

LICHTENBERG

A selection from the

Sudelbücher



INTRODUCTION - TRANSLATION

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[[Unfortunately, P.K.'s selection of Lichtenberg's aphorisms has not been included with this introduction owing to the inordinate amount of time needed to locate and or translate the relevant excerpts into English]]

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ΔΙΧΤΕΝΜΠΕΡΓΚ

Ἐπιλογή ἀπὸ τὰ
Sudelbücher



ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗ - ΜΕΤΑΦΡΑΣΗ

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στιγμή

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INTRODUCTION

I

As an autonomous (independent) literary kind/genre, the aphorism is the creation of the New Times; nonetheless, it (the aphorism) was not formed gradually or step by step inside the processes strictly related to the development (unfolding) or evolution of the art of the word (art of discourse, literature, letters), but rather made its appearance as the abrupt, but crucial or all-important, crystallisation of characteristic facets (or standpoints) of the newer ((more) modern) anthropology, theory of knowledge (epistemology) and world view. This becomes more comprehensible if we compare or contrast it with/to the sayings (mottos, dicta) and the apothegms (maxims) which have been handed down to us from the archaic and the ancient epoch (era, age). The *μηδὲν ἄγαν* (= Greek = (do) nothing in excess; avoid extrem(iti)es; behave correctly) or the *γνῶθι σαυτὸν* (= Greek = know thyself) constitute verbal condensations of a wisdom, and of a ((more) philosophical(-elaborate(d))) wisdom in respect of life, certain of, and in regard to, itself, and able – as it itself believes – to provide the correct orientation – and still something more: true inner fullness and tranquility, that is, felicity (bliss). Insistence upon a stable line of navigation, i.e. course of action, is not here unsuspecting or easy ethicisation/moralisation; it constitutes the decisive praxeological answer to the empirical ascertainment that human life is (the/a(n)) captive (absolutely controlled object) of the passions, happenstances, irresistible and invincible temptations or sudden, unexpected calamities, disasters and woes, and has the ambition or aspires to be

all the more unbending and inflexible (rigid) itself, the more it knows of the variability (changeability, mutability) and the imponderable (nature) of human affairs (things). The fixedness, firmness and steadiness of the ((more) philosophical(-elaborate(d))) wisdom in respect of life and of the correct (right) act ought and is able to be contradistinguished with success to/with/from the fluidity of biotic (i.e. living and life-related) factors, because behind every Becoming (or Series of Events) there is an Is (Being) (an Is stands), and behind every fleeting subjective perspective or prospect, a clear and distinct, and unchangeable, steadfast truth.

An essentially different sense or feeling in respect of man, of the world and of man's place inside the world, feeds and caters for the inspiration of the more modern (newer) aphorism, if we see it (the aphorism) as regards all (the totality) of its representatives and (its) versions. Not that, in accordance with every respective author, exhortations as to what should be done, or that the desire for a biotic (life-related and life-affirming) emancipatory stance in its permanency and its self-conviction, are lacking. However, the centre of gravity of attention has shifted towards the factors which obstruct, and as a rule frustrate, the consistent adoption, the non-deviating, unremitting realisation, of such a stance. And – the crucial point lies/rests here – these factors are not attached or joined to external adversities, but rather are reduced to the texture (composition or nature) of man, and indeed on the one hand, to the manner (mode, way) with/in which man cognitively comprehends the external world, the world of objects, and above all the world of beings like him, and on the other hand, the manner (mode, way) with/in which his logic (sense or reason) and his drives (urges, impulses) collaborate (cooperate, co-act) with, influence or cancel (negate, override) one another. The fundamental position of the modern (newer) theory of knowledge, that is to say, that knowledge is the operating, inter/cor-relating (functioning) of the cognitive functions of the subject, can be meta-interpreted

