The Body in Perspective: Sophie von La Roche's *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1771)

Sophie von La Roche's novel, which now takes pride of place in the canon of eighteenth-century German literature, was published one year before *Von der Physiognomik* (1772), the essay in which Johann Caspar Lavater laid the groundwork for his best-selling *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*.[1] Even though it predates Lavater's four-volume treatise, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* draws extensively on the widespread interest in reading, visuality, and the human body that propelled the Swiss pastor to fame during the 18th century. As the present chapter will elucidate, an analysis of physiognomic and pathognomic details from this novel reveals a writer committed to making a difference in the debate surrounding human physicality, but also in the legitimation of the novel and of female authorship. I will argue that La Roche's use of physiognomy and pathognomy is intimately connected with the specific brand of multi-perspectival narration that she developed, thereby showcasing a level of literary craftsmanship that women were deemed incapable of at that time. More specifically, La Roche adopted the epistolary novel form with its connotations of femininity, naturalness, and authenticity, and she put her own spin on it by developing a polylogic narration through the voices of multiple letter-writing characters who report from different perspectives on one and the same incident.[2]

1 Portions of this chapter have previously been published in "When History Meets Literature: Jonathan Israel, Sophie von La Roche, and the Problem of Gender," *The Radical Enlightenment in Germany: A Cultural Perspective*, edited by Carl Niekerk, Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2018, pp. 211-37.

2 In recent decades, feminist scholars have argued that the gendering of letter-writing in the discourse on literary authorship was not altogether detrimental to women. According to this view, the immense popularity that Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels gained in the mid-18th century boosted the literary credentials of letter writing, which in turn afforded women entrance into a literary territory from which they had previously been excluded. As Silvia Bovenschen aptly puts it, the letter was women's "Entrée-Billett zur Literatur" (1979: 212), the Trojan horse that sneaked them into novel writing (ibid: 200).

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La Roche on Lavater and Physiognomics

As a preamble to discussing the role of physical details in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, it bears noting that La Roche had an ambivalent attitude toward Lavater. She and the Swiss pastor knew each other well. He frequented her literary salon in Koblenz, and she made plans to visit him in Switzerland in 1784. We also know from their correspondence that Lavater helped advertise the women's periodical edited by La Roche to female readers in Switzerland (La Roche 1983: 245) and that she repeatedly asked him for an opinion on her writings (ibid: 263, 265). Further evidence that La Roche thought highly of the Swiss pastor comes from the fact that she often addressed him as "teurer Freund" (ibid: 245), thanked him "für das, was Ihre Art […] Edles hat" (ibid: 263), and even characterized him as "eine[r] der besten unter den Männern" (1780: 156). The admiration and gratitude that exude from these interactions did not stop La Roche from criticizing Lavater's physiognomic practice. We find an example of this in a letter from March 1775 in which Christoph Martin Wieland answers La Roche's question "ob Lavater, wenn er selbst weniger schön wäre, seine Physiognomik geschrieben haben würde" (Wieland 1820: 173). Underlying this thought experiment is a sense of disquiet about the threat that bias of all kinds — including, but not limited to, the one deriving from self-love and self-interest — poses to rational scientific judgment. In framing the issue this way, La Roche anticipates the emphasis on objectivity that would become a key feature of late nineteenth-century science after more research tools and clinical equipment were developed and introduced in laboratories and medical facilities. La Roche's concern with the blind spots of physiognomics also anticipates by a few years Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's lampooning in "Über Physiognomik; wider die Physiognomen" (1778) and in "Fragment von Schwänzen" (1783) of the exclusionary, deterministic rhetoric that informed Lavater's physiognomic endeavor and undermined its claim to scientificity.

In epistolary exchanges with Lavater himself, La Roche was even harsher and more direct in her criticism than when talking to others. Take, for instance, the letter she wrote to him in July 1782 expressing disappointment that the father of modern physiognomics, of all people, was unable to see her true self: "Lavater sieht mich nur durch andre, nicht durch sich selbst; er sieht mich nur in der Hülle meiner Umstände, er! Mit der Feder bin ich, *was ich bin*; mit meiner Person, *was ich kann*." (La Roche 1983: 243) The end of this quote is doubly compelling. By highlighting the power of writing to free women from social constraints, La Roche advocates for female authorship, but she also (and not unrelatedly) educates Lavater on the limitations of physiognomics, especially along gender lines. The social norms dictating how women should carry themselves in the presence of and in interactions with others were so strict, the letter implies, that a piece of writing was a much more reliable measure of someone's character than their physical

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appearance. This casts La Roche's multiple appeals to Lavater for a pronouncement on the literary quality of her works in a new light — as part of a strategy not just to advance the cause of female writers, but to give all women relief from the added physical scrutiny that came with Lavater's doctrine. The problem with this visual form of social regulation was that it led to highly questionable conclusions which could wreak irreparable havoc on a woman's reputation, as documented in La Roche's epistolary novel *Rosaliens Briefe an ihre Freundin Mariane von St*** (1779-81). The 42nd letter in this collection finds the heroine making a solemn pledge "niemals, gar niemals, von dem Aeusserlichen eines Gesichts mich hinreissen zu lassen, Etwas sicher Nachtheiliges von jemand zu denken, noch viel, viel weniger, zu sagen!" (La Roche 1780: 269) Rosalie explains that she made this resolve after witnessing a blatant case of physiognomic distortion against the virtuous Madame D** by a man "dessen vorzügliche Verdienste des Geistes und der Denkungsart allen, und auch ihr die Begierde einflößte [*sic*], seinen Beyfall zu erhalten" (ibid: 271). Rosalie's account of what transpired between the two parties is somewhat vague. She makes clear, however, that the problem lay in the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the moral rectitude and intentions of Madame D**, and on the other, "das allerschiefeste Urtheil über ihren Character" that the gentleman had derived from her actions (ibid: 269). It also emerges plainly from the text that this misinterpretation had far-reaching consequences for Madame D** in both a temporal and a social sense.

