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Author(s): Marion Faber

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The Metamorphosis of the French Aphorism: La Rochefoucauld and Nietzsche

MARION FABER

At first glance an attempt to relate the seventeenth-century French aristocrat Duc François de la Rochefoucauld, darling of the salon, to the late nineteenth-century German thinker and self-proclaimed prophet Friedrich Nietzsche might seem almost absurd. Yet these two men are in fact linked in literary history, both by virtue of the documented influence of the one on the other and more specifically for their use of a particular literary genre: the aphorism. I hope in this essay to explore the impact that La Rochefoucauld's work had on Nietzsche and Nietzsche's transformation of the French aphorism as he found it in La Rochefoucauld into a structure uniquely suited to his philosophical purposes, a structure that Sarah Kofman could call "l'écriture même de la volonté de puissance."¹

The aphorism is a genre that goes back to classical times, Theognis, Hippocrates, and Seneca being among its main practitioners. Despite lexicographical distinctions among *sentence*, *maxim*, *apothegm*, and *aphorism*, the form has been defined rather loosely; certainly Renaissance scholars did not differentiate very strictly.² La Rochefoucauld, the author of *Refléxions diverses* and *Mémoires*, is known chiefly for his *Sentences et Maximes*, the definitive edition of which was published in 1678. It contains 519 aphorisms, or maxims, sometimes grouped around certain key topics, but without any division into sections or subgroupings. A work that gained immediate admiration in its time and that was also held in high esteem in the eighteenth century, the *Sentences et Maximes* were in Nietzsche's day generally considered only a product of the salon and thus superficial, trivial, and not worthy of the consideration of any serious student of philosophy. But Nietzsche was one of La Rochefoucauld's chief admirers in the nineteenth century and was largely responsible for a renewed interest in him, an interest that the twentieth century has sustained.

To assess La Rochefoucauld's effect on Nietzsche, I will focus on one particular work by Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*.

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Written between 1876 and 1878, this work marks a crucial turning point in Nietzsche's career, a turn away from the romanticism of Schopenhauer and Wagner. As we shall see, La Rochefoucauld's work played a decisive role at this critical time in his life.

Until this point, the prodigious young professor of classical philology at the University of Basel had for years been very much under the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, in both biographical and philosophical senses. Since discovering the work of Schopenhauer in his adolescence, Nietzsche had treasured that pessimistic philosophy in an emotional way, identifying strongly with Schopenhauer's persona as melancholy *Einzelgänger*. In addition, Richard Wagner had been Nietzsche's hero; Nietzsche had visited him regularly at his home in Tribschen, forming a quasi-amorous attachment to Wagner's wife Cosima, and seeing in Wagner a kind of ersatz father (Nietzsche's own father had died when he was eight years old). This relationship saw Nietzsche playing the son's role, however unconsciously, becoming a virtual disciple of The Great Man, and furthering Wagner's artistic aims. To this end he changed *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik*, his first major work, to include a long section hailing Wagner's operas as the long-awaited rebirth of Greek tragic art.

But in 1876 Nietzsche broke with Wagner, again both on personal and philosophical levels. After attending the Bayreuth Festival in August 1876, he was no longer ready to stand like a factotum awaiting Wagner's commands. His own large ego could no longer tolerate such a dependent, subservient position. He also came to see Wagner's art, not as revolutionary, but as decadent, death-loving, life-denying romanticism. After Bayreuth, contact between the two men was never reestablished, and members of Wagner's circle considered *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, published in 1878, as no less than a betrayal.

A new friend and new philosophical stimulant had entered the picture in the person of Paul Rée, psychologist and the author of *Psychologische Beobachtungen*, which Nietzsche had read in Basel in 1873, the year of its publication. The German Jew and Nietzsche entered into a friendship, which surely antagonized the anti-Semitic, nationalistic Wagnerites and which meant a new, positivistic orientation for Nietzsche.

It was at Rée's suggestion that Nietzsche began to read La Rochefoucauld, whom Rée admired enormously. In the fall of 1876, when Nietzsche and Rée traveled to Sorrento, Nietzsche read La Rochefoucauld's *Sentences et Maximes* on the train.³ In Sorrento, Nietzsche and Rée lived at the villa of Malwida von Meysenbug, where they

enjoyed long uninterrupted days of talking together and writing. It was here that the first pages of *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* were written. (These pages constitute the second section of the work; the first section, metaphysical observations, had been written earlier and was later incorporated as the first section of the completed work.)

