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Aphoristic Brevity: Towards a Critique of the Common Theoretical Approach

Marco Aurelio Ángel-Lara*

Abstract: What follows is a critique of the analyses of the aphoristic feature that has produced more agreement among scholars in identifying and/or defining the genre: brevity. I suggest that, throughout the history of the genre, such a feature has had specific functions for particular audiences; among those functions, the *specific difference function* used to define and delimit the genre, is just a very peculiar one - the function attributed by an audience of literary scholars concerned with generic definitions. In this context, analyses of brevity as *the* characteristic of the aphoristic genre say more about the current ideological background of analysts than about the genre itself. Pointing at some assumptions of our way of thinking will help to effectively rethink the aphoristic subject.

Keywords: Aphoristic, brevity, specific difference function

La brevedad aforística: Hacia una crítica del enfoque teórico común

Resumen: Lo que sigue es una crítica de los análisis de la característica aforística que ha producido un mayor acuerdo entre los estudiosos en la identificación y / o la definición del género: la brevedad. Yo sugiero que, a lo largo de la historia del género, tal característica ha tenido funciones específicas para audiencias particulares. Entre esas funciones, la función de la diferencia específica para definir y delimitar el género es una muy peculiar - la función atribuida por una audiencia de eruditos literarios relacionada con definiciones genéricas. En este contexto, los análisis de la brevedad como *la* característica del género aforístico dicen más sobre el fondo de la corriente ideológica de los analistas que sobre el género mismo. Señalando algunos supuestos de nuestra manera de pensar le ayudará a repensar efectivamente el tema aforístico.

Palabras clave: Aforística, brevedad, función de la diferencia específica

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La brièveté aphoristique: Vers une critique de l'approche théorique commune

Résumé: Ce qui suit correspond à une critique des analyses de la caractéristique aphoristique qui a produit un accord majeur entre les spécialistes sur l'identification ou la définition du genre: la brièveté. Pour ma part, je suggère que tout au long de l'histoire du genre, cette caractéristique a accompli des fonctions spécifiques pour des publics particuliers. Parmi ces fonctions, la fonction de la différence spécifique pour définir et délimiter le genre est très particulière – la fonction attribuée à un public composé d'érudits littéraires en relation avec des définitions génériques. Dans ce contexte, les analyses de la brièveté telle *la* caractéristique du genre aphoristique en disent plus sur le fond du courant idéologique des analystes que sur le genre lui-même. En exposant certaines hypothèses quant à notre manière de penser, cela aidera à repenser de manière efficace tout ce qui concerne l'aphoristique.

Mots-clés: Aphoristique, brièveté, fonction de la différence spécifique.

Aphoristic Brevity: towards a Critique of the Common Theoretical Approach

Have you ever observed that we pay much more attention to a wise passage when it is quoted, than when we read it in the original author? – Philip G. Hamerton.

Maxims, because what is isolated can be seen better.

Joseph Joubert.

Textual Brevity: Aphoristic Size as a Generic Code

One of the most interesting questions about aphorisms is about how aphorisms come to be such highly significant texts despite their brevity. Curiously, the work of editors of aphoristic quotations offers a way of approaching this question; most critics have not noticed the different work done by editors of generic anthologies when picking up a text from an aphorist such as La Rochefoucauld or, on the other hand, when extracting a line from a Tolstoy's novel, this is so because the final result seems quite similar. However, we could agree that La Rochefoucauld used to intentionally write aphorisms, the same cannot be guaranteed about Tolstoy. It seems that when reading Tolstoy's books, editors decide which lines fulfil the standards of their anthologies, quoting it "aphoristically" by the use of their anthologies' paratexts (such as the visual blatancy of these texts' brevity).¹ The production of these aphoristic quotations could either be seen as the mere detection of the disproportionate meaning of some small parts of Tolstoy's texts (which is the common standpoint of generic criticism) or, also, as an editorial operation which helps to enhance

the meaning of such parts. In a first impression, this last idea could seem rather paradoxical: it may be difficult to imagine that meaning could be enhanced by endowing or reducing a text to brevity. However, this is, in my opinion, a very interesting and, hopefully, fruitful suggestion, worth being investigated and discussed.

If we give credit for a moment to such an idea, we would agree that editors are somehow producing relatively more significant texts by cutting them off from their original contexts. I believe that to explain such a possibility, such separation should be thought of not as a mere reduction to the blank, but as a process of a generic reframing of texts. Thus, the contentious premise that brevity can somehow increase meaning will make sense within the context of a group of users, which make use of such brevity as a signal to decode messages in a particular way, namely the aphoristic one. Brevity will not be a mere external feature of texts, but a generic code for users of a genre: as a catalyst, which must prepare the reception that authors expect from the public of the genre. By bringing their experience and knowledge of the genre, readers will help editors in the creation of aphoristic texts. When reading a collection of quotations, habitual users of aphoristic texts will recognize quoted extracts as a particular kind of sign, as a generic one, with its proper set of codes, conventions and functions.