in such a way that it means (signifies) the perspective character (perspectivity) of every knowledge, its dependence not simply on whatever makes the human horizon generally finite, but, moreover, on the dispositions and the appetites, in a nutshell, on the temperament (idiosyncrasy) of every man looked at and considered in his individuality. However, a logic (sense or reason) which is subject to such and so many limits (restrictions) when it knows, cannot make its way in a sovereign, authoritative and dominant manner when it wants to do it. Its practical goals (purposes, ends), moral/ethical and other (goals), are permeated and soaked with and by subconscious and half-conscious proclivities and propensities (inclinations) of the deeper and darker compartments of the soul – and the only thing which begets self-complacent (self-satisfied) delusion of the domination (sovereignty) of, i.e. by, Reason (Logos), is its ability to rationalise and to beautify the drives (urges, impulses) to such a degree that its voice is heard as the command of ethics (morals, morality). Both in the realm of knowledge, as well as in the field of action (the act, acting), the Is (Being) is scattered (broken up) and dissolved inside the Becoming (or Series of Events), truth becomes fluid, (a) matter of the moment, (a) case of choice/selection, (an) object of preference.

As we know from the history of ideas, the scepticist(ic) and the relativistic currents (streams) manifested themselves with especial (particular) intensity already during the early phase of the New Times. The newer (more modern) rationalism replaced the primacy of theology with the primacy of anthropology, and at the same time, detached (broke) man (off) from God's jurisdiction and his earthly governors or deputies (surrogates, representatives) by putting him in order (incorporating, including or classifying him) in Nature and in its (Nature's) kinds of law bindedness (determinisms, law(rule)-based necessities), whilst pointing out his (man's) multifarious, determinative dependencies on biology, geography, the economy, ideology, and by curtailing in this way that

intellectual(-spiritual) dimension, whose exclusive handling (management) the theologians pursued. The question which arose (was begotten/born) now was if man, as a part of Nature, [[1]] had at his disposal, despite all (of) that, the means in order to dominate (over) nature (both external as well as his own nature), or, [[2]] whether his (man's) complete and total putting in order/inclusion (incorporation, classification) in natural processes logically meant the relativity of his perceptions (views) and of his undertakings, that is, the perspectivity of his knowledge and the variability (changeability, mutability) of his values. In Montaigne, we see how early and how intensely this dilemma became perceived and felt, and concurrently, we find all the basic arguments which advocate for/in favour of the second of its (this dilemma's) two above-mentioned solutions. But Montaigne's significance (importance, meaning) is still wider (broader, more extensive) and is attached/joined to the intellectual(-spiritual) genealogy of our own problem. In his work, that is, the conviction is interwoven regarding perspectivity and relativity – in other words: the fragmentariness – of human affairs (things, matters), with the fragmentariness of the literary form. Of course, the fragments here are still enormous (gigantic), complete essays; nonetheless, that which counts is the knowledge that only a fragmentary form can convey a knowledge necessarily fragmentary; and the other way around (conversely, contrariwise): the conscious relinquishment (renunciation, foregoing, abdication, abandonment, resignation) of/from the empty-of-meaning (ineffective, vain, futile) undertaking (venture) of a full systematic knowledge of Being and of an irrevocable, definitive ethics (morality), is expressed, in terms of language-literary style and register, in the abandonment and non-observance of the ideal of the writing (i.e. pieces written) being as perfect as that built [[– so to speak (metaphorically) –]] architecturally as in e.g. the great theological treatises of the late Middle Ages.¹ However, the abandonment and

¹ (Translator's footnote. Absolutely nothing to do with P.K.): In the West, figures such as: [[Anselm (1033–1109), Peter Abelard (1079–1142),] Bonaventure (1221–1274), Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), Scotus

non-observance is not lamented (bemoaned, bewailed, mourned) as a loss; on the contrary, whatever appears to be (seems) an inevitable fate (destiny) is converted into an analytical tool or instrument, and the conscious confinement (limitation, restriction) of the analytical effort to only one aspect, or to only one moment of human reality, allows one such profound penetration, such that from the full illuminating of a small part of the condition humaine (= French = human condition), conclusions or at least valid and plausible conjectures (guesses) regarding its (the human condition's) totality arise. Fragmentary knowledge becomes knowledge of the fragment, and the knowledge of the fragment discloses and reveals, in (its) turn, the mechanisms which make human knowledge necessarily fragmentary. At the level of language-literary style and register, this means: the aphorism as genre can synthesise a general thought or formulate (express) a momentary observation; however, general thought is not the finding (result) of an inductive syllogism, but a sudden concoction (invention, conception of an original idea) with the speed and the precise aim of an arrow or dart – and the other way around: momentary observation wins its interest and its depth as it submits or introduces a more general thought. Bearing in mind these internal correlations, we can easily reconstitute the road/path which leads from Montaigne to La Rochefoucauld.