In the first sections of his new work, the first work of his coming of age as a philosopher, Nietzsche immediately credits La Rochefoucauld with being his inspiration. Like the Frenchman, he too will now try his hand at "Sentenzen-Schleiferei" (Aph. 35), and he rebukes presentday readers who do not realize how difficult it is to write within the constraints of this form. La Rochefoucauld and his contemporaries are for Nietzsche "scharf zielende Schützen, welche immer und immer wieder ins Schwarze treffen—aber ins Schwarze der menschlichen Natur" (Aph. 36). And indeed, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* is the first of Nietzsche's works written in the aphoristic style, the style that he had admired in La Rochefoucauld and that was to become inextricably associated with Nietzsche's thinking.

Nowhere, then, is the influence of La Rochefoucauld as clear as in this pivotal work of Nietzsche's, the most Gallic of all his writing. Thus it is well suited for an examination of how Nietzsche transforms the French aphorism into his own vehicle. What about the aphorism attracts him to it at this particular point in his life? What does he do to change the aphorism to fit his own, unfettered philosophy of the forenoon?

Four main characteristics of La Rochefoucauld's work can, I believe, explain Nietzsche's strong initial attraction to it:

First, and most obvious, the *Maximes* are a psychological work par excellence. As Nietzsche stated in the quotation above, man's nature is penetrated again and again by La Rochefoucauld's literary arrows. The view of man is materialistic, a psychological investigation of motivation and behavior. There are no metaphysical or religious definitions of man (although in his posthumous aphorisms La Rochefoucauld did concern himself with religion). Neither is the heroic vision of man found in his contemporaries Racine and Corneille asserted in the *Maximes*. This demystifying thrust corresponds well to Nietzsche's intentions at this time.

Second, another obvious aspect of La Rochefoucauld's work is that it is not systematic in any strict sense. Many of us who would never think to make our way through seventeenth century French essays have nevertheless browsed with pleasure through La Rochefoucauld, savoring provocations and putdowns, mulling them over, and going on. True, there are groups of maxims more or less the-

matically related, but one can turn to any page of La Rochefoucauld and find several well-defined, autonomous nuggets of truth or bits of thought for rumination.

The ideological consequence of such a form must, I believe, also have been attractive to Nietzsche, for an ostensibly casual collection of truths corresponds exactly to Nietzsche's philosophical position at this time. His idealistic predecessors in philosophy had conceived the search for truth as the construction of a system for explaining the world. One cannot turn to any page in Kant or Hegel and expect to find a self-sufficient thought, for all is conceived as a great, interdependent system. Schopenhauer, although he was also a consummate aphorist, is in his *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819) the last of the systematic philosophers.

At this period in his career, Nietzsche was *rejecting* Schopenhauer and with him the idea that there can be One Truth which is revealed by one philosophy. Now he is more concerned with the "kleinen unscheinbaren Wahrheiten" (Aph. 3), scientific truths that can withstand any disputing. In terms of metaphysical systems, Nietzsche is nihilistic: the unsystematic form of the aphoristic work is perhaps the only one truly able to reflect this anti-systematic ideology of the Nietzsche of 1876. For him, it must have seemed the only honest form for his philosophy.

Third, La Rochefoucauld's maxims are like the tip of an iceberg of thought. As is well known, they are the result of countless reworkings to achieve the greatest brevity and bite, shocking aperçus which leave the preliminary underpinnings of each thought unstated. This aspect of the maxims must also have been attractive to Nietzsche the artist, for unlike his philosophical predecessors, Nietzsche was not only a philosopher, but a poet as well, and surely valued the aesthetic satisfaction of a formulation no less than its content (given that the two can be separated). His image of the cameo to describe La Rochefoucauld's aphorisms (Aph. 35) indicates his aesthetic orientation, his assessment of the maxims as delicate and difficult works of art. Thus he is drawn to La Rochefoucauld as much for the beauty of his literary style as for his psychological acumen.