When an extract is presented by an editor as an aphorism, a new generic reading is required. Before, as an extract, it exists without genre. As an extract, it loses its relations with its old context, the whole of the text from which it has been extracted, and, because of that, the connection with its original genre. It could also be argued that, later on, as a new aphorism, the extract does not belong to either poetry or prose

1 For a discussion of what an "aphoristic quotation" is (as opposed to an "originally intended aphorism") see my article "Aphorisms: Problems of Empirically based research" in *Orbis Litterarum: International review of Literary Studies* 66 (3): 194-214, jun/2011.

any more. However, this does not mean that it has just been abandoned in a blank, empty, space; it has in fact been allocated to another generic place. The extract, as a new aphorism, is fitted within a set of expectations, codes and conventions that make it a new type of linguistic sign. Editors relocate extracted texts from their original contexts to a medium where they can be read as aphorisms.² Considering the linguistic units of texts themselves there is no change; it is in the way that such texts are seen that we can find important differences.

When such extracts are presented to readers of aphorisms, they automatically make use of their knowledge of familiar codes to read them. It seems that nobody notices the fact that previous codes have been put aside, as such information does not have any practical importance for the new required reading of extracts. But with this oblivion, codes and conventions that editors have given to the texts are taken as their natural features. It could be affirmed that, without identifying such a switch of codes, and users of codes, a generic change of the texts happens unnoticed.

Remarkably, despite the fact that editors introduce some obvious alterations and a relocation of texts within other reading contexts, it seems that such a change of genre has not been recognized.³ The explanation could be that studies on texts are 'naturally' focused on the texts themselves, on their linguistic features. For that reason, it can be difficult to notice a social dimension to this change, which is the process of switching users of genres.

In what follows, I aim to explore the hypothesis that alterations operated by editors are specific codes, which help the generic conver-

sion of extracts from a wide variety of sources into aphoristic texts. From this perspective, they are somehow textual signals that tell readers they have to read 'aphoristically.' If this supposition is correct, revealing editorial codes that allow extracts to become aphorisms will help to explain the alleged generic change. Furthermore, the analysis of such a process will help us to understand how the generic codes of aphorisms operate.

The importance of this question transcends the scope of judgements based on the study of a single writer or, even, a single tradition within the aphoristic mainstream of western literature. A feature such as *size* (brevity) can be fruitfully approached from a perspective that emphasises a few semiotic and functional linguistics elements. Editors and their targeted audiences need to manage a common set of codes and conventions, if communication is going to take place. It is on the grounds of the existence of a common generic medium, functioning within a cultural framework, that such a thing as an aphoristic text is intelligible. This semiotic assumption might lead our attention to aspects of the study of genre that are a step prior to an analysis of the features of texts themselves. I would argue that recognizing basic assumptions and codes of users of the genre is a crucial basis for an understanding of more particular issues to be discussed, such as, for instance, linguistic structure, recurrent topics or personal styles.

Smallness as the Specific Difference of Aphoristic Texts

It is impossible not to notice the small size of aphorisms. For that reason, brevity is, presumably, the feature that has produced more agreement among scholars as an inherent quality of aphorisms (far more than other characteristics such as self-containment, wisdom, truth or wittiness). It has even produced the highest expectations about its ability to define or to delimit aphoristic texts: "What distinguishes an aphorism from a maxim? Nothing, except its brevity." (Eco 2004: 62)

2 It is worth calling attention to the fact that, despite its relative prevalence, the editorial practice of making aphoristic quotations is barely acknowledged as such. Hence, the frequent change of extracted texts, from their original generic sets of codes and conventions to a second set, the aphoristic one, remains unnoticed.

3 Such a generic change does not fit smoothly within categories of generic change like those, described by Alistair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature* (Topical Invention, Combination, Aggregation, Change of Scale, Change of function, Counterstatement, Inclusion, Generic Mixture). (Fowler 1982: 170-189).

However, if we are going to use the small size of aphorisms as a reference of analysis, we have to be aware of the relativity of the concept and the danger of reductionism. *Smallness* is not an objective and fixed quality of things, but a term that gets its meaning by comparison. Warren Motte affirms that “*Small* is a slippery, uncertain word, always relative and heavily dependent on context. We use it oppositionally to measure an object by contrasting it with its surroundings” (Motte 1999: 3). By observing relations of comparison, it is easy to see that there is a fuzzy boundary between small texts and non-small texts. For instance, it would be very difficult to decide on an exact number of words as the limit of *smallness* for texts. Furthermore, any unambiguous decision would struggle to convince everybody: any *n*-number of words given as limit of smallness will have to deal with questions such as ‘why *n* and not *n* +1’ and so on. Quite simply, it is a question of degree. Therefore, nobody could tell the exact maximum number of words that a text should have to still be considered small.

We designate things as *small* capriciously and according to different registers of perception. We may focus on a thing’s physical size; on its duration, intensity, or range; on its significance; on the quantity of elements composing it; or on the simplicity of its structure. (Motte 1999: 3).

Additionally, we must beware of trying to reduce any definition or delimitation between texts to the criterion of size. No matter how much agreement it may produce, any typological classification based on sizes of texts would be determined by differences of degree *between things of the same kind*. And as such, it would not be, by any means, incontrovertible to distinguish different kinds of things. In other words, reducing difference of kinds to difference of degrees is a fallacy that would produce an artificial classification of aphorisms versus non-aphorisms.

For instance, among the examples of aphorisms and non-aphorisms that support Eco’s attempt to delimit texts, one reads the next group of “maxims (that) are also aphorisms”:

It takes little to console us since it takes little to afflict us.
(Pascal, *Pensées*, Brunschwing ed., 136).

If we did not have defects ourselves we would not take such delight in noting those of others.
(La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, 32).

Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us.
(Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*).

