

## Retrospective Introduction to my Book

### *Märchen des Lebens*\*

We relegated fairytales to the realm of childhood—that exceptional, wondrous, stirring, remarkable time of life! But why rig out childhood with it, when childhood is already sufficiently romantic and fairytale-like in and of itself? The disenchanted adult had best seek out the fairytale-like elements, the romanticism of each day and each hour right here and now in the hard, stern, cold fundament of life! Even the truly predestined poets with their more impressionable hearts, eyes and ears fetch their telling tidbits from actual occurrences, listening in on the romance of life itself. The rest of us can all become poets too if only we take pains not to let slip a single pearl which life in its rich bounty tosses up every now and then onto the flat dreary beachhead of our day!

Everything is remarkable if our perception of it is remarkable! And every little local incident written up in the daily newspaper can sound the depths of life, revealing all the tragic and the comic, the same as Shakespeare's tragedies! We all do life an injustice in surrendering poetry as the exclusive province of the poet's heart, since every one of us has the capacity to mine the poetic in the quarry of the mundane! The poet's heart will forfeit this privilege through the evolution of the intrinsic culture of the common human heart!

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\**Märchen des Lebens* (The Fairytale of Life), 1908

# A Letter to Arthur Schnitzler

*July 1894*

Dear Dr. Arthur Schnitzler,

Your lovely letter made me truly inordinately happy. So how do I write?

Altogether freely, without any deliberation. I never know my subject beforehand, I never think it over. I just take paper and write. Even the title I toss off and hope that what comes out will have something to do with it.

One must have confidence, not force the issue, just let oneself live life to the fullest, frightfully free, let it fly—.

What comes out is definitely the stuff that was real and deep down in me. If nothing comes out then there was nothing real and deep down in me and that doesn't matter then either.

I view writing as a natural organic spilling out of a full, overripe person. Thus the failings, the pale cast of thought.

I hate any revision. Toss it off and that's good—! Or bad! What's the difference?! If it's only you, you and nobody else, your sacred you. The term you coined "self-searcher" is really terrific. But when will you write "self-finder"?

My pieces have the misfortune always to be taken for little rehearsals, whereas they are, alas, already the very best I can do. But what's the difference?! I couldn't care less if I write or not.

The more important thing is that I be able to show in a circle of refined, cultured young people that the little spark is fluttering in me. Otherwise, one has the impression of seeming so pressed, so importunate, as if everyone looked askance. I'm already enough of an "invalid of life." Your letter made me very very happy! You're all so kind to me. Everyone full of goodwill. But you really did say such absolutely wonderful things to me. Especially that term "self-searcher."

With no profession, no money, no position and already hardly any hair, you can well imagine that such gracious recognition from a "man in the know" falls on very welcome ears.

Thus am I and will I ever remain a writer of “worthless samples” and the finished product never appears. I’m just a kind of little pocket mirror, powder mirror, no world-mirror.

Yours,

Peter Altenberg

## On Writing

I just came to the realization, to the sudden, illuminating, simple realization, upon receipt of a letter from my true friend, Fr. W., a man most inclined to friendship (he writes with unbelievable verve on one of the finest typewriters) that to write a good letter can only mean to write it such that the recipient be able, while reading it, to hear the letter writer speaking loudly and most emphatically to him, as though seated right there at his side! To be able to completely reconcile in a letter this difference between the one who silently writes and the one who speaks out loud, that's true letter writing skill! Everything else is literary rubbish crowned with laurels à la pig's head. Temperament, incivilities, peculiarities, impertinences, tomfooleries, everything must come roaring out, roaring, roaring; or else it's a contrived, mendacious and, therefore, boring, business! Letter-instant-photography!

A friend of mine, the watchmaker Josef T., once came to me with a request. He had just laid his lovely 23-year-old beloved in the grave.

“Peter, you know me, please help me! Write me a proper inscription for my marble tombstone. When may I hope that you think up something appropriate?”

“Now or never!” I replied right there in the middle of the street. He tore out his notebook.

I wrote:

“I was the Watchmaker Josef T.,  
And then I found paradise through you — .  
And now I'm the Watchmaker  
Joseph T. again — .”

You've got to pour out all your humanity spontaneously, in a rush; because later it turns into a tasteless sauce! That's why there are so many tasteless sauces — .

## The *Koberer* (Procurer)

“Own up,” said the Count to Mitzi G., “who’d you get to draft this letter to me for you?!”

“Drafted?! Drafted?! What do you mean by that?!”

“Drafted! You couldn’t possibly have dreamed it up yourself!”

“Why not?! You think I’m all that stupid?!”

“No, yes. But once and for all, you didn’t write this letter!”

“Who else do you think wrote it?!”

“That I don’t know. You’re the only one that knows it. Listen, Mitzi, I’ll give you one hundred Crowns if you tell his name!”

“One hundred Crowns? Make it one fifty!”

“It was Peter!”

“What Peter?!”

“Peter, you know, Peter Altenberg!”

The letter: “Saw you again last night at the ‘Tabarin!’ Couldn’t talk to you, didn’t dare to. So there I was seated face to face with the guy that had me for a whole year butt-naked under the covers. . . . It was just no use!”

“How did he ever come to draft this letter for you?!”

