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Im Namen Georg Christoph Lichtenbergs (1742-1799) ist die Lichtenberg Gesellschaft ein interdisziplinäres Forum für die Begegnung von Literatur, Naturwissenschaften und Philosophie. Sie begrüßt Mitglieder aus dem In- und Ausland. Ihre Tätigkeit umfasst die Veranstaltung einer jährlichen Tagung. Mitglieder erhalten dieses Jahrbuch, ein Mitteilungsblatt und gelegentliche Sonderdrucke. Weitere Informationen und Beitrittsformular unter www.lichtenberg-gesellschaft.de

In the name of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) the Lichtenberg Gesellschaft provides an interdisciplinary forum for encounters with and among literature, natural science, and philosophy. It welcomes international members. Its activities include an annual conference. Members receive this yearbook, a newsletter and occasionally collectible prints. For further information and a membership form see www.lichtenberg-gesellschaft.de

„Dr. Walderstein's account of the state of his mind“

Mit diesen Worten umschreibt das Inhaltsverzeichnis des *London Magazine* von 1820, was den Leser im ersten Sammelband auf S. 251/254 erwartet. Ebenda, Heft No. III, March, beginnt eine Seite vorher der Artikel eines Ungenannten über *The Phenomena of diseased Imagination*. Er schildert zunächst, angefangen von Luthers Teufelsvision „in the Warteburg“ bis zu dem Mann, der glaubte, einen Flickschuster samt Schemel und Handwerkszeug verschluckt zu haben, Beispiele krankhafter Phantasien, die man wahrscheinlich allesamt mit dem Wort „Hypochondrie“ erklären könne. Es gebe jedoch, fährt der Verfasser fort, eine andere Erkrankung des Geistes, die noch verwirrender sei als die des vollständigen Wahns und hinsichtlich der Beschaffenheit des menschlichen Geistes zu noch „more extraordinary conclusions“ anrege. Es seien nämlich Personen bekannt geworden, deren Kraft „of a perverted imagination“ ebenso stark und aktiv gewesen sei wie in den zuvor beschriebenen Fällen, bei denen aber zugleich die Vernunft ihren Platz behauptet und sie davon überzeugt habe, daß die Einbildung falsch sei, „without in any degree deadening their vivacity“! Und dann kommt der Autor auf „one of the most remarkable of these“, besagten Dr. Walderstein, zu sprechen:

Walderstein, a learned German, lived at the end of the last century. He was an eminent physician of the University of Gottingen, and has left the learned world

in possession of some esteemed works of a scientific nature. Productions of another kind, full of originality and wit, have obtained him a high reputation amongst the general readers of his native country. This extraordinary person kept a private diary, in which he was accustomed to register his thoughts & c. and the picture it presents is one of the most remarkable that has ever been offered to human curiosity and sympathy. It was found amongst his papers, and has fallen into our hands.

Walderstein was exceedingly deformed in person, and his mind appears to have been as much distorted as his body. His heart, however, was good and susceptible – his principles honest and elevated, and the observation possessed an acute and original spirit of observation; but the weakness of his constitution exposed him to nervous affections which exercised their power with little intermission. – In the midst of the absurd and very painful feelings, the consequences of such a constitutional disposition, Walderstein retained the faculty of observing his mental aberrations, of attributing them to their true causes, and of thoroughly detecting their deceitful influence; yet, he had not the strength to throw that influence off! – His miserable health frequently placed him in that situation which La Rochefoucauld describes, when he says, „nous n'avons pas assez de force pour suivre notre raison.“ – The influence of the feelings is then so completely separated from that of the

reason, that the latter does not even attempt to blind itself, but, forced to yield, quietly contemplates its own weakness.

My misfortune (says Walderstein in one part of his diary,) is, that I never exist in this world, but rather in a quantity of possible combinations created by my imagination and my conscience. They occupy a large portion of my time, and my reason has not the power of banishing them.

In another part he says, —

My hypochondriacism, is in reality, the faculty of extracting, for my own use, the greatest possible quantity of poison from every circumstance of life.

This faculty is not uncommon, but Walderstein possessed it in an extraordinary degree.

Would any one believe (says he,) that I have often been wretched, because, for the last twenty years, I have never been able to sneeze three times together!

To see every thing on the dark side; to fear every thing, to look upon health only as a state in which we are not sensible of disease, such would be the character that I should be best able to draw; — I would take myself for the original.

Pusillanimity is the real name for my disease; but how can it be cured?

Oh if I could once make a resolution and determine to be well!

Such was, in fact, the power of his imagination when troubled and set in motion by some internal disorder, that it made him experience real sensations without any natural cause, except the state of his nerves:

I was once in bed (says he) at eleven o'clock at night, and wide awake, for I had hardly laid down. I felt suddenly a great fear of fire, and gradually became as much oppressed with heat, as if the walls of the room were burning around me. While I was in this situation the firebell sounded — a house had taken

fire in a distant part of the town. I do not believe I ever communicated this observation to any body.