Several thoughts that I have and that I could not sum up in words were actually derived from language.
(Kraus, *Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half-Truths*).

These four texts are supposed to exemplify the aphoristic size. Eco then provides another group of texts pointing out that “those that follow are too long to be aphorisms”:

What an advantage nobility is: already at eighteen years of age it places a man in an elevated position, and makes him known and respected, in a way that another could manage to deserve only in fifty years. This is an advantage of thirty years gained without effort.
(Pascal, *Pensées*, Brunschwicg ed., 322)

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.
(Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)
(Eco 2004: 63)

Nonetheless, it is not difficult to see that a comparison between the size of the last two examples of each type (the aphorism by Kraus and the maxim by Wilde) troubles the criterion: counting words, the maxim is even shorter than the aphorism. It has to be said that in Italian, Eco’s examples support his point, which, on the other hand, seems to suggest the awkward idea that certain texts could be aphorisms in certain language and not aphorisms in another one.⁴ In

4 Che cosa distingue un aforisma da una massima? Nulla, se non la brevità.

Poco basta a consolarci perché poco basta ad affliggerci (Pascal, *Pensieri*, ed. Brunschvicg, 136)

Se non avessimo difetti non avremo tanto piacere a notare quelli degli altri (La Rochefoucauld, *Massime*, 31).

summary, as a convincing criterion to delimit types of texts, brevity does not work particularly well.

Smallness as a Generic Signal

Brevity is a feature that few would fail to associate with the genre of aphoristic texts. Its constant and notorious presence in aphoristic texts is such that rarely would an attempt to describe aphorisms not make mention of it. However, in spite of attracting so much attention, the feature fails to satisfy expectations about its potential to define or delimit the genre or its types. Brevity is an observable and constant feature of aphorisms, but it is clear that it does not work as a specific difference for a definition. It may be time to change approach and ask *if brevity have a function as a textual feature*.

In other words, the query will change from *what are the defining features of the genre* to *how do they work for its users*. In the light of this new question, it is precisely the public notoriety of brevity which suggests a function. Being the most noticeable textual feature of the genre, it is not unreasonable to think that the small size of aphorisms is not more than a signal (what could be more notorious than an indicator?).

This idea is rather a simple one and we should beware of jumping to an easy conclusion. For instance, we should not forget the context to answer the next obvious question *a signal of what?* As signals are meant to signal to somebody, it is logical to think that brevity is a signal of aphorisms for readers of the genre. However, it is not only pointing into the texts themselves, but signalling within a generic me-

dium where texts can be placed to be decoded. Thus, the function of the brevity of aphorisms will become meaningful within a social context -not as a mere feature to define texts. Users of the genre will take it as an indicator to start their usual reading.

Within a proper cultural frame of practices and conventions, smallness can produce a specific awareness that precedes and prepares the actual reading process of texts as aphorisms.

More than anything else, its use is a question of approach. We approach small things in a special way, in a tentative fashion and with some hesitation. Yet by the same token, our approach to the small object is perhaps closer than the approach we take to larger things... [...]

Smallness [is seen as] a guarantor of the personal quality of perception: 'The quality of intimacy is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself. The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself'. (Motte 1999: 3-4)

Within a medium of users of the genre, brevity provides an important bit of information: it is signalling to the readers that they are in front of certain kind of text, an aphoristic one, and they have to decode its message in an adequate way. For users of the genre, the first function of smallness is to act as a generic mark. Therefore, an editorial practice such as cutting off extracts is not as simple as merely extracting texts: when placing the extract under the attention of users with a developed genre-consciousness, its small size becomes an advice that prepares expectations, signalling that the text requires a proper decoding process.

Textual Smallness within a Specific Field: towards a Functional Explanation

If aphoristic brevity is an external feature that acts as a signal to other textual properties, the next logical question to ask is *what properties*. To answer this question, I would like to reiterate that such a signal is a signal for an audience;

La memoria è il diario che ciascuno di noi porta sempre con sé (Wilde, L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto).

Parecchi pensieri che ho e che non potrei riassumere in parole li ho attinti dal linguaggio (Karl Krauss, Detti e contraddetti).

Ecco delle massime che sono anche degli aforismi, mentre quelli che seguono sono massime, ma troppo lunghe per essere aforismi:

Quanto è vantaggiosa la nobiltà: già a diciotto anni pone un uomo in posizione elevata, e lo rende conosciuto e rispettato, quanto un altro potrebbe riuscire a meritarlo in cinquant'anni. Sono trent'anni guadagnati senza fatica (Pascal, Pensieri, ed. Brunschvicg, 322).

L'artista non ha convinzioni etiche. Una convinzione etica in un artista è un imperdonabile manierismo dello stile (Wilde, Prefazione alla Ritratto di Dorian Grey). (Eco 2002: 70-71)

aphoristic brevity will imply specific properties of texts depending on targeted audiences. The working question will be '*what functions does the smallness of texts fulfil for its users*'.

Using the social context to answer 'what kind of goal can be achieved by the brevity of aphorisms' forces us to be more careful when answering the sociological question *what group are we talking about*.⁵ So far, the idea of users of aphorisms has been employed without any further distinction, but a minimal understanding of the field requires an awareness of the existence of different groups of users. To this end, identifying some *traditions* of aphoristic texts will help to expose probable functions of smallness within the genre.

