

THE CLASSICAL APOTHEGM AND ITS OLD POLISH APPLICATION

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An instructive formulation of wisdom appears to be the principal phenomenon of the Greek culture, and the apothegm – as its most explicit representation. By limiting its pragmatic use to singular actions, the genre gives prominence to pointed sayings and characteristic expressions (*egregie dicta*).¹ Together with proverbs, maxims, gnomes, dicta, anecdotes and aphorisms, apothegms are one of the oldest and most widespread genological forms of *sapientia*. In a seemingly simple form and, sometimes, of humorous diction, the apothegm has found its way to express and acquire the most sublime ethical issues in ‘low’, though still elegant, a style. Simultaneously, this is also a genre most often employed in the philosophical writings. Usually gathered in the collections of concise and witty formulations, which were registered by name and ascribed to well-known personages, the apothegm was also used in other literary forms of didactic character, for instance, in rhetorical argumentation. However, unlike the cognate forms mentioned above (i.e. proverbs, maxims, gnomes, dicta, anecdotes and aphorisms), the apothegm is not an instrument of conveying a universal or traditional wisdom, sometimes conditioned by the social environment, which the author may share with the recipient. The wisdom the apothegm conveys is individually marked and expressed in a clever and creative manner in order to comment upon significant issues associated with a singular, yet highly momentous, event.

A commonly known fact is that it was the ancient Greeks who contributed to the creation of the extensive tradition of collecting and preserving the ideas and sayings of renowned individuals, which were initially cherished in the collective memory and transmitted orally. It was, however, already during the postclassical era that there appeared more or less organized registers of that

¹ Following the ancient writers, this is how Erasmus of Rotterdam designated the collections of apothegms. See Erasmus, *Ep.* 2431, 6-7; all references are to the collection of Erasmus’ letters (*Ep.*): Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, *Opus epistolarum*, denuo recognitum et auctum per P.S. Allen, Oxonii, 1906-1958, vol. 1-12; *Adag. proleg.* (Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami *Opera omnia*, Leiden 1703-1706. Ed. J. Leclerc, vol. 2, 2E, 3F, 4C).

kind of literature. Though the most famous collections are those containing the writings by Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, it must be noted that their heralds can be discerned in the much more earlier works of Herodotus and Xenophon. Interestingly enough, Aristotle in *Rhetoric* (II 21 1394a-1395b) also invoked the collections of laconian sayings and recognized their intellectual potential as well as the power of influencing moral goals. It was, however, Plutarch who exerted a most significant impact on popularizing such formulations. The true treasures of exempla especially for Italian (Antonio Beccadelli, Poggio Bracciolini, Francesco Filelfo, Lodovico Domenichi, Baptista Fregoso, Angelo Poliziano, Domenico Nani Mirabelli, Paolo Manuzio, Raffaello Maffei, Lucio Domizio Brusoni), German (Conrad Lycosthenes, Joseph Lange) and Dutch (Justus Lipsius, Jan Gruter) collectors of apothegms, *facetiae* and *dicta*, not to mention Erasmus *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*, together with *Sayings of Spartans* – the works most extensively translated, re-worked and studied in the modern era – all constitute the evidence of epic recitation based on the oral tradition and serve as the testimonies to the bygone heroic era. While the bygone past with its legitimization of myths and heroic legends may be cherished and admired as the unattainable aim within the realm of imitation, the historically documented period offered paradigmatic exempla, which were very useful in shaping everyday habits. Hence, the apothegm was repeatedly used as a part of quotations or transformations, thus acquiring a function similar to that of the gnome, maxim or proverb (cf. the apothegms invoked by Diogenes Laertius). However, the very fact of such similarities can be also used to prove that the apothegm originally differed from other forms of *sapientia* mentioned above.

Not only had the ancient Romans a penchant for those forms and continued the tradition of the apothegm, but also they became its worthy continuators. The works by Quintilian (*Inst. orat.* VI 3, 5) and Macrobius (*Sat.* II 1, 12) reveal that Cicero had a three-volume collection of apothegms, while those by Suetonius (*Iul.* 56) and Cicero (*ad fam.* IX 16, 4) make it clear that Gaius Julius Caesar also amassed them. For the Romans, the point of literary reference constituted Valerius Maximus' *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri novem* – the book of the second most-read author by European humanists. Together with Plutarch, Valerius Maximus is considered a representative of the modern convention of *exemplum virtutum*, which is characteristic of the moral rhetoric throughout the ages. In Valerius' work, the apothegm is already intertwined with the anecdote; hence, it focuses on narration and thus becomes a testimony to an already performed ethical act.

The standing of the apothegm derives from the Greek thought, both rhetorical and philosophical, which always emphasized the importance of the word and its power of exerting influence and presenting wisdom in a verbal

manner. Such witty sayings were usually expressed by renowned individuals at an unexpected or important moment, what the Greeks designated as *kairos* (Greek *καιρός*). It is a category of time that means an appropriate moment or occasion. On the other hand, and from the philosophical point of view, *kairos* is the notion that designates a short, fleeting or important moment. In contrast to *chronos* (Greek *χρόνος*), *kairos* refers to a non-measurable category of time, which is of the singular structure (so it is non-cyclic and specific), and encompasses an active participation of both human beings and events as well. *Kairos* thus seems to be a kind of breach or rupture that appears on the continuous line of another category, *chronos*. As Krzysztof Bielawski observes, *kairos* appears when “linearity, continuity and simplicity undergo a rupture, thus acquiring a trait of uniqueness. It is *kairos* that approaches but never comes back” (translation mine).²

Having said that, the apothegm appears to be an exceptional genre that testifies to the metaphorical explosion of *kairos* as it supports the phenomenon of a singular, cleverly formulated and highly individual verbal reaction to a situation that happens in a fleeting moment of unique importance; hence, the possibility of distinguishing it from the monotony of linear time. The apothegm is a genre that goes with those individuals who are blessed with the ability to recognize their own *kairos*. It is a truly extraordinary genre that highlights wit, conciseness and accuracy of verbal reactions, and praises the intuition in everyday situations.

