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The art of literary precision: on the specificity of aphoristic style

✂ Кључне речи:
short literary forms, aphorism, style, rhetoric figures.

У овом чланку приказује се специфичност афористичког стила. Након кратког осврта на историју афоризма даје се дефиниција жанра. Као уобичајени за афористички стил препознају се следећа својства и стилске фигуре: краткоћа, концизност, двосмисленост, непристрасност, универзалност, мудрост, аутентичност, неочекивани закључци, парадоксалне изјаве, шале, провокације, антитезе, елипсе, реторичка питања и игре речи.

A mong various short literary forms written in prose, such as epigram, apothegm, maxim, anecdote, parable, proverb, fragment, short story, essay etc., aphorism still remains under-researched. Although aphorisms are common in the literatures of numerous cultural circles, they are continually popular among readers, and the authors of aphorisms resort to an enormous variety of stylistic forms, the genre failed to receive proper deal of attention from the theoreticians of literature. It is only

in the recent years that the works of German researchers of literature have slowly started to fill in the gap.¹ The effort of investigating the genre of short prosaic form is worthwhile not only, as various theoreticians postulate, for its universal content but also for its unusual stylistic value. This paper is an attempt at a brief presentation and analysis of the lavishness of aphoristic style.

In the history of literature, the style of aphorism went through numerous stages

1) Thick volumes of German theoreticians constitute an exception here, since they thoroughly reviewed the history of German aphorism. Friedemann Spicker: *Der deutsche Aphorismus im 20. Jahrhundert. Spiel, Bild, Erkenntnis.* Tübingen 2004.

and metamorphoses. Aphorism is said to have originated already from the works of Hippocrates², the author of the famous saying *Vita brevis – ars longa*.³ The style of his aphorisms, which were actually medical diagnoses or a result of observing the natural phenomena, resembled precise formulae. This specific stylistic form of scientific observations of Hippocrates was continued by later authors, e.g. a medieval monk from Salerno, Johannes de Mediolano and Paracelsus (1493–1541). The aphorism of the Spanish writers Antonio Pérez (1540–1611) and Balthasar Gracián (1601–1658), full of wit and criticism as well as various rhetoric figures, served as a means of conveying philological commentaries to the works of Latin classics (e.g. Tacit) and had a form of moralistic clues related to living in a society. In the early 17th century, when the literary lounges appeared in France, formulating witty and well-composed aphorisms was one of the favourite entertainments among the participants of these meetings of intellectuals. Those varied activities prepared the basis for the modern aphoristic form of writers and philosophers from France, i.e. François de La Rochefoucauld (1613–1680), Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), N. S. Chamfort (1741–1794), L. Vauvenargues (1715–1747), A. Rivarol (1753–1801), La Bruyere (1645–1696), J. Joubert (1754–1824)), from Germany, i.e. G. Ch. Lichtenberg (1742–1799), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and from Austria, i.e.

Marie von Ebner Eschenbach (1830–1913) and Karl Kraus (1874–1936). The list of the greatest European aphorists would be incomplete without at least mentioning such authors as: Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), the master of paradox, who introduced the aphorism into the canon of English literature with his volume „Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young“ (1894), the Polish writer Stanisław Jerzy Lec (1909–1966), a critical observer of the world and his generation, and Mikhail Turovsky (born 1933), the author of „Itch of Wisdom“ („Зуд Мудрости“, 1986), the collection of aphorisms written in Russian.

The genre is represented both by philosophers (e.g. Emil M. Cioran), who analysed a wide range of existential and metaphysical subjects, and by writers (e.g. Josef Czernin or Wolfdietrich Schnurre), who experimented with language by means of resorting to *fragmentarism*. Aphorism still benefits from the wisdom of numerous literary works, including the Bible and the Talmud, as it was put by Lec: “You ask me, oh beautiful lady, how long my thoughts mature. Six thousand years, my dear.”⁴ The contemporary aphorism therefore bridges the gap between the past and the modern times: it links the intellectual heritage of the past centuries with the original contemporary philosophical thought and the sublime form of expression.

Aphorism seems to be a literary form perfectly catering for the needs of a contemporary reader. The modern era, determined by

2) Cf. Friedemann Spicker (Hrsg.): *Aphorismen der Weltliteratur*. Stuttgart 1999. S. 315.

3) “Life is short, art is long, opportunity fugitive, experimenting dangerous, reasoning difficult: it is necessary not only to do oneself what is right, but also to be seconded by the patient, by those who attend him, by external circumstances.”

