

*A Small Map
of Experience*

Reflections & Aphorisms



LEONIDAS DONSKIS

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of Experience*
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TRANSLATED FROM THE LITHUANIAN
by
KARLA GRUODIS



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Foreword



AN APHORISM IS a distilled, laconic reflection about the author's intimate experiences of reality, expressed through paradox, provocation, or shocking self-disclosure. Aphorisms cannot be conceived theoretically, and one cannot learn how to write them from a manual. They rise up out of authentic experience — from silence and pauses, from stopping oneself so that a thought is not drowned by the flood of words and pretentious expressions. A person who speaks too much is unlikely to succeed in writing aphorisms or maxims. When writing about things that one has experienced and grasped directly, rather than learned from some theoretical or academic lesson, economy of thought and language are key.

From childhood I have been an ardent admirer of such thinkers as Marcus Aurelius, de la Rochefoucauld, Pascal, and Poincaré, and have long thought about writing a book of reflections, maxims, and aphorisms.

Here are some of my favourite winged phrases:

Even if it's not true, it's well conceived.

(Italian proverb)

The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury. (Marcus Aurelius)

To doubt everything, or to believe everything, are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection. (Henri Poincaré)

We all have enough strength to endure the misfortunes of others.
(François de la Rochefoucauld)

An aphorism is also a space for dialogue: it is an open and unfinished thought, which always requires that we, as readers, go back

and attempt to develop the ellipses and silences which the author has left for us like an invitation. The aphorism is, in essence, a form of fragmentary writing, so it is not surprising that it has been popular with modern and postmodern thinkers such as Lichtenberg, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Baudrillard. Like a jazz improvisation, it does not give the author any chance to hide, or to conceal anything. It is a confession — an idea expressed as much through its form as its content.

In this book, dear reader, you will find not only aphorisms, but fragments of thoughts, each of which could be expanded into a book chapter or an article. Deliberately left unfinished, they are like aphorisms because they invite the reader to return to them.

This kind of book has been best described by Jean Baudrillard:

Fragmentary writing is, ultimately, democratic writing. Each fragment enjoys an equal distinction. Even the most banal finds its exceptional



reader. Each, in turn, has its hour of glory. Of course, each fragment could become a book. But the point is that it will not do so, for the ellipsis is superior to the straight line ...

—JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *Fragments: Cool Memories III, 1990–1995*

And so this book fulfils my old dream of offering my thoughts and aphorisms to the English reader, thus giving my more intimate and less academic work a second life. Two people made this happen. For invaluable advice, guidance into the world of non-academic writing and publishing, and unflagging support, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Antanas Sileika. For her most sensitive and masterful translation of my book, and her magic touch as a native speaker of both Lithuanian and English, I am immensely grateful to Karla Gruodis.

For her generosity, kindness, and support, my warm thanks are also due to Mrs. Birutė Garbaravičienė, Chair of the Editorial Board of the publishing group SC Baltic Media.

—LEONIDAS DONSKIS

My Dinner with Leonidas



ACADEMIC, PHILOSOPHER, Euro-parliamentarian, Leonidas Donskis is also an excellent dinner table companion, with whom I have shared hasty, yet exquisite meals in a variety of settings from hotel dining rooms to the terrace outside his home in a former czarist army barrack. One dines with him for the conversations, whose subjects can range from models for Eastern European revival to moral standards in a globalizing world to musings on the writings of Arthur Koestler to the best songs of the Beatles (which he might play on the piano or guitar) to the recipe for lamb shanks *en papillote* to his understanding of himself as a child of Holocaust survivors. The talk is intense, with humorous asides, and often seeks insight into the heart of matters both big and small, and I



always leave the table wondering about the nature of life and fate and society in a way I had not before the meal.

This collection of aphorisms reads like snatches from those dinner conversations with the bridges (and the recipes and music) eliminated, leaving compressed insights that bear further thought.

On the one hand, the insights ask us to wonder about timeless questions, such as how to achieve happiness (not by seizing the world, but adapting to it), and on the other hand the aphorisms address contemporary concerns such as the impact of globalization (an expression of failed hope).

At times the vocabulary sounds like something straight out of the period of Marcus Aurelius, terms such as *wisdom* and *nobility*, and at others like that of a cultural critic reacting to the childish speech in today's new generations (which have extended adolescence and immaturity).

Insight mixes with irony and occasional melancholy (it is unappealing to return to the city where one was born) and the problem of being a Jew and of talking about Jews.



There is nothing quite like a dinner with Leonidas, often in the company of his wife, Jolanta. But this collection of reflections and aphorisms is like a series of notes from those meals—the notes themselves are fascinating, and they open the doors to subjects which merit further investigation.

—ANTANAS SILEIKA



1

AN APHORISM IS that which remains after a painful battle with the excesses of one's own language and experience.

2

THERE IS NO such thing as being alone, because we can always see and listen to the world. Loneliness amongst others only prevents us from understanding the world and ourselves.

3

INTENSITY OF THOUGHT and spirit are a function of one's grasp of, and reconciliation with, the brief time in which one lives.

4

IF WE SERIOUSLY engage in the games of power, our success or failure are but masks of fate or freedom which in turn conceal mechanisms of social control.



5

SEVERITY IS BUT a mask for pedagogical righteousness that in turn conceals impulses of power and social control.

6

GIVEN THE CHOICE to relive some of life's moments, most of us choose those of joy and happiness, even though they are meaningless without those of sadness and loss.

