The Testimony of the Time – Aphorism

Short literary form known as aphorism in the beginning of its development relied on saying. Aphorism concisely expresses general experience, life philosophy, situation and position of a man in this world, socio-political and historical paradoxes etc. Although it is often taken as a criticism of society, it can also be understood as a testimony of time. This paper reveals one aspect of this phenomenon that was neglected by literary theory – aphorism as a form of expressing author’s attitude towards society and its reality.

Aphorism is a drill of spirit in little space.

(Aleksandar Baljak)

In the last couple of decades the number of aphorism writers has significantly increased in Serbia, therefore surprises the fact that this genre has been treated with more attention only in recent times by literary theory, and it is also very strange that other disciplines didn’t recognize the potential of this topic upon which they can base their researches.

The extraordinary production of this form of literature during the last couple of decades will undoubtedly increase the interest in its complex analyses. Critics and researchers, (such as Teofilovic 1992, 73–83; Michailovic 1988, 702–708) that have so far studied works of aphorists and their topics, noticed not only

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1 See forewords, afterwords, reviews of Ratko Bozovic which refer to aphoristic works of authors during the nineties of last century and later. In one of those papers Bozovic says that aphoristics “helped” him not to go down into the pessimistic darkness and hopelessness. Also see www.aforizmi.org (last visit 16. 03. 2011).
significant quantitative increase in the production of aphorism, but also a superior level of quality, which is of the utmost importance.

Definitions of aphorism describe it as a short, pithy statement which expresses the essence of a thought, phenomenon, matter etc. (MPE 1986); it can be a short, specifically formulated phrase, which clearly expresses one thought (Vujaklija 1977) or a thought summarized in a short sentence (RSKJ 1967); or a short, concise saying expressing the wisdom and moral truth that can be applied in different life circumstances (RKT 1985, 708).

Aphorism as a short evidence of reflection on everyday life and its paradoxes appeared in ancient Greece. Initially the term was used in short instructions for treatments of different kinds of illnesses. The history of aphorisms has its beginnings with Hippocrates who wrote a collection of instructions for illnesses and medications. When the author named them aphorisms he wasn’t aware of the fact that by promoting medical advice he was also inventing and naming the new literary form.

It is remarkable how the introductory sentence in the Hippocratic’ collection of medical practices and sayings\(^2\) – “Life is short, [the] art long ” (ars longa, vita brevis) is itself a real literary revelation. The phrase in a short form big strength, although constructed with a different purpose (to define Hippocrates’ writing) at the same time defines aphorism itself characterized also by text pithiness, which means again that the aforementioned definition still stands.

The broadness of meaning and transformation of aphorism through history were indicated by the original diversity of the basic word meaning. The term derived from the Greek verb aphorizein meaning: to mark off, divide, isolate, indicate, determine, choose…, and “with the Latin translation and perception of aphorism as determination, establishment, definition (definitio), up until 19th century aphorism was perceived as a specific form of scientific expression, sometimes even as cognitively privileged” (Teofilovic 1992, 73).

Aphorism wasn’t accepted in the intellectual circles in Europe at the same time and the ways of its adoption were different, probably due to the first specific use of that unusual term. With rare exceptions, the term was for centuries associated with the context of medical practice. In the Medieval Latin literature as well as in the contemporary national literatures rarely were other meanings attributed to that term.

Aphorism became a literary genre in a quite extraordinary way; from the paradoxical instructions for toxin-based treatments to the present-day specific verbal purification from other words. On our soil, during the second half of 20th century, aphorism grew into a terse and critical thought very similar in content to satire.

\(^2\) The instructions are about diets, digestion, the influence of heat and cold, weather, seasons and life, also about ulcer, cramps, internal illnesses, lung illnesses, bladder illnesses and dropsy. This collection of sayings and instructions is preserved thanks to Alexandrian library (Teofilovic 2000, 585).
Aphorism is a short literary form that relies on saying, therefore it can be considered as its further developing form, but even more it differs from the saying by its specific way of thinking. Short forms help us to determine the relationship and interdependence of the oral and written tradition, that have never been strictly separated but irrevocably intertwined whether we are dealing with oral tradition as the source of inspiration or written tradition leaning on oral (Maticki 2008, 315–316).

