Literature Compass 2 (2005) RO 131, 1–4

# Face to Face with Johann Caspar Lavater

Sibylle Erle
*Nottingham Trent University*

Abstract

At the end of the eighteenth century, Europe-wide debates on the nature of man and the practice of interpreting visual artefacts centred on physiognomy, and specifically on one extraordinary, luxuriously illustrated work which claimed to map out how character could precisely be read in the human face: Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

A monolithic figure of European Romanticism, Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) was someone whose influence cannot be overestimated. A Zurich-born pastor and prolific theological writer, Lavater sympathised with the *Sturm und Drang* movement and corresponded with Europe's leading thinkers. His physiognomical interpretations of single images influenced considerably the use of character and development of inner life in the eighteenth-century novel. Deidre Lynch in *The Economy of Character* (1998) has emphasised that the approaches to character-embodiment and versions of character-readings indicate that "individuated, psychological meanings did not come naturally to British writers and readers in the long eighteenth century."[1] Studies of Lavater and physiognomy have concentrated mostly on how character portraiture is sustained by physical description. Lavater's importance for the use of literary character and the development of inner life in the eighteenth-century novel, for example, is discussed by Graeme Tytler's in *Physiognomy in the European Novel* (1982). Ellis Shookman's collection of essays, *The Faces of Physiognomy* (1993), re-examines these issues both within their historical contexts and in relation to their reception histories, while assessing Lavater's celebrity status as well as the complexity of applications and critiques of his physiognomical doctrines. Another equally important interdisciplinary publication is Karl Pestalozzi and Horst Weigelt's *Das Antlitz Gottes im Antlitz des Menschen* (1994). Melissa Percival and Graeme Tytler's collection of essays, *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater's Impact on European Culture* (forthcoming, 2005), deals with the variety of adaptations of Lavater's physiognomy and continues the interdisciplinary discussion of the shape of body-soul relations in European Literature.

Lavater's works range from religious or moral to educational and philosophical tracts, the most famous being *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit*

(1768–1773, 1778) and the self-exploratory *Geheimes Tagebuch* (1771, 1773) [translated into English, 1795]. Lavater's lifework was *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1774–78), which was revised, abridged, edited, pirated and translated into Dutch, French and English within twenty years of its first appearance. He not only believed that physiognomy could develop into a science, he is now accepted as the figure-head of the late eighteenth-century launch of physiognomy as a pseudo-science. His greatest legacy, though, is not in art or theology as Lavater himself might have expected, but in literature.

Lavater's work on physiognomy was recognisably an Enlightenment project of taxonomy. His science of character was readily received by the public at large but was also criticised, ridiculed and parodied from the outset by, for example, Johann Christian Hendel's *Zufällige Gedanken über Herrn Lavaters physiognomische Fragmente* (1776) and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's *Fragment von Schwänzen* (1783). In England, various editions of *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789, 1789–98) – both authorised and pirated[2] – were published on the fringe of the upheaval of ideas brought about by the French Revolution. Even though Lavater's approach was widely discredited in Germany, the idea that character could be based on physical appearance found particular resonance in Britain.

The revival of the ancient art of face reading fitted in neatly with debates on natural and cultural identity as well as the developments in British portraiture and history painting, especially in 1790s exhibition-publication ventures, such as John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery, Thomas Macklin's Gallery of the Poets, and Robert Bowyer's Historic Gallery. *Essays on Physiognomy* had great aesthetic appeal to both specialists and amateurs alike. Its many engraved portraits sought to codify what was beautiful, ugly, wise or foolish in facial expression. Lavater's book is full of advice for portrait painters. Great art, for Lavater, consisted of a concord between moral and physical beauty. This kind of emphasis on the types of character was also put forward by Alexander Cozens in *Principles of Beauty* (1778) and echoed in Sir Joshua Reynolds's lectures at the newly founded Royal Academy where he set out 'authentic' form-character relations.

*Essays on Physiognomy* was on the cusp of the cultural shift from Enlightenment to Romanticism. To make his character-readings more objective Lavater decided to ground them in late eighteenth-century anatomy. Bone shapes, according to Lavater, explained the relationship between outer form and inner character.[3] Starting off from an Enlightenment position, Lavater wanted to assemble an encyclopaedia of the human face. His ambition was to improve the understanding of mankind, a credo formulated as the work's subtitle. However, Lavater's allegedly objective and scientific approach to the variations of the human form in fact hinged upon intuition: "By Physiognomical Discernment we mean – the sensation and the conjectures which certain Physiognomies produce, from which we form a judgement of the moral character which they announce,

 

of the interior of the Man whose face or portrait we examine."[4] His categorisation of the human face was unmistakably tinged with theological preconception and belief in predestination. The sometimes rather alienating rhetoric is nothing but directive and moralistic preaching.

