

Genre, Aphorism, Herodotus

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I. Quotations

1. We have many terms for short literary works: aphorism, maxim, witticism, thought, dictum, adage, and many others. None has a clear-cut definition, and most can be used to mean the class of pithy short expressions as a whole. An “aphorism” may be any short expression or a particular type. A maxim may be a type of aphorism or vice versa.

2. Vagueness serves the anthologizer. In *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, editor John Gross reminds us that the earliest aphorisms to go by that name were a collection of medical sayings by Hippocrates; that when the term was revived in the Renaissance it first referred to such essentially mnemonic statements; but that by the eighteenth century it had come to denote “the formulation of a moral or philosophical principle,” a comment on some aspect of experienced life, and so had completely changed its meaning. Dr. Johnson could thus define an aphorism as “a maxim; a precept contracted in a short sentence; an unconnected position.” It must stand by itself (be “unconnected”), be brief, and treat a moral topic: but so do most short expressions. Johnson is evidently formulating the broad definition, which would include maxims, adages, and other short forms.¹

3. A danger in using the same term for a group of genres and for a particular member of the group is that the characteristics of the eponymous member will almost automatically be applied to the whole group. It is as if: this type is the real one, and the others are deviations. Unwittingly, false generalizations are likely to result.

¹ John Gross, ed., *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms* (Oxford, 1983), vii–x

Those who use the term “novel” to mean both all long fiction and the sort of realist works written in the nineteenth century often wind up characterizing fiction as a whole in terms that would apply only to works like *Middlemarch*. Gross’s introduction, after invoking the broad definition of aphorism, then tries to characterize aphorisms in ways that apply to only one group of them (say, those of La Rochefoucauld).

4. Let us therefore reserve the terms aphorism, maxim, witticism, and dictum, for particular genres of short expressions, and choose a different term for the group as a whole. Let us call that group “quotations.”

When one encounters books of quotations, of which there are a very large number, one finds examples from many different genres.

5. Since anything can be quoted, it would seem as if anything could be a “quotation”; and yet that is not quite so. Not everything that *could* be quoted will appear in a book of quotations.

A “quotation” must be *quotable*. It must be worth remembering apart from its context. It is “unconnected.” It must be understandable in a few words and so is expected to be compressed and lapidary. Usually, it must be possible for someone to know it, or almost know it, by heart.

Quotations are something one forgets or could forget. They slip one’s mind. One looks them up. One forgets them because one commits them to memory.

6. It seems we have reproduced the problem of two meanings for the word “aphorism” by providing a similar ambiguity for the word “quotation,” which we have defined as a pithy short expression of the sort that appears in books of quotations, but which can also mean any set of cited words. Not every quotation is a “quotation.”

To eliminate this ambiguity, let us call any citation, whether memorable or not, long or short, exemplary or evidentiary — an extract. Some but not all extracts are quotations, that is, short works that can stand on their own and appear in anthologies of quotations.

7. Quotations are often best known in their anthologized form, not as they appear in the original source. Indeed, sometimes there is no original source: Bartlett’s lists such quotations as “attributed.” Under “Louis XIV,” we find:

“‘I almost had to wait.’ Attributed remark when a coach he had ordered arrived just in time.”²

The attribution of words to a particular author or speaker may be a genre of folklore. Sayings are given to Lincoln, Shaw, and Yogi Berra as if they were looking for a speaker; and listeners often know that this quotation may represent not what the speaker said but what he *might have* said.

The “might have” quotation is a quotation nonetheless.

8. Cited expressions *become* quotations, they are not automatically so. Becoming a quotation is a change in status, which may involve a change in form. When a set of words achieves that status, we typically remember it in its quoted form, which takes on a life of its own. The quoted version, as it appears in anthologies or used in speeches, may differ slightly from any documentable source, and yet be no less authoritative. Indeed, if we are interested in the words *as* a quotation, the anthology may be more authoritative.

9. The source then becomes something like the notebooks to a novel, interesting but not the finished thing. And that is odd because, after all, we attribute the words to a given speaker, as if he had said exactly those words. And yet we also know he only “might have” said them or might have said not exactly those words but something like them.

We might say: a quotation has its own shadowy kind of *second speaker*, overlapping with not entirely identical to the speaker (or alleged speaker) of the source.

This is one way in which quotations differ from other extracts.

10. As a set of words become a quotation, they are typically polished and made more “quotable.” That polishing marks their change in status.

11. In their once popular book, *They Never Said It*, Paul Boller and John George list quotations (or, as they would have it, misquotations) that differ from the “real” source. Winston Churchill is usually quoted as having said: “I have nothing to offer but blood, sweat, and tears,” but in his address to the

² John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations: A Collection of Passages, Phrases, and Proverbs Traced to their Sources in Ancient and Modern Literature*, Fifteenth Edition, ed. Emily Morison Beck (Boston: Little, Brown 1980), 312. Further references are to BFQ.

House of Commons on May 13, 1940, he really said: “I have nothing to offer but blood and toil, sweat and tears.” Boller and George comment:

He [Churchill] liked the words so much, in fact, that he used them again on several crucial occasions during the war. But the public soon revised the Churchillian phrase, partly because the words, “toil” and “sweat” seemed redundant and partly because the word order sounded a bit awkward. Before long, Churchill was being quoted as having said, “blood, sweat, and tears,” and the words became famous throughout the world. Today, anyone quoting the original statement would be charged with garbling the quote.³

Of course, blood, sweat, and tears are all bodily fluids, as toil is not, so the revision is better for more than one reason.

What Boller and George describe here is *the process of becoming a quotation*: the “public” remakes the words while still attributing them to Churchill, and so he comes to have “said” something more quotable. Or: Boller and George describe the birth of a second speaker, Churchill rather than Churchill.

Once the phrase became a quotation, “famous throughout the world,” it is the phrase from the original speech that sounds mistaken. The anthologized and repeated version has become authoritative — not in the sense that the historical Churchill said it (in that sense the speech is still authoritative) but in the sense that the revised form is *the quotation*.

