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Lucy Hartley

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A Science of Beauty? Femininity, Fitness and the Nineteenth-century Physiognomic Tradition

THE belief that superior physical appearance is the expression of superior moral and mental development was often promoted in mid-nineteenth century Britain. 'There is nothing more attractive and fascinating than personal beauty', Reverend W. T. Clarke asserted in *The Phrenological Miscellany* (1887):

> All men instinctively admire a handsome form and face. They go to the opera, the theatre, the church, wherever people congregate, to feast their eyes upon human beauty. They pay the highest price for the painted counterfeit of it, however imaginary the semblance to adorn their parlour walls. We do not wonder that men are so fascinated by it, and sometimes are so smitten by the sight of it, that they pine away in misery if they can not call its possessor theirs. We do not wonder that people resort to all devices and expedients to preserve and cultivate it, and that the aid of costly clothing, paints, and cosmetics are invoked to conjure up its semblance and prolong its spells (325).

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This description of 'personal beauty' is not unfamiliar: it reflects on the value of beauty as a commodity, to be exhibited, enjoyed and if at all possible copied, bought and preserved in painting for repeated gratification.[1] Yet, Clarke seems a little uneasy with this discussion of beauty as part of real, physical experience, perhaps because of a desire to see beyond the attractions of external form to the inner self. Against the grain of this apparent fascination with beauty, then, he maintains the attractions of physical beauty ought to be linked to the state of mind and ultimately soul. Devoting two long sections to the task of 'How to Be Beautiful' and 'How Not to Be Beautiful', he explores the connection between beauty and morality, readily acknowledging that—confronted with 'a beautiful person—mankind has always gone down on its knees before it as the shrine of a god' because 'to be beautiful is one of the spontaneous ambitions of the human heart' (325). It is more than this, though, as there is a moral imperative bound up with being beautiful, which means we must 'try to be beautiful'. This appeal to a sense of duty introduces a notion of virtue into the discussion and represents an attempt to balance an interest in real bodies with an understanding of ideal forms; it legitimates a form of aspiration—the desire to be beautiful—through which actual identifications of beauty can be recognized in terms of abstract conceptualizations of the beautiful. For, as Clarke reminds us, our appreciation of beauty and the beautiful is an intellectual activity that is enhanced through learning: 'it [beauty] realizes our ideal and wins the admiration of all cultured minds' (327).

Though beauty is not aligned explicitly with femininity, it is clear that Clarke's discussion of beauty and the beautiful is gendered, for it assumes a sexual division of labour that privileges the (masculine) act of looking over the (feminine) condition of being looked at.[2] As the above quotation reveals, beauty motivates us towards possession—the possession of a beautiful object, the possession of a beautiful person, real or imagined—while at the same time offering a route to goodness and virtue; however, Clarke writes as if men are (always) the possessors and women the possessed. Central to this discussion of beauty is the suggestion that to experience beauty, in the flesh as it were, is both pleasurable and dangerous; hence the duty to be beautiful designated by Clarke is intended to acknowledge the pleasure while removing the danger because (and only because) it works in a moral context. But what is gained by being beautiful? How can the aspiration 'to be beautiful' actually be fulfilled? Is it accessible to all or is it reserved for either man or woman? If the suggestion is that to aspire 'to be beautiful' is to participate in a discursive economy in which beauty is aligned directly with morality, then the aspiration towards beauty represents a desire to be good. But, as we have seen, there is another alternative. If there is a danger implicit in the appreciation of beauty then

1 For a detailed account of the cultural context for this sort of commodified looking, see Pointon 1997.

2 The importance of gender to scientific debates has, of course, received much attention in the last twenty or so years with debate focused on the conceptualization of gender distinctions. Works in this tradition are by now too numerous and well known to be cited; those with a particular relevance to this essay include Jordanova 1989, 1999; Keller 1985; and Schiebinger 1989.

the invocation 'to be beautiful' seems to be intended to act regulatively as a means of curbing the pleasures of beauty and promoting its goodness. In both cases, the movement tends towards the absorption and transformation of beauty into goodness.

