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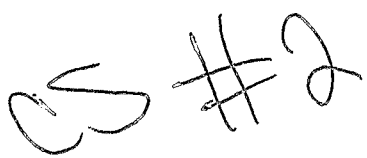

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Reading character in the face: Lavater, Socrates, and physiognomy

K. J. H. BERLAND

Deceived by the noble appearance of the Thane of Cawdor, and ironically about to be deceived again by the appearance of Macbeth, Shakespeare's King Duncan laments, 'There is no art/To find the mind's construction in the face.'[1] In fact, just such an art *did* exist, an art codified by long tradition of at least two thousand years standing as Shakespeare wrote (and which remained cyclically current into the nineteenth century). Duncan was apparently just an unskilled practitioner.

Physiognomy, the science of judging human character based on outward physical appearance, especially in the face, was already an established science in classical Greece – Socrates himself, according to Cicero, submitted unskeptically to physiognomical analysis. By the third century BC, the science had already been codified in the *Physiognomonics*, until relatively recently attributed to Aristotle. The logic underlying classical physiognomy is there set out clearly:

> Mental character is not independent of and unaffected by bodily processes, but is conditioned by the state of the body; this is well exemplified by drunkenness and sickness, where altered bodily conditions produce obvious mental modifications. And contrariwise the body is evidently influenced by the affections of the soul – by the emotions of love and fear, and by states of pleasure and pain. But still better instances of the fundamental connexion of body and soul and their very extensive interaction may be found in the normal products of nature. There never was an animal with the form of one kind and the mental character of another: the soul and body appropriate to the same kind always go together, and this shows that a specific body involves a specific mental character.[2]

The author, whom I shall call the Pseudo-Aristotle, goes on to distinguish three traditional methodologies, each of which he discusses at length. These approaches all resurface at various times during the history of physiognomy, so it will be useful to examine how they handle the collection and interpretation of evidence.

The first school seeks to establish human character by tracing resemblances between a human subject and various kinds of animals. Such resemblances will be meaningful as long as a 'peculiar mental character' can be attributed to certain animals. The assumption follows that 'if a man resembles such and such a genus in body he will resemble it also in soul' (805a; I, 1237). The Pseudo-Aristotle includes several examples of such resemblances. This approach is taken up later by Polemon and Adamantius in the second century AD,[3] by Giovanni

1 – *Macbeth*, I.iv.12–13. For the use of physiognomical marks in Renaissance drama, see Carroll Camden, 'The mind's construction in the face,' in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Hardin Craig* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1941), pp. 208–220.

2 – *Physiognomics*, 805a; trans. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press [Bollingen Series LXXI.2], 1984), I, 1237. Further references to the Pseudo-Aristotle will appear in the text.

3 – See Elizabeth C. Evans, 'The study of physiognomy in the second century AD,' *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, LXXII (1941), pp. 96–108, and *Physiognomics in the Ancient World, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, LIX, Part 5, 1969. My debt to Professor Evans's scholarship will be evident in my discussion of ancient precedents. The brief historical overview I have undertaken is intended only to indicate the variety of approaches and methodologies. For the ancient texts, see R. Forster, *Scriptores Physiognomonici* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1893). For more detailed accounts of the humoural physiological background, see Norman W. Thiessen, 'An outline of the development of concepts of humoral medicine,' *Medical Life*, XXXIX (1934), pp. 3–19; and Anthonio Cioccio, 'The historical background of the modern study of constitution,' *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine*, IV (1936), pp. 23–38. For accounts of the influence of physiognomy on the arts, see Brewster Rogerson, 'The art of painting the passions,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XV (1953), pp. 68–94; Carroll Camden, op. cit.; E. H. Gombrich, 'The mask and the face: the perception of physiognomic likeness in life and art,' in *Art, Perception, and Reality*, ed. Maurice Mandelbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 1–46; Roy Porter, 'Making faces: physiognomy and fashion

in eighteenth-century England,' *Études Anglaises*, XXXVIII (1985), pp. 385–396; Patrick Dandrey, 'Un Tardif Blason du Corps Animal: Résurgences de la Physiognomie Comparée au XVIIe Siècle,' *Dix-Septième Siècle*, 153 (1986), pp. 351–370; J. J. Courtine, 'Corps, Regard, Discours: Typologies et classifications dans les physiognomies de l'âge classique,' *Lange Française*, 74 (1987), pp. 108–128; and Jocelyn Powell, 'Making faces: character and physiognomy in L'École des Femmes and L'Avare,' *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 9 (1987), pp. 94–112. For Lavater and the last cycle of physiognomy, see John Graham, *Lavater's Essays on Physiognomy: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1979); Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel* (Princeton University Press, 1982); Michael Shortland, 'The power of a thousand eyes: Johan Caspar Lavater's science of physiognomical perception,' *Criticism*, 28 (1986), pp. 379–408; and Joan K. Stemmler, 'The physiognomical portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater,' *The Art Bulletin*, 75(1) (March 1993), pp. 151–168.

4 – Giovanni Battista della Porta, *De humana physiognomonia* (Vici Aequensis, Apud I. Cacchius, 1586), 86. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text.

Battista della Porta in the sixteenth, and Charles Le Brun in the seventeenth. Porta was probably the most influential of the later physiognomists before Lavater. Following the Pseudo-Aristotle, Porta links human and animal character by undertaking double readings based on double images, basing his commentary on visual parallels between human and animal portraits. In his account of Socrates (paired with a stag) Porta explains that the resemblance between the knobby forehead of Socrates and that of the deer (see figure 1) indicates a correspondence in their essential nature: they are both timid, yet easily angered.[4]

Figure 1. Socrates and deer. Porta, *De humana physiognomonia* (Vici Acquensis, Apud I. Cacchius, 1586). Reproduced by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

These qualities do not strike us today as belonging to the character of Socrates, as Plato and Xenophon tell us – but, as we will see, the outward physiognomical marks indicate the philosopher's original predispositions. We will return to the diagnosis later. Meanwhile, it is important to note that some commentators have detected a fundamental weakness in the logic of animal–human parallels. Readings derivable from animal parallels are based on the premise that certain animals will be universally recognized as standing for fixed qualities. This is not always the case. Writing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* late in the eighteenth century, the Revd William Tasker quarrels with Porta's so-called Aristotelian method:

> The deer is a timid animal, for, in the Iliad, Achilles insults Agamemnon, by telling him, that he has the heart of a deer; whereas Socrates, who in his youth acted in a military capacity at the famous siege of Potidea and elsewhere, exhibited many distinguished instances of personal courage and bravery.[5]

5 – Revd William Tasker, 'History of physiognomy,' *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXIX (1799), p. 107.