II

The same correlations provide us with the interpretive key to approach and reach Lichtenberg's aphorisms. Because their intellectual(-spiritual) source is not found in some indigenous tendency of – incidentally still unformed (inchoate, unshaped) – German literature, but in the wider/broader European

Johannes Duns (c. 1265 – c. 1308), Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), and William of Ockham (1285–1347), immediately spring to mind.

spectrum of ideas and stances, whose beginnings and most general features were previously sketched out and outlined. Of course, Lichtenberg does not appropriate these ideas and stances by processing or refining La Rochefoucauld's relentless (inexorable, unsparing) and frequently sarcastic knowledge of humans, even though he (Lichtenberg) knows it (La Rochefoucauld's frequently sarcastic knowledge) first-hand, as he also knows Helvétius's work well, La Rochefoucauld's most loyal, perhaps, student amongst the philosophes. Much more does he (Lichtenberg) sail or navigate, i.e. go, with the more moderate, but no less penetrative forms of concurrent English empiricism and scepticism. He (Lichtenberg) admires (marvels at) Hume, he studies the associative psychology of Hartley – and one of his most beloved and favourite literary readings is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, where perhaps for the first time in the history of the more modern/newer novel, the problematic nature – and the fluidity of the concept – of personal identity is delineated so roughly and broadly, with the means pertaining to the literary style and register of satire; Hume's renowned related analysis in the *Treatise* finds here its witty (salty, wisecracking) philological (literary) embodiment. On the basis of the pre-paideia or preliminary education and this angle (standpoint, perspective), he (Lichtenberg) will later take (or devote himself) to the study of Kant, who confirms the fundamental conviction that the knowledge of objects is the function of human cognitive functions and not the faithful cognitive (mental) depiction or portrayal of metaphysically given substances (or essences), even though we can conjecture (guess) that in lieu (the place) of the Kantian forms of supervision (oversight, monitoring; [[translator's note: I think there might be another technical-philosophical term in English such as "introspection"/«ἐνδοσκόπηση» which might be meant, as the Greek term used «ἐποπτεία» does not seem to match]]) and of categories of cognition (understanding, comprehension, the intellect), Lichtenberg would put or posit, at least supplementarily, psychological and social magnitudes.

For Lichtenberg, the professor of physics at the university of Göttingen and one of the – at that time – well-known/famed representatives of this science in his country, a certain/some kind of contradiction did not exist between the necessarily perspective character of knowledge and the method of the positive sciences. Whatever the proponents and or lecturers/professors of contemporary conventionalism stressed around 1900, seemed to Lichtenberg self-evident one century earlier: natural/physical theories are fictitious constructions, products of the pressing intellectual(-spiritual) need for a plethora of phenomena – whose ultimate substance or essence is and will remain inaccessible to the mind/nous – to be economised (i.e. put aside or saved/conserved) within a united or unified (uniform) framework. The highest or supreme interpretive categories and concepts of physics do not have a greater substance (i.e. pertaining to substance) value, aim or result than the paramount (uppermost) genera, species or kinds of metaphysics; they are conventional names, signs like ψ and χ , which fill (in) the gap of knowledge – but in such a way, that the phenomena are “saved”. The symbolic world of physics is hypostatized and thus it misleads (deceives) thought, because it constitutes a part, the most abstract of course, of the – to a great extent – wider/broader symbolic world of language. Just as the conventionalism of our century went (hand in hand) with a systematic critique of the functions of language and with the attempt or effort for its metaphysical temptations to be neutralised, eliminated or defused, so too in Lichtenberg, the awareness (consciousness, insight) of the role of fictitious construct(ion)s in physical/natural science (i.e. physics) is tightly connected with the groundbreaking becoming conscious (consciousness) of the determination of the contents of thought by the forms of language. Already inside the grammatical types (formulae), a certain perception (view) regarding the texture (composition or nature), and the relations, of things is found deposited, so that the cognitive conception of these here (the texture and the relations of things) flows (issues, opens) directly or indirectly into the findings and results which the logic of

language specifies. Caught in the magic net of language, thought becomes the conduit of metaphors, allegories and analogies, it begets (gives birth, engenders) poetry and not truth, even when it works with concepts.²

