FOUR

Lichtenberg’s “Opinions-System” (Meinungen-System)

If every person occupied his own planet, what might then become of philosophy? Nothing—It would be the same as it is now: The essence of an individual’s opinions is his philosophy.

Lichtenberg, Sudelbücher (Waste Books) C.142

Introduction: Opinion Fragments

Only after his death in 1799 did Georg Christoph Lichtenberg’s Sudelbücher (Waste Books) enter the public sphere by way of posthumous publications. Among the extremely wide-ranging topics addressed in these private notebooks, Lichtenberg often writes about an “opinions-system” (Meinungen-System), by which he means the individuals’ methods for reaching and retaining conclusions based on experience. This mode of data collection, more than coincidentally related to the form of the waste books themselves, is conceived as at least latently scientific in its structure—if not actively experimental—and is thus also implicitly anti-normative because the experiences to be tabulated and the ways of drawing conclusions from them could never be perfectly standardized according to a universal method.

Lichtenberg’s Meinungen-System is the complement and opposite of Fichte’s “international opinion-system” [Meinungssystem der Völker],
Lichtenberg’s “Opinions-System” discussed in the previous chapter. Fichte understands the opinion system as an exclusively modern and quasi-conspiratorial phenomenon by which the eighteenth century public sphere turned against itself by excluding reason and replacing it with the conventional—and ultimately conservative—populism of public opinion. Fichte observed that, instead of a vehicle for progress, enlightenment, and equality, the published sphere was increasingly becoming a means of muting and ultimately drowning out the possibility of both revolution and reform. A flood of nonhierarchical discourse—mere “opinions”—threatened to produce a new irrationalism, which Fichte seeks to halt in an appeal to the conscience of individuals, hoping that this innately human orientation toward truth will be able to quell the superficiality of opinions.

A conscientious opinion system (in Fichte’s sense) requires internalization, which implies the methodical practice of an opinions system (in Lichtenberg’s sense). This is the only way for the individual to avoid the compulsive determinism of an opinion system that merely parrots the beliefs of others and instrumentalizes the system as a means for pursuing material or psychological ends. In light of these risks, everything depends on how the difference between the collective opinion system and the individual opinions system is articulated. Fichte conceived a totalized and totalizing opinion system (in functional and dysfunctional variants), within which the individual must in any case—if the system is to work at all—act and think according to extremely codified and formalized discursive norms.

Lichtenberg’s idea of the individual opinions system leads him to much more rigorously investigate the possibilities of formalizing individual thought processes. Compared with Fichte, he is more specifically concerned with the individual’s specific ways of arranging and ordering and relating to existing facts, opinions, theories, and experience. But, like Fichte, Lichtenberg opposes the idea of a merely passive reception of opinions, but he also supposes that the acquisition of opinions always implies activity on the part of the individual, who actively arranges—or fundamentally rearranges—the given inputs that opinions represent as long as they are viewed in isolation. Lichtenberg thus breaks with the idea of an individual governed by a singular “own opinion.” The singularity of the individual’s opinions manifests itself in a plurality of opinions that may or may not be equally “held,” and which—in any case—only come into play as an ensemble within variable contexts. “Pure opinion versus opinion, or better: the opinions of one versus................. 16924$ $CH4 08-13-08 08:15:47 PS
those of the other” (L.205). Though he follows the agonistic structure of
discourse that underwrote the exchange of opinions in Locke, Lichtenberg
views every isolated opinion as a mere subopinion, and “opinion,” even
within any given individual, is thus an irreducibly plurivocal and collective
mass, which is only temporarily and opportunistically at the disposal of the
ego. Opinions in this sense are highly mobile and consequently also imply
a conception of politics that does not take opinion as constant function,
but as an unknown quantity whose underlying determinants and ultimate
meanings cannot be conclusively fixed or quantified.

Even if modern and discursively oriented societies are governed by an
opinion system in Fichte’s sense of media-generated conformism—whether
it be a merely “socially” or transcendentally based system (either based on
regulative posterity or on conscience’s internalized regulations)—the possi-
bility of variable individual adoptions, comprehensions, and motivations
within this more or less monolithically determined system will always imply
at least a minimal degree of autoaffectivity, which will tend to undermine
the “systematicity” of the system. From the point of view of the possibility
of a totally homogeneous opinion system, the individual opinion represents
an internal boundary of the system’s ability to be uniformly spread and
understood. The constitution of a universal opinion system, in other words,
will always be self-reflexively affected, even if nominally and marginally, by
the singularity and occasionalism of actual opinions. The act of expressing
an opinion, especially in writing, further implies a tact and a tactics—a psy-
chology—that precede the first word, and this functional dimension of
opinion, at the limit, can effectively void the content—the truth claim or
validity claim—of the opinion declared. The voicing or, especially, the writ-
ing of individual opinions is always influenced by a functional preconceptual-
ization of the opinion system from the side of the one who intends to
participate in it. The form of the opinion system—precisely what remains to
be determined in every written and spoken opinion—mutually determines
thought’s possible forms and, moreover, the form of thought in writing.

In his “Correction” of the thoughts on the French Revolution, Fichte
speaks of “opinion-fragments.” The German word, Meinungsfragment, un-
ambiguously relegates opinion to the status of the fragmentary and partial,
but remains ambiguous as to whether this means that (1) each isolated opin-
ion is a only fragment, or (2) the totality of the opinions of an individual is
also fragmentary (with regard to the larger totality of truth), or (3) the form
of the individual itself is that of a fragment. Opinion is in any case not accidentally tied to the form of the fragment, and this formal connection is actually amplified to become the form of subjectivity in general. The subject, determined as a subject of experience and of opinions, is an incomplete and fragmentary subject. Fichte speaks of this in an extended nominalization, a list and a dependent clause that becomes a subject without object: “The aversion toward all autonomous thought (Selbstdenken), the intellectual lassitude and the mental inability to follow even a short series of deductions, the prejudices and the contradictions that have spread themselves across the totality of our opinion-fragments (unsere ganzen Meinungsfragmente)—this is the one side” (205). In these words, Fichte characterizes the passive aversion to truth. Opinion fragments, as long as they remain in the passive state described, can only remain fragmentary; their mere addition or summation would never amount to a totality but only another fragment. These fragments, added up, are merely our opinion fragments; the contradictory invocation of a deficient totality—“unsre ganzen Meinungsfragmente”—implies that “we” in our total and collective incompleteness are ourselves no more than a fragmentary sum. The whole collection of fragments which “we” individually and collectively are, are thus designated, if not destined, to remain fragments. The individual, conceived as an opinion fragment and simultaneously as a collection of opinion fragments, cannot be the object of any synthesis or sublation within any projected totality (whether it be predicated as “discursive,” “rational-critical,” or merely “popular”).

How would Fichte respond to such this? He opposes the labor of “thinking for one’s self” (Selbstdenken) to the latent and manifest fragmentariness of opinions, and thus manages to preserve—in admittedly contradictory and merely prescriptive fashion—a teleological impulse toward an idea of truth to be produced historically. This truth is not conceived, however, as a part of an inevitable or automatic process, but is only a possible result of the immanent conflicts of the political here-and-now. And this truth, which Fichte never doubts or relativizes, remains to be validated and instituted within a discursive system that does not exclude—and in fact requires—the real life-and-death conflict of individuals who are once again cast back upon their consciences as the source of an absolute that is necessarily missing from the discourse of opinion. These deficiencies in Fichte’s version of autonomous thought—which is at once too relative, too absolute, and not
real autonomy—necessitates looking elsewhere for a better model of freedom of thought.

Lichtenberg, without asserting the absolute autonomy of the “I,” represents an earlier model of independent thinking, which he, like Fichte—but much more rigorously—tried to deliberately exemplify in his own practice of writing and argumentation. The image of Lichtenberg as free thinker is a standard topos of his popular reception, not without reason, but reading the texts in which he actually analyzes the problem of free thinking will tend to complicate this reception and make it difficult to read him as an unproblematic (or tragic) hero of intellectual independence. In any case, regardless of the how one chooses to dramatize it, Lichtenberg is arguably modernity’s most central test case for the problem of individual autonomy within a discursively formatted opinion system. His envisioned rethinking of thinking cast him in the role of silent partner—because he was largely forgotten—in the work of figures like Nietzsche and Freud. Retrospectively, he was able to become a historical emblem of a post-Cartesian conception of successful subjectivity with a specific emphasis on the livability of the modern conception of the autonomous individual. As has been conclusively documented in recent decades, it is difficult to overstate Lichtenberg’s influence (even in absence of international fame and name recognition) on later philosophy and literature. But, without excessively validating this reception in direction or the other, the reason for it is certainly Lichtenberg’s position on the cusp of a particularly modern predicament; retrospectively, his encounter with the problem of the relation of individual, “private” life to popular, scholarly, and scientific public spheres seems to represent a different and perhaps more successful model than, for example, Wieland’s skeptical populism, Fichte’s individualism, or the rationalism of Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?” From the perspective of these more or less dominant models, it is hardly surprising that Lichtenberg’s response to the dilemmas of the public sphere has also undergone numerous repetitions and permutations in the intervening years. The purpose of the present chapter is not to deal with this later reception directly, but rather to look behind the various attempts at reformatting Lichtenberg’s insights, in order to reconsider his theorizations on their own terms.

In the context developed in my preceding chapters, Lichtenberg’s writings on the epistemology of opinion reveal him to be well-informed and up-to-date on the problems of opinion. They critically reflect more than
reiterate the party line of the Enlightenment ("think for yourself!"). As a natural scientist in the field of physics and astronomy, as well as a more popularly oriented scholar—writing at a time of increasing specialization under the pressure of competing disciplines—Lichtenberg held well-developed amateur opinions on literally everything. Between these two poles of popular and scientific universalism, esoteric and exoteric reason, he was well versed in the discursive pragmatics of both academic communication and popular literary genres such as the novel. He was thus ideally placed to observe and reflect upon the mechanics of a rapidly expanding and transforming public sphere. In summary, it is safe to say, as the present chapter will also show, that Lichtenberg was not entirely convinced that the public sphere of his era could be deemed a success at any of its levels.

In terms of his specific theorizations, Lichtenberg was concerned with Locke’s unanswered questions and unresolved problems (discussed in chapter 3); both address the same impasses of the opinion system, which have plagued modernity from the beginning, and thus Lichtenberg’s iteration of them cannot simply be termed “an advance” or a “solution” that goes beyond the options that were already on the table. The very idea of an advance, moreover, itself presupposes the competitively structured teleological form of a collective singular—not universal—system of “truth,” “progress” and “posterity,” which is not applicable to Lichtenberg’s understanding. He is particularly unimpressed with the potential efficacy of a competitively structured posterity system in which the truth and the better argument will inevitably come out on top. Regarding the simpler formula that Locke gave to the problem—a pragmatics of how to deal with differences of opinion in one’s everyday lifeworld—Lichtenberg, typical for his era in these regards, adds the problem of a historical posterity and intensifies the unhappy compromise represented by the conceptual pair of tolerance and difference (of opinion). In the form of the Sudelbücher, it is already clear that Lichtenberg’s relation to these questions differs from more strictly philosophical, prescriptive, or didactic authors. The aphoristic form of his thought is central here, even when his conclusions seem superficially congruent with the philosophical or enlightenment traditions.

