

*The biggest problem with melancholy is that it is more detailed than  
the world*

(Lisa Robertson, from her poem, "Cuff")

## The Smallest Space: Lyric Aphorism in Contemporary Poetry (excerpted)

Hannah Brooks-Motl

In "Man Carrying Thing" Wallace Stevens made one of his most infamous declarations: "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully." Those lines can seem to describe, and have been used to support, a view of contemporary poetry that focuses less on any given poem's ability to provide an integrative reading experience—or as one critic recently put it, to offer a "poetry of perspective"—and more on its unique capability to disorient, to reproduce the sensation of experience. Yet it may be instructive to look at Stevens's lines not only in terms of what they call for, but how they do so: Stevens describes a poetry of "resistance" in a formulation that is notable for its clarity, its immediate comprehensibility, even its ease. The lines are aphoristic, and an aphorism requires not just acceptance of meaning but instantaneous recognition of rightness: W.H. Auden, who edited the *Faber Book of Aphorisms*, noted that "The aphorist does not argue or explain, he asserts; and implicit in his assertion is a conviction that he is wiser or more intelligent than his readers." [Note, in contemporary poetry, this conviction may be obviously ironic, or exaggerated.]

[L]yric aphorism's claims to "objectivity" rest mainly on its formal assurance; we believe definitions because they sound like definitions. Yet . . . "believing" a lyric aphorism is tricky: close examination often reveals more complicated propositions that can undermine the assurance we think we find in the aphorism's formal closure. Exploiting that difference can lead to poems that ask us to question our presumption that lyric poems are either the products of "single-subjects" or no "subject" at all; lyric aphorism can allow a lyric poet to speak beyond autobiography, as well as interrogate the role of language in the construction of self and experience. As a device, it allows a poem access to all the precedents, and outcomes, of the lyric mode.

Lyric aphorism allows for a particular kind of tone and representation to work in lyric poems, but it doesn't just let poets throw their voice: it also offers a method of thinking.

Lyric aphorism allows a point of departure and arrival: a place from which to descend into the tangle of individual perception, as well as a method for rising out of it . . . .

[Experimental poet Lisa Robertson's] lyric aphorisms can knit together the kinds of experience and levels of diction she scatters throughout her work. In *R's Boat* (2010) lyric aphorisms provide a mode of clarity that stands out formally as well as intellectually. In these lines, for example, the lyric aphorism is embedded in a passage that aptly demonstrates Stevens's poetics of "resistance."

The idea of the indexical  
Is pleasantly estranged, dissolved  
In the memory of matter  
Such as the beige buildings of anywhere

This is the erotic feeling of non-identity  
 Suddenly the horizon folds  
 The biggest problem with melancholy is that it is more detailed than  
     the world  
 Now it has spoken in me to become what I will be  
 Then I would enter the discipline of failure  
 And at the same time to be disinterested

The lines leading up to the aphorism seem tethered to a particular circumstance, perhaps the speaker looking at or remembering an office park, somewhere bleak enough to warrant a “feeling of non-identity.” Yet the scene is not set, the speaker diffuse; though grammatical, the lines are loaded with abstract paradoxes like “the memory of matter” and “pleasantly estranged,” making them difficult to parse. “A Cuff,” the poem these lines come from, is concerned with landscape, architecture, and the processes of looking and perception—which is perhaps why the lines seem to move in dreamy transcription: we are in the nowhere of thinking. So the lyric aphorism again pops out from its surroundings as a moment of clarity—yet it also gestures outside the poem: not just the melancholy of the speaker, but melancholy itself is being defined here. A full-fledged idea in fully-fledged syntax, the line stalls the poem even as it seems to ground us: we respond to the forceful authority of such a definition, its formal finality. As the literary critic Beverly Coyle notes in *A Thought To Be Rehearsed* (1983), her work on aphorism in Wallace Stevens, “**a reader responds to a statement as an aphorism essentially because its formal and thematic elements create in him a sense of closure.**”