The image of the deer, then, does not convey to every viewer the same symbolic associations, so the vocabulary of signs Porta assembles is unlikely to form a body of empirical evidence on which scientific physiognomy might be based.

The second approach draws its signs of character from racial differences. Such theories may be considered a kind of primitive physical anthropology, but in practice they often border on xenophobic superstition or racist caricature.

The third approach bases judgment upon facial expression. The ephemeral and unreliable nature of these signs was recognized quite early, however, and so the field of evidence was eventually expanded to include the basic construction and marks of the face.

The Pseudo-Aristotle joins all these methods (though he favours the first and third) with a framework of ancient biology. The relation between form and character is effected through the agency of the Pythagorean physiology of humours. The practical applications in the *Physiognomonics* are cast in a familiar language: 'A brilliant *complexion* indicates a hot sanguine temper, whilst a pale pink complexion signifies naturally good parts, when it occurs on a good skin' (806b; 1239). Humoural physiognomy (see, for instance, Thomas Hill's *The Contemplation of Mankinde*, 1571) remains current nearly into the eighteenth century, and is combined with Astrology, Chiromancy, and other occult pursuits by such writers as Jean Belot (*Traité de la Physionomie*, in *Les Oeuvres* 1564), Richard Sanders (*Physiognomie, and Chiromancie, Metoscopie*, 1653), and 'Erra Pater' (*The Book of Knowledge*, English trans., 1766).

There were also attempts to move toward a scientific physiognomy based on observation and inductive reasoning. Some such connection seems evident in the fact that Richard Sanders dedicated his book to Elias Ashmole. More significantly, both the anonymous author of *Philosophical Letters Upon Physiognomies* (1751) and John Clubbe in his *Physiognomy; Being a Sketch only of a large Work* (1763) abandon the humoural physiology, the weighty apparatus of citing ancient authorities, and the occult paraphernalia of their predecessors. In their place,

they present practical observations, combined with and illustrating moral pronouncements. At the close of the eighteenth century, Johan Caspar Lavater attempted to reshape physiognomy into the form of a complete, modern science. In this endeavour he was assisted greatly by the manifest strength and integrity of his character, and by the authoritative tone with which he declares his opinions and conclusions. However, in spite of his constant claim that he had developed an empirically based physiognomy, the method he employs is no more empirical than that of his predecessors – a subject to which I shall return.

Today we tend to view physiognomy as a rather foolish or quaint system, thoroughly exploded by 'real' science. But, although it may stir only mild amusement in us, we must recognize that it meant something more to our forebears. Jocelyn Powell explains that the attraction of physiognomy is based on a conception of the formation of personal character different from our own:

> Broadly, one may say that today our ideas of character are psychological; then, they were philosophical. We analyse the individual in terms of a developing dynamic of feeling and behaviour, and our chief interest is a comprehensive pattern of growth; then, they understood a man's character in terms of the ethical implications of his actions . . . . A man is born in particular circumstances and with a particular disposition or temperament. As he grows up he must learn to control and exploit this disposition and act upon his surroundings. The choices of action that he makes define his character, and this character is 'expressed' in his outward behaviour. In fact, a man's character can be read by his actions.[6]

6 – Jocelyn Powell, 'Making faces,' p. 95.

If outward behaviour – what a person actually *does* – is the most reliable indicator of what he *is*, then the physiognomy of facial formation and expression is clearly not very reliable. Momentary emotions or choices may produce interpretable signs (recognizable facial expressions) that indicate how character has developed. However, if the physical structure of the face is fixed at birth, then a successful physiognomical reading must take into account any discrepancy between signs of the original, natal disposition and other signs indicating how well the earliest disposition has been mastered or developed.

The case of Socrates intrigued most physiognomical writers, since there appeared to be the most dramatic disparity between the outward signs of his appearance and his real character that could be conceived. According to tradition, Socrates was remarkably ugly. Xenophon records that he described himself as having bulging eyes, a snub nose, large nostrils 'wide open and turned outward,' a large mouth, and thick lips. In short, he was so very ugly that Xenophon acknowledges that 'he really resembled' the satyrs of the Greek theatre. Socrates, again, jokingly insists that his resemblance to the Sileni (who, as the progeny of the River Nymphs, were partly divine) ought to prove him more beautiful than young Critobulus.[7] Plato, too, writes of this resemblance; in the *Symposium* Alcibiades praises Socrates lovingly, in spite of his ugliness:

7 – Xenophon, *Symposium*, IV.19; V.4–8; trans. O. J. Todd (Loeb Classical Library), pp. 575, 601–603.

> What he reminds me of more than anything is one of those little sileni that you see on the statuaries' stalls; you know the ones I mean – they're

> modeled with pipes or flutes in their hands, and when you open them down the middle there are little figures of the gods inside.[8]

The outward form is deceptive, Alcibiades insists, for the true beauty of Socrates is within, in the spirit that can inspire his listeners with a sacred rage, or make them feel shame for their dissolute ways.

Erasmus, in a famous passage in the *Adages*, maintains that the outward Socrates, the eternally jesting, clowning Silenus, must be 'opened' if we are to find the real Socrates within, the 'great, lofty, and truly philosphical soul, despising all those things for which other mortals jostle and steer, sweat and dispute and struggle . . . .'[9] The Socrates of Alcibiades provides Erasmus with a metaphor (or a model) for discovering the truth: he goes on to say that all true wisdom is discovered by a similar opening of a deceptive outer appearance.

Without further multiplying citations, it is safe to assert that every writer aware of Plato's account of Socrates (or of the later traditions based on this account) was aware of his doubleness, his beauty of spirit weighed against his formidably ugly outside. The tradition of outward ugliness was maintained by a rich supply of visual images, mostly based on Greek and Roman statuary and gem engravings,[10] and reproduced in engravings in numerous texts (figure 2).