More than what he says, the form of Lichtenberg’s writing distinguishes him and makes him exemplary for specific countertraditions of and within the modern public sphere. For him—as was differently the case in Locke, Mendelssohn, Wieland, and Fichte—thought is generated, developed, and
Lichtenberg’s “Opinion-System”

articulated in an internal dialogue with oneself, but Lichtenberg’s waste books attempt to capture and formalize this, putting it into practice as a new private form of writing. The method represented by the thought assemblies called “waste-books” does not respond to the opinion system within the conventions of this system—thereby producing the contradictions and hypocrisies discussed in chapters 2 and 3—but enacts a new system that would be more appropriate to the kind of thought demanded by the modern public sphere. The result is a form of writing that corresponds to “conversing with one’s self” (Selbstgespräch) and “thinking for one’s self” (Selbstdenken). Publicly, on the other hand, Lichtenberg, like everyone else—and possibly more so than many—understood published texts as a form of self-validation before a judging public and posterity, and his dissatisfaction with these efforts seems to be offset by the attempt, in his private writing, including letters, to further his thinking on his own outside of the public arena. From the perspective of the waste books, his published polemics look more like diversionary tactics: they are highly opinionated and often satirical, but, like Nietzsche (who would take this strategy to the limit), Lichtenberg’s published opinions typically betray a demonstratively counterexemplary and essentially insincere participation in the opinion-system. Rather than expounding an internally consistent system, position, or system of positions—and unable bring together the totalizing vision necessary to write a novel—Lichtenberg’s nonscientific publications tend to be reactive and polemical. But, unlike Fichte, whose polemics sought to “correct” the thoughts of the public to instruct it in a system of discourse that might actually work, Lichtenberg tended to push the system to a point of impasse or breakdown. In the ostentation of the fight for the last word—slightly more common in the youth of the public sphere—his performances, more than striving to annihilate his opponents and their arguments, implicitly question the efficacy of the system that is supposed to regulate the exchange of opinions. This specific exploitation of the “hypocrisy” or “performative contradiction” inherent in the system shows what he has in common with other thinkers, but his tactics nevertheless prove uniquely illuminating: Lichtenberg exposes scholarly polemics (along with the fictive posterity that reads and approves them) as a literary genre that is not ultimately governed by the weighing of reasons for the sake of reason.
Think for Yourself I: Parallels with Fichte’s Ego

The situation of the conscience-governed ego (Ich), whose tenuous transcendental status is subjected to rhetorical overcompensation in the preface to Fichte’s “Correction” of the opinions on the French Revolution, is comparably laid bare by Lichtenberg, including a similarly exaggerated reassertion of the ego and its place. In a Sudelbuch entry (B264) from November 1769, Lichtenberg writes:

As a result of our early and frequently really excessive reading, whereby we receive so much material without being able to assimilate it, through which our memory becomes accustomed to managing the household for sensation and taste, a deep philosophy is often necessary to restore our feelings to their first state of innocence (Stand der Unschuld), to find one’s self out from under the rubble of foreign matter, to begin to feel for one’s self, to speak one’s self and I would almost like to say even just to exist at all (auch einmal selbst zu existieren). (Lichtenberg's emphases)

The “state of innocence,” specified here as the state before one learns to read, is in the same position, structurally, as Fichte’s conscience. The state of innocence in Lichtenberg is the fundament of the ego that gets buried under too much indigestible text. As in Fichte, the ego’s very existence is threatened by opinions, the foreign matter of others’ thoughts and ideas. The sovereign ego can become lost, but, as in Fichte, it retains the possibility of finding its way out—finding its way in—and back to itself. This lifelong project of assimilating the rubble of learning is synonymous with Lichtenberg’s concept of autonomous thought (Selbstdenken): his ego cogito is constantly threatened by a kind of automatic function that does not think for itself, which is always on the verge of becoming an impersonal subject of cognition, merely the sum of others’ thoughts.

Following the logic of this dilemma, the words “I think” (ich denke) may disingenuously posit a subject where there is actually is none. It would be better to say “it thinks” (es denkt) because the sum of the cogito may be nothing but the loose change of accumulated—alien and extrinsic—memories. Writing about this “it”—the id or Es against which the ego must posit itself—Lichtenberg produced his single most influential aphorism, K76, an undateable but probably late waste book entry, perhaps from 1793 or 1794:
Wir werden uns gewisser Vorstellungen bewußt, die nicht von uns abhängen; andere glauben, wir wenigstens hingen von uns ab; wo ist die Grenze? Wir kennen nur allein die Existenz unserer Empfindungen, Vorstellungen und Gedanken. Es denkt sollte man sagen, so wie man sagt: es blitzt. Zu sagen cogito is schon zuviel, so bald man es durch Ich denke übersetzt. Das Ich anzunehmen, zu postulieren, ist praktisches Bedürfnis.

We become aware (bewußt) of certain ideas (Vorstellungen) that are independent of us; others believe that if nothing else we depend upon ourselves; how do we draw the line? We only know the existence of our sensations, ideas and thoughts alone. It would be better to say it thinks just as one says it's storming (es blitzt, literally refers to the lightning strike). To say cogito is already too much, as soon as it is translated as I think. To assume the I, to postulate it, is a practical necessity.

Lichtenberg's exegesis of the cogito, unlike the analyses of the earlier B264, seems less optimistic about the possibility of recovering the “I” from the “it.” In K76 he formulates it as a problem of the origin—Ursprung or Herkunft—of the ego.12 If “we” do not know the origin of our “own” thoughts, (pre)conceptions (Vorstellungen), and emotions—if we are not ourselves the complete origin of our thoughts—then we must be unsure about the status of the “I” that thinks that it thinks them. The “I,” rather than a positive entity (Setzung), is thus merely posited, postulated, and presupposed as the result of an excessive translation (Über-Setzung) whose problematic origins are forgotten in the process. The “I” cannot be concretely posited, but is rather only a postulate assumed out of practical necessity. The “I” does not think itself nor does it think for itself, but it only carries on thoughts—others’ thoughts of known or unknown origin—and recursively thinks the thinkable without ever having any certainty of the ultimate ownership of these thoughts. The theory of cognition proposed here—nominally “Lichtenberg’s”—does not recognize thought as an intellectual property. Every thinkable thought is necessarily thinkable not only by the self but by unknown others or, at the limit, by an unknown id (even if this thought is also always thought otherwise by these others).

This id-based conception of thought causes the wider Enlightenment project of autonomous thought (Selbstdenken), which Lichtenberg is often taken to epitomize, to appear untenable. Thought is bound by its own internal and external genealogies—and is ultimately unable to be differentiated
from them—and it travels according to a momentum inaccessible to a subject who is never able call its thoughts its own—only its own—and is therefore not an autonomous subject of thought but only its dependent object. This conception, written at exactly the same time as Fichte’s response to the Revolution, reaches beyond the latter’s ego-centrism by emphasizing the impersonal and merely “topical” component of the cogito. In his final decade, Lichtenberg appears to be at least marginally at home with the idea that the ego may not exist except as a fiction expressed by a shifter used to unreliably indicate an aggregation of contingent experiences and alien thoughts. Lichtenberg’s description of the “I” predicates it as a nonexistence that is not transvalued as a transcendental form or precondition, nor does he fall back to the Cartesian formula of self-reflexivity—the fact that I think at all and think that I know it—to cognitively ground ideas (Vorstellungen) for which the “I” is only a carrier. But Lichtenberg’s next step is to assume that these thoughts as contents, oriented and predisposed within the traditional and topical matrices from which they at least nominally originate, may become newly available to reappropriation and recombination by the activity of the “I,” which is redefined as the one who has ideas and also actively manipulates them, experiments with them, without entirely ruling them or being completely determined by them.13

**Think for Yourself II: Autonomous Thought and the Fallibility of Memory**

Like Locke, Lichtenberg describes memory as an obstacle to the adequate grounding of opinions. Opinions are always without sufficient reason, based as they are upon reasons—between those that memory forgot and those not yet known—which are only ever virtually present. But Lichtenberg’s depiction of the problem of memory is more dynamic than Locke’s because the unnerving experience of memory lapses is autobiographically foregrounded:

The gathering and constant reading of materials without any exercise of the faculties (Übung der Kräfte) has the unpleasant effect, which I have noticed in myself for many years (written 1788), that everything depends on memory and not on a system. It is for this reason that, during oral disputations, the best arguments do not occur to me as readily as when I am alone, or, more precisely, [in oral formulation] I have to invent what I already actually knew, but usually I
realize that I knew it only when it is of no use to me to have known it. (H168, Lichtenberg’s emphases)

Memory in Lichtenberg’s experience is of dubious reliability. It fails when called upon, and its value is further undermined by an irritating untimeliness in what it remembers. Excessive reading is named again as the culprit: “Constant reading,” the disordered absorption of data, causes the memory to become unreliable, unless what is absorbed is also ordered and assimilated by an equally constant “exercise of the faculties” (Übung der Kräfte). This use of the intellectual powers, which may rehearse and internalize arguments alone (in the process of reading) or as a repeated public performance (such as teaching), seems to refer to some kind of processing of what is read. Within this conception, “intellectual practice” can also include writing (perhaps especially of waste books) as a part of the more general task of assimilating what one reads. But this kind of private topical localization, contextualization, and internal analysis proves insufficient to the adequate grounding of the numerous volumes consumed by scholars or other well-read persons. No matter how much Lichtenberg practices and improves his abilities, it seems that “reading” (consumption) still remains disproportionate to “writing” (and other forms of assimilation). The former constantly overshadows the latter as the “I” struggles to stay afloat in the It. The “practice” and “exercise” (Übung) of thought as a means of mastering both memory and masses of material thus appears, at best, as an idealized goal, something to be worked toward despite its ultimate unattainability.

Lichtenberg, speaking of his own failures of assimilation, declares that memory itself, without the deliberate mnemonic assimilatory effort he calls Übung, is entirely unsystematic. The problem is not only that memory forgets (which would imply that the necessary data is simply absent), but what it willfully withholds: everything that has been learned is still there, kept somewhere but not directly accessible. Memory is not just unsystematic but asystematic and antisytematic; it fails deliberately, perversely, freely forsaking the speaker, the thinker, the writer, precisely in the moment of need—refusing his orders and forcing him to “invent what he already knows” before his “own” thoughts can be formulated. Opinions (Meinungen) in this sense are “made up” and invented, impromptu inventions produced under the pressures of the moment, whereas the real opinion of the subject—what it would really think if it had time to think about it—is withheld and perpetually
deferred to a later moment, “when it is no longer of any use.” Allowing for a degree of exaggeration, Lichtenberg characterizes the reasoned discourse of “arguments” as either temporally (or perhaps only temporarily) obstructed, or, in the worst case, as a chaotic mix real and apparent arguments lacking the authoritative or systematic foundation necessary for their final evaluation and differentiation. Thought and opinion are governed by the specifically literary indecisiveness of a system of situational and rhetorical compensations, which would never be compatible with the production of fixed and finished positions, the calculated weighing of pros and cons. Even a younger Lichtenberg, whose injunctions to proceed rationally and methodically are often somewhat more severe—and even if the *Sudelbücher* themselves are viewed as a kind of associative aid and mnemonic ordering device for the construction of future arguments—this “systematicity” will still never completely overcome the chaos of thought’s emergence from its disorderly and unsystematic origins. The name “waste book” and the autobiographical contingency of its form clearly testify to a certain (preordained) failure of this “system” as a method of mental ordering, and even if thought is able to partially overcome its obstacles in the process, the resulting conclusiveness and reason may more often than not—especially whenever “politics” come into play—be indistinguishable from a forced result, an argument of opportunity.

Lichtenberg strives develop a rational system that would be able to avoid the rhetorical falsification of thought under the pressure of situation. But H168’s claim of memory’s *asystematicity*—its refusal of the systematic orders that the conscious mind seeks to impose on it—seems to contradict Lichtenberg’s earlier views.14 In F203, from September 1776, for instance, memory appears to represent a latent mental order that only needs to be manifested through the activity of the subject:

The properly philosophical reader (*der philosophische eigentliche Leser*) does not just keep piling things up in his memory, as the glutton does in his belly, and on the other hand the memory-head (*Gedächtnis-Kopf*) acquires a full belly more than a strong and healthy body; in the case of the former, everything that he reads and finds usable is, if I may say so, directed and distributed (*zugeführt*) within the system and the inner body, this here and the other over there (*dieses hierhin und das dorthin*), and the whole acquires strength.

Here Lichtenberg differentiates between a good opinions system and a bad one. The distinction occurs via an analogy between the “memory-glutton”
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and the “philosophical reader.” Whereas the former merely stuffs itself and thoughtlessly acquires, accumulates, and perhaps retains, the latter is more selective in its diet and only takes on what it can assimilate and order. The German words zugeführt, dieses hierhin und das dortbin imply an biological, economic, or generally distributive metaphor, whose status as a metaphor is underlined by the words that introduce it, “if I may say so” (wenn ich so sagen darf). In this model, selectivity and the reflective ordering of given inputs within given capacities is the key to autonomous thought; originality, on the other hand, is disqualified as a decisive criterion because it would always only be an egocentric subjectivism. But the precise basis for the selection is not elaborated beyond the single word usefulness (Brauchbarkeit), which would seem to represent a moment of uncontrollable subjective input within the system. Based on Lichtenberg’s own accumulative praxis in the Sudelbücher, it is possible to additionally surmise that he does not mean the application or referencing of some namable or fixed external order, but only the following of whichever mental order preexists the new assimilation. This provisional “order” may be defined by passing interests, fleeting associations, and limited perspectives. The contradiction inherent to this conception of Brauchbarkeit lies in the fact that the instance that performs the ordering is presumably the same memory that is to be ordered. In the discrepancy between the performance of ordering that arises out of a preexisting order, the composition of waste books can only amount to a reproduction and accumulative repetition of memory’s own intrinsic disorder. The aspect of reproduction is crucial, however, because the minimal system of repetition—as a kind of “practice” or “drill”—allows memory’s unsystematic and disorderly order to reproduce itself materially as a second order, a second order disorder. Such an Unordnung zweiter Ordnung defines the method of the waste book, which provides a place for thought’s disordered reproduction. In this conception, it would make no difference what is ordered or how it is ordered or on what basis, but simply that ordering takes place. Thought’s own inherently accidental ordering need only be minimally displaced to the second order of writing. Thoughts, memories, citations, reasons, and arguments are merely mustered and ordered to appear, and this minimal order is then a potential basis for future orderings and future re-selections that will continue to constitute the main activity of autonomous thought.
In H168, from 1788, where memory is pessimistically described as both unsystematic and unconsciously antisystematic, the possibility of a conscious systematic compensation is not explored. But, for this reason, such a supplement—invoked in the words “exercise of (mental) powers”—appears all the more desirable; based on the analysis above, it seems that this “training” of Selbstdenken can take place and be given a form in fragmentary writing, which remains insufficient, however, because memory’s insufficiencies will still preponderate over the systematic supplement of writing. The waste book’s second order reproduction of thought remains a testament to failure and disorder. Lichtenberg’s understanding of what it means to write a Sudelbuch confirms this interpretation: in addition to “waste book,” one of his own English translations of Sudelbuch is “commonplace book” (D668); the latter is an apparent reference to the loci communes of the topical tradition. The “commonplace book” is a collection of topical variations, of thoughts and arguments pertaining to preestablished topoi. In fragment E46, Lichtenberg further qualifies this topical practice in an analogy to bookkeeping. Although this analogy appears to claim that the purpose of his Sudel system is to create order—with the Sudelbuch as the place where raw data is collected in anticipation of its final summation—the very need for such an arduous method of recording thought, on the way to its more or less final ordering, attests to a fundamental lack of order: “Only a book in which I write down everything just as I see it or as my thoughts give it to me (wie es mir meine Gedanken eingeben), only upon this basis can these [thoughts] be carried over and entered into another book in which the materials are more differentiated and ordered . . . [and] receive a fitting expression (einen ordentlichen Ausdruck erhalten).” The goal, in addition to the creation of order in a taxonomic or categorical sense, is to give thoughts a more “coherent formulation” through this iterative sorting process. In another implicit reference to a topical matrix from which thoughts originate, the exercise of formulating preexisting ideas requires the intervention of a subject (excluded from the sheer generation of thoughts) at the level of their improved expression.

