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THE WASTE BOOKS

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg

Translated with an Introduction
and Notes by

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The body of this book consists of 1,085 aphorisms and other aphoristically brief writings selected from the notebooks Lichtenberg kept from his student days until the end of his life as a depository for his thoughts, observations and memoranda to himself. He called these volumes his *Sudelbücher*—a rendition of the English "waste books," a term employed in the English business house of the time to designate the ledgers in which transactions of all kinds were entered as they occurred before being transferred to the more orderly and neatly written account books. Each volume was accorded a letter of the alphabet (with I omitted) from A, begun in 1765 (and in fact consisting of five slim notebooks collected together), to L, which breaks off at Lichtenberg's death in 1799. Notebooks G and H existed into the nineteenth century but have since disappeared, most of notebook K was at some time destroyed, and notebook L has a number of pages missing.

The contents of these notebooks are very heterogeneous: a single page can include aphorisms, scientific
jottings and sketches, linguistic experiments, phrases that have struck the writer and appealed to him, quotations from books and magazines, notes for future work, dates to be remembered, titles of books to be purchased; what the Sudelbücher are not, however, are diaries—Lichtenberg also kept diaries, and the orderly descriptions of the day-to-day events of his life they contain bear no resemblance to the pages of the notebooks.

The contents of our volume first appeared in print in the first and second editions of Lichtenbergs Vermischte Schriften (1800–1806 and 1844–1853); in making my selection I used the text of volumes 1 and 2 of Wolfgang Promies’s edition of Lichtenberg’s Schriften und Briefe (1968–1971), in which the lost notebooks G and H and the missing pages of notebook K are reconstructed, as far as this is possible, from the texts published in volumes of the Vermischte Schriften of 1806 and 1844. An additional notebook, called by Promies the Goldpapierheft from the color of its original binding, has also been drawn on for the present edition; and I found Wilhelm Grenzmann’s selection in his edition of the Gesammelte Werke (1949) useful in determining what I thought to be the best of Lichtenberg.

Lichtenberg is credited with having introduced the aphorism into German literature, but he did so posthumously and without deliberate intent: he published much during his lifetime but the notebooks in which he wrote his aphorisms were kept entirely for his own use, instruction and amusement, with no thought of publication. He was a mathematician, physicist and astronomer by profession, and a satirist in his spare time: but the work he published would not have served to keep his name and presence alive beyond his own era. His scientific writings belong firmly to their age; of his non-scientific works the Letters from England (1776 and 1778) are remembered chiefly for their descriptions of Garrick, and his book on Hogarth—G. C. Lichtenbergs ausführliche Erklärung der Hogarthischen Kupferstiche (1794–1799)—survives in literary history as an amazing tour de force or an amazing act of folly, depending on how you look at it (the descriptions and explanations of Hogarth’s drawings are so detailed as to render the drawings themselves almost redundant); and probably none of them would have outlasted him even to the qualified degree they have if they had not been by the author of the aphorisms.

As a distinct literary form the aphorism was, like so many things good and bad, an invention of antique Greece. The word itself is first encountered at the head of the so-called Corpus Hippocraticum: the collection of treatises, of which more than seventy are known, named after Hippocrates, the “father of medicine,” and consisting of rules for good living and good health, brief reflections and other short writings of a kind which, from the
description accorded them, we should now call aphoristic. The epigram and the "sentence" or proverb are plainly related to the aphorism, the character of the Romans and their language is equally plainly favorable to aphoristic brevity, and all good writers have tended towards aphorism when they have wanted to summarize an opinion: nonetheless the aphorism as a deliberately cultivated literary form, as distinct from something said briefly, did not appear in European literature until the Renaissance, when the aphoristic writings of Erasmus, Michelangelo, Paracelsus and Bacon, but above all those of the line of French philosophers from Montaigne to Chamfort, bestowed on it the distinctive character by which we now recognize it.

In its pure and perfect form the aphorism is distinguished by four qualities occurring together: it is brief, it is isolated, it is witty, and it is "philosophical." This last quality marks it off from the epigram, which is essentially no more than a witty observation; the third, which it shares with the epigram, marks it off from the proverb or maxim: its point, though intended seriously, is supposed to strike the reader, not with the blunt obviousness of a palpable truth—"Many hands make light work"—but rather in the way the point of a good joke should strike him—"In the misfortunes of our best friends we find something that does not displease us." In this pure form the aphorism disdains all giving of reasons and presents only a conclusion, so that it is often plainly intended to provoke instant contradiction in the sense that the payoff line of a joke is intended to provoke instant laughter.