Because of the contradiction between his outward appearance and his inward character, Socrates became a test case for the physiognomists. The earliest known practicing physiognomist was one Zopyrus, who observed Socrates without knowing anything of his true character, and who then produced a diagnosis so far off the mark that he placed the status of his science at risk. The story is reported by Cicero in *De Fato*:

> Again, do we not read how Socrates was stigmatized by the 'physiognomist' Zopyrus, who professed to discover entire characters and natures from their body, eyes, face and brow? he said that Socrates was stupid and thick-witted because he had not got hollows in the neck above the collarbone – he used to say that these portions of his anatomy were blocked and stopped up; he also added that he was addicted to women – at which Alcibiades is said to have given a loud guffaw![11]

Cicero goes on to say that such defects (stupidity and lechery) may spring from natural causes, but that the reversal of a natural inclination toward vice may be won with effort, will, and philosophical training. Socrates, he asserts, acknowledged the accuracy of Zopyrus' diagnosis:

> When he was ridiculed by the rest who said that they failed to recognize such vices in Socrates, Socrates came to his rescue by saying that he was naturally inclined to the vices named, but had cast them out of him by the help of reason.[12]

The tale of Zopyrus supports Cicero's argument against determinism. Character can be changed; a healthy balance can be attained. 'Men who are described as naturally irascible or passionate or envious or anything of the kind, have an unhealthy constitution of soul, yet all the same are curable, as is said to have been Socrates' case.'[13] Appropriately enough, Cicero attributes the transformation to rational control of the passions.

8 – Plato, *Symposium*, 215a–b; trans. Michael Joyce, *The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntingdon Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press [Bollingen Series LXXI], 1961), p. 566. Plato also mentions Socrates' ugliness in the *Theatetus*, 143e, 209b (snub-nosed, prominent eyes), pp. 848, 916; and in the *Meno* 80a–c (features and effect on others like a torpedo fish), p. 363.

9 – Mary Mann Phillips, *The Adages of Erasmus: A Study With Translations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 269–270.

10 – For Socratic portraiture, see Margarete Bieber, *The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age*, rev. edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 45; Andreas Pigler, 'Sokrates in der Kunst der Neuzeit,' *Die Antike*, 14 (1938), pp. 281–294; Gisela Richter, 'A new portrait of Socrates,' in *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehman*, ed. Lucy Freeman Sandler (New York: Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1964), pp. 267–268; Cornelius C. Vermeule III, 'Socrates and Aspasia: new portraits of late antiquity,' *The Classical Journal*, 54, 2 (1958), pp. 49–55, and Elizabeth McGrath, '"The Drunken Alcibiades": Rubens's Picture of Plato's *Symposium*,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 46 (1983), pp. 228–235. For portraits in gem engraving, see Gisela Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems of the Classical Style* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1920), figs 213–214, p. 127; and Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems: Greek, Etruscan, and Roman* (Roma: by 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1956), figs 459–466, p. 101.

11 – Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Fato*, V.10; trans. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library, 1948), pp. 203–205.

12 – *Tusculan Disputations*, IV.xxxvii.80; trans. J. E. King (Loeb Classical Library, 1927), p. 419.

13 – *Tusculan Disputations*, IV.xxxvii.80; p. 419.

Figure 2. Socrates, from a gem engraving. Diogenes Laertius, *De Vitis, Dogmatibus, et Apothegmatibus Clarorum Philosophorum* (Curiae Regnitianae, apud Gotthand. Puttherum, 1539). Reproduced by permission of the Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University.

Physiognomists make much of the original ugliness; Porta, for instance, assigns significance to each feature. The flattened nose, flaring nostrils, and protuberant eyes are signs of sensuality (81, 132, 197); baldness signals lechery and shamelessness (41); a stretched-out forehead, rounded shoulders, and hidden clavicles indicate stupidity and insensibility (52, 141); a wrinkled brow indicates anger (57), and overhanging eyebrows indicate malice (64). Similar readings can be found in many physiognomical texts.

Later versions of the Zopyrus story vary widely. Authors attribute Socrates' 'cure' to forces specially suited to their own polemical purposes. Thomas Hill explains that physiognomy analyzes the 'brutish'

part of human nature, before the regenerating operation of grace.[14] Conversely, Jacques Hurault claims that good education helped Socrates counteract his naturally unhealthy tendencies.[15] Joseph Addison optimistically (though vaguely) credits 'the Dictates of Reason',[16] while the liberal Anglican John Clarke claimed that Socrates' cure was provided by 'the Cultivation and Improvement of his Reason' leading him to 'a well-grounded, steddy Belief, of the Being of a God, the Creator of Things, Wise and Good,' which in turn led him to emulate God's benevolence to the best of his ability.[17]

Here we can see suggested the outlines of a gradual progression in which the polemical function of the story shifts with each user. For Hill, it is a fable of the need for grace to counteract human depravity. For Hurault and Addison, it fits into the history of the practical ethics of the wisest of heathens (an object-lesson in self-mastery). For Clarke, it serves to support the polemic for Natural Religion, exemplified by the protochristian Socrates, who died a martyr for the unity of the godhead. It should perhaps be noted that these widely differing interpretations are not anomalous; they fairly represent the range of versions I have encountered.

In nearly every case, the Zopyrus story is introduced when an author wishes to establish that physiognomy is not based on a deterministic or mechanistic view of human nature. Carroll Camden is not entirely fair when he claims that the physiognomists introduce free will simply to account for failures in their methodology: 'For those who say that of their own knowledge the laws of physiognomy do not work, the physiognomists have a ready answer.'[18] In all the influential texts the story consistently retains the point about free will first made by Cicero. This argument reappears on a regular basis as authoritative and exemplary support for the argument that physiognomic marks indicate *potential*, and that people can change. The original story occurs, after all, as an illustration in Cicero's argument opposing a mechanistic view of fate:

> For it does not follow that if differences in men's propensities are due to natural and antecedent causes, therefore our wills and desires are also due to natural and antecedent causes; for if that were the case, we should have no freedom of the will at all.[19]

Thus, the use of the Zopyrus tale (and the principle it illustrates) makes up something more than a sophistical 'ready answer.' Rather, it attempts to preserve what Cicero calls 'the true sequence of cause and effect.' It is not always fruitful to question or trivialize every argument once used to support a flawed or exploded system. The physiognomists are easy enough targets today, especially since there exist some physiognomical texts that *do* assert a mechanistic system of fixed and direct correspondences. But there are also more texts that insist on maintaining the proper distinction between natural causes (innate tendencies) and the potential for change (temperance and will).