The belief in the power of the word (*logos*) that prevailed in the ancient rhetoric, philosophy and literature, was widely accepted and so obvious that it did not demand any justification, defence or separate declarations. Even the sophists themselves used to compare rhetoric to martial arts³ that would allow to win a political, court or private verbal dueling.⁴ In *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias claimed that it was *logos* that should be considered the most

² “[linearność, ciągłość i prostota uległy jakiemuś zaburzeniu i tym samym zyskały walor wyjątkowości, niezwykłości i niepowtarzalności. To *kairos* jest tym czasem, który ‘nadchodzi’; równocześnie nigdy nie powraca]”. K. Bielawski, *Χρόνος (chrónos)-καιρός (kairós)-αἰὼν (aion): czas dla filologa*, w *Boska radość powtórzenia. Idea wiecznego powrotu*. Eds. M. Proszak, A. Szklarska, A. Żymełka. Kraków 2014. 67. See also J.E. Smith’s *Time, Times, and the ‘Right Time’*. *Chronos and Kairos* “The Monist”, 53.1 (1969), pp. 1-13.

³ See Plato’s *Gorgias* 456c-d; Id., *Eutydem*, 272a and further.

⁴ See Diogenes Laertios’ *Żywoty i poglądy słynnych filozofów*, Trans. I. Krońska, K. Leśniak, W. Olszewski, B. Kupis, ed. I. Krońska, introduction K. Leśniak. Warszawa 1982, IX 8, 52. Cf. the translation of and comment on Laertios’ work by Z. Nerczuk. Ibid. *Żywot Protogorasa u Diogenesa Laertiosa (Żywoty i poglądy słynnych filozofów, IX, 50-56)*, “Studia Antyczne i Mediewistyczne”, 44.9 (2011), s. 57-58.

powerful ruler who, though fleshless, exerted influence on people's judgments. Another sophist, Protagoras of Abdera, was acknowledged by Diogenes Laertios as the first author who proved the rhetorical power of *kairos*. It was Protagoras, Diogenes maintained, who proved that the truth or falsity of a view (in a pragmatic or relative sense) was determined by the circumstances themselves.⁵ In *Gorgias* (451 d), Plato expressed a similar view by claiming that the rhetoric was the greatest art, and that mastering the principles of persuasion in any field would lead to gaining the highest good.⁶

Today we do not have many sources that would consolidate the theory of the apothegm or discuss its genological principles. One of those sparse documents is Plutarch's statement from the introductory part to *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*, when the philosopher was invoking the lines addressed to the Roman emperor, Trajan, thus clarifying the usefulness of that type of collections as well as highlighting some of its aspects. The text clearly alludes to the views expressed in *Protagoras* (342e-343b) by Plato who, assuming the persona of Socrates, praised the Spartan ability to formulate concise statements and pointed to the seven Greek wise men's enthusiasm for such formulations.⁷ Plutarch wrote:

I likewise offer to you trifling gifts and tokens of friendship, the common offerings of the first-fruits that come from philosophy [*aparchai apó philosophías*], and I beg that you will be good enough to accept, in conjunction with the author's ready goodwill, the utility which may be found in these brief notes, if so be that they contain something

⁵ Ibid. Therefore, the idea of *kairos* was known in the ancient rhetoric. Gorgias very often referred to it in his writings, although the idea was also widely used in the Greek sophistry, manifesting itself especially in adjusting the speech to current events. Gorgias thought, to quote Cyprian Mielczarski, that "the rhetorical effectiveness depended on saying right things at the right moment (*kairos*). That is why Gorgias is believed to be the master of the situational ethics, which is relative and thus has nothing in common with the normative ethics based on the indisputable principles. He [Gorgias] must have believed that human effectiveness was a result of the ability to adapt to particular situations and singular moments. And that every good speaker had to possess this ability" (C. Mielczarski, *Dziedzictwo klasycznej sofistyki i kultura współczesna*, "Forum Artis Rhetoricae" 3 (2011), s. 16. See also *Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. 1: *From the Beginning to Plato*. Ed. C.C.W. Taylor. London-New York, 1997, p. 235 and G. Kennedy's *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*, Princeton, 1963, p. 66-67.

⁶ Here I paraphrase the comments by Z. Nerczuk, *Żywot Protagorasa*, 57n30.

⁷ "[...] they assembled together and dedicated these as the first-fruits of their lore to Apollo in his Delphic temple, inscribing there those maxims which are on every tongue – "Know thyself" and "Nothing overmuch". Plato, *Protagoras*, with an English translation by W. R. M. Lamb, Cambridge, MA, Harvard Univ. Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967, 343a-343b.

meet for the true understanding of the characters and predilections of men in high places, which are better reflected in their words than in their actions. True it is that a work of mine comprises the lives also of the most noted rulers, lawgivers, and monarchs among the Romans and the Greeks; but their actions, for the most part, have an admixture of chance, whereas their pronouncements and unpremeditated utterance in connection with what they did or experienced or chanced upon afford an opportunity to observe, as in so many mirrors, the workings of the mind of each man. In keeping herewith is the remark of Seiramnes the Persian who, in answer to those who expressed surprise because, while his words showed sense, his actions were never crowned with success, said that he himself was master of his words, but chance, together with the King, was master of his actions. In the Lives the pronouncements of the men have the story of the men's actions adjoined in the same pages, and so must wait for the time when one has the desire to read in a leisurely way; but here the remarks, made into a separate collection quite by themselves, serving, so to speak, as samples and primal elements of the men's lives, will not, I think, be any serious tax on your time, and you will get in brief compass an opportunity to pass in review many men who have proved themselves worthy of being remembered.⁸

