

RHETORIC IN THE MAXIMS OF LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

Sravan Kumar

Assistant Professor of French

English and Foreign Languages University

Shillong

Abstract

Aphorism is a pithy statement which encapsulates truth. However, it does not merely state a truth but does so in such a manner that draws attention to its formulation. The relationship between aphorism and truth is a complex one. Oscar Wilde in his essay 'The Decay of Lying' says "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (1991, p.85). Stylistics is concerned with variations in the use of language whether spoken or written which affect the meaning. Wilde further argues that truth in art is what whose contradictory is also true. This embracing of self-contradiction is the essence of aphorism and various styles and tones have been adopted to describe it. The objective of stylistics is to generalize a particularity of a language until it becomes so narrower that it is further not possible to generalize it. It is in this light that different critics like Roland Barthes, Fink, Zeller have analyzed La Rochefoucauld's Maxims and Reflections so as to interpret the meaning which is otherwise difficult to comprehend. This paper would make an attempt to critically analyze these particular critics.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Maxims, Stylistics, aphorism etc

Aphorism is a pithy statement which encapsulates truth. However, it does not merely state a truth but does so in such a manner that draws attention to its formulation. The relationship between aphorism and truth is a complex one. Oscar Wilde in his essay 'The Decay of Lying' says "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (1991, p.85). Stylistics is concerned with variations in the use of language whether spoken or written which affect the meaning. Wilde further argues that truth in art is what whose contradictory is also true. This embracing of self-contradiction is the essence of aphorism and various styles and tones have been adopted to describe it. The objective of stylistics is to generalize a particularity of a language until it becomes so narrower that it is further not possible to generalize it. Stylistic choices are manifested in *parole* but described with reference to the *langue*. A scheme of language is never complete and static because language is always being put to new uses and adjusted to

them or re-sharpened for old uses particularly for situations where people like to be emphatic. In this way, vocabulary is subject to innovation as it is the least systematic part of language. Literary language establishes special relationship with the scheme of language by using linguistic elements to build new scheme of its own through new rules of meter, line and length, word order and the choice of vocabulary to the existing rules of ordinary language. These new schemes multiply the possibilities of scheme and variation in a complex way allowing departures from ordinary language in accord with the literary scheme and vice-versa. The superimposition of literary schemes on the scheme of ordinary language creates an interesting stylistic study as they are consciously played off one against the other. French language is itself a complex interrelation of many different schemes. There are varieties of French in different regions of France. On a time scale, Old French has quite a different grammar from Modern French and there is a long linking stage of development of the two. Each individual controls unknowingly several different forms of language for instance legal, scientific, and ceremonial or slang language. It is often not the prerogative of the stylistician to study the differences except for some specific complexities related to the language use to set a particular occasion by a certain speaker. Older grammarians were inclined to narrow down their attention to formal written language but the nature of grammatical study does not preclude the study of spoken language. As a result, the distinction between grammarians and stylisticians appears to be less conspicuous since both work through generalizing and seeking descriptions of order within the variety by recognizing a series of schemes of language. The former is interested in each scheme separately whereas the later is interested in comparing schemes, relating them to their contexts and observing intricacies emerging from the interferences of one another. For instance, the standard pronunciation of *singing hymns* and the variety *singin 'ymns* would lead grammarians to know whether the pronunciation represents the total loss of /h/ sound in the speaker's dialect and if it does, would it be relevant to the number of phonemes in the dialect. The replacement of *ng* in *singing* by *n* is not a total loss of *ng* as *ng* remains in the middle of the word. A stylistician is not concerned with this argument but more concerned with the possibility of single speaker's knowledge of both the pronunciations and what would be the difference in social effect. The stylistician deals with what users of language know when they use the language ignoring grammatical generalities.

The French literary theorist, Roland Barthes (1972) is of the opinion that the maxims of La Rochefoucauld can be read in two ways, either as a reference or in continuous mode. They are not basically different from each other as their objective is to find continuity in discontinuity and in disorder. Each maxim is, in a way, the archetype of all maxims in the sense their structure is both unique and varied. The fragmented discourse remains an enclosed discourse in a collection but there are maxims that are devoid of this structure and they can be called free maxims or reflections. They don't adhere to any structure and are not dramatic.

What defines these formal constituents is undoubtedly the terms called the 'relata' of a relation, the terms of comparison or antithesis. But this relationship is less apparent. Barthes says that maxims first reflect solid substances. They do not reflect the progressive flow of thought. Maxim is quite opposite to a normal sentence or a spoken sentence which always tends to melt its parts into each other to equate the flow of thought. For instance, the maxims

« Tout le monde se plaint de sa mémoire et personne de son jugement » (La Rochefoucauld, 1820, p.163)¹

is striking because the points represented are solitary and complete for instance 'memory', 'judgment', 'complaint' etc. It was then constituted into a major-point for example, the substances, the essences and in weak-point for example the key word, relational words. The major points of a maxim are prisoners of a number. We have maxims with two, three, four, five, or seven points, depending on the number of semantic accents.

For example « l'amour propre est le plus grand de tous les flatteurs » (La Rochefoucauld, 1820, p.157.)²

The identity relation here designates two major points: self-love and praise. However, the maxim « le bonheur et le malheur des hommes ne dépend pas moins de leur humeur que de la fortune »³ (La Rochefoucauld, 1820, p.161) has four major points.

Every maxim tends to be antithesis or symmetry according to the classical canon of art.

The art of La Rochefoucauld becomes more refined when in a single maxim he is able to bring together skillfully several of these devices.

