

“Lavater's Semiotics of the Face”  
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One does not need to go far into a daily newspaper to find discussion of human behavior read from signs of the body. Since deciding to talk on Lavater's semiotics of the face about a year ago, I have kept a folder of such accounts carried by the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, mostly looking beyond daily episodes such as those recorded in the column by Ann Landers. Without reference to the tradition in non-verbal communication, Daniel Goleman's reported for the *New York Times* (November 15, 1993) that researchers at the University of California have found "18 kinds of grin, from a happy face to grimace," of which only one "can activate the centers in the brain that can regulate pleasant feelings" (p. 1 E). In another originally written for *The Guardian* (February 2, 1994), Robin Skynner reported how a doctor in England was struck "by the passivity of fathers in those families where the children were referred for behavior disorders" (p. 12A). And looking to the natural sciences, Natalie Angler reported for the *New York Times* (February 9, 1994), that "biologists say studies of species as diverse as birds and elk suggest creatures may appraise the overall worthiness of a potential mate by looking for symmetry," not for "whimsical esthetic reasons," rather for signals of the general health of immune systems and for the ability of genes to withstand "the tribulations of the environment."

A search through the databases of literature, psychology, and biology confirms not only public but also academic interest in the topic, in many cases noting Lavater's ancestry. But where does he fit into the question of role modelling and social behavior? One might say his whole

career does, beginning with his first significant publication on the *Prospects of Eternity* (*Aussichten in die Ewigkeit*, 1768-73),<sup>1</sup> a work inspired by the early death of a friend and written in the form of letters. Here he speculated about the immortality of the soul, accepting it as a natural course of events and focusing on the possibilities of "the constitution of heavenly life" (*die Beschaffenheit des himmlischen Lebens*, 1, 24-25). His approach was to extrapolate the ideal from the real, to observe the present condition of nature and culture and then by analogy to speculate on the pure forms of each in heaven. The entire work was an exercise in bridging the transition between the real events of ordinary life and the ideal purposes of human civilization.<sup>2</sup>

In the sixteenth letter of this early work, he examined the language of heaven which he thought would be free of the arbitrary signs common to human communication. For that realm he projected "a general language" (*eine allgemeine Sprache*, 3, 102), a language "physiognomic" (*physionomisch*), "pantomimic" (*pantomimisch*), and "musical" (*musicalisch*, 3, 108): "I begin with the physiognomic. Just as Christ is the most expressive, vivid, and complete image of the invisible God, an image, in which everything is expression, everything has unfathomable and infinite meaning, . . . so, too, is every human being (the image of God and Christ) totally expression, expression that is instantaneous, truthful, comprehensive, inexhaustible, with no words attainable and inimitable; the human being is a language completely natural."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit, in Briefen an Herrn Joh. Georg Zimmermann, Königl. Großbritannischen Leibarzt in Hannover*, 3 vols. (Zurich: Orell, Geßner, Füeßlin und Comp., 1768-73), wrote the work in the form of twenty-five letters to his friend, Johann G. Zimmermann (1728-95), covering the period from June 1, 1768 to July 13, 1772, initially in three volumes but adding a fourth in 1778 in response to the critical reviews sparked by his vision of eternity.

<sup>2</sup>Alice A. Kuzniar, "Signs of the Future: Reading (in) Lavater's *Aussichten*," *Seminar. A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 22 (1986): 1-19, examines the reception of Lavater's signs of eternity major writers of the Goethe era, observing that "He is preeminently engaged with the study of how signs point to the future and thus, in general, how signs operate," p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Lavater, *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit* (1768-73): "Diese unmittelbare Sprache ist physionomisch, pantomimisch-musicalisch- Ich will mich erklären. Ich mache den Anfang bey der physionomischen. Wie Christus das redendste, lebendigste, vollkommenste Ebenbild des unsichtbaren Gottes ist, ein Ebenbild, wo alles Ausdruck, alles von