12. We may construct a continuum of relations between the source and the quotation. The two may be verbally identical, as is often the case; or the quoted version may round out the original (as in the example from Churchill); or the words may have no recoverable source (as with Louis XIV); or they may be entirely apocryphal, yet always quoted *as* the words of so-and-so.

13. The “accurate” citation is a limiting case.

³ Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 13.

14. The purely apocryphal quotation is also a limiting case. The words belong entirely to the “second speaker.” The listener senses them as a form of folklore.

That is why it is easy for apocryphal sayings to become attached to an “author”: we do not really care about the evidence because we are not citing Lincoln, but quoting “Lincoln.”

15. Some quotations occur as the concluding statement of an anecdote. Collections of anecdotes and of quotations overlap: the quoter may provide an anecdotal circumstance (as Bartlett’s does with the example from Louis XIV) and the collector of anecdotes may orient them towards a final, memorable line.

16. What happens to the quotation happens to the narration of circumstances leading up to it: it too changes and becomes rounded. Boller and George might also have produced a book called *They Never Did It*. The rounding of the quotation often follows a pattern set by the rounding of the anecdote. (Plutarch is a master of both.)

17. Most people know that both famous stories and famous quotations are made more tellable; we may even be *surprised* to discover that the story really did happen and just those words were uttered.

In a “might have been” circumstance, “might have been said” words were uttered: and it may really have actually happened that way!

18. We are dealing here not with established facts but with literary genres.

II. Genres of Quotation

1. Short literary works are as various as long ones, and it would be hard to say anything meaningful about either taken as a whole. But it is often quite helpful to divide a large group into genres; then the relation of genres, with their accompanying ways of seeing and representing the world, may be profitably explored..

2. Mikhail Bakhtin classified genres according to their view of experience. Each genre manifests a “form-shaping ideology” — a sense of experience

that is too complex for exact paraphrase but which seeks expression either in partially adequate philosophical “transcriptions” or in forms embodying the genre’s elusive wisdom. Thus each genre is a philosophy of life, and in the interaction of genres we may hear dialogues about ultimate questions. The approach is as fruitful with short as with long forms.⁴

3. The witticism and the maxim (which space prevents me from discussing here) each voice a sense of life fundamentally different from that of the dictum or aphorism; and so the rhetoric of each of these forms differs.

4. Classification is often uncertain. Sometimes a work, whether long or short, may be read in more than one way, because it may be classed in more than one genre, each with its characteristic tone, meanings, and implicit rules of interpretation.

How one reads the work often depends on the genre in which one chooses to class it. Disputes about meanings are sometimes concealed disputes about genre.⁵

5. Short works are more likely to be generically ambiguous than long ones: for there is much less opportunity to signal a genre.

Thus anthologies sometimes suggest genre (how we are to take the expression) by a brief phrase preceding or following it or by the context of surrounding quotations.

6. Instead of saying that a given short expression is an aphorism or a maxim, one often wants to say: if one reads it as an aphorism, its rhetoric and meaning is one thing and if one takes it as a maxim, they are something else. Sometimes generic ambiguity generates contradiction and sometimes merely compatible differences.

⁴ For an account of Bakhtin’s theories of genre, see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990), 271–305.

⁵ On works that belong by accident or design to more than one genre, see Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s “Diary of a Writer” and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

7. Because short forms each express a view of experience, they may be expanded into longer forms. There are long literary works that seem to have a short form at their core.

Some longer works are all witticism, like *The Importance of Being Earnest*; such works may even seem to exist to feature as many witticisms as possible and allow each to build on the others. Other works seem to be an aphorism turned into a narrative, like Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. Fables obviously often end with a "moral" or maxim.

8. *War and Peace* is the longest aphorism in the world.

III. Aphorisms and Riddles

1. To understand the aphorism, I want to distinguish it from other short forms, especially the dictum.. Then I will contend that there are two broad types of aphorism, the poetic (or mystical) and the prosaic. Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, and Pascal typify the first type; Montaigne the second. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* concludes with mystical aphorisms, and his *Philosophical Investigations* relies on prosaic ones.

I will then discuss three important aphorisms in Herodotus, which, taken together, illustrate both types and say something significant about his view of experience.

2. A model aphorism:

The Lord whose shrine is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign.⁶

Heraclitus

3. Apollo, the Lord at Delphi, answers a question with a mystery. He gives not a clear reply but a vague sign, and the sign he gives is, like Heraclitus's aphorism, anything but transparent. In its very brevity it is capable of multiple interpretations. Each interpretation may beckon further: the sign is a door

⁶ *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle*, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 28.

to an endless maze. Truth is not revealed, because each interpretive step leads to another.

4. The aphorism intimates infinity. Anyone who thinks the oracle's meaning is clear, or that one can by sheer intelligence simply guess the meaning the way one would solve a puzzle, is proven wrong. Some oracles are riddles with definite answers, but when an oracle is an aphorism, it can be probed, not solved.

The god neither affirms nor denies. Rather, he points. But he does not point towards a goal, a perfect solution as in a mathematical problem, but to a horizon that continually recedes as we approach it. For the aphorist, the world does not give itself away. Each mystery begets another. Heraclitus: "Nature loves to hide."

5. The lack of a solution may lead to a feeling of despair (as sometimes in La Rochefoucauld or Dr. Johnson), as if we were in the position of Sisyphus; or it may lead to the luminous feeling of mysteries without end (as in Lao Tzu). Then we feel: even though we do not reach the goal, the quest is not futile because at each step we acquire greater wisdom. Or it can provide the kind of inner peace that comes from suspension of judgment (Sextus Empiricus).

6. The riddle differs from the aphorism because the riddle has an answer. The answer to a riddle solves it, but the interpretation of an aphorism deepens its mystery. The world of the riddler is a different world from that of the aphorist, because the riddler lives outside of mystery. For the riddler, there are only *unsolved* problems.

