authoritative certainty in scholarly writing.⁴ Paul Ricoeur has said of Nietzsche that he is a “master of suspicion”, that “the philosopher trained in the school of Descartes knows that things are doubtful, that they are not such as they appear” (33). Perhaps this history of doubt and certainty gave the aphorism its specific modern form, which is the reaction of the writer to a context of ubiquitous quotation, of the item reduced to a fact, of the fact made into representative aspect of the world as such. Nietzsche has written one appropriate to these comments: “The more mistrust, the more philosophy” (*The Gay Science* §346).

Indeed the further fragmentation is taken, the more impossible the technique of explosion becomes: the evidence the quotation presents comes, in decreasing size, in the form of pages, paragraphs, phrases, words, letters, and, finally: pieces, scraps, markings, impressions. This gradation ends in negativity, where the insignificance of the material is underlined. Memory thus becomes the first fragment of a long tract. So with the technique of fragmentation it is possible to insert reflections into text, which come to form the negative moments of a writer’s inspiration.

There are genres of reflection, one of which is constituted by the aphorism. These reflections are an art of ponderance, of pensiveness. Possibly one could shake from full texts their reflections, strip them of their ponderous moments, and concentrate them. Philosophy is not necessarily the best example, nor is it identical with the genre of reflection as such; it has had a hard time breaking with its derivative moments and its history is of a catalogue of dogmas as well as progressive critiques. In logic, one of philosophy’s products, the continuous or infinite form of knowledge is condensed into the axiom or principle or formula, which carries the appearance of a statement of fact. Contrary to the latter, produced by this tradition of doubt and

⁴ In the medieval scriptorium, scrolls were read out loud. And *certainty* was not the issue determining the use or import of quotations. The lack of spacing between words and paragraphs, the practise of quoting texts without indicating explicitly that this was done, and the dedication of every finished text to the glory of God, testify to this end (McLuhan 82-93).

certainty, is the aphorism, a moment of reflection concentrated into a phrase – the negative moment of a writer’s inspiration.

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