In addition to these three characteristics, there is a fourth aspect, one related to the first: the moral focus of La Rochefoucauld's work. He is a *moraliste* in the French sense, observing the mores of his society; but beyond that, he is a moralist in the English sense, analyzing the moral structure of that society, its alleged virtues and vices. Nietzsche, of course, is above all a moralist, a moralist of the individual, struggling already in this seminal work with the concepts of good and evil as applied to man.

To illustrate the evolution in the moral evaluations of the two writers, their conclusions about the moral nature of man, I shall discuss two pairs of aphorisms. The comparison also clarifies some fundamental stylistic differences.

The first pair of aphorisms concerns gratitude. La Rochefoucauld's 298th maxim is: "La reconnaissance de la plupart des hommes n'est qu'une secrète envie de recevoir de plus grands bienfaits."

Nietzsche writes in his 44th aphorism:

Dankbarkeit und Rache.—Der Grund, weshalb der Mächtige dankbar ist, ist dieser. Sein Wohltäter hat sich durch seine Wohltat an der Sphäre des Mächtigen gleichsam vergriffen und sich in sie eingedrängt: nun vergreift er sich zur Vergeltung wieder an der Sphäre des Wohltäters durch den Akt der Dankbarkeit. Es ist eine mildere Form der Rache. Ohne die Genugtuung der Dankbarkeit zu haben, würde der Mächtige sich unmächtig gezeigt haben und fürderhin dafür gelten. Deshalb stellt jede Gesellschaft der Guten, das heisst ursprünglich der Mächtigen, die Dankbarkeit unter die ersten Pflichten. —Swift hat den Satz hingeworfen, dass Menschen in demselben Verhältnis dankbar sind, wie sie Rache hegen.

Although La Rochefoucauld's work includes passages longer than this maxim and Nietzsche's work has many aphorisms shorter in length, both examples are typical of their authors. La Rochefoucauld's 519 aphorisms rarely exceed two sentences, although he did set a long aphorism on self-love at the beginning of his first edition of the *Maximes*. Approximately one quarter of Nietzsche's work is made up of one-liners, but in a later work like *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* he confines these to a separate section (Part 4) called "Sprüche und Zwischenspiele." His preferred length is the short paragraph, as in the above aphorism. To use traditional terminology, La Rochefoucauld prefers the paradoxical aphorism, whereas Nietzsche prefers the discursive aphorism in the tradition of Hippocrates and Bacon. Or, as Franz Mautner formulates it,⁴ La Rochefoucauld's aphorisms are constructed on the principle of "Einfall," that is, the simulation in one pithy statement of an inspired idea, whereas Nietzsche's more often grow from the principle of "Klärung," that is, the intention to clarify and lay out a matter in a definitive, satisfying way. (In *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, it is also characteristic of Nietzsche to include at the end of his paragraphs a summary sentence that could almost stand by itself as an aphorism of "Einfall": for example, after a paragraph about our dubious knowledge of any metaphysical world, Nietzsche writes (Aph. 9): "Wäre die Existenz einer solchen Welt noch so gut bewiesen, so stünde doch fest, dass die gleichgültigste aller Erkenntnisse eben ihre Erkenntnis wäre: noch gleichgüt-

tiger als dem Schiffer in Sturmesgefahr die Erkenntnis von der chemischen Analysis des Wassers sein muss.”; or, after a paragraph on social justice (Aph. 451): “Wenn man der Bestie blutige Fleischstücke aus der Nähe zeigt und wieder wegzieht, bis sie endlich brüllt; meint ihr, dass dies Gebrüll Gerechtigkeit bedeute?”)

But to return to the subject at hand: In addition to differences of length in these two aphorisms there is the different explanation for gratitude offered by each writer. As always, both authors are disabusing us of our illusions: in this case, that gratitude is as pure, selfless, or straightforward as it would seem. But La Rochefoucauld emphasizes in gratitude the human desire to be self-seeking, to advance oneself, as by flattery. Egoism (*l'amour-propre*) is at the root of La Rochefoucauld's psychology of man, and gratitude is one manifestation of it, a means to use others to gain one's advantage. In other aphorisms about gratitude, he likens it to a kind of money, paid in the hope of making better loans in the future (223), or he stresses the role of pride in agreeing on the price of the transaction (225). La Rochefoucauld's life as an aristocrat close to the court of Louis XIV is surely part of the reason for this particular psychological insight into gratitude.