Diachronic research is not going to be undertaken here to clarify thoroughly the diversity of the field; but, at this point, this functional explanation will benefit from an historical digression. Pointing out some roots of the genre, and their probable original functions, will provide an idea of how textual smallness has been used by some specific groups. Furthermore, some current functions and related features of present day aphorisms can be seen as the results of the evolution of traditions within the genre.

Aphorisms of Hippocrates: Identifying Functions of Brevity in Early Medical Texts

There is consensus about the origins of the term that labels the genre. It is common to mention the medical roots of aphoristic texts referring to the *Aphorisms* of Hippocrates. For instance, among other sources, one reads in the entry on aphorism in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

The term was first used in the *Aphorisms* of Hippocrates, a long series of propositions concerning the symptoms and diagnosis of disease and the art of healing and medicine. (2002)

L. R. Lind makes the same point in his article "The Aphorism: Wisdom in a Nutshell":

⁵ It is worth saying that I have avoided using the word *community*, which implies characteristics of social groups that would be contentious to state.

The first figure who stands out distinctly as an aphorist among Greeks was Hippocrates, who not only wrote aphorisms but entitled them with the Greek word. (Lind 1994: 313).

And in the *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo-americana*:

Aforismo. Lit. Se usa muy especialmente en medicina desde los célebres aforismos de Hipócrates. (1973) [It is specially used in medicine since the famous Hippocratic aphorisms.]

In contrast to this unanimously recognized origin of the term, accounts of an evolution of the genre from such Hippocratic beginnings seem to enjoy much less support.

The first Western European aphorisms were carved in stone and preserve their monumental truths to this day [...] The sayings of wise men, indeed, set the pattern for the aphorisms as an embodiment of ancient Greek thought in its purest form which was to recur as well in Greek drama and often elsewhere in Greek literature. [...]

After the seven wise men came the pre-Socratics many of whose expressions are aphoristic and the Apollonians such as Epimenides; whose motto was "The body is a tomb": σώμα σῆμα. Greek aphorisms continued to abound after Hippocrates [...]

Latin also embraced aphorism. [...]

Each succeeding century bears its crops of aphorisms and their authors begin to take a clearer shape. (Lind 1994: 312)

On the other hand, the historical continuity of a supposed aphoristic genre from Hippocrates to current aphorisms has been even rejected. J. P. Stern says:

The connection between the Hippocratic aphorism and the modern genre of literature which bears this name is usually considered to be 'merely verbal,' meaning that it is merely fortuitous. (Stern 1963:104)

However, believing the opposite hypothesis, Stern proposes a diachronic assumption that would help to fill the gap:

In order to find out whether this is really so (that there is not more than mere verbal connection), we must briefly consider some aspects of its history. For this purpose it may be convenient to distinguish three stages in the genre: the scientific, the hypothetical, and the literary types of the aphorism. The assertion to be proved is that the first of these is a rudimentary form of the last. (Stern 1963: 104).

I share Stern's objective in identifying different types of aphorism in order to better understand the genre. However, I think a typological division cannot be fitted effortlessly within historical stages like his. We should not forget that scientific aphorisms -medical aphorisms for instance- are still being produced. If they are still functional for modern doctors, we can say they are an ancient form, but it would not be easy to affirm plainly that they are a rudimentary one. Probably the beginning of several aphoristic types can be situated historically, but we should not forget that the emergence of a new aphoristic type does not simply signify the disappearance of the old.

Nonetheless, the indubitable medical origin of the word gives us an important reference point with which to situate functions of some groups of texts. Such groups could be classified within one of the traditions of the genre. In the same entry, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* says:

Aphorisms have been specially used in dealing with subjects that were late in developing their own principles or methodology—for example, art, agriculture, medicine, jurisprudence, and politics. [...] (2002: 480).

From this quotation, it is possible to conjecture an epistemic feature of some aphoristic texts. Some of them can be associated with disciplines of knowledge. For the sake of my next argument, it is worth clarifying that the quotation is not actually confining the use of texts to

certain fields, subjects or matters, but linking aphorisms to certain stage of the development of disciplines related to such subjects. Thus, their epistemic function seems to be determined by a methodology, rather than by a subject.

Current definitions of aphorism propose the existence of a group of epistemic texts, such a group can be roughly divided in two main traditions of texts: one can be associated with the moral and religious wisdom, proper to proverbial texts, and the other with texts used by *téchnai* or, as I will call them from now on, disciplines of technical knowledge.⁶ Greek medicine being, according to Greek doctors and many scholars, a *techné*, Hippocrates' texts belong to the second tradition.

The greatest achievement of early medicine was to differentiate itself from both philosophy and religion. It thereby became a profession with a substance and dignity coequal to those of other *technai* or professions. It is, in fact, the only profession for which we still retain to a significant extent the written record of its genesis [the Hippocratic writings]. (Levine 1971: 7)

[...]