Eliminating social, contextual, dialogic and interactive aspects of verbal formulations and disregarding the pivotal role that a human being plays in such a process, that peculiar theory of speech quoted above seems to be in opposition to acting. Plutarch explains that great historical figures' *ethos* (moral conduct) and political views might be recognized and understood properly only when taking into account their words, not their acts, which are predetermined by external circumstances and fate. The words, on the other hand, are free of such connections and remain under absolute control of a human being; hence, they are the most reliable sources of one's thoughts, character and inclinations. Plutarch needed such a notion in order to advance his principal apothegmatical thesis on the consciously formulated word that was owned by a human and reflected one's intellectual aptitudes, thus becoming independent of the unpredictable power of fate. It is worth noting here that in light of this anthropological (or even psycholinguistic) concept, *logos* assumes the properties that used to be associated with *virtus* in ethical theories. Those optimistic ideas of human control over language and language as a touchstone of human character and mirror of the soul or mind, make feasible an in-depth philosophical and psychological understanding of *kairos*. Now, *kairos* leads to presenting a special kind of wisdom that is articulated carefully in concise and pointed phrases. What is more, such an approach

⁸ Plutarch, *Moralia*, with an English translation by Frank Cole Babbitt, Cambridge, MA. Harvard Univ. Press, London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1931, p. 3 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0193%3Achapter%3D1>).

also allows to realize the power of thus understood language as well as to consider it an instrument of any human being's 'verbal' existence.

Although apothegms were invoked by the ancient Greek writers on numerous occasions, their principal features are difficult to define. From a purely etymological point of view, *apophthegma* (prefix *ἀπο-* with a noun *φθέγγομαι*) means 'statement', 'saying' and 'riposte'. The majority of ancient apothegms were quoted precisely as witty sayings invoked in the context of short stories, what obviously suggested an imitative meaning. The research conducted by the contemporary scholars on the use of the term throughout the ages has revealed that in the ancient Greece *apophthegma* contained a kind of ambiguity and was gradually changing its semantic centre. Initially, its meaning could be closer to 'riposte'; hence, the emphasis was placed on the context that induced such a statement. It took some time, however, to consider the term as 'saying', thus making the apothegm the synonym for dictum, maxim or gnome (that happened already in Diogenes Laertios' work). Eventually, the final meaning of the term had little in common with the initial idea behind it as the apothegm became just a counterpart to the anecdote, humorous story or facetiae. Such a fact should be of no surprise since the apothegm has its roots in a short story. That is also the way the Old Polish writers of the Renaissance era, especially the descendants of the Italian tradition of facetiae, comprehended the very meaning of the term.⁹ Łukasz Górnicki, who paraphrased in 1566 Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, an anonymous author of *Facecje polskie* (ca. 1570), or Bieniasz Budny and his *Krótkie a węzłowate opowieści, które po grecku zową Apoftegmata* (Vilnius, 1599) were the most renowned authors of that tradition. The latter was not only imitating Plutarch's collection, but also transforming it into moralistic narrations, anecdotes and stories.

The earliest instances of application of the apothegm can be found in Xenophon's (see, for instance, *Hellenica* II 3, 56) and, later on, in Aristotle's works. Both of them understood it as a witty saying, the accuracy of which depended on a proper reaction, in a specific context, to a particular event, a

⁹ An attempt to define the apothegm in the context of the Old Polish literature was made by T. Michałowska, see *Apoftegmat*, w: *Słownik literatury staropolskiej (Średniowiecze – Renesans – Barok)*, ed. T. Michałowska, B. Otwinowska, and E. Sarnowska-Temierusz, Wrocław 1990, s. 41-42. See also L. Štěpán, *Apoftegmat*, w: *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich. Nowe wydanie*, Trans. L. Engelking, ed. G. Gazda, Warszawa 2012, s. 46; J. Krzyżanowski, *W wieku Reja i Stańczyka. Szkice z dziejów odrodzenia w Polsce*, Warszawa, 1958, s. 24-25; Id., *Facecja staropolska*, w: *Dawna facecja polska (XVI-XVIII w.)*, ed. J. Krzyżanowski and K. Żukowska-Billip, Warszawa, 1960, s. 5-21; S. Graciotti, *Polska facecja humanistyczna i jej włoskie wzorce*, w: Id., *Od Renesansu do Oświecenia*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1991, s. 185-203.

phrase, or a kind of summary of the situation described previously. In the 2nd century, the apothegm was still understood as a 'riposte' since the majority of examples quoted by Plutarch consisted of the sayings invoked out of any context. However, it is possible to find in his collection a couple of instances when an abrupt reaction is replaced by a statement or a verbal articulation of sayings such as decisions or declarations. There are also quotations significantly influenced by the narrator himself; hence, their meaning verges on that of the anecdote since they report significant incidents presented as the stories that are always already triggered by the events rather than by the words. Therefore, according to Plutarch, the apothegm could be a witty verbal reaction that needed certain context or a sapient saying invoked without any introductory comments.¹⁰

The semantic parameters of the apothegm would not be properly defined if we omit one more aspect of the genre, that is, its framing a given situation into a metaphorical saying. Hence, thus evoked allegory is to be understood as a kind of visual speaking that contains a hidden allusion. In the remarks on style (99, 151),¹¹ Demetrius illustrated his argument about a judgment that he considered an allegory by invoking the words of Dionysius the Elder. However, while describing the apothegm in *Rhetoric* (II 21 1395a), Aristotle ascribed the same words to Stesichoros,¹² and approached the genre as a speech similar to the laconic type that demanded further clarifications. Therefore, it is highly probable that the apothegm was understood in two ways: the first meaning was literal and direct, whereas the second one – allegorical and metaphorical, thus conveying ideas in the form of visual riddles that needed some exegesis.¹³ Simultaneously, due to its meaningful conciseness and wit, the apothegm also resembled the gnome, dictum, proverb, or, when incorporated into a narration – an anecdote.

The ancient high esteem held for the apothegm as well as the fascination with its depth, humor, contribution to the development of philosophy and ability to preserve elements of old wisdom were later used by Erasmus in his

¹⁰ Here I paraphrase the comments by J. Russo included in his *Prose Genres for the Performance of Traditional Wisdom in Ancient Greece: Proverb, Maxim, Apothegm*, w: *Poet, Public, and Performance in Ancient Greece*, ed. L. Edmunds and R.W. Wallace, with Preface by M. Bettini, London 1997, p. 57-64.