In Herodotus, the oracle is sometimes a riddle with a definite solution and sometimes a mystery. The overall sense is: intelligence can take us far, but only so far.

7. Pascal abandons mathematics and physics when he sees life not as a problem to be solved but as a mystery beyond the grasp of reason: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of"; "Physical science will not console me for the ignorance of morality in the time of affliction"; "To ridicule philosophy is to philosophize truly"; "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me" (BFQ, 299–300).

In much the same way, Wittgenstein as a logician shows us how far logic can go: his very rationality allows him to sense what lies beyond, the mystical.

8. *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus defeats the Sphinx by solving the riddle that perplexed all others. He rules by virtue of puzzle-solving reason, and voices contempt for the sense of mystery, as does Jocasta. Jocasta explains that the prophecy that Laius's son would kill him proved false, and she concludes that "There is no human being born that is endowed with prophetic power."⁷ The vagueness of mysterious sayings counts against them: "If God seeks or needs anything, he will make it clear to us himself." When the gods speak, they speak clearly, and the world is accessible to reason. Oedipus takes pride that mind and will, his great possessions, are adequate to the world: "I came, know-nothing Oedipus, I stopped the Sphinx, I answered the riddle with my own intelligence — the birds had nothing to teach me" (*Oedipus*, 364).

The irony is that in solving the riddle of who killed Laius he will reveal that the world is governed by unfathomable mysteries, which defy the human sense of purpose and justice. So the chorus concludes with a version of an ancient aphorism: "Therefore we must call no man happy while he waits to see his last day, not until he has passed the border of life and death without suffering pain" (*Oedipus*, 386).

9. This famous aphorism develops a history — it becomes a sort of palimpsest — throughout the history of the genre, appearing not only in ancient literature but also in Montaigne (who devotes a whole essay to it) and in Tolstoy ("The Death of Ivan Ilych" is an extended meditation upon it). This aphorism turns out to mean many very different things, but all involve the sense that life exceeds the grasp of reason and that we can make no confident judgment of our own lives. It bespeaks the sense of mystery.

10. Two paradoxes govern Sophocles's play: reason reasons its way to truths beyond the grasp of reason. And action for a purpose defeats the purpose. The first may be called the paradox of knowledge and the second the paradox of action: both are constant tropes of the aphorism.

⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. Bernard Knox in *Man and His Fictions: An Introduction to Fiction-Making, Its Forms, and Uses*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan, Peter Brooks, and Michael Holquist (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 370.

11. The chorus's final words point to a world of mystery we can never fully probe. The play reveals, but does not explain it. Beyond what we can govern and fathom lie the unfathomable and ungovernable, so that even Oedipus, the king (with power to act) and reasoner (with gift of deduction), is trapped by mysteries larger than any human plan. And if that is true for such a man, then we can call no person happy while he is still alive.

12. The play culminates in an aphorism because it is about the difference between aphorism and riddle. And the aphorism triumphs.

13. If life were a riddle, everything could be solved. But it is not. It is a mystery.

IV. The Dictum

1. The dictum conveys a sense of the world opposite to that of the aphorism. Representative dicta:⁸

- a. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off their subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in

⁸ These dicta are from: a) Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner, 1948), 1; b) BFQ, 563; c) René Descartes, "Discourse on Method" and "Meditations", trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 82 ("Meditations"); and d) Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Discourse on Method," "Correspondence with Arnauld," *Monadology*, trans. George Montgomery (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989), 10.

sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, opening paragraph.

- b. The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

- c. Even though there may be a deceiver of some sort, very powerful and very tricky, who bends all his efforts to keep me perpetually deceived, there can be no slightest doubt that I exist, since he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never make me nothing as long as I think that I am thinking. Thus, after having thought well on this matter, and after examining all things with care, I must finally conclude and maintain that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind.

Descartes, *Meditations*

- d. God does nothing which is not orderly, and it is not even possible to conceive of events which are not regular.

Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, proposition VI

2. Unlike aphorisms, dicta see no mystery. They precisely resemble the solution to a riddle — and no ordinary riddle, but one of immense importance that has long perplexed humanity but has now at last been solved. The dictum announces the discovery and specifies its essential nature. Its sense is: *the mystery is at last over*.

People have always sought the principles of human behavior and have offered explanations of immense complexity and mind-numbing vagueness, but the answer is disarmingly simple (a). The fundamental law of history has hitherto escaped all investigators, but it can now be succinctly stated (b). People have striven to base human knowledge on an absolutely firm principle, which can withstand all critical assault, and now they can do so (c). Endless confusion has beset investigations of the world and its events, but the

fundamental principles are now open for all to see. The purely rational order of the world is absolutely certain. (d).

In direct contrast to the aphorism, the dictum typically tells us that things are *not* so complex as people have thought. As the motion of the planets, which had seemed so bafflingly intricate, can be explained by a few general laws, so can the principles of human behavior.

The dictum comes with the feeling: a dark epoch is over.

3. The rhetoric of the dictum tends to *totality*. Bentham assures us in his opening paragraph that pleasure and pain “govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off their subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it.”

4. A common rhetorical ploy of dicta: the very effort to refute it confirms it (examples a, c, and d). (Thus Karl Kraus’s reply to this ploy: “I tell the psychoanalysts to kiss my ass, and they tell me I have an anal fixation.”⁹).

5. Dicta do not tolerate exceptions; they are absolutely certain; they aspire to perfect *clarity*. They eschew metaphor, which is, if present, restricted to mere illustration and kept under strict control (Bentham’s image of the throne). The dictum means what it says.

6. Dicta typically present their truths as *axiomatic*, that is, as the certain starting point for future investigation.

7. Often, the dictum in its certainty provides the basis for the best possible action, to “rear the fabric of felicity”. The dictum is implicitly and often *utopian*, and utopian tracts and fiction incline to dicta. Dicta share with utopias the conviction that the world is *not* as complex as had been thought.

8. A special speech source lies behind the dictum. Though a specific person announces it, it does not speak his truth, but the Truth. As much as a proposition of Euclid, it is free from the taint of any merely personal source or the limitations of any historical period.