Once freed from the unnecessary or irrelevant hypostatizing of philosophical speculation, medicine can be established, according to the (Hippocratic) author (of *Ancient Medicine* [*Peri archaies ietrikes*]), on a firm and independent footing with a rationale, a method, and objectives of its own. It is then prepared to become a 'science', that is to say, a branch of knowledge, although its essential and lasting connection with 'art' and 'technique' and 'skill' is never lost sight of. Always medicine is spoken of as a *techné*. This word embraces all three of these notions, as well as those of 'craft', 'occupation', and 'profession'. (Levine 1971: 24)

6 Hippocratic authors had a clear position about the relation of their craft to religion: "in earlier times, medicine and all the arts had commonly been conceived as revealed to man by the gods. The most famous statement of this primitive but at the time still prevailing attitude is perhaps that found in the *Prometheus Vincit* of Aeschylus. The attribution of medicine to a god is, indeed, mentioned by the (Hippocratic) author (of *On Ancient Medicine*) as an understandable but false belief; but he adds that it is still the commonly held opinion." (Miller 1949: 189)

It is important to add another epistemological distinction. Disciplines of technical knowledge and, on the other hand, moral and religious wisdom do not only have different subjects, but they also propose different relations with the truth. According to Greek philosophical thinking, *technai* are teachable, their knowledge is explainable and they can be held as a model of practical rationality.⁷ In contrast, wisdom has even been considered revealed, a kind of (divine) gift, and it would be difficult to find teachers of it.

Hippocratic authors were aware of the epistemological dimension of their disciplinary knowledge and they were keen to delimit the orientation of their discipline. They often did so by antagonizing with more speculative or with less practical disciplines of knowledge; Harold W. Miller writes:

The controversy contained in the treatise *On Ancient Medicine*, one of the most thoughtful of the works of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, has been recognized by scholars as of critical importance in Greek thought. The cardinal purpose of the author is to combat the medical theorizing of those physicians and *sophistai* who, having themselves postulated an *hypothesis* (*ὑπόθεσιν*) for their argument attempt to develop the aetiology of disease (*τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς αἰτίας*) by the introduction of some novel 'philosophic'*⁸ *hypothesis*. Against such thinkers, the author contends that medicine is already a *τέχνη ἐούσα*,*⁹ which has already long ago been established both as to content and method. (Miller 1949: 187)

Levine also reminds us that this controversy is also documented in the first chapter of:

(in) *Professional Conduct* (*Peri euschemosynes*), the (Hippocratic) author expresses a kind of

contempt and a rejection of those who do not relate wisdom (*sophie*) to life. This contempt and rejection of impractical speculation recalls the depth of feeling of the Socratics against the physical philosophers both contemporary and precedent whose philosophizing was forever 'up in the air' (*ta meteora*)¹⁰ (Levine 1971:67).

We should remember that *sophia* is more usually translated as *knowledge* than, as Levin does here, *wisdom*.

Introducing a distinction between aphoristic texts related to disciplines of knowledge and those concerned with moral wisdom, obliges us to specify our query in different contexts. From a general question about functions of small epistemic texts, we will have to ask specifically either *how are small texts used within the field of a discipline of technical knowledge* or *how are they used in relation to non-technical disciplines, such as those related to religious and moral wisdom*. At this moment, it is only the first question which concerns us.

Functions of brevity in the Hippocratic aphorisms have to be related to the particular knowledge of its discipline. We are not talking about the knowledge which leads practitioners to general abstractions but to particular actions. Such knowledge is to be applied; it aims to solve field problems. In other words,

10 This quotation continues as follows:

The writer is firm, even prim, on this subject. For him, most 'wisdom' has developed into useless speculation (*pros periergion*) – that is, it is 'overdone' to the point of irrelevancy. [...] Whatever wisdom's object may be, the truly attractive wisdom (*he chariestere*) is that which has developed into an art, not just any art (or skill) but an art whose applications leads to proper professional conduct and a good reputation. All forms of wisdom which are free of self-seeking and impropriety and which are characterized by an artistic (sic) method (*methodos tis eousa technike*) are noble (*kalai*). It may be misleading here to follow Jones in translating *technike* as 'scientific,' which seems to go far beyond our context. (Levine 1971: 67)

While we are on the subject, Levine's comment on Jones's translation should also be commented on: translating *technike* as 'artistic' may also be misleading; I would suggest considering the literal translation. Levine continues:

The first great achievement of the rationalist physicians represented in the (Hippocratic) Collection was to free medicine from religion and from philosophy. Medicine could then exist, grow, and develop apart from both theology (and in its uncritical popular form, superstition) and philosophy. It had, as the author of *Ancient Medicine* said, a principle and method of its own, sufficient to enable it to stand on its own. It may therefore be said that medicine came into being as a rational art when it wrested its territory from encroachment by related and much older human concerns, religion and philosophy". (Levine 1971: 54-5)

7 To illuminate the nature of Greek's *technai*, specially Medicine, see B. Hoffman's article "Medicine as Techné", especially pages 404-5.

8 The following is H. W. Miller's note:

*Such thinking tends *ἐς φιλοσοφίην* (V M 20.5). The use of the word here and the following explanation is probably one of the earliest efforts to demarcate and define the respective spheres of 'science' and 'philosophy,' which had not yet crystallized into its later more restricted meaning (cf. W. Jaeger. *Paidea* 3 [New York, 1944]19 and n. 40).