The strength and motives of Rosalie's turn against physiognomics are interesting in and of themselves, but the episode arrests attention even more forcibly in light of a letter by La Roche informing Lavater that the incident in the novel refers to him (1983: 246). The mystery gentleman whose physiognomic verdict altogether misses the mark, exposing Madame D** to public obloquy, had been modeled, ironically enough, after the most ardent real-life believer in the infallibility of physiognomics. Whether or not the encounter really happened as Rosalie describes it, is inconsequential. Even if the episode is purely fictional, the fact that La Roche created the male character with Lavater in mind speaks volumes about her stance on the pitfalls of physiognomy, as well as about her determination to expose them. And expose them she did — both publicly, through her literary works, where Lavater's name is left out for his protection and to prevent La Roche's intervention from being labeled a personal attack, and privately, in conversations and letters in which she did not shy away from revealing his identity.

Paradoxically, La Roche's critical statements vis-à-vis physiognomics testify to her interest in it. If she had not thought that reading a person's features was useful, she would not have tried to impress upon Lavater that he needed to recognize and redress the deficiencies of his theory. La Roche's interest in physical legibility is also borne out by her literary writings. Even a cursory search through *Rosaliens Briefe*, for instance, yields numerous references to physical appearance,

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some of them quite elaborate and deeply entwined with the development of plot and character. How exactly La Roche turned body language to good narrative account despite her objections to Lavater's physiognomic method can be gauged from *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*. This novel is particularly well suited, I argue, to show that its author did not simply make a case that the benefits of physiognomics outweighed its costs. Instead of settling for Lavater's flawed reasoning, La Roche actively tried through narrative means to effect change and intervene against efforts spearheaded by the Swiss pastor to obliterate the human body from view.

Causation and Corporeal Visibility

Edited and published by Christoph Martin Wieland, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* went through eight editions in twenty years and enjoyed the approval both of the reading public and of luminaries like Nicolai, Goethe, and Herder. It was the first time that a German novel was telling the inner story of an individual, more precisely of a young woman whose virtue is tested numerous times by a relentless villain. Sophie von Sternheim, whose resemblance with La Roche did not escape critics' attention, comes from a family of mixed social background. The love between her bourgeois father and her aristocratic mother is viewed favorably by all their relatives except Sophie's aunt, who worries that this mixed-class union will hurt her own prospects for a good marriage. After the early death of the heroine's parents, this same aunt takes the 18-year-old orphan into her home and introduces her at court with the intention of making her the mistress of the ruling prince. In this way, the conniving aunt hopes to obtain a favorable judgment in an important lawsuit. Sophie's virtue thwarts the evil plan, but her destiny nevertheless takes a turn for the worse after she falls in love with a young English diplomat visiting the court of D. When Lord Seymour hesitates to return Sophie's love, Lord Derby, an experienced seducer, gains her favors by feigning benevolence toward the poor. In order to escape the prince, Sophie marries Derby, only to discover a short while later that the ceremony had been a hoax. She moves to the Low Countries, assumes a new identity, and devotes herself to teaching and charity. In another surprising twist, however, she runs into Derby again. Afraid that Sophie might reveal his past and ruin the new life he made for himself in the meantime, Derby carries her off to the Scottish Highlands, seeking to bring about her death. Eventually, some poor crofters save the heroine, and she is reunited with Seymour. At the end of the novel, Derby dies of natural causes, while Sophie and Seymour marry and live happily into old age. It is a typical eighteenth-century ending of virtue rewarded and vice punished with the two-fold aim of teaching readers proper behavior and

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of obtaining the approbation of theologians by imitating God's moral governance of the world.

In this section and the next, I will highlight two ways in which La Roche explores the body's rhetorical complexity while distancing herself from Lavater's precepts. The first of these involves a questioning of physiognomy's imbrication with causation and can be seen at work in the account of the fortunes of Sophie's parents. From this narrative, which precedes the main story, we find out that Sophie's father, the well-educated son of a professor, had entered military service out of friendship for a younger baron whom he had met at university. After obtaining the rank of Colonel, Sternheim travels to P., where he decides to buy an estate adjacent to the Baron's so as to enjoy the quiet pleasures of friendship and the benefits of an idyllic country life. An equally important factor in this decision is the Colonel's infatuation with one of the Baron's sisters, called Sophie von P. The two fall in love, manage to overcome social prejudices vis-à-vis his modest birth, and eventually get married.

Of particular interest for my purposes in this chapter is the portrait that La Roche paints of Sophie von P., the heroine's mother. What sets this character apart is her melancholy temperament, which disrupts the otherwise perfect harmony of the Baron's household and, from a structural point of view, introduces the first signs of conflict in the novel: "Der Gemütszustand des älteren Fräuleins störte d[as] ruhige Glück [der Familie]" (La Roche 2006: 20). Physically, the young lady's curious disposition engenders "ein stiller Gram […] auf ihrem Gesichte" (ibid: 20). Interesting to note is that the gloom on Sophie von P.'s face is mentioned toward the end of a longer description, after her dominant traits of character have been sketched out. The author, then, does not use the quiet despondency on Sophie von P.'s countenance as a clue to some hidden characterological aspect — which is what Lavater did with the portraits, silhouettes, and sketches that he used in his writings on physiognomy — but rather as the manifestation of an already known temperamental state. This is important because it gets at one of the central problems with Lavater's system: what I would call its rhetoric of bodily causation. The Swiss pastor's physiognomic readings derived character from facial traits, effectively implying that a certain bodily constitution predisposed people to a particular character, not the other way around. Lavater conveyed this message directly, for instance when he quoted from a contribution to Heinrich Christian Boie's magazine "Deutsches Museum," making it clear that he subscribed to the view on physiognomic causality expressed therein: "Die Uebereinstimmung der äußern Figur mit den innern Eigenschaften […] verhält sich […] wie Ursache und Wirkung; mit andern Worten: die Physiognomie ist nicht bloß Bild des innern Menschen; sondern wirkende Ursache." (Lavater 1778, 4: 107) By contrast, the poetic sequence in the description of Sophie von P., i.e., the order in which her characterological traits and her facial features are mentioned in the text,

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undermines the idea that bone and muscle configuration alone determine cognitive abilities and emotional states.