But that “sense of closure” may be a sense only: formal finality can obscure what, exactly, is being formulated. We nod in agreement with Robertson’s sentence because it sounds convincingly final, but how could melancholy actually be more detailed than the world? For one thing, our experience of melancholy is generally fitful, while our experience of the world is stable—that is, we’re always experiencing it. What clouds our view is the scrim of mood, not the world’s availability to us. And what kind of details does melancholy have that the world lacks? Melancholy doesn’t have coniferous trees or global warming though allergies and an environmental conscience might send one into a bout of it. Close examination makes the statement less stable, not more. Though we feel stabilized by the grammar, in the context of the poem Robertson’s aphorism—and its sudden turn to seemingly “transparent” meaning—forces us to reconsider our sense of the poem’s speaker. Cast against a difficult, shifting lyric background, the complicated clarity of lyric aphorism can help connect competing ideas of what lyric poetry might say, and who might be saying it.

*A word is a symptom of what can't be described*

(Elizabeth Willis)

[I]n [her] essay “The Arena in the Garden: Some Thoughts on Late Lyric”. . . [Elizabeth] Willis describes the “voice as figure” as a primary feature of “late lyric” poetry. “Potentially multiple,” she writes, the voice of a lyric poem is “not reducible to the realm of single-subject epiphanies.” The troubling, and troublesome, “single-subject” (that is, the speaker of the poem considered as a singular, univocal presence) is one that lyric aphorism effectively scrambles, and might even do away with. For poets cautious of the ways “subjectivity” can almost automatically inflect voice, lyric aphorisms’ disembodied timbre allows for epiphany that is not relegated to the “single-subject”; yet it also offers . . . an utterance that is grounded in personal observation, even personality.

[L]yric aphorism's claims to "objectivity" rest mainly on its formal assurance; we believe definitions because they sound like definitions. Yet, as we've seen, "believing" a lyric aphorism is tricky: close examination often reveals more complicated propositions that can undermine the assurance we think we find in the aphorism's formal closure. Exploiting that difference can lead to poems that ask us to question our presumption that lyric poems are either the products of "single-subjects" or no "subject" at all; lyric aphorism can allow a lyric poet to speak beyond autobiography, as well as interrogate the role of language in the construction of self and experience. As a device, it allows a poem access to all the precedents, and outcomes, of the lyric mode.

The poet Suzanne Buffam uses lyric aphorism to circumvent, even clip, the kinds of emotional "confession" we might expect in lyric poetry, perhaps especially lyric poetry written by women. Buffam's second book, *The Irrationalist* (2010), published by Canarium (a small press interested in innovative writing), even includes a series of "Little Commentaries" that explore and exploit the boundaries between aphorism and poetry; some are aphorisms in their own right. Her poem "Amor Fati" (one of Nietzsche's favorite terms) sets personal revelation ("I can't help what I want") abruptly next to aphorism's universalizing technique ("There is no such thing as a dream that comes true. / Every dream is already true the moment it is dreamed"). Such juxtaposition allows Buffam to achieve a definitive, executive tone: she amends and scolds the persistent belief that our experiences and feelings are uniquely ours, even as such scolding sounds like it comes defiantly—and aphoristically—from a "single subject." Lyric aphorism offers Buffam, like all the poets I've looked at so far, a form able to accommodate traditionally "lyric" concerns (personal experience, epiphany, emotion) and yet still question them; lyric aphorism tilts the speaker in a lyric poem both inward and outward at once.

