

INTRODUCTION

The Long and Short of It

“All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Tolstoy’s famous aphorism has long led a double life. Those who have read *Anna Karenina* remember it as the opening sentence of a great novel about love and families. But many who could not locate its source still recognize the line.

We all know countless aphorisms or famous short expressions of various sorts: ringing pronouncements, dark sayings, witticisms, maxims, proverbs, and many more. We browse anthologies and encyclopedias in search of them. We repeat witty responses made on the spur of the moment by Churchill, Shaw, or Dorothy Parker. Conservatives cite the wisdom of Burke and Hayek, liberals know inspiring lines of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, and radicals can quote Marx and Engels. Graduate students in literature acquire famous sayings by Nietzsche, Freud, Derrida, and others, while philosophers learn to recognize the best-known aphorisms from Wittgenstein. People who rarely read long books, or even short stories, still appreciate the greatest examples of the shortest literary genres.

I have long been fascinated by these short genres. They seem to lie just where my heart is, somewhere between literature and philosophy. It may seem odd that someone could have written a book on *War and Peace* and yet be fascinated by the shortest literary genres, often no longer than a line. But both great philosophical novels and aphorisms work simultaneously as literature and philosophy, and each demands both literary and philosophical analysis to

be properly understood. Tolstoy himself loved short forms, which, as we will see, he translated, combined into anthologies, and deployed strategically in his fiction. To be sure, some aphoristic genres seem to be more literary and others more philosophical, but, taken as a group, short genres may be viewed as lying on an implicit continuum between literature and philosophy.

“The aphorism, the apothegm, in which I am the first master among Germans, are the forms of eternity,” proclaimed Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*. “My ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book—what everyone else *does not* say in a book” (*TI*, 115). As Nietzsche well knew, numerous other philosophers, sages, and thinkers—from antiquity to the present, and from China to America—had exploited brevity. The thoughts of some wise men, like Greece’s “Seven Sages,” have survived as exemplary aphorisms and have attracted countless imitators. Other great thinkers included detachable aphorisms in longer works or made longer works from aphorisms in sequence. From the book of Lao Tzu to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, classic philosophical works have developed the possibilities of the aphorism.

So have philosophically inclined literary works. Alexander Pope explicitly constructed his *Essay on Man* and *Essay on Criticism* so as to be both readable as a whole and detachable for separate aphoristic couplets. Much the same can be said of Samuel Johnson’s great philosophical meditation, “The Vanity of Human Wishes.” Johnson’s novel, *Rasselas*, uses a story concerning the quest for the best way to live as a vehicle for one famous aphorism after another. An aphoristic sensibility shapes the very essence of these masterpieces.

The lives of such writers often seem like a series of opportunities for aphorisms. Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* reveals the great man’s character through his sardonic maxims, witticisms, and pithy comments. In antiquity, Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* and Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* work in much the same way, and, indeed, it is through such biographies, especially Diogenes Laertius’s, that the sayings of many great philosophers have been preserved.¹ As philosophers, they are aphorists, and as aphorists, philosophers.

From Herodotus and Thucydides to Gibbon, great histories that have survived as literary masterpieces have also relied on detachable aphorisms. If we are willing to include comments up to a paragraph long, then we can discover many remarkable ones in George Eliot and Dostoevsky as well as in Tolstoy. Philosophical novels, including those elucidating the complexities of psychology, offer wise sayings and maxims in the course of narrating particular char-

acters' actions. That is why so many readers have been able to read Dostoevsky's works as narrative guides to the dark side of the soul. These novelists are often supremely aware of aphorisms as whole works, such as those of La Rochefoucauld, as well as of their use by earlier novelists and historians. George Eliot cited, and Tolstoy translated, masters of the short form. Some of Dostoevsky's characters live as if they believe that a life can be redeemed if it results in a single brilliant aphorism.