⁹ As cited in Thomas Szasz, *Anti-Freud: Karl Kraus’s Criticism of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 119.

The dictum claims immunity from biography and history. It escapes “the irony of origins.”

V. Two Types of Aphorism. The Mystical Aphorism

1. In the tradition of the aphorism, two broad reasons establish the unreachability of truth: we cannot grasp it because it is essentially *mysterious*; or we cannot grasp it because it is infinitely *complex* and endlessly ramifying. Either: the truth lies outside this world, or: this world is too complex to understand. These two reasons each define a type of aphorism, which we may call the poetic (or mystical) and the prosaic (or experiential).

2. The examples mentioned so far — from Heraclitus, Sophocles, and Pascal — all belong to the first type. So do the following:¹⁰

- a. The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way.
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name. ...
Mystery upon mystery
The gateway of the manifold secrets.

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, poem I.

- b. If we concede that human life can be governed by reason, the possibility of life is destroyed.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*.

- c. *How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.43

¹⁰ These aphorisms come from the following sources: a) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 5 (poem I); b) Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: Signet, 1968), 1354; c) and d) from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. W. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

- d. There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.522

4. These aphorisms all share a sense that what it is most valuable to grasp lies beyond our reach. The essence of things, the way to live, the true philosophy, and our deepest self all lie occluded, on the other side of a barrier, which we can see only dimly beyond. Mystery upon mystery, the gateway of the manifold secrets: language, reason, the mind, and introspection all fail, though not utterly.

Each tool we use to explore also partly deforms what it would touch, so we must try many and see what results. A sort of uncertainty principle reigns. Language points beyond itself, but we are never quite free of its entanglements.

We grope endlessly through obscurities.

5. One does not speak an aphorism, one voices it. It seems to come partly from outside oneself. An aphorism's source sometimes seems to partake of mystery. We know almost nothing of Lao Tzu (Old Master, a name that is not his true name), who is shrouded in mystery. Pascal's thoughts are traditionally the product of his "night of fire," in which he was seized by a truth beyond himself.

6. We sense it to be fitting that aphorisms often come as fragments. The full intelligence is not there, only hinted at.

7. We also sense it to be fitting that collections of aphorisms are often made by others. It is as if the author were constantly engaged in interminable probing, or lost in the mystery, and so could not return for a complete statement.

8. In Lao Tzu, the ultimate principle lies beyond words, beyond mind, beyond the world. It precedes the division into Something and Nothing, and so neither language nor silence is adequate to express it. All attempts to name it must fail because it comes before the world that gave birth to all names.

Each name reveals something though none is correct. And so the author tries out opposites, and the first chapter, like some later ones, proceeds by juxtaposing antithetical formulations.¹¹

The way to the Way is a constant trying out. The sage is “Tentative, as if fording a river in winter/ Hesitant as if in fear of his neighbors” (Lao Tzu, poem XV).

9. A trope that recurs in aphorisms: The methods we use to find what we most want prevent us from seeing it. Let us call this *the paradox of method*. In La Rochefoucauld, self prevents self-knowledge; in Lao Tzu and in other aphorists there is something about the very fact that we are *in* the world that makes it impossible to understand truths beyond it. Or: our picturing mechanism cannot work in describing the most important things, which are pictureless, since they are what makes the picturable possible.

10. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* concludes with a famous sequence of aphorisms as Wittgenstein turns to problems of “the meaning of life” and contends that these lie beyond the reach of any propositions. For propositions describe what is in the world, a factual state of affairs, but value lies outside the world:

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists — and if it did, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.

It must lie outside the world. ...

6.42 So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

¹¹ For information on Lao Tzu’s rhetoric, I rely on A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989), 215–34.

In ethics and aesthetics, there can be no propositions, but there can be aphorisms, which neither affirm nor conceal, but give a sign.

11. The best-known lines of the *Tractatus* are its last two aphorisms, which reflect on its own method.

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them — as steps — to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.

7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

The aphorism is suffused with the sense that it is at bottom nonsense because it is trying to go further than one can go. Part of the aphoristic sense of the world is a feeling that one's firmest beliefs might be utter nonsense.

The aphorism cannot be *read* like a dictum: what it wants to show is not in it, but beyond it. *It gives a sign*. Signs are used up, transcended, climbed up like a ladder we must then throw away.

When we reach an understanding, we sense it as a different kind of silence.

12. Section 7 of the *Tractatus* is only one sentence long. But though it appears to be the shortest section, it also intimates that it is, in another sense, the longest, because we understand that not it, but the silence following it, is the ending; and that silence does not cease.

VI. The Prosaic Aphorism

1. The second type of aphorism also sees the world as ultimately unknowable. It differs from the first type in two ways.

First, with the prosaic aphorism, truth exceeds human reason not because it is a mystery but because experience itself is too complex for the mind ever to grasp. There is no appeal to the transcendent, only to the motley of this world.

2. Second: The prosaic aphorism typically directs out attention to the world right before our eyes. What is most important to know is not remote or outside “the world of the myriad creatures,” but located in ordinary circumstances whose significance and complexity we miss.

Complexity rather than mystery; the prosaic here-and-now rather than the obscure or transcendent.

3. For the prosaic aphorism, the world does not lend itself to knowledge because it does not reduce to simplicity.

The more we examine things, the less sure we become about them, and so increase of knowledge leads to decrease of certainty.

Nature loves to ramify.

4. For the dictum, the complexity of the world is an illusion; behind the diversity of human experience lie a few simple principles. One just needs the key. Much as the complicated movement of the planets turned out to be explicable in terms of Newton’s three laws, so morality, culture, psychology and everything else of importance reduce to a beautiful simplicity.

The dictum is a form of “moral Newtonianism.”¹²

For the prosaic aphorism, such a view is sheer nonsense. The fundamental state of the world is mess.