4) The aphorisms of Stanisław Jerzy Lec, Oscar Wilde and Karl Kraus quoted in this paper were taken from the following publications. Stanisław Jerzy Lec: *Unkempt Thoughts*. Translated from the Polish by Jacek Galazka. New York 1962. Oscar Wilde: *The Fireworks of Oscar Wilde*. Selected, edited and introduced by Owen Dudley Edwards. London 1989. Karl Kraus: *Aphorismen*. Hrsg. von Christian Wagenknecht. Frankfurt am Main 1986. The aphorisms of Kraus were translated from German into English by the author of this paper.

the multitude and high speed of information circulation, is an ideal time for the growth of short literary forms. Aphorism, which resorts to various disciplines of science, from natural sciences, rhetorics, philosophy to linguistics, sociology and politics, grasps the thoughts in brief and concise manner, hence not wasting space or precious time. This shortness constitutes one of the most important qualities of the genre. Nevertheless, the concept of shortness is relative, as an aphorism can consist of a single sentence or a series of several sentences. As a result, the criterion of shortness seems to provide an unsatisfactory description of the genre. After all, famous quotes are also short and a proverb may be also formulated in a single sentence. The brief form of aphorism has a different background, as it results from the occurrence of phrasal and metaphoric structures in it. Therefore, the additional and apparently decisive criterion characterising the genre in this context is conciseness, demanding the minimum of words and the maximum of content from an aphorist. The German researcher on aphorism, Christian Wagenknecht, denotes this criterion as 'lex minimi'.⁵ Therefore, aphorism is a genre which, in a relatively small portion of text, covers contents of a considerable importance. An aphorist resigns from redundant words and information, but rather invites a reader to an intellectual journey to the land of thoughts. Short and concise form of aphorism, which frequently stems from a long and in-depth process of thinking undertaken by an author, develops only in the contact with a recipient, allowing him or her, after giving a text a thorough consideration, to discover the truth. The author only confines himself or herself to sending a signal to a reader, who later can discover a different and

more important sense. This characteristic feature of aphorism was ironically referred to by Kraus: "Satires which the censor can understand are justly forbidden."

Aphorism assumes the form of a specific dialogue between an author and a potential reader, hence it is a demanding genre. Aphorism is an intellectual challenge not only to a writer, but also to a reader, and in order for the dialogue to take place, the recipient should possess the means and abilities to decipher the author's intentions properly. The nature of the dialogue was described by Lec in the following way: "Thoughts, like fleas, jump from man to man. But they do not bite everybody." If a reader fails to possess a similar knowledge of literature or culture as a writer, the author's intention will be misunderstood and the deeper thought of aphorism will be lost. Such a demanding challenge was frequently given to readers by Lec, for example in the aphorisms quoted below:

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- Open Sesame – I want to get out.
- I'd rather David had killed Goliath with a harp.
- I wonder if any animal looking at us thinks "Ecce homo."
- Not every Abel can afford his own Cain. Some have to rely on collective ones.
- You can die on St. Helena without being Napoleon.
- The kiss of Judas closes poets' mouths.
- Don't tell your dreams. What if the Freudians come to power?

As the above examples indicate, aphorists often refer to biblical parables, myths, knowledge of culture, famous literary works

5) Cf. Christian Wagenknecht: *Das Wortspiel bei Karl Kraus*. Göttingen 1965.

and historic events. Numerous references are used not only to give evidence to an author's erudition, but they are also a rhetoric figure. By means of allusions, references and popular quotes, aphorists convey wide range of meanings, ideas and thoughts in a simple and concise manner.

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The complex perception and comprehension of aphorism is additionally complicated by the fact that the genre appears as an individual structure without any wider context. Beyond any doubt, aphorism is ambiguous since it functions in two semantic planes: literary and metaphoric. The former constitutes the body of aphorism, whereas the latter is a carrier of "deep" thoughts, i.e. the wisdom of aphorism, which contributes to the highly artistic literary form of this genre.

In order to avoid the perception of aphorism as just a witty phrase and to preserve the convention of a dialogue between an author and a reader, some aphorists use generalisations, symbols of the unknown, or readers are required to be familiar with cultural associations, reality or characters appearing in their text. Therefore, aphorism often uses impersonal forms, phrases referring to general public or group nouns (e.g. people, some etc.)

- One can be a virtuoso of false play. (Lec)
- Do not learn more than you absolutely need to get through life. (Kraus)
- We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars. (Wilde)
- It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. (Wilde)

Such a rhetoric figure gives a general character to aphorism and allows this short literary form to reach a universal dimension, since the thoughts conveyed by it remain meaningful independently from time and setting, in which the aphorism was written.