¹¹ See Demetrius, *O wyrażaniu się*, w: *Trzy stylistyki greckie: Arystoteles, Demetriusz, Dionizjusz*, Ed. and trans. W. Madyda, Wrocław 1953, s. 112.

¹² See Aristotle, *Retoryka*, ed. and trans. H. Podbielski, w: *Id. Dzieła wszystkie*. vol. 6. Warszawa 2001, s. 403.

¹³ See J. Russo, *Prose Genres...*, cit., p. 63-64.

writings on adages and proverbs. Erasmus claimed that those forms were both simple yet still enigmatic, what made them close to the parable. Being a part of the category connected with the allegory, it was the parable, Erasmus maintained, that revealed the mysterious quality of the word:

[...] Aristoteles apud Synesium existimat nihil aliud esse paroemias, quam reliquias priscae illius philosophiae, maximis rerum humanarum cladibus extinctae, easque servatas esse, partim ob compendium brevitatemque, partim ob festivitatem ac leporem: ideoque non segniter, nec oscitanter, sed pressius ac penitius inspiciendas, subesse enim velut igniculos quosdam vetustae sapientiae, quae in pervestiganda veritate multo fuerit perspicacior, quam posteriores philosophi fuerint. Plutarchus item (in commentario cui titulum fecit, Quo pacto sint audiendi poetae) veterum adagia similia putat sacrorum mysteriis, in quibus maximae quaequam res, ac divinae minutulis et in specie pene ridiculis caeremoniis significari solent. His. n. tam brevibus dictis per in volucrum quoddam eadem innui, quae philosophiae principes tot voluminibus traderunt.¹⁴

The collections of apothegms appear to be the galleries of renowned historic figures, thus combining the elements of philosophy, rhetoric, history and biography, and the apothegm itself is to be understood as the “sparks of that ancient philosophy”. What is more, the apothegm is also a bright or sensible reaction to a very specific moment when *chronos* breaches and *kairos* appears, and a testimony to an exceptional ability to formulate opinions in a concise and accurate manner. Inextricably intertwined with human soul, the apothegm presents the process of shaping the human mind. However, the genre simultaneously seems to marginalize that subjective and active aspect of humanism, which was so praised by Cicero, Quintilian and the stoics, and instead shows the enthusiasm for the word. The very idea of the word is to be considered, however, an anthropological entity that is in line with Plato’s theory of

¹⁴ “[...] Aristotle, according to Synesius, thinks that proverbs were simply the vestiges of that earliest philosophy which was destroyed by the calamities of human history. They were preserved, he thinks, partly because of their brevity and conciseness, partly owing to their good humour and gaiety; and for that reason are to be looked into, not in sluggish and careless fashion, but closely and deeply: for underlying them there are what one might call sparks of that ancient philosophy, which was much clearer-sighted in its investigation of truth than were the philosophers who came after. Plutarch too in the essay which he called “On How to Study Poetry” thinks the adages of the Ancients very similar to the rites of religion, in which things which are most important and even divine are often expressed in ceremonies of a trivial and seemingly almost ridiculous nature. He suggests that these sayings, brief as they are, give a hint in their concealed way of those very things which were propounded in so many volumes by the princes of philosophy”. Erasmus, *Adag. proleg.*, op. cit., vol. 2, 6 C-F; english translation by M. M. Phillips.

speech, which holds that by speaking a human being reveals one's identity. Moreover, it also correlates with the idea of thinking, understood as a kind of conversation a human being has with oneself. Thus approached, the word, which becomes the essence and synonym of the spiritual sphere of human life, gains a much more subjective dimension. Being capable of influencing the reality as well as establishing human relations, the notion of the word also becomes equivalent to, or even identical with, the idea of acting. *Animus in oratione relucet* – this is how Erasmus referred to it in *Lingua* and, having invoked Socrates' apothegm, explained it in a manner similar to that employed by Apuleius in *Florida*:

Et in nobis animi speculum est oratio. Unde celebratur illud a Socrate dictum: “Loquere ut te videam”. Adductus erat adolescens elegante forma, ut ex aspectu colligeret indolem. At ille non videbat adolescentem, donec taceret, quod non tam in vultu, quam in oratione reluceat animus.¹⁵

While praising in the Preface to his *Apophthegmata* Plutarch's ethical writings, Erasmus noticed that “[a]pophthegms have a special property, and a quality of their own, that enables them to express briefly, sharply, humorously and wittily every single person's mind”.¹⁶ The expression of one's personality, conciseness and elegant wit, emphasized as the principal features of the genre, are considered by Erasmus as those of the highest value, and by Plutarch – of divine talent.¹⁷

Being a domain of the word that expresses human nature in its entirety, the apothegm became the genre that made one realize the influence of speech

¹⁵ “A rich man had sent his son so that Socrates might look him over and judge of his talents. ‘Well, then, my lad’, said Socrates, ‘speak, so that I can see you’. A man's character is reflected less fully in his face than in his speech”: Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, *Lingua*, Cracoviae: H. Vietor, 1526, k. 60v. English translation Elaine Fantham. *Apophthegmatum* iii. University of Toronto Press, 2015. Cf. APUL. *Florida* 2: *At non itidem maior meus Socrates, qui cum decorum adolescentem et diutule tacentem conspicatus foret, “ut te videam – inquit – aliquid et loquere”*. *Scilicet Socrates tacentem hominem non videbat; etenim arbitrabatur homines non oculorum, sed mentis acie et animi obtutu considerandos* [When my Socrates was to meet a beautiful, yet silent, lad, he said: “Speak, so that I can see you.” It meant that Socrates could not “see” a silent man as he was of the opinion that people might only be judged by evaluating their minds and thus making an insight into their souls” (translation mine)].

¹⁶ Erasmus, *Ep.* 2431, 57-59, english translation by Tineke L. ter Meer. Introduction to *Apophthegmatum libri I-IV*, Leiden, 2010, p. 25.