That Lichtenberg was a master of the aphorism in its pure form is amply demonstrated in the following selection. "To err is human also insofar as animals seldom or never err, or at least only the cleverest of them do so," to take one example, seems to me as perfect a model of the form as can be found anywhere: the cliché that, in contrast to the infallibility of God, error is the province of humanity is reinterpreted to contrast humanity unfavorably with the animals in this respect, then the basis of this judgment is disclosed in the "shock" substitution of "cleverest" for the expected "stupidest." The meaning of the aphorism is: if God is infallible, so also is animal instinct (or almost so), and error is introduced only when human or near-human reason begins to operate. The purpose of clothing this observation in aphoristic form is to compel the reader to make it for himself and thus, through the effect of vanity and a feeling of proprietorship, be more inclined to accept it as true.

The close association between the aphorism and the joke was something Lichtenberg himself was aware of—or so it seems from his observation that the "inventor" of knowledge is "wit," while reason is only its "discoverer"; and the connection is still quite close even when the aphorism has expanded into a miniature essay of several sentences: the linking together of things we do not
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normally link together, and some feeling of a punch line
at the end, are still its defining characteristics.

3

The isolation to which the aphorism consigns itself
often has to be paid for in imperfect comprehensibility:
its reader must often possess a background of knowl-
edge against which alone it will acquire comprehensive
meaning. This is so, for instance, even in the case of the
aphorism of La Rochefoucauld quoted earlier: if it is to be
seen as having any raison d'être at all we must at the very
least be aware that common sentiment is opposed to it.
This is why the need has often been felt to understand
Lichtenberg's aphorisms as the salient points of a deep
philosophical front—of a body of thought, that is, which
if its author had been differently disposed could have
been expressed differently. During the nineteenth cen-
tury this need was reinforced in those who admired
Lichtenberg by the hegemony of the philosophical sys-
tem: if a philosopher did not have a system, it was felt, he
was not really a philosopher. In the present century the
fragmentary philosophy of Nietzsche's notebooks and of
the later Wittgenstein has encouraged the suspicion that
Lichtenberg's fragmentary philosophy is of a kind similar
to that of Nietzsche or Wittgenstein. For my part I think
that anyone who conscientiously seeks "Lichtenberg's
philosophy" in the Sudelbücher is not exactly wasting

his time—no one who reads Lichtenberg conscientiously
is wasting his time—but is certainly expending ingenuity
in the wrong place: the analogy with Nietzsche or Witt-
genstein is misleading, inasmuch as their thinking is
only expressed in fragmentary form whereas Lichten-
berg's really is fragmentary. His notebooks resemble
little else in literature for variegated inconsequentiality,
even when the aphoristic and allied writings have
been extracted and tidied up—punctuation, for example,
is often noticeable by its complete absence—the degree
of cohesion they exhibit derives, not from any submerged
systematism, or even from a personal philosophy strug-
gling to find expression, but simply from their being the
product of the same mind and from that mind's being in-
 fused with what we have come to call the "spirit of the
Enlightenment."

The reader may recall Nietzsche's remark, in the pref-
ace to the Genealogy of Morals, that the "aphoristic
form" of Thus Spoke Zarathustra "creates difficulty" for
those who want to understand it: this difficulty, he says,
"arises from the fact that today this form is not taken suf-
ciently seriously. An aphorism, properly stamped and
molded, has not been 'deciphered' when it has simply
been read; one has then rather to begin its exegesis, for
which is required an art of exegesis." There is no evi-
dence that Lichtenberg thought of his "aphorisms" in
this serious and solemn way. Not only were they not
"properly stamped and molded," but he in fact never
employed the word aphorism to describe what he wrote: the earliest edition of his aphoristic writings entitles them _Bemerkungen vermischten Inhalts_ ("Remarks on Various Subjects") and the word "aphorism" was first used prominently by Albert Leitzmann as the title of his edition of 1902 and succeeding years. What Lichtenberg himself calls them, in an expression very characteristic of him, is _Pfennigs-Wahrheiten—"truths in pennyworths."_ If these pennyworths in any way add up to a pound it is only because Lichtenberg is a singularly pure instance of the spirit of the Enlightenment operating upon what it has inherited.