In describing his Sudel writing, Lichtenberg also notably avoids obvious formulations like “I record my thoughts.” He gives this conventional notion a more adequate expression when he says that he “enters each thought (into the Sudelbuch), just as his thoughts submit it to him.” The first step is a literal transcription, followed by efforts of reformulation, but the two
steps will ultimately prove impossible to differentiate because the first thought—the raw data just as it is received—already comes in the form of a formulation (or else it would not be recordable). On this basis, Lichtenberg portrays writing and thinking as inseparable within an interminable process of inter- and intralingual translation (Übertragung). Memory’s deficiencies facilitate the process, revealing the “I” not as the one who thinks the thoughts, but only the one who thinks about them. The “I” does not think thoughts, but only receives them as their bookkeeper, copyist, or translator. The translational labor of formulation is also not guaranteed to succeed, but is rather guaranteed not to. The idea of “waste”—Sudel—implies this certainty of failure (at least from the standpoint of a teleologically structured conception of success). The endless production of reformulations ultimately produces either byproducts or detritus, and even a standard based on sheer “productivity” would have to be suspended in Lichtenberg’s idea of reasoning. Thought as “product” (and especially as an end product) will always be marked by the formulative violence of its creation, its unavoidable artificiality and contingency. In other words, the formulation of thoughts has an inescapable aesthetic dimension that binds thought to merely conventional figurations that will always become overtaxed if they are taken for representatives of truth.

The method of the waste books is systematic asystematicity: individual variants of particular loci and topoi are ordered and formulated—or simply ordered to appear—and are put in a more or less arbitrary place in a serial chronology. Such a practice, necessitated by the fact that the mind is patently incapable of high fidelity reproductions, bears witness to the chaos, debts, and lacks in the intellectual household. As the bookkeeping analogy also suggests, the waste book is a balancing of ledgers and a calculation of debts. Its endless translations are transfers, which, following the metaphor, attempt to work off an inherited debt. But there is no sign of a final accounting in sight. Rather than conceiving autonomous thought (Selbstdenken) as a kind of active self-assertion (Selbstbehauptung)—as both the conventional and Fichtean understandings would have it—Lichtenberg’s Selbstdenken occurs only within an economic frame necessitated by the fact that thoughts are always at least partially inherited from others, and their particular formulation depends upon a linguistic inheritance. The ego within this system is nominal and marginal, burdened by large and unknown debts, and the labor of autonomous thought is consequently conceived as a continual effort of
variation and reformulation. The *Sudelbuch* implicitly includes a tabulation of the debts of thought (if it admits that there are debts at all), even if it does not always undertake a full philology of these debts at every moment. Iterative reformulation instead brings debts into play without canceling them or seriously attempting to work them off. Only by deferring the investigation of its own determinants and dependencies can autonomous thought preserve a degree of at least apparent freedom. The thoughts themselves remain latently dependent on whatever “it thinks,” whereas the subject of thought must actively decide what to do with them. The active element inevitably plays at least a small role, to the extent that thoughts, opinions, commonplaces, citations, and *topoi* are recorded or even remembered at all. 

*Selection happens*, even without the supplementary selective process of writing, which only attempts to materially reproduce the process. The waste book supplements memory’s preselection in the minimal form of sheer notation based on mere notability. Neither fully systematic nor fully systematizable, this nascent—but more likely errant—system provides the individual with a foothold of self-reflection within an opinion system that is experienced as an inherited debt. But the resulting form of thought, by virtue of its inconclusiveness, stands at odds with the identificatory aspect of opinion. Fixed opinions that are “held” must dishonestly represent themselves as fully decided; thought in Lichtenberg’s sense is thereby arrested, and the individual concedes its autonomy to a conventional system of represented authority.

In Lichtenberg as in Locke, the individual’s ideal praxis would be a conscious, “private” pseudo-systematization of its opinions. This merely apparent systematicity would hopefully be able resist the broader collective representational system as well as the equally unsystematic systems of other individuals. The overall function of the collective system thus does not depend on effective persuasion, but on every individual’s recognition that their own opinions (and by extension those of others) are false representations. There is no reason to give up one’s own opinions simply because the reasons of others seem convincing; the rule of the opinion system is not collective truth-seeking but strategic impasse, an artificially produced stalemate agreed upon in advance. According to this model, the autonomous thinker with an opinions system is a primarily defensive mode of knowing interaction within the wider system of opinion. What makes the autonomous thinker different is the ironic (Socratic) knowledge that his own opinions system—just like all of the others—is a pseudo- or proto-system. The
categorical imperative of this (Lockean relativist) version of the opinion system would seek to generalize its “private” and defensive mode, whereas the scientific (Fichtean) version would still insist that a universal horizon of truth be maintained. In the difference between the two conceptions, the individual pseudo-systems, even if they are supposed to tolerate each other, would always latently remain in competition.

Lichtenberg’s understanding of Selbstdenken seeks to defuse the competitive aspect by emphasizing the merely relative and unsystematic aspect of all systems; he reinterprets the Lockean version of the opinion system with a performative emphasis on the possibilities of its praxis. An individual’s system in Lichtenberg’s sense, if it were a genuine system and not a pseudo-system, would necessarily devolve to a “system of beliefs” and forsake its own definition as opinions system. Systems, like beliefs, believe in their universal systematic value and applicability, whereas an opinions system, in Lichtenberg’s sense, could therefore only qualify as sub- or pseudo-systematic. Locke had theorized tolerance essentially as a means of organizing competing belief systems, but Lichtenberg’s opinions system takes it a step further (back in the direction of Hobbes) by supposing that the system would never work unless individuals were able to recognize the provisional status of their knowledge and beliefs, effectively demoting them to the status of opinion.

Despite his awareness of the residual competitive aspect of private opinions systems and the continuing overt competition between belief systems, Lichtenberg’s theorization of the individual’s opinions system as a part of his own performance of Selbstdenken show—at least in theory—that the competitiveness and pressure of the system are only superficial. If Lichtenberg nevertheless holds onto some universal horizons in his Sudel writing, his “systematic” aim is noncompetitive to such a degree that the very gestures that made it appear competitive are revealed as falsifications. Lichtenberg’s ideal of autonomous thought is largely practical in its orientation, but it retains a progressive, universal, and transformative horizon in its supposition that autonomous thought may eventually be able to come up with better norms (even if only within the life of the individual), a better organization for an ensemble of essentially provisional relations. The injunction that corresponds to this aspect—in the Sudelbücher always a self-injunction, a “note to self”—comprises the central systematic claim of Lichtenberg’s opinions system. In E46, in the introduction of his analogy between the
bookkeeping and waste bookkeeping, he programmatically writes “Dieses verdient von den Gelehrten nachgeahmt zu werden [This (the bookkeeper’s log) is deserving of imitation by scholars].” Similar injunctions occur throughout the *Sudelbücher*, enjoining in many cases, as in this one, to carry on a praxis that is already underway. It is a praxis deserving of imitation, but only as a *particular* system (in the limited sense of a temporary arrangement) whose practical value makes it worth passing on. The value in question is a mere use value for “scholars.” A system in this sense is only systematic in its appearance or by virtue of its effects; it is merely a relative praxis, a kind of exercise (*Übung*), which makes no necessary claim to universality, and by virtue of this understanding, the “system” in question withdraws itself from the universal competition between normatively structured systems—or else perhaps it reenters the competition at a new level of awareness or renunciation.

Despite clear affinities to Locke, Lichtenberg much more rigorously distinguishes between opinions systems and belief systems. His conception of the individual’s opinions system, like Moses Mendelssohn’s *Gesinnung*, has nothing to do with belief. The *Sudelbücher* themselves, whose underlying hyper-skeptical premise is the unreliability of the *ego cogito*, are—if this were not a contradiction in terms—a testament to faithlessness. But within the macrosystem of a society or a scientific apparatus, which proposes to base its decisions on the collective force of individual opinions, all individuals must hold to his or her own system, either ironically (if it is an opinions system) or systematically (if it is a belief system), but, in either case, the collective process founds its universality on the ignorance of such differences. For Lichtenberg, therefore, the belief in one’s opinions is ultimately at odds with the collective system’s refusal to distinguish. To believe in one’s system under these conditions—to believe that one’s “system” is a system—is not just to be a believer, but a fanatic (*Schwärmers*), a systematic automaton possessed by a fatal lack of irony about one’s “own” position within a system that does not ultimately recognize beliefs as beliefs but only as opinions. This position, that of the individual, not only as the conduit of a universal system, but also as the antisystematic break within this system, is introduced in the short-circuit of memory’s scrambling effects. The individual is the asystematic margin from which the possibility of autonomy emerges, which is only methodical in its appearance. Functioning through the interplay of “I” and “It,” *Selbstdenken* is the point of indeterminacy, the
nebulous passage in all strictly systematic aspirations. Only by way of this passage can autonomous thought designate the precarious—merely “postulated”—place of individual freedom within the collective-universalist system of opinion.

**Enthusiasm (Schwärmerei) and Science**

There are no longer any emissaries of God. If he [the zealot who believes himself sent by God and able to speak in his name] has not sworn to your worldly logic, then kick him out of the house until further investigation.

Lichtenberg, *Sudelbücher*, F802

Lichtenberg’s opinions system is not—contrary to an enduring stylization and self-stylization of the Enlightenment—structured by the institutional victory of stronger reasons over weaker ones, a posterity principle of natural selection within the advancement of reason. His opinions system proposes, following and developing Locke, that the opinions of others should not believed, even if they may appear to have better reasons on their side. Lichtenberg, in this sense, espouses a credo of noncredulity, which since antiquity (and especially in the eighteenth century) was given the Horatian formula of *nil admirari*. But he diverges from Locke because Lichtenberg’s justification of right to reject others’ proofs does not derive from the authority of tradition (a stable but arbitrary base in Locke). If the authority of tradition and custom—the *nomos* of Herodotos, reformulated as Locke’s law of opinion—were unmasked as mere opinions, and if the order of things were therefore left up to the best arguments of reason alone, nothing but chaos would result. For Locke, the ethical matters in question cannot ultimately be decided by reason alone but only by the limited, provisional, and speculative weighing of probabilities. Confronted with this undecideability and the realities of his own time, Locke nominally but unconvincingly opts for the status quo. But the other extreme, the misguided imperative of a hyper-rational Enlightenment that believes that it can dictate all things according to reason, is decisively excluded because it would, as a result of reason’s limitations, only produce new superstitions in the name of reason. The German word for this chaos of reasons, suddenly made
available to everyone, is Schwärmerei, which became fashionable in the eighteenth century to describe overzealous pseudo-rationalisms.

If all decisions, especially life decisions, were based on the fiat of whoever has the best reasons at the moment, this could only mean deciding too hastily based on the appearance of reason. Opinion appears in this context not as an instance of the competition between reasons, but of noncompetition, as the right of refusal in the competition of reasons, the right to postpone one’s decision, and the right to resign oneself to one’s own opinion despite overwhelming—but in the end only “probable”—evidence to the contrary. Lichtenberg follows Locke’s conviction that one need not assent to everything that has the appearance of reason. But other factors come into play in Lichtenberg, including and especially the functionalist criterion of utility (Brauchbarkeit). For him the right of nonassent is not dictated by a recourse to the tradition, but, more radically, by the potentially nullity of the tradition as tradition—as a coherent and enduring system. The tradition, like the opinions systems it generates, can only be provisional. Tradition—a collective singular—can only appear and be passed on in a state of topical fragmentation that gives the individual room to think about it, in a sense within it, without being strictly determined by it. The right not to assent to the opinions of others is the right and the prerequisite of autonomous thought. There is no freedom of thought as long as individuals can be necessarily compelled by the reasons of others. Selbstdenken can only operate once the quality of belief has been factored out of inherited knowledge (at the limit: all knowledge).

