

## **JAMES RICHARDSON**

### **Proverb, Aphorism, Poem**

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I am a Hard-Working Poet struggling with an addiction to one-liners -- aphorisms, maxims, apothegms -- which I sometimes think of as the Fast Food of Literature, maybe the potato chips of literature. Finland has an Aphorism Association, aphorism contests, an aphorism blog. But when I started writing aphorisms 20 years ago, I was the only living U.S. aphorist I knew about. When I presented aphorisms at readings people weren't sure what to call them -- the word "aphorism" was unfamiliar. They would come up to me and say "I liked your.... proverbs." That's an interesting confusion: it seems half-true. But only half.

I would like to think about the generic differences among aphorisms, proverbs and poems. And the practical differences, the differences in where they come from, how they get written.

First off, I don't want to say that there is an absolutely hard distinction between proverbs and aphorisms. There are a few very sharp proverbs that sound like aphorisms, and there are simple and general aphorisms that sound like proverbs. Also, I'm guessing many aphorists aspire to the proverbial, that they have the paradoxical ambition of having a few of their aphorisms become so well-known that they detach themselves from authorship and become proverbial.

Nevertheless, there are differences. Basically, all proverbs are created by that prolific author Anonymous, or Anon. Not only don't we know who he is, he hardly ever refers to himself. He never says "I" or "me." He's a little shy of pronouns in general -- "he, she" -- preferring nouns. Maybe because proverbs don't imagine a personal point of view. They are always a quotation -- they present themselves as the Simple Truth.

Anon, judging from his proverbs, is a canny and slightly weary fellow, unsurprised by what life does to us. "Man proposeth, God disposeth," he'll say, or "This too shall pass." He has a taste for the general and reusable. Unlike a poet, he doesn't worry whether we've heard his exact words

millions of times. Nor does he have a philosopher's care for consistency. One day he says "Haste makes waste," but the next day he feels the opposite: "He who hesitates is lost." Of course you should "Stop and smell the roses," he says. On the other hand, don't forget that "Time is money." "Birds of a feather flock together" he'll usually say, and he's usually right. But when the unusual happens, he still needs something to say, so he says the opposite, namely that "Opposites attract."

That is, Anon has neither the ambition nor the naiveté of the systematizer. He's definitely not a scientist, and only in a very un-academic sense a philosopher. His truths, though stated very generally, are applied quite locally. As Charlotte Schapira has noted in *La maxime et le discours d = autorité*, when Anon says "Like father, like son" he doesn't expect anyone to object "Wait, I know a son who's not like his father!" He means that right here in front of us, right now, a particular son has behaved just as his father might have.

So proverbs are tied to occasions, and in a way dependent on them. They are pre-formulated responses to eternally recurring situations. "Ah," they sigh, "it is as we have always known!"

Since proverbs are pre-literate, carried in the head, they have to have a certain memorability. Their memorability might be enhanced by symmetry of sound, rhyme, syntax as in "Like father, like son." Or by an apt but easily gettable metaphor. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree" -- which is the same proverb, almost. That one also exists in German "Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Baum," and I'm sure a real scholar could find cognates for many of the proverbs I'm going to mention, in many languages. Of course "memorability" is not unique to proverbs. Aphorisms want to be memorable, in one way or another. And poems want to be memorable, at least poems of the more traditional kinds.

Now, allow me to quote a few aphorisms to work on. These won't by any means represent the whole spectrum of the aphorism. Aphorisms can range from incisive, to riddling or paradoxical, to politically or philosophically explicit. They can vary in length. And of course they come out of many centuries and many cultures.

But I will start with two of my favorite aphorists, and with a kind of aphorism that seems to me central, and that will help me contrast the aphorism with the proverb. A little later in the talk, I'll bring in some very different aphorisms. These are La Rochefoucauld:

Nous avons tous assez de force pour supporter les maux d'autrui  
We all have strength enough to endure the troubles of others.

On n'est jamais si ridicule par les qualités que l'on a que par celles que l'on affecte d'avoir.

We are never as ridiculous through qualities we have as through those we pretend to have.

Si nous ne nous flattions point nous-mêmes, la flatterie des autres ne nous pourrait nuire.  
If we never flattered ourselves the flattery of others could not harm us.

Il est plus honteux de se défier de ses amis que d'en être trompé.

It is more shameful to distrust one's friends than to be deceived by them.

François, Duc de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)  
translated Leonard Tancock

Next I'll jump to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are from Antonio Porchia, who was born in Italy, emigrated to Argentina and wrote in Spanish. Don Paterson, the Scots poet and aphorist, has an aphorism in which he cites Porchia as the gold standard of the aphorism. I guess I would agree with that.