This inheritance was for Lichtenberg his native German Pietist tradition as it had been modified by the effects of the French and English Enlightenment and by the most influential philosophers of his day, Leibniz and Kant. Like so many who have contributed to the humane culture of Germany, he was a son of the manse: his father and both grandfathers were Lutheran clergymen, and his paternal grandfather, a contemporary of Spener, the founder of Pietism, fell strongly under Spener's influence and became a Pietist. The movement was extremely influential throughout Germany from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, but, unlike similar non-conformist movements in Britain and elsewhere, it did not involve its adherents in a breach with the established church or the setting up of new "nonconformist" churches. From the point of view of understanding Lichtenberg's background, two characteristics of the Pietist faith need to be noticed.

The first has to do with its power to preserve belief in the existence of God well beyond a loss of belief in the veracity of any existing church. The Catholic proposition with regard to Protestantism that, constituting as it does a breach with the one true faith as revealed to and transmitted by the one true church, it is only a stage on the road to atheism may in the long run be proved true (it is too soon to tell); but in the short term it has proved the reverse of the truth. The so-called deism of the French philosophes, succeeded by the frank atheism of the period of the Revolution, was an outcome of the absolutist mentality of Catholic France: either the Christian God as preached by the one true church, or no or next-to-no God at all. In Protestant Germany, on the contrary, the believer was presented with no such either-or demand. The existence of the Lutheran church was in itself a demonstration that to deny the church of Rome in no way involved a denial of God; this being so, the non-conformist who took the further step of denying the Lutheran church, at least as far as inward conviction was concerned, could do so in the confident expectation that God would still be with him; and the same was true if the nonconformist took the yet further step of denying all organized religion, and indeed all distinctly Christian belief of any kind—he still felt under no constraint at the same time to abandon belief in God. So it was that in
Germany the age of the Enlightenment was not at the same time an age of atheism or near-atheism, and that the first German philosopher who was also an atheist was Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Idea*, 1818). Lichtenberg tells us that he ceased to be a believing Christian at the age of sixteen, but his notebooks make it clear that this loss of faith did not involve him in a loss of belief in the supernatural altogether: that God exists he seems never to doubt, though he is quite sure that the fact cannot be proved. This does indeed look like a halfway stage to atheism—the Catholic position is, of course, that the existence of God can be proved, though it is also known to us through revelation—but to Lichtenberg himself it was hardly more than a move in the direction in which the Pietist tradition would naturally have taken him.

The second characteristic is that German Pietism was capable of a high degree of secularization. Although the Pietists were for a long period content to be known as the *Stilten im Lande*—"quietists" who left the affairs of the world in the hands of others—the movement also inspired the evolution of a social conscience more in accord with Spener's original conception: for to Spener the individual's moral self-improvement was not far removed from vanity if it was not accompanied by the performance of Christian good works. Pietists, and the much more numerous host of those whose conscience had been Pietized without their knowing it, thus came to equate effecting social improvements with doing the work of the Lord (a species of do-goodism, if you like, provided you are willing to think of Bismarck as a do-gooder). That this is the highway to the secularization of religion hardly needs pointing out; what may not be so clear is that it will certainly have running along beside it a parallel highway to the secularization of thinking. The distance in time between P.J. Spener (1635-1705) and G.C. Lichtenberg (1742-1799) is not very great, but mentally they inhabit different ages: Spener thinks, and cannot help thinking, as a theologian; Lichtenberg regards theology as being, like everything else, subject to the judgment of the philosopher, who has unseated the theologian as the supreme arbiter in the realm of speculative thought. In differing in this way Spener and Lichtenberg are entirely representative of their respective epochs: for, in Germany at least, philosophy is theology secularized.