Autonomous thought presupposes disbelief. Lichtenberg specifically states the right of nonassent—of disbelief—in fragment D612, where he speaks of “the weak ones who have not already resolved the matter [on their own].” These individuals, which politicians call “undecided,” can be more easily persuaded by spurious argumentation, by the appearance of truth. They are easier to mislead “into the temptation of thinking otherwise” because their thinking is not adequately secured internally. Lichtenberg opposes these “weak ones” to those who assume “the duty of a man who is set in his ways” (die Pflicht eines jeden gesetzten Mannes; Lichtenberg’s emphasis). This “duty,” as Lichtenberg calls it, is to already know what one thinks so that one cannot be easily tempted to think otherwise. This may appear to sanction stubbornness, but, as in Locke, a conversion economy of opinion is much more dangerous, even if the possibility of unfounded prejudices is
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thereby admitted as a potential cost of individual autonomy. In Lichtenberg, this “settledness” is not only a prejudice, nor does it take its basis from the presupposed stability of tradition; instead it would ideally be merely a self-consciously heuristic, regulative position with the purpose of protecting the individual’s private system from the contagiousness of others’ systems. To the extent that all beliefs and opinions (including one’s “own”) are thus filtered by thought, the prejudice of being set in one’s ways only amounts to a prejudice in favor of the individual’s own autonomy itself, its own settledness (Gesetztheit) with itself, as its inalienable right and its justification for exempting itself from the potentially tyrannical rule of apparent reasons.

As everyone knows, such a defensive posture is still subject to abuse, especially when it reverts to sheer individual self-righteousness. With the refusal to acknowledge the reasons of others, autonomy—Selbstgesetztheit—can also mean the willingness to carry on the debate indefinitely according to the appearance of the strongest reason, but without any real outcome. The bracketing of reason and reasons in the name of opinion can turn into merely speculative reasoning and rationalization for its own sake or into the unwavering defense of a pre-established position. What was supposed to be autonomous (selbstgesetzt) thus becomes merely opinionated, a return to the repressed determinism at the level of discourse itself; in the defense against foreign determinations, the structure of the opinionated self becomes increasingly deterministic. Enthusiasm (Schwärmerei) is one word for this second order conversion economy, produced by an opinion system that sought to rule out precisely this kind of unfreedom in the face of one’s own thoughts. In the case of Schwärmerei, the private opinions system (formalized as an individualized pseudo-system and a regulative safeguard against premature capitulation to others’ opinions) begins to take its own systematicity too seriously, creating a kind of meta-sphere of pseudo-reasons in which any and every opinion can play itself out. Discourse, denying the need and ability to present absolute or even sufficient grounds, thereby loses its ground entirely.

Lichtenberg felt an uncomfortable connection with the freaks and fanatics (Schwärmer) of his era. This claim goes against prevailing images of Lichtenberg as a highly rational thinker at the forefront of the Enlightenment, but Wolfgang Schimpf has convincingly argued that Lichtenberg uses Schwärmer in positive and neutral senses, and not just as a term of condemnation. Schimpf develops the divergent valences of the word in a contrast
between Lichtenberg’s negative conception of “transcendent ventriloquism” (transcendente Ventriloquenz), bad Schwärmerei “by which men can be made to believe that something said on earth came from heaven” (F665), and creative furor poeticus as a more positive kind of enthusiasm. Schimpf thus concludes that “fanatical thought (schwärmerisches Denken) . . . was not entirely foreign to the nature of this natural scientist.”18 The point of overlap between the fanatic and the scientist is that both operate according to imaginary “systems.” As Lichtenberg writes in his essay on physiognomy: “An enthusiastic observer, once he has become stuck within his own system without any hope of retreat, is always suspect.”19 Everyone has a system, including and especially the fanatics, because they have wagered everything on their systems. They have identified with their system, identified with it as their own, with a level of ego investment that excludes the possibility of retreat (ohne Hoffnung zu einem Zurückzug).

The possibility of revision or retreat from and within the system therefore is the decisive factor that differentiates fanatics from scientists. Any system that must at all costs be taken as a system—the system—is suspicious prima facie and lacks credibility. Such a system, no matter how good its reasons may be or appear, must always revert to a structure based on authoritative declarations and decrees. The desire to unequivocally assert fixed ends reveals the illegitimacy of the means, regardless of their apparent reason. For this reason, Lichtenberg concludes his sentence on the “system” of the Schwärmer with the implication that they do not even really believe in their own system. They have been carried away by a certain instrumental effectiveness, specifically—in a witty variation of the saying that “hunger is the best cook”—by desire and profit motive: “But hunger, especially in the society of crafty deception, is able to observe almost as well as it can cook.” Schwärmerei is not interested in methodical or scientific observation; it is not concerned with reason but only with craft and cleverness (Klugheit), and therefore it observes only what is flattering to itself, just as poor cooking is flattered—overlooked—by hunger. The hunger for belief can be preyed upon, as it were, by the hunger for money, or for power or fame.20

In a later essay, “Über die Schwärmerei unserer Zeiten” (On Schwärmerei in our Times), which originally appeared in the “Göttingisches Magazin der Wissenschaften und Litteratur” in 1783, Lichtenberg offers a somewhat different interpretation.21 The later essay seems to view the matter more from the point of view of the deceived than the deceivers, although this is a
fine line, since, as Lichtenberg wrote of Lavater a few years later after meeting him in person, it is possible for a Schwärmer to be deceiver and deceived at the same time. But this possibility is in overt contradiction with the instrumentalization thesis of the physiognomy essay. If the deceiver is deceived, then the motivation and the means–ends relation become confused and involuted. Speaking of Lavater, Lichtenberg writes to Johann Daniel Ramberg on July 3, 1786: “He means it all sincerely, and if he deceives, then he is a deceived deceiver (ein betrogener Betrüger)” (4:678).²² He is well-meaning (er meint es ehrlich), which means that he merely means (meint) without any sense of his own ends, which is to say his intentions are harmless. Lichtenberg, who had been expecting to meet “a hotheaded, enthusiastic debater,” finds in Lavater nothing of the sort. In person Lavater was “an excellent head” (ein vortrefflicher Kopf), who has only been sadly misguided in his life. In August 1786, again writing to Ramberg, Lichtenberg returns to the theme of Lavater’s honorable forthrightness (Ehrlichkeit) and his lack of adequate intellectual training, implying that the two go hand in hand:

I believe with certainty that Lavater is an honorable man, who however takes his own head for the whole world, and every thought that ascends in it for a new planet. Had there only been people around him who had been kind enough (freundschaftlich) to point out to him that it was only fog (because he is really a very good listener), then something great might have become of him. But now it is too late. (IV:681)

Lavater is excessively impressed with the novelty of the products of his own mind. But this, according to fragment C.142 (epigraph to this chapter), may be the general condition of everyone. Each person mentally dwells on their own planet, mistaking the cosmos of their own thoughts for the world: “If every human dwelled on his own planet, what would philosophy be then? Exactly the same thing it is now, the essence of an individual’s opinions is his philosophy.” From Lichtenberg’s planet, Lavater looks like a Lichtenberg without training, a Lichtenberg lacking his own methods of exploration. Lichtenberg sees an alienated image of himself in Lavater. The planet analogy can be plausibly read as a description of Lichtenberg himself, for whom every new linguistic formulation augments the thought world of his Sudelbücher.

Lichtenberg’s critical relation to zealots and fanatics (Schwärmer) often seems to be inflected by a certain amount of bad conscience. He first gains
respect for Lavater when he discovers that he is not a systematic and calculating zealot but a sincere if deceived deceiver. Lichtenberg identifies with Lavater’s thought worlds in accordance with his own view that thought systems are everything, but that they can never be systematic and absolute without at the same time being deceived and deceiving, disingenuous and coercive. The villainous duplicity and systematic fanaticism that Lichtenberg had expected to find in Lavater does not appear, apparently because the latter operates out of sheer opinion and invention (Meinung), without the resource of any real systematic logical or argumentative training. The point for Lichtenberg, which would be the positive aspect of a technical education in the school of reason, is to parse thought better, to sort through its nebulous regions, to recognize the fog (Nebel) as fog, without presuming that reason will ever be able to completely chart the terrain over which thought floats.23

In a much earlier essay, “Timorus” (1771), Lichtenberg makes a comparable claim. “Timorus” is a polemic on the problems of conversion in general, with particular critical attention to the case of two Jewish converts to Christianity in Göttingen, whose motives for conversion had been called into question. The text presents the broad and perhaps overly elaborate argument that reason is never the decisive in conversions. But the more pointed claim is that private use of reason in the pursuit of personal and spiritual ends leads “straight to the devil.” In a witty reversal of more familiar claims about the moral dubiousness of the Enlightenment, Lichtenberg argues that irreligiosity, atheism, heathenism, tolerance of Jews, and all other supposed moral transgressions and failings of modernity and Enlightenment, are not the direct result of the Enlightenment per se or of its idea of reason. These “evils”—it is not clear how seriously Lichtenberg takes them, since they are the evils named by his opponents—are instead produced whenever reason is appropriated by religion to pursue its ends (thereby violating the boundary between faith and reason from the other direction). The religious critics and opponents of the Enlightenment are thus themselves the cause of the harms that they attribute to the Enlightenment:

These are the results of your cursed study of antiquity, of your secret histories of the heart, of your anatomy of the soul and physiology, of your subtle pedagogical systems, your mathematical doctrines of nature and your popular forms of expression, that we have now discovered a Northwest Passage to the devil (eine
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Nordwestliche Durchfahrt zum Teufel), by which every sheep-head in his night gown (Schafskopf in seinem Schlafrock) can find his own way there. Show me where our ancestors ever made such speeches as you make: They were more concerned with the labor of their own hands, but if they ever thought about religion or about us, then their motto was: tremble and worship, and not as now: think and investigate, and I would like to add: and go to the devil. (3:233).

The main emphasis of this passage, despite its complex inversions of perspective, is unmistakably critical of Protestant and Pietist religiosity; this is perhaps surprising, considering Lichtenberg’s typically critical views on Catholic Christianity. In part, I think that this inconsistency reflects his willingness to alter his positions and perspectives according to the argumentative needs of the moment, and it may also partly be a result of his generally unfavorable assessment of all organized religion.24 The specific impetus, however, lies in the strategy of turning his opponents’ arguments against them.

What connects this passage with those on Schwärmerie is the common claim that the indiscriminate “private” use, manipulation, and misapplication of most likely misunderstood principles and methods of reason leads to a chaos of opinions according to which there is no personal salvation but only a personal damnation. This chord is sounded again ten years later in the 1783 Schwärmerie essay. At this time, some three years before meeting Lavater, Lichtenberg already seems to have a fairly specific and almost entirely negative idea of Schwärmerie. But the Schwärmer in the essay are like Lavater—and in precisely the same formulation—“not zealous debaters, . . . not hot-heads.” Lichtenberg caricatures their intellectual profile, describing two fanatics of his acquaintance as “slow and quiet in their speech, calm individuals, whereby each has a look on his face like he is blessing the other, completely calm, but with an inner joy that can hardly be concealed, each believes with every response that he is putting the other out of his misery with a lethal blow (Gnadenstoß)” (3:416). Lichtenberg does not state the precise topic of this conversation, but a number of possibilities are mentioned. The most amusing, for instance: “I believe that one of them would have died the very next day, if it meant he had a hope of ending his life in the year 7777” (3:416). The Schwärmer anecdotes of the essay refer to acquaintances of Lichtenberg’s youth, who serve as the models for an uproarious comedy yet to be written. These Schwärmer were, in other words,
Lichtenberg’s sometime friends, or at least acquaintances, and his comic condemnation thus bears a trace of guilt by association.

Religion plus mismanaged reason is the formula of superstition, and this is an amazing source of comedy. The Schwärmer are able to accomplish their ends using a semblance of reason, even if Lichtenberg can only observe reason’s apparent total absence: “The most amusing thing (das ange-nebmste) however, was when they sometimes differed in their opinions and tried to refute each other; false statements with false statements and daydreams with daydreams” (3:416, Lichtenberg’s emphasis). Schwärmerei is not the end of opinion in false belief (Aberglaube), but rather the hypertrophy of opinion—as superstition—above and beyond belief. Contrary to Lessing’s hope that philosophy might be able to ease the matter through conceptual clarification, no Aufklärung is possible under the circumstances Lichtenberg describes. Schwärmer are immune to philosophical intervention because they are—as Lichtenberg would later say of Lavater—“lost causes”:

If in such cases everything flowed from a single false premise but otherwise was produced by rational derivation, then there might have been hope of someday ripping out the nettle, but, as it is, every sentence of the hundreds that they had at hand, on its own, like the segments of a tapeworm, has attached itself to them, draining them of and consuming their reason. (3:418)

This image, an extreme variation on the topos of the thousand-tongued Fama from Virgil’s Aeneid, describes Schwärmerei in quasi-clinical language as a mental illness. If fanaticism, as Lichtenberg describes it, is a para-rational disorder, a parasitic form of reason, then it no longer makes sense to think of Schwärmer as “motivated” by any particular ends. The para-formations of reason are not related to reason by any possible derivation. If they were, then they would be reasonable, even if they were also wrong because of their basis on false premises. Fanaticisms are pseudomorphoses of reason, and Schwärmer are not possessed by ideology as much as by “pseudology,” a second-order reality that essentially plays by its own rules, without reference to any form of grounding.