Such a distinction also informs Johann Caspar Lavater's masterly work on physiognomy, but he attempts to take it a step further. In his endeavour to bring a scientific *tone* (if not an empirical method) to

14 – Thomas Hill, *The Contemplation of Mankinde* (London: by William Seres, 1571), fol. 1^{v}.

15 – Jacques Hurault, *Politicke, Moral, and Martial Discourses*, trans. Arthur Golding (London: by Adam Islip, 1595), p. 32.

16 – Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 88 (June 8, 1711); ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, 368.

17 – John Clarke, *The Foundation of Morality* (York: by Thomas Gent, and sold by A. Bettesworth, T. Hammond, and T. Ryles, 1726), pp. 66–67.

18 – 'The mind's construction in the face,' p. 211.

19 – *De Fato*, IV.9; p. 203.

physiognomy, he asserts that a rigorous program of careful observations would reveal minute gradations of appearance, allowing more accurate judgments. He chastises his predecessors for failing to detect the subtle but important variations in significance.

Nonetheless, his own observations are not used to discover, but to confirm fundamental *a priori* principles of the science; Lavater agrees with the ancient notion of a natural harmony of moral and physical beauty, implicit in Plato's accounts of Socrates' attraction to Alcibiades and other disciples. However, he argues that moral changes have a discernible effect on outward appearance; thus a truly skilled physiognomist would have recognized in Alcibiades' face the signs of potential dissipation and moral collapse. He speaks generally of such transformations:

> I have known young people of a very beautiful figure and an excellent character, who in a short space of time destroyed their beauty by intemperance and debauchery: they still passed for beautiful, and were so; but, great God! how fallen from their original beauty![20]

20 – Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind* (London: J. Murray, H. Hunter, and T. Holloway, 1789–98), I. 139. Further references will appear in the text.

On the other hand, a man born with a natural inclination toward vice will bear the marks of such a disposition. These natal marks are confirmed by the further development of bad habits, by 'vicious education,' and by consistently seeking to gratify base appetites. But the process is not irreversible:

> But if he begin seriously to attempt a reformation of his conduct; if he successfully combat his passions, and obtain a signal victory over them; if, with a sincere and resolute intention, he repress at least the most violent of their sallies; he will be in truth, and in the proper sense of the word, a virtuous man; nay, his virtues will be more eminent than those of any man naturally good. And yet such a man would be quoted as an example of virtue united to ugliness. Be it so; but this last is the faithful expression of the impure passions, which polluted, and had taken root in the soul. Besides, before the heroic efforts he made to shake off the yoke, the ugliness of his visage was much more striking: examine, and you will find how much he is improved since that era. (I, 140)

But how does Lavater expect the observer to conduct such examinations? Certainly he gives lip-service to the value of careful observation, but in practice his method of arriving at general principles has nothing in common with the Baconian tradition of inductive research, in spite of his ostensible adherence to that tradition. John Graham has noted that Lavater's approach is really only scientific in its 'flavor'; instead of providing a scientific account of the way character is revealed by the form of the body, Lavater 'rhetorically premises a direct relationship as a self-evident principle.'[21] This is not to say that Lavater is uninterested in collecting data (particular observations of facial formations and character). Michael Shortland maintains that Lavater's 'science of physiognomy relies above all else on the practice of weighing up, collating, and otherwise organizing the evidence of the senses. "Facts," Lavater writes in an important passage, "must decide; consequently observation and experiment are requisite."'[22]

21 – John Graham, *Lavater's Essays on Physiognomy*, pp. 45, 50.

22 – Michael Shortland, 'The power of a thousand eyes,' p. 388.

It is never safe to assume that the practical demonstrations following

declarations of critical principle will follow the principles the author has suggested. When Lavater insists on the pre-eminence of fact, and when he insists that new physiognomists should consult experience rather than traditional authority,[23] he is appropriating the language of scientific reform for his own purposes, but a scientific vocabulary may be assumed without affecting the method of inquiry applied. Facts must decide, certainly, but who decides what data deserve to be called facts, and who decides what facts are relevant to a particular case?

It is not sufficient to accept Lavater's word about his commitment to an empirical method. In practice, it is readily apparent that the manner in which he actually collects data is itself completely undocumented. He makes no attempt to record either particular data or the process of inference that allows him to establish his physiognomical principles. These principles he is content to declare confidently, *ex cathedra*, and such case studies as do emerge are merely called up as illustrations of general statements (i.e., deduction dressed up as induction). It is this very confidence that allows Lavater to achieve an impressive rhetorical tone of authority, a tone which accounts for a good deal of his popularity.[24]

The degree to which he relies on this authority can be seen everywhere in his *Essays*, from his assertions of physiognomical principle, to his boldly unacknowledged recycling of traditional patterns,[25] to his illustrational 'readings' of faces. The reproduced images he provides to support his exposition are useful as illustrations, but they have no integrity, no meaning of their own. If certain aspects of the images do not lend themselves to his interpretation, Lavater simply asserts his own superior understanding of the reality which the image has failed to represent adequately.

Exactly how Lavater's method of interpretation really works can be seen in his 'Fragment' on Raphael, an artist whom he praises lavishly, calling him 'the greatest painter that ever existed' (II, 324). Lavater claims only an amateur's knowledge of the mysteries of Art, but he explains that he finds in Raphael's work instructive subjects for the 'science of Physionomies.' From this point of view, his disclaimer about knowledge of art becomes academic, since he reserves the right of speaking frankly. In effect, he does not claim to know much about art, but he knows what he likes. His authority is based on his superior knowledge of what he calls the real world, and so his commentary will be that of:

> . . . a man who thinks for himself, . . . an observer who loves Nature and truth; in a word, I shall submit my ideas to the severe and impartial examination of those who are acquainted with Nature and the Arts. Of those, I say, *who are acquainted with Nature*; for without such acquaintance, it is impossible to form a judgment of Art. However sublime this last may be, it has no merit but what arises from approximation to Nature. The more it succeeds in reproducing it, even to illusion, the more perfect it will be; it will be noble and sublime in proportion to its more exactly copying *beautiful Nature*; but in every age, *truth* must constitute its dignity and essence. (II, 324–325)

23 – Shortland sees this as part of Lavater's 'method' (pp. 388–389), perhaps attributing more coherence to his system than Lavater was capable of developing. On the connection (which Lavater often denied but nonetheless is often quite obvious) between Lavater's analyses and those of his predecessors, see Graham, pp. 45–47.