Expressing himself through aphorism, an aphorist creates a miniature, but original literary piece, concise, in little space and very often in an unexpected and slightly paradoxical way. Even though the abstract expression is a way of creation, the critical attitude towards society is visible and it refers to everyday life or near future, leaving the impression on the reader of aphorism. Aphorisms are the work of individual artists, but success is accomplished if readers accept and perceive aphorisms just as one of the valuable factors, in other words, for readers they should become that ideal space in which the general deficiency of profuseness is comprised into a remarkable and luxurious profuseness of deficiency (Markovic 1987, 179).

Author’s achievement and creativity lie in his ability to create the perfect form of aphorism by using one up to two sentences. Its ordinary form contains a concise unrhymed prose sentence, but it can also appear in the strophic form of two or four verses (RKT 1985, 4). Aphorism as a short, firstly folk than artistic genre contains great strength and rich life experience, it is an ideal synthesis of literature and philosophy (Otasevic 2005, 35).

Aphorism as testimony of time reflects flaws of the society in very few words that compose this lapidary literary form. It is important to mention that the themes of aphorisms are various (education, relations between sexes, particular professions etc.). It is also noteworthy to add that aphoristic expression is not employed in natural sciences, but its use is very common in the field of social studies – politics, art, philosophy, etc. In order to produce an effect on audience it is essential that its themes hit the very core of social life of the community. Consequently aphorists mostly express themselves through short forms. Using them to achieve the wanted point aphorists concentrate all their power of expression on language. Aphorism is successful when it is accepted by readers as a social epiphany of wide interest for the community.

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The development of aphoristic thought in Serbia is longer than one century. In 19th century aphorism had different forms of expression, it was related to epigrams, sentences and sayings, i.e. wise proverbs. Literary pieces of 19th and the first half of 20th century often included this literary form, especially works of those writers who were inclined to this specific literary style.

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3 Besides authors’ written works there were also magazines about joke, satire, even aphorism – Sumadinka, Ziza, Vragolan etc.
The writers who can be regarded as aphorists in Serbia – Jovan Sterija Popovic, Jovan Jovanovic Zmaj, Ljubomir Nenadovic, Ilija Ognjanovic Abukazem, Bozidar Knezevic, Stevan P. Besevic, Djura Jaksic – during their creative work didn’t think as nowadays aphorists do. However, their style of describing occurrences in their society is very similar to aphorism. This fact incites the notion that at the same time there were paradoxes and individuals capable to perceive them and leave a written trace about them. As a result, the future aphorists seemed to have a good starting point for their rather specific way of thinking.

Until World War II aphoristic statements were part of the works of different authors, with a wide range of topics, from the socio-political observations to the commentary on current social events. In that period, satirical nuances are also noticeable becoming an important characteristic of more or less all our aphorists that could be considered as originators of this genre.

The following choice of aphoristic statements is the testimony of a specific social critics, but also of the topics that served as inspiration to authors of that time:

- Censors are midwives of every literary work. But many times they leave the child lame; 2. Old clothes and new houses always need to be repaired.⁴ (Teofilovic, 2000, 112–113)

- The one who became rich squeezed the sweat of many people into his fortune; 2. Do you know what an uprising is? A storm that lifts up every filth and corrupts the most sacred things; 3. What is easier to keep? A woman or a basket full of fleas?⁵ (Milincevic 2004, 889–892)

- Great love can not breed by little hate; 2. To be or not to be, it is all the same in the beginning, – but only in the beginning. 3. Many things were not brought to an end just because they didn’t have a beginning.⁶ (Teofilovic 2000, 113)

These examples are only moderately indicating the range of the topics of aphorisms of that time, which is quite wide and it refers to the social problems, morals of the society and its citizens, government. It can be stated that this period was marked by Ljubomir Nenadovic’s aphoristic deliberation summed up in one brief statement: Press is free, it is just the writers who are being arrested. That is why this aphorism is up to date even nowadays and it surely is a precious pearl of Serbian aphoristic thought.