Seven years after La Roche, Lichtenberg would similarly object to the misuse of causation in how people conceived of the relationship between the external and internal dimensions of being. According to him, the only true physiognomy, "wenn es eine wahre gibt," is the "Gellertsche Physiognomik" understood as "[eine] Sammlung von Bemerkungen, die einen Grund zu wahrscheinlichen Schlüssen vom Charakter auf die Gesichtsbildung, *aber nicht umgekehrt*, enthalten" (Lichtenberg 1972: 281, my emphasis). As evident from this quote and others in the same vein,[3] Lichtenberg did not take issue with Lavater casting the connection between physiognomy and character in causal terms. What he disputed was the Swiss pastor's intransigence on the direction of causality, i.e., which element of the body-soul dichotomy brings about the other. The problem with treating the fixed facial and bodily features as causal sources of character is that this approach restricts both the field of vision and the range of inquiry. Along this line of thought, Lichtenberg intimates that Lavater's method trained people to search only for certain causes and only in certain places, thereby overlooking other important factors that shape human character:

> So steht unser Körper zwischen Seele und der übrigen Welt in der Mitte, Spiegel der Wirkungen von beiden; erzählt nicht allein unsere Neigungen und Fähigkeiten, sondern auch die Peitschenschläge des Schicksals, Klima, Krankheit, Nahrung und tausend Ungemach, dem uns nicht immer unser eigner böser Entschluß, sondern oft Zufall und oft Pflicht aussetzen. (ibid: 266)

3 Earlier in "Über Physiognomik," Lichtenberg expressly refutes having something against the idea of causal interconnectedness with which physiognomy operated: "Niemand wird leugnen, daß in einer Welt, in welcher sich alles durch Ursache und Wirkung verwandt ist, und wo nichts durch Wunderwerke geschieht, jeder Teil ein Spiegel des Ganzen ist. […] An dieser absoluten Lesbarkeit von allem in allem zweifelt niemand." (Lichtenberg 1972: 264-65) It is not surprising that someone working at the intersection of physics, philosophy, and literature should uphold a principle whose ramifications extended, then as now, deep into all three fields. But Lichtenberg does it with caution, rather than blind faith. As this passage attests, the German polymath had the intellectual acumen and rhetorical sophistication to make a nuanced argument that took into account both the pros and the cons of causality. One of the benefits he identifies in viewing life through a cause-and-effect lens is absolute legibility, i.e., intelligibility. By approaching everything around them as causal relata, humans become connected to one another across disciplinary and other divides. Conversely, Lichtenberg also warns — with an eye to physiognomics — that the lure of universal legibility can lead down treacherous paths, "da eben dieses Lesen auf der Oberfläche die Quelle unserer Irrtümer, und in manchen Dingen unserer gänzlichen Unwissenheit ist" (ibid: 265). In order to avoid this pitfall of misapprehension and false knowledge, physiognomists in particular cannot proceed "ohne nähere Bestimmung" (ibid: 265), which Lichtenberg proposes to derive "aus bekannten Handlungen des Menschen" (ibid: 293).

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The importance of context that Lichtenberg highlights here also comes through in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* when it is suggested that Sophie von P.'s "leidende Miene," "[ihr] Ton des Schmerzens" and "[ihre] viele[n] Seufzer"(La Roche 2006: 27) are partly symptoms of the melancholy she inherited from her English mother and partly signs of affection for Colonel Sternheim.

But context is only the first line of offense against rigid causal thinking. In the longer passage from which the Lichtenberg quote above is excerpted, *Zufall* appears four times alongside other words that similarly highlight the impossibility to account for human nature through inflexible rules, laws, and patterns — words such as *Anomalien, Ungemach, Fehler, Biegsamkeit, Perfektibilität, Korruptibilität, Verzerrung, Auswuchs, Veränderungen, Verbesserung,* and *Verschlimmerung* (Lichtenberg 1972: 266-67). This indicates that Lichtenberg deemed it important not just to reverse the direction of causality and to give context its due, but also to factor contingency into any verdict about what makes people who they are. This went decidedly against Lavater's pronouncement that "die Willkürlichkeit ist die Philosophie der Thoren [*sic*], die Pest für die gesunde Naturlehre, Philosophie und Religion" (1775, 1: 47). By bringing up contingency, Lichtenberg did not just deliver a perfunctory response to the Swiss pastor's rhetorical flourishes. At stake in his emphasis on the inadvertent was the crucial difference between causation, correlation, and coincidence — a difference that harkened back to the radical rethinking of causality that Lichtenberg's contemporary, David Hume (1711-1776), had set in motion in the first half of the 18th century. In a marked departure from his predecessors, the Scottish philosopher famously posited that when we examine two objects taken to be related as cause and effect, we perceive their contiguity and priority, but "we can never penetrate so far into the[ir] essence and construction […] as to perceive the principle, on which their mutual influence is founded" (Hume 2000: 415-16). This is because the most critical element in establishing causality, namely "a necessary connexion [*sic*]" between causes and effects (ibid: 55), cannot be discovered "either by our senses or reason" (ibid: 415). In other words, there is no observational evidence for our belief that causes necessarily produce their effects. To be clear, the argument here is not that causality does not exist, only that it is not empirically verifiable and cannot be ascribed to a feature of the natural world. Instead, according to Hume, the idea of a necessary connection between two objects or actions "is nothing but an internal impression of the mind" (ibid: 111). Power and necessity, he stresses elsewhere, are "qualities of perceptions, not of objects, and are internally felt by the soul, and not perceiv'd externally in bodies" (ibid: 112).

Like Hume's construal of causality as a byproduct of the imagination, rather than an observable fact, Lichtenberg's challenge to causal reasoning through an emphasis on context and happenstance excised purpose from nature and drew attention to something altogether missing from the Aristotelian accounts

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of causality that underlay scientific thought until well into the 17th century: the subjective human factor. To put the point another way, revisionary discussions of causality mattered for the twofold reason that they fueled a change in scientific paradigm — away from teleological conceptions of nature — and that they fostered a branching out of science into the hitherto neglected territory of human experience and human relations. In one sense, this double move away from a divine teleology of nature to human contingency was a corollary of the same shift to empiricism and secularism that boosted the appeal of physiognomics in late eighteenth-century Europe. On another level, however, Lavater's theological dogmatism, his unshaken belief in God as the cause and purpose of all things put him fundamentally at odds with empiricists.