9 * VM 1.9. The use of *ἐούσης* is Ionic, and carries the implication that the *techné*, medicine, is a naturally-existing, true and real *techné*. [...]. (Another H. W. Miller's note)

it involves the practical skills of knowing and doing. Consequently, our next question should be *what functions could textual brevity have within the technical discipline of a teachable, practical and rational knowledge.*

The etymological origin of the term could help us to identify some of the relations between texts and technical praxis. "The Greek word *aphorismoi* [...] is defined as meaning *pi-thy sentences*, but the term also bears in its matrix the now accessory but originally primary notions of *definitions, distinctions, and delimitations.*" (Levine 1971: 81)

Gr. *ἀφορισμός* a distinction, a definition, f. *ἀφορίζεω* [...]. (OED, 2000)

Such primary notions must be understood in the light of the Hippocratic origin of the texts. Thus, they are *definitions, distinctions, and delimitations for practitioners of the medical discipline.*

The current common meaning of *Definition* as "a statement, declaration or proposal establishing the meaning of an expression" (Craig 1998) is less probable in the context of Hippocratic medical praxis than the nowadays rare meaning of "The setting of bounds or limits; limitation, restriction. *Obs. Rare.*" (OED, 2000). This probability is reinforced by the primary notion of *Delimitation*, which according to *OED* means "determination of a limit or boundary; esp. of the frontier of a territory." (2000).

One reads in the *OED* about the other primary notion of the term, *Distinction*: "1. The action of dividing or fact of being divided; division, partition; separation [...] 3. The action of distinguishing or discriminating; the perceiving, noting, or making a difference between things; discrimination. With *a* and *pl.*, the result of this action, a difference thus made or appreciated. [...] 5. The faculty of distinguishing or accurately observing differences; discernment, discrimination. [...] 6. The condition or quality of being distinctly or clearly perceptible; distinctness." (2000).

From this, it is easy to conjecture that aphorisms assisted Hippocratic doctors in making professional diagnosis and prognosis. They were perceptions, distinctions, differentiations, discernments, discriminations, limitations, boundaries, divisions, partitions, restrictions, and determinations for medical praxis. They helped practitioners to identify symptoms and to act consequently according to their *techne*. As Levine notes, except for the first Hippocratic text, which is the most general one¹¹, the aphoristic texts of Hippocrates "form, in fact, a kind of brief manual of medicine, stating in the most condensed way a clinical picture, a prognosis, a recommended or disapproved therapy." (Levine 1971: 82)

As the following examples will show, Hippocratic aphorisms aim to constitute a point of reference to orientate medical practice:

VII.34. When bubbles settle on the surface of the urine, they indicate disease of the kidneys, and that the complaint will be protracted.

IV.73. When the hypochondriac region is affected with meteorism and borborygmi, should pain of the loins supervene, the bowels get into a loose and watery state, unless there be an eruption of flatus or a copious evacuation of urine. These things occur in fevers. (Hippocrates 1952).¹²

Almost all texts appear to be either empirical observations, finely tuned distinctions, typical symptoms, forecasts, causal explanations, usual remedies, expert recommendations and well-versed guidelines.

11 In Levine's words:

The most famous phrase in the Hippocratic Collection comes from the very first *Aphorisms*. It is often misquoted or quoted out of context that we need an effort to restore it to its original context. 'Life is short, Art long' is either meaningless or means anything you want it to mean. The full aphorism reads thus: 'Life is short, whereas the demands of the (medical) profession are unending, the crisis is urgent, experiment dangerous, and decision difficult. But the physician must not only do what is necessary, he must also get the patient, the attendants, and the external factors to work together to the same end.' [...] No other aphorism in the seven sections approaches this one in generality. (Levine 1971: 82).

12 The first number (roman numerals) corresponds to the section of the book and the second one to the text within that section, in William Adams translation.

Hippocratic aphorisms were used to communicate and carry the knowledge of the practitioners of a discipline. However, this could be said generally about most Hippocratic texts:

The Hippocratic writers had [...] major objectives, and there is evidence that they succeeded substantially in achieving them. One was to amass empirically a body of knowledge peculiar to the fledgling profession and somehow to control it and shape it and organize it for the benefit of patient and practitioner. [...] (Other major) objective was to pass all of this on to others. In doing this they created the first cadres and schools and apprenticeships (or internships, if you like) of rationalist medicine." (Levine 1971: 55)

The particular question here is *what advantage did textual brevity offer to the Hippocratic users of technical knowledge*. The answer could be the manageability that a small size offers to a technicians' knowledge. It is noticeable that brief messages are easy to communicate, but, more importantly, brevity benefits the texts with highly concentrated attention from readers or listeners. It would be simple to say that attention promotes understanding, but since the Hippocratic texts are clear and plain, it would be difficult to believe that brevity's main function was to make one think deeply about the given information. Certainly, that should have happened, but, very probably, a more important function of brevity was to aid memory. On the one hand, brevity facilitates the process of holding information in the memory by several means, for instance: small pieces of information get more attention, short texts are practical for repetition and so on; while on the other hand, once acquired, it is easier to retrieve short rather than large pieces of information.

The importance of the didactic and mnemonic functions of Hippocratic texts is confirmed by the information we have about the personal background of its author, and by the historical context in which they were written. The *Aphorisms* have been attributed to

Hippocrates himself¹³, so it is natural to think that his professional experience explains their didactic qualities:

(Hippocrates) was well known both as a practitioner and a *teacher* of medicine [...]. There is also the implication in Plato's words that Hippocrates travelled from city to city and that, like the great sophists and rhetoricians, he came to Athens to practise and to *teach* his art. (Hippocrates 1952: ix). (My emphases)

If the *Aphorisms* are instructional and informative, it is because their writer's goal was not to produce enjoyment, but to clearly convey a message. When Hippocrates wrote the *Aphorisms*, memory had a major importance as epistemic tool: a recent past of orality had sanctioned its utility. In a culture without the technology of the written word, memory was the only way of keeping knowledge, and it was very convenient to encode knowledge in such a way as to facilitate retention and retrieval. If the *Aphorisms* are brief, it is mainly because of the mnemonic qualities of brevity. In his book *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong writes:

The theorem 'You know what you can recall' applies also to an oral culture. But how do persons in an oral culture recall? [...] In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. [...] Serious thought is intertwined with the memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax. (Ong 1995: 33-4).