On this basis, the absolute authority of reason may become functionally and virtually indistinguishable with the absolute autonomy of unreason. In conversation, both share the argumentative characteristic of incontrovertibility—unconvertibility—whether it be that of “the man who is set in his ways” (des gesetzten Mannes) or of the Schwärmer (with whom there is no
common basis of argument). Another violent image of the Schwärmer depicts the permanence of their state: “They were, by the way, also unable to be converted (nicht zu bekehren), and I truly believe that it would be easier to give sight back to someone who had had both his eyes put out, than to give such a one reason” (3:418). Unconvertability, the rational virtue of the one who is “set” in his position, is also the vice of the fanatic. One could try to relativize this situation by arguing that in the end it all comes down to social, intellectual, and historical norms: The one who is “set in his ways” is simply representative of a more mainstream current. This would be Locke’s position, whose (collective) law of opinion in combination with the (private) right of non-assent to the opinions of others attempted to produce a safeguard against the conversion economy of opinion. But Lichtenberg excludes this reading: first, because his interpretation of autonomy as “settledness” (Gesetztheit) reaches its limit in the figure of the genius (discussed in the next section), who is the flipside of the Schwärmer, but both are alike because they swim against the current of prevailing norms.

Second, the relativist tendency of the law of opinion is put on hold by Lichtenberg’s idea of unconvertability, which functions, so to speak, as its own law (das Gesetz), which marginalizes and suspends both relativism and conformism (which go hand in hand under the law of opinion) in the interest of autonomy. Even more radically: if everyone “lives”—metaphorically—on their own metaphorical planet, then the very idea of conversion becomes an absurdity. If life and thought are nothing but the ongoing praxis of translation (Übersetzung) and reoccupation (Umbesetzung) of preexisting thoughts (as topoi), then the resulting form (of theme and variation) will be incompatible with the idea of a total reversal (Umkehrung) or conversion (Bekehrung). The place of (con)-version (-kebrung and -setzung) is completely already pre-occupied (besetzt): this may lead to all manner of obsession (Besessenheit), but will never reach any ultimate conversion. For these reasons, Lichtenberg deems all conversions to be inauthentic, and this is also why he reverses the charge of hypocrisy, turning it against those who would question the reasons why individuals choose to convert. When it comes to conversion, everything is interior to such an extent that the exterior is free to do whatever it wants. Inconvertibility thus implies infinite and limitless convertibility.

This is explicit in “Timorus,” in a passage where Lichtenberg defends the Jewish converts from the accusation that they only did it for the sausages:
Supposing however (Gesetzt aber), . . . that the sausages neither opened their eyes to the proof, nor even served as the occasion that led them to see the light, but instead that the they were the sole motivation of their conversion, then why is this so horrifying? I do not see it. (3:231)

Lichtenberg picks up this train of thought again a few paragraphs later: “Conversion (Bekehren) [amounts to] the same thing as inversion (Umkehren), that is, the end A is to be brought around to where B used to be” (3:231). The A and B are, as Lichtenberg shows in his analysis, body and soul. Lichtenberg psychological thinking supposes the interdependence of the body and soul, which implies that the only way to bring about an effective conversion or to decisively change someone’s opinion is by physical intervention, in effect, by violence. The spiritual motivations for a conversion—if any—are unknowable even to the individual (and certainly to outsiders), and reason is thus essentially excluded from the equation (even if all manner of rationalization is possible). Looking at things pragmatically, reason tends toward some kind of more or less arbitrary “settledness,” which, at the limit, includes the pseudomorphosis of Schwärmerei, but would never be able to supply adequate grounds for conversions. The rule of reason and reasons (including all para- and pseudo-reasons and rationalizations) is predisposed toward fixity, and thus “authentic” conversion—whatever it might be—cannot be known within these parameters; if conversion exists, it must be extrarational (as the Christian tradition also teaches, from Paul to Augustine to Petrarch and beyond).

On the basis of this understanding of conversion—which lies beyond all human means, ends, and reasons—the guillotine appears to Lichtenberg as the ultimate conversion machine: “In past conversions, people tried to get rid of the opinion without actually touching the head; in France they now proceed more directly, removing the opinion along with the head” (K(2)155). The futility of conversion is implied by its impossibility, but rather than braking the conversion economy (as tolerance would demand), the apparent futility of conversion may only radicalize the problem. The French Revolution does not represent a fundamental change in this regard, but only an intensification. Even before the Revolution, in a fragment probably from the end of 1775, Lichtenberg’s underlying thesis was still the same:

When one considers that the human being consists of body and soul, and that the latter possesses thousands of ways of creeping into the former and hiding
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itself there, whereas the former tries in vain to creep into the latter, for this reason, in my view, the way in which Charles V sought to enforce the interim is always the best way of propagating opinions. With a handful of soldiers it is possible to propagate much more truth in a country than with a handful of books, and the red religion has always appeared to me to reason in such psychological matters with a clarity that no others have been able to achieve. . . . And since man is half ape and half angel, and the ape always goes wherever the angel wants to go and vice versa, therefore it makes no difference which of the two sides receives the impact. Satellite and planet (T rabant und Haupt-Planet). A handful soldiers is always better than a mouthful of arguments. (Eq6)

These authoritarian consequences may be ominous, or at least cynical, but they also show that, even before the Revolution, Lichtenberg had no illusions—the general illusion of the Enlightenment described by Koselleck and discussed in my chapter 2—that reason will simply triumph and rule by itself automatically and without violence. By describing a continuum of mind and body, Lichtenberg also does not draw an essential distinction between means and ends. Reason is the battlefield as much as the actual battles are wars of reasons. Thus, more than ten years before the Revolution, Lichtenberg in a sense foresees the nexus of terror and ideology that would become definitive in the coming epoch.

If unconvertibility is the norm and modus of the opinion system, then nonviolent “persuasion,” according to its systematic aim, contains the same violence and tendency toward annihilation as the more “direct” means of the guillotine. But Lichtenberg advocates neither the direct elimination of unorthodox opinions nor the more subtle and impractical attempts of Enlightenment reason to bring about the same ends. Whenever the unsystematic Schwärmer come into conflict with the authority claims of systematic reason, Lichtenberg’s sympathies clearly reside with the former. Even his comical presentation of Schwärmerei shows this. And more broadly, in the framework of the history of religion and its relation to reason, Lichtenberg appears as a defender of everything that the emergent (and latently Christian) Enlightenment orthodoxy of history would see as surpassed and obsolete. This position may be a result of his experience as a writer of S u del bü cher, which gives him an intimate understanding of the limitations of the impulse toward the future systematic annihilation of past errors. He also does not seem to have much vested in the idea of historical progress: everything, including supposedly superior systems that have arisen in the
past and which will continue to arise, will all always remain equally historically surpassable. “Better systems” are therefore not absolutely superior or of a fundamentally different order than systems that are judged to be simply wrong. Systems as such, for Lichtenberg, are only proto-systems and pseudo-systems, para-systems and post-systems, system shells or system corpses, and it is only as such that they are even epistemologically accessible. A universal system—a true system—if there ever were (to be) one, would be, according to this negative system theology, essentially unknowable. Only the relation, interrelation, relativity, and relativism of systems make it possible to even differentiate between them.

The potential of both reason and Schwärmerei to achieve its systematic ends by force of illegitimately prescriptive and even violent means was more apparent to Lichtenberg than it was to many of his contemporaries. He crucially does not differentiate between Schwärmerei and the analogous threat posed by “legitimate” science and reason. Rather than distinguishing between the two, he tends to draw parallels. According to a parenthetical remark in the Schwärmerei essay, one such parallel is the development of specialized vocabularies: “You see, everything has its own lingo (neologisms, Kunstwörter).” The aspirations of an overtaxed systematicity can be recognized in its language, not only in the case of Schwärmer, but also in all technical terms and jargon, of which Lichtenberg is always highly skeptical. This can perhaps be best observed, on the one hand, in his furious criticism of the new system of chemical nomenclatures and, at the other extreme, his dislike of much of the contemporary poetry and literature of his era.

In the case of literature, Lichtenberg deplores the falsification of expression into stereotyped and conventional formulations. For him poetry, exactly like Stüdelbuch writing, should be a place to experiment with new formulations, figures, and metaphors. Poetry has the right and privilege—so-called poetic license—to break with the formulaic and everyday use of language to hopefully discover new and better formulations. The vulgar and clichéd “poetic” use of language is ultimately the main object of ridicule in Lichtenberg’s essay on Schwärmerei. The conventions of poetic expression are no better than the conventional language people use to express they-know-not-what, “whenever one sees the people who are doing so very well (so recht wohl) whenever they find themselves among decent folk (unter guten Menschen), who become so light, so free in their heart (so leicht, so weit um die Brust) whenever they see Jupiter and all of the planets rolling...
by above them” (3:418). The point of this sarcastic characterization of the “appreciation” of nature is that the language of expression can take on a phantasmatic life of its own, becoming a kind of fetish that actually obscures the intent of expression, of saying something, of finding a more adequate name, metaphor, or description of reality. Naming—which is never “proper” for Lichtenberg—requires constant reformulation, renaming, and overnaming. Speaking means naming things in their quiddity, but this constant challenge to thought is forgotten and ignored as soon as the speaker resorts to prefabricated norms of expression, which in effect only express the expressions of others. In making this point, Lichtenberg also cites and varies a proverbial saying, thus ironically underscoring the severity of the dilemma: “the mouth runneth over with that of which the heart is not full” (3:417). The autonomy of normative reason expresses itself (regardless of its ultimate rationality) as a false—merely conventional—autonomy of language. Lichtenberg’s critique of this formalizing tendency of conventional language demands a constant recognition of the absence of a one-to-one relation between words and things. But words can themselves become things—purely instrumental self-affirming symbols—as soon as the difference is forgotten. The effective belief in the one-to-one relation leads to a confusion of words and things, producing a form of linguistic reification that imagines them as interchangeable, giving rise to a merely apparent autonomy that is in fact an autoaffective linguistic illusion that posits its own truth—the uncertain truth of a formula—in the place of an increasingly unrecognized and distorted reality.

The point of language as language for Lichtenberg, as opposed to language as system, is to rupture its conventional and only apparently systematic veil by the constant metaphorical-analogical reconstellation of the possible relations that language expresses (and always tends to mistake and overspecify). In an early waste book entry, the objection to stereotyped idioms was supplemented with a programmatic admonishment: “Shakespeare frequently distinguishes himself in his expressions (in seinen Ausdrücken) by not so easily choosing metaphors that are already received in everyday life, such as for example the motivation (der Triebfeder), which G . . . , but instead selects an image, specially pertaining to precisely the matter at hand” (A84). The creation of new understandings (as well as the correlated possibility of “distinguishing one’s self”) both depend on an existential analytic that leads to the production of new metaphors. This process of re-metaphorization is
elsewhere described by Lichtenberg—in yet another new metaphor—as a dechanneling (Entkanalisierung) and rechanneling (Neukanalisierung) of language: “Whenever one uses an old word, it often moves along in the channel according to the understanding that the ABC-book has dug for it, but a metaphor makes a new channel for itself, and often breaks right through. <the use of metaphor> (Nutzen der Metaphern)” (F116). Neologism in itself is therefore not the problem, but rather paleonymy—except that new words may wear out even more quickly than old ones. In the idea of metaphor, Lichtenberg develops a parallel understanding of true science and true literature, both of which would be defined as a program of perpetual neologism.

Lichtenberg’s resistance to Lavoisier’s new systematic nomenclature in the field of chemistry relies on the same argument as his attacks on merely conventional expressions in poetry. The decisive sentence of Lichtenberg’s protest against Lavoisier’s nomenclature appears in various formulations: “Hypotheses are recommendations, but names are decrees (Hypothesen sind Gutachten, aber Namen sind Dekrete)” (J(2)1692). Also, clearly with Lavoisier in mind: “The experiments (Versuche) are a work of genius, it is only the names that are a work of vanity (Eitelkeit)” (J(2)1700). And, in another note: “The manifesto-quality of nomenclatures (Das Manifestmaßige in der Nomenklatur)” (J(2)1714), and “what kind of an empty babble (Gerede) there would be in the world, if one sought to entirely change the names of things into their definitions!” (J(2)1806). The word or “name,” as Lichtenberg puts it in K19, should not contain its own definition, but should always be an arbitrary sign with the definition as a variable; collapsing this signifying structure into a fixed identity makes future change and revision difficult or impossible. For Lichtenberg, Lavoisier’s nomenclature attempts, in effect, to institute its theory at the level of language. Lichtenberg compares this hyper-rationalizing nomenclature of French chemistry to the politically motivated renaming of places that occurred after the French Revolution.