Through their respective critiques of causality, Hume and Lichtenberg undercut the self-assurance with which people took conjunction for causation when observing contiguous events, oftentimes misinterpreting what they saw. It stands to reason that this posed a challenge to Lavater's belief in a universal and complete physical legibility predicated on causality. To be sure, framing the body-mind problem in causal terms provided a path out of the dualistic impasse created by Descartes. Whereas the French philosopher maintained that mind and body have radically different natures and, therefore, cannot interact, physiognomic theory posited a connection between physical properties and mental states similar to the one between cause and effect. At the same time, this shift to a relational paradigm came at the cost of the body's visibility. The combination of causality and theology in Lavater's rhetoric reduced external appearance to a transparent conduit to divinity, a see-through interface that did not require much attention or interpretive effort beyond applying some pre-established schemes. Lichtenberg tried to restore some of this lost visibility — not by turning back the clock to Cartesianism, but by nuancing the discourse on causality along Humean lines.

La Roche anticipates this move in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*. In addition to questioning how the roles of cause and effect are distributed between mind and body, the critique of causality and of a causally-driven legibility that she mounts in this novel foregrounds the importance of contingency. As the Baron tries to discover if something other than a temperamental predisposition might be to blame for his sister's "rührende Traurigkeit" (La Roche 2006: 21), he finds it impossible to make causal inferences based on physiognomic observation alone: "Er besorgte, irgendein begangener Fehler möchte die Grundlage dieser Betrübnis sein; beobachtete sie [seine Schwester] in allem auf das genaueste, konnte aber keine Spur entdecken, die ihm zu der geringsten Bestärkung einer solchen Besorgnis hätte leiten können." (ibid: 21) In the end, the Baron's curiosity does find satisfaction — not because he manages to break through Sophie von P.'s imperviousness to physiognomic readings, but rather by chance and by his sister's design. Just when the Baron is ready to admit defeat, declaring "ich

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habe sie beobachtet, aber weiter nichts entdecken können" (ibid: 26), his wife overhears Colonel Sternheim talking to himself about his love for Sophie von P. This discovery emboldens the Baron to approach his sister about the possibility of marrying Sternheim. During, and as a result of, the heartfelt tête-à-tête between the two siblings, Sophie von P.'s feelings for the colonel are revealed as an aggravating circumstance for her pre-existing inclination to melancholy. In essence, therefore, it is by accident, rather than causal physiognomic analysis, that Sophie von P.'s feelings transpire, setting the stage for a solution to the predicament of Sternheim's non-aristocratic pedigree.

Critique of causality is also built into the main storyline of *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, which follows the formula of virtue rewarded and vice punished, but not before some detours that upset the heroine's life in dramatic ways, making readers question whether virtue is indeed conducive to happiness. The sinuous life trajectory of Sophie von Sternheim shows that, when it comes to cause-and-effect relations, La Roche performs a delicate balancing act in this novel. On the one hand, as argued above, she cautions against the limiting habits of mind that can develop when one adheres too strictly to the doctrine of causal determinism. In this, La Roche follows Hume, whose name appears several times throughout her collection of autobiographical musings *Mein Schreibetisch* (1799, 2: 140-41 and 2: 453-55). The fact that the Scottish philosopher had made "einen sehr ernsthaften Ausfall gegen das Romanlesen" did not interfere with La Roche's appreciation for the "Weisheit und Güte" of his ideas, as she herself readily notes (ibid, 2: 454). If anything, it motivated her to prove Hume wrong by intervening in the debate on causality with the means afforded to her by literary fiction. Showing that the novel can hold its own in this important philosophical and scientific debate of the 18th century is one of the ways in which La Roche transcended her indebtedness to Hume. Another is that she used the medium of the body to advance her argument against a blind application of causal inference. This approach allowed La Roche not simply to critique causality and physical transparency, but to show that these dogmas shaped conceptions of human nature more broadly. From this position, she also made a case for literature in general, and novels in particular, as media that can most reliably foster a comprehensive understanding of human beings by synthesizing different disciplinary perspectives on the topic and submitting them for readers' review.

On the other hand, La Roche did not completely disavow causality. Let us remember in this context that *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* ends up endorsing a causally-driven narrative scheme grounded in conflict and resolution, reward and punishment. Furthermore, La Roche's use of non-verbal communication grants causality an important role in tracing the effects of one's physical presence not so much on the mind or soul, as on one's surroundings. In the example from before, Sophie von P.'s gloomy demeanor may not dictate her

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character, but it does set in motion a series of events without which nothing else in the novel would be possible. If the Baron had not noticed and become concerned about his sister's facial expression and body language cues, the love of Sophie von Sternheim's parents for each other would have remained unfulfilled, and neither the novel's heroine nor her story would have seen the light of day. An apparently unimportant physical attribute, then, incites the main action of the story, making possible the subsequent plot points by which the novel advances.

The partial endorsement of causality that we see in these examples does not bespeak a lack of literary craftsmanship or intellectual refinement on La Roche's part. Quite the contrary, it is the mark of a mind attuned to the novel's struggle for legitimacy and well-versed in theoretical discussions that over time conceded more and more literary merit to causation. Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700-1766), for instance, imported the principle of sufficient reason from the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754) into the realm of literary criticism, where it spawned the idea that dramatic action must develop causally if readers are to perceive it as probable: "Nach der Weltweisheit entsteht alle Wahrscheinlichkeit aus dem Satze des zureichenden Grundes. Wo man also alles in einander, das ist, das folgende von einer jeden Begebenheit in dem vorhergehenden auf eine begreifliche Weise gegründet antrifft; da ist Wahrscheinlichkeit." (Gottsched 1734: 294) For all their disagreements with Gottsched, Johann Jakob Bodmer (1698-1783) and Johann Jakob Breitinger (1701-1776) extolled causality as well. According to the former theoretician, "die Wahrnehmung *des verknüpften Zusammenhanges* [der Erdichtungen] mit bekannten Dingen" (Bodmer 1741: 548, my emphasis) optimizes the impact of literary fiction on readers, and it also lifts poetry and the novel "zu der Würde der Historie, welche in dem höchsten und äussersten Grade der Wahrscheinlichkeit bestehet" (ibid: 548).

