
2 Aphorism in Twentieth-Century Narrative Prose in French: Theoretical Considerations

In reading Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, written during the period when the French *moralistes* were publishing many volumes of sententious formulations, we should not be surprised to encounter such propositions as "Les paroles les plus obscures d'un homme qui plaît donnent plus d'agitation que les déclarations ouvertes d'un homme qui ne plaît pas" (294). For a moment this sentence, cast suddenly in the present tense rather than in the *passé simple*, interrupts the narrative flow and calls attention to itself.

What, however, are we to think of such interventions in the case of twentieth-century narrative prose? For example, how might we assess the function of the terse pronouncements that Sartre regularly interposes as the narrative of *La Nausée* progresses? A single example suffices to illustrate: "jamais un existant ne peut justifier l'existence d'un autre existant" (247).

Further, how might aphorisms such as the following, which appear respectively in novels by Proust, Colette, and Gide, bear upon the overall discourse of the novel, and upon the reader's reception of it?

notre personnalité sociale est une création de la pensée des autres. Même l'acte si simple que nous appelons "voir une personne que nous connaissons" est en partie un acte intellectuel. (*Swann* 18–19)

Pour écrire un livre il faut de la patience, et aussi pour apprivoiser un homme en état de sauvagerie, et pour raccommoder du linge usé, et pour trier les raisins de Corinthe destinés au plum-cake. (*Naissance du jour* 110)

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Combien d'affirmateurs doivent leur force à cette chance de n'avoir pas été compris à demi-mot! (*L'Immoraliste* 167)

As we observe such aphoristic texts, do they in any way distinguish themselves from those found in other national literatures? Put more specifically, might we observe anything particularly "French" about their constitution? And finally, to what extent are aphorisms such as these capable of standing by themselves? What of an independent existence – a genre unto themselves – in a separate anthology?

APHORISM AND ITS NEIGHBORING TERMINOLOGIES: "A WILDERNESS OF DEFINITIONS"

The term used throughout this study, *aphorism*, warrants a thoroughgoing preliminary discussion because of its problematic nature. The decision in favour of this term over other related ones must be taken advisedly, for one is confronted in the relevant literature with a wide range of possibilities: proverb, epigram, the commonplace, maxim, dictum, sentence, sententiousness, sententious proposition, axiom, precept, law, slogan, apothegm, proverbial locution, adage, generics, fragment, *devise*, and bonmot. Even this lengthy enumeration constitutes only an incomplete list of all the terminology that borders on *aphorism*.

François Rodegem, in "Un problème de terminologie: les locutions sentencieuses," goes so far as to propose a taxonomic matrix in an attempt to define and categorize definitively the various terms. Bennington points out how Rodegem's criteria encompass an unwieldy array of concepts – for instance, "rhythm," "metaphoricity," and "normative thrust." Bennington reveals the pitfalls inherent in such a taxonomy of sententiousness and warns of "the danger of assuming that sententious discourse can be thought of as a unified 'space' adequately covered by the terms available for designating individual sententious utterances, and the consequent apriorism implicit in the assumption that each of the available terms must correspond to a distinct position in the matrix" (11). For this reason Bennington opts in his study for the broader term "sententiousness." Nevertheless, even this word carries with it a semantic load that severely limits the scope and function of "generic" (aphoristic) formulation within imaginative prose. The notion of sententiousness, or as Bennington recasts it, a "laying down of the law," may well apply to the bulk of eighteenth-century French fiction – and both Bennington and Humphries argue this point convincingly – but what

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of literary texts in post-Nietzschean Western civilization? While it is true that the “sententious” novel of the eighteenth century is an impelling ancestor of the twentieth-century francophone novel, one must ask whether the idea of “laying down the law” accurately applies to the diversity of aphoristic phenomena we encounter in it.

Four otherwise disparate pieces of scholarship cast some clarifying light on what John Gross aptly refers to as “a wilderness of definitions” (vii). These four pieces complement and at times corroborate one another; the common space they occupy stems from the fact that they all posit the appropriateness of the terms “aphorism,” “aphoristic,” and “aphoristics” to denote the phenomenon that forms the object of this study. The four studies in question, especially those of Bennington and Humphries, are close to one another in their dates of publication. Enough time has elapsed since this flurry of activity to evaluate them as a kind of composite entity and elaborate upon them.

In *Linguistics and the Novel* Roger Fowler offers a concise point of departure for a preliminary discussion of aphorism within narrative prose. Fowler takes elements from Fielding’s *Tom Jones* to illustrate his hypothesis that “Fielding’ doesn’t hesitate to announce directly his views on the ethics of human behavior ... by proclamations of general moral ‘truths.’ The latter may be announced in the form of aphoristic generic sentences. These are very recognizable semi-proverbial sentences in which the speaker asserts the truth of the predicate in respect of all possible referents of the subject noun phrase. Such sentences are typically cast in the ‘timeless’ present tense” (86). Fowler tends here to combine somewhat indiscriminately the notions of proverb and aphorism, thereby illustrating a problem of terminology that must eventually be confronted. His comments are valuable at this introductory stage, however, for they neatly formulate the concept of “aphoristic generic sentences” and their fusion to the novelistic genre.

Further, Fowler demonstrates how authors frequently devise “transformational disguises” to “avoid the alienating dogmatism of the explicit form of the generic” (87). This means that instead of employing within the narrative fully formed aphorisms capable of standing alone, authors may choose to embed them in the deep structure of the text. To illustrate, Fowler continues to employ material from *Tom Jones*: “For instance, what reader but knows that Mr Allworthy felt, at first, for the loss of his friend, those emotions of grief, which, on such occasions, enter into all men whose hearts are not composed of flint, or their heads of as solid materials?” (86) Later, for the sake of contrast, Fowler recasts Fielding’s sentence

into a more readily identifiable aphorism. The aim of this exercise is to reveal how otherwise “dogmatic surface structures” can be disguised and yet “still be cunningly asserted.” Consider, now, Fowler’s rewritten version: “Emotions of grief enter into all men whose hearts are not composed of flint or whose heads are not composed of as solid material” (87). Dealing with such heavily “disguised” aphorisms – that is, aphorisms almost unrecognizably “embedded into the narrative” (Gray, 270) – goes beyond the scope of the present study. Given that we are dealing with a largely untouched field of research, namely aphoristic phenomena within twentieth-century narrative prose in French, it seems advisable to limit the scope of study to the “very recognizable” form of aphorism and to leave more heavily “disguised” aphoristic discourse for a separate project.

In a recent publication, *Kafka’s Aphorism: Literary Tradition and Literary Transformation*, Richard Gray needs seek no alternative to the term *aphorism* to conduct a discussion on Kafka’s well-known collection of “Aphorismen,” published posthumously in 1946. Aside from Kafka’s creation of aphorisms per se, Gray sets out to demonstrate the author’s “inclination toward aphoristic utterances” within the whole of the author’s literary production (124). Indeed, Gray’s leap from “aphorism” as the term was used by the writer he is studying to the more general concept of “aphoristics” (134) in the context of imaginative prose forms the pivotal substance of his research and implicitly posits the notion of the aphoristic writer of fiction: “My thesis will be that the periods of intense occupation with the aphorism represent the breakthrough of a tendency that had been perennially present, if latent, in Kafka’s creative personality, and that it would remain a creative undercurrent throughout his life” (124). Gray’s work is particularly useful, not only for its provocative ideas on “the marriage of aphoristic and novelistic form” (3) but also for the way it attempts to elaborate a history of both French and German aphorism.

Perhaps the single most thorough, concise, and well-organized treatise on the topic at hand is Harald Fricke’s *Aphorismus*. Although the bulk of his research concerns “Klassiker des Aphorismus in deutscher Sprache” (70) and collections of aphorisms conceived as such by their authors, Fricke, too, goes on to elaborate something of a history of French aphorism. To a limited extent he also explores the role of aphorism within novelistic discourse, but in doing so he raises many more questions than he answers.

