Introduction

"The most entertaining surface on earth […] is that of the human face."[1] These words are as true today as when the German philosopher and physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) uttered them at the height of the infamous 'physiognomic debate' of the 18th century. In our day-to-day interactions, we intuitively read faces and bodies, i.e., draw conclusions about inner states and emotions on the basis of external appearance. But what happens when descriptions of people are woven into the fabric of literature? Why and how do writers of prose fiction — specifically, novels — engage readers in analyzing facial traits, body language, and sartorial details? What factors inform the literary representation of human beings, and how do these representations, in turn, shape their cultural milieu? These are some of the questions guiding the present monograph, which focuses on the role of physical descriptions in German novels between 1771 and 1929 against the backdrop of larger developments in how the human face and body were perceived and conceptualized. Drawing on texts and discourses from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, I show that the bio-medical sciences, philosophy, the visual arts, and mass media all competed over the human body in the course of time, and I argue that literature helped shape these conversations in important ways. The book uses a cultural studies approach that crosses disciplinary boundaries to offer a constellation of ideas and polemics surrounding the readability of the human body. By outlining some of the main discursive and institutional reconfigurations that took place beginning in the late 18th century, I draw out the multi-faceted permutations of corporeal legibility, as well as their relevance for the development of the novel and for facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue.

The time span covered in this monograph corresponds to the period of most sustained and dramatic activity in the study of the human face. While physiognomics is only the point of departure for the multi-disciplinary analysis undertaken here, its meandering trajectory between science and propaganda epitomizes a general trend in the treatment of the human body, and, for this reason, it deserves close attention at this point. Interest in the semantic potential

1 "Die unterhaltendste Fläche auf der Erde für uns ist die vom menschlichen Gesicht" (Lichtenberg 1984: 245).

of the face goes back to ancient times. The formal study of physiognomy is said to have begun with Pythagoras, but the first written work on the topic was penned by Aristotle in the fourth century BC. Physiognomic theory and practice became very popular during the Renaissance due to works such as Michel de Montaigne's "Sur la physionomie" (1580) and Giambattista della Porta's *De Humana Physiognomonia* (1586). The success of Charles Le Brun's treatise on the expression of emotions in painting, *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (1698), shows that physiognomy continued to hold its own in the 17th century, not least by virtue of its association with the arts. But it was not until the publication in the late 1770s of *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (*Physiognomic Fragments for the Promotion of Human Understanding and Human Love*) by a Swiss pastor named Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801) that the practice of assessing character from outer appearance gained widespread attention in the West. Lavater's four-volume treatise ushered in the biggest expansion of European physiognomic thought and raised to new heights the interest in corporeal legibility.

The book's popularity was due as much to Daniel Chodowiecki's one-of-a-kind illustrations as to societal developments. The growth of cities, the increase in travel, and the transition from a feudal to a bourgeois order made it increasingly difficult to categorize people solely by their dress. Lavater's physiognomic method promised to relieve the anxiety that derived from this loss of certainty by instructing people on what signs to look for in the body's surface and how to interpret them. The Swiss pastor also distinguished himself from his predecessors by lending scientificity to the study of facial traits. In a marked departure from the moral comparisons between human and animal faces that had dominated physiognomic studies before him, Lavater drew on Enlightenment rationalism and positivism to recast physiognomy as a modern scientific discipline. In spite of this, he remained deeply devoted to his Christocentric worldview and continued to consort with famous occultists and charlatans of the day. It was in no small part this curious combination of religion, science, and the occult in Lavater's interests and writings that drew so many people from different fields and of different views into the so-called *Physiognomikstreit* ('physiognomic controversy'). On German territory, almost every major writer weighed in on the debate, from Goethe, Lichtenberg, and Nicolai to Schiller, Lessing, and even Hegel. The reasons why many people distanced themselves from the clergyman cannot be explored here in full, but two deserve mention for their relevance to physiognomy's subsequent descent into racist and nativist rhetoric. Some objected to Lavater's religious zeal, especially when it translated into a very public and aggressive campaign to convert the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) to Christianity. Others warned against the dangers of pseudo-scientific attempts to discern character on the basis of arbitrary laws about the meaning of facial features. By the early 20th century, it was crystal clear that these early detractors of Lavater's

system had been right to sound the alarm. But signs of physiognomy's lapse into essentialism had begun to surface already during the 19th century.

