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Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 272 p. \$19.95 / £16.99. ISBN: 978-0691210759.

A Theory of the Aphorism is a book through which Hui proposes a new reading of the aphorism and its history up to the present time, including social media platforms such as Twitter. The volume encompasses six chapters. Each chapter deals with and emphasizes a different and unique way in which the aphorism appears as a singularity. The reader can follow the thread of the analysis as it develops in order to see how the author goes on a constructive and interpretive journey from Confucius to Nietzsche. Within these chapters, one has the chance to zoom in to Heraclitus, the Gospel of Thomas, the ad-hoc duo of Erasmus and Bacon, and Pascal. All these “names” of ancient and modern authors together with the Gospel of Thomas have something in common. This commonality is the way in which the expression of thought is delivered to the “reader” at the peak of its intensity. For the author of *A Theory of Aphorism*, this quality is simultaneously compact and explosive (1).

In the Introduction of the volume (1–22), Hui maintains that “aphorisms are before, against, and after philosophy,” and its history stands for an “animadversion” with its own cultural network (2). In its interpretation the “aphorism thereby opens a plurality of worlds” (3). The methodologies employed are blended together as a comprehensive reading strategy which absorbs within the philosophical, philological, and hermeneutical. This approach allows Hui to state that aphorism has a paradoxical relation to any systematic thought (4). The aphorism is used within a “dialectical play between fragments and systems” (12). As is already known, the aphorism has had numerous designations which had several fluid meanings.

To understand the concept of aphorism the reader has to use a different way of multidimensional and transgressive translation of its complexities: one has to be able to grasp its trans-historical and trans-cultural dimensions. Questions about its development and mutations are desirable, and Hui is not afraid to raise and deal with them. Those questions are near philosophy, alongside philosophy, and in its own inquisitive anticipation. Hui is not wrong to situate the aphorism in a space in-between the fragment and the system.

The author’s readings of aphorism from early China to Nietzsche’s late writings scan transversally the plural literatures, to those who were believed “masters,” to the twenty-first century version of Twitter. Hui discusses “canonical” figures which used this way of expressing and reflected upon this form of expression, aphorism (18). However, if an aphorism proposes and presupposes

a definitive statement, then each and any kind of *definition* means, of course, its de-limitation and our im-possibility of touching it (16). The similarities studied by our author unveil the possibility of silence (Confucius), the proximity to hide (Heraclitus, Thomas, Bacon, Pascal, and Nietzsche), the infinite (Confucius, Heraclitus, Jesus, Pascal, Nietzsche, and Deleuze), the discontinuous, the fragmentary, and the unfinished (Bacon, Pascal, Nietzsche, and Blanchot) (20).

The whole assemblage of ideas that the author has put forth within this volume makes us aware of a complex reading which is both trans-historical and trans-cultural, while maintaining its selective character with a Nietzschean rhythm, and allows us to discover multiple lenses about “their infinite horizons and inexhaustible depths” and their power (21). The author’s declared intention is to bring together readers with specific interests in aphorism who will read textualities not in their literary proximity and will gain something through the aphorism.

The first chapter (23–42) emphasizes how the “assemblage of textual units” was used by the Han period to serve as foundation of imperial authority (8). For the *Analects* of Confucius, the author employs the methodology of Maurice Blanchot in his *The Infinite Conversation* (1993) in order to discuss these fragments and collections. These fragments have become a thought engine (37), and the collections have reached a point in which the commentary tradition has turned into a cultural industry (38). Hui underlines that there is an infinity of readings of a finite “saying” (41).

Chapter 2 (43–61) points out how with Heraclitus the aphorism was a “before” of the birth of philosophy, and how *logos* is an anticipation of what follows with Plato or his heirs (19). Heraclitus’s fragments are philosophical, “at the edge of discursive philosophy’s dawn,” and are situated “after” and against Homer and Hesiod but “before” and against Plato and Aristotle (46). Those fragments are a timeless invitation for the reader to participate in the thought enterprise in the same way that Heidegger invites the reader to accompany him on the timeless *Holzwege* or Blanchot in his novels. As a way, but not “the” way.