¹⁷ He wrote (*Ep.* 2431, 89-91) that “no other Greek philosopher was more blessed and worthy of being read [than Plutarch]” (translation mine). See also Erasmus' *Ep.* 2431, 66-67 and *Adag. proleg.*, cit., vol. 2, 5 D.

on the intersubjective expression of human nature, thus putting aside the necessity of writing stories or biographies. If, however, the significance of the apothegm is based on its ability to reflect one's personality, it must be also stressed that the true apothegm was to reveal a historical personality and not a fictional, mythical or fantastic one. Hence, it was to refer to a particular human being and not to one's abstract virtues, thus constituting not a topical, but a historical example. By fusing together the most universal features with what is most individual, unique and fluid in human nature, the collections of apothegms verge on the fields of history, biography and philosophy. Written in thematic sequences, those historical sayings of specific individuals, which reveal the complexity of human personality, also found their place in the moral system, becoming its part and parcel. That is how they acquired the meaning of the paradigm.¹⁸ In other words: the apothegm, if recognized in the context of moral philosophy, is a form that makes a fluid and complex human personality a universal ideal. Moreover, it allows to frame an incidental saying into a peculiar exemplum that can be extracted from the continuum of time and complexities of historical incidents. The apothegm links the syntagmatic, that is, the whole gamut of personality traits, with the paradigmatic, which expresses the unchangeable aspects of human nature. Hence, since the exemplum, with its emphasis on the universal and moral, encourages imitation, it is the apothegm that supports the judgment and presentation of unique human conduct. By registering the sayings of the most renowned historical figures, the collections of apothegms gather the whole range of singular personality traits, thus constituting a kind of "general individuality", which is to express the most valuable humanistic features: valour, moral integrity, ingenuity, pertinence, conformity, sublimity, common sense and wit, thus opposing commonly held opinions and beliefs.

Having said that, it should come as no surprise that the apothegm conquered the humanistic writings. Aptly, the comments mentioned above also allow to notice the significance of the notion of the word for the philosophical tradition of humanism as well as recognize the variety of forms it may assume in literature. What is more, the present discussion also makes one realize the importance, continuity and authenticity of such a tradition in the light of the Renaissance writings in Europe, which favored especially favored

¹⁸ For inspiring ideas on the role of the apothegm in Erasmus' oeuvre, see J. Domański, *Erazm i filozofia. Studium o koncepcji filozofii Erazma z Rotterdamu*, Warsaw, 2001, s. 225-263. Cf. the same *Etyka a osobowość filozofa. Uwagi o pojęciu filozofii i żywotach filozofów w XIV i XV w.*, "Studia Filozoficzne", 10.167 (1979), s. 159-160; P.G. Bietenholz, *Biography and Presentation of Character in the Work of Erasmus*, w: *History and Biography in the Work of Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Genève, 1966, p. 51-89.

small, compendious forms of literature that reflected the role, significance and social potency of human speech. Not only did they constitute an important aspect in the rhetorical deliberations, but also, and it seems to be of utmost significance here, they were extremely important for anthropological considerations. Later on – in the Baroque era – those deliberations focused more on the notion of time understood as the sphere of realizing human *ingenium*, and surrendered to the fascination with human mind, ‘wit’, the speed of making associations, thus situating apothegmatic forms more in the field of rhetoric and aesthetics, than philosophy and ethics.

The Old Polish directions of the apothegm’s development (16th- and 18th-century) do not constitute an exact reflection of the tendencies mentioned above as the contemporary writers comprehended the genre in different ways. What is more, any approach to the concept of the apothegm was also influenced by a writer’s artistic disposition as well as their literary and aesthetic tastes. There is no doubt that the Renaissance collections, which were referred to as the ‘apothegms’, did differ a lot from their European counterparts since the Old Polish versions of the genre rarely conformed to the classic model and assumed the form of dictum, concise narration or epigram. Let’s illustrate this statement by invoking two greatest literary personalities of the Polish Renaissance that belong to two different generations. The works of those writers show how the tradition of the apothegm was transformed and incorporated to the sphere of artistic endeavors in the First Polish Republic. Although Mikołaj Rej (*Figliki*, 1562 and *Apoftegmata* included in the collection *Żwierciadło*, 1568) and Jan Kochanowski (*Apoftegmata*, published posthumously in *Fragmety*, 1590) both chose identical titles for their works, they differed in the approach to the functions of the apothegm. Rej associated it with the aphorism, gnome or dictum, whereas Kochanowski – with the short story. Moreover, the former, similarly to the medieval authors, either identified the genre with abstract aretological arguments,¹⁹ organized in accordance with the conventional categories, or treated it as practical, though fictitious, inscriptions that could be painted on walls, or engraved on stone doors and everyday articles, such as mugs, plates and spoons. The latter, on the other hand, linked the apothegm with a concise narration, usually liberated from moral ideas and educational objectives, thus considering *ingenium* the trait of the highest value.

As a moralist emphasizing educational and ethical values, Rej incorporated into the genre abstract typologies of good and evil, and peopled it with

¹⁹ See A. Budzyńska-Daca’s *Apoftegmata – między oralnością a piśmiennością. Rozważania nad Rejową nauką o cnocie*, w: *Mikołaj Rej – w pięćsetlecie urodzin*, eds. J. Okoń, M. Bauer, M. Kuran and M. Mieszek, Part 1, Łódź, 2005, s. 159-170.