What would he infer from this? That he had perceived the fire at the distance of several streets. He does not say so, nor perhaps would he allow himself to think so. What he relates, however, he had really felt.

I do not blush for my superstition, (says he) any more than I blush because my senses inform me that the earth does not move. My error forms the body of my judgment, and I thank God that he has given it a soul capable of correcting it!

It is not to be supposed that these secret errors of the imagination influenced, in any degree, his conduct, or the opinions which he professed in society. Allowing for some singularities which were attributed to the state of his health, Walderstein was considered as a sensible man, and one of sound judgment; and so undoubtedly he was. Nothing to the contrary can be deduced from these singularities, of which he was the careful observer, recorded in a private journal, that constitutes one of the most interesting of documents from the light which it throws upon the varieties of the human mind.

Sometimes, (says he) when I have intended, and believed myself to be very much occupied, I have passed whole hours in building castles in the air. I felt what loss of time this was, but without some such medicine of the imagination, I believe I should never have arrived at my advanced age.

In another part of this diary, he says,

I have often remarked, that when I have had my nervous attacks, my physical organs have been sensibly affected by many things, which at any other time would only have hurt my moral feeling. For example, I have felt real bodily pain at hearing any one make use of a violent oath or imprecation, so much so, as to

be obliged to leave the room.

This peculiarly lively connexion and correspondence between his moral and physical existence, was sometimes the source of his sweetest sensations.

When I have been perfectly free from pain, as is not unfrequently the case when I am in bed, my sense of this happiness has often brought the tears into my eyes; the effusion of my gratitude increased my tranquillity.

The habit, joined to the talent, of observation, formed a principal feature in the character of Walderstein.

I should have been happier had I been less successful in gaining a knowledge of the human heart. I have acquired, it is true, the power of pardoning more easily the bad actions of men; but I have ceased to derive pleasure from their praise. Their envy perhaps might afford me satisfaction, and this is not as it should be.

It is dangerous, we apprehend, to be convinced of the little value of the opinion of the world. „Si les hommes n'aimaient pas la gloire,“ says Vauvenargues, „ils n'auraient ni assez d'esprit, ni assez de vertu pour la mériter.“ But does any one really despise the opinion of the world? Walderstein who thought that he derived no pleasure from the praise of men, trembled at the slightest approach of ridicule. A joke that was pointed at him he could not bear; a laugh in his presence, that was at all suspicious, made him uncomfortable and restless. This susceptibility, which was to be attributed to the consciousness of the deformity of his person acting on the irritability of his nerves, increased with his years, so much so, that latterly he determined to withdraw himself entirely from society, where the general refinement of his manners, and his literary talents always procured him an honourable distinction. It was in his retirement that he appears to have made the curious observations on his own character that are to be found

in his diary:

I am consoled for my indolence, (says he,) by the satisfaction which it affords me to have observed it. The pleasure which I derived from this new observation was greater than the regret which I felt at the discovery of a new fault: – the man was forgotten in the professor.

Diderot one day consulted a physician, one of his friends, upon some complaint with which he was attacked. The Doctor listened, and, as his friend described the symptoms, his eyes brightened, while his ejaculations, indicating attention, were conveyed rather in a tone of pleasure than regret. When Diderot had finished, the medical man exclaimed, – „Ah, my dear fellow, how fortunate! how very lucky! your complaint is exactly the pituitaria of the ancients – which was supposed to be lost!“ The man was here certainly forgotten in the professor's satisfaction at the discovery of a lost disease! The habit of scientific speculation disposes the mind to look at certain objects only in one point of view, to regard them independently of their connexion with other objects, to consider them by themselves divested of their consequences. To a painter, for instance, a fire that destroys half a town is a beautiful fire; to a politician, a successful deceit in diplomacy constitutes a well conducted negotiation. This habit becomes more or less dangerous as we are more or less accustomed to correct the influence of our imagination.

I have often been pleased, (says Walderstein,) in planning to myself the manner in which I could kill such or such persons, or set fire to such or such a house without being discovered. Not that I have ever observed in myself the smallest desire to commit these actions, but they occupied my imagination, and I have often fallen asleep over such thoughts.