Lichtenberg entered philosophy as a distinct discipline through the philosophy of Leibniz, for which the fundamental optimism of the Pietist faith made him especially receptive. As the final and supreme exponent of philosophical rationalism Leibniz appealed strongly to an age in which instinctive certitude as to the nature of the metaphysical world was on the wane. He seemed to prove, as though by mathematics (this is the essence of the appeal of philosophical rationalism), that the world was a structure all of whose parts are in harmony with one another, that there were no "gaps" in this structure.
within which chance (i.e. evil) might operate but that the law of causality was effective everywhere, and that all had been forethought and fore-arranged by an omnipotent and benevolent God—in short, that this is the best of all possible worlds, a proposition one was in danger of calling into question. Something of Leibniz remained with Lichtenberg to the end; he never lost his belief, for instance, that the world was a harmonious whole; but his belief in Leibniz as a whole could not survive his two visits to England, where the skepticism of the Enlightenment and the empiricism of contemporary British philosophy combined to undermine the credibility not only of Leibniz but of any comprehensive metaphysical system whatever. The change he underwent is well expressed in his saying that he now dealt in truths in pennyworths—an undertaking which might be called the opposite of the wholesale trading practiced by the rationalist systems of continental Europe. He became an empiricist and a skeptic, and so he remained until his thinking received its final redirection from Kant. Much has been written about Lichtenberg’s relationship with Kant, the general drift of which has been that he failed to understand him; Grenzmann even goes so far as to say that at bottom he got nothing out of him at all. A true perspective can perhaps be obtained if we regard him as having been too close to Kant (1724–1804) to be able to see him entire. What emerges unequivocally from his notebooks is that Kant offered him a corrective to the exclusively objective orientation encouraged by empiricist philosophy by directing him back to the subjective apparatus by means of which cognition of any kind is performed: to speculation about the objective world he added speculation about objectivity itself.

Lichtenberg was born on July 1, 1742, in Oberramstadt, near Darmstadt, as the youngest of the seventeen children of the pastor of Oberramstadt most of whom had died at birth or in infancy. From early youth he suffered from a malformation of the spine, the precise origin of which is unknown, which developed into a hump. That Lichtenberg was a hunchback was a fact that colored his whole life and is one that has to be remembered and taken into account when we read what he writes about himself.

His native intelligence was, it seems, evident from the first, and his disinclination to follow his family into the church made an academic career an obvious choice for him. In 1763 a stipend granted him by the local landgrave enabled him to attend the university at Göttingen, where he studied mathematics and the natural sciences and around which his life thereafter revolved: in 1770 he was appointed an extraordinary professor, in 1775 a professor in ordinary, which he remained until his death. He taught
mathematics, physics, astronomy and a variety of other more or less scientific subjects.

Before his appointment but after his studies had been officially concluded he stayed on in Göttingen as tutor to a number of English aristocratic youths whose fathers had sent them to Germany as a way of broadening, if not their minds, then at any rate their experience, and he produced upon them so favorable an impression that, their studies (whatever they might have been) over, they insisted he be invited to England both for his own sake and for the sake of those who would be fortunate enough to meet him. As a consequence Lichtenberg paid two visits to England—from Easter to early summer 1770 and from August 1774 to Christmas 1775—and their importance for him and for the course of his thinking cannot be exaggerated. London was by far the largest, grandest and most stimulating thing he had ever seen, and he remarks again and again on its colossal size, wealth, variety and vitality (though before taking what he says completely at face value we must call to mind that he was all the time unconsciously contrasting London with Darmstadt and Göttingen). He was welcomed into the highest society as well as into the most learned: George III and Queen Charlotte, who could of course both speak German, took great pleasure in his conversation, and one morning the king caused enormous consternation at his lodgings by coming there unannounced for a private discussion (according to reports he arrived on the doorstep at 10 a.m. and when the door was opened to his knock asked in German whether the Herr Professor was at home). He visited everywhere he could think of visiting, most memorably Drury Lane, where Garrick was in the last year of his career. Outside London he visited Bath, Birmingham (Matthew Boulton’s factory, the world’s first assembly line), and Margate, England’s oldest public bathing resort, a phenomenon then unknown in Germany. After his return to Göttingen at the end of 1775 he became notorious for his anglophilia and as an advocate of almost everything English—when Kotzebue wrote an abusive satire on his private life he included the phrase “I clothed her with British generosity” so that the object of his attack should not remain in doubt.