To Lavater's way of thinking, the entire human being was comprised of signs of communication, indeed, language, like the body itself was an interplay of "rest and motion" (Ruhe und Bewegung, 3, 115). Language was of the body, for "each muscle can be of the most elegant significance" (Jede Ruh' und Bewegungsart eines jeden Muskels kann von der erhabensten Bedeutung seyn, 3, 117). Each nerve had the potential to signal a message, and it was this inventory that he called "the general language of heaven" (eine allgemeine Sprache des Himmels, 3, 119). And it was this language that he hoped to document in his study of the human face, a project first announced in a lecture in 1771,<sup>4</sup> and a few years later outlined in four volumes called *Physiognomic Fragments, for the Advancement of Human Knowledge and Love* (Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe, 1775-78).<sup>5</sup> The work includes more than 800 portraits, silhouettes, and caricatures of many contemporary and historical figures, most of them by prominent artists such as Daniel Chodowiecki (1726-1801) and Johann Heinrich Lips (1758-1817), which together with Lavater's descriptions of the illustrations continue to serve as an index of the silent language of eighteenth century affective culture.<sup>6</sup>

Early in volume two Lavater suggested his system of three fundamental lines as signs of

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unerschöpflicher und unendlicher Bedeutung ist; ein so wahrhafter, unerschöpflicher Ausdruck, ... so ist jeder Mensch- (ein Ebenbild Gottes und Christi,) so ganz Ausdruck, gleichzeitiger, wahrhafter, vielfassender, unerschöpflicher, mit keinen Worten erreichbarer, unnachahmbarer Ausdruck; Er ist ganz Natursprache, 3, 108-09. Lavater's early spelling of physiognomy was without the "g", a trend still found in the first polemical responses by Lichtenberg in 1778.

<sup>4</sup>Johann C. Lavater, *Von der Physiognomik* (Leipzig: Weidman & Reich, 1772), was reviewed anonymously in the *Auserlesene Bibliothek der neuesten deutschen Litteratur* (1773), 3: 1-13; 259-66. Here the correlation of "virtue" (Tugend) and "beauty" (Schönheit, 12) as well as his notion of "total impression" (Totaleindruck, 13) are noted as central principles of a work written "for the thinking head" (für den denkenden Kopf, 259).

<sup>5</sup>Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann & Reich/Winterthur: Steiner, 1775-78). The English version appeared several decades later as *The Whole Works of Lavater on Physiognomy. Translated from the Last Paris Edition*, 4 vols., Trans. George Grenville (London: Butters, 1787).

<sup>6</sup>See Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Greenwich, Conn.: Doubleday, 1959).

a semiotics of the face. In an "Extra" (Zugabe) "On two Mouth Pieces" (Ueber zwey Mundstücke, 2, 74-77), which he wrote to the "Eighth Fragment" on the face of Socrates done in marble by Rubens, Lavater extrapolated from the lines of the lips three basic types of human beings connected to human actions and human words: "There are three main classes of human beings and human works and--human words! . . . Indeed, as the form, so the words, as the words, so the deeds" (Es giebt drey Hauptklassen von Menschen und Menschenwerken und--Menschenworten! . . . Zwar, wie die Gestalt, so die Worte; wie die Worte, so die Thaten, 2, 72). The first of these three basic types of human beings was defined as "loose, casual, unintentional oscillation" (Lockerheit, Lässigkeit, absichtloses Hin- und Herschwanken, 72); the second was "stiffness, tension, exhausting, the force of art" (Steifheit, Gespanntheit, Anstrengung, Kunstkraft, 72); and the third was "Freedom, Correctness and Truth" (Freyheit und Richtigkeit, 72).

Lavater explained that the first two types were polar extremes in that the first was without the "power of resistance" (Widerstehenskraft), and the second without "flexibility" (Nachgeblichkeit, 72). And between these extremes there was the third sign of "free straightness" (freye Geradheit, 72), a sign characterized by movement with direction, namely, the sign that symbolized the freedom to shape purposiveness and intentionality. And these three classes he symbolized with three types of lines, with three threads (Figure 2, 2, 73), the first hanging loosely, the second taut and plumb, and a third swinging in pendular motion: "with the lines, so with human beings" (Wie mit den Linien, so mit den Menschen, 73). In Lavater's view the two extremes, the taut and the loose, do not have the same appeal as the line that shows direction, or "freedom and correctness." Like a free swinging pendulum, the line that shows motion and direction at the same time has the greatest appeal: "Correctness and Freedom in all

parts, members, features, nuances, expressions of humanity will appeal better to you than the indefinite looseness and artificial exertion" (das Richtige und Freye in allen Theilen, Gliedern, Zügen, Nüancen, Aeusserungen der Menschheit, wir dir besser gefallen, als unbestimmte Lockerheit und künstliche Anstrengung.-- 2, 73).