Individuality, detachment from a context and independent stylistic form are crucial qualities of aphorisms, which exclude the possibility of being a part of a larger literary work.⁶ The authenticity of aphorism as an independent entity in literature is nowadays at risk, since numerous publishers release the collections of short and well-composed excerpts taken out from a longer literary work (e.g. a novel or a drama), calling them, against any proper definitions of the genre, the collections of aphorisms. Unfortunately, such publications, which usually are solely commercial enterprises, ruin the reputation and uniqueness of aphorism as a literary genre.

The authorship and a voluntary intention to express one's thoughts in this short literary form is another important factor determining the exclusive character of the genre. Aphorism also deters time frames, hence it frequently uses the present tense, which guarantees eternal universality and validity of the idea(s) expressed in this form. Originality of aphorism stems from the genuineness of thought and its unique presentation. Tautology and banality are the most common mistakes committed by poor writers attempting to create aphorisms. Therefore, respectful aphorists have always tried to achieve absolute originality, interesting antitheses, paradoxes and unusual comparisons, often using a conversational rather than formal written discourse, as in the case of Kraus, who argued in his apho-

6) Cf. discussion on contextual isolation of aphorism. Stephan Fedler: *Der Aphorismus*. Stuttgart 1992. Harald Fricke: *Der Aphorismus*. Stuttgart 1984.

rism: “Sentimental irony is a dog that bays at the moon while pissing on graves.”

The relevant characteristics of aphorism, i.e. shortness, conciseness, ambiguity, detachment, universality, wisdom and genuineness, were frequently perceived by the aphorists themselves as the following examples seem to indicate:

The aphorisms, in which I am the first master among Germans, are the forms of “eternity”; my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book – what everyone else does not say in a book. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

An aphorism ought to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world like a little work of art and complete in itself like a hedgehog. (Friedrich von Schlegel)

Exclusively of the abstract sciences, the largest and worthiest portion of our knowledge consists of aphorisms: and the greatest and best of men is but an aphorism. (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

An aphorism can never be the whole truth; it is either a half-truth or a truth-and-a-half. (Karl Kraus)

Aphorism is a microcosm, which reflects a macrocosm, it contains everything. (Mikolaj Bierdiajew)

The lavishness of rhetoric figures in aphorisms is impressive: witty points, original transformations of well-known proverbs, quotations or sayings etc. The beginning of an aphorism usually seems to convey just a regular idea, however the later occurrence of surprising phrases or unexpected thoughts, changes the seemingly intended sense of an aphorism completely:

- Those whom the gods love grow young. (Wilde)
- Time is waste of money (Wilde)
- Truth will always be naked, even when turned out in the latest fashion (Lec)

- All is in the hands of man. Therefore wash them often. (Lec)
- Don’t cut off the branch you are sitting on, unless they want to hang you from it. (Lec)

Aphorisms surprise a reader also by using paradox, whose aim is to present the author’s thoughts in such a way that the reader is misled. As soon as the reader starts to feel that he or she follows the author’s way of thinking, there appears a paradoxical phrase, which purposefully ruins the apparent logic of the aphorism. Therefore, paradox is a refined play on words and thoughts.

- One should always play fairly – when one has the winning cards. (Wilde)
- Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are. (Wilde)
- This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last. (Wilde)
- Illiterates have to dictate. (Lec)

Aphorists frequently resort to irony and sarcasm, which also indicate the parody-oriented character of the genre. In its message, aphorisms may seem aggressive, since they can expose the ignorance of adversaries, initially flattering them with apparent praises, which actually could be taken seriously only by a naïve reader. Not only sarcasm but also irony often emanates from aphorisms written with a special attention to every single word, which may ridicule someone very painfully, as some examples of Wilde’s aphorisms illustrate:

- Education is an admirable thing. But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be thought.
- I am so fond of eating! I am very English in all my tastes.

- Sense of humour, also in relation to oneself, is also inextricably connected with aphorism.
- To love oneself is the beginning of a life long romance.” (Wilde)

Numerous innovations in the manner of expressions appear in the aphoristic writing. For instance, Karl Kraus is possibly the only author, whose aphorism assumed a form of mathematical formula:

$$\text{Soul of a woman} = \frac{x^2 + \sqrt{31,4 - 20 + 4,6} - (4 \times 2) + y^2 + 2xy}{(x + y)^2 - 3,8 + 6 - 6,2} - (0,53 + 0,47)$$

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The necessity to eliminate every redundant word forces aphorists to apply various types of rhetoric figures, thus the lavishness of styles in aphorisms stems not only from the attempts at achieving originality and expressing ideas in a more attractive way, but also from economy of a sentence. Consequently, the variety of rhetoric figures allows for a presentation of a considerable semantic area with the minimum input of lexis.