The little doubt that remained in the wake of such pronouncements about whether having a causal engine to propel the narrative forward was a matter of convenience or necessity for novels, would completely dissipate within a few of years:

> Daferne auf unserer Erdkugel alle Dinge in einer genauen Verbindung stehen, so muß auch überhaupt unter den erzählten Begebenheiten eines Romans ein Zusammenhang seyn. Keine darf daher den andern widersprechen, und überhaupt muß eine genaue Wahrscheinlichkeit beobachtet seyn. […] Dieses verbindet einen Dichter, sein Gedicht also einzurichten, damit die folgenden Begebenheiten aus den vorhergehenden können gerechtfertiget werden. ("Einige Gedanken und Regeln" 37)

In this anonymous text from 1744, the abundance of terms denoting compulsion (*muß, keine darf, verbindet*) makes clear that a causal concatenation of events was

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not something that authors could opt in or out of, but rather an indispensable, foundational element of novelistic fiction. Writing in 1751, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715-1769) echoed the same sentiment when he distinguished narration (*erzählen*) from a simple account of events (*erwähnen*). Whereas the latter reports on what happened, the former needs to explain how everything came about causally: "Wir wollen nicht bloß wissen, was vorgegangen ist, sondern oft auch, wie es erfolgt ist. Wir wollen eine Sache in den Umständen wissen, durch die sie eine Begebenheit geworden ist" (Gellert 1751: 97).

The increase in causality's literary appeal documented by these theoretical excerpts has to do, first of all, with the fraught position that eighteenth-century novels occupied between public acclaim and critical hostility. Literary pundits who had initially dismissed the novel as wanting in poetic achievement were forced by the high tide of popular taste to take this new literary form seriously. Under these circumstances, they embraced causality because it offered a convenient justification for admitting novels into the select ranks of mainstream culture. Highlighting the causal thread that runs through novelistic narratives fostered a rapprochement between philosophy, natural philosophy, and literature that lent novels the prestige and sophistication they were accused of lacking. Secondly, the cause-and-effect idiom also helped the novel develop a unique identity that could set it apart from its predecessors and competitors. Following the transition from its 'old' incarnations (courtly-historical, picaresque, gallant, and allegorical political) to the 'new' bourgeois prototype, the novel was no longer beholden to the paradigm of heroic action and extraordinary adventures that had ruled this genre until the 18th century. Under the influence of Leibniz's doctrine of the best of all possible worlds, attention shifted instead to the possible and the probable, which, according to Breitinger, catered more than the real to people's thirst for knowledge (1740: 61). That this emancipation from *das Wunderbare* to *das Wahrscheinliche* inaugurated — and was itself fueled by — a new, causal episteme is nowhere more clear than in Lichtenberg's description of his era as one "in welcher sich alles durch Ursache und Wirkung verwandt ist, und wo nichts durch Wunderwerke geschieht" (1972: 264). If David Hume had concluded that relations of causation can never be more than probable, novelists showed that causal relations, in turn, influence the perception of probability.

In practice, the novel's recalibration away from the grand sweep of adventure translated into new kinds of protagonists and a new mode of writing. Larger-than-life, idealized heroes no longer fit the bill, and supernatural creatures had fallen out of fashion even earlier because, as Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696-1782) observed, nothing destroys the impression of reality more than "to introduce allegorical beings co-operating with those whom we conceive to be really existing" (Kames 1970, 3: 249). In the place of these older characters that exceeded the bounds of probability arose individualized, down-to-earth protagonists that could

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forge a new model of readerly engagement, predicated on identification rather than emulation. This same goal of relatability made necessary a different form of narration, pragmatic and picturesque. If readers were to feel not as passive observers of contrived scenarios, but as witnesses to probable events, authors had to renounce "cool description and florid declamation" (Kames 1970, 2: 154) and focus on lulling readers "into a dream of reality" where "every thing [*sic*] must appear as actually present and passing in our sight" (ibid, 2: 155).

Through their symbiotic association, causality and body language played a central role in all eighteenth-century projects that furthered this two-pronged objective of reforming character and style in novels. In a first instance, detailed physical descriptions made characters come alive on the written page precisely by virtue of the cause-and-effect relationship they entailed between external appearance and inner character. David Hume's description of how causal inference works goes a long way toward explaining the impression of vividness that we derive from such an experience. When we are engaged in causal reasoning, Hume argues, we make inferences from an impression present before the mind to an absent cause or effect. That is to say, causation takes us beyond what is immediately "present to the senses" (Hume 2000: 52), with the result that we not only think of absent causes and effects but believe them to be present. It is easy to see from this perspective why causation was not easily dispensable to a novelist like La Roche, who aimed to put events and characters before readers' eyes. Physical descriptions increased the liveliness of characters also by helping to explain what motivated them to act in a certain manner. The window that body language cues offered into human psychology made it easier for readers to identify with characters, not just to observe or learn from them. Last but not least, the nexus between causality and physical legibility actualized the narrative potential of change that Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg (1744-1796) and Johann Jakob Engel (1741-1802), among others, foregrounded in their early narrative theories. Depicting events, actions, and passions in the process of becoming rendered characters lifelike and believable, hence more likely to arouse empathy. And one of the most effective ways to signal such change, many agreed, was non-verbal communication. Lord Kames, for instance, made the case that gestures enliven the incidents that come under our observation, that they express "sentiments beyond the reach of language" (1970, 3: 219), and that these sentiments must carefully "represent the different stages of a passion, and its different directions, from its birth to its extinction" (ibid, 2: 165). In the German-speaking world, Johann Jakob Engel combined his interest in the role of gestures and mimicry in the theater with Friedrich von Blanckenburg's idea that novels should depict "[das] Werdende" of a protagonist (Blanckenburg 1965: 68). The result was a narrative theory in which gestures and pathognomic expressions are intimately bound up with the ideas of development and interconnectedness that expository prose set out to convey. Just

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as the writer of genuine prose must lead us "von einer Idee auf die andre, von einer Veränderung des Systems auf die andre, durch alle dazwischenliegende mittlere Ideen" (Engel 1964: 9), so too physical descriptions must function syntagmatically as part of a causal progression, of "[eine] zusammenhängende Reihe innerer und äusserer Zustände," as opposed to "[eine] magre, abgerissene Folge bloßer Begebenheiten" (ibid: 10).