Diversity, variety, and the unexpected are all fundamental, and a belief in underlying simplicity can be sustained only by ignoring counter-evidence. The prosaic aphorism looks with irony on the ways the mind deceives itself into thinking it has found, rather than arbitrarily imposed, a pattern.

Like the variety of the world itself, such forms of self-deception are endless.

5. Prosaic aphorisms therefore commonly appear in satirical works directed against simplifiers — against the Walter Shandys or Panglosses, who would torture everything in existence to make it fit a formula. Dostoevsky’s greatest aphorist is surely the underground man, who loves to offer nasty paraphrases of purported systems: utilitarianism or other theories of rational choice; methods designed to reduce human conduct to a mathematical formula; Hegelian descriptions of the rationality of history; utopianism of all sorts and any form of psychological determinism. He then answers the sys-

¹² The phrase “moral Newtonianism” comes from Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, trans. Mary Morris (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 6.

tematizers with an aphorism shattering all such pretensions at universal simple explanations:

- a) But man is so fond of systems and abstract deductions that he is ready to distort the truth intentionally, he is ready to deny what he can see and hear just to justify his logic.

- b) Try it, and cast a look upon the history of mankind. Well, what will you see? Is it a grand spectacle? All right, grand if you like. The Colossus of Rhodes, for instance, that is worth something. ... Is it variegated? Very well, it may be variegated. If one only took the dress uniforms, military and civilian of all people in all ages — that alone is worth something, and if you take the undress uniforms you will never get to the end of it; no historian could keep up with it. Is it monotonous? It may be monotonous, too; they fight and fight; they are fighting now, they fought first and they fought last — you will admit it is almost too monotonous. In short, one may say anything about the history of the world — anything that might enter the most disordered imagination. The only thing one cannot say is that it is rational. The very word sticks on one's throat.

- c) But two times two makes four seems to me simply a piece of insolence. Two times two makes four is a fop standing with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting. I admit that two times two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are going to praise everything, two times two makes five is sometime also a very charming little thing.¹³

Tendentious paraphrase answered by an aphorism: this dialogue defines the structure of Part I of *Notes from Underground*. Indeed, the underground man's self-consciously irrational behavior is itself intended as a sort of enactment of his own aphorisms against rationality.

¹³ These three citations are from Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground" in *Notes from Underground* and *The Grand Inquisitor*, trans. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Dutton, 1960), 20–21, 26–27, and 30.

6. The mystical aphorism inclines to rapture, the prosaic to skeptical doubt. For both, the world is surprising and the proper response to it is wonder.

7. If Heraclitus and Lao Tzu typify the mystical aphorism, then Montaigne exemplifies the prosaic. In Montaigne, aphorism feeds on aphorism as thought repeatedly finds ramifying complexity; this sequence defines the structure of many essays and parts of essays. The essay — in Montaigne’s sense of an unsystematic trying out — is a natural home for the prosaic aphorism.

8. Montaigne’s essays and aphorisms insist on the infinite complexity of human beings and the world they make:¹⁴

The world is nothing but variety and dissimilarity.

“Of Drunkenness” (Montaigne, 244).

What have our legislators gained by selecting a hundred thousand particular cases and actions and applying a hundred thousand laws to them? This number bears no proportion to the infinite diversity of human actions. Multiplication of our imaginary cases will never equal the variety of real examples. ... There is little relation between our actions, which are in fixed and perpetual motion, and fixed and immutable laws.

“Of Experience” (Montaigne, 815–816).

The sense of “variety and dissimilarity” and of “the infinite diversity of human actions” provokes Montaigne’s multiplication of examples, with the sense that no number could be sufficient. The essays develop potential infinities, which the aphorisms then summarize. Each infinity yields to another of a different type, and therefore to new aphorisms.

9. For the mystical aphorism, language fails because it belongs to this world but the truth does not. For the prosaic aphorism, it fails because it can never be supple enough. It is too crude a tool to discriminate the fine differences that make experience what it is. For the mystical aphorism, language is

¹⁴ All citations from Montaigne are from Donald M. Frame, trans., *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965).

too much of this world; for the prosaic aphorism, it is not enough like the world in its infinite diversity.

10. We cannot reduce anything human to a formula. The prosaic aphorism is sometimes phrased as a parody of a possible law or as the denial of a law. Its rhetoric is often negative. From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.

11. Hence the theme of the prosaic aphorism is often inconsistency, inconstancy, *impurity*.

Montaigne uses a negatively worded aphorism as the title of one essay: “We Taste Nothing Pure.” This essay seems to develop the rhetoric of its title with a series of negative aphorisms ramifying potentially infinitely:

The weakness of our condition makes it impossible for things to come into our experience in their natural simplicity and purity. The elements that we enjoy are corrupted, and the metals likewise; and gold must be debased by some other material to fit it for our service.

Neither virtue thus in its simple form, which Aristo and Pyrrho and also the Stoics made the end of life, nor the sensual pleasures of the Cyreniacs and Aristippus could be serviceable to life without admixture.

(Montaigne, 510)

12. Tolstoy: “But pure and perfect sorrow is as impossible as pure and perfect joy” (Tolstoy, 1286).

13. Rhetoric of this sort becomes counter-rhetoric. To show impurity, it tends to the oxymoronic and the paradoxical:

Profound joy has more seriousness than gaiety about it. ... Happiness racks us.

(Montaigne, 510)

When I confess myself religiously to myself, I find that the best goodness I have has some tincture of vice. And I fear that Plato in his most verdant virtue ... if he had listened to it closely — and he did listen to it closely — would have sensed in it some false note of human admixture,

but an obscure note, perceptible only to himself. *Man, in all things and throughout, is but patchwork and motley.*

(Montaigne, 511; italics mine)

In the mystical aphorism, paradox teases us out of thought to suggest something beyond the world where reason has its home. In the prosaic aphorism, oxymorons and paradoxes suggest the sheer baffling motley of things.

When the mystical aphorism cultivates fragmentariness, it does so to gesture to the inexpressible beyond. The white space is part of it, as it hears the silence. The fragmentariness of some prosaic aphorisms suggests that completeness, like purity, is not to be looked for.