The economy of a sentence mentioned above may be successfully obtained by means of antithesis, since contrasting words, phrases or thoughts enables a writer to preserve the clarity of conveying his or her own ideas in a relatively small volume of text. The aphorisms quoted below seem to illustrate this phenomenon clearly:

- Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. (Wilde)
- You have to climb to reach a deep thought. (Lec)
- Dark windows are often a very clear proof. (Lec)
- How should we train memory to learn to forget? (Lec)
- A fat man lives shorter but eats longer (Lec)

In their aphorisms, the authors often apply the technique of chiasmus. The order

of occurrence of words or phrases is reversed, resulting in an occurrence of a new, surprising thought, for instance:

- Children play soldier. That makes sense. But why do soldiers play children? (Kraus)

Word plays are also commonly used by aphorists, which allows them to exploit the multitude of meanings and associations from a single word or phrase:

- One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art. (Wilde)
- The only way to atone for being occasionally a little overdressed is by being always absolutely overeducated. (Wilde)
- My unconscious knows more about the consciousness of the psychologist than his consciousness knows about my unconscious. (Kraus)
- Matrimony is the union of meanness and martyrdom. (Kraus)
- The immorality of men triumphs over the amorality of women. (Kraus)

While playing with words, aphorists also manipulate with such rhetoric figures as rhythm and rhyme:

- I had a nightmare: surplus of bureaucracy in a country which just liquidated illiteracy. (Lec)

Elliptic constructions and rhetorical questions are also typical for the genre, as these rhetoric figures facilitate the rule of economy of words.

- Opinions are usually divided – among the strong (Lec)
- To God what is God's, to Caesar what is Caesar's. To humans – what? (Lec)

Despite its tendency to obtain the shortest possible representation of thought, the aphorism paradoxically does not avoid repetitions. As a matter of fact, repetition serves as a method to focus reader's attention to a particular thought. The aphorisms quoted below seem to prove that it is possible to resort to repetition without losing the effect of shortness and conciseness.

- I am beautiful, I am strong, I am wise, I am good. And I discovered it all! (Lec)
- War: first, one hopes to win; next, one expects the enemy to lose; then, one is satisfied that he is also suffering; in the end, one is surprised that everyone has lost. (Kraus)
- Morality is a venereal disease. Its primary stage is called virtue; its

secondary stage, boredom; its tertiary stage, syphilis. (Kraus)

The lavishness of style in aphorism seems infinite. The genre of short prose surprises readers with various categories of rhetoric figures: unexpected conclusions, paradoxical statements, jokes and provocations, antitheses, ellipses, rhetorical questions, word plays etc. This richness of form and style allows aphorists to convey varied ideas, thoughts and meanings with the use of carefully selected concise phrases, which may only apparently seem laconic. Apart from conciseness and metaphorical character, aphorisms are the finest examples of freedom of thinking in literature. A well-written aphorism is a sort of invitation sent to a reader to participate in a dialogue with an aphorist. The recipients are encouraged vicariously to follow the intellectual hints given by the writer who refers to universal and humanistic ideas in a highly original manner. During this specific conversation with the author, the reader must be alert as he or she has been drawn into a discussion, whose course and conclusion are unpredictable. Undoubtedly, aphorists love to surprise. Unconventional formulation of thought and avant-garde stylistic form of aphorism, which may sometimes puzzle a reader, largely contributes to the exceptional character of the genre and proves the finest skills of aphorists.

summary



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The following presents the stylistic characteristics of the short prose form, the aphorism. The article briefly describes the historical development of this genre (Hippocrates, La Rochefoucauld, German and Austrian aphorists, Oscar Wilde, Stanislaw Jerzy Lec), and points to several tendencies of the contemporary aphorism (fragmentarism, language

experiments). Brevity, conciseness, originality, ambiguity, wisdom as well as universality are mentioned as constructive elements of the aphorism genre. The aphoristic style is characterized by irony and a sense of humor, as well as the presence of several rhetorical devices, such as: paradoxes, antitheses, wordplay, ellipsis – which help aphorisms have a compact language form.

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