But isn't much poetry concerned with the universal implications of a particular speaker's utterances? How does lyric aphorism differ from any other rhetorical device at a poet's disposal? It might be helpful to think about the tricky positioning of speaker and experience lyric aphorism allows by taking a quick look at a poem not interested in unraveling such relationships. Over eight collections of poetry, Laura Kasischke has honed narrative, "single-subject" lyric poems to a fine, perfect point; in the tradition of Sylvia Plath, or Edna St. Vincent Millay, Kasischke's domestic lyrics use repetition, rhyme, and often explosively accurate imagery to portray the dialectic between outside event and inner, emotional experience. But they rarely, if ever, use lyric aphorism. While they pursue the inner life of one speaker, they do so within the parameters of the poem's world—Kasischke's clarity of utterance does not rise up . . . to the realm of aphoristic expression.

Kasischke's speakers may have experiences we all recognize, but they don't articulate them in the terms we've seen lyric aphorism demand. "Terrible Words," from the collection *Lilies Without* (2007), for example, opens with these lines:

I've said these words before, exactly these.

I said them in winter, in the car, at night,  
warmed by the cigarette lighter's dangerous eye.

I said them in summer  
When the flowers were in bloom

But there were too many biting flies to go outside.

Truly, I

was the first to say them.

Here, the “I” describes a potentially “universal” experience—saying something you don’t mean—while remaining firmly in the rhetorical realm of the poem’s particular experience: the situation of the car, night, the cigarette lighter is cast as a singular, exceptional event that could have only happened to the “Truly I” narrating the poem to us. Consider this in relation to Buffam’s short “Invective,” from the series of “Little Commentaries.” Toying with the idea that statements are their own evidence, Buffam’s speaker sounds at once irrefutable and forlorn:

Fuck you and the horse you rode in on  
Is often just another way of saying come back.

Like Kasischke, Buffam addresses a situation we all might be familiar with—not saying what you mean, because what you mean is too painful to be said. But Buffam’s couplet is also an aphorism: **it pivots** on that definitional, line-splitting “Is.” The bravado of this aphorism rests on its unhappy symmetry: it starts with “fuck you” and ends with “come back.” We might compare these lines to Kasischke’s and note that the formal requirements of aphorism are not present in Kasischke’s: her verbs describe a sequence of past actions, rather than delineate a timeless definition; she includes many “I” statements. Buffam’s speaker is only speech: there is no context for the utterance, no back-story, no account. When we peer into lyric aphorisms, we glimpse neither a lyric subject—in the Kasischkean sense—nor a voice interrogating the conditions of its own assemblage. **Lyric aphorism allows poets to “resist” an overt identification of speaker with poet, while allowing for the presence of a speaking subject.**

In the strict requirements of its formulation, lyric aphorism can almost seem like a received form—certain elements, used in certain ways, must be present for it to work. But unlike a sonnet, **lyric aphorism is formulaic at the level of sentence and syntax.** In forcing the poet’s voice into the narrow channel of its statement, lyric aphorism divests it of particularity. This is why all aphorisms tend to sound as though they were written by the same person. Yet that lack of particularity still responds to the particular worlds of the individual poems—for example, melancholy in Robertson’s survey of dilapidated landscapes. Lyric aphorism requires those materials be used in distinct ways, however, and in doing so, they let personal claims flare out. Carefully slid into the waiting slots of aphorism, the everyday, the personal, even the confessional, become in and of themselves ways of making broader claims, of connecting personal address to worlds far beyond the personal. **Aphorisms, unlike proverbs, are personal. But they also assume a kind of “personalness” for everyone. In lyric aphorism, that authoritative posturing—the boldness, even pompousness of the aphorism—can be tempered by the careful lyric surrounding it. Lyric aphorism allows for a particular kind of tone and representation to work in lyric poems, but it doesn’t just let poets throw their voice: it also offers a method of thinking.**

Wallace Stevens perceived of aphorism in his own work as “launching pads of thought”; in [Language poet Lynn Hejinian’s formulation they might be “investigations of an idea.” And yet Hejinian toys with the

formal elements of aphorism, stretching them out in quotidian pitter-patter that softens their definitive edges; Hejinian's lyric aphorisms are pleasantly blurred, like watercolors. Here are lines from *Happily*:

