

Article

Kafka's Aphorisms and Paradoxical Modernity

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Introduction

The literary aphorism emerged in its modern guise out of the scientific discourse of the late eighteenth century as short, condensed ('aphoristic') statements of fact turned their focus away from the natural world and towards their own constituent language.¹ This process transformed the aphorism from a mode of scientific enquiry into a distinct literary form: a brief, autonomous unit characterized by a constitutional resistance to easy interpretation and a tendency to make an issue out of linguistic instability. It betrays an Enlightenment pedigree by requiring readers to question their own preconceptions ruthlessly, while (in a twist which can be both understood as a rejection of rationalism or as its ultimate epistemological intensification) turning its attention back upon itself. The aphorism effectively replicates aspects of the scientific method as the reader replays the role of observer, charged with objectifying and accounting for phenomena: a literary symbol, perhaps, of modern self-consciousness.² Though the aphorism does not beget unambiguous data, it is founded upon the same spirit of curiosity which compels modern humanity towards constant scientific discovery. It 'gives one

insight while suggesting many', revealing itself as a form imbued with paradox, where no single truth proclaims itself without alluding to an unknowable number of other potential truths.³

Franz Kafka's engagement with the genre, *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, has resulted in strikingly little secondary literature. In his 1975 study, Werner Hoffman observed a notable disparity between the scant scholarly attention accorded to the aphorisms compared with the vast number of studies devoted to Kafka's narrative writing.⁴ A similar dearth of attention to the aphorisms in recent years would appear to confirm the continuation of this pattern.⁵ This neglect is puzzling, as Kafka's aphorisms must necessarily bear the form's paradoxical and preternaturally 'modern' predisposition, which in turn suggests a useful new angle from which to approach the interrelationship between Kafka's writing with its wider cultural context. For *Die Züräuer Aphorismen* signal the confluence of a wider, macro-historical modernity (as betokened by the form itself) with a mode of expression specific to a particular cultural context, to what might be termed a distinct 'modernity'. Kafka's aphorisms may well, therefore, play out the tensions inherent in the term modernity, which simultaneously calls to mind both a strictly demarcated epoch, and a historical continuum of inexorably shifting (technological, economic, social) advances.

The present study will attempt to read Kafka's aphorisms as a means of discerning the interplay between a general post-Enlightenment sensibility and a distinct modernity unique to the author's immediate historical context. To this end, the observations of J. P. Stern will provide a useful framework, since they outline the form's general characteristics by reference to Georg Lichtenberg (1742-99), a professor of physics at the University of Göttingen, whose career as an aphorist parallels the form's progression from scientific to literary discourse in the very midst of the Enlightenment. Any reading of Kafka's aphorisms can thus be usefully understood in the light of Lichtenberg's modernity: despite their dramatically differing socio-historical contexts, we ought nevertheless to explore the reasons underlying both writers' respective decisions to engage with and deploy the same idiosyncratic form. Their shared 'absolute' modernity will in turn provide a generalized backdrop against which the specific modernity of Kafka's aphorisms can be more compellingly projected.

Certainly, the respective historical contexts of Lichtenberg and Kafka are more readily described in terms of difference and contrast than by reference to any shared sense of a general and overarching modernity. Lichtenberg wrote as a member of the majority German-speaking, Protestant population of Göttingen, in an age now coterminous with the intellectual inroads of the Enlightenment; by contrast, Kafka belonged to a linguistic and ethno-religious minority at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a 'crisis of reason' had already challenged the rationalism's hegemony in intellectual and political life.⁶ Yet both contexts are identifiably 'modern' insofar as they equally demonstrate intellectual attitudes and social patterns forged in the Enlightenment. Free trade, alienable property, the concept of citizenship, the rational pursuit of ends by appropriate means, legislation by a sovereign state and a process of secularization – characteristics provisionally suggested by J. W. Burrow as emblems of modernity⁷ – are the very norms and ideals underlying an entire macro-historical period which encompass both Lichtenberg and Kafka.

Hence a shared platform of ideals and social practice unifies the two writers' otherwise contrasting milieus, and this study will attempt to discern how Kafka's aphorism can serve as a literary embodiment both of this generalized modernity and of its culturally specific permutations. Since the aphorism as a form is by definition obliged to generate myriad potential interpretations, it lends itself extremely well to close analysis. For this reason, my study will confine itself to the examination of a relatively small sample of *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, the dense interpretative potential of which should offer insights into the form's unique capacity to enact historical tensions and contradictions. In order to illustrate the observation of shared yet distinct historical identities, the study will also incorporate three of Lichtenberg's aphorisms, which will be analysed in juxtaposition with examples by Kafka.