But before they are put at/in the service of science, the fictional construct(ion)s, in a looser (slacker) and more motley form, are put in/at the service of the social and of the personal life of people. They appear as religious or political myths and as prejudices and biases of all kinds and of all sorts, starting from the collective belief or faith of the human genus/race (mankind) that it (the human race) constitutes the end (goal and purpose) or the unsurpassable capstone (i.e. crowning achievement) of Creation, and finishing in the usually vain or coquettish perception/view of every person in regard to himself, on the basis of which he chooses/selects his friends and his foes. Lichtenberg follows the mechanisms of the formation of such construct(ion)s from their elemental roots up to their most refined ramifications. The infinite aspects of collective and individual self-love/egotism provide the code for the decoding of each and every respective perspective, from inside of which the world and one's fellow human appears (can be seen), and also its (self-love's) infinite metamorphoses give [[us]] the thread for the understanding/comprehension of the parallaxes (i.e. distorted views) and or of the (various kinds of) overturning(s) (overthrows, subversions) of this perspective. It would, however, be superficial and untoward (inappropriate, absurd) for all this to be attributed either to a conscious and ceaselessly awake and alert innate malevolence (evil), or to a deformation of human nature under the pressure of a badly made or badly set-up society. Lichtenberg does not accept (either) the

² (Translator's footnote. Absolutely nothing to do with P.K.): this is where Lichtenberg's line of thought (seems to) lead(s); it's obviously not P.K.'s position, which accepts that there are limits to and difficulties with knowledge, but that people can know empirically-logically as non-normative "value-free" science, to the extent possible. Otherwise, anyone could just claim anything, and there would be no scientific realm of thought against which any claim could be judged, compared, etc. (if possible). Science qua scientific observation and knowledge, however, not only is not compulsory, in fact it is socially often absolutely unnecessary and sidelined at best.

myths of misanthropy, but also neither (does he accept) the myths of philanthropy. Because he knows that human behaviour takes root in a deep-deep (i.e. very deep) and ethically-morally neutral stratum, (there) where biology and psychology have not yet separated, where the light of consciousness only just also begins to shine from inside of the abysses of the subconscious. Not without reason, Lichtenberg's frequent observations regarding dreams and their peculiar (odd, quirky) logic bring us up to the peripheries (fringes or edge(s)) of the ascertainments of psychoanalysis. The syllogistic starting point is – in the wide/broad sense of the term – identical (equivalent, synonymous), and method is identical, up to a point, as well. Just like Freud, so too does Lichtenberg support/base his findings from/as regards the study of the behaviour of others, on the conclusions of a ceaseless and honest self-observation. He feels satisfaction and boasts about recording (registering, noting/writing down) the fluctuations of/in his psychological state, the dependence of his dispositions and of his preferences on his physical state/situation, the incatenations and intertwining(s) and interweaving(s) of his thought associations, the unexpected turns of his thoughts or of his desires. And he does not want to either cover up/over or to idealise or to rationalise anything. If he wants [[to feel]] some complacency, he finds it in the thought that the characteristic stance of a small soul is self-pity, whereas (the characteristic stance) of a proud (soul) is self-irony. He detests every rhetoricism, especially the rhetoricism of “tragic dead-ends (impasses)”.