unreal characters of Latin, Italian and German origins, additionally highlighting his artistry of witty articulation by writing in distich and quatrain. On the other hand Kochanowski, whose approach was closer to the humanistic tradition of Erasmus, not only presented himself and his ability to support universal wisdom in concise formulations, but also provided a fresh overview of the individuals' comments on the contemporary reality by employing wit – a significant trait of *humanitas* in its entirety. A descendant of Callimachus and *Vita et mores Gregorii Sanocei*, Kochanowski is very explicit in his presentation of *egregie dictum* and its ability to interweave with *factum illustre*. Hence, *egregie dictum* gains the role of the apothegm, which always treats a wittily articulated word as an important element of the characterological definition of man and human values. This is not, however, the apothegm in its classical form represented by Plutarch or Erasmus – the Old Polish tradition, as I have already mentioned, clearly gravitated towards the Italian and German models, thus becoming more like a ‘witty story’ or ‘witty saying’. Reaching its full potential in the Renaissance popularity of epigrams with pointed conclusions, the Old Polish apothegm assumed various forms of, for instance, epigrams, amusing anecdotes, miscellaneous ‘anthologies’ of humor usually added to Boccaccio- or Poggio-like short stories or *figliki* (little jokes).²⁰ Interestingly, Rej also called his collection of those little jokes ‘apothegms’, and peopled them with characters, whose roles depended either on the place they occupied in the social hierarchy, or their profession and living conditions (hence, there is a peasant, priest, coachman, doctor, tailor, merchant, widow, drunkard, sly wife, etc.). Finally liberated from the categories of good and evil, rightness and truth, that type of literature – and it is its right, anyway – prizes the witty mind, craftiness and ethical relativism, and considers them the most significant traits. On the other hand, the apothegm, which shunned patent judgement, explicit moralizing and didactic importunity, thus highlighting intellectual velocity, was invariably influenced by beauty and ethical rightness that constituted the essence of a human being's characterological definition.

Truly appreciating the phenomenon of ambiguity, “intellectual virtuosity of wordplays”, or – broadly speaking – the conceit that “praised reality by a metaphorical approach to it”²¹ as well as considering ethics indispensable in gaining personal excellence, it was Łukasz Górnicki who represented an understanding of the apothegm that was similar to Castiglione's. Nevertheless, in *Dworzanin polski*, Górnicki proposed an extended philosophy of

²⁰ See S. Graciotti, *Polska facecja humanistyczna i jej włoskie wzorce*, cit.

²¹ Ibid. 199.

humor that was illustrated by anecdotal passages (often about people widely known in the contemporary Polish society and court), what was in contrast with Plutarch's classic understanding of the apothegm. Górnicki's idea of the genre, which he defined as "the stories of kings, princes, hetmans, superiors and other excellent individuals[, that contained] much usefulness and not mere laughter",²² followed the Greek model and thus was understood as useful, witty, accurate, balanced and apt formulations verbalized by the most renowned representatives of the society. Such an approach to *apophthegmata* did not occupy a central position in Górnicki's second work.

"Act according to time" is the idea that the humanistic writers ascribed to the most renowned figures, and in the 16th century that vision was associated with the true wisdom understood as a spark of the heavenly order visible on earth in the form of nature and expressive of the private and social life of a thinking human being. In the subsequent era, the idea of making time slow not only put emphasis on a pragmatic and ethical approach to the human mind, but also highlighted an aesthetic, almost 'narcissistic', phenomenon of the human talent, which was considered an inborn gift:

Thunder Bolts were the Arms, which the fabulous Jupiter made use of, when he had a Mind in an instant to signalize his Power over mortal Men. With these Arms he triumph'd over the Rebel Giants. Because Swiftnes is the Parent of quick Success, the Eagle, whose tow'ring, rapid Flight mounts up to the very Sun, was made choice of by Jove to carry his celestial Artillery. Which Minister of the God of Thunders is a Symbol of great Genius's, whose peculiar Talent is an elevated foaring Capacity, and a rapid Swiftnes in the Execution and Enterprizes. (125-126).²³

The artistic encounter between two poetics: the classical and the baroque, became a starting point for associating ethics and aesthetics in the writings of the 17th-century author, additionally supporting the everlasting model established by Plutarch. Therefore, the further part of the present article would be best illustrated by Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski's biblical poem *Ecclesiastes* as well as his tinted with paraenesis *Rozmowy Artaksesa i Ewandra* in prose. While impersonating Koheleth, Lubomirski expresses an idea of time that reflects philosophical and religious concepts associating God with Logos leading humans and actions in accordance with the plan of divine providence in a deliberate, yet wise, way. What is more, the author simultaneously reveals his preoccupation with the classical aesthetics of harmony and propriety which condition moral order, support the idea of beauty and highlight

²² Ł. Górnicki, *Dworzanin polski*, ed. R. Pollak, Kraków, 1928, s. 197-198.

²³ B. Gracián y Morales, *The Compleat Gentleman*, Trans. T. Saldkeld, London, 1730, p. 125-126.

the need for moderation and balance – all of these based on the principle of common sense:

There is a time to weep as there is to laugh, a time to bewail and a time to prance. A time to cast stones and a time to gather. A time to embrace and a time to stop, a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to cast away, a time to sew and a time to rend. There is a time to be silent and to speak. A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. (translation mine).²⁴

On the other hand, when the baroque author assumes the role of Artakszes, it becomes visible that it is no longer the atmosphere and time of *Ecclesiastes*: “The gift of the great pranks admired by all is that they can derive conceit and energy from a most trivial issue. And the poets can thrive in brevity and make a slightest thing a rewarding and learned matter” (*Rozm.* III, 67, translation mine).²⁵ Here, time is no longer the epitome of harmonious wisdom, but of mental acuity and wit, and is inextricably linked with speed. The pun thus constructed turns into a most excellent ornament of a high aesthetic quality.

In *Rozmowy*, people capable of creating similar puns are called “political”. Lubomirski often uses that adjective as an equivalent to the words such as ingenious, apt, useful, subtle, excellent, thoughtful, sagacious, careful, insightful, inscrutable, capable of using a stratagem, as well as clever, cunning and effective. Moreover, usually of a positive semantic priming, the adjective refers to an ‘important’ man who exerts an influence on the government and governing as well. Being, as it were, in place of God, the ‘political’ man, “exposed to the world’s opinions, carries the world forever and without a murmur” (*Rozm.* XII, 15, translation mine). To be a ‘politician’ in a way Lubomirski sketches it means to be the artist of social life; the artist, who combines in himself ethical and aesthetic virtues, what results in a completely new quality:

Striving to fulfil Mercury’s orders, the poets gave him a staff with two snakes slithering around it, thus creating a true hieroglyph that pertains to each negotiator as every active person is to pay attention to two snakes – his own stratagem but also the one of his opponent’s. The staff is like a wise and thoughtful virtue which, when full of honesty and subtlety, excellently manages between those two political snakes. (*Rozm.* IV, 74).