Many of the best-known short literary works belong to the category specialists have called "wisdom literature." The oldest Western book we have, *The Instructions of Ptah-hotep*, consists of maxims, and it is obvious why such brief sayings, originally preserved by spoken repetition, would be the first works preserved. The Bible contains examples of wise sayings counseling prudence and justice, many collected in the books of Proverbs and Psalms. It also contains counter-wisdom about the futility of all things, such as the most famous lines in Ecclesiastes. Whether in the form of proverbs or pronouncements of great thinkers, wise sayings continue to be coined and still play an important part in our lives. As the first philosophy and the first literature, they seem never to go out of style.

Other short forms have a distinctly practical intent. In a moment of crisis, they summon us to action. These ringing lines demand we live up to our highest values. Like wise sayings, they eventually become part of the informal philosophy that makes a people what it is, or, rather, aspires to be. When repeated in later years, they become a central part of a people's literature.



Although aphorisms constitute the shortest literary genres, they rarely attract serious study. Universities give courses on the novel, epic, and lyric, while drama is often taught as a family of genres including comedy, tragedy, and melodrama. But I know of no course on the family of genres including proverbs, wise sayings, witticisms, and maxims. The explanation can hardly be the relative fame of the authors, because many aphorisms come from the very same well-known authors: Shakespeare, Pope, Voltaire, Jane Austen, and Tolstoy, for instance. Some authors best known for their pithy sayings or witticisms stand as true literary geniuses, such as Kraus, Chamfort, and La Rochefoucauld. The canon of great aphorists also includes La Bruyère, Lichtenberg, Nietzsche, Gracián, Vauvenargues, Joubert, Schopenhauer, Ambrose Bierce, Francis Bacon, and Samuel Johnson. As much as any author of epic poetry,

these authors demonstrated keen awareness of writing in a tradition. Canetti observed that “the great writers of aphorisms read as if they had all known each other well” (*OBA*, 364).

The present study examines the aphorists’ relationships with each other. If it succeeds, it will show why these short works repay serious study. The very fact that aphorisms figure so prominently in our speech and writing demonstrates the pleasure, however guilty, we take in them. It is as if we hid our taste for them under a bushel, instead of displaying unapologetic appreciation. If we did, we would see the many complex ways in which different genres of short literature work, the fascinating dialogues that have developed among them, and the inventive techniques by which longer masterpieces have included them. Above all, we would grasp the distinctive wisdom aphorisms offer.



Even the most cursory examination of the topic will convince us that there is no agreed-upon definition of terms such as “aphorism,” “saying,” “apothegm,” or “maxim.” Meanings vary even more than with such controversial designations as “novel” and “epic.” Aphorisms sometimes include all short works, sometimes just those examples that have an author, and sometimes only a small subset that may be variously identified either by tone, form, or idea. One man’s aphorism is another man’s maxim. Etymology rarely helps, since the meanings of terms shift radically over ages and cultures. Hippocrates’ aphorisms would not be called that today. They are closer to what we might call maxims, while the works La Rochefoucauld called maxims bear little resemblance to maxims as we usually think of them. If one struggles to arrive at the true meaning of these terms, one will surely be lost in an endless labyrinth.

I therefore prefer to classify the works themselves and then, merely for the sake of consistent usage, apply a term to each class—with the understanding that a different term could have been chosen and that I am not trying to regulate the proper use of terms. With this proviso, I will use the term “aphorism” to refer to the entire family of short genres, although others may prefer a different designation. But how shall the works themselves be classified?

Like arguments over terminology, classification debates may seem pointless, and yet, as thinkers from Aristotle to Linnaeus and Darwin have understood, one can often best understand a range of phenomena by first examining its types. If nomenclature proves less than helpful in doing so and the phenomena lend themselves to different groupings, one needs to reflect on *why* one is

interested in the phenomena in the first place. Articulating the questions one hopes to answer also helps. Only by deciding on the sort of thing one is looking for can one hope to find it. There is no single correct way of classifying genres. Rather, principles of classification properly depend on the reasons for classifying. Different purposes demand different classifications.

