

Lichtenberg & The Little Flower Girl

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translated and with an afterword by

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It will not have escaped admirers of Lichtenberg that many of the things attributed to him in this book have been quite shamelessly invented and concocted: his sitting around in the evenings, the back and forth—mainly forth—of his feelings, the regular headaches, and the irregular quotations. But it is precisely here, in the inventions and concoctions, the conundrums and contradictions, the whole—as someone once put it—“human mess,” that the full truth about the little man may find its best expression. Under our hands, he has become not as he was, but as he might also have been.

GERT HOFMANN

[1]

ONCE, MANY MANY YEARS AGO, PROFESSOR LICHTENBERG pulled on his lecture coat and headed out. He wanted to see what the weather was doing. Because he was a vain fellow, he had silver buttons on his lecture coat. From time to time, he would lose one. Then he would go crawling around his apartment in the wing of the house on the Gotmarstrasse, crying: Where has it got to now? As he scabbled around among the chair legs, one thing became clear: he had a hunchback! Quick, let's write about it!

The hunchback was enormous!

Lichtenberg himself can't have been much taller than four-foot-nine. And that's how he would go about in the world. That's how he would go about in the public street, and even out of town. But he always came back. Sometimes he would wear a hat, mostly he wouldn't. They called him "a little lizard of a fellow" or "our leprechaun."

He would never have been good-looking, even without a hunchback. His eyes were generally inflamed, his nose dripped from time to time, people corresponded about his ears—"like dishcloths!"—and as for his teeth . . . More about them anon! His hunchback was a little beast that squatted on top of him. From there it dominated his life. Even the agitation that came over him from time to time came from there. People didn't just want to see it, they were keen to touch it as well.

What for?

Because it was lucky!

And so he trotted through the town. Stop, little chappie, they cried, and reached out their hands towards his hunchback. He wished they wouldn't insist on touching it. It made him feel terribly impatient, later sad.

Stop that, he cried, what do you think you're doing? Sometimes he ran away.

He had vile thoughts when he was sitting alone at home, writing one of his long and witty letters to a young and pretty woman. He sucked the top of his pen and thought them . . . He would be wearing a wig, usually one of human hair. He wore silver buckles on his shoes. When he had been walking awhile, he cried: Air! and pulled them open. Because the wig was a little big for him—"look," he said, "my head's shrinking!"—he tugged at it from time to time. Under his arm he carried a bunch of books "that double, if not treble, the significance of the world." And now I'm going to bring the world back to manageable proportions, he cried, and tore out a few pages. Often he hated scholarliness and got all melancholy. He sat in a corner and cried: What's it all for? (He meant life and all the trimmings.) And now, he said, I'll take a turn round the block! The students he called his "little ones." I can already hear them stamping their feet with impatience, he said! Any minute I'll have to start earning money and spreading understanding!

That was . . .

In May 1777. It's no longer true. It has to be made up afresh.

And where?

Why, in Göttingen on the Leine! Where the professor lived. And his books and scientific equipment with him.

His eyesight got worse. Sometimes he couldn't see anything, sometimes admittedly too much. Then he would shut his eyes and cry: That much isn't called for! His round head rather thoughtful, he hadn't been out yet that day. He preferred

indoors. There he had his three desks and any number of chairs and the colossal bookcase “that one day will fall on top of me.” And the windows, affording him a view of the street, and of those people who were coming down it, perhaps with a view to seeing him. (It was the custom for artists and scholars to keep open house, and offer all comers a plate of soup.) “It is characteristic of Göttingen,” he wrote to Johann Gottwerth Müller von Itzehoe (1743–1828) “that even the outdoors are cramped, to say nothing of the Göttingen minds!” Because he wasn’t in England anymore—and wouldn’t go there again—he stopped looking out of the window. All he could see there was the German sky anyway, more white than blue.

So Lichtenberg sat in Göttingen with few friends and numerous adversaries.

And without so much as a wife?

Without a wife!

When he set foot outside the house, there was a small puff of wind blowing. The Gotmarstrasse was almost empty. The wind swept the hat off one gentleman’s head, or at least it did its damndest to. It lifted up the women’s skirts, that was the best thing about the wind. Lichtenberg went out onto the street to keek under a skirt or two. To see the odd ankle and calf, and maybe even a knee. He thought: Nothing is wasted on me, not even trifles!