Happiness is independent of us bound to its own incompleteness sharply

I can know you without yardstick or sleep, without analysis and from  
near or far,  
but I can't know you without myself

Nostalgia is another name for one's sense of loss at the thought that one  
has sadly  
gone along happily overlooking something, who knows what

Such hemming-and-hawing might seem to muddy the crystalline channels of aphoristic formulation. Yet in their 1968 introduction to Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry* (which includes his great literary aphorisms), editors and translators Ernst Behler and Roman Struc note that aphorism itself necessitates a kind of bounded openness. They make this case for aphorism: "The aphorism is the only literary means of communication for agile thinking in the process of development and change which does not want to limit itself prematurely." Hejinian would agree. Her run-on aphorisms build on and check one another, constructing definitions even as they suggest the limits of such a project.

[L]yric aphorism can also be a method of revolt. Irreverent, rebellious versions of it can be found in the very recent work of a number of younger poets, including Chelsey Minnis, Sommer Browning, Dorothea Lasky, and others. Lyric aphorism in this light may appear much sillier than anything we've looked at before. Aphorism's formality, its omniscient tone of address, is easily twisted into mockery of its own sententiousness; lyric aphorism in these younger poets can frequently slide into its bawdy foil—the one-liner. Like a lot of writing that plays with non-canonical "forms" (the craze a few years ago for instruction poems, for example), lyric aphorism for these poets might be a mouth that joyously bites the hands that feed it—poems and poetry. But even as lyric aphorism in the work of these poets mangles poetry, the aphorisms somehow also constitute it. It's not just that aphoristic gestures have sneaked into lyric poems, but that a kind of lyric has turned out to sound—and look—like aphorism. In the last poet I'll look at, aphorism isn't simply embedded within a lyric field, but is a force that redraws the field of a poem entirely.

One of the most idiosyncratic, touchy, and—as at least one book blurb joyously retorts—"indulgent and melancholy" poets to come along in a while, Chelsey Minnis is adept at long-form poems that veer crazily through emotional and typographical terrain. Her third book, *Poemland* (2009), is composed almost entirely from "aphorisms and observations," its pages furnished with three-to-six untitled lines of rejoinder, complaint, assertion, and/or boast. In a way *Poemland* is Minnis's take on "poetics"—a flagrantly digitized version of *Materia Poetica*. Like the Scottish poet Don Paterson, whose *Best Thought, Worst Thought* (2008) includes scathing aphorisms on poetry, Minnis uses aphorism to taunt poetry, complaining of its badness or inconsequence; but she also toys with aphorism itself, pushing past its formal boundaries and wielding it against lyric conventions of speaker, self, and incident. Nothing really happens in *Poemland* except the speaker's endless fulminations. Here is page 88:

One's happiness cannot be stated . . .

Because it is too natural . . .

And it is like a creamy bruise around the eye . . .

And steam-grown flowers . . .

And it takes you several years of hustling to achieve this effect . . .

Minnis's previous work has also played with punctuation: her first books, *Zirconia* (2001) and *Bad Bad* (2007), included poems composed of cranky, trinket-like images strung together by long sets of ellipses. Minnis's use of ellipses here counteracts—even mocks—the resounding closure we expect from aphorism proper. Statements trail off provocatively, forcing us to question what, exactly, we find truthful about them in the first place.

But Minnis doesn't just take potshots at punctuation; her book skewers the aphoristic tone as well. Nothing definitively "is" in Minnis's poetry—only "like." Her "it is like" statements shove simile back into the tiny test tube of aphorism. Where aphorism might allege definition, Minnis only pretends to compare, using the universalizing tone as a glib gesture, a kind of middle finger to the quotidian ironies an (actual) aphorist like Cioran might attempt. Less concerned with articulating grand abstractions, Minnis uses the detritus of a messy, single woman's apartment ("There is no need for the truth . . . / Like scythes that cut through prom gowns . . .") to make the big meanings she wouldn't deign to utter otherwise.