I said to him, I said: “For God’s sake, write me something I’d have written if I knew how to write!”

“So the letter’s from you after all?!”

“That’s what I said from the start!”

So then she patched things up again with the Count.

# Coffeehouse

You've got troubles of one kind or another — get thee to the coffeehouse!

She can't make it to your place for whatever perfectly plausible reason — to the coffeehouse!

Your boots are torn — to the coffeehouse!

You make four hundred Crowns and spend five hundred — coffeehouse!

You're a frugal fellow and don't dare spend a penny on yourself — coffeehouse!

You're a paper pusher and would've liked to become a doctor — coffeehouse!

You can't find a girlfriend up to snuff — coffeehouse!

You're virtually on the verge of suicide — coffeehouse!

You loathe and revile people and yet can't live without them — coffeehouse!

No place else will let you pay on credit — coffeehouse!

## I Drink Tea

Six P.M. approaches. I sense it coming on. Not as intensely as the children sense the approach of Christmas Eve. But I sense it all the same. At six on the dot I drink tea, a festive satisfaction that never disappoints in this burdensome existence. Something you can count on, to have a becalming bliss at your beck and call. A given completely free of life's vicissitudes. Pouring the good mountain spring water into my lovely white half-liter nickel-plated receptacle already gives me pleasure. Then I wait out the simmer, the song of the water. I have a huge, semispherical, deep, brick-red Wedgewood cup. The tea comes from the Café Central, wafting with the scent of high mountain meadow, of wild bugle and sun-burned pasture grass.

The tea is golden yellow-straw yellow, never brownish, always light and unoppressive. I smoke a cigarette along with it, a "Chel-mis, Hyksos." I sip it very very slowly. The tea is an internally stimulating nerve bath. You can bear it all better while drinking it. You feel it inside, a woman ought to have that effect. But she never does. She hasn't yet acquired the culture of serene sweetness so as to affect you like a noble warm golden-yellow tea. She believes she'd lose her power. But my six o'clock tea never loses its power over me. I long for it daily in just the same way and lovingly let it wed my body.

## Perfume

As a child, rummaging around a drawer in the desk of my beloved, oh so beautiful Mama, the desk made of mahogany and cut glass, I found an empty perfume bottle which still retained the potent scent of a certain unidentified fragrance.

Many times I'd sneak over and sniff at it.

I associated this fragrance with all the love, tenderness, friendship, longing, sadness in the world. But for me all these feelings were bound up with my Mama. Later fate fell upon us, unsuspected, like a horde of Huns and inflicted heavy losses all around.

And one day I dashed from perfumery to perfumery hoping to possibly find in the little sample bottles the fragrance from the mahogany desk drawer of my late beloved Mama. And finally, finally I found it: Peau d'Espagne, Pinaud, from Paris.

And I remembered the bygone days when Mama was the only womanly presence able to arouse pleasure and pain, ardent longing and deep despair, but who would always, always forgive whatever I'd done and who fretted over me and perhaps even before falling asleep at night prayed for my future happiness . . .

Later, many young women in their guileless sweet zeal sent me their favorite perfume to thank me from the heart for a beauty tip of my devising, namely that every perfume ought to be rubbed into the skin all over the naked body right after the bath so that it wafts forth like the body's own true natural essence! But all these perfumes were like the scents of breathtakingly beautiful but rather poisonous exotic flowers. Only the fragrance Peau d'Espagne, Pinaud, from Paris, brought me a melancholic tranquility, even though Mama was no longer there and could no longer forgive me for my sins!



## On Smells

Women are enormously impressionable, they so easily take on the smells of their surroundings! If she was in the dairy, then for hours afterwards she'll smell of milk, her hands, her hair, her entire body—. If she was at the green grocers, she'll retain for hours the smell of all the greens, like a mixed vegetable soup—. In the garden she smells of lilacs or linden trees or just of garden—. On the high mountain meadow of cow pasture land and fresh cut meadow. This is a tragic fate; since she always smells afterwards of the last lout she was with, of the last snob and his repulsive scent, his foul odor of duplicity! She never smells of poets since poets keep a respectful distance, probably on account of their artistic egotism. Most often women smell of "smart alecks" always too close for comfort! That's when they are most receptive to smells—. Noble ladies definitely ought to remain outdoors in nature or stick to the saintly solitude of their own domicile. It stinks everywhere else!

Even good books never stink, they are the distillation of all the malodorous sins one has committed of which one has finally managed to extract a drop of fragrant humanity!

But the other sins can't be distilled!

# Tulips

There are geniuses among the tulips, too, just as there are in every manifestation of the organic! Like orchids, for instance. I once had a white tulip that stayed shut tight, immaculate and virginal, for a full fourteen days despite the warmth of my room and water. Only then did it open and brazenly display its stamen and its pistil. And so it remained for another eight days. Others, for instance, will open on the spot in a warm room and water, and are already complete in all their splendor; their petals fall as if stunned by the blow. Still others, especially the speckled ones, evidently just shrivel up like little old grannies, without losing their petals they die off, doggedly resisting life. You throw them away even though there could still be a little spare life left in them! And it may well be so. Tulips are not without smell, they exude to the eyes! It may well be the most exciting, longest lasting scent there is!