“Hypotheses are recommendations, nomenclatures are mandates” (K20). According to Geoffrey Winthrop-Young’s thesis,27 Lichtenberg was an antireformist in scientific, literary, and political realms. In this reading, Lichtenberg believed in sticking to the old words and old forms. Though this may have a certain qualified accuracy, and it may have proven true in effect, Lichtenberg’s apparent antireformism and anti-Revolutionary stance is clearly not the result of a fundamental conservatism but of his radical
conception of the metaphorical status of all language. It must also be emphasized that this understanding resists both the idea of language as a free play of signification (without reference empirical objects) and the tautological claim of scientific nomenclatures to totalize the process of signification within a posited identity of sign and signified. Beyond the technical aspects, Lichtenberg’s own self-stylization—which is in a sense all that matters when it comes to a superficial descriptor like “revolutionary” or “conservative”—is radically and explicitly antiauthoritarian and Protestant (without necessarily being reformist). Lichtenberg writes, for example, in a fragment that appears in close proximity to the fragments on Lavoisier: “Fighting against authorities is all very well, if I am not mistaken the Catholics used this argument. And even if the Protestant doctrine were driven back within the walls of Wittenberg, I would nonetheless say that the protest. [that is, the Protestant religion] is still better” (J(2)1722). The abbreviation of the protestant religion to mere protest is important here because Lichtenberg appears willing to dispense with the actual religion and reduce it to its essence of universal protest. Protest as such represents an autonomous validity claim, regardless of what it protests against and regardless of its revolutionary or reformist success or failure. At the limit, this infinitization of protest makes “victorious” protest unthinkable: protest can only be a protest ad infinitum; it can only be legitimate and meaningful if it protests authority. As soon as it becomes an authority, it is no longer a protest.

On this basis, Lichtenberg’s position against Lavoisier’s system of nomenclature may appear too dogmatic, too declarative, too sweeping. Perhaps he was himself seduced by a potentially false analogy between the various fields in which naming, nomenclature, and language reform played a role. Regardless, his emphatic resistance to strict nomenclatures in every form is consistently motivated by the desire to keep artificial terminologies from becoming completely identical with the things themselves (or completely divorced from them, so that the terms themselves becoming reified as things), which amounts to the same thing in either case. For Lichtenberg, in literature as in science, such a purity of reference amounts to nonreference, a mere illusion of reference, which he calls “nonsense” (Gerede)—pure system babble. He argues that “theories,” including the literature’s metaphorical models, must be as open as possible to metaphorical remodeling, whereas the attempt to decree a terminology as a closed system and a dead universal eternity is completely antiscientific. Lichtenberg seeks to safeguard the merely hypothetical status of theories against a prescriptive
systematicity that would mistake hypotheses for applicable and actionable results. Lichtenberg’s ethical antisystem thus implies a hypothetical ban on every form of decisive institution and on every kind of application or enforcement (Durchsetzung) of norms (which are always only provisional, providing insufficient reason for forced propagation).

Regardless of whether Lichtenberg’s actual applications of this principle in the fields of poetry, science, and politics were finally “correct”—or whether they were only contrary to the retrospectively validated judgments of a teleologically structured posterity—is still open to debate. In any case, his antireformism is clearly not the result of a fundamental conservatism but of a critique of the possible basis of systematic reform. For Lichtenberg, the form of reform itself is essentially conservative because it is based on a systematic institution of fixed (terminological and expressive) structures, which have the effect of minimizing and precircumscribing future change and development. Such fully determinate systems also, perhaps most importantly for Lichtenberg, have the side effect of making autonomous thought impossible. If thought is defined by the individual’s ability to constantly and variously bridge heterogeneous analogical systems with new and hopefully better metaphors, then the institution of strict nomenclatures—fixed expressions of fixed relations—removes the individual from the equation. Lichtenberg sees this as a hyperauthoritarian feudalization of knowledge, which eliminates the individual as a free, ethical, and inventive subject and turns it into an entirely passive and impersonal systemic factor. Thus the Enlightenment’s hopes of universalizing freedom (of thought) by the expansion of science and education—the more it actually succeeds in accomplishing this program—may tend to progressively undermine itself. Categorical nomenclature, like totalitarian and revolutionary regimes, eliminates the individual and its opinion along with the possibility of a progress that would be progress beyond the present system or the present theory. Nomenclatures, words that are taken to unambiguously refer to things rather than serving as merely functional and provisional signs, can add fuel to a system of unstoppable and self-instituting pseudo-systems, which, like those of the Schwärmer, have closed off their own hopes for revision and reevaluation.

For Lichtenberg, the Revolution—both political and chemical—is not actually revolutionary but is already the counterrevolution and the counter-reformation, at least in the objectives of its language politics. The Revolution was not a radical break—as his friend Georg Forster imagined—nor
did it represent, as in Novalis’ reading of events, the hope of a new counter-
reformation that would finally be successful, but for Lichtenberg it was in-
stead a prime example of the main stream of a history that is still and always
has been essentially “catholic” in its basis in the ideas of belief and author-
ity. It was against the intensification and sublimation of authority that Lich-
tenberg wished to register his individual protest, in full awareness of its
futility. Lichtenberg protests, from a worldly rather than religious point of
view, against what he sees as the increasing predominance of a posterity
system whose arrival was greeted so enthusiastically by his contemporaries
(with Moses Mendelssohn as a lone exception). Lichtenberg’s most em-
phatic utterance on this point appears in another fragment from Sudelbuch
J; this text also noteworthy for its use of the word opinions (Meinungen) to
disparagingly refer to what would otherwise be called theories:

Opinions will follow opinions for as long as the world still stands, and therefore
philosophical economy demands that the expenditure of this always fearful shift
(Wechsel) be made as minimal as possible; this way however [presumably: through
new nomenclatures like Lavoisier’s], with every change of opinion we are left
with the whole useless terminological shell hanging around our necks (das ganze
unnütze Wörter-Gebäuse). We already have a language though which we can make
ourselves completely comprehensible! Don’t we want, after all of the endless
exchanges (Wechsel), to come out smarter (klüger) in the end? To pay attention to
these attempts (Versuche)—to pay attention to these signs of the times (Zeichen
der Zeit)—is indeed also philosophy, and that I also think that it will bring honor
to take note of it already now, in the present [i.e. before the endless paradigm-
shifts of science have actually played themselves out]. If I were the only one, or
even the first to remark on it, I would be much more proud of this of all of
French chemistry. Posterity (die Nachwelt) will be more encumbered with such
foolishness, when it discovers by necessity what can be foreseen now with a little
philosophy. It must come down to it in the end. (Es muß am Ende dazu kommen.)
Now perhaps there are only a few who do not let themselves be blinded, but in
the end, when it is no longer be bearable, it will be everyone. I would rather that
this opinion of mine should make it into posterity than anything else.—In the
hundredth generation, they will have to take note of what we could have noticed
already in the third—at least [I have made] a note of protest. For what can be
impossible for the current (Strom) of the crowd? Hypotheses are recommenda-
tions, but names are decrees. (J(2)1691, Lichtenberg’s emphases)

How is it possible to read a text that asks for, invokes, manipulates, and
partially preempts its own reception? How does one receive a text that
Lichtenberg’s “Opinions-System”

speaks against the very posterity to which it also appeals as the organ of its own reception? One can, it seems, hardly read such a text—especially in an age when there are no emissaries from God anymore—that is shameless enough to attempt to receive its own reception in self-stylized prophetic fashion, denouncing posterity in the name of an impossible counterposterity.

More simply, it could be mere resentment, or, to use a conventional metaphor: sour grapes. Another problem may be that Lichtenberg’s thesis here does not seem hypothetical enough. He claims to know the outcome in advance, which makes his “reception-theory” look more like a disgruntled “I told you so” before the fact of a history that can only come to the same conclusions after the fact. But did history actually “prove him right” as it proved itself wrong? This is probably still unclear, but Lichtenberg’s resentment is obvious enough—at least from the point of view of the posterity of a science that still believes that it has sufficiently secured and justified its basic terms and underlying models, including their revisability and correctability.

On the other hand, in the larger scheme of things—as far as “science” is conceived here as only a small subsection of a larger historical scheme ruled by “opinions”—it may be that Lichtenberg’s argument can be read to diagnose the same problematic interrelation of “structure, sign and play,” which Derrida also isolated several generations later. In this case, the ultimate verdict is definitely not in yet because whatever may finally emerge from the endless turnover in theories, systems, and disciplines—and whether or not anyone gets smarter in the end—will always remain to be seen. The millennial timeframe that Lichtenberg has in mind leaves room, and it is doubtful that the present perspective is more certain than his, but since the impasses that he foresaw are patently more extenuated, his individualized advocacy of a kind of system pluralism and theory pluralism (under the broad umbrella of “metaphor”) may also be of increased relevance.

In situating Lichtenberg’s prognostication, it is also important to view his comments within a subproject of Enlightenment philosophy, starting with Leibniz and Descartes, to produce a universal nomenclature with the scientific precision of mathematical symbols. Within this horizon, Blumenberg’s Metaphorology represents the first (rather late) attempt to systematize Lichtenberg’s early insight. Lichtenberg realizes, casting himself as Cassandra, that his argument is destined to be overlooked until it is too late. The protest is thus a mere and mute protest, but Lichtenberg is at least
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proud to have discovered it early, at precisely this time, near the end of his life at the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, in the inception phase of an epochal project, which attempts to design a system of science based on nomenclatures, Lichtenberg designates this project itself as an experiment (Versuch). Lavoisier’s system, among the first and most extreme efforts at strict terminologization, is “a sign of the times.” itself an experiment, the ultimate results of the resultant terminologies can only be known through the trial and error of future generations. But Lichtenberg nevertheless claims that the results are already foreseeable. The endeavor of terminologization is a risky experiment because humanity itself is the final object of the experiment. As an experiment, terminologization also predefines the range of its own results without considering the wider sphere of its unintended consequences. This experiment—without any controls—is structurally analogous to the pseudo-rationalizations of the Schwärmer; Lichtenberg sees the two as a part of the same history (not in opposition, which is still the more typical reading), which is why his own time may provide a unique vantage point for predicting their shared outcomes with the result that the scientific “success” of conceptual systems will be worse than their failures (in cases of Schwärmer). The terminological experiment will fail, especially in its success; this can be seen already in 1790, but its failure will make itself felt later on.

Especially later in his life, Lichtenberg seems to become deeply concerned that the settledness of the individual (and also of the collective) will lead to a dead end, an end that is everywhere being aggressively pursued in the name of a false—futile, fatal, predetermined, unfree, and self-fulfilling—systematic consistency. This kind of posited, positive consistency tends to reproduce itself, to endure regardless of its validity—despite whatever validity it may have—according to the “normative power of the factual.” Systematic consistency blindly creates, reproduces and maintains order, its own order (K(z)109, L11, J1160), regardless of the consequences. Fragment L11, arguing through the classical authority of a Cicero citation, represents a particularly compelling formulation of this point:

It is sad when one finally arrives in one’s opinions at the situation of which Cicero (Quaestionem Tusculanarum Lib. 2) said: qui ceris destinatisque sententiis addici et consecrati sunt, ut etiam, que non probat, cogantur defendere. (For this is suffered with impatience only by those who are, so to speak, sworn and sold to certain determinate and fixed points of view and through the resultant necessity
are forced to defend positions that they do not want to support for the sake of being consequential.) (L.11, translation based on the German)

This outcome within the mental life of the individual provides the model for Lichtenberg’s philosophy of history (and prognosticated history of philosophy). Everything that is fixed and decided is also exhausted and exhausting. Under these conditions, the labor of undoing these systems becomes a Herculean task of autonomous thought (addressed in the next section).

Between the drive to systematization and the antisystemic impulses that also originate from the individual, Lichtenberg cannot finally decide whether total systematic reason will finally triumph over “eternal alternation.” But even his “protest” tends to emphasize the inevitability of the latter (despite the attempts of the former). It is also far from clear what “we” will become as a result of this two-sided dynamic. The fatal side, the side of systems, implies that a definitive answer can only come as a fait accompli after the fact. The other side adopts a view, perhaps most similar to that of Hamann among Lichtenberg’s contemporaries, of all rationalist-systematic intentions as only passing phases—all-too-human vanities. Also in the context of nomenclature, Lichtenberg writes “the nonsensical disappears on its own, and that which nature simply rejects does not grow back” (K.21). But this sentence only inverts the fatalism while it suggests the conditions for the ultimate success of the experiment, but it is difficult to take this providential hope too seriously—at least not anymore—in a time when the infernal pseudo-systematic noise of opinions and theories, of competing rationalisms, fanaticisms, political theologies, metastasizing pseudomorphoses of “reason,” continues unabated.