24 – Part of this popularity was generated by Lavater's successful program of self-presentation as the ideal man of the age of sensibility. On this characterization, see Graham, pp. 45–52.

25 – Graham notes (p. 45) that Lavater's analysis of the mouth, nose, eyes, forehead, and chin were 'in the tradition.'

Lavater's manifesto of interpretation makes the order of discovery plain. First comes the state of 'being acquainted with Nature'; this condition is not based on the empirical collection of information, but on the possession of the best set of moral, religious, and sentimental convictions. Art (understood as faithful representation of external reality) is sublime when it corresponds to what those who are 'acquainted with Nature' hold to be true. Call this acquaintance with nature what you will – but it is hardly a knowledge gained through induction.

Because the best representation consists of the illusion of reproducing reality, Lavater (like Platonic critics) assumes that all art is radically limited. Portraiture, especially, imperfectly approximates reality; no artist ever captures all the significant details of the subject's appearance. Thus, in spite of all his genius, even Raphael falls short. In his portraits, Raphael's greatness is found joined with certain habitual faults. Lavater explains: 'I call that *great*, which produces a permanent effect and a pleasure ever new. I call that a *fault*, which is contradictory to truth and Nature' (II, 325). And, quite simply, Lavater reserves for himself the privilege of judging an image's greatness or faultiness. Since he has claimed the status of one who knows truth and Nature, he is obviously qualified to judge whether an image (or its component parts) contradicts what he knows to be true.

Thus he can complain that not a single feature of the face in one of the images reproduced in the book 'is to be found to be perfectly true.' The eye, eyebrow, mouth, chin, and forehead are 'caricature,' and the nose is 'unsuitable to a human face.' All these faults, he explains, spring from Raphael's incorrect copying of a model in Greek art (delusive itself, because it is only a copy) instead of following Nature (II, 326). In fact, according to Lavater all the great artists were similarly incorrect. He points out 'how widely the greatest Masters deviate from Nature, and . . . conceal their faults by dint of genius' (II, 329). Artistic genius is dangerous, then, because it is capable of producing adventitious beauties to flatter the senses – but it cannot fool the understanding (II, 331). That is, the observer acquainted with Nature, impervious to the often untrustworthy rhetoric of art, will be able to dismiss art's distortions of what he already knows to be true. When Lavater approves of a work of art, he anchors his commentary and praise on the same knowledge of Nature that provides him with critical authority: 'The more that forms possess of the truth of Nature, the more correct and harmonious will be the design, and the more will these forms please the eye and satisfy the mind' (II, 341). Lavater, then, seeks in Raphael's art confirmation of a preconceived body of truth; when it is not readily discernible, the fault is in the artist.

> I love what is exact, precise and correct; what is not so, cannot be consistent with truth. Nature surpasses, in this respect, all the efforts of Art. She always knows what she is about; she disposes every thing, she designs every thing . . . . Hence the nearer Art approaches these principles of Nature, the more expressive will it be, and the greater effect will it produce. (II, 345).[26]

26 – Here once again Lavater's criticism is clearly allied to the Platonic tradition that judges all art inferior because of its status as mere imitation of reality.

Lavater attempts to make his argument sound like a matter of common sense. If an artist's rendition of an illustrious figure does not conform to the truth of Nature, he insists, it is not correct. But this is not simply a question of verisimilitude, since neither author nor reader can compare the representation with the original. Instead, Lavater holds up his own convictions as an absolute standard. *He* is acquainted with Nature, and cannot be seduced by the flash of Raphael's genius to admit a representation that is not appropriate to his great knowledge of human nature. Thus, even in excellent pictures such as *Clemency* (figure 3) there are problems with the fit.

In practice, the image Lavater uses in his text is always subservient to the word. Though Raphael is one of his favourite artists, Lavater suits the illustration to the text's conceptions, rather than drawing

CLEMENCY.

Figure 3. 'Clemency.' Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (London: J. Murray, H. Hunter, and T. Holloway, 1789–98). Reproduced by permission of the Allison-Shelley Collection, F. L. Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.

inferences from the extant image. When the image falls short, he quarrels with details:

> Here again, and almost always, the tip of the nose is faulty. Besides, there is in this figure a knitting of the eyebrows which gives it an air of chagrin and sullenness; the nose likewise is too near the mouth. All these irregularities degrade this face otherwise energetical, and render it disgusting. (II, 346–347)

There is no practical consideration in such analysis as to whether Raphael's model might actually have *looked* like this. Neither is the criticism simply a register of aesthetic taste. Instead, we learn that the representation falls short of Lavater's ideal, and thus it is only a badly brought off attempt.

From this examination of Lavater's approach to the sources of his 'facts', we can see that he applied an essentially external (because subjective) standard to the judgment of likeness. In this sense it resembles any procrustean treatment of the body of historical fact: what fits is welcomed, and what does not fit is cut away and discarded. Lavater cuts away whatever does not suit his sense of truth, claiming to discard it because of a flaw in representation.