Like La Rochefoucauld, Nietzsche is exposing a secret reason for gratitude; he does not accept it at face value, but seeks a psychological explanation more true than the obvious one. But his metaphor is derived neither from the search to find favor with a monarch nor from commercial trading. Nor is self-love or pride particularly salient here. Rather Nietzsche, in an anticipation of his theory of the will to power, uses territorial metaphors of attack, of power struggles, to interpret what we call gratitude. The powerful man has been weakened by a kindness. By his gratitude he avenges himself on his benefactor, showing his own power and thus demonstrating that gratitude and revenge—normally conceived as opposites—are fundamentally similar.

This is not only an example of the paradoxical element in the aphorisms of both writers (gratitude = greed, gratitude = revenge), but it is also an example of the new monistic tendency in Nietzsche's philosophy, which resists dualistic explanations, seeking rather in both metaphysical and moral terms a monistic description of human behavior.

Other of Nietzsche's aphorisms dealing with gratitude likewise conceive it in terms of weak and strong, of nobility of nature rather than of egoism per se. Tabling the question of the influence of a Bismarckian *Zeitgeist* on his analyses, we can at least speculate that such a psychology of gratitude may be partially attributed to

Nietzsche's conception of his *own* life as struggle, a struggle with himself, with his illness, with his contemporaries. *Overcoming* (an assertion of power) is at the root of much of his philosophy, and all is examined in this light. Characteristic in this regard is how Nietzsche improves La Rochefoucauld in his 50th aphorism. La Rochefoucauld had analyzed people's need for pity as their "stupidity" in a misfortune. But Nietzsche sees pity as more than mere stupidity: it is a covert use of power, the power to make others feel bad, the power to hurt. This interpretation is especially significant, as it refutes Schopenhauer's exaltation of pity as the highest moral feeling.

Nietzsche's aphorism is also distinguished from La Rochefoucauld's by its historical orientation. In the phrase "jeder Gesellschaft der Guten, das heisst ursprünglich der Mächtigen," there is an indication of Nietzsche's invariable geneological approach to subjects under investigation, whether metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, or moral. This historical approach both goes beyond La Rochefoucauld's, which never concerns itself with life outside its particular time, place, and society; and at the same time it exposes the false universality of La Rochefoucauld's apodictic statements by insisting on the evolution of every kind of behavior or conviction. When we read La Rochefoucauld, we seem to be in a universe of eternal cubbyholed qualities, vices and virtues. As La Bruyère described them, La Rochefoucauld's maxims seem to be "des lois dans la morale."⁵ No allowance is ever made for diversity or change due to social class, historical period, or geography. True, he uses phrases like "n'est souvent que" and "la plupart des hommes" to qualify his assertions and allow for deviation from his norm. But no reader remembers the quibble: his aphorisms preclude argument; they have the ring of the absolute. Who will ever remember that gratitude is greedy ambition in "la plupart des hommes" and consider seriously that minority for whom it is not? In tracing the *evolution* of our world in his discursive aphorisms, Nietzsche undercuts this closed, irrefutable impact of the aphoristic form as La Rochefoucauld uses it.

As a related example of this phenomenon, we may consider another pair of aphorisms, this one concerning self-deception. La Rochefoucauld writes: "Nous sommes si accoutumés à nous déguiser aux autres qu'enfin nous nous déguisons à nous mêmes" (119). This again has the ring of the absolute. Our deception of others by assuming disguises goes so far that it ultimately includes self-deception and we keep our true nature even from ourselves. Such a thought assumes that there is a "real nature," but one which remains unknown to the subject in question. A similar aphorism states: "Dans toutes

les professions chacun affecte une mine et un extérieur pour paraître ce qu'il veut qu'on le croie. Ainsi on peut dire que le monde n'est composé que de mines" (256).