²⁴ S. H. Lubomirski, *Eklezjastes*, Id., *Poezje zebrane*, ed. A. Karpiński, Warszawa, 1995, Vol. 1, vv. 227-240, 290.

²⁵ All Polish quotations from *Rozmowy Artaksesa i Ewandra* by S. H. Lubomirski are taken from my edition of Lubomirski’s work included in “Biblioteka Pisarzy Staropolskich”, Vol. 32, Warszawa, 2006.

When a subtle game meets moral reason, when appearance encounters truth and moral integrity confronts dissimulation, there appears a chance of a political success. It must be also stressed that ‘wit’ (aesthetic aspect) not supported by rightness (ethical aspect) and virtue, leads to a political failure.

It is, however, a witty conceit that, according to Lubomirski, is of the highest value since such a formulation within the realm of aesthetics is synonymous with the idea of good within the realm of ethics. Moreover, Lubomirski’s conceit is to be understood as a literary idea or, more often than not, an apt, original and inventive manner of artistic expression based on comparison, analogy, paradox or pun (rarely does he consider it a figure of intellectual or artistic speech that organizes a whole statement). Lubomirski maintains that the conceit should reveal itself both in the manner of reasoning as well as in the style of a literary composition, that is, in its boldness, vividness, ingenuity and expressive beauty – only then can the conceit be a source of pointed brevity, wit and stylistic energy. Therefore, the conceit highlights not only an argument, but also its vigor and humor, thus mirroring a psychological category of *ingenium* so widely elaborated on in the 16th-century poetics. Aptly, morality and aesthetics are linked by the principles of rightness, appropriateness and mental agility which, in turn, includes the virtues of writing, speaking, thinking and acting.

Rozmowy Artaksesa i Ewandra is also an example of writing where the statements about talent and wit not only pertain to the theory of creation, but also to politics as they concern diplomacy, advice, war tactics, patronage, favors and lifestyle of great statesmen. Aptly, there is also the place for numerous stories and sayings, the function of which was to illustrate current events. Arising from a remarkable insight and a specific type of reasoning, the apothegms have always been at service of usefulness, which describes and determines the value of beauty. The examples of witty sayings and insightful acts mentioned above undoubtedly express Lubomirski’s fascination with mental agility of the people dealing with politics, who are constantly working under pressure of time and circumstances that demand instant and appropriate reactions to the current events.

To a great extent, Lubomirski’s work is preoccupied with the art of wit – the art that should be mastered by every ‘political man’. Although it was the humanistic heritage that unmistakably shaped the author of the Baroque era and his classical ideas, the wit was always subordinate to common sense which, in turn, betrayed a tinge of three principles: rightness, appropriateness and balance (the last one replaced the principle of appropriateness in the theory of creation). The relationship between beauty and truth is not violated here; miraculously, it is highlighted thanks to its parenetic trait. Hence, we are confronted with the work proposing a peculiar type of ‘political ethics’.

Simultaneously, Lubomirski's characters, people of excellent wit and wisdom, seem to treat their acts as a kind of art – that is why it is possible to talk about 'political aesthetics' as well. There was a good cause for Gracián's writing that "Contrary to judgement, *ingenio* is not pleased with truth but always aspires to beauty".²⁶ That interpersonal game should be conducted in such a way that an individual is to achieve a result and, additionally, do it in a beautiful manner, thus gaining admiration and recognition. Not surprisingly, that was how some politicians reached undying fame: their witty and memorable sayings and acts (to borrow Valerius Maximus' *facta et dicta memorabilia*) are commemorated in the ancient works of Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, Tacitus, Curtius Rufus, Valerius Maximus or modern writings of Baldassare Castiglione, Łukasz Górnicki, Michele de Montaigne, Justus Lipsius, Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, Ambroży Marliani and Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro. Explored by the renowned theoreticians of the conceit, such as Baltasar Gracián or Emanuele Tesauro, that manner of speaking is one of most significant issues in the early modern literature.

The animating force propelling all sayings of the well-known politicians invoked in the work of the Polish nobleman concerns the categories of beauty and rightness, which should not be restricted to aesthetics and ethics, respectively. Lubomirski is very explicit in his negative opinion of the phenomena that are harmful or are connected with any form of injustice. Aptly, he also criticizes everything that is done either at the wrong time or not on time at all as well as condemns the acts that are intrusive, tasteless, inappropriate, those that generate aversion or are simply devoid of charm. Such an approach will be illustrated best by Alexander the Great's well-known apothegm included in numerous works of the ancient authors like, for instance, in Valerius Maximus' *Facta et dicta...* (VI 4 ext, 3) or Curtius Rufus' *Historiae Alexandri Magni* (IV 11, 12-14):

Having been defeated by Alexander, Darius offered him the hand of his daughter with generous dowry and the vast majority of his empire, but Alexander refused to accept the truce. Parmenion, a man of importance, spoke up, saying: "If I were Alexander, I would accept what has been offered and make a treaty." Alexander thus replied: "So would I, if I were Parmenion." (Rozmowa IX, 44)

Parmenion's ill-judged opinion was transformed by Alexander the Great into a cutting retort, which gained the power of a witty argument supported by rightness and pertinence. A special quality of that anecdote reveals itself in the clash between two points of view that, though similarly constructed,

²⁶ The quotation is taken from D. Gostyńska's *Retoryka iluzji. Koncept w poezji barokowej*, Warszawa, 1991, s. 54.