We have heard an anecdote of a servant who was employed in shaving his

master, when a tenant brought in a considerable sum of money in gold, The glittering metal lay in a heap on the table before the gentleman, who desired the servant to proceed in the operation which he had already commenced. The valet advised him to lock up the gold first, which the master refused to do. As the valet continued his duty, he repeated the advice, but without success; and, at length, he pressed it so anxiously that his master grew angry and desired him to be silent. The man obeyed, but his agitation became excessive, his hand trembled, and at last he threw the razor down and ran out of the room. The master followed, and, having brought him back, questioned him as to the cause of such extraordinary conduct. He confessed that the sight of the gold, in the situation in which he was placed, with a razor so near the throat of his master, had turned his head. He supplicated for pardon on his knees, but at the same time reproached his master with having placed such a horrible temptation before him. This man no doubt was a very honest fellow, but he had allowed his mind to dwell upon the simple idea of the possibility of the murder and robbery, until by degrees his imagination had acquired such force as left him only the power of avoiding a great crime by flying!

Perhaps a combination of circumstances similar in its nature, acting upon a similar state of mind, led to Nicholson's dreadful murder of Mr. and Mrs. Bonar, a calamity which must be fresh in the memory of our readers, and to account for the perpetration of which, no sufficient motive can be described as existing in the mind of the murderer. He professed no hatred of his master or mistress, and made no attempt at gain; he pleaded only that the devil tempted him to the act which he had contemplated at first without criminality.

I once dreamt, (says Walderstein), that I was condemned to be burnt alive. I was

very calm, and reasoned coolly during the execution of my sentence: „Now,“ I said to myself, „I am burning, but not yet burnt, and by and by, I shall be reduced to a cinder.“ This was all I thought, and I did nothing but think. When, upon waking, I reflected upon my dream, I was by no means pleased by it, for I was afraid that I should become all thought and no feeling.

Such a result was not much to be feared in this case; but it is probable that Walderstein, by acquiring the power of separating himself as it were into two persons, one of which acted and the other judged; by making his thoughts the subject of his observations, and each of their movements matter for reflection, had much weakened the power of some particular feelings, which would otherwise have obtained too much influence over him.

We think rapidly enough, (says he), but we are not aware that we think, but we are not aware that we think; any more than we are sensible that we grow or that we digest. There is however this difference, that the work of digestion is only felt by bad stomachs, while the operation of thought is only remarked by good heads.

I have often observed, (says Walderstein) that my opinions differed when I lay in bed from those which I held when I was up, and I have frequently laughed at night at an idea which during the day had appeared to me serious or improper.

Two thirds of mankind do the same, but without observing it. Whence arises their inconsistencies, their fickleness, the versatility of their judgments, and sometimes of their principles? Whence, but that at the moment that some new sensation alters their manner of thinking on a particular subject, they are not conscious that they think at all; they have not taken the trouble to examine their thoughts, and to compare and arrange them.

It would be highly important, however, to distinguish in our opinions such as are formed directly from external objects, and such as are the result of our own reflections; to remark in the effect which they produce upon us, what part is the consequence of their special qualities, and what part is the result of the particular disposition with which we have judged them.

Be ever upon the alert; let nothing pass in your mind without accounting to yourself for it; – measure and compare your thoughts; in this consists the whole law of philosophy: – at least of the philosophy of Walderstein. No one ever put this maxim more in practice, and no one had ever more occasion to put it in practice than himself.

What is very distressing, (says he), is, that, when I am ill, I can think nothing, feel nothing, without bringing it home to myself. It seems, as if the whole world were nothing but a machine expressly formed to make me feel my sufferings and inconveniencies in every possible manner.

„Tout m'afflige et me nuit, et conspire à me nuire.“

A terrible state this, as will easily be believed.

In some degree the madness of Tasso resembled, this, where he felt, himself surrounded by persecuting enemies, even devils and wild spirits. Such also was the derangement of Rousseau, when he fancied that all the princes and great men of Europe were leagued together to set-on the little boys of the villages through which he passed against him. Tasso was considered mad; Rousseau was very near so appearing; and what was wanting to Walderstein to become so? Only to forget for an instant that he was in danger of madness. What is reason but the knowledge of our folly?

Wer war dieser sonderbare Dr. Walderstein? Richtig. Aber nicht alle englischen Leser werden es gewußt haben,

und deshalb kam das Blatt in der Septembernummer (S. 278) noch einmal auf die Angelegenheit zurück mit folgender Notiz:

In our third No. (Vol. I. p. 250) we inserted a paper, furnished by a correspondent, in which some extracts are made from Lichtenberg's account of himself, under the head „Phenomena of diseased Imagination“: the name of the author, however, is, by some mistake, wrongly given. He is called Walderstein. The readers of the LONDON MAGAZINE, who preserve the work, may correct this error.

Dunkel bleibt freilich der Hintergrund dieses Vexierspiels. An ein Versehen kann ich nicht recht glauben, weil der Korrespondent doch wohl die gedruckten Schriften vor sich liegen hatte. Wollte man etwa dem angelsächsischen Publikum einen typisch deutsch klingenden Namen präsentieren oder gab es andere Gründe, Lichtenberg wenigstens aufs erste zu verschweigen? The readers of the PHOTORIN, who think to have any explanation, may give it.