In the 1800s, physiognomics became secular, expanded its geographic reach, and branched out in several directions. Important studies were published at home and abroad that echoed, built on, or revised Lavater's ideas — sometimes for noble purposes, sometimes for questionable ones. Charles Bell (1774-1842) and Charles Darwin (1809-1882) focused on the expression of emotions in the body,[2] while Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), a physiologist and close friend of Goethe's, explored the symbolic potential of the human form in *Symbolik der menschlichen Gestalt* (1853). On the more dubious side, efforts were mounted to construct typologies of criminality and deviance on the basis of physiognomic criteria. Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) pioneered this idea in *L'uomo delinquente* (1876), and Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910) followed in his footsteps, paying special attention to the physiognomies of women criminals. Similarly problematic was the work of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), a German neuro-anatomist and physiologist who, together with his disciple Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832), published *Anatomie und Physiologie des Nervensystems im Allgemeinen und des Gehirnes insbesondere* (1810). This study laid the foundations of phrenology, a new discipline purporting to explain the characteristics of the human mind based on the shape of the skull. Phrenology fueled the appeal of physiognomics despite Gall's repeated efforts to keep the two disciplines apart. His psycho-physiological theory brought about the medicalization of Lavater's physiognomic discourse and opened it up to ideological manipulation for colonial purposes in England and elsewhere.

The radicalization and instrumentalization of physiognomic thought became only more pronounced after the turn of the century. To be sure, there were some theoreticians who worked in a speculative rather than rational tradition and took physiognomy in interesting directions. Rudolf Kassner (1873-1959) and Max Picard (1888-1965) are two notable examples in this respect. But they were the exception, not the norm. Overall, against the backdrop of a growing interest in eugenics, a strand of physiognomic theory prevailed in the early decades of the 20th century that sealed the fate of Lavater's brainchild as a vehicle for exclusionary discourses and practices. Eugenicists such as Hans F. K. Günther (1891-1968) and Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss (1892-1974) gave a fatal racial twist to the inside/outside divide that physiognomy had promoted from its inception. If, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the study of the human face had been used to mark the separation between outer appearance on the one hand and inner character, temperament, or emotions on the other, in the politically charged environment of the early 20th

2 See Bell's *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting* (1806) and Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).

century, the emphasis fell on differentiating between Self and Other, 'us' and 'them.'

This cursory review of physiognomy's history shows that within the span of 150 years following its revival in the 1770s, this pseudo-science morphed from a discipline designed to foster "the knowledge and love of mankind" into a building block of racial-ethnic policies in Nazi Germany. It would be misguided to think that the discursive manipulation of the body on which this process rested was specific only to eugenics or the German-speaking world. As texts from different cultural backgrounds will show in the course of this study, many disciplines purported to 'read' the body, i.e., unlock its secrets, when in fact they overwrote it with preformed ideas. The rise of sciences caused not only the meaning of Being to be forgotten, as Martin Heidegger (cf. 1998) and Edmund Husserl (cf. 1970) have argued, but also its material corporeality. In point of physical appearance, medicine and philosophy conflated readability with transparency. Instead of seeing the body, they saw past or through it, effectively relegating the human frame to invisibility. I argue in the chapters to follow that no one recognized and countered this fictitious legibility better than writers of literary fiction, who modeled a different way of 'reading' in their novels, one that allowed the body to evade signification and categorization — hence, also manipulation. Echoing Milan Kundera's idea that novels rescued the human being left behind by science and philosophy (1988: 4-5), the present monograph outlines a tradition of fictional writing that resisted the tendency prevalent in other fields to either disregard the body altogether or squeeze it into the straitjacket of predetermined, univocal interpretations. It did so, I want to stress, not out of blind opposition to other disciplines, as may be assumed from today's perspective, in which science and the humanities are pitted against each other. Rather, the authors discussed here were concerned about the effects that the sublimation of the physical body would have on all aspects of human existence — not just on the well-being of literature, for example. In other words, they were not trying to divorce science from literature, but to bring them together in a common fight for the preservation of humanity.