14. Our very impurity is not constant, and we ourselves differ from moment to moment. An unstable knower tries to know an unstable world:

We think of what we want only when we want it, and we change like that animal which takes the color of the place you set it on. What we have now just planned, we presently change, and presently again we retrace our steps; nothing but oscillation and inconsistency:

Like puppets we are moved by outside strings.

Horace

We do not go; we are carried away.

“Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions” (Montaigne, 240)

These supple variations and contradictions that are seen in us have made some imagine that we have two souls, and others that two powers accompany us and drive us, each in its own way. . . for such sudden diversity cannot well be reconciled with a single subject.

Not only does the wind of accident move me at will, but, besides, I am moved and disturbed as a result merely of my own unstable posture; and anyone who observes himself carefully can hardly find himself twice in the same state.

“Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions” (Montaigne, 242)

15. Moral Newtonians believe that we can attain the sort of certainty on which to base utopian actions. To the prosaic aphorists, not only is such

knowledge unattainable, but we could not act upon it if we had it. Will cannot control the world because it cannot even control itself:

But as for our will Does it always will what we would will it to will? Doesn't it often will what we forbid it to will, and that to our evident disadvantage? Is it any more amenable than our other parts to the dictates of our reason?

“Of the Power of the Imagination” (Montaigne, 73).

16. Such passages in Montaigne look forward to the realist novel, another form in which the prosaic aphorism finds a natural home. For the realist novel, the world, like ourselves, is all patchwork and motley and both are always becoming.

The self that is not itself — the personality that is not whole — the self that changes and can occasionally do what is uncharacteristic — the will that wills what it would not will: these ideas were to be key themes and generate numerous aphorisms in George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy.

Many novels could be told as the story of how a hero or heroine comes to renounce a dictum for a prosaic aphorism. Wisdom is figured by a switch in genre of short expression.

17. As Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* contains especially pure forms of the mystical aphorism, so his *Philosophical Investigations* exemplifies the prosaic aphorism. We may see the change between these two works in many ways, but one is in terms of genre. Wittgenstein moves from one kind of aphorism to another, from one reason philosophy errs to another. In the latter work, the reason philosophy cannot achieve certainty in the most important things is not that they lie outside the world, but that the world itself usually does not reduce to an essence.

65. Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, — but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language.” I will try to explain this.

66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? — Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” — but *look and see* whether there is anything common to them all. — For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!¹⁵

18. The central appeal of the prosaic aphorism is always: *don’t think, but look!*

19. And the place to look is right before your eyes. It is the familiar that should produce wonder.

129. The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something — because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his inquiry to don’t strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. — And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful (PI, 50e).

20. This is the Wittgenstein who loved Tolstoy: the truths we seek are hidden in plain view and are therefore all the more difficult to discern.

21. In the dictum, truth lies beneath things. It must be uncovered, once and for all.

In the mystical aphorism, truth lies outside the world, beyond the gateway to the manifold secrets. It beckons to a receding horizon.

In the prosaic aphorism, truth lies camouflaged right before our eyes. We must learn to see it and endlessly explore it.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 31e.

VII. Herodotus

1. Herodotus uses both the mystical and the prosaic aphorism, though I think the latter defines the overall spirit of his inquiry.¹⁶

2. With the mystical aphorism, Herodotus reminds us that beyond everything we can know, the fates and the gods operate in ways that no intelligence can penetrate. The smartest man in the world cannot fathom either divine purposes or what may be blind dictates.

3. Like many aphorists to come, Herodotus invokes a paradox of knowledge: often enough, even when we can know things, the knowledge is useless. For it is another mystery of life that knowledge may defeat its goal precisely when it apparently attains it (Oedipus) or that knowledge and power may be fatally separate (Tieresias). Oedipus destroys himself when he succeeds in discovering the murderer of Laius. Tieresias, who knows the truth in advance, can do nothing with his knowledge. Tieresias's aphorism reminds us: "Wisdom is a dreadful thing when it brings no profit to its possessor. I knew this well, but forgot" (Sophocles, 362).

4. The spirit of Tieresias's insight informs Herodotus's story of a feast given at Thebes for Mardonius. The Thebans invite fifty Persians and an equal number of Thebans. The Persian seated with Thersander offers him a "memorial of my opinion," so that Thersander can see to his own interest: "Do you see these Persians feasting here, and the army that we left encamped by the river? Of these you will see, after the lapse of a short space of time, only some few surviving."¹⁷ The Persian here speaks in advance the sort of moral that Herodotus often delivers after the fact: fortune will reverse the prosperity of the Persians, turning, in a short time, their feasting into mourning. Though the Persian is not an oracle, his speech is oracular.

¹⁶ Stewart Flory has argued that the key genre of the *Histories* is the anecdote, and that taken together, Herodotus's anecdotes suggest that "history is made up of an infinite number of tiny, intricate details" and point to "the complexity of human life and the lack of clear solutions to human problems." If so, the anecdotes taken together point to the wisdom of the prosaic aphorism. See Stewart Flory, *The Archaic Smile of Herodotus* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 154, 158.

¹⁷ Herodotus, *The History*, trans. Henry Cary (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), 550.

Thersander asks why the Persian does not share his insight with Mar-donius and other high-ranking Persians, so that the disaster he foresees might be averted. The Persian replies that this is not the sort of disaster that could be averted, for it comes from the mysterious dictates of fate. In such cases, advance knowledge does no good. Indeed, it is a mark of fate's mysterious power that it can handicap itself, by giving advance warning.

Speaking his Greek wisdom in Greek, the Persian tells Thersander: "My friend, that which is fated by the deity to happen, it is impossible for man to avert, for no one will listen to those who say what is worthy of credit; and though many of the Persians are convinced of this, we follow, being bound by necessity" (Herodotus, 550). Sometimes in life, neither knowledge nor will are of any use; and many Persians who foresee defeat continue to play their part. The Persian assumes Thersander can act on this knowledge — that is the reason he gives for imparting it — because this necessity seems to be directed only at the Persians themselves.

