



**THE WASTE
BOOKS**

**GEORG CHRISTOPH
LICHTENBERG**

TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
R. J. HOLLINGDALE

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

THE WASTE BOOKS

GEORG CHRISTOPH LICHTENBERG (1742–1799) was born in Oberramstadt, Germany. In 1763 he joined the University of Göttingen, where he studied mathematics and the natural sciences and, in 1770, was appointed a professor. In addition to his scientific writings, his works include *Letters from England* and a book on Hogarth's etchings.

R. J. HOLLINGDALE was born in London in 1930. Among his many translations are Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Ecce Homo*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Anti-Christ*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*; *A Nietzsche Reader*; Goethe's *Elective Affinities*; Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorisms*; and a selection of Hoffmann's *Tales*.

THE WASTE BOOKS

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg



Translated with an Introduction

and Notes by

R. J. HOLLINGDALE

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

Translation, Introduction, and Notes copyright © 1990 by R. J. Hollingdale
All rights reserved.

First published by Penguin Books 1990

This edition published in 2000 in the United States of America by
The New York Review of Books, 1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph, 1742–1799.

[Selections. English. 2000]

The waste books / Georg Christoph Lichtenberg ; translated and with an
introduction and notes by R. J. Hollingdale.

p. cm.

Originally published: Aphorisms. London ; New York : Penguin Books, 1990.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-940322-50-1 (alk. paper)

1. Aphorisms and apothegms. I. Hollingdale, R. J. II. Lichtenberg,
Georg Christoph, 1742–1799. Aphorisms.

PT2423.L4 A25 2000

838'.602—dc21

00-009227

ISBN 0-940322-50-1

Cover photograph: Electron tree, discovered by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and
known as a "Lichtenberg Figure." SPL/Photo Researchers

Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

October 2000

www.nybooks.com

I N T R O D U C T I O N

1

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.

2

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 nonscientific 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 in-

tended 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

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 knowledge 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 century this need was reinforced in those who admired Lichtenberg by the hegemony of the philosophical system: 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 Wittgenstein is misleading, inasmuch as their thinking is only expressed in fragmentary form whereas Lichtenberg's really is fragmentary. His notebooks resemble little else in literature for variegated inconsequentiality, and 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 struggling to find expression, but simply from their being the product of the same mind and from that mind's being infused with what we have come to call the "spirit of the Enlightenment."

The reader may recall Nietzsche's remark, in the preface 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 *sufficiently 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 evidence 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 Lich-

tenberg'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 nonconformist 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 half-way 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 *Stillen 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.

4

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 Göttingen 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 Göttingen, 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 aggress-

siveness. 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.

5

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