Elaine Scarry reflects on the ramifications of this complex relationship between beauty and goodness in a recent book, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999). She argues that the humanities have tended to reject the claims of beauty in the last twenty years or so, mainly on the grounds that it obfuscates political responsibility, favouring instead a critique of the sublime in all its majesty. Against this trend, she presents a defence of the beautiful and our responses to beauty as fundamental to our understanding of justice. 'Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness or (in the case of objects) quasi-aliveness of our world, and for entering into its protection', she explains:

> Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver. As the beautiful being confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life. Each 'welcomes' the other: each—to return to the word's original meaning—'comes in accordance with [the] other's will' (90).

By restoring beauty to a central place in our discussion of the individual and society, Scarry advocates the intrinsic virtue of beauty and stresses the democratizing gesture associated with it. She claims beauty precedes and forms the ground for justice in so far as it relies on reification, making concrete an abstract concept and so enabling a move from the idea of beauty to the appreciation of the beautiful. It is this move, Scarry says, that takes the focus of the individual from themselves and on to other individuals in the world, and so prepares for a recognition of 'ethical fairness'. And, she maintains, there are three sites where beauty offers an invitation to this 'ethical fairness': that of the beautiful object, that which involves the beholding of the object, and finally that which produces the 'creative act' of response to the beautiful object (95). There are problems with this argument, especially with its assumption of the equality of our relations in the presence of beauty; but, interestingly, Scarry moves away from the association of beauty with the objectification of women, and offers instead an account of beauty as a form of social contract. The claim is that, as a contract, beauty literalizes the relation of perceiver to perceived and so reveals the symmetry fundamental to its form. The weakness of this account is that it avoids the introduction of a sense of history or politics, not as monolithic structures—the very thing Scarry rejects (and quite rightly so)—but as a vital means of understanding the changing conceptualizations of beauty from one complex historical period to another.

I do not want to suggest that the idea of beauty is a special or privileged discourse in the nineteenth century. Nor do I want to suggest that beauty is used to smooth over questions of responsibility, aesthetic or otherwise. An analysis of beauty that is derived from the connection between appearance and character (as emblems of body and mind, respectively) deems physicality the index of mental and sometimes, but not always, moral development. What I do want to suggest, then, is that the particular alignment of beauty and science in mid-nineteenth-century Britain draws on biological narratives of improvement in order to sustain a vision of the stability of the social order. One of the obvious sources for these narratives is physiognomy, the practice of seeing emotional expressions as signs of character and mind;[3] the belief in the connection between body and mind is, actually, supported and sustained by physiognomical teachings, revised at the end of the eighteenth century in the writings of Johann Caspar Lavater and popularized throughout the nineteenth century as a science of man.[4] What interests me here is the persistence of appeals made to science in order to explain beauty. As Robyn Cooper has suggested, 'the "speaking" of women and beauty is multivocal and conflictual and the subject is . . . complicated . . . because of the connection of the female body with the emotions of love and the sensations of desire' (Cooper 1993:35). Yet, physiognomy legitimates this speaking of woman and beauty in so far as it provides a means of classifying human nature from physical attributes and characteristics.[5]

By seeing physical appearance, and especially beauty, as an index of mental and moral development, nineteenth-century writers like Clarke and Alexander Walker and Herbert Spencer were sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly drawing on the physiognomical tradition. I have chosen these figures to illustrate my points because their discussions reveal the problems involved in conceptualizing beauty as symmetry and proportion. A little-known figure today, Walker was a middle-class radical and Lamarckian, the product of the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, who trained as a physiologist and published a series of books on beauty and femininity; notable amongst these works is an early treatise on physiognomy that applies his physiological understanding to Lavaterian principles. Spencer, on the other hand, is a well-known figure, supporter of the Darwinian theory of evolution by means of natural selection and staunch advocate of its relevance to social progress and reform. Whether in the hands of moralists like Clarke and to a lesser extent Walker, or materialists like Spencer, the attempt to explain beauty in scientific terms makes manifest a universalizing gesture that is highly deterministic. The accounts of beauty offered by Walker and Spencer share a belief in beauty as a representation of proportion, most often embodied in the fitness of the female body, and at the same time express the impossibility of maintaining

3 See Hartley 2001 for a detailed account of the impact of physiognomy in the period. I argue that what emerges in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a psychological account of human character and behaviour—a science of the mind—is both the long-term outcome of physiognomical teachings and the reason for their dissolution.