In the twelfth fragment of volume two, Lavater presented an alphabet in the profile of the human skull, asking "how much one can read from a silhouette" (Wie viel man aus den Schattenrissen sehen kann?, 2, 94-99). Here he discussed the symmetry and asymmetry of profiles according to "a small classification of lines" (eine kleine Classification von Linien, 96).<sup>7</sup> These lines he described as 1) "perpendicular" (perpendikular), 2) "straight" (gerad), 3) "bowed" (gebogen), "tensile" (gespannt), and 4) "wavy" (wellenförmige), as sections of a circle-- "concave" (konkav), "convex" (konvex), "broken" (gebrochen), "rectilinear" (eckig) "compressed" (gepreßt), "expanded" (gedehnt), "collapsed" (zusammengesetzt), "homogenous" (homogen), "heterogenous" (heterogen), and "contrasting" (kontrastirend, 2, 96). All of these lines can appear as variations of the three basic types of lines that are loose, rigid, or directed. And all of these variations, he argued, could be found in different combinations in nine horizontal subdivisions of the human profile, proceeding from the "crown of the forehead" (Umriß der Stirne) to "the neck" (den Hals, 97). Each horizontal section (See Figure 3, 97), he claimed, was a "letter of the alphabet" (Buchstabe, 97), at times communicating as much as "a syllable" (eine Sylbe), sometimes reading like a whole "word" (Wort), and often presenting "a whole speech" (eine ganze Rede, 97).

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<sup>7</sup>Paul J. Watson and Randy Thornhill, "Fluctuating asymmetry and sexual selection," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, 9 (1994): 21-26, have found interest in asymmetry spreading "across diverse disciplines in the life science," especially among "behavioral ecologists," who see "random deviations from bilateral symmetry, as a means of ascertaining the stress susceptibility of developmental regulatory mechanisms," p. 21.

Lavater's emphasis was on the fluctuating symmetry and asymmetry of profiles, on the fact that profiles consisting of only one kind of line were flat, were a "caricature" (Karrikatur), or a "monster" (Mißgeburt, 2, 97), and that "proportioned mixtures and gentle confluence--varied lines form the finest and best faces" (Proportionirte Mischung und sanfte Ineinanderfließung--verschiedener Linien bildet die feinsten und besten Gesichter, 97). Any deviation from proportional lines, he argued, usually left the reader with a sense of "anomalies" (Anomalien, 97) in both direction, sometimes with positive and sometimes with negative impressions. Reading the anomalies as deviations from idealized lines was the source of Lavater's subjective culture, of the process of sizing up the character of facial types across genders and cultures. The profile in which he marked the nine horizontal sections of the face (Figure 3, 2, 99), was left anonymous, although he claimed it was the "silhouette of one of the greatest men of the times" (Schattenbild eines der größten Männer unserer Zeit, 99). From such profiles, he proposed that we might discover the "depths of godly order, wisdom, and truth" (Tiefen göttlicher Ordnung, Weisheit und Wahrheit, 99), which, he hoped, would be explored by some "mathematical genius" (ein mathematisches Genie), who would experiment "with the curve of humanity" (an den Curven der Menschheit, 99).

In the fourth volume Lavater expanded on the anomalies of asymmetry in a fragment on "Medical Semiotics. Or something about the Signs of Health and Illness" (Medizinische Semiothik. Oder etwas von den Kennzeichen der Gesundheit und Krankheit, 4, 365-68). He admitted to little knowledge of human pathology, but emphasized the rich variety that doctors could bring to understanding body language, because the body in illness was radically irritated and showed pronounced lines. This fragment Lavater devoted to the possibilities of a "physiognomic semiotics" (physiognomische Semiothik, 366), to an inventory of

correspondences between expressions and postures and diseases, pain, and suffering. The yield of such study surely would show the variation in human behavior, and would benefit "prognostics" (Prognostik, p. 366) as well: "How important, if the doctor with great probability could say to a healthy person--you can in a natural way expect this or that illness! Protect yourself from this or that! Just as the poison of small pox slumbers in your body and by and by is irritated, so also stress."<sup>8</sup> For his project Lavater recommended a semiotics of past and present illnesses, something beyond the practice of medicine for the well-being of the human species, and to this end he offered a lengthy footnote on "semiotic writings" (semiothischen Schriften, 367), including works "by the famous Stahl" (von dem berühmten Stahl, Halle, 1700, p. 367).<sup>9</sup>