To sum up the argument in this section, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* depicts the relationship between the body and causality as ambivalent. On the one hand, the two are intimately connected in helping the new novel achieve probability and vividness. On the other hand, La Roche remains profoundly skeptical of the union between these two entities. In the episode that revolves around Sophie von P.'s gloomy disposition, a seemingly unimportant facial feature exposes the limitations of a physical and narrative universe governed exclusively by causal laws. The fact that causal reasoning cannot, by itself, solve the mystery of Sophie von P.'s melancholy and that this pathognomic riddle lies at the origin of the main narrative, gestures toward a connection between body and text that falls in the realm of the organic and outside the reach of purely causal taxonomies. Like the body, the text cannot be reduced to causal, mechanical, or physical processes. And similar to texts, bodies invite interpretation — the kind of interpretation that does not exclude empirical observation and analysis, but can also not be reduced to these cognitive operations, since so much in literature, as in real life, depends on the imagination and on historical conditions. As a result of this powerful two-way analogy, the body and the text become more visible in their resistance to the hegemonic propensities of causation. Readers pay more attention to them precisely because they exceed the explanatory power of cause-and-effect models of analysis. The act of telling and the experience of living become evident in the fault lines of causal hermeneutics. The message is clear: people and novels draw life and sustenance from much more than ordinary physics. Just as stringing words together does not amount to a story, much less a novel, so too human life is more than a sum of body parts and operations. Causality may help us make sense of what we experience and read, but it does not exhaust the meaning of our existence and of texts. Human life and narrative life are, in a word, irreducible.

Multiperspectivism and Corporeal Visibility

Another way in which Sophie von La Roche restores visibility to the body and challenges the opinions prevalent in her time about corporeal legibility is by developing her own multiperspectival approach to the text and the body. In order to show how this manifests in the novel, I turn now to a watershed episode in the heroine's life. During a pretend country festival, Sophie von Sternheim's honor is

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tarnished beyond repair when everyone witnesses her coming out of a parsonage with a blush on her face, followed shortly thereafter by the prince. The incident stands out by virtue of its life-altering consequences for Sophie, but also because it is the only one that the three main characters and correspondents report on at length and in immediate succession — beginning with Derby, followed by Seymour, and ending with Sophie. A close reading of these three letters will reveal that their authors embody different attitudes vis-à-vis the importance and meaning of physical appearance, thereby undermining the assumption of many of La Roche's contemporaries that the body is an immutable object with a fixed meaning, detached from any specific human observer.

Lord Derby's account of the country festival is marked from the beginning by an interest in its participants, their dress and behavior — more precisely, by the varying degrees to which the attendees inhabit their peasant costumes:

> … unsre Bauerkleider machten eine schöne Probe, was natürlich edle, oder was nur erzwungene Gestalten waren. Wie manchem unter uns fehlte nur die Grabschaufel oder die Pflugschare, um der Bauerknecht zu sein, den er vorstellte; und gewiß unter den Damen war auch mehr als eine, die mit einem Hühnerkorbe auf dem Kopfe, oder bei Melkerei nicht das geringste Merkmal einer besondern Herkunft oder Erziehung behalten hätte. (La Roche 2006: 134)

Despite using a word with strong theatrical connotations (*Probe*) to describe the gathering, Derby does not take people's identification with their role as a measure of acting talent. Nor does he see in it a barometer of how successful the performance is in replicating a real-life country festival. In this class-conscious milieu, passing for someone below one's rank is considered contemptible, rather than admirable, because it proves beyond doubt that one is not naturally noble in character. While Derby may seem to be divorcing social status from moral standing, he is in fact enshrining their interchangeability by treating all peasants as socially and morally inferior. His reading of events also rests on the assumption that the body unleashes its full revelatory potential in situations in which it is supposed to dissimulate. The implication is that some people unwittingly expose their true character when trying to impersonate someone else. This intimates, contrary to what many believed in the late 18th century, that the body in its natural state is not transparent, i.e., that its meaning is not self-evident.

To be sure, it is not customary to ask whether a performance reveals something about an actor's character that is not readily apparent in real life. Here, however, framing the issue in this way allows Derby to make himself and Sophie stand out. He lauds the adeptness with which his natural elegance enhances the bold and resolute character of the Scottish peasant he plays. In other words, Derby thinks he is ennobling the role, rather than stooping down to the level of a real peasant. But

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even this pales in comparison with Sophie, whom he describes as exuding charm and beautiful nature even when she is in disguise:

> Aber diese Zauberin von Sternheim war in ihrer Verkleidung lauter Reiz und schöne Natur; alle ihre Züge waren unschuldige ländliche Freude; ihr Kleid von hellblauem Taft, mit schwarzen Streifen eingefaßt, gab der ohnehin schlanken griechischen Bildung ihres Körpers ein noch feineres Ansehen, und den Beweis, daß sie gar keinen erkünstelten Putz nötig habe. (La Roche 2006: 134)

Everything in Sophie's appearance, from physical traits and hairstyle to body posture and dress, is cast here as a token of her natural charm. The peasant clothes do not work to her detriment, as they do for others. On the contrary, they match and even enhance her Grecian simplicity. The heroine's disposition and demeanor also contribute to the overall effect of her presence. She is blithe and light-hearted, speaks most obligingly with all the ladies, and makes a strong impression on everyone at the party (ibid: 134-35). Derby's extensive remarks about the universal appeal of Sophie's appearance legitimize his own fascination with her and reveal his sharp spirit of observation, which he directs at other people as well. He notes, for instance, that Countess F. and Sophie's aunt showered the young lady with caresses so as to keep her in a lively mood until the arrival of the prince, and that Seymour "verbarg […] seine Liebe unter einem Anfall von Spleen, der den sauertöpfischen Kerl stumm und unruhig, bald unter diesen, bald unter jenen Baum führte" (ibid: 135). These examples demonstrate that Derby is a keen observer of body language, but also a connoisseur of human nature who reads the reactions of those around him through a psychological lens — not only a moral one, like Lavater. Put another way, Derby tries to see beyond what is directly visible, which reinforces the idea that, for this particular character, there is more to physical appearance than meets the eye.