Lavater devotes an entire chapter ('Fragment') to Socrates, who is important to him (as to his predecessors) because he exemplifies the possibility of attaining virtue against great odds. Lavater opens his discussion by examining the Zopyrus legend as 'a most interesting text for Physiognomical discussion' (I, 165). To accommodate the possibility that a man might change, physiognomy requires two levels of significant marks: disposition and display, talent and employment, faculty and application, the solid parts of the face and the soft, the permanent and the moveable. In diagnosing Socrates as lazy, lecherous, and stupid, Zopyrus apparently 'had not paid sufficient attention to all the features, to all the excellencies of the Physionomy of Socrates; or, if you will, that he had attended too much to what was coarse or massy in it' (I, 165). Even though Socrates told his disciples Zopyrus was right about his original nature, Lavater rather scornfully concludes that Zopyrus was only a superficial practitioner, incapable of fine distinctions. 'The form of the face of Socrates may have appeared very ugly to inexperienced eyes, while the play of his Physionomy presented the features of celestial beauty' (I, 169). Perceiving the marks of a corrected disposition to vice takes the most practised eye, because 'the radical faculties of the man are more distinguishable in the moveable and fugitive traits' (I, 169). The ancient physiognomist, according to Lavater, could see only the marks of passion, and was not skilled enough to see that they had been counteracted. Nor could he see the strong forms of moral beauty that Lavater insists underlie the initially repellent first impression of Socrates' face. However, Lavater insists that the science has developed far enough that the careful observer can see through both levels of deceptive appearance. Experienced eyes can see the subtle moral beauty of form only superficially coarsened by vicious inclinations, and can also see that these inclinations have been mastered.

In so reasoning, Lavater stands the traditional pattern on its head.

Instead of a Socrates naturally vicious attaining greatness through heroic effort, he presents a naturally great Socrates overcoming adventitious obstacles of inclination. The traditional pattern is built on a concept of character that admits radical amelioration. Lavater's version suggests that Socrates was *always* great. He is no longer the moral example of the possibility of self-control and improvement; instead, he now becomes a hero appropriate to an age of sensibility – a unique, noble, moral man, ideally suited to serve as an exemplar of human goodness.

Lavater offers his readings of Socrates' form and feature with his characteristic tone of authority, which seems sufficiently convincing that reference to a codified system of marks seems unnecessary. His choice of illustrations corresponds perfectly with the pseudo-inductive method I have already outlined. He might have chosen to collect traditional portraits available to him, and, after studying the evidence,

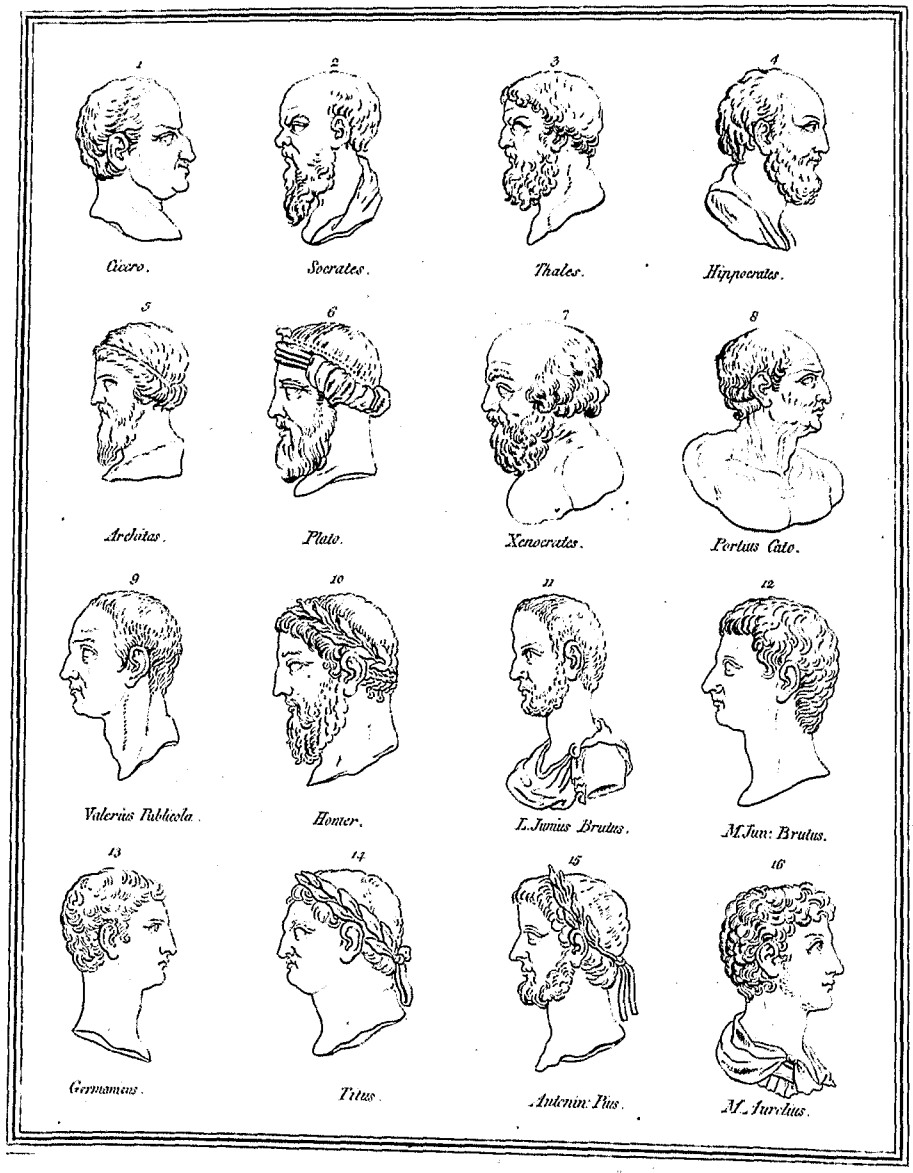

Figure 4. Antique heads; reproduced by permission of the Allison-Shelley Collection, F. L. Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.

he might have induced a general principle. One traditional, ugly portrait does appears among his illustrations, in a plate of 'Antiques,' (figure 4) but Lavater is not very pleased with it. This image of Socrates, among the serried ranks of heathen philosophers and emperors, appears closely aligned with the ugly Athenian tradition. But in this case, Lavater argues that the tradition is corrupt. The oldest pictures, he insists, are little more than 'bad copies' or 'caricatures.' The artist made a 'mistake in the drawing' of Socrates by 'placing the eye too near the nose' (I, 215). By what standard is this detail a mistake? Although Lavater's scrupulous attention to such detail lends support to the

Figure 5. Socrates (Lavater); reproduced by permission of the Allison-Shelley Collection, F. L. Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.