Despite his pessimism, Lichtenberg holds onto some hope—if only as a figure of thought meant to be operative in the very long term—which he hopes to install within and against the posterity system, as a possibility that Enlightenment and its dialectics will finally burn themselves out and leave behind a more livable conception of life. This hope, which comes dangerously close to a hope of deconstruction, bets on the actual underlying asystemacity of language and of the posterity system as well. The short rhyme cited at the top of “Timorus” condenses the point:

Laßt den Teufel brummen,
Er muß doch verstummen. (3:209)

Let the devil buzz and hoot,
In the end he must go mute.
With the rise of science and reason, the labor of autonomous thought no longer takes place under the shadow of an oppressive tradition. The latter is freed up by Selbstdenken because it allows the tradition to be taken selectively and according to its usefulness, providing nourishment for thought as a limitless possibility of thinking or being differently in an era of increasing systemic conformism. What makes this Selbstdenken a melancholy science is thus also the condition of its possibility. Autonomous thought occurs within and under the shadow of systematic claims to authority, which are no longer held by any single tradition per se, but within concrete institutions and systematically reproduced discourses. From this perspective (more Koselleck than Habermas), the Enlightenment is not some bygone era of a blossoming public sphere of free discourse, but rather the moment of intensification of a shadow that reaches up to the present era. Discourse itself may proliferate here, but the proliferation itself proves nothing. The actual freedom of discourse and the freedom of the thoughts behind it are only a subordinate factor within the apparently ubiquitous (though in fact historically specific) opinion system. Within this system, as Lichtenberg was the first to point out, the relative freedom of discourse becomes more and more circumscribed by growing systemic and systematic constraints and compulsions, which figure and prefigure the content and dynamics of discourse itself through and through. In making the hypothesis the ultimate category of true science, Lichtenberg attempts to salvage something for sheer opinion, which, though it cannot really stop the advance of new absolutisms, might at least be able to hold its ground within them. He sides absolutely—even if only as a “protest”—with the ongoing thinkability of thoughts over the final validity of the results.

Think for Yourself III: Genius and the Opinion System

In closing I would like to recall one more time, that I do not wish to improve, nor to innovate, but merely to excuse (entschuldigen).

Lichtenberg, “Speech of the Number Eight” (3:468)

Based on the virtuality that Lichtenberg presupposes of all human systems, all of which are ultimately only second order representations—in effect language, models, metaphors—the universalism of reason can at best
be taken as an unenforceable cognitive ideal, while in reality everyone has their own particular “system.” Reason must remain equally out of reach for everyone, if it is not to become instrumentalized in the competition of reasons, and therefore Lichtenberg’s version of the collective opinion system, as the general and common intersubjective macrosystem, the economizer of individual opinions and beliefs, must also be an open system. This means that the final systematicity of the posterity system—or its lack thereof—will always remain to be seen. To the extent that posterity always circularly awaits its own verdict upon itself, it is not a closed or finished system, and history has not yet reached its end. Only posterity itself can prove whether there was a posterity system or not. It is only in this absence of the final judgment of a definitive posterity that actual posterities can formulate themselves, in the back and forth of opinions. What differentiates Lichtenberg from many of his contemporaries (and other thinkers of the modern era) is that his “system” lacks the expectation that it will prove to have been systematic and thus remains radically unguaranteed. “Systems” are only a human experiment, and every system, including this one—the one that tries to predicate the opinion system as system—is sheer opinion, an artificial and provisional representation.

But the opinion system as posterity system must have some ability to structure and give outlet to the opinions of individuals, or else it would be completely out of line with its own concept. The ego, with its beliefs and opinions, must at least have the illusion of participation within some kind of collective (if not universal) horizon, without which thoughts would not even begin to be able to (oppositionally and occasionally) formulate themselves. As long as opinion and belief continue to differ amongst themselves—only nominally distinct—their ambiguity will continue to define an inner conflict between the systematic and the asystematic, which will also be reflected as an internal crisis within the collective system, which will thus always fall short of its ideal of systematic asystematicity. But it is thereby left open in terms of its possible or impossible systematicity. Belief cannot be fully expunged from opinion, just as the “I,” even once it has been recognized as a fiction—a collective singular and a merely practical postulate—still cannot be totally given up to the much more real and ubiquitous id (es).

The “I” and its opinion—id’s opinion—will always be marked by the scar of individuation. According to fragment G(2)86, “the most healthy and
beautiful, the most regularly constructed people are those who take everything in stride (sich alles gefallen lassen). As soon someone has an affliction, he also has his own opinion (eine eigne Meinung).” This aphorism inverts the opposition of passive and active, and reverses their conventional valuation. Passivity in one’s opinions, to the point of being completely imperturbable and having no opinion at all (sich alles gefallen lassen), does not look like a bad thing (if only it were possible), whereas the active and opinionated ego is interpreted as the psychological effect of a passively endured affliction (Gebrechen), which produces the misguided belief in one’s own opinion as a kind of resentment or compensation. The ego in its entirety and all of its activities are passive because it and its opinions are generated from a source that it has no access to or control over. “Health and beauty,” on the other hand—unmarred naturalness—are attributed to those who have no opinion and no ego at all, “who are amenable to everything” without ever identifying or individuating. This contrast is also implicitly coded as an opposition between opinion as masculine vice and “naturalness” as a feminine virtue. “Natural,” “feminine,” opinionless passivity is favored over egocentric masculine opinion (also essentially passive, but compensatory), which takes the form of an unjustified self-assertion, the overcompensation for an “affliction.” Lichtenberg locates this affliction in the place of the id: “It” is the failure of memory—which may also remember too much—and the resulting impotence in the face of an unsafe, unkind, and uncertain world.

Both behavioral types can be equally characterized as passive and unfree, but Lichtenberg clearly idealizes the mode (figured as feminine) that lets everything pass over it. If such an attitude toward the world were possible—in the cosmos of literature, neither Job nor Faust would fit the bill, but perhaps Billy Budd—it would either be a pure semblance or pure undifferentiated id. Though Lichtenberg may imagine that he has met some people who approximate of this ideal condition, it is clear from the rest of his writing that this perfect and natural passivity is nothing but an ideal and does not reflect of his understanding of the actual operation of the opinion system. Because of the specific economies of memory and knowledge (presented above), being “amenable to everything” is not an option. Thus, in reality, everyone is practically bound to an “I” that is only really a postulate but is inevitably overstated and attributed with a phantom life of its own, as well as its “own” opinions.
The inner systematicity of a system that is collectively ubiquitous (which does not allow belief to be entirely factored out) is coterminous with the pseudo-systematicity of the “I.” For Lichtenberg, the opinion system is supposed as both the problem and the solution, the place of the illegitimate self-assertion of the “I” and its suspension of this illegitimacy in the recognition of the provisionality of its own position and its origins. The “I” is inevitable, just as it is equally inevitable that it will end up holding some opinions, but because these opinions not uniquely its own, they must be met with irony rather than emphatic belief. In entry C194 (perhaps from January 1773), one of several in which Lichtenberg speaks of a fictive ultimate “council of humanity” (Rat der Menschen), he postulates such a suspension of belief as the minimal criterion of genius. The “usual mind” (der gewöhnliche Kopf), on the other hand, “always conforms to the prevailing opinion and the prevailing fashion . . . he behaves passively (leidend) in everything.” In strong apparent contradiction with the “affliction” hypothesis, this sentence reaches the same judgment as Fichte—in only slightly less critical terms—by identifying opinion as a completely passive uncritical conformism.

But Lichtenberg also advocates a positive, active conception of opinion, which, predictably and in a sense also conventionally, refuses to accommodate itself to opinion as a mere fashion or social norm. By actively resisting and disbelieving the opinions of others, one must make an effort avoid credulous participation. But this activity can formulate itself by a provisional negation and only within the confines of a psychological—egological and compensatory—passivity motivated by an underlying lack. C194 thus continues: “It is constantly occurring to the great genius (dem großen Genie fällt überall ein): could not this too be false? He never gives his vote (Stimme) without consideration (Überlegung).” Great genius or no, this is recognizably the same reformist and autoreformist model of autonomous thought advocated by Locke, which Lichtenberg gives a specifically topical orientation: “Could not even this system, including my “own” system, be false?” The genius’ relation to opinion, systematically antisystematic, can never come to rest, as is evident in the two words: “even this,” which stand for ad infinitum.

Another central aspect here, easily overlooked, is that the matter of genius should arise at all in a consideration of the opinion system. Lichtenberg explains genius rather clinically, more or less sociologically, not as the external “in-spiration” of some sort of spirit (Genius), but instead links it to the
opinion system. Defining genius in this way also has the advantage of applying the idea of genius (like the opinion system) very broadly, not just to the arts, but to all areas of human endeavor. From this perspective, genius stands for an alternate relation to systems in general; “genius” defines the preexisting possibility of all systems to be de- and resystematized, and “the genius” only actualizes this potential. This very circumspect approach to what is often taken for “originality” leads to an additional consequence: Lichtenberg coordinates the conceptually disparate terms of the “spontaneous idea” (Einfall) and “consideration” (Uberlegung), both of which characterize the intellectual praxis of the genius. This methodical coordination of the ad hoc with the reflective is also characteristic of the writing of Sudelbücher. Inspiration and consideration combine to bring together incompatible habits of thought. Einfall, on the one hand, may tend to be trivial and contingent, dependent upon the accidental association of whatever it receives; the more measured Uberlegung, by contrast, may tend to become ponderous, overly captivated with its own attempts to come to terms with its objects and capture them within more or less prefabricated topical and philosophical understandings. This dilemma circumscribes the situation of the genius, to whom it constantly “occurs” that he must reconsider everything (and just not everything all at once, but everything individually, in its quiddity).

Everything that is unconsidered and insufficiently considered, everything that is uncertain and possibly false in every discursive formation, constantly strikes the genius. But how does this kind of more or less negative skepticism produce genius and works of genius in any positive or productive sense? The skeptical method of genius opens up a space for reinvention in everything that had appeared to be fixed and systematic. The genius is thus characterized by a minimum of belief and minimal respect for authority (the decisive structuring factors for the reproduction of “systems”). In relating to existing systems, the genius systematically disbelieves, thereby revealing the contingency of the existing system and opening the way for new systems. Genius is thus only secondarily an attribute of individuals or works. The works themselves and the lives of the ones who made them would always to some degree represent a new institution and a new system, whereas the primary aspect of genius lies in its possibility, its latency within all “systems” as their para-systemic a priori. A consequence of this—set in terms of a possible philosophy of history or of a “demystification” thesis in
the style of Max Weber—would be that the more truly systematic life becomes (or is believed to have become), the less room there for geniuses.

The genius experiences systems according to their ability to be rendered inoperative, to be neutralized and rethought. The potential of genius lies in its ability to initiate the shutdown of all systems and every authority claim; art only represents this. By way of this figure of genius, which defines the system of the relativization and corrosion of all possible systems, Lichtenberg also views the opinion system as (relatively) absolute. According to this conception he indeed views it as much more absolute than any particular opinions system or beliefs system of the individual. The absoluteness of the latter would be limited a priori by its particular—merely relative—systematicity within and as a variation of existing norms (which are also “systems” in Lichtenberg’s sense). The collective opinion system is a system of systems whose actual systematicity remains dubious or at least—necessarily and constitutively—undecided.

Without the belief in one’s thoughts, in their truth, or in the possibility of their general validity, the only other possible measure of thought is functional utility, observable in the realm of its effects. Entry C194 continues with an explication of this functionalist model: “I knew a man of great talents whose entire opinions-system, just like his supply of furniture, distinguished itself by a particular order and functionality (Brauchbarkeit); he did not take anything into his house for which he did not see the use (Nutzun); to acquire something just because others had it was impossible for him.”

Here, as in the analogy of eating and digestion discussed above, the individual’s opinions system is systematic to the extent that it represents a method of selective acquisition. This practice of bricolage is not original in any absolute sense, and its value is merely that of “usefulness,” “use,” and “applicability.” To follow the analogy: most individuals go around passively, mimetically, and reflexively—that is, methodically and systematically—acquiring mental white elephants, junk, objects for which they have no use, whereas the truly methodical thinker, the “genius,” knows to assess heterogeneous thoughts and make them work. The genius, so to speak, allows himself the luxury of using filters of his own design, rather than merely taking preexisting “systems” at face value.

