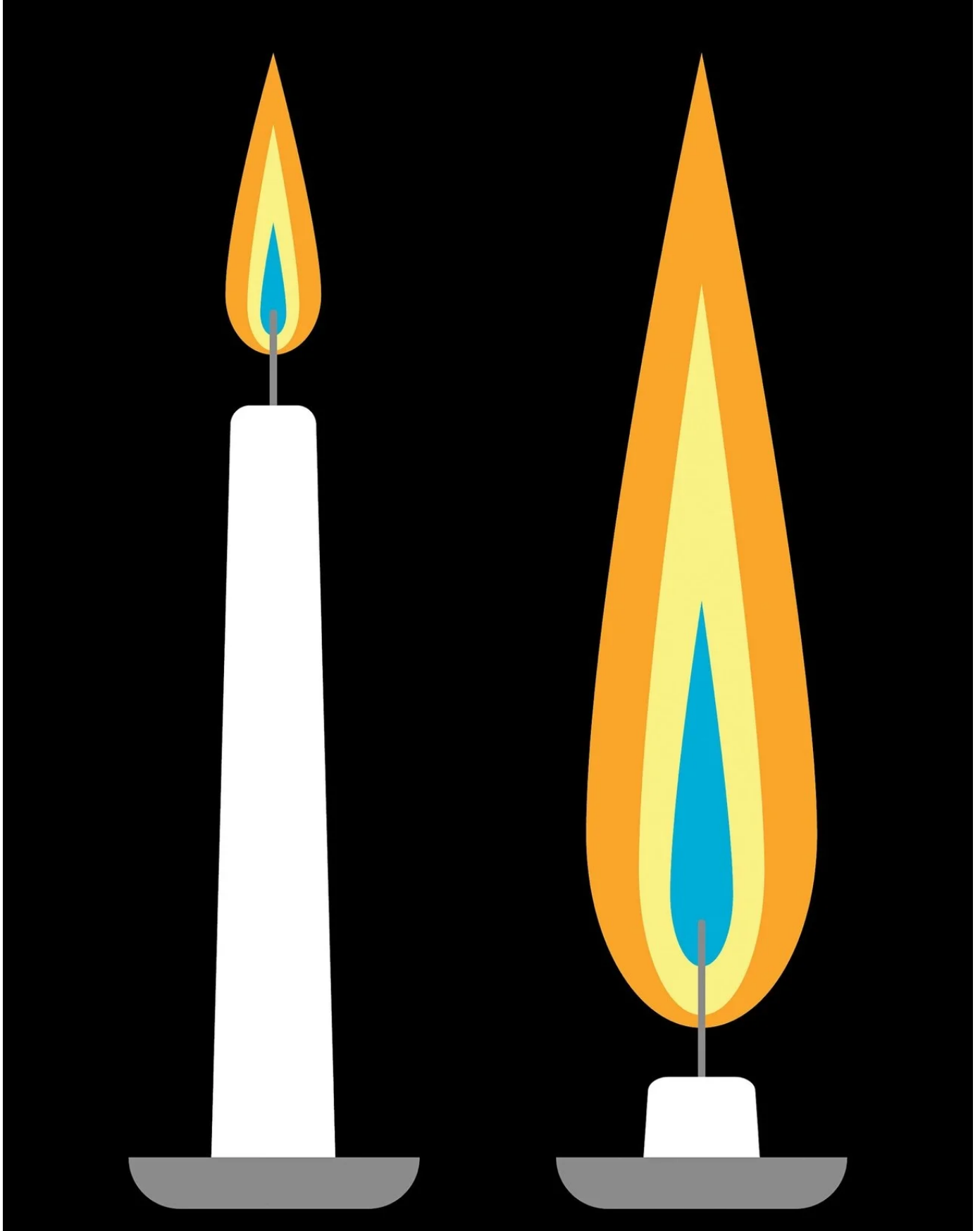


## THE ART OF APHORISM

*Why are these fragments of wisdom—empirical or mystical, funny or profound—such an enduring form?*