The anatomy of behaviour is one of the essential facets of Lichtenberg's intellectual(-spiritual) strategy. The other facet consists in the simultaneous experimentalism with language and thought, whose result is crystallised in sophisticated and showy/pretentious, masterful witticism. At that height of intellectual demands, witticism constitutes something much more, and something much more different, than the usual joke as an expression of

goodwill, or than the usual scoffing and derision as a scathing (i.e. bitterly denouncing and harshly critical) weapon. It (Witticism) constitutes a novel and unanticipated combination of elements and of possibilities of language, so that whatever elements of reality or of thought correspond to the elements of language, are combined equally unexpectedly. This regrouping or reconstitution does not enrich simply the existing, generally accepted thought and reality, but rather it overturns it, showing that this (reality) is founded with, i.e. by means of covenants (compacts, agreements, contracts) which renowned “common sense” embraces or takes onboard (adopts, absorbs, warms to) without examination. Witticism inevitably shatters (disturbs, destroys, distresses) such covenants; because the ground/terrain or soil (earth) where common sense flourishes (blooms, reaches its peak) is precisely the lack (absence) of witty (brainy) genius, of that which is called Witz, esprit or humour, and which – in contrast and opposition to the sluggishness or listlessness and the conformism of common sense, is characterised by perpetual mobility and unadvised impiety (irreverence, profanity). In witticism, if it is understood in this way, and is executed or exercised in this way, whatever Lichtenberg demands of thought (cogitation, reflection, meditation) generally is fulfilled in the tastiest manner (of manners): to see everything *otherwise* and *differently*, to circumvent openly admitted or confessed truths, and to turn them upside down in order to see if perhaps in that way they will be more effective (and instructive to, or influential on, the public). This, of course, is much more difficult than what all those – who think that they are transcending every conformism only (and only) because to the old conformism they pit or oppose (contrast) a new conformism – can imagine. As an observer of the revolutionary outbreaks (explosions, eruptions) of 1789 and of the years immediately following, Lichtenberg had the opportunity to ascertain that e.g. in the place of pre-revolutionary hierarchical

(kinds of) conformism(s), went conformisms of democratic equality,³ and that these bound the thought equally tightly along with, i.e. as, the previous conformisms. If he lived today, Lichtenberg would have extended this thought by saying that the democratic fragmentation of society into independent individuals did not mean the end of conformism, but only the multiplication of its bearers, and in part the reversal of its content: because even also a general revolt (uprising) against conformism in the name of “self-realisation” can constitute a new conformism, equally incapable as any other kind of conformism whatsoever to be witty in the radical sense Lichtenberg gives to the term (wit(ticism)).⁴

The narrow nexus (connection, inter/cor-relation) between the acceptance of the perspective character (perspectivity) of truth, and the possibility of witty or ingenious (bright) thought bringing to light truths thanks to the unexpected change of/in the openly admitted or confessed perspective – this nexus shows us in itself that for Lichtenberg, relativism and scepticism do not at all entail some relinquishment (abandoning, foregoing, renunciation) of systematic thinking (reflection) and of active life. The passion and joy of precise observation, love of the concrete (specific) and of the characteristic detail, the systematic study of and indulgence in the labyrinths and the traps of theory, the fine distinctions and the daring comparisons, the attempt and effort to approach the past and to keep one’s distance from the present, merciless self-analysis and the forgiving (charitable, clement, lenient) understanding or comprehension of others, the art of writing, and the still greater art of erasing (rubbing out): so, are these not enough to fill a finite life? The motive here is not only (super)abundant and unending theoretical curiosity; perhaps, deeper is the need for honesty and the

³ (Translator’s footnote. Absolutely nothing to do with P.K.): notice how here “democratic” is CLEARLY a term relative to *societas civilis*. Obviously, we are not talking about actual Greek(-style) democracy.

⁴ (Translator’s footnote. Absolutely nothing to do with P.K.): just think e.g. of all the tattoos, the piercings, the hair colours, the FREAK-FEMINO-FAGGOTISED-JOO-NEGRO-MUHUMUD-DRUG-WORSHIP, etc., etc., etc., today, in certain “Western” countries.