differ in meaning as they are full of understatements. Therefore, something that was supposed to be the same, turned out to be different: if Parmenion were called Alexander and had the latter's power, he still would be Parmenion, that is, a reckless, faint-hearted man and not a great, honorable ruler – hence, he would succumb to Darius' proposal. If, on the other hand, Alexander had Parmenion's mind and his traits, he would be a true Parmenion, eager to accept a disgraceful offer of the Persian king. Alexander's answer also reveals another extremely important characteristic, that is, the aforementioned mental acuity and unusual presence of mind, kept even in the face of unexpected circumstances. To quote Gracián:

The child of a happy promptitude of spirit. Owing to this vivacity and wideawakeness there is no fear of danger or mischance. Many reflect much only to go wrong in the end: others attain their aim without thinking of it beforehand. There are natures of Antiperistasis who work best in an emergency. Celerity wins applause because it proves remarkable capacity; subtlety of judgement, prudence in action. (33)²⁷

The ethical rightness in Lubomirski's works is to be associated with the aesthetic rightness as well – beauty thus becomes a means of conveying good and, hence, justifies all actions of a tactful man. Therefore, it is better to use a 'silent argument', that is, a gesture easily comprehended by a savvy mind or use an appropriate or charmingly ambiguous word than turn out to be a stupid, obtuse, inept, tasteless or, finally, hateful nuisance. The argument mentioned above, together with the majority of anecdotes invoked by Lubomirski, do have their internal logic, which becomes clear when it comes to the didactic message of the discourse. What is more, those replays are based on witty transformations of their denotations and paradoxical reversal of their semantic value as well as the value of actions introduced in a new context.

It must be also emphasized that the initial ideas of the witty minds almost always take for granted the final success. Designated by Lubomirski as "witty conceits", they are independent of the ancient context; however, the Old Polish author made them subject to the argument's rhetorical line and, hence, they became closer to the theory of the apothegm or facetiae than to the conceit as understood by Peregrinus, Gracián or Tesauro. Brilliant, ambiguous, paradoxical, and apt – those humorous jokes and sayings, subtle expressions and concise phrases are to be praised not only due to their successful finale and excellent aim. What should also be emphasized is a fleeting and usually disregarded circumstance connected with time needed to (re)act. Like a spark, time cannot be estimated (it is invisible) in the finished

²⁷ B. Gracián y Morales, *The Art of Wordly Wisdom*, Trans. Joseph Jacobs, London and New York, Macmillan and Co., 1892, p. 33.

works (literary as well); the only thing that it is possible to recognize is the long-lasting perfection itself. The less prepared an answer, the more apt and brilliant thought. The celerity and expressiveness of wit replace prudence and, hence it becomes a form of reflection and caution.

It is of outmost importance to remember that the author of *Rozmowy* was both an aesthete and a moralist as well. That is why Lubomirski's aesthetic views cannot be separated from his philosophical and ethical concepts, the quality of *ingenium* is simultaneously the quality of virtue and all aesthetic deliberations do have their philosophical base.²⁸ Those who follow the principle of rightness can be called sensible, prudent, wise, but not witty; they can command respect and authority, but not admiration and awe. A 'political man' strives to achieve the essence of beauty in its pragmatic sense, which materializes in the encounter between *ingenium* and a given situation; in other words, in the clash between a powerful and full of spirit might of wit and an argument of usefulness and moral integrity. To act appropriately and beautifully – that was the ideal the Marshal and other great individuals of his times admired. Interestingly, Lubomirski was not that distant in his way of thinking from Castiglione's / Górnicki's *The Book of the Courtier* or Tesau-ro's *Filosofia morale* (it was Tesau-ro who claimed that "[t]o reach happiness, a human being needs to possess moral virtues that consist both in good deeds and *ingenium*, *ingegno*. Only then it is possible to realize all features given by God in one's own acting, *artificio proprio parto*". As Stefan Zabłocki observes in *Powstanie manierystycznej teorii metafory*, a monograph devoted to the relationships between 16th- and 17th-century theories of aesthetics and ethics:²⁹ "*ingenium* realizes itself most perfectly in witty formulations that fill the listeners with admiration and amazement, thus standing out above others".³⁰

²⁸ For further discussion, see J. Dąbkowska's *Etyka i estetyka tworzenia w Rozmowach Artaksesa i Ewandra Stanisława Herakliusza Lubomirskiego*, "Barok. Historia – Literatura – Sztuka", 10.1 (2003), s. 109-127.

²⁹ Here is invoked and paraphrased a lengthy passage of mine about the conceit in S. H. Lubomirski's writings. For further references, see 'Argucyje' mowy i działania. *Estetyka bycia 'człowieka politycznego' w Rozmowach Artaksesa i Ewandra Stanisława Herakliusza Lubomirskiego*, w: *Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski – twórca i dzieła*, A. Karpińska and E. Lascińska, eds., Warszawa, 2004, s. 170-186.

³⁰ [Najłatwiej urzeczywistnia się *ingenium* poprzez dowcipną wymowę, budzącą podziw i zdumienie u słuchaczy i pozwalającą człowiekowi na szlachetne wyróżnienie się od innych.] S. Zabłocki, *Powstanie manierystycznej teorii metafory i jej znaczenie na tle poglądów estetycznych epoki. Przyczynek do dziejów arystotelizmu w XVI wieku*, w: *Estetyka – poetyka – literatura*, ed. T. Michałowska, Wrocław, 1973, s. 123.

The mannerist Baroque did appreciate the significance of that classical genre and maintained its importance as a form sensitive especially to man's most precious features, that is, quick mind and language capable of articulating personal elements of *ingenium*. Despite the fact that the apothegm was being gradually replaced by the maxim that enchanted Europe thanks to François de La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims and Moral Reflections* (1665), it also became evident that no other genre was able to combine more perfectly aesthetics and ethics. Aptly, the apothegm's ability to characterize in a perfectly concise manner the intellectual, ethical and psychological features of man was also not surpassed. Hence, the apothegm becomes the perfect illustration of man's virtues that are reflected in speech and have the power of acting.³¹

³¹ Translated by Agnieszka Matysiak.