

REVIEWS

Secrets of the Oracle: A History of Wisdom from Zeno to Yeats by W. David Shaw. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009. x, 387 pp. ISBN 978-1-4426-4034-4. \$65.00; £42.00.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the two most talked-about teacher-scholars in the English departments at the University of Toronto were Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan. To those of us who were graduate students at the time, they seemed poles apart: Frye, the great discoverer of coherence in that vast miscellany we were all trying to master, English literature; and McLuhan, the explorer of advertising and popular culture, firing off brilliant but disconnected “probes” that left us all wondering how, or if, his ideas fitted together. Yet for all their differences – Frye puckishly referred to “the McLuhan rumour” – they were alike in one fundamental way: the thinking of both depended upon the aphorism. McLuhan puzzled his readers because he rejected logical sequence and a developing argument in favour of the juxtaposition of “probes” (his word for aphorisms), on the model of Bacon’s essays. And Frye thought naturally in aphorisms, as his notebooks reveal. “My own writing is developed out of a number of discontinuous aphorisms,” he said in a 1981 interview; “I scribble notes; that’s where the aphoristic side of my writing develops.” Then he had to “pull the aphorisms together in the right sequence, to produce the right sort of connective tissue” out of the outpouring of single sentences and short paragraphs with which he typically began a large topic.

David Shaw writes in that same aphoristic mode. Though the subtitle of his latest book is “a history of wisdom from Zeno to Yeats,” Shaw almost immediately steps away from the continuity implied in the word “history” when he begins his introduction by undermining that label – his book, he says, is “ostensibly a history” – and quotes Frye, whom he calls “my intellectual father,” saying that “*real* wisdom ... starts in discontinuity.” For wisdom seems to depend, paradoxically, on what is not said: on obliquity, or on (what Frye called in a 1969 interview) the “big packet of silence” which surrounds every sentence in oracular writers from Heraclitus to McLuhan. The aphorism not only reaches beyond speech to silence, but beyond sight to the unseen. In *Aids to Reflection* (also a discontinuous work), Coleridge had pointed out that the word “aphorism” has its origin in the Greek word for horizon, and Shaw, quoting Coleridge, calls the aphorism “the horizon trope” because it is “the limit of our vision.” The aphorism is constantly pushing against, or pointing beyond, that limit, and does so especially when it is puzzling or contradictory