Embarked on his academic career in earnest, Lichtenberg quite soon acquired celebrity not only for his erudition but even more for the engaging and entertaining way in which he imparted it: he enjoyed a genuine popularity, and many of those who composed his overflowing audiences came not to learn but to “hear Lichtenberg.” He was among the first to introduce experiments with apparatus into his lectures, and over the years he assembled a fine collection of the scientific apparatus of his day, especially that which produced or was otherwise involved with electricity. In 1780, to the great alarm of his neighbors, he erected the first lightning conductor ever seen in Göttingen (lightning conductors were supposed to be dangerous, and some of them were: it was not always
understood that they had to be firmly earthed. He had already produced experimentally the phenomena known thereafter as the “Lichtenberg figures” (star-shaped patterns formed by dust or other fine matter settling on the surface of an inductor), and he had tried to snatch electricity from the air by means of kites. In 1784 Alessandro Volta, the father of the volt, visited Gottingen especially to see Lichtenberg and his electrical equipment.

His scientific writings show him to have been informed about the then frontiers of scientific progress, but it was not given him to make any practical scientific discovery, a fact he attributed in part to an unconquerable tendency to procrastination (which may, in fact, be the explanation of his failure to launch the first hydrogen-filled balloon, for he certainly knew how to do it well before the famous ascent from the Champs de Mars in August 1783). Nonetheless he was in 1793 elected a member of the Royal Society.

His private life was very irregular, though not very much more so than that of several even more celebrated Germans of his age. In 1777 he met Maria Stechard, then aged thirteen and “a model of beauty and sweetness,” who thereafter visited him every day and from Easter 1780 lived with him permanently. His relationship with his “little daughter” was well known in Gottingen, but nobody was really bothered by it and only the dramatist Kotzebue saw fit to “expose” Lichtenberg’s mode of life in a satirical pamphlet of an incomprehensible aggressiveness. Maria died in August 1782 and Lichtenberg was affected by her death as by nothing before or afterwards. During the following year, however, he encountered another woman of the people, the 22-year-old Margarethe Kellner, and from 1786 onwards they lived together. Margarethe gave Lichtenberg six children; they were married in October 1789, and she survived him by forty-nine years.

On August 10, 1846, the dramatist Friedrich Hebbel wrote in his diary the subsequently much-quoted remark: “I would rather be forgotten with Lichtenberg than immortal with Jean Paul.” The remark is calculated to bring a smile to the face of the reader nowadays, for Jean Paul’s immortality was cut short rather quickly, while Lichtenberg is the best-remembered representative in Germany of the age of the Enlightenment. During the almost two centuries since his death on February 24, 1799, he has come close to being the German writer’s favorite writer. Goethe commended him as being worthy of study “in a way that few are”; Schopenhauer singled him out as an example of the true philosopher who thinks not for the instruction of others but because “thinking for himself” is his greatest pleasure; Nietzsche counted his aphorisms as one of the only four German books which, apart from Goethe’s, were worth reading again and again; in the
1920s Kurt Tucholsky regretted the unavailability of his writings ("Wo ist Lichtenberg!"). In his book on The Germans (1982), Gordon A. Craig describes Lichtenberg’s aphorisms as being “among the great achievements of the German spirit in the eighteenth century”; Lichtenberg himself he calls “a formidable critic who directed his shafts against charlatans, mystagogues and purveyors of false science” and “an inveterate opponent of provincial patriotism, that ‘Teutschheit’ which was really a disguised form of xenophobia” whose “brilliant sallies against this recurrent German disease were to win the praise of people like Heinrich Heine, Leo Tolstoy, Karl Kraus and Albert Einstein, all of them spiritual heirs of the Enlightenment.” This formidable array of recommendations, which would presumably have greatly astonished Lichtenberg himself if he could have known of it, may suggest that the general unfamiliarity of his name and writings that exists outside Germany is something to be remedied.

This selection from Lichtenberg is ordered chronologically, from notebook A to notebook L: this seems to me in every way preferable to trying (and failing) to arrange each aphorism under a subject heading appropriate to it. It also serves to preserve something of what is in fact before us in the original, which is not an orderly series of prescriptions and commandments but a very disorderly series of notebook jottings extending over thirty years.

The attentive reader will notice that one or two aphorisms appear more than once, in slightly different wording, and he will also understand why they do.