Let me be clear: I do not aspire to be the Northrop Frye of short genres and offer the definitive classification to supplant or forestall all others. Because classification depends on purpose, I regard the idea of a single true system, irrespective of purpose, as intellectually muddled. Choose a different set of questions, and you will arrive at a different classification.

The purpose that guides this study resembles the one that has guided my earlier studies of great writers and works. I most often read literature as a source of wisdom and insight, and I have long been attracted to the shortest works for this reason. The best seem to capture important facts about experience, thought, and human nature. That is presumably why, in almost all cultures, the most widely represented, as well as the earliest, short genres consist of “wise sayings,” essential truths meant to be passed on to subsequent generations. This form is far from my favorite, but not because I reject its aspiration to wisdom. Rather, I find still greater wisdom in other genres, some critical of the wise saying’s assumptions.

Given my preferences, I decided to classify genres according to their worldviews, the distinct sense of human experience that each conveys. How does each genre imagine life, what does it value, to whom does it appeal and why? When genres dispute each other, what issues shape their disagreement? What kinds of arguments do they use and to what emotions do they appeal? What forms of expression does each genre find most suitable and most effective?

I largely share Mikhail Bakhtin’s approach to genres as “form-shaping ideologies,” that is, as worldviews seeking expression.² It is an approach admirably suited for genres lying on the continuum from literature to philosophy. So understood, formal features do not define a genre but follow from the sense of experience that does. Given certain beliefs and values, genres seek out appropriate forms of rhetoric. Over time, they develop sets of tacit but recognized conventions and assumptions. With short genres, these conventions and assumptions play an especially large role because brevity does not allow for much to be explicitly stated.

Brevity can have surprising consequences. We shall see that short genres typically presume a particular social setting, a distinct role for the reader or

audience, and a specific attitude to the moment of uttering. Time, knowledge, and self-knowledge prove to be recurrent topics that each genre approaches in its own ways.

For every occasion there is a genre: a kind that laughs and a kind that despairs; a kind that voices public defiance and a kind that meditates alone; a kind that wonders and a kind that banishes wonder; a kind that is intensely personal and a kind summoning the whole people; a kind that displays remarkable quick-wittedness and a kind that exhibits epic stupidity; a kind that is amazed at the world beyond and a kind that is fascinated by the most prosaic, unhistoric acts of daily life.

We shall examine each of these short genres as well as the ways in which they interact. Like philosophers from diverse schools or theologians representing rival orthodoxies, aphoristic genres enter into dialogue, sometimes friendly and sometimes hostile. Those dialogues shape future works, which contribute to the ongoing conversation among worldviews. Aphorisms of one genre quote or allude to other genres in order to comment on them, and those others, aware of such commentary, respond.

World literature is a great symposium, and we are invited to the banquet. With short genres, it is a banquet of delicious morsels.



The first chapter of this study raises some general questions of literary classification and the ways in which genres interact. Then in the following chapters I consider pairs of genres related to each other in interesting ways, usually as opposites or dialogic antagonists.

I first consider the type of aphorism I call “apothegms” (in a special sense).³ These intriguing works picture the world as fundamentally mysterious and so contrast with “dicta,” which purport to have at last resolved all mystery. To illuminate these opposing genres, I also consider a number of related forms, such as the “riddle” and what I call the “hypothesis.”

The next chapter considers the varieties of wit and witlessness. I begin with the philosophy conveyed by great witticisms, the kind of intelligence they value, and the view of life they implicitly or explicitly endorse. I contrast these gems with comments that have survived for the opposite reason, their remarkable stupidity or inarticulateness: like the sublime ineptness of Inspector Clouseau, these comments rise (or fall) to their own unexpected splendor. The Clouseau principle governs what I call the “witlessisms” of Sir Boyle Roche, Dan Quayle,

and many other negative paragons. Some witlessisms, such as those made famous by Yogi Berra and Sam Goldwyn, turn out to be readable as paradoxical expressions of real wisdom. Although these paradoxes are unintentional, some authors have fabricated them deliberately by assuming a witless persona who, in sincere silliness, voices an important point. Mark Twain stands as the great master of such inspired innocence.