The strength of his method lies in the fact that only after he has observed the behaviour of aphorism in many contexts does he

attempt to enumerate the specific elements and techniques that might constitute a distinct literary genre called *aphorism*. As it moves forward, Fricke's work not only traces the diachronic movement of French and German aphorism but also serves to modify and inform our present notions about it. Thus his research probably represents the most thorough and balanced attempt thus far to elaborate a comprehensive theory of aphorism and to define the genre.

Fricke cautions those embarking on any examination of aphorism against three common methods that, in his view, lead to erroneous results. First, there are those studies that

focus on a favorite author and/or a favourite type of aphorism and extrapolate their findings into a sweeping delineation of the genre. (4)

At the other end of the spectrum are authors who often limit themselves to a simple typology of aphoristic phenomena and completely sidestep the task of determining those characteristics common to the genre. (4)

A third deficiency lies in the widespread attempt to find, solely within an individual aphorism itself, sufficient criteria [to determine] whether it belongs to the genre. (3-4, translations mine)

Fricke particularly opposes the third approach and, taking one of Goethe's aphorisms ("Wer das erste Knopfloch verfehlt, kommt mit dem Zuknöpfen nicht zu Rande" "All the buttoning in the world won't help if you get the first button wrong.") as an example, sets out to convince his reader that "the wording of an isolated remark in no way suffices as a basis for classifying it as an aphorism; rather, text, co-text, and context must be considered together in order to establish that it belongs to the genre aphorism" (4, translation mine).

To arrive at a practicable definition of aphorism for his own work, Fricke traverses a morass of research carried out by other scholars. Two of these merit our brief attention.

Fricke refers somewhat exuberantly to Franz Mautner, author of *Der Aphorismus als literarische Gattung*, as "the father of aphorism research within the field of literary science." Mautner recognizes that aphoristic sentences occur not only as an independent genre but also as elements within the novel and the drama. He initially defines such sentences as "any otherwise undefinable, shorter prose utterance" (5). Fricke, however, seizes upon Mautner's later, more precise definition to inform his own study:

die 1) knappe sprachliche 2) Verkörperung eines 3) persönlichen 4) äusserlich isolierten 5) Gedankens [the 1) concisely formulated 2) embodiment of 3) a personal, 4) outwardly isolated 5) thought]. (5, translation mine)

Additionally, Fricke cites the research of R.H. Stephenson for articulating a crucial dilemma. Here, as is frequently the case, Fricke fluidly shifts his focus from the structural to the epistemological behaviour of aphorism. Stephenson brands as a cliché the idea that aphorism “conveys an unconventional, ‘system’-contradicting thought.” In his estimation an aphorism performs, rather, the exact opposite function, which is to express “‘old hat’ [*Altbekanntheit*], yes, even banality, through the subtle and artful employment of rhetorical devices” (6). This conflict – aphorism either as conveyor of “old hat” or of new, heretofore unthought-of ideas – represents still another issue to be borne in mind as we delve into the function of aphorism within contemporary francophone novels.

To gain insight into the vast array of influences acting together to shape Fricke’s definition of the genre, we must read his study in full. A systematic explication of the definition might, however, compensate partially for the absence here of his contributive intertext. First, let us view the definition itself: “Ein Aphorismus ist ein kotextuell isoliertes Element einer Kette von schriftlichen Sachprosatexten, das in einem verweisungsfähigen Einzelsatz bzw. konziser Weise formuliert oder auch sprachlich bzw. sachlich pointiert ist.” (An aphorism is a co-textually isolated element of a chain of written, non-fictional, semantically versatile prose texts, cast into a single sentence or into a concise form and containing a mordant reference, or provocative by reason of its content or its linguistic constitution (18, translation mine). The problems created by examining Fricke’s definition in isolation from its own co-text are compounded by translating the sentence. This must be said so that the resulting transformation into English will not cast unfair doubt on Fricke’s laudable endeavour both to clarify and consolidate and to expand the definitions of his predecessors.

On the question of how aphorism is used in novelistic discourse, Fricke’s project must be seen only as an attempt to establish aphorism as an independent literary genre, alongside, say, poetry. For this reason he concentrates almost exclusively on collections (“chains”) of aphorisms originally conceived as such by their authors. While Fricke admits that textbook examples of aphorism can appear in the novel (see the section on Jean Paul), he considers such manifestations of the genre to be so fraught with additional questions that he elects to dodge the issue (84).

Nevertheless, Fricke’s move to define the genre proves worthwhile, for it succeeds in distinguishing aphorism from its sister genres. Further, the fundamentals he establishes act as convenient springboards into the realm of novelistic discourse.

With regard to Fricke's definition, it may be stating the obvious to say that such a compact, carefully thought-out genre as aphorism belongs mainly to the realm of written discourse. In an article on written language and imaginative fiction Margaret Rader, a linguist at the University of California Berkeley, enlivens an otherwise dry and all-too-obvious assertion. She challenges the widely prevalent view that writing is little more than grammatically and lexically complex language (195), that it is "decontextualized or autonomous language" (197), or worse yet that it preserves "the precise and explicit speech of the analytic philosopher, the scientist, and the bureaucrat" (186). In Rader's view, as opposed to Bennington's, writing need not necessarily inscribe "sententiousness" or "lay down the law." Instead, she contends, "Nothing intrinsic in the medium of writing dictates that no contribution should come from the reader." Indeed, Rader sets out to rehabilitate the written word, affirming that literary discourse by definition "make[s] possible the development of a complex image in the mind of the reader." Writing that achieves this end, she goes on to argue, "deserves to be placed along side of ... scientific prose as one of the ways gifted language users have explored the potential of language in its written form during the last two hundred years of Western culture" (187).

In this same vein, the argument Fricke puts forward on the non-fictional, exploratory character of aphorism might seem pedantically self-evident. By addressing the issue, however, he is able to separate aphoristic propositions from epigrams – the latter of which are often put into verse – and from aphoristic but fictional anecdotes and jokes (20). When we consider aphoristic sentences within the novel – by definition an imaginative genre – the question of an aphorism's non-fictionality becomes more complex. In isolation such aphorisms behave essayistically, or "objectively" (*sachlich*) – i.e., they focus clearly on some object or phenomenon in the extratextual world. However, as a functional element within their original (novelistic) habitat, they also complement the rest of the novel's more imaginative elements. How aphorisms behave within a given novel, and their possible value in isolation from it, are two of the key issues addressed throughout this study.

With regard to the assumption that aphorism is prose, Fricke simply opposes the genre in its purest, most condensed form to aphoristic poetry, dialogue, drama, and sketches (13–14, 20–1). One area of Fricke's definition serves, in its extreme compactness, to initiate a productive discussion: the question of the adjective *verweisungs-fähig*. On the one hand Fricke seems to have chosen this derivative from the verb *verweisen* (among a host of other meanings,

“to refer”) to indicate that an aphorism acts as a signifier – that it fulfils a referential function. On the other, however, he insists that its “semantic reference is not immovably fixed” (15).

Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm’s thoroughgoing *Deutsches Wörterbuch* analyses over several pages various incidences of *verweisen* and its derivatives with illustrations from prominent German texts. Two of their findings prove particularly enlightening when applied to Fricke’s use of the word:

e) die verweisung [*sic*] enthält eine aufforderung. [a *verweisung* (the nominative form of *verweisen*) contains an invitation to do something].

a) auf ein ziel, eine aufgabe, eine verhaltensweise oder einen gegenstand v[erweisen], mit dem man sich beschäftigen soll [to point out a goal one should pursue, a duty one should carry out, a behaviour one should cultivate]. (2190, translations mine)

Fricke is sensible, however, throughout his study to avoid suggesting that an aphorism possesses only one definite referent – that it “lays down the law” on behalf of the author or even the text; rather, the diverse experiences that readers themselves bring to making sense of the aphorism is of overriding importance (140).