An asterisk at the end of a numbered section indicates that there is a note on that section at the end of the book. I have kept these annotations as brief and as few as I could: to annotate an aphorism seems to me too much like explaining a joke. Generally I have worked on a need-to-know basis: Does the reader need to know this in order to understand the aphorism? Assuming that the reader already knows who, for instance, Plato or Montaigne or Captain Cook are, and does not need to know who, for instance, Banks (D 23) or Dr Price (D 102) are, I found that what needed annotating was chiefly details of Lichtenberg’s life, a number of less familiar German writers referred to, a few linguistic points, and a few references to contemporary events.

—R. J. Hollingdale
February 1988
1 The great artifice of regarding small deviations from the truth as being the truth itself is at the same time the foundation of wit, where the whole thing would often collapse if we were to regard these deviations in a spirit of philosophical rigor.

2 It is a question whether in the arts and sciences a best is possible beyond which our understanding cannot go. Perhaps this point is infinitely distant, notwithstanding that with every closer approximation we have less in front of us.

3 With many a science the endeavor to discover a universal principle is perhaps often just as fruitless as would be the endeavor of a mineralogist to discover a primal universal substance out of which all the minerals had arisen. Nature creates, not genera and species, but individua, and our shortsightedness has to seek out similarities so as to be able to retain in mind many things at the same time. These conceptions become more and more inaccurate the larger the families we invent for ourselves are.
4 The greatest things in the world are brought about by other things which we count as nothing: little causes we overlook but which at length accumulate.

5 Rousseau was right to call accent the soul of speech, and we often regard people as stupid and when we look into it we find it is merely the simple sound of their manner of speaking.

6 To fit the meter to the thought is a very difficult art and one the neglect of which is in large part responsible for the ludicrous in verse. Meter and thought are related to one another as, in ordinary life, life-style is to office.

7 If we want to draw up a philosophy that will be useful to us in life, or if we want to offer universal rules for a perpetually contented life, then, to be sure, we have to abstract from that which introduces a much too great diversity into our contemplations—somewhat as we often do in mathematics when we forget friction and other similar particular properties of bodies so that the calculation will not be too difficult for us, or at least replace such properties with a single letter. Small misfortunes incontestably introduce a large measure of uncertainty into these practical rules, so that we have to dismiss them from our mind and turn our attention only to overcoming the greater misfortunes. This is incontestably the true meaning of certain propositions of the Stoic philosophy.

8 Superstition originates among ordinary people in the early and all too zealous instruction they receive in religion: they hear of mysteries, miracles, deeds of the Devil, and consider it very probable that things of this sort could occur in everything anywhere. If, on the other hand, they were first taught about nature itself, they would more readily regard the supernatural and mysterious elements of religion with greater awe, instead of considering them as something extremely commonplace, as they do now—so commonplace, indeed, that they think it nothing out of the ordinary if someone tells them six angels walked down the street today.

9 There are no such things as synonyms: the inventors of the words we regard as synonyms certainly expressed in them not one thing but presumably species.

10 One might call habit a moral friction: something that prevents the mind from gliding over things but connects it with them and makes it hard for it to free itself from them.

11 At least once a week a dietetic sermon should be preached in church, and if our clergy too would acquire this science spiritual reflections could be woven into it that are here very apposite; for it is hardly to be believed how spiritual reflections when mixed with a little physics can hold people's attention and give them a livelier idea of God than do the often ill-applied examples of his wrath.
12 The fear of death which is imprinted in men is at the same time a great expedient Heaven employs to hinder them from many misdeeds: many things are left undone for fear of imperiling one's life or health.

13 The proof that there is a future life advanced by philosophers, which consists in saying that God could not reward our last moments if there were not, belongs among the proofs by analogy: we always reward after the act, consequently God also does so. But we do so when we cannot see ahead; when we are not prevented by this disability we also reward in advance. We pay an advance subscription to a university, for instance: may God too not have paid an advance subscription? ...

14 Food probably has a very great influence on the condition of men. Wine exercises a more visible influence, food does it more slowly but perhaps just as surely. Who knows if a well-prepared soup was not responsible for the pneumatic pump or a poor one for a war?

15 I have seen that fervent ambition and mistrustfulness always go together.

16 When sometimes I had drunk a lot of coffee, and was consequently startled by anything, I noticed quite distinctly that I was startled before I heard the noise: we thus hear as it were with other organs as well as with our ears.