'Like a path in autumn': revealing the aphorism's Enlightenment roots

Beyond observing the aphorism's rejection of easy truths, the form defies easy categorisation. Aphorisms can vary greatly in their style, tone and length: *Die Züräuer Aphorismen* range in length from three (# 93) to 201 words (# 86). Some adopt a broadly narrative form, others describe a single image, while a few resemble parables.⁸ Given this evident heterogeneity, I will in this section endeavour to provide some sort of overview of the literary aphorism in general and to demonstrate how the form typically generates meaning. According to Stern,

The aphorism [...] is a strange and surprisingly complex configuration of words. Its charm hides in an antithesis, perfectly integrated, issuing from a double look at a word or an idea. It conceals its autobiographical source yet displays its process of generation. It is self-conscious, yet never exhibits its author's self-consciousness unmodified. It is something of an experiment of words and ideas, yet it commits aphorist and reader alike to an irretrievable occasion in experience. [...] To one side of it loom empty puns, to the other fragmentary reflections.⁹

It is useful to relate some of these observations to Kafka's aphorisms, and so to highlight those features described by Stern as characteristic of the form. The particular aphorism I wish first to examine is number 15:

Wie ein Weg im Herbst: kaum ist er rein gekehrt, bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern.

[Like a path in autumn: no sooner than it is swept clean, it covers itself again with the dry leaves.]¹⁰

The antithesis of this aphorism is centred upon the notions of 'rein kehren' ['sweep clean'] and 'sich bedecken' ['to cover oneself'], underscored by the difference in agency within the verb, with the first verb voiced in the passive, the second in the reflexive. Thus the reader is encouraged to ponder both the antithetical nature of the visual imagery (a path swept clean; a path covered in leaves) and the grammatical voice (the path is swept; the path covers itself). It

is here that the 'strangeness' of the aphorism's verbal configuration might first strike the reader: that the path is endowed with agency ('bedeckt er sich'; 'he covers himself/it covers itself) is, from a literal perspective, surprising and so suggests a degree of anthropomorphism. However, the activity in which the path engages ('sich bedecken') is close to our empirical knowledge of paths (they do indeed end up covered in leaves during autumn) and so this conflict highlights and questions the notion of agency. This pattern of questioning might then extend to the very notion of reflexivity ('doing something to ourselves'), since the outcome ('being covered in leaves') is the same, regardless of who engages in the covering. The aphorism seems to be suggesting that the agency implied by reflexive verbs is illusory, since ultimately such activities entail passivity.

This extension into a more general realm of human experience is signalled by the aphorism's first word 'wie' ['like']: the significance of the 'Weg' ['path'] must be understood in the context of its role within an open-ended simile. It is here that the reader is alerted to the manner in which the aphorism 'displays its own process of generation'. Alerted by the presence of the simile – a linguistic convention whereby ostensibly dissimilar entities are compared with one another (though simultaneously retaining their distinct identities) – the reader understands that the writer of the aphorism must make an observation within the empirical world which bears comparison with 'ein Weg im Herbst'. The comparison then employs the pronoun 'er', which remains grammatically consistent with the previously mentioned 'Weg'. However, the conventions of simile would dictate that the pronoun is being introduced as a new, distinct subject, which reads more intuitively as 'he' rather than 'it' (though it could theoretically refer to any masculine noun, sentient or otherwise).

The comparison with this anonymous 'he' reveals the self-conscious mode of the aphorism, since it deliberately articulates a knowing degree of ambiguity which can only arouse – though never confirm – the reader's suspicion that the simile refers to a particular person: perhaps (a version of) the author, or indeed the reader. This suspicion can only be heightened by the double meaning (the 'pun') of 'Blätter' ['leaves'], which could equally signify the leaves of a book as those of a tree and whose qualifying 'trocken' ['dry'] thereby becomes a seemingly negatively laden commentary upon literary activity. This in turn implants notions of reading and writing as an area of enquiry within the aphorism, permitting the previous observation about reflexivity and agency to be more tightly focused. Kafka's writing can be seen as a reflexive activity, whereby he acts simultaneously as both agent and object of the very aphorism he constructs: the author becomes simultaneously the writer and the written. Furthermore, the reader's attempts to 'uncover' the author are condemned to constant frustration, since the passive-active Kafka will re-cover – that is, dissimulate through literary ambiguity – all that has so recently been 'gekehrt'. Nevertheless, the aphorism seems to suggest, though we are aware of the banally Sisyphean aspect to clearing away leaves, we cannot and do not leave paths untended; perhaps, then, the aphorism here both invites the reader to ponder the task, whilst stressing its thanklessness. The aphorism here becomes, in essence, an archly-paradoxical (anti-) invitation to re-read what has already

been read; the only certainty conveyed is its own perennial sense of uncertainty.

This short phrase thus creates and questions the capacity of itself and its constituent components to generate meaning and to question, demonstrating the self-referential and paradoxical aspects we recognize as being formal characteristics of the aphorism. That this linguistic construction of uncertainty, this 'most paradoxical of genres' is formally self-referential does not, however, denote its total autonomy from the empirical-historical world. Most obviously, the aphorism presupposes a shared pool of linguistic reference with the (contemporary) reader. Terms and words can perhaps be charged with new nuances and subtexts, but such transformations emanate from a shared platform of vocabulary, where 'Blätter' (for instance) simultaneously 'means' the leaves of a tree and those of a book.