7

WHAT IS WISDOM? It is the ability to see the face of every person one speaks to, to hear everything they say.

8

WHAT IS NOBILITY? It is the courage and ability to see as good and wise not only those who like and are like us.



9

WHAT IS HAPPINESS? It is the ability to reconcile one's character with the world, and in particular with those one loves.

10

WHAT IS A SPECTACULAR CAREER? It is a deliriously fast transition from living in the present to planning life in terms of months and years.

11

TRUE INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM is usually expressed as courtesy and respect for others — not only out of fear, but from the knowledge that one is limited and flawed.

12

THERE IS AN aspect of genius within those who recognize it.



13

SOME ARTISTS ARE perfect products of their age, while others actively help to create it. These are two aspects of the same social dynamic: either one reflects one's time or becomes an alternative to it. Each is equally important to the social and political thinker.

14

A WISE THOUGHT is often built on the foundation of two contradictory follies.

15

EXCESSIVE CRITICISM IS often nothing but the ability to feed off of another's talent — to make oneself the centre of attention by opposing someone superior.



16

IN CHOOSING VENGEANCE one can claim to be reducing the number of bad and dangerous people in the world, but by choosing their methods one is only increasing their number by one.

17

IN THE MALE imagination, a beautiful piece of woman's clothing is the shortest path to an appreciation of her body.

18

GOODNESS, BEAUTY, AND truth never call themselves by these names; they allow us to see, hear, and understand the world without dividing it into opposing categories.

19

AESTHETIC MATURITY MEANS confronting
the original works in whose
reproductions one delighted as a youth.

20

THE CULT OF celebrity stems from
an inability to feel reality. Only in
England can cooks become pop culture
icons — something that would
be unimaginable in Italy. One only has
to think of the many chefs, much better
than Jamie Oliver, who are working
quietly away in small Italian village
restaurants. It would never occur
to Italy's Olivieri that they could
be TV stars. In their country chefs only
become famous by starting a social or
cultural movement like Giacomo Maioli's
Slow Food. Italians don't need media
wizardry to make up for a lack
of real experience.

About The Book



To entail, scan and embrace more knowledge of “what is” and “what ought to be done” in fewer words—to make a statement as short, concise, terse and pithy as possible while rendering the sights it opens as vast as possible—is the principal intention of the practitioners of the difficult art of the aphorism. Many writers have tried it, few have succeeded. A successful aphorism, true to its mission, allows a small step to go a long, perhaps an infinitely long, way. But as knowledge needed to find one’s way in our increasingly crowded and complex world grows at a mind-boggling pace, so do the difficulties on the road to success. In our liquid-modern times horizons tend to break up or dissolve as soon as they are drawn. It is this unprecedented quality of our condition that Leonidas Donskis



attempts to grasp and convey by resurrecting the badly missed and badly needed art of the aphorism, injecting into it a new impetus, a perfect match to the vertiginous pace of our life, and bringing that art up to the gravity and grandiosity of the challenge we confront. We should all be grateful to him for this exquisitely harrowing task he has performed ...

— ZYGMUNT BAUMAN
*(sociologist and philosopher,
Professor Emeritus of Sociology,
University of Leeds)*

About The Author



Elected a member of the European Parliament in 2009, Leonidas Donskis is a philosopher, political theorist, historian of ideas, social analyst, and political commentator. As a public figure in Lithuania, he also acts as a defender of human rights and civil liberties. Born on August 13, 1962, in Klaipeda, Lithuania, Donskis received his first doctorate in philosophy from the University of Vilnius, and later earned his second doctorate in social and moral philosophy from the University of Helsinki, Finland. His scholarly interests lie in philosophy of history, philosophy of culture, philosophy of literature, philosophy of the social sciences, civilization theory, political theory, history of ideas, and studies in Central and East European thought.



Donskis is the author or editor of thirty four books, fifteen of them in English. He is co-author (with Zygmunt Bauman) of *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2013) and author of *Modernity in Crisis: A Dialogue on the Culture of Belonging* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Troubled Identity and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), *Power and Imagination: Studies in Politics and Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), *Loyalty, Dissent, and Betrayal: Modern Lithuania and East-Central European Moral Imagination* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), *Forms of Hatred: The Troubled Imagination in Modern Philosophy and Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003; VIBS-Value Inquiry Book Series Nomination for the 2003 Best Book in Social Philosophy in North America; VIBS 2003 Best Book Award), *Identity and Freedom: Mapping Nationalism and Social Criticism in Twentieth-Century Lithuania* (London: Routledge, 2002), and *The End of Ideology and Utopia? Moral Imagination and Cultural*



Criticism in the Twentieth Century (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

Donskis' works originally written in Lithuanian and English have been translated into Danish, Estonian, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Swedish, and Ukrainian.

From 2005 to 2009, he served as a Member of the Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH) in the European Science Foundation (ESF). On 7 June 2009, Donskis was elected a Member of the European Parliament.

In 2004, Donskis was awarded by the European Commission the title of the Ambassador for Tolerance and Diversity in Lithuania. In 2008, Donskis received from Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands the Orange-Nassau Order Commander's Cross. In 2011, he has received an honorary degree (Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters) from the University of Bradford, the UK.

About The Translator



Karla Gruodis has lived and worked in both Canada and Lithuania and is currently a member of the Department of English at Dawson College in Montreal. Former editor of *The Lithuanian Review*, and editor/author of *Feminizmo ekskursai* (Pradai, 1995), she specializes in the translation and editing of scholarly writing, and is a practicing artist.