In the postwar period, during the ‘60s of the 20th century, satirical aphorism in Serbia got its fervor, which is lasting, with its lesser or bigger oscillations, till this day. The socio-political, socio-economical and cultural situation in last dec-

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⁴ For research on the topic of aphorisms are relevant Zabavni kalendari from 1830, 1832. and 1835, and before them Mali bukvar za veliku decu.

⁵ Historical dramas, especially comedies by Jovan Sterija Popovic contain aphoristic way of thinking. The writer is describing everyday life of the Serbian society profusely using satire to characterize the nature of his characters.

⁶ Jovan Jovanovic Zmaj in its own way contributed to this subject, which those examples show.
ades was a suitable field and stimulus for aphorists to discern, in their own specific way („with a sharp quill“), the „illogical“ phenomena in the society and its development.

- It is well known that the journalists know a little. And when they do know something, it is not what is expected of them to know; Who always wants to be right, needs to change his mind a lot. (Dusan Radovic) (Baljak 1987, 56; 57)

- First you are a man in shadow, then the man with the shadow, finally a shadow of a man; When you’re lying for yourself, you are a liar. When you’re lying for the state, you’re a statistician. (Vlada Bulatovic Vib) (Baljak 1987, 65; 66; 68);

- Justice that knows nothing but to punish becomes injustice; Why only the church? The devil should have been separated from the state, too. (Branislav Crncean) (Teofilovic 2000, 46; 49);

- The whole world gone crazy, only we are normal! That’s not normal! It is not our fault for being in the tunnel with no exit. The mistake is in the project! (Vitomir Teofilovic) (Teofilovic 2000, 183; 185)

The appearance of many highly gifted writers of this short pungent thoughts indicates that the society is changing very slowly and because of that it is the never-ending inspiration for aphorists. While reading their aphorisms, readers get the impression that everyday life is most stimulating for „a drill of spirit in little space“. Other topics are also inspirational for this kind of creative work, and therefore authors dedicate their attention to them. Family and family relationships, education of children, professions such as policeman and journalist etc. found themselves in the focus, especially of those aphorists who had been writing before the social crisis of ‘90s of the last century. In comparison with the social phenomena other themes are significantly less present in aphorisms, and it seems like the topic of the leader is an everlasting inspiration for all of the writers:

- When leader dies the front row is taken by bosses of the funeral; The ruler of the heavenly state doesn’t mix with other leaders. He’s looking down on them; We’ll keep singing the odes as long as the leaders guide us! (Teofilovic 2006, 13; 126).

- He was ahead of his time. Never wanted to be a leader; Let yourself be guided by the compass, said the leader (Dangubic 1986, 49; 56).

To our collective misfortune, the aphorists expressing their creative maturity during the last decade of 20th century had “abundance of material” in their surroundings for their inspiration. Disintegration of the state and economic crisis provoking other crisis (moral crises, above all) have significantly increased the production of aphorisms. Considering the fact that aphorisms are still being lavishly produced, the question is on what level are we as a society – our economy, culture, moral... or it doesn’t have anything to do with us!
If Dostojevski had lived in Serbia, he would have written only „The crime“. Raskoljnikov would have been the assistant-witness; We didn’t calculate correctly the parabola. We fell from the past straight into the past (Puaca 2007, 50–51).

The globalization is too narrow for us! Heavenly people have cosmic wideness; It is no longer important to fit in the society; it is enough to fit in the party. Since our history has become too narrow, we are heading straight into the legend! (Teofilovic 2006, 7, 11, 15).

The most difficult thing is to be Serbian... When there’s no one to forbid it; I’ve travelled the world, but there is no people who live better than on our television! (Rade Jovanovic) (Bozovic 2007, 14, 19).