The oldest and most commonly used aphoristic genre is the “wise saying”: the pronouncements of sages and the anonymous wisdom of past generations that circulate as proverbs. As the biblical book of Proverbs repeatedly tells us, nothing could be more important than “to know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding . . . [t]o understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings” (Proverbs 1:2–6). Wise sayings typically view the world as providential, guaranteeing reward for prudence and righteousness.

Such optimism provokes the ire or contempt of a more skeptical genre, which questions the rationality of the world and stresses the numerous ways in which the supposedly wise, no less than the rest of us, arrange to see only what they want to see. In the Bible, the moral calculus of Proverbs, Psalms, and some other books is answered in Ecclesiastes and debated in Job. La Rochefoucauld counters the sages and moralists with masterful explorations of human vanity and self-deception.

Borrowing the term used by La Rochefoucauld, I call these works “maxims” (or occasionally, “sardonic maxims”). Maxims unmask vanity, self-deception, and egoism disguised as virtue. Of course, one may unmask others’ egoism to feed one’s own. Self-deception ambushes those who expose self-deception. The best maximists avoid the trap of exempting themselves from the scrutiny they direct at opponents. Nietzsche, Kraus, Guicciardini, Bierce, and others appeal to the disillusioned psychologists among us, and their maxims seem to gain in force as we age.

At times of crisis, when a group’s survival is threatened, great orators and heroes encourage the people with the sort of ringing words we all learn at school. Later in life, these words may seem childish to some but even more inspiring to others. If a new crisis arises, an orator may use earlier models to formulate sayings encouraging the people. Reminding them of the best of their tradition, or inventing that tradition under the guise of reminding them, the orator summons the people to meet the challenge. The “summons,” as I call this form, was popular in antiquity and figures in more recent national his-

tories. Europeans know Pericles, and the genre he exemplifies includes great lines spoken, or occasionally written, by Thomas Paine, Napoleon, Admiral Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, Abraham Lincoln, and Winston Churchill. In the times that try men's souls, these orators may offer nothing but blood, sweat, and tears.

The summons constitutes one kind of literature of trial. The form of trial I call the "thought" could not differ more. While the summons tends to be perfectly polished and is pronounced before a public audience on a solemn occasion, the thought offers a private meditation, still incomplete and tentative, as it first occurred to the author. This trial—in the sense of a trying out—experiments as it goes along. Thoughts therefore tend to be rather diffuse and to test the criterion of brevity characterizing short genres as a group. They are barely memorizable or not memorizable at all, and yet, by their very testing of the norm, they affirm it. Anthologies of aphorisms, perhaps somewhat apologetically, often include them.

Thoughts fascinate by their capacity to reveal the very process of thinking and to show ideas when they could still be developed in many different ways. They are typically collected and published by others, or, if not, are written to resemble those that have been. Lichtenberg, Pascal, and Nietzsche have offered impressive thoughts that invite us to extend them in new directions. They call to mind *how* we think—or at least how we might hope to think—when meditating on a question that truly matters.

In the last chapter, I return to the form I call apothegms. Instead of contrasting apothegms as I have described them with an antithetical genre, I juxtapose them to apothegms of a different type. "Mystical apothegms," as I retrospectively rename the ones discussed in Chapter 2, regard the world as ultimately beyond our ken because it is based on principles transcending language and defying the very categories with which we think. By contrast, "prosaic apothegms" trace the inadequacy of mind not to otherworldly mystery but to thoroughly mundane complexity.