Such presumptions of a shared vocabulary necessarily invoke presumptions of a shared cultural field in which both books and trees are familiar. In turn, such references might import more complex associations, where 'books' might denote anything from plain bookishness to a complete estrangement from nature (interpretations apparently prompted by the preceding term 'trocken': itself signalling a dual meaning, though here through the 'literal' and 'figurative' senses of 'dry'). In short, the aphorism is only self-referential insofar as its potential meanings are constantly transformative of one another; for this process to be enacted, however, a wider field of linguistic-cultural reference must be deployed.

Although the aphorism's (potential) references to bookishness appear to allude most obviously towards Kafka's immediate historical context, where anti-Semitic discourse often posited assimilated Jews as being 'excessively' intellectual, it is first necessary to identify the more subtle, though equally embedded, imprint of a wider, macro-historical modernity.¹¹ Rather than examining particular terms and their possible referents in the immediate empirical world, attention should instead be directed towards the aphorism's seemingly infinite interpretative potential – where an open-ended comparison with an autumn path can precipitate meanings, the destabilising, transformative force of which enacts an endless cycle of semantic destabilisation and transformation. It is here that a general, post-Enlightenment perspective between the curious-bewildered individual and an ever-changing environment becomes observable in the very linguistic machinations of the aphorism. For modern humanity must forever grapple with the notion of a perennially expanding field of knowledge, where every scientific epiphany is weighted down by myriad further questions. Ever since the revolutionary insights of Copernicus and Newton, we have inhabited a giddy realm where the endlessness of the intellectual void is paradoxically confirmed with each discovery. This gaze into the infinite is, however, as liberating as it is bewildering: as Georg Lukàcs observes, 'wir können in einer geschlossenen Welt nicht mehr atmen' [we can no longer breathe in an enclosed world].¹²

Significantly, the eighteenth century aphorisms of Lichtenberg initially belonged to the realm of scientific discourse.¹³ However, the moment 'science' is rendered into language – transformed into a 'scientific discourse' necessarily unprepared for the insights it must convey – linguistic insufficiency, rather

than scientific statement, may become the unwitting focus of the resultant utterance. Yet even when the self-consciousness evident in Lichtenberg's aphorisms had entirely transcended scientific discourse, becoming an unambiguously 'literary' voice, the form's roots in natural science do not completely disappear from view: words and linguistic constructs are taken from a range of experience, placed in new combinations and, in a fashion analogous to scientific experimentation, subjected to verification.¹⁴ According to Stern,

The aphoristic experiment becomes a kind of hypostatization of scientific procedures (the means becomes an end), yet as such it can never return for verification to the world of science from which it sprang [...] Its only court of appeal now is experience, life itself, whose laws are those of value, not of verification.¹⁵

This distinction between value and verification is crucial to any insight into the workings of the aphorism: deprived of the sort of conclusive proof or disproof sought by scientific procedure, it floats within an ephemeral realm of relative, evolving and transformative meaning. The value of a word, a notion, an image depends – like the economic value of an exchangeable good – upon context. That linguistic context is, moreover, irretrievably transformed by the acknowledgement of this value (analogous, perhaps, with the changes wrought upon the wider economy by the revaluation of a particular good or service).

Emerging out of the natural sciences, though never articulating one single truth, scientific or otherwise, the aphorism reveals itself as a preternaturally modern form. Its insights are formed in a spirit of experimentalism and grounded in an interpretative terrain so inured to dogma it is compelled to exist in a state of constant flux. The aphorism can only ever generate destabilized meanings which, moreover, may simply create greater instability from which still further insights may be inferred. Yet by considering the aphorism as a fundamentally modern form, a certain degree of stable continuity can be detected between the aphoristic endeavours from dramatically differing historical contexts (such as those respectively represented by Lichtenberg and Kafka). The instability from which the aphorisms derive their creative power serves as an unlikely constant; perennial uncertainty emerges as the one predictable aspect of a genre premised upon unpredictability. This constancy of uncertainty appears to concord with Gerhard Plumpe's observation of literary modernity: from the eighteenth century onwards, experimentation superseded replication as literature's primary paradigm, premised upon a 'Gesetz forciertes Innovations' ['law of accelerated innovation'].¹⁶ Hereafter, unfamiliarity would characterize the reader's experience of the text amidst the ever-changing, transformative process of modernity's literary manifestations.