One might add, as a foreshadowing of the present study’s more detailed look at the issue of referentiality, that an additional factor in the deferral of an aphorism’s meaning will stem from the influence exerted by its co-text, in this case the novel. For example, a postmodern novel, built out of unconventionally compiled segments, might provide a greater number of possibilities than more traditional novels for attributing meaning to its aphorisms.

As is the case with most studies on aphorism, Fricke’s work addresses the issue of length (for him *ein Einzelsatz*) as a determinant of the genre. While many of the various definitions embrace this “single-sentence” criterion, they also concede that it is mainly concision that indicates whether an utterance is an aphorism or not. Thus, in the final analysis, compactness overrides the notion of one sentence in determining whether a discourse unit is an aphorism.

Still another criterion common to most definitions of aphorism – the one of perhaps greatest import – is the idea that it must in some way provoke to thought or action. Fricke neologizes from the French to form the German adjective *pointiert* to convey, as economically as possible, the provocative qualities of aphorism. His lexical choice seems appropriate, for the adjectival derivative of the French noun *pointe* carries with it a rich semantic load, ranging from “evocative,”

“provocative,” “pointed,” “stinging,” and “spiked” all the way to “barbed.” The provocative features of an aphorism arise, according to Fricke, either from its rhetorical constitution or from the way it enters into a signifier/signified partnership with an “object.” Again, it bears repeating that Fricke emphasizes repeatedly his view that as an aphorism takes on a signifying function, much depends on “active reception” and on the reader’s particular field of knowledge and experience (140).

To round off this section on the definition and nature of aphorism, we may do well to listen to the (counter-) arguments of an unabashed anthologizer. John Gross has compiled a large quantity of texts in a recent publication, *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*. In its brevity his three and one-half-page introduction, where he elaborates a method and a rationale, could have been guided by two of the sixteen aphorisms that inaugurate the collection:

Summaries that contain most things are always shortest themselves.

Samuel Butler, *Prose Observations*, 1660–80 (1)

It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what other men say in whole books – what other men do not say in whole books.

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1888 (1)

It is evident from his bibliography that Gross has assimilated a substantial body of knowledge on aphorism. He has himself paid the price of first becoming “lost in [the] wilderness of definitions” (viii). Yet all this preparation carried out behind the scenes is only barely apparent in the anthology’s introductory material. With a remarkable economy of words Gross reasons rapidly through to a few key conclusions. It therefore seems excusable, in the effort to define what an aphorism is and is not, to reproduce a lengthy excerpt from his introduction:

[Samuel] Johnson himself defined an aphorism, in what was by then its current sense, as a maxim; a precept contracted in a short sentence; an unconnected position. A maxim is also one of the definitions in the OED (along with a short pithy statement containing a truth of general import); ... Yet although the two words certainly overlap, they are far from interchangeable. An *Oxford Book of Maxims* would not, I think, sound particularly inviting; all too often a maxim suggests a tag, a stock response, something waiting to be trotted out in the spirit of Polonius. Aphorisms tend to be distinctly more subversive; indeed, it is often a maxim that they set out to subvert. And they are less cut and dried, more speculative and glancing ...

Without losing ourselves in a wilderness of definitions, we can all agree that the most obvious characteristic of an aphorism, apart from its brevity, is that it is a generalization. It offers a comment on some recurrent aspect of life, couched in terms which are meant to be permanently and universally applicable. But the same could be said of proverbs; and aphorisms, unlike proverbs, have authors. The third distinguishing mark of the aphorism, in fact, is that it is a form of literature, and often a highly idiosyncratic or self-conscious form at that. It bears the stamp and style of the mind which created it; its message is universal, but scarcely impersonal; it may embody a twist of thought strong enough to retain its force in translation but it also depends for its full effect on verbal artistry, on a subtlety or concentrated perfection of phrasing which can sometimes approach poetry in its intensity. (At the same time one should add that compression is not necessarily the supreme stylistic virtue in an aphorism, and that the finest examples are not always the most terse. A good aphorism – and here too it differs from a proverb, which has to slip off the tongue – may well need to expand beyond the confines of a single sentence.) (viii)

Several of Gross's ideas call for a contrastive analysis with those of Fricke. Fricke agrees with Gross on the notion of the aphorism's "unconnected position," but only in the case of aphorisms that appear in "chains" or in collections originally designed as such by their authors. For Fricke the *Herausoperieren* (surgical removal) of aphorisms from an essay or a novel represents an evil to be avoided, and the resulting (bastardized) anthologies must be approached with "the greatest caution" (10). By contrast, Gross argues that an aphorism must simply be capable of standing alone.

This more all-encompassing premise then governs the whole of Gross's anthology project. His introduction also situates aphorism within "the wilderness of definitions" more succinctly than any more lengthy study, including Fricke's. However, with regard to proverbs, Fricke usefully adds to Gross's discussion by remarking that an aphorism may in time become a proverb, or a "common saying" (23). (In all other ways Fricke treats an aphorism and a proverb as nearly identical genres.) Gross's introduction also posits more forthrightly than Fricke – or any other study – the function of aphorism as "commenting on a recurrent aspect of life." Later we will see how Kenneth Burke elaborates on this assumption. For Burke the concise "naming of situations" (260) typically accomplished by proverbs constitutes the very substance of literariness.

Finally, whereas Fricke wants to confine aphorism to a single sentence, Gross does not hesitate to select longer texts for his anthology.

Gross's justification for doing so is humorous and trenchant, namely to avoid in his book "a rat-tat-tat of 'one liners'" (ix).

Before attempting to bring together all the salient elements from the preceding "wilderness" into a practicable delineation of aphorism, we might do well first to view a textbook example of the genre. This aphorism neatly demonstrates the various problems and issues explored thus far. Gross excerpts it from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: "Life for both sexes is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself" (72).

Besides having to reflect on the many factors that might constitute an aphorism *per se*, we must also bear in mind that the preceding example was taken from a larger context and that the elements that normally surround it could cause it to behave quite differently from the way it does as part of the "Self-Doubt" section of Gross's anthology.

For the purposes of this study the term "aphorism" seems the most apt of all possible shorthand symbols to conduct a coherent discussion of provocative "sententious" passages within francophone novels written during this century. None the less, we must realize that we are not employing an innocent, a *degré zéro* (Barthes) term; rather, we are consciously resorting to a ready-made signifier charged with complex baggage from the Western literary tradition. Thus, we may do well constantly to bear in mind that in choosing this term over another, we confine the whole phenomenon of aphoristics within the modern francophone novel into an *a priori* epistemological system.

Further, we can safely posit that, as part of that "system," aphoristic discourse is usually cast in the "timeless" present tense. The use of the present tense in the novel has the particular function of interrupting the narrative flow and calling attention to itself. For a moment there is a suspension of the recounting of particular events and descriptions, and a shift to the "generic" is effected.

An aphorism thus has general, or "generic" import. This import might be seen to arise from the way it conveys a revolutionary or, on the contrary, a banal or commonplace idea.

Aphorisms are concise and are frequently but not always confined to a single sentence. They are thought- and image-provoking, to the point of being caustic and subversive in their more extreme incidences. In their "strong" form, at least according to Fricke, they are

found in "chains" that have been conceived, laid out, and published as such by their authors. However, the very genre that Fricke so painstakingly defines can be just as frequently observed as a part of narrative prose.

Although an aphorism that was originally placed into novelistic discourse is capable of making sense standing entirely alone, it will probably behave differently from the way it does when it performs within its larger context. This is to say that the function of aphorism varies, depending on whether it is part of an original "chain," a contrived anthology, a narrative, or is deployed independently – for example, as an epigraph.