Antes de recorrer mi camino yo era mi camino  
Before I traveled my road I was my road.

Quien me tiene de un hilo no es fuerte; lo fuerte es el hilo.  
 He who holds me by a thread is not strong; the thread is strong.

Hallarás la distancia que te separa de ellos, uniéndote a ellos.  
 You will find the distance that separates you from them, by joining them.

Qué te he dado, lo sé. Qué has recibido, no lo sé.  
 I know what I have given you. I do not know what you have received.

Not using faults does not mean that one does not have them.  
 No usar defectos, no significa no tenerlos.

Antonio Porchia (1886-1968)  
 translated W. S. Merwin

First off, you might be able to imagine the situation that might have led these writers to sit down at a desk and write these aphorisms, but I think it's hard to imagine them as proverbial responses to an event happening in front of us. For example, in what social situation would you say "Before I traveled my road, I was my road"?

Unlike most proverbs, these aphorisms say "I" or "we" -- they at least pretend to talk to us. Whereas a proverb is said by one Anon to another, as if quoting the law.

More important, maybe, all the ones I've quoted are in one way another concerned with the work of definition, distinction.

Before I traveled my road, I was my road.

"Road" starts out almost proverbially, as something like a path you can walk on, but it ends as being something inside you, something you are. So not only is there definition, there is redefinition. This is very common in aphorisms -- notice how many use the same word twice,

in different senses.

He who holds me by a thread is not strong, the thread is strong.

All stones are broken stones.

Those who demand consideration for their sacrifices were making investments,  
not sacrifices

All work is the avoidance of harder work.

This very conspicuous repetition is all the more striking in a genre characterized by brevity and economy. It's the sign of a process: statement or definition, then redefinition. Of course the repetition doesn't have to be explicit:

You will find the distance that separates you from them, by joining them.

This one plays with two different ideas of distance is without actually repeating the word "distance." In talking about definition and re-definition, maybe I'm just rediscovering the etymology of the word "aphorism." It's related to the Greek word for "horizon," and comes from a verb meaning "to delimit or define." And maybe in a way, I'm just re-stating the difference between oral and written literature: that fact that written literature tends to be more analytical and inward than oral literature.

But I want to say three more things about this definition and redefinition, this play of words, this switch of tracks or perspectives that often happens in the middle of an aphorism.

A proverb matches itself to an outside situation. These aphorisms are slightly more self-contained. They state or define their own situation, and then re-define it. Rather than a split between world and sentence, we have a split inside the sentence, almost a self-consciousness. That would be rare in a proverb. The aphorism shares the proverb's fondness for concision and for metaphors, for memorability and general applicability, but it would like to be independent of a specific situation, to be able to survive surrounded by white space. And maybe by other aphorisms. All the aphorisms I've quoted are from books of aphorisms, collections.

Second, the definitions/redefinitions in these aphorisms are very similar to the misdirections and changes of perspective that happen within jokes and riddles. In jokes, the stumbles and switches, the puns and wordplays, are more surprising and jarring. We "fall for them," we trip, and we laugh as we fall. These aphorisms are not exactly "funny;" maybe they are closer to "witty." Their fall is gentler, a kind of deepening in the middle of the line

Before I traveled my road I was my road.

As if you were walking downstairs and there was one less step than you thought. But many aphorisms can be MADE funny with a little adjustment of performance.

WE ALL HAVE STRENGTH ENOUGH TO ENDURE THE TROUBLES.....of others.

This kind of wit seems essential to many kinds of aphorisms -- and it marks a distinction from proverbs. Proverbs can be anything from cheery to resigned to downright cynical, but they are rarely funny and not so often even what we'd call witty. They pass from hand to hand, mouth to mouth and get smoothed down -- they have to belong to everyone. Maybe humor by definition, doesn't belong to everyone. Maybe all jokes are in-jokes. I don't think I believe in the inevitable aggressiveness of wit. But a joke and riddles do have an inside and an outside. You start off on the outside, with uncertain expectations, and eventually there is a trick or slip or wordplay -- or redefinition -- that changes your angle of vision. Suddenly you "get it." Suddenly you are inside.

The third thing. Because these aphorisms are not just statements but re-definitions, because they are a process, they are often highly dependent on the order of their words, on syntax. If you say the punchline of a joke before the main part of the joke, it falls completely flat. If I reverse the Porchia

I was my road before I followed my road.

It isn't witty or tricky any more. It's suddenly a flat statement, almost a little narrative. When we finish the sentence we have to go back to the beginning to figure out what it means, to recover

the distinction it's making. How about

All broken stones are stones.

Duh? Pedantic and tautological? Almost stupidly geological?

How about:

The troubles of others are easier to endure than our own.