4 Published in German in the 1780s and then in French, the first English publication of Lavater's work was a five-volume edition, *Essays on Physiognomy; Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Henry Hunter, 5 vols, London, 1789, and this was followed by Thomas Holcroft's three-volume edition, Lavater 1789–93. There were several other editions published in the 1790s, most notably by Samuel Shaw, C. Moore and George Grenville, but it was Holcroft's edition that was reissued more than eighteen times over the succeeding eighty years.

5 Much has been written on the application of physiognomic ideas to the novel, especially in depicting the character and emotions of female heroines. See, for instance, Fahnestock 1981, Porter 1985 and Price 1983.

proportionate sexual relations. It is this contradiction that I shall explore in the rest of the essay.

Lavater's Physiognomical Teachings

Physiognomy has had a long and chequered history—disparaged as a mystical and highly deterministic practice and lauded as a source of information about nature and man—from the classical tradition of Aristotle to Giovanni Battista della Porta and Charles Le Brun in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Johann Caspar Lavater, Charles Bell and Charles Darwin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[6] Lavater's monumental work on the subject, *Essays on Physiognomy*(1789–93), is a collection of observations and aphorisms that, he claims, contribute to our understanding of man and mind, helped by the inclusion of an eclectic array of illustrations, and silhouettes of the character of famous individuals.[7] He took his remarks, on expression in particular, as a means of revealing the essences proper to man: he believed, for instance, that a description of human nature involved an explanation of the properties or essence of mind and character and, so, his account of the nature of man provided patterns for understanding the unity and order of the physical world based on the activity of the mind. A definition from the fourth edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1810) spells this out. Physiognomy, it says,

> is a word formed from the Greek for nature, and I know', and it means 'the knowledge of the internal properties of any corporeal existence from the external appearances. [Physiognomists] . . . among physicians, denote such signs as, being taken from the countenance, serve to indicate the state, disposition, &c. both of the body and mind: and hence the art of reducing these signs to practice is termed physiognomy (xvi.439).

At the heart of Lavater's physiognomical system was a description of the natural kinds (or types) of existence that were inherent in the organic world. 'To know—to desire—to act—Or accurately to observe and meditate—To perceive and to wish—To possess the power of motion and of resistance—These combined, constitute man an animal, intellectual, and moral being' (Lavater 1789–93:i.10–11). Though these three kinds could be taken as illustrations of different types of human beings, each had a distinctive character that, in theory at least, was applicable to animals: first, animal life, localized in the belly and including the organs of reproduction; second, moral life, focused on the breast with the heart as its focal point; and, finally, intellectual life, located in the head with the eye as its locus. The face was exemplary of these three classes of life, Lavater claimed, as the countenance depicted an individual's character writ large: and so the mouth and the chin

6 One of the earliest philosophical treatises on physiognomy is a work thought to be written by Aristotle, entitled *Physiognomics*. For a full account of the classical tradition of physiognomy, see Evans 1969.

7 The literature on Lavater's famous work is extensive but it is worth looking in particular at John Graham's work on the subject; see for instance, Graham 1961, 1966, 1979. Following Graham, studies of physiognomy have tended to stress the literary applications of physiognomic principles, especially in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel; see Allentuck 1967, Rivers 1994, Shookman 1993, Shortland 1985, Tytler 1982, and Weschler 1982.

represented animal life; the nose and cheeks stood for moral life; and the forehead to the eyebrows embodied intellectual life. These classifications mark out a hierarchy of description that links animality to the reproductive function as the lowest order of description, morality to the motions of the heart as the middle order of description, and the intellect to the head as the highest order of description. To discuss highness and lowness in this form, effectively as localized physical attributes, is significant as it suggests a stepped or punctuated explanation of the development of creatures through a series of gradations that make manifest the difference between insect and man.

From this a scheme of the physiognomical relation of the sexes can be constructed that associates woman with the lower and middle orders of description and man with the middle and higher orders.