17 Prejudices are so to speak the mechanical instincts of men: through their prejudices they do without any effort many things they would find too difficult to think through to the point of resolving to do them.

18 We must take care that in seeking to demonstrate the possibility of many things we do not all too quickly appeal to the power of an all-perfect being: for as soon as one believes, e.g., that God makes matter think one can no longer demonstrate that a god exists apart from matter.

19 Our life is so precisely balanced between pleasure and pain that things that serve to maintain us can sometimes cause us harm, as for instance a quite natural change in the air. But who knows whether much of our pleasure does not depend on this balance; perhaps our sensitivity in this matter is an important part of that which constitutes our superiority over the animals.

20 A sensation expressed in words is like music described in words: the expressions we use are not sufficiently at one with the thing to be expressed. The poet who wants to excite sympathy directs the reader to a painting, and through this to the thing to be expressed. A painted landscape gives instant delight, but one celebrated in verse has first to be painted in the reader's own head ...

21 In order to become really sensible of a piece of good fortune which seems to us a matter of indifference we must
imagine we had lost it and have recovered it again at just this moment; to undertake this experiment successfully, however, requires a certain amount of experience in all sorts of suffering.

22 The excuses we make to ourselves when we want to do something are excellent material for soliloquies, for they are rarely made except when we are alone, and are very often made aloud.

23 In his *Comedy*, Dante Alighieri names Virgil, with many tokens of respect, as his teacher, and yet, as Herr Meinhard remarks, makes such ill use of him: a clear proof that even in the days of Dante one praised the ancients without knowing why. This respect for poets one does not understand and yet wishes to equal is the source of the bad writing in our literature.

24 To understand the true meaning of a word of our mother tongue certainly often takes us many years. By understanding I also include the meanings that can be bestowed upon it by the way in which it is spoken. The signification of a word is—to express myself mathematically—given us in a formula in which the way it is spoken is the variable and the word itself the constant quantity. Here there opens up a way of endlessly enriching the languages without increasing the number of words. I have found that we enunciate the phrase *Es ist gut* in five different ways and each time with a different meaning, which is, to be sure, often also determined by a third variable quantity, namely facial expression.

25 The *animalcula infusoria* are bladders with desires.

26 It is we who are the measure of what is strange and miraculous: if we sought a universal measure the strange and miraculous would not occur and all things would be equal.

27 Minds detached from an external world must be strange creatures; for, since the ground of every thought lies in the mind, such minds would be capable of the strangest combinations of ideas. We call people mad when the regulation of their conceptions no longer corresponds to the sequence of events in our regular world; for which reason a careful observation of nature, or of mathematics, is certainly the most effective specific against madness; nature is, so to speak, the guide-rope by which our thoughts are led so that they shall not wander away.

28 The grocer who weighs something is as much engaged in putting the unknown quantity on one side and the known on the other as is the algebraist.

29 The contention over *signification* and *being* which has caused such mischief in religion would perhaps have been more salutary if it had been conducted in respect to other subjects, for it is a general source of misfortune to us that we believe things are in actuality what they in fact only signify.
30 It is a wholly unavoidable fault of all languages that they express only the *genera* of concepts and seldom say adequately what they intend to say. For if we compare our words with things we shall find that the latter proceed in a quite different series from the former. The qualities we perceive in our souls are connected in such a way it is not at all easy to assign a boundary between any two of them; this is not so in the case of the words with which we express them, and two consecutive and related qualities are expressed by signs which seem to us to have no relationship with one another. We should be able to decline words philosophically, that is to indicate their relationship through modifications. In mathematical analysis, the undetermined part of a line $a$ we call $x$, and the remainder we call, not $y$ as in ordinary life, but $a - x$. That is why mathematical language possesses such a great advantage over ordinary language.