It may be asked at this point what exactly made literature, especially the novel, well suited to the task of restoring the body's visibility. Lavater himself talked about literature in *Physiognomische Fragmente*. He uncovered evidence of physiognomic observation in many Swiss, German, French, and English authors of the day, and even dedicated a chapter of his treatise to educating poets and dramatists on how to achieve physiognomic 'verity' in their writings. This shows that the Swiss pastor treated literature as a fertile site of dogmatic emplacement. Some writers were happy to oblige him in this expectation, but they do not concern us in this book. The focus in what follows is not literature's ability to echo and amplify ideas uncritically, but rather to question, engage and make meaningful interventions. And in this respect, novels fit the bill perfectly. For to enter the novelistic world of multiple

perspectives and truths means to emancipate oneself from the tyranny of dogma, as Milan Kundera pointedly remarks:

> To take, with Descartes, the *thinking self* as the basis of everything, and thus to face the universe alone, is to adopt an attitude that Hegel was right to call heroic. To take, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in *imaginary selves* called characters), to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*, requires no less courage. (1988: 6-7; original emphasis)

The relevance of novels for exploring the long history of attempts to make the body legible also rests on historical grounds. Here, too, it helps to take the study of the human face as an example. The period covered in this investigation saw the fortunes of physiognomic theory and of the novelistic genre fluctuate in ways at once different and similar. On the one hand, whereas novels increased their cultural capital over time and stayed true to their core aesthetic, the practice of assessing character from external appearance followed a downward spiral that culminated in the perversion of its doctrines by the Nazis. On the other hand, the trajectories of these two cultural phenomena also overlapped for a while, and there was no shortage of communication between them. Physiognomic ideas found a particularly fertile ground in novels — so much so that one cannot dismiss the coincidence between the rise of this literary genre and the rise of physiognomy as mere historical contingency. Important strategic considerations and conceptual connections facilitated this rapport. As a latecomer to the literary scene, the novel needed all the help it could get to prove its relevance and worth, both vis-à-vis the established genres of literature and in the cultural arena more generally. Eager for legitimacy, novelists were more open to innovation and experiment than their colleagues who worked in drama and poetry. Physiognomy was such an experiment, and a fashionable one too. At least in the beginning, Lavater's doctrine contributed, through its own popularity, to increasing the appeal of this new literary genre. Many novelists were also well-disposed to Lavater's system because it reflected their own interest in human beings, in legibility, and in acquiring knowledge through secular reason and through the senses. Most importantly, however, physiognomic observations fostered the development of narrative and portraiture techniques that helped the novel come into its own as a distinct, modern type of literary expression. Although novels had been written well before Lavater's day, it was only in the mid- to late 18th century that they started to develop into the form we know today. This transformation involved breaking away from the idealized heroes and unchanging moral truths that had characterized chivalric romances and picaresque novels. After Daniel Defoe, the European novel turned to depicting "human character as it manifests itself in society" (Frye 2000: 308), and attention to the body played no small part in this

about-face. Physiognomic traits, body language, and dress were deployed to depict character development and inter-human relationships; they elucidated events, built suspense, and elicited emotions in readers. Far from meaningless, corporeal details were part of a self-reflexive exercise whereby the novel fleshed out its generic conventions in an attempt to gain validation from critics who dismissed it as a pseudo-epic. My study also argues that physiognomy became a staple of novelistic narration because it offered this new genre a means to reflect on its connection to embodiment and readability. Novels needed this self-reckoning in order to cast themselves as the literary genre best suited to capture the essence of a cultural episteme focused on legibility and human beings.