The Greeks win only because the Persians are fated to lose, and while the Persians can do nothing, Greeks retain freedom of action. Perhaps that is another reason the advance knowledge is given in Greek. But the reasons that necessity has dictated the Persian defeat and made the Persian's knowledge worthless remain radically mysterious.

5. The Persian concludes with an aphorism: "The bitterest grief to which men are liable is this, when one knows much, to have no power to act" (Herodotus, 550). Wisdom is a dreadful thing when it brings no profit to its possessor. Knowledge is not power. Knowledge and power in opposition rule our mortal day, because it is not our purposes, however well informed we may be, that guide events, but higher ones we cannot fathom. This sense of a higher mystery figures often in Herodotus, and this aphorism seems to summarize many anecdotes in earlier books.

6. Herodotus has a keen sense of divine unfathomability, but he also often seems to attribute the ultimate unknowability of the world to its sheer variety, complexity, and contingency. Even without transcendent powers and purposes, the world is too varied for human understanding. To be sure, these two limitations on knowledge are not really distinct in Herodotus, but seem to be part of his greater sense of the vulnerability of life and the weakness of

our efforts. Nevertheless, we see him most often not rapt before the oracular but tirelessly *inquiring* into all and sundry.

Herodotus's book, after all, begins by describing itself not as a justification of divine ways — it is no *Paradise Lost* — but as researches into the doings of men, so they will not be effaced by time. The anecdote about Mar-donius's feast itself begins and ends with Herodotus telling us how he came to know the story. Herodotus seems to be always traveling somewhere and asking everyone about events, geography, and customs. He sifts evidence, and, at times leaves key contradictions unresolved. There is no overall pattern, and even the story of the conflict between Europe and Asia that ties the work together seems unable to embrace all the endlessly fascinating and surprising facts Herodotus provides.

7. To read Herodotus is to appreciate the amazing variety and diversity of the world, which we may search and probe endlessly. As in Montaigne: nothing is of a piece, there are always surprises, we are inconsistent, all patchwork and motley.

8. Mystical and prosaic aphorisms lead to a different ethic and a different attitude to action. In the prosaic aphorism, the impossibility of certainty is no impediment to action: action requires no guarantees.

If Herodotus sometimes gives us mystical aphorisms rejecting the adequacy of merely human knowledge, he also gives us prosaic aphorisms suggesting we may sometimes achieve our purposes without it. To be sure, no knowledge, strategy, or plans can ever suffice because things are radically contingent and events depend on a present moment that no one could ever foresee. But if we recognize such contingency, we can sometimes take advantage of it.

9. That would appear to be the moral of the story of Smerdis and Darius. You will recall that Otanes and other Persians have ascertained that the throne of Persia is occupied not by Smerdis, the brother of Cambyses, but by Smerdis the magus, who rules with the help of his brother magus Patizithes, the palace steward. Because few know that Cambyses has had Praxaspes kill his brother, the magus is able to take advantage of his extraordinary resemblance to the slain man to impersonate him.

Just as the conspirators have pledged to remove the imposter, Darius arrives at Susa, and they ask him to join them. He agrees, but only on condition that they act at once, for delay would invite betrayal. Otanes regards Darius as rash: the conspirators are too few and, in any case, have no plan. How are they to kill the magi, how convince the people that the ruler is an imposter, how even gain access to the palace? Action demands knowledge, and they do not have it.

10. Darius replies aphoristically: “There are many things that cannot be made clear by words, but may by action; and there are other things that seem practicable in description, but no signal effect proceeds from them” (Herodotus, 202).

11. In the Mardonius story, knowledge does no good because it cannot be acted upon. In the Smerdis story, knowledge is not to be looked for because it cannot be had in time.

Sometimes action itself creates opportunities.

Darius understands the separation of knowledge and effort, but finds in the separation a spur to action. In the Mardonius story, the separation of knowledge and effort spells fatality, in the Smerdis story opportunity. Darius proposes to accept radical uncertainty and act upon it.

The absence of knowledge derives from the radical contingency of things, and contingency may just as well act in our favor as against it.

12. For reasons he could not have foreseen, Darius proves correct. Unknown to the conspirators, Prexaspes has chosen just this moment to reveal to the people that he killed the real Smerdis and that an imposter rules; and the palace guards for some reason do not prevent the conspirators from entering. Where plans would prove of no use, sheer accident helps. He who would base his actions on incontestable reasons must live and die deliberating.

13. Herodotus’s story looks forward to a long tradition of prosaic aphorisms and narratives based on them. That collection of countless aphorisms, Dr. Johnson’s *Rasselas*, tells the story of a prince who would base his life on certain knowledge and incontestable reasons, but who learns the inadequacy of mind to the complexities of the world. “Thus it is, said Nekayah, that philosophers are deceived. There are a thousand familiar disputes which reason

can never decide; questions that elude investigation and make logic look ridiculous; cases where something must be done and little can be said.”¹⁸

In *War and Peace*, battles are governed by sheer contingency and there can be no science of war. Yet the absence of a science does not make effective action impossible, just different. The wisest general, Kutuzov, falls asleep at strategy sessions, which he regards as utter nonsense. He closes one such session with an aphorism: “‘Before a battle, there is nothing more important . . .,’ he paused, ‘than a good night’s sleep’” (Tolstoy, 323).

If the world were amenable to mind and reason, then planning would be of most use, but in a world of contingency and uncertainty, what matters most is *alertness* to what cannot be foreseen, the ability to take advantage of fleeting opportunities. Otanes would lose by planning, but Darius wins by alert action, always governed by sheer presence of mind.

14. Upon reflection, the story of Smerdis is a strange one. For it seems quite singular that the usurper should also be *named* Smerdis. After all, he manages to impersonate Cambyses’s brother because he so resembles him, not because he has the same name. Had he been named something else, he could have assumed the name Smerdis as easily as he assumes the rest of royal identity. It is almost as if history was punning. Contingency seems to exceed necessity.