Lavater explored facial lines from every angle, comparing male and female profiles, oval profiles, profiles of bald men, bearded men, and then animal skulls (Fragment 13, 2, 139-142), and most importantly for emerging studies in physical anthropology, he illustrated the anatomy of the human skull from various angles and perspectives. Here the clear lines of demarcation found in the skulls of children were particularly important (vol. 2, pp. 166-67): "how weak the lower jaw is" (Wie schwach ist da noch der Unterkiefer, 167). Always drawing comparisons, and yet distinctions, between genders, generations, humans and animals, he emphasized the individuality of certain signs of communication, an individuality that represented variations from his principles of three lines and his alphabet of the face. Nowhere did he more clearly relate and distinguish the character of human beings and animals than in his illustration with thirty-two

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<sup>8</sup>Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-78), Wie wichtig, wenn der Arzt mit überwiegender Wahrscheinlichkeit zum Gesunden sagen könnte--"Natürlicher Weise hast du einst diese oder jene Krankheit zu erwarten! Nimm dich vor diesem, vor jenem wohl in Acht! Wie das Pochengift in deinem Leibe schlummert, und so und so erweckt wird--so die Hektik!, Vol. 4, p. 366.

<sup>9</sup>Watson and Thornhill, "Fluctuating asymmetry and sexual selection" (1994), explain that today patterns of asymmetry allow "researchers to evaluate a basic aspect of viability fitness, namely, developmental stability--the capacity to develop properly in the face of genetic and environmental stresses that tend to upset development," p. 21.

monkey faces, of which one was much more human than all the others. Yet in comparisons of man and animal, the point was always the humanity: "O human being, you are no ape" (O Mensch, du bist kein Affe--, 180).

Lavater reduced his semiotics of the face to three fundamental lines of communication, one loose and active, a second taunt and potent, and a third free and directed, three "cross-cultural universals of affective meaning" found in modern psycho-linguistics. Charles E. Osgood, William H. May, Murray S. Miron, pioneers in the statistical measurement of factors in subjective culture, developed an "Atlas of Affective Meanings" for 600 concepts (7) tested with the semantic differential techniques in more than twenty-five human communities around the globe (413).<sup>10</sup> They explained that the statistical structure of emotional response to the concepts of culture typically has a three dimensional shape that shows evaluation **E**, potency **P**, and activity **A**: "It was also this close resemblance of the dimensions of feelings and meanings of facial signs to the E-P-A system that led us to use the term 'affective meaning system,'" (395).

In their discussion of the "primordality of the affective meaning system" (394-96), Osgood and others have argued that, if the E-P-A structure is primitive phylogenetically, "it might also be expected to appear early in the course of ontogeny" (395), and this is precisely what researchers in physiognomy have recently investigated, particularly in experimental studies on early behavioral response patterns among human and animal species. Here we find particular validity in Lavater's three lines of character, for, despite the cliché that "beauty is only skin deep," biological evolution shows that certain aesthetic marks not only play an important role in mating patterns but also seem to support Lavater's call for a "medical semeiotics" in which

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<sup>10</sup>Charles E. Osgood, William H. May, Murray S. Miron, *Cross-Cultural Universals of Affective Meaning* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

human shape would serve prognostic medicine. The question is not of aesthetics, for the primordial preference for well-proportioned bodies is a bias for bodies with an immune system that can resist infections by parasites that may stunt growth. Today evolution biologists are following a symmetry hypothesis that Lavater, too, hoped to explain in his search through the paintings and sculpture of 5000 years of culture. He hoped to formalize principles of drawing faces which would serve mankind in the practice of reading faces for the advancement of human communication and understanding.

It was in the physiology of the face that Lavater sought a catalog of cross-cultural communication, and it was in lines of non-verbal communication that he projected his organic teleology. This was **not** an ideology of form, for in the third fragment of volume two, Lavater wrote a "warning against intolerant idealization" (Warnung vor intolerantem Idealisieren, 27). The language of his physiognomy was laced with Leibnizian concepts of human individuality, with the idea that no entity of nature, no human being is replaceable. The immortality of nature lies in the uniqueness of individual life. But the caution was also marked by the organicism of Rousseau, by belief both in the potential deterioration and the improvement of mankind: "Indescribable is the corruptibility and the perfectibility of the human being" (Unbeschreiblich ist die Verderblichkeit und die Vervollkommenheit des Menschen, 2, 30). Yet, the potency of human development is the more dominant theme in Lavater's work, for "no human being stops being a human being" (Kein Mensch hört auf, Mensch zu seyn, 30).