appearance of scientific rigour, there is never any reference to the source of his information. His superior knowledge of Nature simply provides the conviction that it must have been so. How then can a knowledgeable physiognomist overcome the problem of faulty copying through the far reaches of time? Lavater suggests that a more reliable image may be produced by comparing representations. He starts with one generic image (figure 5). This image also resembles the traditional portraits, but it has been somewhat improved. That is, the most dramatically ugly features have been softened, moving the image closer to the way Lavater must have thought the philosopher should look. It is not a complete transformation; rather, it is a variation on a theme. Further variations follow as he offers eight 'heads copied after the antique,' (figure 6) all with 'the same bald head, the same hair, a flat nose, a cavity near the root of the nose, and something clumsy in the whole taken together' (I, *175). These heads (and another appearing on the next page) do resemble the known portraits of Socrates, but they too have been considerably softened. Without citing any source for these images, Lavater proceeds to examine them for tell-tale signs of accuracy or distortion. He does not draw from the accumulated evidence a 'scientific' conclusion about Socrates' appearance and character. Instead, he selects the portions of each image most suitable to his idea of what Socrates should have looked like:

> The foreheads 1.4.8 are more perpendicular than the other. There is not a single one of the eight that presents the forehead of an idiot, but these three are the least intelligent. The outline of the forehead and of the skull of figure 2. is that which announces most sense. The mouth of the same face and that of figure 4. denote most firmness; that of 3. most ingenuity. The contour of mouth 5. has something very sprightly

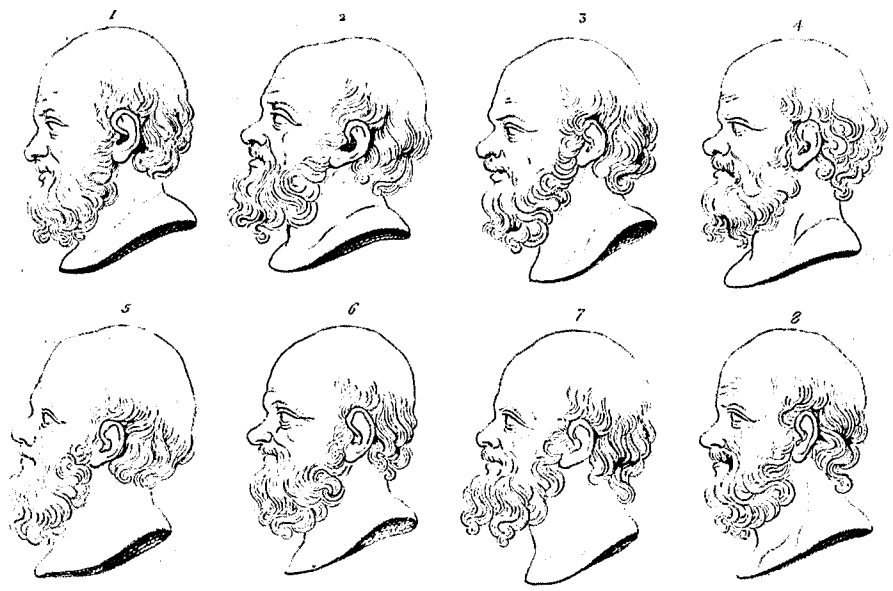

Figure 6. Eight ways of looking at Socrates (Lavater); reproduced by permission of the Allison-Shelley Collection, F. L. Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.

> in it, but it does not express so much genius as mouth 2. The 6th is less expressive. The 7th, accompanied with a look of attention, answers tacitly: it has something more mischievous than the 8th. The eye of the profile below [figure 5] is wretched: the forehead is more ordinary, more destitute of sense than all the others: I say as much of the nose, and of that mouth half-open, devoid of all expression; and yet this pitiful copy too passes for a head of Socrates. (I, 176*)

By making subtle distinctions between the nine antique versions, Lavater builds a kind of composite notion (like the 'Identikit' composite drawings of modern police) of the real appearance of Socrates. The key to a successful representation is its suitability to the observer's conception. Contrasts allow the knowledgeable physiognomist to select those marks of character which truly belong to the subject of analysis. Typically, this knowledge *precedes* observation: 'Physiognomical feeling is the first basis of the Science of Physionomies; . . . antecedent to all experience, to all comparison, and to all reasoning' (I, 189).

Apparently none of these copies is ultimately very suitable, since when it comes time to study the physiognomy of Socrates, Lavater leaves them behind. Instead, he bases his in-depth analysis on a very much softened print taken from Rubens (figure 7). Lavater takes it for granted that the image achieves a 'resemblance.' Still, consistent with his doubts concerning even the greatest art, he adds, 'I imagine the original must have been still better' (I, 172). His response to the picture takes the form of an appeal to the common experience of the initiated; its strength of assertion and its rehearsal of interpretations, obvious to anyone who looked with an educated eye, make the passage worth quoting at length:

> Whoever could have sought in the structure of that forehead the seat of stupidity, and who believe they could perceive the signs of it in that vault, that eminence, those cavities, have never studied the nature of the human forehead; they have never either observed or compared foreheads. Whatever be the influence of good or bad education, of a favourable or unfavourable situation, and though both the one and the other may contribute to render a man virtuous or vicious, a forehead such as this is ever consistent with itself as to the form and principal character, and a real Physionomist could not be mistaken in it. Yes, that spacious vault is inhabited by a mind capable of dispelling the darkness of prejudice, of overcoming a host of obstacles.
>
> Besides, the prominency of the bone of the eye, the eyebrows, the tension of the muscles between the eyebrows, the breadth of the ridge of that nose, the cavity which contains those eyes, that elevation of the eye-ball – how expressive are all those parts, considered separately or in their combination! how they concur in denoting great intellectual dispositions, even of faculties already perfectly unfolded, and arrived at full maturity! – And the portrait before us, what is it, compared to that which the original must have been? – Among a hundred portraits painted by Artists of ability, is there one which expresses with sufficient accuracy the contours of the forehead? nay, where is even the silhouette which gives them with sufficient correctness? Much lèss are we to expect precision in a print engraved perhaps after a twentieth or thirtieth copy. (I, 172–173)[27]

27 – Lavater rarely considers whether the process of translating original drawings or paintings into plates for his book might actually introduce distortions. Even here Lavater is simply stating that the print is only the last stage of a long series of distortions of the original; the decline from the original *includes* the Rubens from which the print was taken. I have not been able to determine to what extent Lavater wrote with the original works by the artists he discusses before him, or whether he worked with the plates commissioned for his books. The tone of the 'readings' suggests that he had the plates (or sketches for them) before him as he wrote.