Aphorism differs from its neighboring genres, but sometimes only slightly. Proverbs and aphorisms, for example, turn out to be very closely related; perhaps an aphorism differs from a proverb only in that the latter has forged its way into common speech because of the ease with which it "rolls off the tongue."

Aphorisms can fulfil a referential function, and yet their image-creating, thought-provoking nature implies an active, oftentimes volatile text/text-recipient relationship.

Fricke and Mautner have successfully argued that aphorism is a literary genre unto itself, although they take the matter still further and attempt to segregate it and then confer upon it a supposed purity. Who, however, is to forbid an aphorism from intermarrying – with the novel, for example – and thereby to create new permutations of textual function and signification?

THE NARRATOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCE OF APHORISM

The research of two eminent American linguists, William Labov and Paul Hopper, although not directly concerned with the study of literature, casts considerable light on a number of key narratological functions within novelistic discourse.

In 1972 the socio-linguist William Labov published the results of an exhaustive study of "Black English vernacular" (BEV) in his collection *Language and the Inner City*. One of the essays from that volume, "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," is useful to a discussion of aphorism as it appears within the novel. Labov draws a number of challenging conclusions about narrative, having analysed vast quantities of recorded "casual inner-city" speech. In presenting his findings, he advances a few spare hypotheses, all supported by copious examples from the tapes he collected.

Nowhere did Labov make literary texts the object of study. However, he suggested that his discoveries could apply to a wide range of narratives (359). This conclusion provides an internal justification for extending his work to novels written in other languages.

Citing the samples he collected, Labov demonstrates that a “fully formed narrative” often displays six major sections:

- 1 Abstract
- 2 Orientation
- 3 Complicating Action
- 4 Evaluation
- 5 Result or Resolution
- 6 Coda (363)

Labov tends to lump narrative “beginnings, middles and ends” into one general category, which he most often refers to as the “chain of actions” (366). He rightly observes that these “have [already] been analyzed in many accounts of folklore or narrative” (366). Such fundamentals of narrative therefore require no further commentary here.

To the remaining portion of the narrative structure, more germane to the purposes of this study, Labov assigns the name *evaluation*. Labov takes more interest in the evaluated part of the narrative than in the mere recounting of events. He defines evaluation as “the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d’être*: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at. There are many ways to tell the same story, to make very different points, or to make no point at all. Pointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, ‘So what?’” (366). Having quickly identified the characteristics of the *récit* proper, or the unadorned chain of events, Labov then contrasts these readily identifiable elements with the more sophisticated set of elements that he feels make up the “evaluation” of that chain.

Labov argues that in English-language narratives the chief grammatical indicators of the simple story-line are “preterit verbs, simple past tense marker[s] and some past progressive” (376). He then ventures a more enterprising hypothesis in the further assertion that “evaluation” is “perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause” (366). According to Labov, “evaluative” clauses can also be marked grammatically, just as the purely “narrative” ones are. He observes that, when functioning in evaluative clauses, verbs switch from the preterit or the imperfect (or sometimes the narrative present) of the indicative to other tenses and modes

(381). It is worthwhile to recall that Fowler too noted how the verbs in aphorisms suddenly break from the usual past tenses and instead are cast in the timeless, generalizing present tense.

Although Labov does not report any incidence of aphorism, or even sententious discourse, from his recordings and analyses of BEV, he establishes a very broad heading under which they might fit. He sets out to demonstrate that a narrator, when explicitly evaluating the chain of events he or she is reporting, "can stop the narrative, turn to the listener, and tell him what the point is" (371). Labov cites the blatant example of a certain narrator who frequently interrupted her story with such platitudinous evaluative remarks as "but it was quite an experience" (371).

An aphorism might be seen to produce an analogous effect – that is, of stopping the narrative flow and suggesting the point of the story. An aphorism, however, "tells the point" with far greater sophistication, wit, and subtlety than did the intervention of the aforementioned narrator. Additionally, the insertion within a *récit* of an aphorism whose verb suddenly switches to the timeless present tense has the effect of universalizing an otherwise specifically located story, and perhaps of causing an anonymous reader to liken it to personal experience.

As an example, let us consider Proust, who perhaps more frequently than any author from any period intercalates essayistic/aphoristic passages into his narrative. In the excerpt that follows he states the "point" of his enterprise in *A la recherche du temps perdu*: "D'ailleurs, que nous occupions une place sans cesse accrue dans le Temps, tout le monde le sent, et cette universalité ne pouvait que me réjouir puisque c'est la vérité, la vérité soupçonnée par chacun, que je devais chercher à élucider" (*Le Temps retrouvé*, 439).

It is reasonable to assume that aphoristic, generalizing formulations, with their abrupt switch into the present tense, form the technique par excellence by which Proust tells his reader the reason he is telling the story. Antoine Compagnon, in his introduction to the Folio edition of *A la recherche* complements this view with the assertion that the narrative voices in Proust's novel epitomize a fusion of "le héros passé et le narrateur présent" (*Swann*, vVIII). As such, Proust's deployment of aphorism is one of the chief means whereby he seeks to elucidate, more powerfully than with a bare story-line, some "truth" he supposes to be "suspected by everyone." This underlying justification for aphorism in Proust's writing is significant, for it can reasonably be applied to other authors' work.

One might criticize Labov for a certain tendency towards totalization as he elaborates a perhaps too-neat taxonomy of narrative. As a

counterfoil, Ludwig Wittgenstein's more plastic view of language is worth considering. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein offers a model of language whose main components are "language games" (39e, 83), fluid "propositions," or "signposts" (39e–40e) – three interrelated terms. For Wittgenstein a language-event can be likened to an overall game, itself composed of subgames (propositions or signposts). During the course of these "games" the rules are made up – or even altered as one goes along (39). Within a written narrative one might imagine the subgame "aphorism" bearing the title "NB: This is why I think this story is worth telling."

Had Ollendorff, to whom Proust initially submitted the manuscript of *A la recherche*, paid closer attention to the aphoristic "signposts" in the first thirty pages, he might have been less baffled by the apparently banal story-line about sleeplessness and been prompted to share, as Grasset more shrewdly did, in the success of this seminal twentieth-century novel. Instead, Ollendorff summarily dismissed both Proust and his manuscript in these terms: "Je suis peut-être bouché à l'émeri, mais je ne puis comprendre qu'un monsieur puisse employer trente pages à décrire comment il se tourne et se retourne dans le lit avant de trouver le sommeil" (*Swann*, xxxii).

Taken in conjunction with one another, Labov's quasi-empirical and Wittgenstein's reflective-philosophical approaches begin to reveal the workings of aphorism as a lingual operation – in the particular case of novelistic discourse as a subfunction that occurs within the overall narrative structure.

The influential work of Paul Hopper on aspect, foregrounding, and backgrounding in discourse provides a valuable addition to Labov's research and takes us a step further in the exploration of aphorism as it functions in a narrative. In opening his study, Hopper independently corroborates Labov's parallel hypotheses on "narration" and "evaluation." Hopper, however, bases his conclusions on a nineteenth-century traveller's tale in Swahili and concludes that a fundamental difference exists between the sentences in the foreground (what he terms the "main line" events) and the sentences in the background (the "shunted" material). For Hopper the chief difference between the two lies in the fact that "backgrounded events usually amplify or comment on the events of the main narrative" (214). He elaborates by saying that "backgrounded clauses do not themselves narrate, but instead they support, amplify, or comment on the narration. In a narration, the author is asserting the occurrence of events. Commentary, however, does not constitute the assertion of events in the story line but makes statements which are contingent and dependent on the story-line events" (215–16).

Hopper then proceeds to enumerate the various features he believes to constitute backgrounded material. His findings prove especially useful in the case of narratives in French, for he embarks on a discussion of the *passé simple* (the French preterit), contending that it “is the foregrounding form of the verb in my framework” (217). Within Hopper’s framework the *passé simple* favours, among other things,

- actions as opposed to states;
- affirmative as opposed to negative verbs;
- human subjects as opposed to non-human subjects; and
- singular subjects as opposed to plural subjects.