Man is the most firm—woman the most flexible.
Man is the straightest—woman the most bending.
Man stands steadfast—woman gently trips.
Man surveys and observes—woman glances and feels.
Man is serious—woman is gay.
Man is the tallest and broadest—woman less and taper.
Man is rough and hard—woman smooth and soft.
Man is brown—woman is fair.
Man is wrinkly—woman less so.
The hair of man is more strong and short—of woman more long and pliant.
The eyebrows of man are compressed—of woman less frowning.
Man has most convex lines—woman most concave.
Man has most straight lines—woman most curved.
The countenance of man, taken in profile, is more seldom perpendicular than that of the woman.
Man is most angular—woman most round (Lavater 1855:403).

It is an incredible list of characteristics as it sketches out a literal and physical map of the disproportionate relations of the sexes. As a result, definitions of masculinity and femininity as well as classifications of man and woman can be formulated. In the examples that follow, it will become clear that this understanding of the relations of the sexes underwrites Alexander Walker's treatise *Beauty* (1837) and Herbert Spencer's essay 'Personal Beauty' (1854), and is used to serve scientific and social purposes rather than aesthetic ones.

Walker's Explanation of Beauty

In the advertisement to his book, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (1837), Walker advocated the universal appeal of a critique of beauty in woman and also the apparent absence of

such an account in nineteenth-century writing.[8] 'There is', he states, 'no subject more universally or more deeply interesting than that which is the chief subject of the present work. Yet no book, even pretending to science or accuracy, has hitherto appeared upon it, [and] not one has been devoted to woman', he adds, 'on whose physical and moral qualities the happiness of individuals and the perpetual improvement of the human race are dependent' (Walker 1837:vii). His account of beauty combines 'ideas of goodness, of suitableness, of sympathy, of progressive perfection, and of mutual happiness' in order to provide a moral backdrop to the correspondence between mental (psychical) and physical.[9] On the one hand, we are offered an analysis of beauty as an external object and, on the other, as a state of mind with an associated state of feeling. What the advertisement and indeed the book suggest is that the application of the scientific disciplines of anatomy and physiology to the female physique provides an opportunity to refine our rational understanding and aesthetic judgement of the beautiful. As a result, the 'mystical and delusive' character of female beauty will, we are promised, be replaced with an account that will 'unravel the greater difficulties which that subject presents' (viii–ix) and show beauty as 'the external sign of goodness in organization and function' (xiv). The book is, Walker subsequently says, an explanation of 'the laws regulating beauty in woman, and taste respecting it in man' (148).

Actually, Walker sought to stabilize beauty by reifying it, marking out a 'new view of the theory of beauty' by reconfiguring 'woman' at the centre of the discussion. 'In this work', he explained,

> it is the form of woman which is chosen for examination, because it will be found . . . to involve knowledge of the form of man, because it is best calculated to ensure attention from men, and because it is men who, exercising selection, have alone the ability thus to ensure individual happiness and to ameliorate the species, which are the objects of this book (Walker 1837:12–13).

A few points are important here. In the first place the originality of Walker's thesis seems to lie in his understanding of the relations of the sexes in a manner strikingly similar to Lavater's physical map. In the second these sexual relations appear to be determined by an instinct to survive that is primary in man. And in the third this survival instinct in man can lead to the progress of the human race. Placed within a frame of reference that always refers to man, the purpose of woman is to enable and support the advancement of man while providing a little pleasure along the way, for woman has a physical appearance that brings with it the possibility of corruption, according to Walker. 'Be it known', he cautions, 'that the critical judgement and pure taste for beauty are the sole protection against low and degrading connexions' (20). And later he added: 'our vague

8 Walker published this work as part of a trilogy on beauty, women and marriage; see Walker 1838, 1839.

9 This notion is developed in Walker 1834, an earlier work on physiognomy.

perceptions . . . and our vague expressions respecting beauty will be found to be, in a great measure, owing to the inaccuracy of our mode of examining it, and, in some measure, to the imperfect nomenclature which we possess for describing it' (147).

True to Walker's primitive developmental thesis, there are three kinds of beauty—locomotive, vital and mental—that are derived from three classes of human organs—levers, cylindrical tubes and nervous particles. In sum, locomotive beauty is represented by levers and located in the limbs; vital beauty is represented by tubes and located in the stomach; and mental beauty is represented by the nerves and located in the face and head. These three kinds illustrate the richness of the descriptions drawn from the alignment of character and appearance:

> It is evidently the locomotive or mechanical system whose figure is precise, striking, and brilliant. It is evidently the nutritive or vital system which is highly developed in the beauty whose figure is soft and voluptuous. It is not less evidently the thinking or mental system which is highly developed in the beauty whose figure is characterized by intellectuality and grace (161).