A Curiously Biblical Modernity

The vocabulary of *Die Züräuer Aphorismen* does, however, confound any complacent assumption of literary modernity or a more general post-Enlightenment rationality. Charles Taylor considers the archetypal modern

individual as a rational agent, 'buffered' from the fear of 'demons, spirits, magic forces' which would have plagued his or her pre-modern forebears.¹⁷ Yet in apparent defiance of Kafka's 'buffered', secular context, explicit references to Biblical and religious language prevail throughout the aphorisms. This incongruous throwback to the lexicon of a pre-modern yesteryear must, therefore, be examined before any exploration of the aphorisms' modernity can seriously be pursued. My own quantitative analysis reveals that the ten most commonly employed nouns in the aphorisms are, without exception, terms quite readily identifiable with religious or theological discourse.¹⁸ Indeed, while the terms might each independently possess entirely secular applications, their collective import is more compellingly redolent of a religious text than of typically 'modernist' literature.

Furthermore, a number of aphorisms make explicit reference to Biblical figures or turns of phrase: for instance, numbers 82, 83, and 86 thematize the distinction between a 'Baum des Lebens' ['The Tree of Life'] and a 'Baum der Erkenntnis' ['The Tree of Knowledge'], while aphorisms 11 and 62 both appear syntactically to be a revisiting of the Book of Job's most famous quotation ('The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away'). Indeed, so disparate are the biblical allusions in aphorism 11 (Job, the Lord's House, forbidden fruit, the Last Supper) that it almost reads like a self-consciously parodic hotchpotch:

Verschiedenheiten der Anschauungen, die man etwa von einem Apfel haben kann: die Anschauung des kleinen Jungen, der den Hals strecken muß, um noch knapp den Apfel auf der Tischplatte zu sehen und die Anschauung des Hausherrn, der frei den Apfel nimmt und frei dem Tischgenossen reicht.

[Varieties of views which one can have of an apple: the view of the young boy, who must crane his neck in order just to make out the apple on the table top and the view of the host, who freely takes the apple and freely hands it over to his guest at the table.]¹⁹

This self-consciousness is, however, unable to evolve into the conventional language of parody, since the aphorism does not aim to destabilize sacrosanct language from the unshifting ground of an alternative, unchallenged narrative; rather, it acknowledges the relativity of all perspectives – including its own. The host who sits at the centre of the aphorism's events might well exist in a classically revolving grammatical universe, where he as subject ('der') takes the aptly-declined object ('den Apfel') and hands it over to an attendant indirect object ('dem Tischgenossen'). Yet this image of Newtonian predictability has already been shattered into a Picasso-like simultaneity of perspectives before it can even be established. Precedence in the 'Verschiedenheit der Anschauungen' is accorded to a little boy, whose tentative gaze creates a simultaneous subjectivity relative to the apple; the reader, in turn, senses his or her own observation of the two observers further fragmenting any presumed stability of perspective.

Thus the relativity of the aphorism subverts the seeming religiosity of its language, asserting a peculiarly modern multitude of perspectives. As the aphorism relates this splintering of reality, the religious language of a bygone era is propelled saliently to the fore. The distinct deities of Genesis, the Book of

Job, and of the New Testament all hopelessly jostle for attention, for we can never for certain know which of these gods is God or whose perspective equates to reality. A cacophony of distinct deities will never be equivalent to an unmediated reality: even God's Word transmutes into the competing and so incoherent narratives of Job, Genesis, and the Last Supper.

The hunted becomes the hunter: subjectivity's dissolution

The seemingly Biblical language of *Die Zürauer Aphorismen* belies an utterly modern sensibility, predicated upon the bewildering realisation of relative perspectives. Aphorism number 43 explores another important aspect of modernity – one which I believe to be particularly relevant to Kafka's own cultural context:

Noch spielen die Jagdhunde im Hof, aber das Wild entgeht ihnen nicht, so sehr es jetzt schon durch die Wälder jagt.

[The hunting dogs are still playing in the farmyard, but the prey cannot escape them, so intently it already hunts through the forests.]²⁰

Three equally weighted sections of ten syllables are immediately discernible, each of which serving a distinct function in developing the reader's understanding of the aphorism's evolving meaning. The first section provides a seemingly unproblematic ('literal') presentation of hunting dogs playing in a farmyard, though the association of 'Jagdhunde' and 'spielen' is arguably faintly incongruous, while the preceding 'noch' ('still', implying an expectation of imminent change) ensures the clause is loaded with a sense of foreboding.