By Adam Gopnik July 15, 2019



“Almost all books of aphorisms, which have ever acquired a reputation, have retained it,” John Stuart Mill wrote in 1837, aphoristically—that is to say, with a neat if slightly dubious finality. (“How wofully the reverse is the case with systems of philosophy,” he added.) We prefer collections of aphorisms over big books of philosophy, Mill thought, not just because the contents are always short and usually funny but because the aphorism is, in its algebraic abbreviation, a micro-model of empirical inquiry. Mill noted that “to be unsystematic is of the essence of all truths which rest on specific experiment,” and that there is, in a good aphorism, “generally truth, or a bold approach to some truth.” So when La Rochefoucauld writes, “In the misfortune of even our best friends, there is something that does not displease us,” he is offering not a moral injunction saying “Take pleasure in the misfortune of your best friends” but a testable observation about what Mill termed “the workings of habitual selfishness in the human breast.” The aphorism means: We do take pleasure—not in every case, perhaps, but more often than we might admit—in the misfortune of our best friends.

We don’t absorb aphorisms as esoteric wisdom; we test them against our own experience. The empirical test of the aphorism takes the form first of laughter and then of longevity, and its confidential tone makes it candid, not cynical. Aphorisms live because they contain human truth, as Mill saw, and reach across barriers of class and era. “Old men delight in giving good advice as a consolation for the fact that they can no longer set bad examples,” another La Rochefoucauld classic, is not only humorous in its tidy reversal; it is also still rather persuasive, as we watch the drift from rebelliousness to reaction in every generation.

Aphorisms come at us in so many forms and from so many periods that one might think an academic study of aphorisms would aim to give them a family tree—tracing the emergence of the humanistic aphorism from its solemn white-bearded grandfather, the proverb; the descent of the clever, provocative epigram from its sly guerrilla progenitor, the parable (the form that allowed Jesus to spread subversion while seeming merely obscurely elegant). And then we might learn how those later forms have spawned such contemporary commercial descendants as the one-liner and the meme.

But Andrew Hui’s new study, “A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter” (Princeton), does something oddly and interestingly different. The kind of witty generalization about human behavior that Mill considers an aphorism to be is largely absent from Hui’s book. (So is Mill’s essay on aphorisms.) On the whole, Hui condescends to the epigram of manners, and to what we normally think of as the golden age of aphorisms, the seventeenth century in France, whose writings he finds marked by “the frothy ambience of elite social networks.” Instead, the history he has written is devoted to something more like what we usually call “sayings”—as in the sayings of the Buddha in the Dhammapada or the sayings of Confucius in the Analects, not the burnished bon mot but the fragmentary and often cryptic utterances of oracles, gurus, and rabbis. Still, buy the premise and you’ll enjoy the bit, as David Letterman, an aphorist of sorts himself, used to say. Once the reader accepts this more expansive and sombre definition of the aphorism, much of interest follows, written in that dense, allusive, and largely non-aphoristic style which is called good writing in academia. (Not that it isn’t good writing of a kind; it is, of a kind.)

“Philosophies come and go, theologies rise and fall, but the aphorism abides,” Hui announces. His heroic aphoristic arc takes us not from the chilly La Rochefoucauld to the witty Wilde but from the elliptical Pascal to the gnomic Nietzsche, both of whom encrypted their philosophies in brief bursts of memorable obscurity. The arc ends with modernist figures such as Cioran and Calvino, who are at once oracles and comedians. Hui even poses, a little apologetically, the question: Are tweets anything like the classic aphorism? It’s a version of the cultural journalist’s favorite question, “What has Twitter done to our minds and lives?,” and—though it will look quaint thirty years from now, just as the endless fussing about the meaning of music videos and Atari

games in the nineteen-eighties looks quaint today—it is one that the Twitter-afflicted are bound to wonder about.

Mill and Hui do converge on the right question, though: Why is spiritual wisdom found in fragmentary form more reliably than in extended dogma? Why is it that the sayings last, even when their systematic surroundings don't? We know Jesus' parables better than we do the doctrine of the Trinity, though the latter is far more central to Christianity, just as we know Zen monks' koans better than Zen monastery practices. Even Socrates' wisdom comes down to us in recorded counterpunches. The primal situation of the religious life is not the hermit writing down his revelations in a tower but the master speaking fragmentary truths to a circle of startled students with pencils. The aphoristic saying falls from the teacher's lips, and gets written down and repeated and then shared. (Many of these must have been retrospectively created—some of the general sayings ascribed to Jesus may have been drawn from a reservoir of common wisdoms.)