Important and hierarchical levels of explanation can be glimpsed in this schematization of beauty: the third and lowest order is the locomotive or physical, classified as mechanical and characterized by the limbs; the second order is the nutritive, classified as vital and characterized by the stomach; and the first (and highest) order is the thinking, classified as mental and characterized by the face and head. Perhaps it is not surprising, given his earlier comments, that the common type is vital beauty, that is a beauty located in the stomach region and described characteristically as 'soft and voluptuous'. Vital beauty signals the reproductive capacity of woman, answering the question of what woman is for in terms of the growth and propagation of the species; it is, importantly, a beauty that is properly fitting to woman as type: 'the vital system . . . is, and ought to be, most developed in woman'. The notion of superior physical appearance as the expression of superior mental development seems to work in different ways here: on the one hand, it indicates the difference between animals and humans and, on the other, it identifies the feminine limit of such a correspondence. So, whereas Walker's ideal form of beauty is the thinking kind, classified as mental and characterized by the face and head, he is clear that the real form of beauty is the nourishing kind, classified as physical and characterized by the stomach.

Walker seems to be rehearsing an argument similar to that presented later by Clarke. That is to say, beauty operates on two levels as a real quality and an ideal form: the ideal affirms the natural connection between external appearance and internal character and signals the highest development of human nature, whereas the real presents a challenge because it can only ever

be seen in relation to the ideal as the provider of physical pleasure without any guarantee of elevating mind or man. Clarke's and Walker's descriptions of beauty suggest strongly that the relationship between the real and the ideal stands for the relation of the sexes in which man is figured as an elevating force (characterized as mental), and woman as a pleasurable one (characterized as physical). Herbert Spencer develops this position but, unlike Clarke and Walker, his discussion focuses on real not ideal beauty. He asks what purpose beauty serves in society in an early essay on the topic, and he claims the answer lies with the fitness and proportion of physical attributes.

The Spencerian Theory of Beauty

In his essay 'Personal Beauty' (1854), Spencer offers an illustration of the natural congruity between 'beauty of character and beauty of aspect' (1854a:356). Headed by a quotation from Goethe—'We should do our utmost to encourage the Beautiful, for the Useful encourages itself'—Spencer defends the claim of a connection between ugliness and stupidity on the one hand, and beauty and intelligence on the other. We know such an organic connection exists, he explains in a lengthy passage, because its development can be traced in the physical features of the face:

> It will be admitted that the projecting jaw, characteristic of negroes and, indeed, of all the human races, is a defect in a face—is a trait no sculptor would give to an ideal bust. At the same time it is an ascertained fact that prominence of jaw is associated in the mammalia generally with comparative lack of intelligence . . . In conformity with the great physiological law that organs develope [*sic*] in proportion as they are exercised, the jaws must be relatively large where the demands made upon them are great, and will diminish in size as their functions become less numerous and less onerous. Now, in all the lower classes of animals the jaws are the sole organs of manipulation—are used not only for mastication, but for seizing, carrying, gnawing, and, indeed, for everything save locomotion, which is the solitary office performed by the limbs. Advancing upwards, we find that the limbs, and more particularly the forelimbs, begin to aid the jaws and gradually to relieve them of part of their duties . . . The increased complexity of the limbs, the greater variety of actions they perform, and the more numerous perceptions they give, are necessarily associated with a greater development of the brain and of its bony envelope. At the same time, the size of the jaws has diminished in correspondence with the diminution of their functions. And by this simultaneous protrusion of the upper part of the cranium

> and recession of its lower part, what is called the facial angle has increased (1854a:356).

His claim—that the process of sexual selection deemed a 'good physique' more important to a woman than her 'moral and intellectual beauties'—was driven by a sense of women's peculiar place in nature (1904:i.478). Spencer firmly held the opinion that the physical laws of development did not necessarily correspond to the moral laws, which were responsible for regulating the life of an individual; any cultivation of the mind at the expense of body would, he said, be detrimental to the position of woman in the natural order. While in some cases 'plainness may coexist with nobility of nature', the process of induction led Spencer to claim that 'mental and facial perfection are fundamentally connected, and will, when the present causes of incongruity have worked themselves out, be ever found united' (1854b:452).