These thoughts may at first seem downright Nietzschean. Nietzsche's love of masks has been well documented; as a writer he likes to assume various personae to carry his ideas forward. But in *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* Nietzsche writes of self-deception in the following manner:

Wie der Schein zum Sein wird.—Der Schauspieler kann zuletzt auch beim tiefsten Schmerz nicht aufhören, an den Eindruck seiner Person und den gesamten szenischen Effekt zu denken, zum Beispiel selbst beim Begräbnis seines Kindes; er wird über seinen eigenen Schmerz und dessen Ausserungen weinen, als sein eigener Zuschauer. Der Heuchler, welcher immer ein und dieselbe Rolle spielt, hört zuletzt auf, Heuchler zu sein; zum Beispiel Priester, welche als junge Männer gewöhnlich bewusst oder unbewusst Heuchler sind, werden zuletzt natürlich und sind dann wirklich, ohne alle Affektation, eben Priester; oder wenn es der Vater nicht soweit bringt, dann vielleicht der Sohn, der des Vaters Vorsprung benutzt, seine Gewohnung erbt. Wenn einer sehr lange und hartnäckig etwas scheinen will, so wird es ihm zuletzt schwer, etwas anderes zu sein. Der Beruf fast jedes Menschen, sogar des Künstlers, beginnt mit Heuchelei, mit einem Nachmachen von aussen her, mit einem Kopieren des Wirkungsvollen. Der, welcher immer die Maske freundlicher Mienen trägt, muss zuletzt eine Gewalt über wohlwollende Stimmungen bekommen, ohne welche der Ausdruck der Freundlichkeit nicht zu erzwingen ist,—und zuletzt wieder bekommen diese über ihn Gewalt, er ist wohlwollend. (Aph. 51)

Here the aphorism is not launched from the premise of a fixed, incontrovertible "real nature" which disguises itself from itself. Nietzsche's relativism is evident in this aphorism, for seeming actually *becomes* being. The external is all there is; the present is the result of an evolution and is itself in flux. (In the fourth section of *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* art too is seen as a process, rather than as an unchanging product of perfection.) We might say that Nietzsche's paradoxical conviction goes even deeper than La Rochefoucauld's: the phenomenon *is* the noumenon.

In yet another sense as well, La Rochefoucauld tills the ground where Nietzsche will plant new seeds. La Rochefoucauld's psychologically penetrating, but ultimately neutral or pessimistic vision of the human condition does acknowledge that ideal virtue, true love, true friendship might exist, but the overwhelming force of the collection is that the world is a place where *amour-propre* dominates, where commerce and self interest are the chief motivations and kind-

ness, generosity, humility, and all the other so-called virtues are in actuality (and regrettably) means to further one's own interest. The attributes of civility and self-knowledge are all that remain unscathed. Egoism, in short, is at the center of all human activity. His last aphorism, longer than any of the others in the collection, concerns death and the inability of anyone in society to despise it truly. As a briefer aphorism states: "Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement" (26). By concluding with this long aphorism on death, he gives his collection a decidedly nihilistic cast.

Just as our reading of Nietzsche has been altered by virtue of our knowledge of the subsequent thought of Sigmund Freud, so our reading of La Rochefoucauld changes with our knowledge of Nietzsche.⁶ La Rochefoucauld's egoism becomes the springboard for Nietzsche's idea of the will to power. In this reaction, Nietzsche accepts La Rochefoucauld's insight, but does not draw the same pessimistic or nihilistic conclusions. For Nietzsche's aim is not to destroy (despite his reputation as the philosopher with a hammer); even in *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, his most negating work, he insists on using the aphorism to create a new set of hierarchies to accommodate the small, humble truths of human behavior which he has discovered. In this sense, the fifth and central section of the volume concerns the free spirit, one who takes from out of his critical perspective a positive attitude, who "dem Herkommen entgegen eine ganz individuelle Erkenntnis der Welt zu erwerben trachtet" (Ap. 230).

Why must La Rochefoucauld's insights about egoism be a source of dismay? If analysis of human interaction shows that a balance of strength is more at its root, then let us affirm that strength, affirm egoism. Or, to cite another example, what for La Rochefoucauld are the "passions," continually betraying man's reason and leading him to goals he had not been able to foresee with his intelligence, become in Nietzsche that Dionysian element in art and society, one that Nietzsche champions. In this connection, Nietzsche himself comments on his development of the thought of La Rochefoucauld, writing in *Der Wille zur Macht*: "ihm entgegen suchte ich zunächst zu beweisen, dass es gar nichts anderes geben könne als Egoismus."⁷ Elsewhere, he calls La Rochefoucauld's attitude "Selbstverkleinerung,"⁸ again rebuking the melancholy aristocrat for unduly low self-esteem.