Seymour sounds a different note with respect to the role of people in general. His letter opens with a description of the festival from which all participants are conspicuously missing: "der Fürst gab unter dem Namen des Grafen F* dem Fräulein von Sternheim eine Fête auf dem Lande, welche die Nachahmung auf den höchsten Grad der Gleichheit führte, denn die Kleidungen, die Musik, der Platz, wo die Lustbarkeit gegeben wurde, alles bezeichnete das Landfest" (La Roche 2006: 143). Even though Seymour and Derby both note the verisimilitude of this make-believe peasant gathering, their explanations for it diverge. As we have seen, Derby's argument is that the celebration comes so close to a real country fête because some members of the nobility are not truly noble in character. Seymour, on the other hand, believes that the festival feels real because it has been made to look this way through setting, props, music, and costumes. The human actors do not figure into his assessment at all. Unlike Derby, he says nothing about their contribution to the event or about its effect on them, instead reducing

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the performers metonymically to "Kleidungen." By Seymour's own admission, what ultimately interests him is the abstract idea behind the gathering, as well as its practical realization: "Der Gedanke und die Ausführung entzückte mich in den ersten zwo Stunden, da ich nichts als die Schönheit des Festes und die alles übertreffende Liebenswürdigkeit des Fräuleins von Sternheim vor mir sah" (La Roche 2006: 143). The aesthete Seymour is too invested in lofty ideals to pay attention to the human bodies that inhabit this space. The fact that he never acknowledges the presence of human actors or their role in rendering this performance realistic and aesthetically pleasing bespeaks a naïveté or indifference vis-à-vis physicality whose devastating consequences materialize later in his epistle. I will come back to this shortly.

For now, let it be noted that Seymour's idealism is also reflected in the way he first describes Sophie's figure during the festival as the living image (*Bild*) "der lautern Unschuld, der reinen Freude" (La Roche 2006: 143). Just as the governing *idea* of the festival is what most intrigues Seymour about the event, so too Sophie appeals to him not for her looks, but for the *image* she projects of an exuberant, all-around virtuous woman. This is again in contrast to Derby, who scrutinizes Sophie's appearance closely, and not for innocent reasons. Twice in the novel, he likens the heroine to Milton's Eve: once in his epistolary account of the festival, and the second time right before he rapes her (ibid: 222), clearly indicating that his emphatic interest in Sophie's physique is driven by sexual desire. By having one suitor idealize the heroine while the other objectifies her sexually, La Roche exposes the Madonna/whore binary that traditionally governed male representations of women. In addition to fueling this gendered critique, the presence or absence of physical details from Seymour's and Derby's descriptions of the country festival dramatizes the radical difference that perspective makes in the perception — sensory as much as intellectual and emotional — of one and the same person or event.

The issue of perspective gains added relevance as the two men proceed to interpret a particular expression on Sophie's face, extrapolating from it the nature of her character and of the young woman's relationship with the prince. The entire chain of events is triggered by the heroine's mysterious disappearance in the parsonage adjacent to the festival grounds, which immediately sets everyone talking. Everyone except Derby, that is, who, instead, finds a more favorable position from which to observe Sophie upon her return. By his account, it took less than 15 minutes for the young woman to come back to the party, visibly changed:

> Die schönste Karminfarbe, und der feinste Ausdruck des Entzückens war auf ihrem Gesicht verbreitet. […] Niemals hatte ich sie so schön gesehen als in diesem Augenblick; sogar ihr Gang schien leichter und angenehmer als sonst.

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> Jedermann hatte die Augen auf sie gewandt; sie sah es; schlug die ihre zur Erden, und errötete außerordentlich. (La Roche 2006: 135)

The novelist does not leave readers in doubt about the highly subjective nature of this description. Derby makes no secret that this is his own personal opinion ("Niemals hatte *ich* sie so schön gesehen"), and his description of Sophie's euphoria as radiating from her face to the entire body similarly dispels any expectations readers may have of reading an objective report. The idea that delight claims more and more visibility in the heroine's body reminds us that this perception is filtered through Derby's eyes and consciousness. Sophie could not possibly have grown more graceful or attractive over the course of 15 minutes. Rather, the aura of mystery surrounding the heroine's actions leads Derby to project increasingly more desire onto her body.

Another effective strategy that La Roche uses to highlight the importance of perspective in the interpretation of facial and body language is to contrast Derby's viewpoint with that of others who witness the same incident. The ordering of details in the passage above indicates that, for this particular observer, the blush which animates the young lady's features upon her return to the party is tied to a feeling of contentment, whereas the intensified blush that subsequently appears on her face derives from Sophie's realization that her every move is being watched and analyzed. The same facial expression can convey different emotions, Derby suggests, but many people are ill-qualified to detect such nuances, much less to understand their far-reaching implications. This applies to no one better than the festival attendees, who clearly do not distinguish between different types of blush responses. From the moment when the prince walks out of the parsonage, Sophie's pathognomic reactions admit of only one explanation in the eyes of bystanders:

> In dem nämlichen Augenblick kam der Fürst auch mitten durch das Gedränge des Volks aus dem Pfarrgarten heraus. Nun hättest du den Ausdruck des Argwohns und des boshaften Urteils der Gedanken über die Zusammenkunft der Sternheim mit dem Fürsten sehen sollen, der auf einmal in jedem spröden, koketten und devoten Affengesicht sichtbar wurde; und die albernen Scherze der Mannsleute über ihre Röte, da sie der Fürst mit Entzücken betrachtete. (La Roche 2006: 135-36)

As the young lady blushes for a third time, the onlookers become firmly convinced of a licentious relationship. Unfortunately for Sophie, her interactions with the prince during the remainder of the festival continue to feed the rumor mill with speculations and mean-spirited comments. The affability with which she brings refreshments to the guest of honor, the consuming glances that he casts in her direction, and his insistence that she sit next to him — all these are taken as sure signs that Sophie has surrendered to the prince's charms.