Hence the experimental aspect of the aphorism is already apparent, since these slight incongruities serve to estrange the reader from what he or she reads, and so to enter a relationship characterized more by observation of (rather than immersion in) the unfolding linguistic event. A reader who has already detected a somewhat foreboding tone from the first section will have such suspicions confirmed in the following clause, where a doom-laden 'aber' offsets the hounds' playfulness: their prey is then explicitly named and the terrible, inevitable hunter-hunted relationship is laid bare. Narrative convention would stipulate that the third section provide an explanatory account for the two previous statements, offering a plausible causal link between the dogs playing in the farmyard and the animal's inability to escape ('for it had unknowingly wandered into the farm', for example). However, the changed rhythm of the final section, the slow, stressed syllables of 'jetzt schon' alert the reader to a subversion of expectation, as if the cogs of the linguistic machine through which meaning is normally processed have been deliberately jammed, thereby revealing its inner workings for the first time. This implicit act of narrative sabotage effectively 'outs' the reader as an aficionado of tied-up loose ends and reassuring cliché (which are, naturally enough, entirely absent from the aphorism's non-conclusion). Instead, the reader is presented with a puzzling 'explanation' of an animal failing to escape its hunters on account of its own hunting activities in the forest. The reader can but re-read the aphorism

in pursuit of meaning, though acutely aware that 'meaning' is here unlikely to have the satisfying, unproblematic solidity of a well-crafted yarn. The aphorism resists or refuses a clear sense of narrative causality.

An endless array of re-readings is presumably possible, depending upon the individual's respective preferences and interpretative bent. However, it is the final clause's subversion of expectation which enables the aphorism to function as a generator of (further) meaning: it is imperative, therefore, to investigate which narrative and linguistic conventions have been flouted in order to understand the perspective from which the aphorism's 'second glance' is directed. I would argue that it is the aphorism's peculiar handling of notions of subjectivity and agency which most compellingly subverts linguistic conventions. The idea of subject and object, perhaps the most fundamental of grammatical structures, is almost literally 'fleshed out' in the aphorism's presentation of 'die Jagdhunde' ['the hunting dogs'] and 'das Wild' ['the prey'], yet the aphorism systematically confounds the linguistic expectations aroused by this primal relationship.

Firstly, the ostensible preyed object becomes the aphorism's subject, albeit one engaged in an ineffectual attempt to escape the hunting dogs. This ineffectiveness in turn establishes the expectation by which 'das Wild' would revert to grammatical type, either falling victim to the passive voice ('the animal was caught and eaten') or ending up at the wrong end of a subject-object relationship ('the dogs caught and devoured the animal'). However, the aphorism foregoes either of these conventionally unhappy endings in favour of the enigmatic suggestion that the animal's inability to escape is a result of its own proclivity for hunting: 'das Wild' transcends its lot as passive object to become a hyper-active subject.

The reader might seek an explanation for this curious turn outside the self-referential realm of the aphorism's language. He or she might conceivably discern a moral message in the re-projection of 'das Wild' as a predator, in which 'escaping' denotes an individual's capacity to reject prevailing norms of violent subjugation, and where a conscious decision for passive victimhood is preferable to mindless, gregarious and socially mandated violence. An implicit critique of an aspect of (industrial, individualistic) modernity thus inhabits the aphorism, confirming its status as an unambiguously modern form. However, this engagement with a wider realm of codes and referents, where the reader imports cultural-political nuances from his or her experiences of the empirical world, appears to undermine its claims to autonomy and self-referentiality. Can the aphorism voice a critique of modernity while maintaining formal autonomy – that is, beget transformative meaning solely through the interplay of its linguistic components – or are these competing claims irreconcilable?

Paradoxically, the application of such external social-moral codes enlivens rather than dissolves the aphorism's autonomy and self-referentiality; the reader's imported value systems serve only to stimulate the aphorism's inner machinations. The aphorism behaves in the manner of a linguistic kaleidoscope where the inner components can be forever rearranged, though never substantially changed, by an externally applied force.²¹ The aphorism's resistance to easy interpretation necessarily encourages the reader to project his or her own experience of the empirical world as a means of lending familiarity

to an unfamiliar linguistic realm; by charging aspects of the component language with newly imported nuance, the entire context is transformed through semantic association. Hence any reading of the above aphorism which infers a (moral, socially critical) subtext must necessarily and immediately discern a shifting field of meaning as a direct result of this very inference.

Thus whoever detects a 'moral' narrative arc in the aphorism's transformation of the subject from prey to predator might turn his or her attention back to the words 'Wild' ['prey'] and 'Jagdhund' ['hunting dog'], newly modulated as equivalent to one another by the application of external, societal referents. In a semantic extension of this 'moral' observation and in the spirit of experimentation, a reader might (for instance) think to endow the subject 'Wild' with the prefix 'Jagd-', thereby denoting an equivalence of status and purpose with the hunting dogs. Yet the resulting word 'Jagdwild' ['game'] would singularly fail to signify this equivalence, instead re-invoking the conventional hunter-hunted relationship of dogs and wild game.

