

G. C. Lichtenberg: a “spy on humanity”

by [Roger Kimball](#)

On the aphorist.

We may use Lichtenberg’s writings as the most wonderful dowsing rod: wherever he makes a joke, there a problem lies hidden.

—Goethe

Lichtenberg digs deeper than anyone... . He speaks from the subterranean depths. Only he who himself digs deep hears him.

—Karl Kraus

[T]here are truths that are singularly shy and ticklish and cannot be caught except suddenly—that must be surprised or left alone.

—Nietzsche

In the exacting ledger of posterity, the aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg rates high but is undeniably a specialty item. He is not a household name. He is something rarer: a name savored by household names. Goethe, who corresponded with Lichtenberg, admired him greatly (even though Lichtenberg disputed his theory of color). Arthur Schopenhauer, not someone addicted to dispensing praise glibly, reserved his highest compliment for Lichtenberg, declaring him to be a *Selbstdenker*, some- one who genuinely thought for himself. Likewise, Nietzsche, whose powers of contempt often outshone his talent for appreciation, repeatedly cited Lichtenberg with agreement and respect. (Nietzsche might have had Lichtenberg in mind when, in *The Gay Science*, he defended his own method of handling philosophical problems: “I approach deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them and quickly out again. That one does not get to the depths that way, not deep enough, is the superstition of those afraid of the water.”) Kierkegaard, too, regularly cited or alluded to Lichtenberg, and in fact prefaced his book *Stages on Life’s Way* with a version of one of Lichtenberg’s most famous aphorisms: “Such works are mirrors: when an ape looks into them, no apostle looks out.” Wittgenstein, with his weakness for sudden enthusiasms, made Lichtenberg one of his causes, recommended him to various correspondents, and pressed copies of his work on friends, including Bertrand Russell. Lichtenberg’s influence on Wittgenstein’s work went deeper than mere content: the gnomic form of the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* owes a great deal to the example of Lichtenberg’s aphorisms. Scratch an important nineteenth- or twentieth-century thinker and the chances are good that you will find a warm word or two for the work of G. C. Lichtenberg.

Nevertheless, what Jacques Barzun said of the English essayist Walter Bagehot is also true of Lichtenberg: he is well known without being known well. A healthy slice of his most enduring work has been translated into English, but that was some years ago and—such is the fickleness of intellectual fashion—Lichtenberg’s

reputation has diminished into a name flanked by a handful of witty remarks:

He swallowed a lot of knowledge, but it seemed as if most of it had gone down the wrong way. He who is enamored of himself will at least have the advantage of being inconvenienced by few rivals. Not only did he not believe in ghosts, he wasn't even afraid of them. A handful of soldiers is always better than a mouthful of arguments. The fly that does not want to be swatted is safest if it sits on the fly-swatter.

There is a lot of gold in Lichtenberg. The casual negligence of presumed familiarity has assured that it remains buried for most American and English readers. We hear the name, remember an epigram or two, and leave it at that.

The republication of R. J. Hollingdale's translation of a selection of Lichtenberg's aphorisms^[1] may serve as a welcome corrective. First published by Penguin in 1990, Hollingdale's translation of 1,085 aphorisms amounts to perhaps a quarter of the material that Lichtenberg collected in the nine volumes of his notebooks (two of which went missing in the nineteenth century, along with portions of two others). Lichtenberg began keeping his notebooks in his student days in the mid-1760s and he kept scribbling in them until a few days before his death, at fifty-seven, in 1799.