Was he really as tiny as people said, and as they wrote in London? Well, one thing, he had stopped growing! Or maybe his brain was still growing, he wasn’t sure. His brow, when he passed his hand over it, was prettily curved, but what was behind it? At any rate, he had dainty little hands and feet, and shining eyes, sometimes. And that big head full of notions—“both scientific and other.” With that, he invented an alternative world, which he often made notes about. Shame, he thought, that I’m not completely healthy!

What was the matter with the man?

Most often “an ague with fever.” Then he pulled on his night-cap, and lay down in his wide empty bachelor’s bed. There was a space next to him, but it wasn’t possible to find a woman to occupy it. He pulled the blankets up to his throat, then his hunchback was gone. If his students came and called for him next door, he let them know: I’m grateful for the inexplicable popularity, but they’re to leave me alone! I’m preoccupied with my body today, the other things closed! Or he was suffering from “hunchbackitis,” which “left him incapable of the upright walk that is the leading characteristic of our species.” Often when he should have been giving a lecture, his students had to go home empty-headed.

Once there was waiting for him in a coal-black coat a Professor Crome from Giessen, who revered him. “As his listeners,” wrote Crome, “depressed by so much youthful learning, finally emerged from the lecture room, Lichtenberg tottered down from his chair, and fell unconscious into the arms of his manservant Pesti. Pesti carried the little man onto the chaise and laid him down. Thinking he was in convulsions and on the point of death, I didn’t want to disturb him further and was about to take my leave,” wrote Crome. “But his man assured me that he suffered this condition after most of his lectures, and it would pass soon enough. So I stayed, and we had a long and cordial discussion about electricity in rabbits, dogs and other hirsute mammals.”

At any rate, Lichtenberg lay in bed a lot, wrestling with death.

“In case Heaven should really consider it necessary to withdraw me from circulation and put out a new version,” he wrote to his friend Polycarp Erxleben (1744–1777), “I would like to give it one or two useful bits of advice, in particular concerning the form of my body and the overall design of the whole thing. Straighter,” he wrote, “altogether straighter!”

It was a peculiarity of his that he was forever having to set out his ideas. It was an urge contained in his large, round and now almost bald, head. That's why he was so driven, why he was always looking for this thing or that. Not buried treasures or wigs—he was always looking for them too—but words, words! When he had found one, he would write it down on a piece of paper. He would take it over to the window. Then he would shake his head and say: No, not that one! and crossed it all out again. He was always on the lookout for something, for instance, cheap writing paper. Or a quill so he could scratch behind his ear. Or, continually, for a good friend, with whom he could walk, arm in arm, albeit rather lower, through the Barfusserstrasse, telling him the while what was on his mind. Or a mistress.

Eh? The little cripple?

Why ever not?

It was the eighteenth century, and he never managed to outlive it. He was now thirty-five years old and he looked in the mirror a lot. While there, he thought: I look younger! because, as already noted, he was vain as well. In the evening, he wore his lined cap which kept his brain nice and warm. That's where all his desires were, his dreams, his thoughts. He didn't really believe in the other Being any more. But if he should have the grace, and if he really did acquire a mistress . . . Maybe he would sleep better? Maybe his hunchback would go away, just not be there after a while? "I should not shed," wrote Lichtenberg, "a single tear for it!"

Such was the yearning he carried about with him, first up the Gotmarstrasse, and then back down it again, on the opposite side. God, he thought, the weight of that yearning! and he pulled his wig down a little. Then his brow was covered, his temples were gone from sight. His heart was still pounding, though, because he was walking so fast.

Where to, in God's name?

To see his little ones. That would have been in 1777, more or less. Frederick the Great—the Great, is that right?—had invaded Bohemia with his forces. Unfortunately there were no battles. The Russians had got the better of the Turks on the Pruth, and now they occupied Wallachia. Lichtenberg sat around at home. He read books and wrote a little bit.