Again, it becomes more like an opinion, a statement, actually an annoyingly obvious one.

Though at the same time a statement so crude and insistent that it makes you want to disagree -- I think immediately of how my children's disappointments hurt me more than my own. Maybe there's a distinction here. With an aphorism, as with a riddle or joke, as with literature in general, we don't think first "Do I agree?" We are drawn in to a process. We try to figure out how it works, in what sense it might be true. But flatter kinds of statement provoke less participatory kinds of agreement and disagreement.

OK, so maybe the doubletakes or track-switches of aphorisms are related to what happens in jokes. And in their slight fussiness with their terms, their hairsplitting repetition, there's a self-consciousness, a wit, that again may or may not exactly be funny, but doesn't feel proverbial. You might think of it as a failed equation. "A does not quite equal (oops) A." or "A = A'," or "A actually equals B."

So maybe aphorisms are part proverb, part joke. And maybe we can say that they state and then revise the kinds of definitions or truths or situations that the proverb takes for granted. Let me go a few steps further out on my limb. Here is something from the stranger end of the aphoristic spectrum -- perhaps the more poetic end. These are from the 20th century Spanish writer Ramón Gomez de la Serna, usually just known as Ramón

El mármol es el jabón de los siglos.

Marble is the soap of the ages.

El sueño es el depósito de objetos extraviados.

Sleep is a place where lost articles may be found.

El champaña está lleno de globitos de alegría.

Champagne is full of little balloons of joy.

El corazon es el puño cerrado que boxea dentro del pecho.

The heart is a clenched fist boxing inside our chest.

El cielo gris quiere decir que el día va a ser como d espectáculo de cin.

A gray sky means that the day is going to be like those shown in black and white movie screens.

Ramón Gomez de la Serna (1888-1963)

translated Miguel Gonzalez-Gerth

Are these even aphorisms? Maybe they are little poems, or metaphors. Well, I mentioned that the etymology of "aphorism" implies definition. Definition and metaphor are both of the form a=b or a is like b. They are part of the same spectrum. A dictionary definition, for example, tries to find fairly exact equivalents. Stone. Definition 1. "Earthy or mineral matter." A dictionary would not be happy with "Marble. Definition 1 . Soap of the ages." The emphasis in a dictionary definition is on making "b" as much like "a" as possible.

But there's a limit to the likeness. You can't use the word you're defining in the definition.

"Stone. Definition 1: Stone, stone-like" doesn't work. Tautology, identity, perfect similarity are not definitions. They are not metaphor either. "A stone is a stone" is not metaphor. In fact, we hear it as explicitly anti-metaphorical. It says a stone is only what it is, we accept no fancy substitutes, no literary ambiguity. The law is the law. Business is business.

That is, both definition and metaphor assume not only similarity but difference, more so with metaphor. "Stone is earthy or mineral matter" works as part of a definition. It's not a very interesting metaphor -- because the a and b aren't different enough "A stone is like a brick" might be a little closer to metaphor, but it's still flat, still not different enough. If we say a stone



is a soul or an entire universe, we've gone past the dictionary -- we're in a poem by Nerval or Charles Simic. Can the difference be too great? "Stones are angry radios" goes past making sense to being funny, or maybe just silly. Surrealisms often walk that line.

Ramon's aphorisms or metaphors or definitions don't exactly have the joke's little stumble and fall, a definition giving way and a new definition clicking into place. They are a more sudden and vertiginous reach into an associative realm of language and image where it's harder to describe why something feels right or true or why it doesn't. The distance between a and b is great, often surreal. Ramon's re-seeings often ARE funny, and intended to be, though maybe "delightful" is a better word for them .

Of course, we could come up with an rational explanation for how "Marble is the soap of the Ages" works. Having to do with whiteness, with sculpturally shaped soaps, with the routine cleanliness or neutrality of cultural cliché, and so on. It would take a couple of paragraphs, it would have many loose ends, and we'd have a hard time getting a committee to agree on it, because the associations it depends on are more variable from person to person, more private. A contemporary American reader would hear "soap" in the sense of "soap operas," melodramatic daytime television. But Ramón would not have.

Maybe here the aphorism has been stretched until it becomes poetry.

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I said I'd try to speak practically as well as theoretically about aphorisms

Back in 1993, I was doing research for an essay on metaphor to be called "On Likeness." A footnote sent me to the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, which I read not only with delight but with something like ricochet. "Wait, that's not right," I'd mutter, or "That's not all," scribbling some correction or analogue or sequel to one of his insights. My response often felt like a rotation or flipping or twisting of the Duc's sentences, a spatial skill not unlike those involved in making metaphors, doing math and solving various small household problems. Maybe it's not coincidental that I was at the time mildly addicted to a now-ancient video game, Tetris, which as you may remember, involves fitting together rapidly falling colored shapes to form a block

without gaps. When I first saw James Geary, an aphorist and the editor of Geary's Guide to the World's Great Aphorists, he was reciting aphorisms while juggling. I thought I knew what was going on.