But it was not just self-interest that underlay the novel's preoccupation with corporeal matters. The more important driving force, and the one that receives the lion's share of attention in this book, was the deep and genuine concern of novelists for the plight of the body. This explains why they continued to employ descriptions of faces and bodies in their narratives even after physiognomy had begun its descent into infamy. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the same disquiet about the instrumentalization of corporeality that prompted twentieth-century writers to distance themselves from the essentialist rhetoric of racial physiognomists can be traced in the 18th and 19th centuries. Situated as it was at the confluence of several fields and discourses, physiognomy opened a line of communication between literature and other fields that afforded novelists a broader, cross-disciplinary perspective on the body's trials and tribulations in the age of scientific rationalism. From this vantage point, they gained a better understanding of the causes and mechanisms of corporeal disenfranchisement and crafted a more effective response than if they had viewed the situation through an exclusively literary lens. And responding was crucial. For novelists did not see themselves as bystanders to this crisis of legibility and its attendant polemics, but rather as active, responsible participants in a larger conversation that could effect real change. As my analysis will show, Sophie von La Roche, Friedrich Spielhagen, and Alfred Döblin did not simply echo debates from medicine, philosophy, and the visual arts on how to read the human body; they intervened in these debates in ways that were distinctively literary, yet also conducive to interdisciplinary exchange. Their message is unambiguous: a more humane approach to the body can only be found through a combination of discipline-specific methods and shared insights. Insularity will not work.

Before proceeding to a detailed outline of the three parts that make up the present monograph, a cautionary aside is in order regarding the methodology employed herein. *Fictions of Legibility* does not claim to offer definitive answers to the questions it raises. If it did, it would fall into the same trap as physiognomics. The choice of texts is also not exhaustive, but a representative sampling of novels by authors who actively engaged with narrative theory, with corporeal rhetoric,

and with how other disciplines purported to 'read' the human body. As with any sampling procedure, it is important to acknowledge what has been left out and to qualify the overall message conveyed by the chosen specimens. It bears noting in this regard that even though I see La Roche's, Spielhagen's, and Döblin's texts as representative of a larger pattern whereby literary fiction championed the cause of corporeality, not all novels followed their lead. Far from it. Especially in German literature, it is not difficult to find examples of writers who uncritically accepted or adopted the doctrines of bodily effacement spawned by Lavater's physiognomic system. The goal of this book, then, is not a wholesale glorification of any particular literary genre or group of authors. What I argue, instead, is that moments of resistance, however isolated, did exist, contrary to the misconception that German writers and thinkers have by and large not been concerned with the body. Despite their paradigmatic character, the readings that I propose in this study emphasize depth over breadth, singularity over universality, in much the same way as literary fiction itself. By focusing on a small number of texts, I uncover nuances of content and style that remain inscrutable in survey-style investigations. It all amounts to an endorsement of literature's inherent complexity and of the virtues of close reading.

Part One argues that Sophie von La Roche's narrative practice, as exemplified by her novel *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1771), opposed the tendency of the age to see through the human body. In a first step, I explain that the 18th century was attuned to all things visible and legible, and that this sensitivity combined with other factors to produce a fascination with physical appearance. However, underneath the semblance of interest lurked the reality of indifference. Technological, scientific, and socio-economic developments purported to move society forward, but they effectively drove people away from themselves and one another. Even in medicine, where the dearth of diagnostic instruments forced doctors to pay attention to skin tone, pulse, and temperature for signs of disease, the body functioned only as a see-through interface, a gateway to something otherwise inaccessible. In other words, the human figure was important not in itself, but for what it could facilitate. Under these conditions, reading the body became synonymous with reading through it and making it conform to preconceived notions of corporeality. I argue that La Roche distanced herself from this Lavaterian mode of reading which turned its object into a personal echo chamber and thwarted creativity, exploration, and free thinking. She did so, on the one hand, by critiquing the entwinement of physiognomics with causal models of explanation, and, on the other, by developing her own brand of multiperspective narration, more radical even than that of Samuel Richardson. By stressing context and contingency over causation, and epistemological pluralism over a single, universal truth, La Roche restored visibility to the body, with important consequences for promoting the cause of novels, of female authorship, of (interpretive) freedom, and of a truly ethical relation between Self and Other.