And he taught at the Kur Hanoverian University of Göttingen. That hadn't been in existence for very long. His lecture room was on the first floor, where he also lived, ate, slept, evacuated, and "had scientific dreams." Often he would have dreams of women as well. Then he would close his eyes and say: Oh! and they would file past him. When he saw one he liked the look of, he would dream of her for weeks. Then she would grow pale and dim, and another one came along. When he felt hungry during one of his lectures, he would say: I've had a scientific idea! And he would go to his kitchen and make himself some "very substantial" bread and butter. When he'd polished it off, he would return to his students, say: I'm back! and pick up just exactly where he'd left off. He had a hundred students. When he counted them sometimes, there were even a hundred and one. Or he only had ninety-nine, and he shook his head, because then someone would have overslept. Or one of them would have closed his eyes for the last time in the night. When it was time for the fellow to be buried, Lichtenberg exclaimed: Not that as well!

[Text continues in printed book to p200;
Afterword follows]

Afterword

SOMEONE SAID—YOU CAN PROBABLY THINK OF EXAMPLES—that some or all or most novelists have one novel they keep writing over and over. My father had two. There were the books of generalized or particularized childhood (*Veilchenfeld*, *Our Conquest*), and there were the books about the problems of art and being an artist (*Our Forgetfulness*, *The Parable of the Blind*, the long stories about Walser, Lenz, Balzac, Casanova in *Balzac's Horse*). He wrote other books too (*The Spectacle at the Tower*, *Before the Rainy Season*), but they weren't *his*—or perhaps *him*—to anything like the same degree. Intriguingly, his three last books, *The Film Explainer*, *Luck*, and *Lichtenberg & The Little Flower Girl* each, in different ways, managed to harness both tropes, art and childhood, and that may be a further reason why I was so determined to translate them. To me, they are a sort of very loose trilogy, and his apotheosis.

★

My father was always a writer—long before I was born—but circumstances, job, family, moving around—he was an itinerant professor of German lit., with four children—all conspired against his writing. Perhaps he couldn't see what to do, or what form to do it in. He deliberated. And he wrote plays and a great number of radio plays through the 1960s and 1970s. The result was that when his first prose book was published in 1979—he took his decisive impulse, as a number of English and American writers have since, from the Austrian, Thomas Bernhard—he gave every appearance of being a late starter. Thereafter, he was always a man in a hurry. He didn't know how long he had left,

but he knew it was unlikely to be the 30, 40, 50 years of a standard literary career. He pushed himself. He wrote very nearly a book a year. That's what presumably gave him a stroke at the age of 57—which, typically, he “worked off”—though it left him unable to read—and what killed him, though not until he had written another three books, which for me are the books at issue. “*Dieser freundliche, gehetzte Mensch*,” as Michael Krüger his last publisher described him, “this friendly, driven man.” The best way out may indeed, with Frost, be through, but through is still, as often as not, out.

★

Lichtenberg & The Little Flower Girl wasn't intended to be his last book, but—unless he had been spared to write others (he was only 62 when he died)—it is hard to see how it might be improved upon in that capacity. Its last words I don't think can be improved. *Und dann?* And then? It's the sound of his author's engine, Scheherezade almost, still ticking and willing. The manuscript lay completed on his desk when he died on 1 July 1993. The date is Lichtenberg's birthday. (He was 251.) All writers' lives are more or less misshapen and more or less failed; nothing is worth what most of us put into it. Even the poets of war and liberation—Rupert Brooke, Byron, Apollinaire—end unfortunately or tawdrily. I feel nothing but pride and awe for my father, who put himself through these three last books, and ended *Und dann?*

★

A note on technique. My father's prose is based on the scenes of dialogue he learned to write in his radio decades. There is very little description—staple of “classic” novel writing, but also, in anything less than the most gifted hands, source of so much ineffable boredom and fatuity for the reader—in his books. The set-ups are harsh, often confrontational, resonant with pain, humiliation, irony. The speech is jumpy, incisive

beyond realism, stressed and tinged with the surreal or the macabre. If I can have people talking, he once said to me, I'm away. Over this he applied layerings of what one might call grammatical varnish. A scene is recollected, written down, told, played over another scene (often—I kid you not!—all four), and you get layer after layer of reported speech. (Very effective in German, less so in English where all verb endings sound like the imperfect.) That was also how they were written, built up and spun out and pasted together from version to version in the course of very many rewritings. That was in the early books.