It’s not enough that we have our problems. We are at the junction of East and West; Nobody’s perfect. The fact that I think wrong about myself, that’s something else. (Ratko Dangubic) (Bozovic 2007, 54, 56).

A slap in the face is the information from the first hand. Executioner was with his victim when it was most difficult (Aleksandar Baljak) (Bozovic 2007, 66).

In recent history no nations have died out. It is a great challenge for us; You’re dying? But do you have an appointment? (Slobodan Simic) (Bozovic 2007, 72, 76)

The State – that’s me! There lies its greatness; We wanted to go through the wall with our heads, but the smarter one didn’t give in. (Dejan Milojevic) (Bozovic 2007, 233–234)

We have opened ourselves to the world. We are begging; In our circus there is no room for the audience. (Vesna Dencic) (Bozovic 2007, 258, 264)

While running away from our tradition, centuries are growling at our feet; Many can lose days, but only “the chosen ones” can afford to lose decades and centuries (Visnja Kosovic) (Bozovic 2007, 330, 336).

Aphorists from the last couple of decades never hesitated to express a more direct social engagement, which is especially noticeable in their production during the ‘80s of the last century and later. Aphorists who creatively matured during the last two decades when the crisis in our society reached its culmination, in their escape from everyday life used aphorisms abundantly to detect “disagreeable“ social and human relationships. That is absolutely to be expected since the aphorism in its essence always carries some kind of wisdom like a sting to human folly. Recognizing and pointing out social anomalies through witty aphoristic reflections depends, on the one hand, on the creativity of an artist, and, on the other hand, on the general social circumstances, which are significant impulse for their creation.
Aphorism has become a powerful means of recognizing not only the absurdities of life, but also the troubles of our nation, due to the specific position of our country (“the road house”) and historical circumstances, to which we have contributed with our active/passive behaviour.

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What is the purpose of aphoristic creativity or, in other words, does aphorism have a meaning? The assumption that aphorism is the message which is, in a specific way, presented to wide audience by its author, confirms that its existence in the society is justifiable, useful, and, even more, desirable. Why is it desirable? Because of the themes that are in the center of authors attention, such as social anomalies and also (“exaggerated”) good or bad social adjustment to the life of the community. Through pithy content of a thoughtful expression enriched with a touch of wittiness which often turns into irony and satire, the author strives to depict social and everyday life circumstances. For that reason, a profuse use of irony, satire, absurdity, allegory etc. shouldn’t come as a surprise because they significantly contribute to the strength of the spoken/written thought, and make it more concise and lethal, taking into account its short form. This kind of literary form occupies reader’s attention forcing him to reflect more about aphorism’s meaning, especially since the message isn’t always discernible and “catchy” at first reading, which is again a provocative side of this literary genre.

One of the reasons why aphorism is so popular is that it represents not only the spirit of one man (i.e. its author), but also the spirit of the community, that is the source and inspiration of creativity. Aphorism, therefore, can be beheld as a link between separate parts of the community involved in different ways in the social processes (events) that ultimately concern each and every member of the community.

From aforesaid it can be concluded that aphorism is a little monument to everyday life paradox (Damnjanovic 2011, 117), and its simplicity is just a well-formulated cover for numerous variations of meanings. Messages hidden in the aphorism request an effort from the reader not only to search for the meaning in the words and social circumstances, but also to decode what’s underneath, in the unspoken context of aphorism. And yet, this could mean that aphorisms are reading material for fewer and fewer readers. Therefore, aphorisms can not be treated as an “easy” literature. Pithy play of terms, upheaval of meaning, correspondence of absurdity of existence (Damnjanovic 2011, 117), the paradox of political and everyday life are the base of aphoristic statement. Considering the fact that aphorism is the appropriate means of appraising different life situations, it has been generously used during the last two decades, as a suitable form to express dissatisfaction and unwillingness to come to terms with the social reality emanating fear and hopelessness.
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