So, for example, when both Nietzsche and La Rochefoucauld agree on the dubious nature of pity, as described above, La Rochefoucauld will leave it at that. But Nietzsche will go further, taking up La Rochefoucauld's insight and setting it in a positive light, in Aphor-

ism 499, for example, where he states: "Mitfreude, nicht Mitleiden macht den Freund." If La Rochefoucauld describes friendship as a "commerce ou l'amour propre se propose toujours quelque chose à gagner," (83) Nietzsche in Aphorism 376 again goes further, writing "Indem wir uns selbst erkennen und unser Wesen selber als eine wandelnde Sphäre der Meinungen und Stimmungen ansehen, und somit ein wenig geringschätzen lernen, bringen wir uns wieder ins Gleichgewicht mit den übrigen. . . . Und so wollen wir es miteinander aushalten, da wir es ja mit uns aushalten. . . . Feinde, es gibt keinen Feind. . . ."

We see then in La Rochefoucauld a step in the direction of that proposed intellectual liberation described in *Also sprach Zarathustra* as the three transformations of the spirit. La Rochefoucauld, we might say, is ready to achieve the freedom of the lion, but never goes that far; he does not affirm the negative truths he has discovered.

Why not? La Rochefoucauld makes no attempt to use his aphorisms as other than a collection of aperçus. As Jean Starobinski writes, "C'est n'est pas une morale en système."⁹ We have after reading them a *portrait* of man and his society, or, to return to Nietzsche's image, a series of cameo portraits, and that is the end of it. But in reading Nietzsche one has the feeling, even from the beginning in this first emancipatory collection, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, that the aphorisms are not there simply to paint a portrait: rather—for all his rejection of systems, metaphysical or moral—one has the feeling that Nietzsche's aphorisms are in the service of a *theory* of man. And in fact later aphoristic works do indeed pile stone upon stone in the service of a theory fully—if cryptically—articulated in that aphoristic-oracular work *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

Thus the metamorphosis in the content of the two aphorists does not merely refer back to their particular intellectual historical orientation in time and place, but also reflects that for each, the aphorism is the means to a different end.

In closing I would like to consider more specifically Nietzsche's adoption of the French aphorism in terms of style. The following pair of aphorisms on the same theme is an instance of Nietzsche's close emulation of his model.

La Rochefoucauld: "La parfaite valeur est de faire sans témoins ce qu'on serait capable de faire devant tout le monde." (216)

Nietzsche: "Man springt einem Menschen, der ins Wasser fällt, noch einmal so gern nach, wenn Leute zugegen sind, die es nicht wagen." (Aph. 325)

What strikes us first about La Rochefoucauld's aphorism is its balanced construction: "de faire sans témoins" is balanced by "de

faire devant tout le monde.” This polar structure is intensified by the extreme contrast of “sans témoins” and “tout le monde” (by writing not just “un autre” or “des autres,” but “tout le monde,” La Rochefoucauld emphasizes the grand spectacle involved in the second form of action). In addition, that world of absolute but inaccessible virtue which we discussed earlier in regard to the maxim concerning self-deception is also evident here, for the implication is that perfect bravery might exist, but no one actually *does* without witnesses that which the presence of witnesses makes hypothetically possible. Continuing the paradoxical thought, mere bravery equals lack of bravery equals exhibitionism. In formulating his observation as a definition, La Rochefoucauld reveals that the language of the absolute in the everyday world is empty of meaning. (Other such examples: love of justice (78), gratitude (298), moderation (293), and liberality (263).

Nietzsche’s aphorism also has a polar structure, but the thought, although it is essentially the same thought, is not couched as a definition. It is more of a *comparison*, again more relativistic. Neither is this aphorism as abstract as La Rochefoucauld’s: rather than defining “perfect bravery,” Nietzsche gives a quasi-anecdotal example. This is generally true in Nietzsche, who is not out to write an anatomy of any kind and who avoids the closed nature of definition. Instead, his aphorism shows a more *visual* use of language. Although it is usually the German philosophers who encourage us to consider abstract words as having an almost concrete presence (*Geist, Freiheit, Freude* march forward through German philosophy), here it is La Rochefoucauld who, as Starobinski writes, makes of abstractions “des acteurs indépendants, de petits personnages,”¹⁰ entities with lives of their own. So strong is this tendency that La Rochefoucauld can write: “Quand les vices nous quittent, nous nous flattons de la créance que c’est nous qui les quittons” (192). The vices and virtues seem to exist apart from the subject itself.