Once he found himself unable to read, my father evolved a different method, and a whole new style. Where my mother—indispensable to his whole enterprise, and never sufficiently to be praised—had previously typed up fair copies of his manuscripts, she now read drafts back to him, for him to correct and embellish aloud. Where previously the star of the show had been the grammar—my father had a rather undesired reputation for brilliant intricate syntax—the late books are different. The sentences and paragraphs are shorter, the confrontations more present, the scenes seem to ghost in and out, a bigger role falls to diction, to heckles and interjections, to personality. If the early books were like palimpsests, stories etched over stories, and all the verb endings and agreements correct and nailed down, the last three seem to float. Switches of speaker and scene, anonymous interjections, an effect of collage, facts and factoids, a strange vagueness or indeterminacy—are we in a one-off or a habitual scene? repetition or variation? it's often very hard to tell—tiny Brechtian or Shakespearian additions of props—the shoe buckles and bonnets here, the wigs and underthings, the meat, the soup, the apples—questions, prompts, exclamations. “It was summer again—or it was still summer.” I don't know of anything like them in literature. (Maybe Georg Büchner's extraordinary fragment, “Lenz”; or Penelope Fitzgerald's last, great novel *The Blue Flower*, about Novalis.) I have to say I have loved translating these books, their abruptness, their

wild comedy and ringing bathos, their emotionalism and vocal quality. I was working on the first of them, *The Film Explainer*, when my father died. My determination to complete the “set” was as strong as anything I’ve felt in writing.

★

A word, too, on Lichtenberg. As you may have gathered by now, not a hoax or an invention. Not a “character,” though of course he is that too. Unless you’re a Germanist, a lover of aphorisms, or a student of *ur*-science, you might be forgiven for not knowing. A real person. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. (1742–1799), as my father might have said. The youngest of seventeen children, most of whom died in infancy. Malformed spine. Studied mathematics and science, visited England twice, in the epistolary swim of the international science of the time. A card of the Enlightenment. Further a note-taker and heterogeneous scribbler, who kept what he called *Sudelbücher* or “wastebooks”—the term is from contemporary bookkeeping, a preliminary record of commercial transactions—for his own amusement, never for publication. Goethe, Heine, Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, and Einstein—among others—all championed him later; to Nietzsche his *Aphorisms* was one of the four great books by a German. (They are available in English, warmly recommended, edited and translated by R. J. Hollingdale, in the NYRB classics series.)

Substantial parts of his life and thoughts, as given in *Lichtenberg & The Little Flower Girl*, are “true.” Mathematics, science, Göttingen, England, the wastebooks. Some—but not all—of the aphorisms are *echt* and therefore lifted. “A book is a mirror. If a monkey looks into it . . .” is. “The only manly attribute I have decency unfortunately prevents me from displaying,” a little surprisingly, is. “Apparently they’re coming back, the birds! It said so in the paper! Not the same ones, of course, Nature’s swapped them round,” presumably isn’t. (The great thing about these isn’t their genuineness or not, but their availability as a further form of expression, as a currency—like toy money.) The

experiments. The balloons and the electricity. The Lichtenberg figures. The hunchback. The flower girl. Maria Stechard, called *die kleine Stechardin* by my father, in accordance with a beautiful, archaic practice that, along with the definite article, allows a feminine ending, *-in*, to be appended to the surname. Here, the little Stechardess. Their extraordinary cohabitation. (“His private life,” writes Hollingdale, quite uncensoriously, in fact, rather tantalizingly, “was very irregular, though not very much more so than that of several even more celebrated Germans of his age.”)

All this, though, is energized and made to work. There can be no greater contrast than that between *Lichtenberg & The Little Flower Girl* and the turgid, research-heavy, imagination-free, historical novel (probably weighing in at a tad under 600 pages) favored in current Anglo-American practice. My father’s Lichtenberg keeps bumping against the limits of life: knowledge, law, mortality, infirmity, geography, another person, society, superstition, work. It is even, if you like, a criticism of life, the sort of thing novels used to do two or three hundred years ago. Admirers of the book have said it’s the sort of thing Lichtenberg himself might have liked to have written. (As he never went to Italy, or back to England, so he never wrote a novel either.) Reading it back, I see it has something in it of Fellini, whom my father—along with his Kafka and his Mann and his Gogol and his Bacon—idolized. It’s probably the zaniest, gloomiest, and funniest thing you’ve read in a long time, if not ever.

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