The inability of 'das Wild' to escape from the dogs (or, more generally, from its predetermined role) is here revealed as an essentially linguistic phenomenon, where the transformative power of words capriciously fail to behave predictably. Since this fatal non-equivalence of 'Jagdhunde' and 'Jagdwild' can be constructed out of the component words of the aphorism, the observation also attests to the form's dynamically self-referential autonomy, albeit one powered by the reader's familiarity with a much wider scheme of reference. The aphorism's mechanisms are those of modernity: like the kaleidoscope, it is a machine to be operated by creatures of the empirical world, comprising components produced in an industrial and rationalized context, though sealed from it and eliciting interest solely through its internal rearrangements. The aphorism's self-referentiality is quite patent; the self it references, however, is unambiguously of its time

Identity, (non-)belonging and German literature

It is through the examination of this self-hood, revealed through the linguistic machinations of the *Jagdhunde*, that the notion of a relative modernity becomes patent. The aphorism here displays a form of modernity which could only have been conceived in a specific historical context, distinct from (though still pertaining to) its wider post-Enlightenment backdrop. Particularly apparent here – though evident elsewhere in Kafka's aphorisms – is what might be termed a semantic slippage of subjectivity, whereby words fall into a meaningful sequence while refusing to conform to the conventions of subject-object relationships. The pattern of subtle transmutation of 'das Wild' from its conventional role of grammatical passivity into that of the very hunter it ought to be fleeing bears, I would argue, a linguistic imprint which situates Kafka's writing at an historical remove from Lichtenberg. A reading of the following aphorism by Lichtenberg should highlight this historical distance:

Man soll sehr gut schießen, wenn man etwas getrunken; sehet da die Verwandtschaft zwischen Schützenkunst und Poesie.

[It is said that one can be a very good shot when one has had a little to drink; see there the relationship between shooting and poetry.]²²

The theme is ostensibly similar to Kafka's *Jagdhunde*, insofar as both aphorisms make reference to the notion of hunting (though here armed hunters rather than hounds spell out the activity). Once again, following convention, the aphorism makes an issue of something other than its obvious theme: here, for instance, Lichtenberg appears in part to be ironizing received wisdom and clichéd views of poetry. Yet despite the superficial nature of the shared theme of hunting, the two aphorisms bear comparison for what they reveal about their respective stances towards subjectivity and, by extension, their historical context.

Certainly, Lichtenberg's aphorism displays a barely conventional attitude towards conventional notions of subjectivity. The theme of shooting, so readily appropriable to notions of activity and passivity, becomes itself a target for considered contemplation. Of course, commenting upon the role of an empowered subject (here, the gun-bearing hunter) is not in itself a subversion of expectation; indeed, such commentary would normally merely inscribe the active role of the hunter into narrative. However, here it is conventional advice relating to gunmanship ('Man soll sehr gut schießen...'/ 'It is said that one can be a very good shot...') rather than shooting itself which becomes the aphorism's subject, linguistically disarming the huntsman. Readers are then directly enjoined to take the well-refreshed hunter into their sights ('sehst da'/ 'see there'), rendering him – or his activity – into the passive object of contemplation; the scene is thus set to 'see' shooting, however uneasily, as a metaphor for writing poetry. The hunting aphorisms of both Lichtenberg and Kafka share, therefore, a certain enjoyment in flouting subject-object expectations.

Yet in spite of this subversive reversal of perspective, whereby the drunken hunter serves as the focus of a contemplative gaze or an ironic smirk, the aphorism does not undergo the slippage of subjectivity which characterizes the transmutation of Kafka's 'Wild' from hunted to hunter. Rather, the aphorism enacts an expanding vista, fixed first on popular wisdom and its slant on shooting, then opening up to include poetry and its notoriously drunken practitioners. However, the ground under the reader's feet, as well as that beneath the linguistic realm he or she contemplates, remains, as it were, fixed. We need not doubt who or what plays which grammatical role in the contemplative panorama laid out by Lichtenberg.

This firmness of grounding and grammatical anchoring are, by contrast, often lacking in Kafka's aphorisms: an unsureness of footing which surely emanates from the author's historical context. Indeed, these shifting grounds of perception might well be understood as a literary response to all-too-real ethno-geographic circumstances, lending a unique voice to Kafka's specific (and problematic) cultural setting. For Prague's Jewish population at the turn of the twentieth century existed in a state of acute estrangement, both from the language they spoke and the territory they inhabited. Anti-Semitic discourse presented Jewish speakers of German as usurpers of a 'borrowed' tongue, while

strident Slav nationalism appeared to claim Prague as an exclusively Czech city.²³ The almost literal groundlessness amidst which Kafka's ethnic identity was forged could therefore be seen to inform the subjectivity-shifting shape of the aphorisms. Lacking linguistic stability, Kafka's aphorisms effectively play out a peculiarly Jewish relationship to a language that cannot be possessed.