The coincidence, however, does prove important in one respect. Cambyses has had his brother killed because of a dream: a messenger comes to him to tell him that Smerdis now rules. The dream proves true but with a different Smerdis. In much the same way, Cambyses believed a prophecy that he would die in Ectabana. “He therefore believed that he would die an old man in Ectabana of Media, where his treasures were,” but the oracle proves correct when he dies in the insignificant Ectabana of Syria. Again, the life of Cambyses seems governed by the sheer chance of a repeated name.

15. Other stories of fate and oracular predictions work rather differently from the Smerdis story. In the *Oedipus*, or in the tale of Mardonius, fate dictates a result that will happen regardless of what one does. Whether one consults the oracle or not, the result is certain. The outcome is guaranteed

¹⁸ Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand Bronson (New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), 566.

regardless of whether one knows it; and if one does know it, the most one can do is modify the route to the certain outcome.

But in the Smerdis story prediction itself seems to be the cause of the outcome. Smerdis is killed only because of Cambyses's prophetic dream. This prophecy is wholly and entirely *self-fulfilling*. No dream, no murder of Smerdis.

Moreover, in this story the outcome is guaranteed only in a trivial sense. No matter what happens, Smerdis will rule. But that is only because both men are named Smerdis. If it had not been for Cambyses's dream, or if Cambyses had chosen to ignore it, the real Smerdis, rather than the magus Smerdis, would have ruled, and so, again, the prophecy would have proven true. Independent of events, it cannot miss.

16. This dream proves prophetic not because events are fated but because of the purely contingent fact that two people have the same name. It's as if fate were not dictating but punning. If in other stories, contingency seems to serve the whims of fate, here fate seems to serve the whim of sheer contingency.

We wonder: is the world so arranged that what looks like contingency is really the agent of a plan; or is it that fate itself is sometimes subject to sheer chance?

So long as we recognize the inadequacy of mind on which both kinds of aphorism insist, does it really matter?

17. Herodotus's most famous story is doubtless the encounter of Croesus and Solon, which contains yet another version of the aphorism that ends the *Oedipus*: count no man happy before he is dead. This aphorism is usually interpreted in what I have called the mystical sense: there are purposes and powers beyond human ken, and we must recognize that no human power can probe the ultimate mystery. Therefore wisdom consists in humility, which is what Croesus so markedly lacks.

Croesus imagines that, with his power and wisdom, he can control events, but this very confidence marks him for destruction. If there is one thing the gods are ever anxious to prove, it is the shallowness of our most considered reasons. And so Solon warns: "Croesus, do you inquire of me concerning human affairs — of me, who know that the divinity is always jealous, and delights in confusion?" (Herodotus, 13). After Croesus dis-

misses Solon, “the indignation of the gods fell heavily upon Croesus, probably because he thought himself the most happy of men” (Herodotus, 15). We now get the story of the death of Croesus’s son, which again proves what Oedipus must learn: that divine purposes are beyond the ken of even the most powerful, the most fortunate, and the most intelligent. We act in obscurity and dwell in mystery.

18. But the Croesus story also includes a different moral expressed in a different kind of aphorism: that not just divine purpose, but the sheer variety and contingency of life exceeds human grasp. Were there no gods at all — or when the gods are indifferent to human affairs — even then, the uncertain nature of events in this world would mock confident reason.

Now I put the term of man’s life at seventy years; these seventy years, then, give twenty-five thousand two hundred days, without including the intercalary month; and if we add that month to every other year in order that the seasons arriving at the proper time may agree, the intercalary months will be thirty-five more in the seventy years, and the days of these months will be one thousand and fifty. Yet in all this number of twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty days, that compose these seventy years, one day produces nothing exactly the same as another (Herodotus, 13–14).

Apart from any divine purposes, the sheer diversity of things makes prediction impossible.

19. Not just time but place defeats certainty. Solon appeals, as Herodotus does, to geography as well as history. Just before he concludes that no man should be considered happy until we see his end, Solon again appeals not to mystery but to motleyness:

Now it is impossible for any one man to comprehend all these advantages: as no one country suffices to produce every thing for itself, but affords some and wants others, and that which affords the most is the best; so no human being is in all respects self-sufficient, but possesses one advantage, and is in need of another; he therefore who has constantly enjoyed the most of these, and then ends his life tranquilly, this man in my

judgment, O king, deserves the name of happy. We ought therefore to consider the end of everything, in what way it will terminate; for the Deity having shown a glimpse of happiness to many, has afterward utterly overthrown him (Herodotus, 14).

No man is self-sufficient: nature places its bounties on the right hand and on the left. The very existence of trade shows our *incompleteness*. No man, like no place, is whole; every one and every country is a patchwork of advantages and disadvantages; the motley nature of time and space answer to each other. The reference to the Deity seems entirely perfunctory and serves as a mere trope for the inconstant and amazingly various nature of things.

20. Solon also refutes Croesus's assumption that happiness consists in greatness. Enraged that Solon has chosen obscure people as the happiest, Croesus demands: "My Athenian friend, is my happiness, then, so slighted by you as nothing worth, that you do not think me of so much value as private men?" (Herodotus, 13). Solon answers that indeed what is most important is the ordinary things that even a moderate person may possess, and Croesus is mistaken in directing his attention away from the ordinary.

21. Montaigne's essay devoted to the aphorism "That Our Happiness Must Not be Judged Until After Our Death," begins with the Croesus story. Montaigne judges Herodotus's moral to be the one Montaigne himself so often conveys: "the uncertainty and variability of human affairs, which the slightest shift changes from one state to another entirely different" (Montaigne, 54).

22. This most famous of all Greek aphorisms can therefore be read as an allusion either to the mysterious nature of things beyond or to the amazing variety and complexity of this world. It can be understood as both a mystical and a prosaic aphorism. In Herodotus, it is both, and his work as a whole consistently conveys both morals. What they share is the sense that, for one reason or another, nature loves to hide.