Hui dedicates chapter 3 (62–83) to the famous Gospel of Thomas (NHC II,2) and explores the genre of *logoi sophon*. He reaches out to the idea of “collection” and “apocryphal” fragments which are situated *against* the conventional gospels (19). Hui emphasizes the series of binaries (living/death, orality/textuality, hidden/revelatory, speech/taste) (62). The “sayings” of Jesus challenge the reader to discover the true nature of the world through a discovery of the self (63). Within this assemblage of fragments, hermeneutics becomes a soteriology.

For Hui the Gospel of Thomas has its own theory of aphorism: “that one attains secret knowledge of a hidden God not from a congregation of believers [...] but through inward meditation on the words of Jesus” (63). The paradox of the aphorism is that it unites and divides at the same time. In the context of early Christianities, the aphorisms of the Gospel of Thomas “are an invitation to a nonmethodical, nondogmatic way of faith” (63). Hui’s opinions about the Gospel of Thomas’s *status quaestionis* remains indebted to the scholarly prose at work today. However, the way in which he manages to bypass this aspect is visible when he interprets the meaning of the fragments of Thomas and the centrality of the “cultivation of the self” (82–83).

With chapter 4 (84–120), dedicated to Desiderius Erasmus and Francis Bacon, the reader is reminded that the Renaissance shows a fascination with “retrieving the fragments of antiquity” (9). One can see it as a look backward, as used by Erasmus, or forward, as it was used by Francis Bacon, towards a new natural history (19). Hui presents Erasmus’s view of the fragment as an optimistic one, as a key to the past (86). The aphorism was extremely valued during the Renaissance (see the writings of Calvin, John Dee, Robert Dallington, Rudolph Agricola) and was organized topically, alphabetically, or by author (88–90). Erasmus’s commentary on the microform exposes rhizomes, networks and correspondences within the classical tradition (97). The infinite expansion of texts is at best illustrated by Erasmus’s unfinished work the *Adages*, a true example of “a Borgesian infinite library” (101).

For Francis Bacon the aphorism represents the best invitation “to participate in the enterprise of modern inquiry” (106). According to Hui, Bacon’s view on aphorism “provides an open horizon of investigations rather than a closed system of accumulated knowledge” (108). This is the reason for which “Bacon’s work is finally, and always, unfinished and unfinishable” (118). Together, Erasmus’s *Adagia* and Bacon’s *Instauratio magna* provide our author with the opportunity to claim that they were involved in “infinite labors” (119).

Pascal, the main character of chapter 5 (121–150), is presented as being situated in between Descartes’s philosophy and “a Christian poetics of the fragment” (19). The author of *Pensées* has focused on the hidden and the revealed God in a similar manner to the Gospel of Thomas: the nature of the aphorisms, the order of fragments, work in progress, and finished writing (125–126). Hui’s reading is fresh and comprehensive; the reader has the opportunity to understand Pascal’s enterprise as being in the reader’s favor (134). At the same time the reader is informed how “the multiplicity of interpretive meanings is reflected in the manifold ways of arranging a text” (135) and how Pascal is “before” Derrida in understanding that writing brings absence and presence (149).

Finally, with chapter 6 (151–176), Nietzsche's approach to aphorism is closing the circle opened by Bacon and Pascal. Hui recognizes how the aphorism captures modernity. The incomplete and the complete attract the aphorism in a movement of the opposites. With Nietzsche the reader encounters in Hui's book the best example of a philosophy of fragment, namely, the post-1870 writings of Nietzsche (153). The form in which Nietzsche has chosen to cast his ideas is understood by Hui as Nietzsche's "way of training his readers not to subscribe to a doctrine or a particular Nietzschean view of life, but rather to create and craft their own philosophy of life" (154). Nietzsche is close to Heraclitus and, in requiring the reader to do "the work of reading," is close to Thomas. The reader is offered "infinite freedom" and a "radical hermeneutics" to bridge writing and any potential ethics (155). According to Hui, Nietzsche tries to convey the idea that the "after" of any understanding of an aphorism is living it, not thinking or reading about it (176).

At the end of the volume, Hui puts forth an epilogue (177–188) in which the reader is walked through the tweets and retweets of the "followers" and "the collective spirit of the internet" (179–180). But does he close or leave his volume unfinished? All these fragments or "ruins" which come always as a "before" and an "after" need no commentaries, thoughts, or readings, but living.

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