This assertion of a direct relationship between the features of the face and the faculty of mind is, as I have suggested, a re-assertion of the meanings of expression embodied in the physiognomic tradition. But Spencer's obsession in this essay is how to explain the development of mind when the fitness of aspect in proportion to character is not self-evident. To address this, he compares first human babies to those of animals and then moves on to consider the existence of ugliness in what he terms the 'inferior races':

> If the recession of the forehead, protuberance of the jaws, and largeness of the cheekbones, three leading elements of ugliness, are demonstrably indicative of mental inferiority—if such other facial defects as great width between the eyes, flatness of the nose, spreading of the alae, frontward opening of the nostrils, length of the mouth, and largeness of the lips, are habitually associated with these, and disappear along with them as intelligence increases, both in the race and in the individual, is it not a fair inference that all such faulty trials of feature signify deficiencies of mind? (1854a:357.)

It is well known that Spencer's interest in character and mind was motivated by social concerns such as the origins of morality, the construction of educational programmes and theories of progress.[10] The progressive model of intellectual growth alluded to by Spencer in these sentences could, therefore, be mapped quite literally through the size, shape and features of the face. Sander Gilman has discussed the ways in which conceptions of the ugly ('diseased') and the beautiful ('healthy') sustain social orders through biological narratives. The ugly, Gilman claims, is 'anti-erotic rather than merely unaesthetic. It is denied the ability to reproduce' (Gilman 1995:92). Hence, Spencer's belief in the 'organic relationship between that protuberance of jaws which we consider ugly, and a certain inferiority of nature' drew out a strong sense of the intellectual disparity between men and women. Of

10 The literature is extensive but see in particular Bowler 1975, Burrow 1966 and Richards 1987.

course, in the context of natural and sexual selection, notions of good looks and mental capacity were inextricably linked to the fitness of women to reproduce. According to Spencer, this sexual division was inevitable given the reproductive functions of woman for, as Nancy Paxton has observed, 'woman's most important contribution to the evolution of the race was a healthy "physique", which her education could cultivate, while man's contribution was a fully developed brain which his schooling, likewise, should foster' (1991:333).

The importance of assuming a fit between aspect and character is perfectly illustrated in a subsequent passage that introduces the second part of 'Personal Beauty'. Using the familiar analogy of the face as a book, Spencer considers at length the reasons why there might, on occasions, be an absence of fit between aspect and character.

> Imagine a book of which the first page when analysed turned out to contain a mixture of the description of *two objects nearly allied but not so identical*, expressed in ways almost alike but not quite so. Imagine that in one part of the page the sentences of the two descriptions come alternately; that in another, half-sentences from each were united into one sentence, so as to make but obscure sense; and that in some case the interchange occurred several times in the same sentence. It is clear that though you might very well recognise the nature of the things treated of, no definite conception would be conveyed to you.
>
> Suppose further that on reading over several pages you found each of them to contain somewhat similar pairs of descriptions somewhat similarly mixed—the objects described being always akin to the first and to each other, and the manner of combining the descriptions having more or less resemblance. Possibly on comparing them you might gain some insight into the principle of arrangement, and so get a glimmering of the specific interpretation.
>
> But now suppose that as you advanced you found *the objects treated of on the same page were in many cases more widely divergent*, and the *intermixture of the descriptions* less similar in method to foregoing one—that beside this you by-and-by came upon pages containing a union not of two descriptions—and that by the time you reached the middle of the book this *jumbling of descriptions* had produced a *high degree of complexity* both in respect of the number combined and the modes of combination. What would be the result? Manifestly you would abandon all efforts at interpretation, and would doubt whether there was any meaning to be discovered. However really systematic the structure of each page, and however comprehensible to one having the clue, yet in the absence of a clue the contradictions, the inconsistencies, the mystifications would be

> so numerous as to suggest the suspicion that the book was an elaborate hoax (Spencer 1854b:451, my emphases).