31 No prince will ever define the merit of a man by conferring favors, since numerous examples have shown that rulers are not generally good men. The French king bakes pastries and ruins honest girls. The King of Spain carves up hares to the sound of drum-rolls and fanfares. The last King of Poland who was Elector of Saxony peppered his court jester's arse with shot. The Prince of Löwenstein, when a great fire had devastated his property, bewailed only the loss of his saddle. To please a dancer, the Landgrave of Kassel rode his horse into the suite of another prince who is no better either: he is deceived by the most miserable of creatures. The Duke of Württemberg is crazy. The King of England put a bun in Miss P.'s oven. The Prince of Weilburg bathed publicly in the river Lahn... And these are the greatest among men. How, then, can we expect human affairs to proceed in a tolerable fashion? Of what use are introductions into the art of commercial management if the overlord of the whole is some buffoon who acknowledges no sovereignty but that of his own stupidity, caprice, whores and valets? Oh, if only the world would wake up! If only three million of them were dangling on the gallows, perhaps fifty to eighty million others would be happy!

32 When Plato says the passions and natural desires are the wings of the soul he expresses himself in a very instructive way: such comparisons illuminate the subject and are as it were the translation of difficult concepts into a language familiar to everyone—true definitions.

33 The world is a body common to all men, changes to it bring about a change in the souls of all men who are turned towards that part of it at that moment.

34 Even at school I harbored ideas of suicide which were diametrically opposed to those commonly accepted in the world, and I recall that I once disputed in Latin in favor of suicide and sought to defend it... In August 1769 and in the following months I thought about suicide more than
ever before, and I have at all times considered that a man in whom the instinct for self-preservation has become so weakened that it can so easily be overpowered may kill himself without incurring guilt. If a sin has been committed, it was committed a long time before . . .

The peasant who believes the moon is no bigger than a plough wheel never reflects that at a distance of a few miles a whole church appears only as a white speck but the moon on the contrary seems always to be the same size: what prevents him from connecting these ideas, which are all presented to him distinctly? In his ordinary life he does in fact connect ideas and perhaps does so by more artificial connections than these. This reflection should make the philosopher pay heed: perhaps in some of the connections he makes he is still a peasant. We think early in life but we do not know we are thinking, any more than we know we are growing or digesting; many ordinary people never do discover it. Close observation of external things easily leads back to the point of observation, ourselves, and conversely he who is for once wholly aware of himself easily proceeds from that to observing the things around him. Be attentive, feel nothing in vain, measure and compare: this is the whole law of philosophy.

It thunders, howls, roars, hisses, whistles, blusters, hums, growls, rumbles, squeaks, groans, sings, crackles, cracks, rattles, flickers, clicks, snarls, tumbles, whimpers, whines, rustles, murmurs, crashes, clucks, to gurgle, tinkles, blows, snores, claps, to lisp, to cough, it boils, to scream, to weep, to sob, to croak, to stutter, to lisp, to coo, to breathe, to clash, to bleat, to neigh, to grumble, to scrape, to bubble. These words, and others like them, which express sounds, are more than mere symbols: they are a kind of hieroglyphics for the ear.

The philosophy of mankind as such is the philosophy of one certain individual man corrected by the philosophy of others, even of fools, and this in accordance with the rules of a rational assessment of degrees of probability. Propositions on which all men are in agreement are true: if they are not true we have no truth at all.

To grow wiser means to learn to know better and better the faults to which this instrument with which we feel and judge can be subject. Cautiousness in judgment is nowadays to be recommended to each and every one: if we gained only one incontestable truth every ten years from each of our philosophical writers the harvest we reaped would be sufficient.

It is astonishing how infrequently we do what we regard as useful and would at the same time be easy to do. The desire to know a lot in a short time often hinders us from precise examination, but even the man who knows this
finds it very hard to test anything with precision, even though he knows that if he does not test he will fail to attain his goal of learning more.

40 It is easy to construct a landscape out of a mass of disorderly lines, but disorderly sounds cannot be made into music.

1 Whenever he was required to use his reason he felt like someone who had always used his right hand but was now required to do something with his left.

2 He had an appetite for nothing yet he ate something of everything.

3 He took neither the broad nor the narrow pathway to eternity, but with frequent prayer and a good table had set out along a medium-sized one which might be called the spiritual-princely.

4 Winckelmann, Hagedorn and Lessing have communicated a wholly new spirit to our German critics. Formerly they said of a bad engraving: This engraving is a bad one—now they express their verdicts with more warmth. Of a Cœur-Dame they will speak as follows. The face has too much of one locality in it. The Juno-eyes the calendar-artist has tried to achieve possess nothing but size, they have nothing of the motionless fire that made Paris waver, nothing of the heaven in them revealed when they