Also, the tense markers of the *passé simple* (i.e., “-ai,” “-as,” “-a,” “-âmes,” “âtes,” “èrent”) indicate in a concrete, observable way how verbs actually go about “favouring” the above situations (217).

In Hopper’s schematics it follows that specialized verb morphology can likewise signal backgrounded clauses. Essentially, he contends that “backgrounding is indicated [in verbs] by a variety of formations that have in common the absence of the perfective-realis markers of foregrounding” (237). Hopper unfortunately leaves the present tense out of his discussion and focuses instead on markers of the imperfect, pluperfect, future, future perfect, and conditional as potential indicators of backgrounded clauses. He does, however, offer the incisive observation that verbs in foregrounded clauses – at least in the few languages he deals with – are usually “punctual, rather than durative or iterative” (215). The results of any switch within a narrative from the punctual (e.g., preterit) to the durative or iterative present are the same: in general, the latter serve to amplify or to comment on reported events. To be more exact, one could say that a verb’s switch away from the punctual aspect tends to depict a “state or situation necessary for understanding motives” or simply to convey stasis of one kind or another, as opposed to re-presenting, via language, dynamic, kinetic events (216).

A problem in Hopper’s method, at least for our purposes, arises from the fact that in French narratives the imperfect and the present, along with the *passé simple*, are often used to convey the actions of the story-line. In the case of the imperfect the events being recounted, instead of being completed action, either are habitual or were repeated an unspecified number of times. In the case of the “historical” or narrative present, this tense simply replaces the preterit to produce a more marked effect.

It may be helpful, after so many theoretical considerations, to look at three segments of actual novelistic discourse, so that the concepts of foregrounding, backgrounding, evaluation, and switching from one language-game to another (and therefore from one set of verb morphology to another) do not remain abstractions.

Gide's aphorism from *L'Immoraliste*, quoted at the outset, offers a textbook example of how a narrator inserts a pithy durative-iterative (or "timeless") sentence into a narration otherwise cast in the *passé simple*. "De nouveaux soins, de nouveaux soucis m'occupèrent; un savant italien me signala des documents nouveaux qu'il mit au jour et que j'étudiai longuement pour mon cours. Sentir ma première leçon mal comprise avait éperonné mon désir d'éclairer différemment et plus puissamment les suivantes; je fus par là porté à poser en doctrine ce que je n'avais fait d'abord que hasarder à titre d'ingénieuse hypothèse. *Combien d'affirmateurs doivent leur force à cette chance de n'avoir pas été compris à demi-mot!*" (166–7, emphasis added).

The second representative passage, also cited in part at the beginning of this study, is excerpted from the opening section of Proust's *A la Recherche* – from the very pages that caused Ollendorff to reject the novel. Throughout this section of the text Marcel, the narrator, recounts events from the past mainly in the imperfect, injecting all the while many essayistic and aphoristic reflections. The example that follows represents Proust's idiosyncratic conception of consciousness, the self, and otherness:

Sans doute le Swann que connurent à la même époque tant de clubmen était bien différent de celui que créait ma grand-tante, quand le soir, dans le petit jardin de Combray, après qu'avaient retenti les deux coups hésitants de la clochette, elle injectait et vivifiait de tout ce qu'elle savait sur la famille Swann, l'obscur et incertain personnage qui se détachait, suivi de ma grand-mère, sur un fond de ténèbres, et qu'on reconnaissait à la voix. *Mais même au point de vue des plus insignifiantes choses de la vie, nous ne sommes pas un tout matériellement constitué, identique pour tout le monde et dont chacun n'a qu'à aller prendre connaissance comme d'un cahier des charges ou d'un testament; notre personnalité sociale est une création de la pensée des autres. Même l'acte si simple que nous appelons "voir une personne que nous connaissons" est en partie un acte intellectuel.* (Swann, 18–19, emphasis added)

Finally, the following passage from Saint-Exupéry's *Terre des hommes* offers an example of how a narrative voice recounts past events using both the *passé-composé*/preterit and the present, then interposes an aphorism, it too cast in the present tense. In the case

of the narrative proper, however, note how the aspect of the verbs is punctual. The verbs used to construct the aphorism are also in the present, but their aspect is durative-iterative. "J'ai atterri dans la douceur du soir. Punta Arenas! Je m'adosse contre une fontaine et regarde les jeunes filles. A deux pas de leur grâce, je sens mieux encore le mystère humain. *Dans un monde où la vie rejoint si bien la vie, où les fleurs dans le lit même du vent se mêlent aux fleurs, où le cygne connaît tous les cygnes, les hommes seuls bâtissent leur solitude*" (66–7, emphasis added).

Summing up thus far, it can be said that aphorism interrupts the flow of the main narration, that it temporarily suspends the "language-game" that simply reports events and constructs a storyline. The change in language-game boundaries is often marked by modifications in the morphology that indicates the verbs' tense and aspect. In the specific case of aphorism within French narratives the switch is from the *passé simple*, the imperfect, or the narrative present into the "timeless" present. An aphorism's purely narratological *raison d'être* is to amplify, to comment on, to universalize, and thus to elicit a more involved response to the story than if the aphorism were not present.

SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF APHORISM IN NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

One might enunciate the essence of the task now at hand in the form of a question: When a reader is making sense of a text – specifically of a novel – what difference might the presence of an aphorism, or of aphorisms, make as the narrative unfolds? As we attempt to address in detail this "umbrella" issue, we confront what Humphries aptly viewed as "a conceptually treacherous terrain" (56). In order to maintain a degree of clarity as we venture through that terrain, it seems sensible to limit this rung of the discussion to two main topics: 1) What are some of the specific structural and referential behaviours of aphorism? 2) In the light of (1) above, how might an aphorism, or a novel's network of aphorisms, influence the way a reader receives a given literary text?

Harald Fricke enumerates the "Building Blocks for a System of Aphoristic Techniques" (140). We are in debt to Fricke, for in this concluding section of his book he relies entirely on his own research and presents comprehensive definitions not to be found elsewhere. His contribution in crystallizing a definition of the genre rests, therefore, in the fact that he appears to be the first scholar to enumerate in any extensive way the many factors constitutive of aphorism.

Fricke begins by quoting from a study by Ulrich Greiner and then picks up where his colleague left off. Greiner had stated that “all the significant inquiries into the nature and form of aphorism account for the fact that an aphorism prompts an active [reader] reception. However, few if any explanations exist of how aphorisms actually go about performing this task, i.e., how they stimulate and cultivate such a reception” (140, translation mine). Fricke begins his own enumeration with these words of caution: “The procedures that are put forward are neither necessary nor adequate to determine whether a text is an aphorism or not (it is simply that, empirically, they occur frequently); and they are neither exhaustive nor disjunct – rather, they complement one another and overlap in many ways” (140, translation mine). The “procedures” Fricke refers to are grouped according to eight headings as follows:

1 *Überspitzung* (Exaggeration)

In Fricke’s schematics *Überspitzung* serves as an umbrella heading under which a wide range of hyperbolic formulations might be classified. An author wittingly or unwittingly constructs the aphoristic text in such a way that it “goes recognizably too far” (140), with the effect that the reader is provoked to challenge the proposition in some way – into questioning it or into comparing it with personal experience. Some of the techniques used in the creation of such exaggerated propositions (translation of Fricke’s examples are mine) might include:

Superlatives. As illustrated by “The costliest of all mistakes is a mistake of the heart” (141).

Antithesis. Here, two or more sharply contrasting polarities are brought together in a single statement – for example, “You can spurn the love of a woman in a number of ways: through trust and mistrust, through indulgence and tyranny, through too much and too little tenderness, through everything and through nothing” (141).