As Hollingdale observes in his introductory essay, these notebooks are not diaries. Lichtenberg did keep a diary—a voluminous one—where he recorded the itineraries of his domestic and social life. But the notebooks were something else, a general repository, an intellectual clearinghouse, “a Book wherein I write everything, as I see it or as my thoughts suggests it to me.” Lichtenberg's notebooks are a sort of omnibus. As J. P. Stern put it in *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (1959)—the best book in English on Lichtenberg—they consist of “jottings, extracts, calculations, quotations, autobiographical observations, platitudes, witticisms, drafts as well as polished aphorisms.” Lichtenberg considered publishing at least portions of his notebooks but never did. His feelings about their value seemed to vacillate with his moods, which themselves vacillated wildly. Sometimes he referred to their contents as *Pfennigs-Wahrheiten*—“penny-truths”—at other times he waxed grandiloquent: “I have scattered seeds of ideas on almost every page which, if they fall on the right soil, may grow into chapters and even whole dissertations.”

The first German edition of Lichtenberg's notebooks, published early in the nineteenth century, bore the title *Bemerkungen vermischten Inhalts* (“Remarks on Miscellaneous Subjects”). It was an accurate if understated title. Later editions have been known by the picturesque word that Lichtenberg himself occasionally employed: *Sudelbücher*, Lichtenberg's translation of the disused English term “Waste Books.” According to the OED, a “waste book” is “A rough account-book ... in which entries are made of all transactions (purchases, sales, receipts, payments, etc.) at the time of their occurrence, to be ‘posted’ afterwards into the more formal books.” Substitute the words “thoughts, musings, observations, quotations, etc.” and you have the “waste book”—the rough draft—of the soul's economy that Lichtenberg produced. Hollingdale speaks in this context of the “variegated inconsequentiality” of the *Sudelbücher*. They have a little of everything, but what they present is not so much a system as a sensibility, a take on the world.

Lichtenberg did not think of himself as an aphorist. I am not sure that the word *Aphorismus* even appears in the *Sudelbücher*. By training, he was an academic and a man of science. He was born in Oberramstadt, near Darmstadt, in 1742, the youngest of seventeen children, five of whom survived childhood. His father, who died when Lichtenberg was nine, was a prominent clergyman, part of the reformist Lutheran movement called Pietism, which stressed Bible-study and the ideal of simple Christian living. Lichtenberg tells us that he lost his

Christian faith when he was sixteen, though he retained a somewhat amorphous belief in God inspired less by the Bible than by Leibniz's vision of a pre-established, divinely ordered harmony that suffuses the cosmos. Although popular with other children, Lichtenberg was a weak and sickly child. He suffered from a malformation of the spine, caused probably by tuberculosis, which resulted in his being a hunchback. Not surprisingly, this physical fact influenced his entire life and outlook. Still, Lichtenberg was not without a sense of humor about his condition. "My head," he explained, "lies at least a foot closer to my heart than is the case with other men: that is why I am so reasonable." Later he mused that "If Heaven should find it useful and necessary to produce a new edition of me and my life I would like to make a few not superfluous suggestions for this new edition chiefly concerning the design of the frontispiece and the way the work is laid out."

Lichtenberg's malady did not prevent his having many erotic attachments. Hollingdale describes his private life as "very irregular." Lichtenberg's executors destroyed the more intimate portions of his diaries, so posterity has been spared many details, but it is clear that he preferred his women simple and he preferred them young. In 1777 he met Maria Stechard, a poor weaver's daughter who was then twelve or thirteen. Lichtenberg employed her as a housekeeper, and she soon became his mistress. They lived together from 1780 until her early death in 1782. He was affected by her death, Hollingdale notes, "as by nothing before or afterwards." The relationship provided Lichtenberg's neighbors with something to gossip about, much to his chagrin. It also brought him much happiness. "She reconciled me," Lichtenberg sadly recalled, "to the human race." In 1784, Lichtenberg met Margarete Kellner, a daughter of a whitewasher, who was then in her early twenties. From 1786 they lived together and were married in 1789. Although the relationship was stormy, Margarete gave Lichtenberg seven children. She survived him by forty-nine years.

Life was not easy for Lichtenberg. One early critic described him as "the Columbus of hypochondria." The fact that not all his maladies were imaginary made his situation all the more painful. J. P. Stern speaks of the "indefinable mixture of illness and hypochondria, sloth and fits of depression, indolence and fear" that ruled intermittently over Lichtenberg's life. In one note, he bitterly announced his plan to write an autobiography called "The Story of My Mind, as well as of My Wretched Body."