A further comparison with Lichtenberg's aphorisms underlines quite explicitly the ways in which differing cultural contexts and ethnic identities find a literary voice. Tellingly, although Lichtenberg's lifetime predates the emergence of a single German state and an official political identity by over half a century (Germany would only be unified in 1870), his aphorisms are peppered with references which aver a direct, considered yet unproblematic relationship with German cultural identity. Of course, we should not infer too strong a degree of equivalence between Lichtenberg's literary voice and the historical figure's own cultural identity: the former might have been quite deliberately constructed to be at variance from the latter. Nevertheless, I would argue that the aphorisms such as the following could only have emerged from a cultural context in which ownership of language and identity were relatively unchallenged – indeed, where a complete coincidence of language and identity was assumed:

Der Deutsche liegt im Charakter so zwischen dem Franzosen und Engländer in der Mitte, daß unsere Romanschreiber leicht einen von diesen beiden schildern, wenn sie einen Deutschen nur mit etwas stärker Farben malen wollen.

[The German character lies roughly halfway between that of the Frenchman and the Englishman, meaning that our novelists can easily portray either one of the two if they wish to depict a German in slightly stronger colours.]²⁴

In this ironic aperçu of national character and literary practice, the possessive adjective 'unsere' ['our'] signals a shared cultural heritage between the literary voice and its (assumed German) readership. The aphorism's ironies and sense of playfulness are thus rooted in a stable national identity.

In another aphorism – an apparent satirical sideswipe by Lichtenberg at a presumably lacklustre writer – the German-affirming 'unsere' reappears, perhaps implicitly confirming the aphorism's place within a wider body of literary endeavour:

Daß Garve aufgehört hat zu schreiben, ist ein so großer Verlust für unsere Literatur, als daß Lavater angefangen hat.

[That Garve has stopped writing is as a great a loss for our literature as Lavater's decision to start.]²⁵

The possessive adjective suggests more than the (implied) author's sense of ownership of a particular national identity; 'unsere' here appears to assert the membership of the aphorism itself within a wider body of German letters. This unproblematic equation between the author's writing and what might be termed 'German literature' contrasts strikingly with Kafka's aphorisms, where

explicit references to ethnicity or nationality are entirely absent. Kafka's sole mention of the German language occurs in the forty-sixth aphorism, and then only to point out a linguistic quirk which seems to undermine notions of subjectivity and identity:

Das Wort 'sein' bedeutet im Deutschen beides: Da-sein und Ihm-gehören.

[The term 'to be' signifies in German both 'being-there' and 'belonging to him'.]²⁶

Strikingly, Kafka's reference to the German language relates more obviously to the literary activity in which he engages than to its wider cultural context. Kafka here makes explicit those implied goals of the aphoristic enterprise: to make an issue of linguistic instability and so to gain insights into the relationship between language and the reality it purports to signify. By alerting the reader to the 'sein / sein' homophone-homograph, the aphorism subverts the grammatical autarky of the verb 'to be', which typically operates within – defines, even – the realm of subjectivity and eschews direct objects.

Identified explicitly with a term of possession, the verb 'sein' is illuminated momentarily by a denial of subjectivity, where the very concept of being becomes loaded with notions of ownership and hierarchy. This linguistic observation thus relies upon the same destabilising strategies visible in other aphorisms, creating fluidity between those linguistic categories which had hitherto propped up our faith in the very notion of identity. This observation could have been disclosed, of course, without mention of the linguistic phenomenon's specifically German nature: after all, a monolingual definition of a word will typically assume an aspect of convenient pseudo-universality. For the sake of brevity, we might omit to mention that a term's quirks and idiosyncrasies are unique to our own language ('the word "rose" signifies both the past tense of "rise" and a type of garden flower' – an obvious nonsense if translated directly into German). Yet the above aphorism conspicuously dispels with this convention, thereby alerting the reader to a specifically German conflation between being and belonging to someone. The aphorism's self-referentiality thus broadens to incorporate its wider cultural-linguistic context, though arguably through a simultaneous assertion of its own distance from that culture. That Kafka adopts this distance from what ought to have been 'his' language signifies an ethnic identity utterly distinct from Lichtenberg's comfortable German-ness; that the aphorism alludes to a slippage of subjectivity inherent in the German language situates an historically identifiable breakdown of identity within a very specific cultural context.

Conclusion

The manner in which Kafka's aphorisms can be identified as emerging from a 'very specific cultural context' must ultimately take into account a wider geographical and cultural panorama than that of the author's immediate milieu. As Philippe Moret observed, a 'tendance gnomique' [sententious tendency] in

many ways characterizes the thrust of twentieth century literature:²⁷ it would be an absurdity to suggest that *Die Zürauer Aphorismen* play with notions of subjectivity purely as a result of the perceived (un-)rootedness of assimilated Jewish culture. Rather, the aphorisms betoken the experimentalism of modernism, of Western literature in general, as much as they generate meanings from the particular context in which they were written. The distinct 'modernities' with which Lichtenberg and Kafka respectively engage derive difference through the force of generations of literary innovation ('Gesetz forcierter Innovation') and historical development.