Sweeping Statements. According to Fricke, such formulations provoke a response as a result of being too plausible to be true. Often the desired effect is achieved by using the totalizing “never,” “always,” “all,” “nothing,” etc. Fricke offers a textbook example of this subgenre: “A man of spirit will not only never say anything stupid; he will never hear anything stupid” (142).

One must add, however, that *Überspitzung* in aphorisms, particularly many of those in the tradition of the French *moralistes*, may not have been designed to be questioned or to provoke contrary, speculative thought but rather to “lay down the law.” Such aphoristic texts

fall perhaps more into the realm of the maxim than into that of aphorism. Fricke refers to many such sentences as actual “allgemeine Verhaltensregel[n]” – that is, general rules of behaviour and not calls for critical thinking (142).

Finally, Fricke includes under the general heading of *Überspitzung* those aphorisms that contain some form of *definition*. These are short utterances that attempt to define or redefine a given notion. They can be taken seriously – that is, they make a sincere attempt to totalize – or they can bear discreet marks of irreverence, as in this specimen: “Remembrance – reminder of everything you didn’t accomplish” (143).

2 *Aussparung (Understatement)*

In contrast to the foregoing, a further broad grouping is composed of aphorisms that create their effect by saying too little. Aphorisms of this type stimulate the reader’s intellect by somehow compelling it to supply missing components. Divergences in the sense made of the aphorism will thus vary according to the unique baggage that the reading subject brings to the text.

This “completion” might be achieved through a wide range of devices, enumerated in part as follows:

Banality. Fricke cites a telling example: “There always falls a first snowflake, no matter what kind of tumult comes later” (145). Taken at its surface level, one might tend to rejoin with “So what?” However, if we go beyond the first level of signification, namely meteorology, the above *lieu commun* is transformed into an allusion to catastrophes and how they usually begin in seemingly insignificant ways.

Ellipsis. The example that Fricke offers to illustrate this aphoristic technique speaks for itself and requires no translation: “Kannibalismus – Militarismus – Nationalismus” (145).

Open-endedness. Incompleteness of a slightly different order than ellipsis is produced when the aphorism comes to an abrupt halt, and alludes to missing links in a possibly longer chain of signification: “A reader has it good: he can choose his authors” (146).

Concealed Meaning. In such incidences of aphorism the thought is enunciated fully; but on contemplating its perhaps obvious, or not-so-obvious secondary meaning, a caustic “pointe” is effected. Fricke cites this example: “Socialist brotherly love knows no bounds” (146).

3 *Überrumpelung (The Element of Surprise)*

The preceding techniques apply chiefly to the content, or to the referential qualities that may inhere in aphorisms. The next two main

headings, by contrast, deal with some of those structural, lingual, or rhetorical devices that contribute to an aphorism's powers of evocation. The *Überrumpelung* section of Fricke's study proves slightly problematic within the present context, for most of the examples he has chosen work only in German. In other words, many of the salient features of an aphorism that he hopes will illustrate each subheading cannot be adequately translated into English. I have therefore in all but one case chosen analogous examples, written originally in English, taken from the *Oxford Book of Aphorisms*. The subheadings in question are 1) *neologism*, 2) various kinds of *word-play*, 3) a trenchant *rewriting of the familiar*, 4) *chiasmus*, and 5) *Schlusspointe* – a surprise twist of events to cap off an otherwise lacklustre thought (146–9). What follow are examples to illustrate, respectively, each of the above subheadings:

- 1 He would like to start from scratch. Where is *scratch*? (46, emphasis added)
- 2 Vision is the art of seeing things invisible. (238)
- 3 Style is nothing, but nothing is without its style. (310)
- 4 Who seeketh findeth not, but who seeketh not is found. (Fricke, 147)
- 5 While watching the ups and downs of reputations, I have often found myself exclaiming, 'Ah, the rats are leaving a *floating ship*.' (308, emphasis added)

Fricke somewhat erroneously views one additional characteristic of aphorism as being more structural than referential in nature, namely the capacity of an aphorism to *unmask* (*Entlarven*) an otherwise hidden truth. He therefore places this phenomenon under the rubric of *Überrumpelung*. From the single example he offers, however, it is far more difficult than in the other instances to ascertain where the aphorism's structural-lingual powers of evocation begin and its referential capacities leave off: "When hate turns cowardly, it goes masked into society and calls itself justice" (148).

4 *Verrätselung* (*Mystification*)

Here, certain lingual devices are fused to the concept of *Aussparung*, with the effect of provoking further thought from the reader. Perhaps the most primitive way to cause the reader to "complete" an affirmative proposition is to recast it so that it appears in the guise of a *question*: "Doth any man doubt, that if there were taken out of men's minds, vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations

as one would, and the like; but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy, and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?" (*Oxford*, 226)

For Fricke, the last four routes an aphorism might take to obscure its substance (and thus elicit a more active reader response) are the rhetorical devices of metaphor, simile, zeugma, and oxymoron. These tropes, however, are familiar enough to warrant no summary of his analysis here.

As a convenient example of an approach to another aspect of aphorism's signifying function, one that ties together everything said thus far, we might turn now to Richard Gray's work on Kafka. Gray attempts to link up historical context, author, authorial intent, and reader response. However, the work of the structuralists, the New Critics, and the French post-structuralists has taught us to problematize such an amalgam.

So, before we plunge too quickly into the thorny issue of authorial intent, the French thinker Paul Ricoeur offers a plausible intermediary approach. Throughout his career Ricoeur has retained the essence of his idiosyncratic hermeneutical model; however, he has not been afraid to modify it when revisions of traditional literary theories took hold (Thompson, 1–26).*

At the risk of oversimplifying a highly sophisticated and complex hermeneutical theory, we might take three of Ricoeur's central ideas – "distanciation," "the world of the text," and "appropriation" – to shed considerable light on aphoristic phenomena in the twentieth-century francophone novel. Ricoeur's conception of textuality and literariness constitutes an alternative but in some ways similar model to the more radical "indeterminacy" model ascribed to Derrida, de Man, and Lacan. It is then productive to fuse Ricoeur's three categories to Kenneth Burke's definition of literature as "proverbs writ large" (256). Proverbs, for Burke, articulate "typical, recurrent social situations" (255).

In Ricoeur's scheme of things, one of the fundamental aspects of textuality is the capacity to "project a world" (132). Before examining what this proposition means, we might do well to view from the outset what Ricoeur believes it does not. First, with the structuralists, he contends that the "world of the text" can "explode ... the world

* Basic to the summary and discussion that follow are two articles included by John Thompson in his selection of Ricoeur's essays, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, comp. and trans. John Thompson: "La Fonction herméneutique de la distanciation" and "Appropriation."

of the author" (139). Put more simply: "What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant" (139). Neither does Ricoeur advocate a hermeneutical method based "on grasping an alien life which expresses itself through the objectification of writing" (140) – that is, on trying to grasp, for example, a novel's life and times. He goes so far as to assert that "this abolition of the ostensive character of reference is no doubt what makes possible the phenomenon we call 'literature'" (141).

Nevertheless, he sensibly qualifies this rationale, now practically become a received idea, with "there is no discourse so fictional that it does not connect up with reality" – no *degré zéro* of writing (141). These warring dialectics converge in a discerning question that reveals the nucleus of Ricoeur's thinking on the matter of textual "interpretation." He argues: "If we can no longer define hermeneutics in terms of the search for the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed behind the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the dismantling of structures, then what remains to be interpreted?" (141) In answer to the question he reiterates his conviction regarding an "abolition of a first-order reference" and further states that "this is the condition of possibility for the freeing of a second-order reference, which reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects, but at the level that Husserl designated by the expression *Lebenswelt* [life-world] and Heidegger by the expression 'being in the world'" (141).

The nexus between the reader's consciousness and the "second-order reference" to which Ricoeur refers is "the world of the text, the world proper to *this* unique text" (142). The reader's entry into and "interpretation" of this world can be achieved through two processes: "appropriation" and "distanciation."