The emphasis on “usefulness” also marks a shift away from the initial terrain of Lichtenberg’s consideration: the standard of considered acquisition, though it seems to follow from the idea of Überlegung, appears to have only
a minimal analogical connection to the method of the constant negation
(*Einfall*), and the functionalist criterion of *Brauchbarkeit* is something else
again. The first step in the argument—*Einfall* or *Überlegung*?—conceives
the relation to the individual from the point of view of traditions; the “ge-
nius” is constantly receiving and in a sense inheriting all manner of input
(*Überlieferung*), which may also serve as the constant, more or less acciden-
tal, occasion for the thought that this foreign matter should be fundamen-
tally reconsidered. Here the individual finds itself in the dative case (dem
*großen Genie*) as a passive recipient. But in the next step of utility, the same
relation is recast in terms of individual practice, which includes specific re-
actions and activities that may be undertaken. Now the individual appears
in the subject position, the nominative case, with the dative cast into a sub-
ordinate clause. Between these positions, Lichtenberg sketches a practical
and linguistic aporia: two incompatible perspectives are delineated, juxta-
posed, inverted, but the unifying transition between the two analogic
streams remains obscure.

As if aware of this latent rupture in his train of thought, Lichtenberg’s
next sentence picks up the metaphor of the imaginary grand council (*Rat*),
while continuing with his anecdote of “talented man”: “He thought, it has
been decided without me, that it should be thus, but perhaps it would have
been decided differently if I had been there” (C194). This argumentative
shift, which attempts to reconnect the divergent perspectives introduced,
represents a provisional suspension of every posterity that is imagined as
ubiquitous, overwhelming, and concretely systematic in its discursive ef-
fects. The personal presence of one individual might have changed every-
thing. The idea of posterity itself must always be reconsidered according to
its de-totalizing aspect and the criterion of “usefulness,” which can only be
known retrospectively and perspectively, ethically but not morally (at least
not in the first instance). Usefulness always implies a particular time, place,
and circumstance. Things may *prove to be useful*, but only from a certain
perspective or according to a certain set of ends. The ends may be invalid-
dated, which means that usefulness can only be a relative standard. More
concretely, Lichtenberg writes in G(2)183: “The first American who dis-
covered Columbus made an unfortunate discovery.” Functionalism is essen-
tially mobile and tends to destabilize the functional presuppositions upon
which systems are based.
The criterion of “usefulness” represents the limited and specific opportunity of an ethical reevaluation of a presupposed means–ends relation. In a wider sense, the question of Brauchbarkeit poses the question of the usefulness of the tradition itself from within this tradition, but from the narrow standpoint of the individual who asks: what does it mean to me? From this angle of usefulness, the individual is virtually relocated to the standpoint of posterity. The impulse toward continual reconsideration from the perspective of individuals motivates a constant reconfiguration of possibilities. This is the only framework that can provide some stability against both the rampant individualism of the inconsiderate self-assertion of opinion and the self-propagating spread of received opinion. All past resolutions are thus invalidated and redesignated with respect to their lack of individual resolutions. The metaphor of the council, which functions as a form of irony, a mode of self-differentiation and self-distancing, is presented in the subjunctive, which allows the subject’s virtual participation in the council. The counterfactual invocation of this “council” makes evident its deferral and its literal nonexistence, thereby underscoring the virtuality of all democratic form, which must always ultimately—within the limits of life, death, and history—defer itself to a posterity system that can only be represented as a corporate body that patently does not exist and never will. But the individual subject is only responsible before the virtual democracy and not before any real one. This subject defines itself by the hypothetical right to suspend any and every systematic and systemic authority—by its right of nonacquisition of conventional norms and the opinions of others.

What above all distinguishes Lichtenberg from other authors treated in the present study is his refusal to take the posterity system itself completely seriously. His idea of a regulative posterity is a patently fictive invention, which therefore above all does not claim that any actual posterities function democratically or that their particular judgments are in any way final; and they are certainly not the product of any necessary historical law or universal reason that drives things forward. Posterity for Lichtenberg—as system of systems or figure of figures—can only be supposed virtually from the side of the individual, or else it will tend to become tautologically self-positing, self-reproducing, finally deterministic and suicidal. Lichtenberg’s meta-historical hope, therefore, is that the virtual positions of hypothetical thought will sustain themselves above and beyond the violent impositions
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of the hyper-rationalist version of science and enlightenment that can dangerously overlap with other kinds of authoritarian truth systems.

At the end of the Sudelbuch entry C194, Lichtenberg considers the unpromising possibility of a completely static posterity, which he sees as the end and completion of the Enlightenment—still a long way off—in an enlightenment that will never be characterized by the absolute rule of reason, but only by a relative degree of systematic completion. Like the individual who is set in his opinions, this historical end state is also described as “settled,” “set,” gesetzt:

Let thanks be given to these men [the geniuses], who, from time to time anyway, are able to shake things up again, when they are beginning to settle; our world is still too young for this; we cannot yet become Chinese. If all nations were entirely separated from each other, then they might each perhaps arrive, though with different degrees of perfection, at the sinological standstill.

This image—so there is no confusion—has little or nothing to do with China, except perhaps in the most banal sense in which Eurocentric perceptions are nevertheless capable of producing countermodels to Europe’s own self-stylization. What Lichtenberg describes here is the possibility of the European Enlightenment to achieve a completely static end, to change from a history of progress to a self-identical, perpetual system. True perfection (Vollkommenheit) does not have various degrees (Stufen), unless the sentence is understood as referring to humanity’s essential inability to achieve any true or ultimate perfection. Even the “perfection” through the progress of reason would only produce a relative state; it might produce a new “culture,” but it would only be a utopia to the extent that it is blinded to itself. Perfection thus does not mean absolute perfection but can only refer to an apparent “perfection” whose disavowed reality is merely standstill (Stillstand). The precondition for this stasis is international isolation, which may also stand for intersubjective and intellectual isolation. The concept of the political in this sense, even as a merely internal self-differentiation, also presupposes external differences (of opinion) and instances of difference, including but not limited to enmity. Static perfection is only plausible as long as things are viewed in isolation. The nations, completely separated from each other, may look like individua (in the sense of Lichtenberg’s “planet theory”), but, as in the case of individuals, these individua are also infinitely divisible and internally differentiated. Read in this way, the planet
theory does not imply that individual instances are monads, solipsistically out of touch with their others and their surroundings, but, to the contrary, it only means that intersubjective (or international) interactions will never be able to completely dissolve the differences. Only in the very end—also only virtual, if the opinion system is allowed to propagate an image of itself as closed and self-sufficient—does something resembling complete isolation take place. This outcome would be the culmination of a false totality that has made itself real. Even the tendencies in this direction must be avoided, in Lichtenberg’s view, even if this means following a different idea of systematicity and going against the current of a certain literalism of reason.

Everyone remains alone, even if this isolation also has the character of a relation. “Progress” in this sense, which can only occur as radical analogical epiphanies (Einfälle) if it is to avoid systematic expansionism, depends on the analogical relation (not a relation of identity) between individual and nation. The opinion system depends, in other words, on the euro- but polycentric, uni- but plurivocal, mono- but polytheistic, and perhaps completely contradictory and unviable conception of a nations system; it depends on the idea of nation as a model of individual particularism, even after the dissolution of the idea of the nation as a concrete reality. “The nations” in Lichtenberg’s understanding are not “completely separated” from one another, and to this extent they never were “nations”—in the strict sense of original natality—at all. The inseparable togetherness of individuals, like that of “nations” (according to Lichtenberg’s now outdated metaphorical model) produces rejuvenating effects in their representation of insuperable difference—even at a late date in history. The fictive unity of nations, like that of the individual, is only a postulated, retrospectively instituted, and decreed unity, which in both cases may appear as a debit or handicap to the extent that its determinations are irreversible. This determinism according to the national model only holds until the borders are lifted, perspectives are freed up, and differences (including language difference) come into play. This kind of unregulatable metaphorical—and literal—border crossing opens every “closed” system to uncontrollable analogization, re-metaphorization, and retranslation, which has the potential to simultaneously destroy and rejuvenate the old systemic edifice. This desystematizing effect is history for Lichtenberg, not so much thanks to the systematic or antisystematic efforts of individuals but, even before the individuals, thanks to the blank spots, the possibilities, the futures, and the latencies left open within the
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systems themselves. In this form and within this conception, the “European” system itself may still have potential. What is at stake is also nothing less than the making—and breaking—of individual epochs. Only in this constant division and subdivision of everything that is apparently “individual” can the divisions and differences that occur in the course of interactions be retrospectively transformed from their “-centric” state of isolation and polarization to reveal factual interdependencies. Lichtenberg’s hypothesis contains the implicit possibility that epochs are broken not so much through “advancement” or a systematic “progress” or logical consequence (which would only continue and deepen the current epoch), as out of the systemic exhaustion of painting oneself into a corner. This state of exhaustion is where genius comes in, as the deus ex machina that can rediscover and sublimate the chaos, the nonsense, and the nihilism of every infernal system.

Lichtenberg, far removed from any eschatological expectations, even in the post-Revolutionary era, thought that the world and the Enlightenment were too young to forcefully enter the era of its maturity and old age. In a text that also seems to pertain to the status of the Sudelbücher themselves, he thus writes:

> One great usefulness of writing is also that the opinion of one person and that which he says can be passed on to posterity (die Nachwelt) unfalsified. The tradition (die Tradition) takes something from every mouth through which it flows and can finally represent a matter in such a way (endlich eine Sache so vorstellen) that it becomes unrecognizable (unkenntlich). It is a translation every single time. (Es ist allemal eine Übersetzung.) (H(2)130)

These three sentences come the closest to formulating Lichtenberg’s view of posterity as well as of his own place within it. It is also a view, as he implies, that he would like to pass on. But he does not wish for his opinions to be systematically canonized in a fixed dogmatic form or monumental image, but hopes rather to be able to continue to speak to and through posterity, more or less directly. He speaks to and of a posterity without any guarantees about its future existence, its form, or the form of his own reception within it. Every sidelong glance at posterity as if there were a grandiose, transfiguring, or transcendent posterity—a Fama, a final authority, a pantheon, a canon, some form of personal reincarnation—would be insincere, though there is no doubt, as this fragment also reflects, that these questions...
also preoccupied Lichtenberg. But rather than playing by the rules of a posterity system already geared toward “literary” fame, thereby implicitly recognizing the authority of this system, Lichtenberg prefers to doubt precisely this idea of a systematic posterity by addressing it directly and ironsically personifying it. He attempts to see through its actual possible functions without idealizing or seriously personifying it, actively operating upon and within this posterity without accepting it as an unavoidable form that necessarily prescribes and privileges specific (communicative) forms, forums, or conventions.

Lichtenberg projects a posterity in which the names may be forgotten, but in which representations and ideas (Vorstellungen) necessarily pass through the “mouths” and minds of individuals. In this posterity, there are no representative models or precursors (Vorbilder) that would be carried on and reproduced as such. The representations of opinion—figured here in a metaphor that mixes spoken language and writing—do not have a representational function (for example, in the sense of Carl Schmitt); they do not represent a tradition, a transcendence, or an identity, which they would claim to make concrete and visible, but instead are defined by their distortive function, changing and misrecognizing whatever is passed on. Though they may attempt to posit and represent a limited transcendence (in the sense of “transcendent ventriloquism”), this merely intentional claim has no power over the fact that the representations of opinion are spectral because as soon as the opinion moves beyond the individual “speaker,” either in writing or by way of fama, then this speaker—living or dead, but virtually dead—is no longer in control of the initial representational intent and only continues to “speak” (in time but not in view of the transcendence of time) by proxy.

Lichtenberg’s Sudelbücher are usually read as a private compendium, but based on H130 it may appear that he at least considered the possibility of their posthumous reception, and thus, even in the waste books, some kind of posterity is still there as a virtual interlocutor and the measure of his thoughts. If this fragment is read as an implicit description of Lichtenberg’s writing in the Sudelbücher, this would read their form as a dislocation of opinion and history, pursuing their own dynamic of posterity to produce a specific consequence—to produce a metaphorical margin between orality and textuality. But, according to the fragment’s first claim, it is precisely writing in its great “utility” that is the privileged locus of opinion variations,
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ideas written as if spoken and recorded in a form that at least makes it possible for them to be passed on. The second part of the fragment introduces a finite teleology of meaning—“finally” (endlich)—into the individual iterative particles (“eines,” “allemaal”), so that the opinions systems that emerges from the memories of individuals may generate infinite micro-epochal histories. This is always something less or other than a stable institution or a predictable program, but it also may at least partially help to tame the conflictual, violent, and schismatic possibilities of a competitively conceived opinion system. Under Lichtenberg’s “system,” the specificity of the individual viewpoint, rather than being brought to bear representationally for the sake of dominating others, has a better chance of formulating itself in terms of its real individuality (outside of the “political” pressure to identify, join, or conform). This system is ultimately a completely entropic nonsystem, an institution of lawless distortion, disfiguration, refiguration, and reconfiguration, which may or may not have any real weight in day-to-day political reality. But lacking such a supplementary nonsystem, this “reality” will continue to betray its own purposes and work toward highly destructive ends. The potential for ideological exploitation is also included within this distortive moment, but it can only become virulent when it is accompanied by the habit of thought called belief. The success of institutions and ideas is defined by how individuals act within them, and there can be no institutional structure or form of social organization that can entirely compensate for the possible instrumentalization of individual thoughts and potentials. The pressures of this instrumentalization are, in effect, what Lichtenberg’s opinions system seeks to counterbalance.