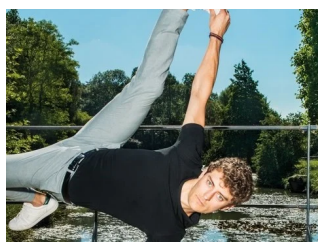
Mill's scientific-minded answer is that we recognize the aphorism, with its immediacy, its turn toward tangible experience, as the preferable alternative to dogma. That's why we have Jesus giving us parables of sowers and mustard seeds, of houses built on sand and stone, rather than explanations of how he might be God and man and spirit all at once.

The anthropological answer is that, although we normally think of religions as sets of absolute rules, an ambivalent enigma is actually a more practical tool for spreading the faith, since it can mean many things to many people. What did Confucius mean when he remarked on the ceaseless flow of a river? Something pessimistic (since the flow of time is unstoppable, don't ever think you can master it), or something optimistic (the advance of things can't be impeded)? Well, it can mean more or less what you like; great religious and ethical sayings, unlike great religious systems, tend to be roomy enough to accommodate many readings. They are the escape clause written into the contract with God.

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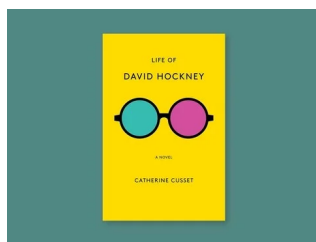
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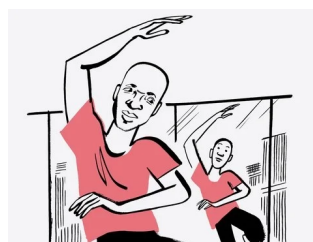
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The more mystical appraisal of the aphorism is that the fragment captures all we can hope to see of the divine. Our universe and the God within it are too big to be systematized; we see Him or Her most clearly in glimpses, the way that ants see humans. The hero of Hui's story, aptly, is an apostle of this view, the seventeenth-century French mathematician and mystic Blaise Pascal. Pascal's *non finito* manner, with little

brought to a conclusion, is not an unfortunate failure but a deliberate defiance of Cartesian system-building. The illogic of one cryptic fragment colliding with the next cryptic fragment vindicates soul over system. (Max Beerbohm once suggested, in this spirit, that Sappho's work doesn't survive in fragments but was *written* in fragments.) Pascal's great aphorism "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing" announces a purposeful romanticism of small parts, which don't have to cohere to vibrate.

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The taste for the partial as an indictment of specious ambition is carried over to Pascal's great successor, the nineteenth-century German aphorist Nietzsche, for whom the fragment was also a way of thumbing his nose at big thinkers with finished philosophies. Nietzsche saw a direct connection between his leaps of faith, or non-faith, and the aphoristic form, writing, "In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak: but for that one must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks—and those who are addressed, tall and lofty." As with Greek temples, so with philosophies: the fascination of the fragment, seen up close, leads to the pathos of the ruin, seen from a distance.

**I**s the aphorism—empirical or mystical, funny or fragmentary—a living form? For much of the past century, we would have answered no, but suddenly we seem to be living through a revival of the aphorism as a self-sufficient thing. The Scottish poet Don Paterson has published three justly praised books made up of nothing but. Among his best: "It's monstrous to think of our parents having sex, because we then have to think of them conceiving *us* . . . Hard enough to live with the exile without replaying the scene of the eviction"; "A poem with one line wrong is like a Rubik's Cube with one square wrong: what it is precisely *not* is one move away from completion"; "Amazing that the chess clock never found a more general application. A more enlightened society would have made it as indispensable to conversation as shoes to walking."

Contemporary in style, Paterson's aphorisms still have a taint of the past. The human sciences are all too human, and one of the truths is that the self-assured heterosexual aphorism—the confident statement about the nature of the "love of women" and so on ("In some Neanderthal part of me, every husband poses an

affront” is one of Paterson’s)—has to ring a leper’s bell these days, and wear shaming scare quotes, not to mention brackets. Since a generalization about life is also, invariably, a half-truth about it, the missing half of the truth often registers more clangingly now than the half that’s there.