Ricoeur borrows the word "appropriation" from the German *Aneignen*, which he defines as "'to make one's own' what was initially 'alien'" (185). This means that through the agency of a literary text, the reading "I" might be brought to "interpret – or to appropriate" all or part of "a proposed world which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own most possibilities" (142).

Ricoeur takes pains to emphasize, however, that "appropriation is quite the contrary of contemporaneousness and congeniality: it is understanding in and through distance. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self" (143).

Ricoeur's phenomenological concept of appropriation also diverges from the widely popularized concepts of literature as a means towards self-recognition or self-identification – of seeing one's "good

old" self enacted again and again in self-validating plots or characterizations. Rather, "appropriation" can only occur after the reading subject has achieved a certain "distanciation" – that is, through being shown "imaginative variations of the ego" (144). This "distanciation," for Ricoeur, "demands an internal critique," a "critique of the illusions of the subject, in a Marxist or Freudian manner" (140).

Ricoeur himself best summarizes the discussion thus far:

Far from saying that a subject, who already masters his own being-in-the-world, projects the *a priori* of his own understanding and interpolates this *a priori* in the text, I shall say that appropriation is the process by which the revelation of new modes of being – or if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, new "forms of life" – gives the subject new capacities for knowing himself. If the reference of a text is the projection of a world, then it is not in the first instance the reader who projects himself. The reader is rather broadened in his capacity to project himself by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself. Thus appropriation ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of ... It implies instead a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic ego. (192)

Ricoeur of course nowhere addresses the question of aphorism in literature. None the less, his theory of textuality and literariness might elucidate the process by which aphorism contributes to "dispossession of the narcissistic ego" during the course of reading a novel.

To complete the grafting of Ricoeur's hermeneutics on to the concept of aphorism within the novel, however, we must first turn our attention to another conception of literature that complements Ricoeur's. In his classic essay "Literature as Equipment for Living" Kenneth Burke sets out to "violate current pieties, break down current categories and thereby 'outrage good taste'" (262). Burke inveighs against the traditional "inert" (262) (and therefore useless) literary typologies – for example, of the novel (261) – and instead pleads in favour of an innovative form of "sociological criticism" (253). This alternative mode of classification would be based on a series of "active categories" (262).

He sets up his line of argument with an analysis of proverbs. Burke contends that proverbs came into being in order to "size things up"; "to console and strike, to promise and admonish"; "to describe for purposes of forecasting" (259); for "vengeance" (254); and to illustrate "type situations" (253). In Burke's view "such naming was done not for the sheer glory of the thing but because of its bearing upon human welfare" (253).

He then makes a leap from the vernacular usage of proverbs to “the whole field of literature” (256). He asks rhetorically, “Could the most complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately be considered somewhat as ‘proverbs writ large’” (256)? If we allow this premise to stand, literature then becomes (among many other things, certainly) a means for naming “typical, recurrent social situations” – or, in the terminology of Ricoeur: worlds. Moreover, the “names” in question are not developed out of “‘disinterested curiosity,’ but because [they] imply a command (what to expect, what to look out for)” (254).

This is not to imply, necessarily, that because a text “commands” it must be branded didactic. To illustrate the entire point at issue, Burke cites *Madame Bovary*, which, he argues, “singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutatis mutandis*, for people to ‘need a word for it’ and to adopt an attitude towards it. Each work of art is the addition of a word to an informal dictionary” (259).

This comment constitutes another way of expressing the very idea that informs Richard Gray’s thesis – that Kafka, because he explored and named modes of being and reality (but drew no conclusions), is an aphoristic writer (91–292), in spite of the fact that his novels exhibit few textbook examples of the genre itself. For Gray aphorism, to a greater extent than any other literary genre, induces “the hermeneutical interaction of the text and reader in which a progressive dialogue ensues upon the questioning of the reader by the text” (54).

Fricke can be seen to corroborate this radical claim by his definition of aphorism as a genre eminently capable of provoking the reader and causing the reader to reflect more actively (140).

To crystallize the foregoing discussion on the interpretive-strategic value of aphorism, it may be said that in novelistic discourse an aphorism can represent the point of juncture *par excellence* wherein a “fusion of horizons” (Ricoeur, 192) takes place. This notion of fusion might embrace the narrated chain of events, description, the experience of the author, and the experience of the reader.

A first step in identifying how an aphorism elicits a response from the reader is to analyse its purely structural characteristics. A mere structural analysis, however, that takes no account of an aphorism’s potential to signify often results in a tedious impoverishment of the original text. One needs therefore to go beyond the bounds of formalism/structuralism in its strong form and propose that a novel’s aphorisms, viewed both in their original narrative habitat and in anthologized isolation, allow particularly efficient access to what Ricoeur calls the “world of the text” and to what Kenneth Burke

terms literature's inherent "equipment for living." John Gross offers a complementary thought when he argues that an aphorism – a terse, often poetic form – "bears the stamp and style of the mind which created it" (viii). It does not seem difficult to identify the relatedness inherent in the notions of stamp, style, mind, world, and equipment.

The move to include aphorism in the process of completing the hermeneutical circle or, by contrast, to access the "world of the text" is admittedly a blurry one. It would be misleading to use aphoristic weaponry in order to create new and definitive interpretations, or to determine once and for all the "first-order" – or any other – referents in a novel. Rather, through a heightened awareness of aphoristics in a given novel, a path might emerge, among many other possible ones, that can lead to an enhanced capacity on the part of the individual reader to make sense of a text and to access its world.

Aphorism also facilitates entry into Ricoeur's distanciation-appropriation dialectic, in that it can serve to make the reader more immediately aware of a heretofore ignored or neglected social situation. Recast in both Ricoeur's and Burke's language, aphorism, by virtue of its rhetorical and semantic constitution, may provoke a reader, more than will just the story-line itself, into "appropriating" a "proverb" and, by extension, an entire "equipment for living."

THE HERITAGE OF APHORISM IN MODERN FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE

Whether there exists an idiosyncratically French "school" of aphoristic expression is an issue fundamental to this study. However, such a segregation of aphoristics into French, German, or any other national "model" turns out to be fraught with difficulties, as Richard Gray, whose work includes some contrastive analysis of German and French aphorism, is compelled to admit: "One is somewhat reluctant to relate these differences to national character or culture. In fact, the final intermingling of these separate types – or, perhaps more germane, the sublation of the dogmatic in the initiative aphorism – in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries goes against such cultural biases. Much more significant, of course, are temporal-historical considerations: the German aphorism evolves 150 years later than its French counterpart" (39). Thus, Gray must largely abandon the move to create French/German distinctions. Instead he suggests that conclusions be drawn based on the inherent features of aphorism and on "temporal-historical considerations."

A vast quantity of scholarly study has been carried out on the maxims, sentences, and aphorisms of the French *moralistes*. Most of

these studies demonstrate how the pre-1800 French maxim tends to convey dogma, or “lay down the law.” But the very term *moraliste* must be approached with caution. Heinz Krüger, in an investigation of aphorism entitled *Über den Aphorismus als philosophische Form*, challenges a notion prevalent outside of France: “The designation ‘Moralist’ provokes in the less delicate German usage quite the contrary to the French: ‘moraliste’ is neither the petty pedantic out to change the world nor the monumental purveyor of ethics out to present his ideas” (50, translation mine).

It seems more reasonable, and safer – even when discussing the French *moralistes* – to move away from a taxonomy of stereotypic national traits and to limit the discussion to features we know to have had currency in a specific country at a given time. To be sure, an impressive number of pre-1800 aphorisms in France might be deemed *Verhaltensregeln*, perhaps tried out first in the salons and then codified. And yet how many of the aphorisms coined by the best-known *moralistes* can be regarded as overtly didactic, heavy-handed, or univalent?