need for joy which honesty gives – honesty not understood as a moral/ethical virtue next to (beside) all others, but rather as an end-in-itself and as the self-reinforcement of (or self-support for) the spirit's force and strength to see things in the way many people do not dare to see them, and to reject every censorship, even the censorship (on the part) of ethics (morals, morality), when it (ethics, morality) imposes upon and forces (necessitates) you to stress that, and to disregard the other (thing). On the terrain (ground, soil, earth) of this honesty, an internal discipline is born very different to/than/from the known forms of honesty, which constitute a means for the achievement of a goal (end, purpose). Discipline therefore coincides with its (the said (Lichtenberg's) honesty's) goal (end or purpose), it is nothing other than the filling (in) (repletion) of time and of life with the engagements, activities and pursuits of the witty (ingenious, brainy) mind. Precisely, whoever knows – and does not forget – the transitoriness (transience) and the relativity of human affairs needs such a discipline doubly (twice). One needs it (such discipline), moreover, as a footing, foundation or basis for one's own self-respect inside a world of fluid perspectives and of alternating values, as personal fortification against sciolism (i.e. the half-knowledge of things, but never in any depth or with real, extensive insight and understanding), and against the cocky insolence of newspaper scribblers and of pseudo-critics, against the prissiness and the narcissism, the great tongue (language) and the small soul of the so-called philological and literary world (world of letters). Lichtenberg's sidesplittingly hilarious notes about the goings-on (carryings-on) of those philologising (i.e. engaging in the literary world (in letters)), read as if they were written today. Not because Lichtenberg was a prophet; but because since then, nothing has changed.

III

Lichtenberg's aphorisms are found scattered inside/within his so-called *Sudelbücher*, that is, in the rough-draft notebooks where he wrote down (recorded) as if in the form of a catalogue, higgledy-piggledy (pell-mell) and without a second processing, i.e. correction and revision, all kinds of thoughts, observations, curiosities, collections of jottings and other notes, anecdotes and plays on words. It is a matter of a whole life's work, since he started writing down this material (these writings down) in 1764, at 22 years of age, and continued it (them) without breaks until the year of his death in 1799. It is a life's work also in the sense that Lichtenberg wrote and published a minimum of (very few) texts, mainly small treatises in various magazines and philological calendars, whilst other texts, he withdrew at the last moment. Apart from certain satires, his more/most well-known publication was/were the *Analytical Explications of Hogarth's Etchings* (= *Lichtenberg's Commentaries on Hogarth's Engravings*), which he wrote in the context of a long confrontation with Lavater's physiognomics. It is not difficult to understand what pushed Lichtenberg – a very short (midget) hunchback – to an opposition to a view (perception), which from the external features of man, wanted to deduce his (man's) psychical properties (qualities or characteristics). The same confrontation (contrasting and opposition) occupies a significant part of the *Sudelbücher*, whereas other sectors/sections of theirs (of the *Sudelbücher*) refer to matters of the then natural/physical (physics) and mathematical science, or include Lichtenberg's thoughts on the occasion of the reading of Kant, his observations regarding the revolutionary events in France, or regarding his trips to England etc.. As one guesses or foretells, here not just a life, but also an epoch (era), is depicted (illustrated, put forth). For that reason (as well) alone, the totality of these texts is accessible to the knower of the epoch. Our selection, nevertheless, was made with such criteria that philological (literary) and

historical aids are superfluous. It offers only aphorisms, and indeed all those which as to their style and register and their content belong pre-eminently (above all) to the wider/broader European tradition of the genre. At the (epi)centre (focal point, centre of attention/interest) stands (is) the problem of the knowledge of man, of the mechanism of passions and of perspectives, and of the particular way (mode, manner) in which this mechanism acts at certain moments, in certain individuals or in certain groups. The knowledge of humans and self-knowledge were for Lichtenberg in essence identical (equivalent). And, as he insinuates (implies) a few times, he wanted them to be identical for his reader too.

The *Sudelbücher* were published for the first time after Lichtenberg's death in *Vermischte Schriften* (ed. L. C. Lichtenberg – F. Kries, 9 v., 1800-1806). The second, augmented edition of the *Vermischte Schriften*, in 14 volumes, was done (produced) by L. C. and C. W. Lichtenberg in the period 1844-1853. The edition *Aphorismen* in 5 volumes (ed. A. Leitzman, 1902-1908) followed. Recently, two very good editions were released, one by W. Promies (*Schriften und Briefe*, 4 v., 1967-1974) and the other by F. Mautner (also *Schriften und Briefe*, 5 v., 1983). Our translation is based on the text of the latter (edition (by F. Mautner)). The aphorisms are presented in the order (where) they can be found in the text, which was handed over or passed down [[to us]] in note/exercise books dated and characterised (distinguished or labeled) with/by capital letters.