Fink is another critic apart from Lanson and Zeline who has done more than any other critic to analyze profoundly the style minutiae of the maxims. He believes that style can be studied only by means of comparison and to this effect he compares La Rochefoucauld with Seneca. He establishes a principle of trochaic style in many of the maxims of La Rochefoucauld. He proves his point when the same maxims are recast in different manner in different editions. For example the maxim « La Philosophie triomphe aisément des maux passés et des maux à venir, mais les maux présents triomphent d'elle »⁴ (La Rochefoucauld, 1678, M22)

¹ This maxim talks about how everyone complains about their faculty of recollection and no one complains about prudence.

² This maxim talks about Self-love and how it is the biggest of all the flatterers.

³ The luck and misfortune depend more on the fortune than the temperament.

⁴ The philosophy triumphs easily over bad deeds of past and future but the bad deeds of present triumph over philosophy.

is recast as

« La philosophie triomphe aisément des maux passés et de ceux qui ne sont pas prêts d'arriver, mais les maux présents triomphent d'elle ».

By using the study of the variants, Fink is of the opinion that the majority of maxims show a tendency to condensate or shortens. La Rochefoucauld tends to mitigate an already blunt chiasmus by rearranging the contents in the parallel structure and makes it conspicuous as in the maxim where *quasi toujours* is assimilated to *toujours*.

For example the maxim

« La passion fait souvent du plus habile homme un fol, et rend quasi toujours les plus sots habiles. »⁵ (1665,M6)

is changed into

« La passion fait souvent un fou du plus habile homme et rend souvent les plus sots habiles. »

the variants show an omission of definite articles to the purpose of generalization,

For example the maxim

« Les grandes et éclatantes actions... »⁶ (1665,M7)

is changed into « Ces grandes et éclatantes actions... »(1678)

-a change of word to effect a sharper contrast

for example the maxim « L'avarice produit quelquefois la liberalité et la liberalité l'avarice »⁷ (1665,M11)

is changed into « L'avarice produit quelquefois la prodigalité et la prodigalité avarice »⁸

-the weakening of a form by the interpolation of various expressions,

for example « L'amour de la justice n'est, en la plupart des hommes que la crainte de souffrir l'injustice. »⁹ (1678,M78)

⁵ The passion is such that it often makes the clever people foolish and the foolish the clever.

⁶ The great and striking actions...

⁷ Greediness produces sometimes liberality and liberality sometimes produces greediness

⁸ Greediness produces sometimes profligacy and profligacy sometimes produces greediness

⁹ The love of justice is most of the times, because of the fear of suffering the injustice.

on the contrary, the 1665 edition does not have *la plupart*.

-The rifling of one portion of the picture into a second half of the maxim to effect unity

« Quelque industrie que l'on ait à cacher ses passions sous la voile de la piété et de l'honneur, il y en a toujours quelque endroit qui se montre. »¹⁰ (1665, M12)

« Quelque soin que l'on prenne de couvrir ses passions par des apparences de piété et d'honneur, elles paroissent toujours au travers de ces voiles » (1678)

Fink says that La Rochefoucauld also gives importance to clauses that close antitheses and contain climax. For example « Ce qui fait que la plupart des femmes sont peu touchés de l'amitié, c'est qu'elle est fade quand on a senti de l'amour. »¹¹(1665, M440)

Fink points out that many of the maxims are of nominal style and even prepositional phrases which stress the nouns are preferred to verbs that are stressed.

For exemple « ...le jugement n'est que le grandeur de la lumière de l'esprit. »¹²(1665,M97)

Similarly, every critic brings in some methodology to work on stylistic aspects. Fink insists that La Rochefoucauld uses conscious attention to form and refuses to make any concession to the content at the cost of form. Fink contends that the antithesis of the content like in virtue versus vice demands the elliptic form and it's a classical baroque feature. Barthes describes that the maxims of La Rochefoucauld as some kind of general block composed of particular blocks. These internal blocks are immobile, solitary elements that are either substantive or adjective or verbal, each of which refers to a full meaning, eternal, autarchic for example love, passion, pride, hurt, deceit, delicate senses etc. .

The objective of stylistics is to generalize a particularity of a language until it becomes so narrower that it is further not possible to generalize it. It is in this light that these different critics like Barthes, Fink, Zeller in relation to La Rochefoucauld's Maxims and Reflections have been analyzed so as to interpret the meaning which is otherwise difficult to comprehend.

References:

1. Barthes, R.(1972).*Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture*, Seuil.
2. La Rochefoucauld (1998).*Maximes*, Imprimerie Nationale.
3. La Rochefoucauld (2002).*Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes morales et Réflexions diverses*.ed.Laurence Plazenet, Honoré Champion.

¹⁰ However much one tries to hide ones passions under the veil of piety and honor, they would be disclosed.

¹¹ Those who say that most of the women are less sensitive to friendship would take it back once they are smitten by love.

¹² The judgement is the greatness of the enlightened mind.

4. Fink, Arthur Herman(1934) Maxim and Fragment, Grenzmöglichkeiten Einer Kunstform, Max Hueber Verlag.
5. Turner, G.W. (1973). Stylistics, Penguin Books.

BIONOTE

Sravan Kumar teaches French at The English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong Campus since 2002 in the capacity of Assistant Professor. He did his postgraduate studies and M.Phil. from Delhi University. He is the recipient of Erasmus Mundus scholarship (a student exchange program) in the year 1997 from Delhi University and pursued further studies from University of Rennes, France. He was selected for teaching assistantship program by French Embassy for two consecutive years from 1998-2000 to teach at various French Lycées. His areas of interest include French language, literature and linguistics. He has presented various papers in International and National Seminars and has four publications to his credit. He is currently working on "Narrative pattern in the Khasi folktales".