The subject-matter of these pages, Spencer explains, symbolizes character while the description is typical of features. Then the fun starts. The 'two objects nearly allied but not so identical' exemplify two races of man, united through joint offspring; second, 'more widely divergent objects' and 'intermixture of descriptions' represent the faces produced by the intermarriage of strongly contrasted races; and third, the pages with the 'high degree of complexity' and a 'jumbling of descriptions' stand for the faces of most people that develop from the repeated mixture of mixed races.[11]

If we take the time to consider the example of sheep breeding, Spencer goes on to say, we will learn the basic truth of breeding, namely, that crossing a pure breed with an impure one will produce a pure breed with a mixed constitution:

> An unmixed constitution is one in which all the organs having for innumerable generations worked together, are in exact fitness, are perfectly balanced; and the system as a whole is in perfect equilibrium. A mixed constitution, on the contrary, being made up of organs belonging to two separate sets cannot have them in exact fitness, cannot have them perfectly balanced; and a system in comparatively unstable equilibrium must result. But in proportion to the stability of the equilibrium will be the power to resist disturbing forces. Hence when two constitutions in stable and unstable equilibrium respectively, become disturbing forces to each other, the unstable one will be overthrown and the stable one will assert itself unchanged (1854b:451).

The proposition is that the lack of fitness between aspect and character intimates an individual of mixed race, and Spencer suggests that the essential instability of this kind of mixed constitution will not ultimately survive in the midst of perfectly balanced individuals with pure constitutions. This belief in the fundamental importance of the link between external form and internal structure was later extended in his *Principles of Psychology* (1855) as the law of mental progress or intelligence. From the simplest organism in its environment to the distinction of individuals into more complex species via intelligence, Spencer believed the development of mental life involved a gradual movement from reflex action to instinct, memory, reason and will: 'the evolution of life is an advance in the Speciality of the correspondence between internal and external relations' (1855:423). His synthesis depended, in fact, on a number of assumptions: the similarity of life and mind; the equivalence of mental actions, distinguished merely by the complexity of internal to external relations; and the need for organisms to adapt to an

11 The study of race and ethnicity has become an important academic subject during the last two decades and, as with studies of gender representation, particular attention has been paid to its conceptualization in science and medicine. This work is familiar too many but, for a summary of the historical issues, see Harris and Ernst 1999, and Stepan 1982.

environment that changed frequently through the modification of their internal organization to external factors.

It is the very unpredictability of beauty that seems to have fascinated and perplexed writers like Walker and Spencer who sought to integrate discussions of beauty and the beautiful into scientific debates about human nature. Their writings set out to assign categories to the thing that we call beauty—almost invariably seen as Woman—and so provide a means of linking conceptions of beauty to the moral and mental development of the human race. Terms such as fitness, proportion and purity abound in these discussions and are invariably embodied in Woman, the means of maintaining the social order via the reproductive function. But the great contradiction is, of course, that Woman stands for proportion but women are unable to experience it in their sexual relations. For Spencer, the survival of the species is seen as dependent on the selection of its healthiest and most agreeable types: that is to say, those beneficial to the betterment of man. Thus, mind was the product of organic development rather than a unique gift bestowed by the creator, and though life and mind evolved alongside each other the difference in response between inner and outer relations meant that the nervous system and eventually a distinctive form of life, namely intelligence, were produced, a characteristic more pronounced in men than women.[12] His ideas on beauty and the progress of the human race affirm the importance of physiognomy in describing human nature and character and also reformulate its future in terms of evolutionary thought. Whereas Clarke and Walker struggle to explain the purpose of real, physical beauty as anything other than a means of aspiration, with a pronounced moral purpose, Spencer takes beauty as a sign of fitness, proportion and stability: three attributes that attest to the purity of an individual's constitution and ultimately their capacity to survive. The anxiety expressed by Clarke and Walker with regard to the place of beauty in society is replaced, therefore, by Spencer's assertion that beauty makes manifest a correspondence between appearance and character that, if preserved, assures the stability of the human race and so maintains the social contract. The problem is this notion of beauty is double-edged: it represents the proportion of form on the one hand, as Scarry argues, but is unable to uphold a perfect symmetry in its relations on the other. So, while the purity of the correspondence between appearance and character determined the fitness of an individual to reproduce, it was also, and not incidentally, the cause of many inconsistencies in explaining the alignment of Woman and beauty.

12 The scope and rationale of these ideas are examined in Greene 1959 and Young 1971.

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