However, the importance of memory retrieval and retention does not explain all the aspects related to the mnemonic features of the texts. A brief historical explanation of the relation between truth and memory in the ancient Greek world may illuminate some epistemological features of Hippocratic aphoristic texts. Incidentally, such an explanation may help us to understand the aura of authority that has been commonly associated with the genre.

13 "The *Aphorisms* (have been) attributed to Hippocrates himself (in modern times by Littré and Jones, among others)." (Levine 1971:81).

As Marcel Detienne has shown in *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece* (Detienne 1996), the archaic Greek concept of truth (*aletheia*) was closely related to memory (*Mnemosyne*). In the archaic period, the talent of *not forgetting* produced the control of truth. Such talent involved techniques of memory common to oral poets and it required a special connection with the gods (it is not an unconnected fact that Muses were the daughters of Mnemosyne). *Aletheia* was a kind of social good, not a concept of logic; therefore, other masters of truth, such as seers and divine kings, could use their prestige to support the social order.

In this context, one could simply think that aphoristic brevity enjoyed the prestige and status of other brief texts with mnemonic functions or epistemic contents, such as proverbs or, even, oracular utterances. But textual brevity, as a technique to enhance memorization of rational, practical and teachable knowledge, supports a different relation between memory and truth than that attributed by Detienne to the archaic world. Nothing in the *Aphorisms* would suggest that they aimed to portray themselves as carriers of (revealed) knowledge owed to memory; but more as a result of professional experience. Earliest aphoristic texts were used instrumentally, as a mnemonic technique; they were not presented as results of oblations to Mnemosyne. They were tools, not gifts. However, it is probable that at that time most people saw the *Aphorisms* as being endorsed with an authority like that of traditional proverbs or prophetic words. Even so, for practitioners, their authority came from the supposed knowledge of a teacher, not from the revelations of a master.

This epistemological distinction is a very important clue for understanding the earliest aphoristic brevity as a signal. If textual brevity was a signal of instrumental knowledge, then their content had to be interpreted without looking for any mysterious or hidden meanings, but straightforwardly in the context of medical practice and theoretical knowledge. Within this context, the functionality of Hippocratic aphorisms should also explain most of their features

—and it will help to explain why it is not so easy to find similarities with other texts currently called ‘aphoristic’.

Rhetorical sumptuousness, logical trickery and aesthetical exploration do not seem to be characteristics of Hippocrates’ aphorisms. The Hippocratic aphorisms are brief but clear, they are often very descriptive and not always particularly concise. Their features seem to be subordinated to achieve effective communication of technical knowledge within a community of practitioners. For instance, the language of Hippocratic aphorisms is neither figurative, witty nor sarcastic, but literal and plain. They are not especially compressed to achieve concision, because —although brevity was a very useful mnemonic feature— to communicate functionally applicable knowledge, clarity is indispensable. An inexact but helpful analogy can be made with academic writing: here in this kind of writing, any elegance should be achieved within the constraints of a clear and unambiguous communication; any aesthetic beauty that produces vagueness should be discarded.

Brevity, a Changing Signal

It is difficult to say to what extent the authority of that Greek beginning has influenced the history and thinking about aphoristic brevity. Nowadays it is still difficult to dissociate the brevity of aphorisms from epistemic contents. Nonetheless, another combination (than that of brevity and the knowledge of a very prestigious group of technical practitioners) would have produced different signalling effects. I would like to comment that the simple fact that brevity can be combined with other types of content suggests that, as a signal, brevity should not have an inherent or a constant connotation.¹⁴ For that reason, since “no signifying

14 In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is worth emphasizing that I am not using the term in its current philosophical sense. A warning in the entry *Connotation/Denotation* of the *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* will help to explain my use: “these terms (Connotation/Denotation) are given a different, almost opposite sense in non philosophical, especially literary, contexts. The overtones of the word, things suggested without being part of the meaning of the word, are calling connotation. In this usage, ‘home’ denotes the place where one lives but connotes privacy, intimacy and cosiness [...]” (Mautner 2005: 118-9).

code can be properly divorced from the social practices of its users" (Fiske 1990: 64), brevity could mean one thing to one group of people and something else for another.

As a current aphoristic signal, brevity connotes a wider range of possibilities than only technical-knowledge content. For knowledgeable users of the aphoristic genre, this signal can recall a tangled complexity of expectations of meaning - from humour and irony, even sarcasm, to wisdom. It can be said that as a mere external feature of texts, brevity has not changed, but through the existence of its tradition, brevity has acquired diverse connotations. Therefore, decoding current aphoristic brevity is a different practice than interpreting the Hippocratic one. Arguably, it is this complexity which currently delights and puzzles us when thinking about aphorisms. Since current knowledge of the signalling possibilities of brevity is neither clear nor explicit, one could say that our own competence in decoding brevity entangles us in it: a higher genre consciousness increases awareness of the possibilities of brevity, making it possible to recall more, even contradictory, connotations.