Lichtenberg's career unfolded at the University of Göttingen, where he studied mathematics and science and, from 1770, held a succession of academic positions. He was an immensely popular teacher, one of the first to weave experiments into his lectures. Students came from far and wide not so much to study with as to witness, to "hear Lichtenberg." A man of prodigious but unfocused curiosity, Lichtenberg dabbled everywhere but persevered nowhere. In science, his primary interests were in astronomy and electricity. Some of his scholarly work in astronomy was recognized by later astronomers who named a lunar crater after him. In 1780, to the consternation of his neighbors, he erected the first lightning rod in Göttingen ("That sermons are preached in churches," Lichtenberg observed, "doesn't mean the churches don't need lightning rods.") In 1784, Alessandro Volta came to watch Lichtenberg's experiments with electricity. We still speak of "Lichtenberg figures," the star-shaped patterns formed in dust by certain electrical discharges. ("Lightning flowers" are Lichtenberg figures etched in the capillaries just beneath the skin when someone is hit by lightning.) Although he was elected to the Royal Society in 1788, Lichtenberg made no important scientific discoveries. "A physical experiment which makes a bang," he noted, "is always worth more than a quiet one. Therefore a man cannot strongly enough ask of Heaven: if it wants to let him discover something, may it be something that makes a bang. It will resound into eternity." Much to his regret, Lichtenberg made no bangs in the world of science.

He did, however, generate an enthusiastic following. At the beginning of his teaching career, Lichtenberg tutored the sons of some English aristocrats. So popular was he that, in 1770, he was invited to England by his former pupils. It was the first of two visits. (The second, longer, one was from September 1774 until just before Christmas 1775.) It was love at first sight. Like the better sort of German then and later, Lichtenberg became a ferocious Anglophile. He moved in the highest social circles. He met Priestley, who performed experiments for

him, and many other men of science. The King and Queen delighted in his company and in speaking German with him. (Göttingen, as it happened, was one of George III's Hanoverian dominions.) So conspicuous was the royal favor—the King caused great commotion by coming to Lichtenberg's lodging one morning at 10:00 AM and asking for "Herr Professor"—that a rumor briefly circulated that Lichtenberg was George II's illegitimate son. Lichtenberg became an avid theater-goer in London. He was mesmerized especially by Garrick's acting ("he appeared wholly present in the muscles of his body") and said that it was from Garrick that Germans could learn most about what the word "man" really means. Lichtenberg's other great discovery in London was the engravings of Hogarth (who had died in 1764). Beginning in 1794, Lichtenberg published a series of meticulously detailed "explanations" (Lichtenberg called it an *Ausführliche Erklärung*) of Hogarth's engravings. Not a belt-buckle or button, barely a speck of dust, is left uninventoried. Lichtenberg's English translator described that work, which remained incomplete at Lichtenberg's death, as "a unique and sometimes bizarre excursion" into the textual recapitulation of the visual.

It is not surprising that Lichtenberg found in Hogarth a congenial spirit. Quite apart from their artistic merit, Hogarth's engravings are masterpieces of social observation. And it was to this above all that Lichtenberg devoted himself. "Chief employment of my life," he minuted in his diary in 1771, "to observe people's faces." One commentator described him as a "spy on humanity." It was almost literally true. Lichtenberg delighted in observing the street scene with a telescope from the eyrie of his window. "When an acquaintance goes by I often step back from my window, not so much to spare him the effort of acknowledging me as to spare myself the embarrassment of seeing that he has not done so." Lichtenberg was the faculty of *menschenbeobachterisch*—human observing—made flesh. The fruit of that passion was a collection of aphorisms united not by theme or tone but by a sensibility that was at once generous and disabused.