We may do well to consider for a moment some perhaps surprising examples of their work, not at all difficult to find in their collections, and ask to what extent scholarly effort to create sharp distinctions between the supposed “dogmatism” of the French moralists and the purported speculativeness of the German *Aphoristiker* prove fruitful.

Montaigne, considered to be the precursor of the seventeenth-century *moralistes*, offers this example of a relatively playful, speculative *réflexion morale*: “Il n’y a rien de mal en la vie pour celui qui a bien compris que la privation de la vie n’est pas mal” (37).

It was the “ascetic,” ostensibly stolid Pascal who wrote this polyvalent example: “Les hommes sont si sincèrement fous, que ce serait être fou par un autre tour de folie, de n’être pas fou” (182).

The aphoristic *réflexions morales* of La Rochefoucault are characterized by their capacity to unmask human foibles through a minimum of direct preaching and a maximum of malicious play with words: “La vérité ne fait pas tant de bien dans le monde que ses apparences y font de mal” (65). It seems difficult to link this reflection with the word *moral* in its traditional sense.

Finally, a more provocative, open-ended La Bruyère than we might imagine: “Deux choses toutes contraires nous préviennent également, l’habitude et la nouveauté” (300).

It may reasonably be argued, as Gray actually does, that the French maxim of this period did tend to perform a “socially integrative function,” whereas the development of aphorism in Germany over a century later was characterized more by a quasi-philosophical

enunciation of *Einfall* – of “a sudden, unplanned, and unpredictable discovery of a unique insight” (44–5). Later, however, these two concepts overlap considerably in the aphorisms written in any country; and by the twentieth century the author of an aphorism is free to operate within an infinitely nuanced continuum, the opposite ends of which are speculativeness and dogmatism.

Indeed, as we explore French-language novels of the twentieth century, we will discern strong echoes of both traditions – of French moralism and of purportedly Germanic speculativeness.

To illustrate the latter “tradition,” consider one of Nietzsche’s aphorisms: “Der Glaube an die Wahrheit beginnt mit dem Zweifel an allen bis dahin geglaubten Wahrheiten.” (Belief in the truth begins with calling into question all truths heretofore accepted as such. I:750, translation mine.) The speculativeness of the proposition is effected by the repetition in modified form of the terms *truth/truths* and the dialectical presentation of belief/doubt.

It might reasonably be concluded, however, that the echoes of the French *moralistes* prove clearer and more persistent in the francophone corpus than in other bodies of literature.

THE EXTRACTION OF APHORISMS FROM
NOVELISTIC DISCOURSE AND THEIR
SUBSEQUENT ARRANGEMENT INTO
AN ANTHOLOGY

Bennington, in part I, section 8 of his study, presents an incisive analysis of the uses and abuses of aphorism anthologies. In the case of the eighteenth-century novel, the practice of lifting aphorisms or maxims from the original text and then reformatting them has been widespread. Thus, ample material for analysis exists. From Bennington’s observations, two main issues emerge that need to be addressed in this context: first, which aphoristic formulations are “liftable,” and second, how they should be arranged once they have been isolated from the text.

When one encounters, within a narration, a fully formed aphorism cast in the present tense, the task of extraction presents no difficulty. Often, however, as we observed with *Tom Jones*, the author of a novel more or less imperceptibly weaves an aphoristic reflection into the fabric of the narrative. This means that a disguised aphorism can be included as a component of reported speech, can be ascribed to the reflexive consciousness of one of the characters, or can be part of a more lengthy, more overt passage of essayistic “intervention.” When this kind of “embedding” of aphorisms occurs, the author must often

cause the tense of the verb(s) to agree with the surrounding tenses rather than cast them into the “timeless” present, or an otherwise textbook aphorism may simply begin with an indicator of indirect discourse, such as “she said” or “he thought.” In such cases an anthologizer must make an arbitrary decision on where to draw the line. Does one lift only the “pure” specimen, or does one slightly rewrite an aphoristic sentence so that it can act more independently?

With regard to the “rewriting” option, Bennington selects Bette Silverblatt’s study of Duclos’s *Les Confessions du comte de **** as a representative example and demonstrates how, through minimal rewriting, she could have listed not 109 sententious propositions from the novel but 179 (61).

The present study will limit itself largely to examining fully formed, clear-cut aphorisms. Two exceptions will be made, however, in the instances of Gabrielle Roy’s *Alexandre Chenevert* and Claude Simon’s *La Route des Flandres*. The rationale for going beyond fully formed aphoristic sentences will be explained in the relevant chapters.

Why lift aphorisms from a novel at all? Bennington speculates that one’s chief motivation for taking such a course, at least in the domain of the eighteenth-century novel, has been (and he quotes Derrida) to “monumentalize inscriptions now made lapidary: ‘the rest’ in peace” (57). In other words, the anthologizer sets out to rescue the essence, the “surplus” of a novelistic text and to create a monument to it. In this connection Bennington appropriates a notion from Freudian psychoanalysis to make his point. He sees the drive to anthologize as a “manifestation of repressed anality; the precious metal of the maxim is easily enough identified with the faeces, a ‘reste’ detached from the body. The ‘orderliness’ of the anthology can also be linked to Freud’s description of anal eroticism” (56). Bennington alludes here to the kind of anthology that seeks to extract sententious propositions from a novel and then to reclassify them into “eternal” rubrics: “Man,” “Love,” “Life,” and the like.

The objectives of this study clearly diverge from those of such anthologizers. The main thrust here is not to “monumentalize” but to analyse the behaviour of aphorism within narrative. For this reason a separate listing of each novel’s aphorisms is appended to the body of the text. The aphorisms, however, are arranged in the order they appear in the novel and not in a new-and-improved sequence bent on some extratextual criterion of “orderliness.”

The opportunity to peruse a separate listing of a novel’s aphorisms might prove beneficial for several reasons. First, such a format allows us to present and discuss evidence succinctly and clearly. Additionally,

it may be helpful to be able to find and consult certain individual aphorisms at a glance and then refer back to the original context. It is also enlightening to review a given novel's aphorisms collectively. Through such a reading we obtain, for example, either an *a priori* or an *a posteriori* overview of the extent to which an author thinks and writes aphoristically. An overview of this kind can in turn help to reveal, in concise form, the "stamp and style" of an author and of his or her work.

Such an enumeration also provides one way to discern efficiently the topic chains, the essential substance of a text's "world." Particularly in the case of an "indecipherable" narrative such as Claude Simon's *La Route des Flandres*, a prior awareness of the novel's spare flashes of compressed *Denkökonomie* (Gray, 266) might form the basis of a pre-reading exercise or of a concentrated, specialized reading of the text. The uninitiated reader in particular could "scan" the text's (at first reading) disconnected narratological elements and make better sense of them after having become familiar with the philosophical/subjective parts of the text.

However, even in the case of a less problematic text – for instance, Saint-Exupéry's blatantly sententious *Terre des hommes* – a look beforehand at some of the work's key aphorisms in a classroom setting can prepare the novice to appreciate the book's plotless, seemingly disjointed collection of *récits*.

We hardly need to be reminded that such "postmodern" narrative practices as these two have become increasingly common in literature produced during this century; spotting a work's aphorisms and focusing attention on them may facilitate the process of making sense of such difficult texts.

A brief word on how the foregoing theoretical considerations will relate to each of the seven novels is in order at this point. The texts that compose the cross-section for study are too diverse with regard to style and content to be submitted to a rigid mapping of the theory on to the novel. Therefore, as we proceed into the next stage, it seems more sensible simply to bear in mind the many ways in which aphorisms *may* function narratologically, and to consider how they might create meaning in a given context. From each novel inherent tendencies may thus emerge. While a given part of the theory might serve particularly well to elucidate a given tendency, it would be tendentious to force upon each text mechanically all the theoretical considerations elaborated thus far.