Montaigne, Guicciardini, Lichtenberg, George Eliot, and other masters of the prosaic apothegm (let us call them apothists) show how our minds tend to simplify the sheer multiplicity and variety of the world. At least when we are dealing with human beings, causes do not reduce to a few underlying laws. Everything shifts before our eyes in unpredictable ways. Inherently skeptical, prosaic apothegms teach us to suspect hasty generalizations and to perceive ever finer distinctions.

If a genre can be said to be a hero, then the hero of this book is the prosaic apothegm and the longer forms it generates, especially a particular type of realist fiction I call the prosaic novel. The reader will not be surprised to learn that the world's greatest prosaic novels include *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.



In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explains that truths not amenable to logical proof may be demonstrated more or less persuasively in two distinct ways: by a brief statement (or enthymeme) or by an extended example (or case study). The former appeals to the deductive, and the latter to the inductive, spirit.⁴ It is also possible to combine the two methods. A long work may tell a story to illustrate an insight. The insight may demand such expansion not only to exemplify it but also to show its complex implications.

For much the same reasons, a short genre typically has a longer counterpart (often more than one). A given worldview may be developed aphoristically or at length. We can best understand each by considering the other. A longer work may explore the worldview of a shorter one and contain many examples of it. That is one reason so many aphorisms come from longer works.

Sometimes the relationship between short genre and longer work may be relatively simple, as Aesop's fables illustrate a moral and as Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* serves as a vehicle for witticisms. At other times the relationship turns out to be considerably more complex. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* contains many brilliant sardonic maxims, but it does considerably more. Maxims themselves achieve a new richness as Gibbon's very long book deploys them. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot formulates maxims worthy of La Rochefoucauld and apothegms as good as Samuel Johnson's. But the book could hardly be considered just an expansion of these.

The very fact that some long works contain examples of more than one short genre illustrates one way in which aphorisms can be developed. The author of a long work can take the side of one genre against another or create an unresolved dialogue among several of them. Many short genres play a role in *War and Peace*. Although this work respectfully explores the wisdom of proverbs, maxims, and apothegms, Tolstoy treats the summons with irony and the witticism with contempt. Tolstoy regarded the sense of life expressed by witticisms as supremely shallow for valuing mere cleverness above all else.

To illustrate how short genres relate to long ones, each chapter of the present study considers, along with a short form, its longer relatives. I hope that the

discussion of each illuminates the other and that it will become clear why an understanding of short works opens new perspectives on longer ones.



I remember my surprise at discovering that the author of *War and Peace* was fascinated by literature's shortest forms. Three thick volumes of Tolstoy's complete works contain his published and unpublished anthologies of aphorisms. He translated La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Lao Tzu (from a French version), and many other masters of short forms. In his *Circle of Reading*, an anthology with aphorisms for each day of the year, he also included weekly short stories to develop the insights of short sayings.

Some of Tolstoy's later tales explicitly develop the implications of well-known sayings, which they take as titles. Those tales include some of his greatest, such as "God Sees the Truth, but Waits to Tell," which I discuss in the chapter on wise sayings. We have seen that *Anna Karenina* exemplifies an aphorism by following it with a lengthy narrative, which in turn contains examples of many short forms. Tolstoy grasped the relations of short genres to long ones better than any writer I know, and so, in my discussions of that topic, his works appear especially frequently.

The present volume therefore has three goals. It offers a discussion of several fascinating short genres, the worldviews they express, and the forms with which they express them. It also explores the relation of each genre's sense of the world to other genres or long works developing that sense. Finally, those interested in Tolstoy will discover the relation of his pithy sayings to his longer works and a new way of understanding his masterpieces. If we indulge a taste for paradox, we might say that *War and Peace* is the longest apothegm in the world.



It may seem odd to find so many types of works consisting of only a few sentences or less. In fact, aphorisms come in many more kinds than I have had the space to discuss. Short genres evidently can display considerable variety. Concision itself offers opportunities as well as constraints.

All short genres are brief, but each short genre is brief in its own way.