He who says he hates every kind of flattery, and says it in earnest, certainly does not yet know every kind of flattery. If people should ever start to do only what is necessary millions would die of hunger. Wine is accredited only with the misdeeds it induces: what is forgotten is the hundreds of good deeds of which it is also the cause. Wine excites to action: to good action in the good, to bad in the bad.

Lichtenberg once said that he would give part of his life to know what was the average barometric pressure in paradise. He never discovered that quantum, but in his aphorisms we have an extraordinary register of the barometric pressure of the human heart.

As a literary form, aphorisms have the liability of their strength. Aphorisms are insights shorn of supporting ratiocination. Sometimes they are arrived at in an instant, in a sudden illumination; sometimes, as Lichtenberg's draftings and redraftings of the same phrase or idea reveals, they are arrived at through a process of intellectual and rhetorical honing. Bertrand Russell reports that when he told Wittgenstein that he should not simply *state* what he thought was true but should provide arguments, Wittgenstein replied that arguments spoil the beauty of insights and that "he would feel as if he was dirtying a flower with muddy hands." Just so, aphorisms are the blossoms of thought. They may depend on stalk and soil, but their beauty is independent of those prerequisites.

Whether arrived at instantly or through patient refinement, the defining characteristic of the successful aphorism is what we might call its *suddenness*. Some good aphorisms are obvious truths stated neatly. "You can make a good living from soothsaying [*vom Wahrsagen*] but not from truthsaying [*vom Wahrheit-sagen*]." The best are truths that only seem obvious after they have been stated neatly. (They inspire the thought: "Now why didn't I think of that?") Many aphorisms have an enigmatic or double-sided character: they cut both ways and depend upon some essential ambiguity or equivocation for their power, their poetry. Whether they are *true* often seems

secondary or beside the point: they are piquant, they *feel* revelatory and thought-provoking, and that is enough. “The roof tile,” Lichtenberg says, “may know many things the chimney doesn’t know.” I would hate to part with that mot. But is it true? It would take an intrepid man to say.

Many people discount aphorisms, partly because so many are ambiguous, partly because they are episodic, isolated, and compressed. They seem too pat to be pertinent. Those traits can be liabilities, depending on the subject at hand. One would be ill-advised, for example, to trust a manual for bridge-builders or heart surgeons that was composed of aphorisms. But in other contexts the very characteristics that rob aphorisms of discursive strength endow them with other sorts of intellectual power. Nietzsche was quite right to defend the aphorism against its detractors. (“It is aphorisms!,” he wrote with mock contempt. “Is it aphorisms?—May those who would reproach me thus reconsider and then ask pardon of themselves.”)

But Nietzsche was also right that the aphorism, though it can reach deep, must do so quickly. A ponderous aphorism is a failed aphorism. It follows that, considered as intellectual nourishment, aphorisms are best taken sparingly; their very concentration makes them hard to digest *en masse*. Like an electric flash on a camera, they require time between discharges if they are to be fully illuminating. When Lichtenberg says that “The most dangerous untruths are truths slightly distorted,” we nod in agreement. He has encapsulated an entire theory of heresy in a handful of words. When he goes on to say in another aphorism that “With most people disbelief in a thing is founded on a blind belief in something else,” we nod again. Here we have the mechanics of some forms of atheism in a nutshell. When we read further that “This was the handle by which you had to grip him if you wanted to pour him out; if you gripped him anywhere else you burned your fingers,” we may nod again—here is an astute observation about a familiar character type. But how many more such nuggets can we take on board at a sitting? My own recommendation is that aphorisms be taken in doses of no more than a few pages a day. Any more, and the mind begins skipping.

Often, the appeal of an aphorism is a function of its cynical knowingness: “If I should ever produce an edition of his life,” Lichtenberg wrote of we know not whom, “go straight to the index and look up the words *bottle* and *conceit*: they will contain the most important facts about him.” We all know people like that, just as we know what Lichtenberg means when he observes that “Sometimes men come by the name of genius in the same way that certain insects come by the name of centipede; not because they have a hundred feet, but because most people cannot count above fourteen.”