And Paterson, as a stylist, can also go one beat too far.

The poorest are denied their  
nostalgias by their social  
immobility. Their primal territories  
are the ones they still inhabit.  
Their sweetest memories are all  
ungeographic.

seems more effective without the last sentence. The wonderful

Almost everything in the room  
will survive you. To the room, you  
are *already* a ghost, a pathetic soft  
thing, coming and going.

would end better at “ghost.”

But it may be that this kind of slightly ragged, expansive, narrative aphorism is the true aphorism of the modern era. E. M. Cioran, the Pascalian French-Romanian aphorist and insomniac, who wrote volumes of them and seems to be Paterson’s model, could produce lines that were straightforward and concise: “One can experience loneliness in two ways: by feeling lonely in the world or by feeling the loneliness of the world.” But more often they were discursive, short moments of rumination rather than neat sentences of certainty: “There is no other world. Nor even this one. What, then, is there? The inner smile provoked in us by the patent nonexistence of both.”

Certainly, the Australian aphorist James Guida seems at his very best when he writes long: “Nobody need leave their bathroom to taste the ‘big’ truths. To know that all in life must end, consider this disgusting shower curtain; that nature is full of magical renewal, see this tube of toothpaste, which with one more squeeze proves again that its contents are infinite; that social life occasionally means warfare with fast-scurrying villains—I refer you to this cockroach.” This kind of aphorism fills the space left not only by the epigram but by the epistles once exchanged by friends with time to be funny.

And so, by this process, the aphorism properly so called is by now backing up into its cousin, aphoristic prose, which certainly has kept a living presence in criticism and reviewing. It may be that all the aphoristic kinds—from the blunt saying to the polished epigram—run together in critical prose, where they are weapons in the struggle rather than heads mounted on the wall. Aphoristic prose is to the true, pure aphorism what storytelling is to standup comedy: easier to do because less dependent on a single explosive response. Even if the aphorism doesn’t quite work, the ideas around it still get communicated. The best writers of aphoristic prose—G. K. Chesterton, Clive James—use the aphorism as comic relief on the climb, more than as the summit itself.

What of Twitter? “Brevity is the soul of wit,” Shakespeare’s Polonius says, issuing the greatest unintentional aphorism in literature: at the time, scholars say, the line meant merely that concision is the essence of useful intelligence, and, of course, it was uttered as part of a deliberately long-winded speech. But it now captures—by the accident of the evolution of English, such that “wit” now means humor—a subtler truth: a joke is

improved by compression. Twitter, in its imposed brevity, seems to affirm the aphorism's original meaning: be intelligently succinct!

Being succinct without being funny often produces the effect of merely being mean. The Internet meme entertains because of its predictability, resting on the common expectations of the crowd. The dog in the burning house, the face palm, the man settling in to eat popcorn and watch the spectacle: these things are buoyed by the familiarity of their occurrence. Social media seems less good at wit, in either sense, than at running jokes—like the closet in the radio show “Fibber McGee and Molly” (to go a long, long way back), whose contents regularly spilled out when the door was opened. The fun, more often than not, lies not in surprise but in knowing exactly what will happen before it does.

The aphorism, in the course of history, can be taken as the epitome of the rational or the epitome of the irrational. It can be compressed and self-contained wisdom, or it can be a broken fragment designed to show that ours is an already shattered world. But, whatever it is, it's always an epitome, and seeks an essence. The ability to elide the extraneous is what makes the aphorism bite, but the possibility of inferring backward to a missing text is what makes the aphorism poetic. We are told that, in reading, context is everything, but the aphorism reminds us that there is joy, too, in the freedom from context. We don't ask which of La Rochefoucauld's friends made him jealous—the thought lands independent of its circumstance. Oscar Wilde's best epigrams are usually funnier when taken away from the designated speakers in his plays. Aphorisms supply the same kind of pleasure as the first morning on a new island—a reprieve from feeling too deeply embedded in a time or place. Where big books remind us of how hard the work of understanding can be, aphorisms remind us of how little we have to know to get the point. Sayings see what systems can't. ♦

*Published in the print edition of the July 22, 2019, issue, with the headline “Brevity, Soul, Wit.”*



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