Lavater's physiognomical readings are spontaneous, emotional outpourings as well as reiterations of long-lived social and racial stereotypes, readings dressed up in pseudo-scientific jargon – then as now a technique guaranteed to give even the most crackpot notions a veneer of respectability. What makes the production of *Essays on Physiognomy* so fascinating is that Lavater is not just the author of the project but also its principal subject.[5] *Essays on Physiognomy* can be seen as a work in progress: while Lavater was moving towards perfection as a physiognomist, the project neared completion. In reality, he published a few small books with physiognomical rules, while trying to see the project through its many translations, none of which were straightforward or a financial success. Further, he could never bring himself to write a conclusion. The close readings in *Essays on Physiognomy* have a tendency towards projection. Lavater gives judgements without explaining them and intersperses his analyses with comments on technical difficulty and imprecision, as well as responses on aesthetics, ethics and biography. Not only is the premise of Lavater's research project incompatible with rational enquiry, it is impossible to learn to read faces in Lavaterian style. Nevertheless, the countless images, the huge physiognomical collection and especially Lavater's tireless efforts at interpreting the human face bear witness to his extremely passionate struggle with representation and bodily semiotics. What we are left with is a documentation of extraordinary sensitivity as well as self-obsession and self-display.

## *Notes*

[1] D. S. Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 9.
[2] M. L. Johnson, 'Blake's Engravings for Lavater's *Physiognomy*: Overdue Credit to Chodowiecki, Schellenberg, Lips', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 38(2) (2004), pp. 52–54.
[3] J. C. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 3 vols. (1789–98), vol. 2, pp. 145–149.
[4] Lavater, *Essays*, vol. 1, p. 93.
[5] J. K. Stemmler, 'The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater', *The Art Bulletin* 75(1) (1993), pp. 151–168.

## *Bibliography*

Benedict, B. M., 'Reading Faces: Physiognomy and Epistemology in Late Eighteenth-Century Sentimental Novels', *Studies in Philology* 92(3) (1995), pp. 311–328.

Berland, K. J. H., 'Reading character in the face: Lavater, Socrates, and physiognomy', *Word & Image* 9(3) (1993), pp. 252–269.

Gombrich, E. H., 'The Mask and the Face: The Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and Art', in *Art, Perception, and Reality*, ed. E. H. Gombrich, J. Hochberg, and M. Black (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977).

 

Graham, J., *Lavater's Essays on Physiognomy: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Berne, Frankfurt am Main, Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1979).

Johnson, M. L., 'Blake's Engravings for Lavater's *Physiognomy*: Overdue Credit to Chodowiecki, Schellenberg, and Lips', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 38(2) (2004), pp. 52–74.

Kleisner, F., *Körper und Seele bei Georg Christoph Lichtenberg* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998).

Lavater, J. C., *Essays on Physiognomy*, 3 vols. (1789, 1789–98).

Lynch, D. S., *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Mraz, G. and U. Schlögl, eds., *Das Kunstkabinett des Johann Caspar Lavater* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag Ges.m.b.H. & Co. KG., 1999).

Percival, M., *The Appearance of Character: Physiognomy and Facial Expression in Eighteenth-Century France*, Modern Humanities Research Association, vol. 47 (London: W. S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1999).

Percival, M. and G. Tytler, *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater's Impact on European Culture* (Delaware Press, forthcoming 2005).

Pestalozzi, K., 'Lavaters Utopie', in *Literaturwissenschaft und Geschichtsphilosophie: Festschrift für Wilhelm Emrich*, ed. H. Arntzen, *et al.* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975), pp. 283–301.

Porter, R., 'Making Faces: Physiognomy and Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England', *Études Anglaises* 38(4) (1985), pp. 385–96.

Shookman, E., 'Wissenschaft, Mode, Wunder: Über die Popularität von Lavater's Physiognomik', in *Das Antlitz Gottes im Antlitz des Menschen: Zugänge zu Johann Caspar Lavater*, ed. K. Pestalozzi and H. Weigelt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1994), pp. 245–253.

Shortland, M., 'The Power of a Thousand Eyes: Johann Caspar Lavater's Science of Physiognomical Perception', *Criticism* 28(4) (1986), pp. 379–408.

Stemmler, J. K., 'The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater', *The Art Bulletin* 75(1) (1993), pp. 151–168.

Tscherny, N., 'Likeness in Early Romantic Portraiture', *Art Journal* 46(1) (1987), pp. 193–200.

Tytler, G., *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

 