Actually I should have said "my responses" to La Rochefoucauld's aphorisms. Plural, since often I'd end up with many slightly different versions of the same aphorism, maybe roughly equivalent as ideas but completely different as experiences, sequences, redefinitions. Roughly the same words in different orders. They came so quickly that it felt more like reading than writing: Good Taste would later have to choose which version worked, which snapped or cracked or surprised best, which chimed most cleanly. I thought of them as isomers, chemical compounds which have the same formula, the same number of atoms of each element, but may differ utterly in their properties because they are different shapes.

This leads me to one quite practical test of the difference of the difference between proverbs and aphorisms. Lots of poets, probably most, read poems in order to write poems. And as I've said, I often read aphorisms to write them. Responding, flipping, analogizing, rotating them into my own. To read The Oxford Book of Aphorisms or Antonio Porchia is to eat a bowl of corn chips. I can barely make myself think about each one long enough to write before going on to the next one. In contrast, to read a collection of proverbs is to risk suffocation in a room of pure carbon dioxide, already-breathed air. (UNLESS, they are the less familiar proverbs of another language).

I have committed hundreds of aphorisms, but I don't think I have ever derived an aphorism from reading proverbs. Why? I'm not sure I understand. But it seems to be that in their smoothness and generality, proverbs are unflippable, like a pizza dough the diameter of the room. You can say the opposite of a proverb's meaning, but as I've already intimated, that's already another proverb and just as smothering. Proverbs seem designed to end conversations. Though you can certainly imagine an argument with two people quoting opposite proverbs at each other. In contrast, aphorisms argue within themselves the kinds of truths proverbs insist on.

No one will ever write a novel by accident. A poem, too, takes time. You remember working on

it, and at least have the illusion of knowing how you did it. But if I say "Pick a single word" and you say one, where did it come from? You certainly don't say you "wrote it" or "created it" -- more like you chose it, or it chose you. It's similar with puns -- the language seems to give them to you, and some people can't help taking them. One-liners must be in the middle of that spectrum, maybe as much accident as composition. Almost all Proverbs and most of the jokes that make the rounds are anonymous: who came up with them, and how? I feel that way about some of my aphorisms, as if couldn't claim authorship. I do anyway. W. S. Merwin says "Deem yourself inevitable and take credit for it"! But I have a soft spot for the ones that sound most like proverbs written by no one, short and unsophisticated, their reference restricted to nature and household, faintly animist or fabulous or parabolic:

Snakes cannot back up.

Nothing dirtier than old soap.

Birds of prey don't sing.

Water deepens where it has to wait.

But those aren't quite proverbs are they? Or maybe only the last one? There's something a little uncertain and puzzling about how and when you would apply them that makes them more like aphorisms, or poems.

Probably in looking back I've exaggerated the automatism and impersonality of the aphorism, not to mention its uniformity. An aphorism can be like a proverb. It can be an "a is not quite a" redefinition, but it's just as likely to be a chiasmus, e.g. Karl Kraus's "Journalists write because they have nothing to say and have something to say because they write," which is perhaps a double redefinition. And a contemporary collection of aphorisms might also contain things more like wisecracks, paradoxes, political quips, word-play, parables, psychological or natural observations, quick out-takes from a dramatic scene or novel, and anything from a sentence fragment to a mini-essay. The longer aphorisms are, the more labor they absorb, and the less they

sound like Anon and more they sound like their author. Certainly I work at them. Certainly they can end up as thoughts I could have imagined myself thinking, but that feels to me like their eventual limitation, not their origin.

"I look over my old books, happiest when I find a line it seems I could not have written."

Still, some aphorisms I claim not only as mine but as me. "All work is the avoidance of harder work" and "The best time is stolen time" are something like personal mottoes, and I also think of them privately as about writing aphorisms. I write aphorisms when I'm having trouble writing poems, or when I'm avoiding a report or memo. I have learned that I can start the day writing poems and then slide into writing aphorisms. But that as soon as I switch to aphorisms, I cannot go back to poems. When that wise-cracking word-flipping impatient guy who writes aphorisms shows up in my head, he banishes the deep patience, the unfocused gaze that seems to be necessary for writing poems. Aphorisms are a way of resisting greater labors and large smothering truths, and what has by now become 800 of them feels to me like a long procrastination, a parenthesis in that essay on metaphor that I started writing in 1993...and still haven't finished.