Minnis's aphorisms are inextricable from the poetry they redress—"poetry" provides the poems with the majority of their subject matter. But Minnis's aphorisms function more like Bacon's model, or even a commonplace book, than a lyric poem. They collect and respond, ironize, flaunt, declare, shuffle, and assert. Their tone trumps all—even our interest in their speaker. We ask questions of the utterance, not the person uttering it. Minnis's "I" remains stable, though exaggerated; it also evades event, managing to give anecdote the slip. Minnis does not ask us to ponder the manifold performances of self, or the events that might engender such a performance; instead she uses aphorism to fight not voice—in the way we've considered it in Buffam—but its fussy sibling, tone. In Minnis, what is said is always a function of how it is said. "This is a chain between your thighs . . ." she declares on page 19. "This is a freedom from achievement . . . / Writing a poem is like trying to do something, isn't it? / It's like trying to have an ungroveling feeling . . ." Without any clear referent, the authoritative bite of this poem seems curiously toothless. This particular poem is a chain? Poetry in general is freedom? Minnis manages to both insist and not say. She is aristocratic, but also bratty. Lyric aphorism becomes a way to assert the self while apparently erasing it; it allows a way of thinking that can seem thoughtless.

I have proposed lyric aphorism as a formal technique discernible inside of certain contemporary poems. Generally embedded within a lyric poem, lyric aphorism proposes a kind of clarity that is distinct from other kinds of clarity—emotional insight, for example, or the kind of epiphany a lyric poem built around anecdote might suggest. Lyric aphorism exceeds those concerns through its formal requirements, as much as through its philosophical pedigree: its syntax seems to describe its content as Truth, and so we might accept it as such. But **lyric aphorism can also seem to posit clarity while actually troubling it.** In this mode, lyric aphorism achieves a slightly different effect, suddenly presenting us, in a poem that has "resisted" our attempts to assume a coherent speaker, with the effect of a single voice. Such "speaker effects" seem to me to be rooted in the nature of aphorism, where form makes coherency a given. But

lyric aphorism in the work of the poets I've looked at also speaks to the contemporary appetite for poems that play out their inheritance to lyric traditions in multiple ways.

**While lyric aphorism allows for a certain amount of “speakerlessness” through its formulaic syntax, it’s also grounded in particular experiences that often provide the very substance of that formula.** By using the syntax of aphorism, poets I've looked at escape the pat certitudes of individual voice, the “complacent security on which the lyrical ego hoists its banner” in the words of poet and critic Jed Rasula. But by utilizing aphorism’s distinctive logic, they adroitly avoid simply spinning platitudes. **The contradictory thinking that aphorism as a philosophical method proposes allows lyric poets to complicate their own propositions**—both as they arise in individual poems, and those of lyric poetry itself. This kind of thinking can be wild and reorienting to poetry, as the work of Chelsey Minnis shows.

Minnis and her contemporaries might suffer from accusations of not writing “poetry”—of writing jokes, or pseudo-aphorisms, or even babble. Yet their provocations seem important, and make their poems interesting and alive as both poetry and critique (Frederick Schlegel: “Poetry can only be criticized through poetry”). In Minnis’s book, lyric aphorism becomes in some sense lyric poetry—not simply embedded within it, but constitutive of it. This is possible because **aphorism functions both as form and as thought**. A renewed interest in aphorism might signal a strand of poetry more interested in poetry’s ability to speak towards universal experience, remembering that **poems can ignite collective emotional and intellectual recognition**. Poetry can, after all, talk to the parts of us that want to feel connected to other people, less alone or fragmented in our lives and in our reading both. Lyric aphorism might inaugurate a new way to think about our selves generally, as beings who are, in the end, wonderfully—even thrillingly—non-particular.

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