Part Two, which focuses on the 19th century, traces an even more drastic attempt to erase the body from view and a similar attempt to rescue it from oblivion, this time by the novelist and theorist Friedrich Spielhagen. To be sure, physiognomic readings continued to garner appeal against the background of developments in the social sphere. The growth of big cities, the explosive rate at which the urban population expanded, and the emergence of new social classes bred anxiety about the anonymous masses surrounding the metropolis dweller. This, in turn, boosted confidence in corporeal reading practices that promised to help people navigate their increasingly opaque social environment. But much like in the 18th century, physiognomy and its offshoots did not do justice to the body's material and rhetorical sophistication. Instead, they reduced it to measurable, classifiable abstractions, thereby reflecting the general tendency of the age to rationalize the human form into invisibility. Medicine followed this trend as well. The introduction of new scientific methods and diagnostic tools in this field drove doctors farther and farther away from patients. In their rush for objectivity, physicians became enamored of metrics and quantitative data and lost sight of the human being. Discoveries such as the stethoscope and X-rays gave them access to the internal organs in other ways than through subjective patient narratives or personal engagement with the sick body. The outer corporeal surface became medically irrelevant, hence invisible, while the inner domain of the body was measured and classified into uniformity. Friedrich Spielhagen, I argue, countered this double loss, of corporeal visibility and complexity, by showcasing the body's inherent ambiguity and by unsettling the fixity of types, which had migrated from the sciences into literature. At stake in this restorative gesture was a nuanced understanding of social relations during his time, a safeguarding of literature's fundamental ambivalence, as well as an engagement with the tension at the core of novels between the physical body and the social body, individuation and exemplariness, the particular and the universal. In essence, Spielhagen's novel *Zum Zeitvertreib* (1897) affirms the body's inextinguishable uniqueness and vitality. Human beings cannot be circumscribed by categories and laws, the author reminds us, because life resides precisely in the variations, gaps, and ambiguities that no taxonomy can capture.

The third and final part of the book argues that Alfred Döblin countered the effacing of the body's materiality and complexity by voiding physical descriptions of psychological content in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). This solution seems counterintuitive, even paradoxical, especially by comparison with Spielhagen's strategy from only 32 years before, of revealing depth where none appeared to exist. My analysis shows, however, that Döblin's break with psychology made sense in the complex cultural, medical, and political context of the age. I argue that his approach derived, in a first instance, from the conviction that psychologism was detrimental to art and literature because it promoted an over-simplification

of human life. The novelist's commitment to a purely corporeal body was also rooted in his disillusionment with the failure of physicians to properly tend to patients during the seismic disciplinary upheavals of the early 20th century. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* takes aim in particular at the unproductive bickering of mental health professionals, which left both physical injuries and mental afflictions neglected and untreated. I also argue that Döblin's anti-psychological approach to corporeality evinces connections with the rise of new visual media. The treatment of the face and body in early nickelodeon films and in the photography of August Sander confirmed to Döblin that keeping texts free of psychological symbolism can yield a wealth of epistemological and narrative benefits. Last but not least, my analysis shows that Döblin's soul-stripped bodies have important political valences. In their anonymity and malleability, they resist being pigeonholed into fixed categories or types and warn readers that they, too, must resist theories and practices that use bodily features to legitimize racism and ethnic purifications.