Crucially, the genre Kafka adopts – specific to and emerging from Prague's assimilated Jewish life – cannot be meaningfully disentangled from these wider developments. Consequently, any comparison between the aphorisms of Lichtenberg and Kafka which highlights the latter's culturally specific sense of problematic subjectivities must necessarily invoke a wider twentieth century, 'modernist' sensibility. This literary voice resounds with the uncertainties associated with the economic, technological, and social changes which had transformed Western society in its entirety. Kafka's aphorisms must, therefore, be read through a complex, multi-layered and often contradictory array of historical contingencies and relationships. Through their adoption of a literary form still associated with scientific discourse, *Die Zürauer Aphorismen* display a broadly post-Enlightenment sensibility. This shared rationalist grounding accounts for the manner in which the aphorisms of Kafka and Lichtenberg appear to bear the same general characteristics outlined by Stern, even though the two figures wrote at a century's remove from one another.

However, the modernity such resemblances bring to light is, by definition, a process rather than a constant, perennially transformative and unstable. As such, the modernities familiar (if that is the right word) to Lichtenberg and Kafka were utterly alien from one another; the aphorism can thus serve both as a culturally specific voice and as a literary embodiment of a more general, post-Enlightenment era. Moreover, the specific manifestations of modernity in Kafka's immediate context were unique and idiosyncratic to a specific Jewish context, while nevertheless remaining inextricably entangled within a wider network of social, economic and cultural developments or innovations.

Modernity – the age from which the literary aphorism emerged, the notion with which it engages – is a preternaturally paradoxical phenomenon: it unifies an epoch, only then to endlessly subdivide it through unleashed historical forces. Yet the aphorism is premised upon paradox and, as such, seems uniquely poised to understand – or, at least, play out – the contradictions which formed the shifting epistemological ground out of which it emerged. Through its denial of stable truth, the aphorism embodies the one constant of an age bereft of certainty; Kafka's engagement with the form attests to a recognition of this perennial uncertainty from a cultural context singularly sensitive to its implications.

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Notes

¹ J. P. Stern, *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Shattered Occasions. Reconstructed from his Aphorisms and Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), pp. 104-110.

² Stern, p. 118 and 222.

³ Stern, p. 216.

⁴ Werner Hoffmann, *Kafkas Aphorismen* (Berne and Munich: Francke, 1975), p. 5.

⁵ This relative neglect of Kafka's aphorisms does not, of course, denote the complete absence of scholarly attention. Hans H. Hiebel's chapter on psychoanalysis and Kafka's writing, for example, makes references to the aphorisms. See Hans H. Hiebel, *Franz Kafka: Form und Bedeutung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), pp. 247-79.

⁶ See J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason. European Thought 1848-1919* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁷ Burrow, pp. 112-13.

⁸ Roberto Calasso, 'Die verhängte Herrlichkeit', afterword to *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, ed. by Roberto Calasso (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 119-34 (p. 126).

⁹ Stern, p. 216.

¹⁰ German text taken from Franz Kafka, *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, ed. by Roberto Calasso (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), p. 25. This and all subsequent translations of the aphorisms by Kafka and Lichtenberg included in this study are my own. Published English translations occasionally refrain from translating the aphorisms literally for reasons of clarity and style: for instance, Michael Hoffmann's translation here forgoes the 'covers itself again' formulation in favour of the more neutral-sounding 'it is once again littered', in Franz Kafka, *The Züräuer Aphorisms*, trans. by Michael Hoffmann (London: Harvill Secker, 2006). In order for the accompanying textual analysis to make sense consistently, it has been necessary to remain as faithful as possible to the original German.

¹¹ See Sander L. Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

¹² Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans: ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der großen Epik* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965), p. 27.

¹³ Stern, p. 104.

¹⁴ Stern, p. 196.

¹⁵ Stern, p. 118.

¹⁶ See Gerhard Plumpe, *Epochen Moderner Literatur: ein systemtheoretischer Entwurf*. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), p. 32.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 135.

¹⁸ These are: *Welt* [world], 29 times; *Leben* [life], 15 times; *Böse* [evil], 15 times; *Mensch* [human], 12 times; *Weg* [path], 11 times; *Erkenntnis* [knowledge], 9 times; *Gute* [good], 8 times; *Glaube* [belief], 8 times; *Paradies* [paradise], 8 times; *Himmel* [heaven], 7 times. Although, in apparent concordance with Old Testament injunctions, the term 'Gott' ['God'] is entirely absent.

¹⁹ Kafka, *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, p. 22.

²⁰ Kafka, *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, p. 54.

²¹ This comparison appears to echo the concept outlined by Deleuze and Guattari of 'une machine d'expression'. See Giles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975), p. 51.

²² Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Aphorismen*, ed. by Max Rychner (Zürich: Manesse, 1997), p. 97.

²³ Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 163.

²⁴ Lichtenberg, p. 84.

²⁵ Lichtenberg, p. 297.

²⁶ Kafka, *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, p. 57.

²⁷ Philippe Moret, *Tradition et Modernité de l'Aphorisme: Cioran, Reverdy, Scutenaire, Jourdan, Chazal* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), p. 7.

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