Still, the element of cynicism can be overdone. “What is called an acute knowledge of human nature,” Lichtenberg writes, “is mostly nothing but the observer’s own weaknesses reflected back from others.” Well, sometimes, perhaps. But sometimes an acute knowledge of human nature is just that: an acute knowledge of human nature. “What they call ‘heart,’” Lichtenberg tells us, “lies much lower than the fourth waistcoat-button.” Well, yes, there is such a thing as sex. But is “heart,” is romance, to be entirely explained as a cover or front for sex? Freud thought so. Maybe Lichtenberg did, too. Were they right?

Having a low opinion of human nature may not be a prerequisite for being a good aphorist. But it helps. (It also, *nota bene*, aids in one’s appreciation of aphorisms.) Chamfort, Pascal, Gracián, Vauvenargues, La Rochefoucauld: none of these master aphorists was burdened by an overly sunny view of humanity, though each was gloomy in his own way. Pascal’s observation that all a man’s troubles begin when he leaves his room is of quite a different character from La Rochefoucauld’s thought that “In the misfortunes of our best friends we always find something that does not displease us.” But both proceed from the assumption that things are always worse than they seem.

The cynical nature of many aphorisms is one reason the genre is so popular. Many people, especially many intellectuals—the most ardent customers for the aphorism—pride themselves above all on their disillusionment.

They see themselves “seeing through” manners, pretensions, morals, whatever, and what they see is seldom edifying. (As a class, intellectuals are rarely—to use Wordsworth’s phrase—“surprised by joy.”) Aphorists are by profession debunkers. That is a large part of their power. It also points to a limitation. Untempered by elements of affirmation, debunking generates its own species of bunk. Take the aphorism by La Rochefoucauld quoted above. It is one of his most famous, and was well-known already in Lichtenberg’s day. Lichtenberg himself thought well of it, noting that “It sounds peculiar, but he who denies the truth of it either doesn’t understand it or does not know himself.” But mightn’t it also be that it sounds peculiar because it *is* peculiar, and that the misfortunes of our best friends generally stir pity, empathy, and compassion?

Many of Lichtenberg’s aphorisms are more ruminative than scarifying. “There is a great difference,” he observes, “between *still* believing something and *again* believing it.” Anyone who has reflected on the seasons of faith will know what Lichtenberg means. Some of his aphorisms have pointed relevance to the contemporary cultural scene: “It requires no especially great talent to write in such a way that another will be very hard put to understand what you have written.” Others, alas, have been overtaken by events: “It is easy to construct a landscape out of a mass of disorderly lines, but disorderly sounds cannot be made into music.” Lichtenberg was especially acute on the follies that intellectual life falls prey to. “Nowadays,” he notes, “we everywhere seek to propagate wisdom: who knows whether in a couple of centuries there may not exist universities for restoring the old ignorance.” And again: “There are very many people who read simply to prevent themselves from thinking.” Do Lichtenberg’s aphorisms add up to a coherent philosophy? I doubt it. J. P. Stern suggests that Lichtenberg promulgated a doctrine of “scattered occasions” (the phrase is Bacon’s), a sort of “inverted Categorical Imperative” that invests the moment, not the moral maxim, with absolute value. Perhaps. But that is simply to elevate the absence of doctrine into a doctrine. Lichtenberg’s acts of espionage on mankind were unsystematic even about being unsystematic. They were raids on the interesting, conducted as time, mood, and inspiration permitted. There is no unifying thread, though there are recurrent themes. One familiar theme is part description, part admonition: “It is almost impossible to bear the torch of truth through a crowd without singeing somebody’s beard.” If you bear the torch, Lichtenberg seems to say, be wary.

Notes

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1. *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg The Waste Books*; translated and with an introduction by R. J. Hollingdale. New York Review Books, 236 pages, \$12.95 (paper). [Go back to the text.](#)

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