La Rochefoucauld’s abstract language is also extremely constrained in its use of metaphor. A conventional word or two generally suffices: death is like the sun (26), fortune is like light (380), the river of virtue ends in the sea of self-interest (171). The seventeenth century classicist does not go far afield to color his writing. In Nietzsche’s aphorisms, images are more daring: flattery can be a sleeping potion (318), people are like corks on the surface of a wave (627); the man of action is like a waterfall (488); people are like piles of charcoal in the forest (585). Reading in retrospect again, we see that it is Nietzsche the precursor of the Expressionist poets who introduces to the aphorism a palette of color that of course would have been considered vulgar in seventeenth century France.

When Nietzsche tries to write paradoxical aphorisms like Rochefoucauld's they often fall flat, whereas La Rochefoucauld's rarely do. Our previous pair of aphorisms illustrates this point to some degree, La Rochefoucauld's being more succinct in expressing the same thought. Or:

Nietzsche on marriage: "Einige Männer haben über die Entführung ihrer Frauen geseufzt, die meisten darüber, dass niemand sie ihnen entführen wollte." (Aph. 388)

La Rochefoucauld on the same topic: "Il y a de bons mariages, mais il n'y en point de délicieux." (113)

If within the context of German humor Nietzsche's aphorism actually does seem witty (bad taste and misogyny acknowledged, but disregarded for the moment), it is still clumsy and laboriously phrased compared with the graceful brevity of La Rochefoucauld's, whose entire wit rests on the one word "délicieux," used to its fullest possible effect.

In terms of style, then, Nietzsche's brilliance as an aphorist does not shine forth when he emulates La Rochefoucauld's paradoxical aphorisms most closely. However, to say this is a flaw is to say that El Greco would be found wanting if he tried to be Paul Klee. It is Nietzsche's *expansion* of the genre that makes his aphoristic writing significant. We have already seen how he uses the genre to present a psychology of man in an authentic form, incorporating in addition to his historical perspective a broader use of metaphor. Nietzsche also widens the *range* of the aphorism to include subjects never considered by La Rochefoucauld. In *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* alone, there are in addition to the moral and social realms that furnished our examples, sections on metaphysics, art, religion, and politics. Furthermore, the cynical tone of La Rochefoucauld's aphorisms rarely if ever changes, but Nietzsche varies that tone with pathos, anecdote, and confession. Unlike La Rochefoucauld, he also allows the genre to include the dialectical, allows argument. Where La Rochefoucauld twists a knife, Nietzsche hammers at the nailhead until it is firmly lodged.

Nietzsche's emulation of La Rochefoucauld's aphorisms in *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* starts him on his way, but his is a different way, that of a philosopher, not a *moraliste*, a poet, not an *écrivain*, an apologist, not an aphorist. He cannot stay put at La Rochefoucauld's aphorism, but molds and expands it until it becomes the vessel of his thought, a thought that likewise does not stay put at the devastating aperçu, but goes on to question and explore, argue and conclude.

MARION FABER · Swarthmore College

NOTES

1. Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la métaphore* (Paris: Editions galilee, 1972), p. 167.
2. See Harold Pagliaro, "Paradox in the Aphorisms of La Rochefoucauld and Some Representative English Followers," *PMLA* 79 (March 1964), 42-44.
3. For this information and a general overview of Nietzsche's relation to French writers, see W. D. Williams, *Nietzsche and the French* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952).
4. Franz Mautner, "Der Aphorismus als literarische Gattung," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 27 (1933), 154.
5. Cited in Margot Kruse *Die Maxime in der französischen Literatur* (Hamburg: Kommissionsverlag, 1960), p. 24.
6. In fact, Ronald Hayman writes in *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 197, that *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* can be considered "a stepping-stone between La Rochefoucauld and Freud."
7. Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, Karl Schechta ed. (Munich, 1954-56), vol. 3, p. 461.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 907.
9. Jean Starobinski, "La Rochefoucauld," *Nouvelle Revue française* (July 1966), 22.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.