Such intricacy of brevity's signalling effect hints to the long history of the aphoristic tradition. The process of becoming the sign that brevity currently is, goes beyond the sphere of semantic or syntactic study; it belongs to the history of the culture: how does a (textual) convention develop within the social practices of human groups. I believe that a thorough diachronic examination could explain current signalling functions of aphoristic brevity. It is not, however, my aim to undertake such a study; but in order to support my hypothesis (that a diachronic examination would produce synchronic understanding), I will reflect on the *Hippocratic case* in order to propose a possible, though merely speculative, account of the process of 'becoming a signal' in that early stage of the aphoristic genre.

Among the texts used to communicate medical knowledge between Hippocratic prac-

titioners, the *Aphorisms* were outstanding for their mnemonic qualities and it is very probable that their first intended function was only to aid memory. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to believe that the notoriety of textual brevity soon became a signal of the content of the *Aphorisms* for Hippocratic practitioners. Hippocratic doctors learned to see the *Aphorisms* brevity as a visual signal to prepare a proper reception of epistemic contents. They knew, before they even began to read, that a message was there to be memorized. In an age when knowledge considered worthy of being memorized was regarded as highly important, brevity as a signal should have been charged with great significance and authority within the group of Hippocratic doctors -and it is probable that its aura affected the imagination of ancient common people. However, it is realistic to think that non-practitioners could not make the same association between the signal and a certain specific technical content; perhaps, they just saw Hippocratic brief texts as containing 'something important'. This would not have been unusual -when a group of people see a signal and try to understand and interpret it out of its natural context, they will somehow re-signify it. If that happened to the *Aphorisms*, the prevalence of the association of 'brevity' with specific 'technical knowledge' was broken and, from then on, brevity as a signal could be interpreted differently.

Additionally, the way in which aphoristic brevity had been freed from its first (and probably of subsequent) signalling functions will also explain how its original mnemonic functions went astray. If aphoristic brevity, when seen by Hippocratic practitioners, incited readings of highly concentrated attention in order to enhance memorization of technical information, when it was seen by non-practitioners, brevity was not a specific signal to initiate such a particular type of reading. Common people could generally associate aphoristic brevity with an important content, not with a particular one, which implied specific tasks for the reader. The dissociation of brevity from technical knowledge untied aphorisms from their original function of aiding memory, and, in time, their

brief form could be seen, by the general public, merely as a signal to start an attentive reading of an important but variable type of content.

I have argued that changes of users through time would help to explain changes in the uses of brevity as a signal. Furthermore, I suspect that the current complexity of the signalling functions of brevity may be explicable as a memory of changes in the function transmitted to the present by the aphoristic tradition. Let us simplify for a moment, the changes of signalling functions of brevity (*SF*) as a linear sequence, let us say from *SF1* to *SFn*, where the passage from *SF1* to *SF2* is the change from Hippocratic practitioners to non-practitioners. In the moment *SF2*, users would have seen brevity mostly as signal of an 'important content', but they also got a good glimpse of its past function as a signal of Hippocratic knowledge. One could say that since *SF2*, all users of the genre are in a similar situation: at the end of a sequence *SF1... SFn*. From that perspective, brevity as a signal will be perceived as a complex one, which can, in theory, produce glimpses from the entire sequence of signalling functions accumulated through the existence of the tradition.

It would be a mistake to think that all signalling functions of brevity can be explained as a sequence of associations between 'textual brevity' (form) and 'textual content'. Among the signalling functions of brevity, there is one which seemingly belongs to another kind. Attempts, such as Umberto Eco's one, to make brevity the distinctive element of aphorisms are, certainly, an effort to define aphorisms; nonetheless, those attempts can also be alleged to be part of the sequence of signalling functions of brevity: when brevity became the signal to identify aphorisms. This type of signalling function is based on a different kind of association than form and content; 'being a signal of aphoristic texts' associates 'brevity' and 'the (supposed) existence of a (definable) generic thing called *aphorism*'. This association implies ontological assumptions like the existence of generic things (such as aphorisms); it also implies epistemological

and methodological hypotheses: that a genre is definable and that one specific (textual) element could define a genre. In other words, 'being a signal of aphorisms' is another function given to brevity by a specific group of people: those trying to figure out criteria to define and recognize aphorisms. Such a group is not using aphoristic texts to communicate, but they are thinking about aphorisms in order to classify and understand them within the framework of their own (generic) categories. For this group, their interpretation of brevity seems to offer a possible solution to the problem of defining the genre: brevity signals aphorism; *i.e.*, it fulfils the function that a group of researchers of the aphoristic genre might find useful.

In summary, through time, users have learned not only to see textual brevity as a signal to trigger the appropriate reception of certain contents, but also, when looking for defining features, as the signal of a genre. However, when size is identified as the essential feature of aphorisms, a single textual feature is used to define the aphoristic communication; nonetheless, this task is beyond the possibilities of any single element of the texts. Brevity is not only a textual feature or specific difference for the use of critics, but also a signal to groups of readers to initiate a special way of reading, a code that advises that a text belongs to a genre and has to be read according to the generic conventions of the moment. It will be worth asking for the signalling effects that brevity has for current readers of aphorisms, who are not especially interested on defining the genre. In an explanation to such a kind of question, one would find some of the complementary parts to complete the puzzle of the question of how aphorisms work. ■

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