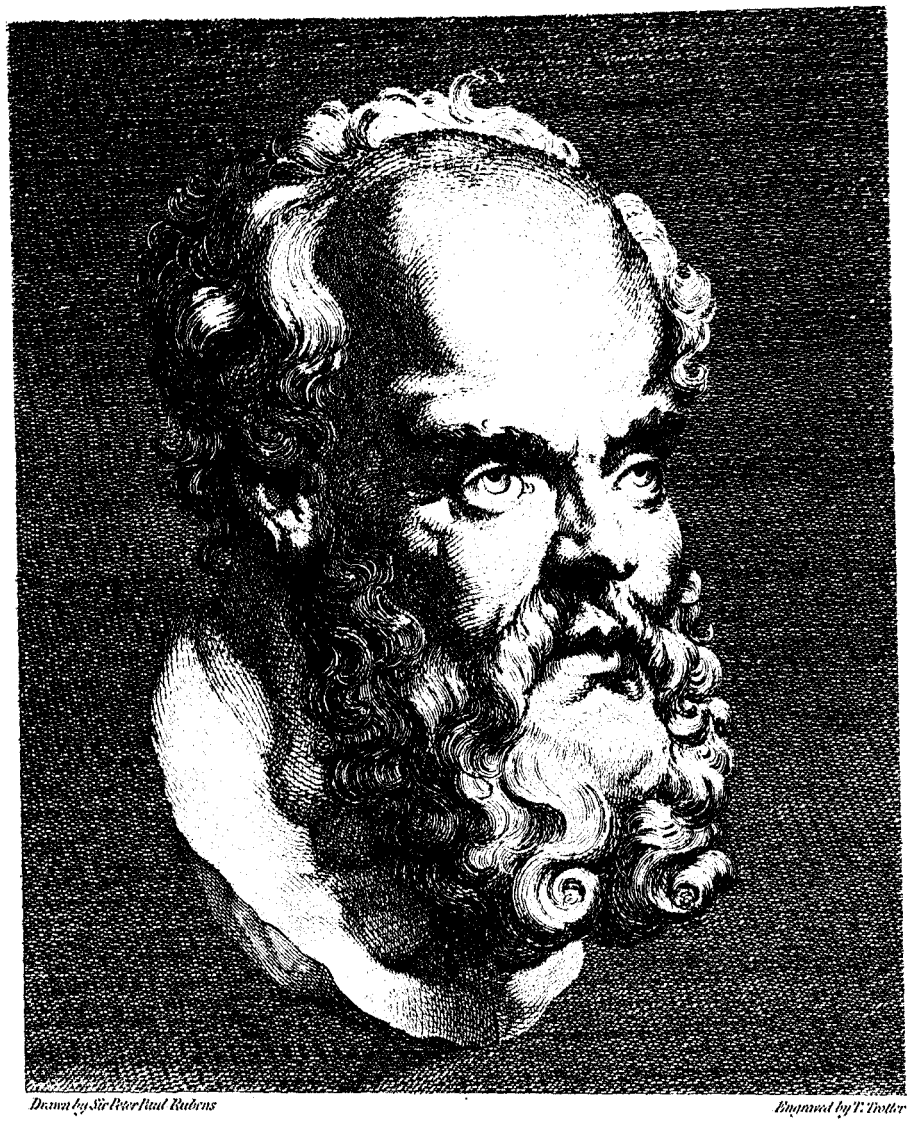

Figure 7. Socrates according to Rubens (Lavater); reproduced by permission of the Allison-Shelley Collection, F. L. Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.

Lavater introduces a wealth of 'facts' – individual observations of particular physical characteristics – to support his readings, which has encouraged some readers to see an attempt to recast physiognomy into more empirical science, but these facts neither relate to a standard, codified body of observations and rules, nor do they serve as the basis for forming such a body. Instead, they are 'proof' of Lavater's opinions dressed in the authority of his self-presentation.

It is this very authority that allows him to dismiss as mistakes of draughtsmanship any characteristics in ancient portraits that do not fit his views. The Rubens illustration is very useful. It is a very indirect

descendant of the ancient ugly portraits; Rubens has softened nearly all the marks that once indicated stupidity and viciousness, a softening process that brings the visual representation of Socrates more in line with the eighteenth-century notion of a heroic Socrates, a martyr to intolerance and superstition. Lavater's facile declaration that it comes from a lost original (and that this original portrait itself is an inadequate representation of the noble subject) is hardly convincing. Lavater does not consider that the artist's conception of the subject or the artist's own personality might affect the representation (though he suggests elsewhere that a great artist sometimes 'communicated to his heads the air of his own physionomy: he thereby ennobled them, if you will' [II, 356]).

As we have seen, the Rubens head furnishes Lavater with all the necessary elements to confirm his idea of Socrates. In this process of selection we can see a clear view of Lavater's method. Committed to the principle that there is a reliable connection between moral and physical beauty, he simply refashions the traditional portraiture to fit this theory. In his readings of the Rubens Socrates, Lavater finds abundant opportunity to accumulate 'evidence' for his system of physiognomy. Indeed, the Rubens version takes its place in a series of carefully adjusted images that move closer to Lavater's sense of what Socrates should look like.

Thus Lavater has reversed the interpretive direction which his 'scientific' tone might lead us to expect. Instead of approaching the traditional portraits to see how they can help us to understand the historical character, he alters the images to help support his 'understanding,' a kind of *a priori* sentiment or conviction which he calls 'Physiognomical feeling.'

In tracing the history of interpretations of what Socrates' face shows, we can see signs of two patterns of development. First is the evolution of physiognomy itself, together with shifts in the notion of character. We can also see that the history of visual images has continued to provide interpreters with a flexible body of material. That is to say, portraits of Socrates are not simply fixed, objective, factual data; rather, they serve as raw material which can be adapted or refashioned to support a new preconception or theory. Lavater, as much as his predecessors, finds the mind's construction in the face deductively, forming a notion of mental construction first, and then seeking confirmation in detail afterwards.