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Seeing how pleased the heroine's aunt is with this turn of events, Derby also believes at first that only a tryst can explain the quasi-simultaneous exit of Sophie and the prince from the same building. Soon, however, he changes his opinion for reasons that deserve careful analysis. Derby writes:

> Wut nahm mich ein, und im ersten Anfall nahm ich Seymourn, der außer sich war, beim Arm und redete mit ihm von dieser Szene. Die heftigste äußerste Verachtung belebte seine Anmerkungen über ihre [Sophies] vorgespiegelte Tugend, und die elende Aufopferung derselben; über die Frechheit sich vor dem ganzen Adel zum Schauspiel zu machen, und die vergnügteste Miene dabei zu haben. Dieser letzte Zug seines Tadels brachte mich zur Vernunft. Ich überlegte, der Schritt wäre in Wahrheit zu frech und dabei zu dumm. (La Roche 2006: 136)

Even at the height of his anger, Derby retains an interest in the external manifestations of affect, as the expression *außer sich sein* and the adjective *äußerst* — a derivative of *außer/äußerer* — suggest. But physiognomic and pathognomic savviness is nothing if not accompanied by common sense and receptivity to context. For what ultimately restores Derby's faith in the young lady's integrity of body and character is the flawed, implausible reading that Seymour provides of her facial expression. The duplicitous behavior against which he rails is so uncharacteristic of Sophie's modest, natural manner that Derby immediately sees through the fallacy and distances himself from it. Faced with the absurdity of his interlocutor's hypothesis, the skilled physiognomist recognizes what no one else at the party seems to see: that body language is semantically polyvalent and that, under the influence of appearances and strong emotions, people often settle for one of many possible interpretations, which in turn limits how they perceive reality and engage with others.

With fresh eyes and a mind free of preconceptions, Derby decides to investigate the matter further and finds that Sophie had, in fact, met with the parson in order to give him money for the village poor. The truth, then, reveals the heroine to be more noble — not less — than circumstances make her appear, and also more noble than those who pass facile judgment on her: "Und dennoch war das Mädchen würklich edler als wir alle, die wir nur an unser Vergnügen dachten, während sie ihr Herz für die armen Einwohner des Dorfs eröffnete, um einen der Freude gewidmeten Tag bis auf sie auszudehnen" (La Roche 2006: 137). While acknowledging the innate merits of Sophie's generosity, Derby also ponders how much charity, when not recognized as such, can stray from its intended purpose and harm its benefactor: "Was war aber ihre [Sophies] Belohnung davor [*sic*]? Die niederträchtigste Beurteilung ihres Charakters, wozu sich das elendste Geschöpf unter uns berechtigt zu sein glaubte." (ibid: 137) To those who might argue that acts of kindness do not need external recognition and that inner satisfaction is the only true reward for virtue, Derby responds that the expression of this very satisfaction

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on Sophie's face had been mistaken for a sign of guilt, causing her to be ostracized for immoral conduct. In other words, one can neither escape nor counteract the injurious effects of living in a society that places excessive value on decoding the body's messages but does not know how to do it properly or how to avoid the pitfalls inherent in this endeavor.

It is impossible to overlook the applicability of this sardonic comment to Lavater's declared aim of promoting the knowledge and love of mankind through physiognomics. But La Roche goes still further in criticizing the illusion of physical transparency and monosemy. As I have shown, the parsonage incident teaches that body language cues are often underread, overread, or otherwise misread. Another bitter lesson to be gleaned from this episode is that the few people who manage to see past circumstantial appearances and not past the body may well choose to employ the resulting insights for malicious purposes. Knowing the truth about Sophie's blushes and about what actually happened in the parsonage, Derby could easily clear the heroine's name. Instead, he keeps the information secret as a means to secure Sophie's trust and insinuate himself into her life. He is surprisingly open about it too, boasting to the letter addressee and to readers: "ich allein wollte die Sache ergründen, ehe ich ein festes Urteil über sie [Sophie] faßte, und siehe, ich wurde auf der Stelle für diese Tugend mit der Hoffnung belohnt, das liebenswerte Geschöpfe ganz rein in meine Arme zu bekommen" (La Roche 2006: 137).

By endowing Derby, of all characters, with the most prowess in reading body language, La Roche distances herself from the unquestioned assumption of physiognomists up to the 18th century that beautiful people and those skilled in physiognomic observation are morally superior. Derby's exultant, unapologetic confession also serves as a reminder that how emotions manifest in the body is different from how they are perceived and interpreted by various observers, and different again from how these interpretations are used. In this way, La Roche draws attention to the multiple layers of mediation between the body and its environment, similar to the ones between a text and the culture in which it is embedded. To borrow a Formalist term, *Sternheim*'s author uses literature to lay bare the physiognomic device with all its attendant problems. Through this process of defamiliarization, she achieves what Viktor Shklovsky would later argue of art in general: that it redeems experience from the blinding effects of habit. By exposing the mechanics of the physiognomic gaze, La Roche makes us see what we no longer notice because of custom or familiarity. She "return[s] sensation to our limbs," "make[s] us feel objects," and "lead[s] us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition" (Shklovsky 1990: 6). Faces and bodies thus gain visibility at the same time as the elaborate mechanism designed to erase them from view.

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This gesture of undoing draws much symbolic power from the perplexing effects of the physiogno-mania to which aristocrats fall prey in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*. One such effect that Derby elaborates on in his letter is the curious reversal of roles between him and the heroine. A misconstrued facial expression causes irreparable damage to Sophie's reputation, while Derby's "Begierde, die Sache ganz zu wissen" transforms him from professional bad guy ("berufene[r] Bösewicht") into "d[ie] best[e] Seele der ganzen Gesellschaft" (La Roche 2006: 137), because it brings him the closest of anyone to a plausible interpretation of Sophie's appearance. If misunderstandings are a commonplace in eighteenth-century literature, the same cannot be said of villains distinguishing themselves in a positive way and securing the victim's trust by pursuing the truth, rather than through deceit. Derby's singularity in this respect, coupled with the transfer of moral worth between him and Sophie, offers a scathing commentary on the hypocrisy of a society that advertises its adherence to a strict moral code, only to undermine it through questionable physiognomic practices. This posturing renders even more powerful La Roche's gesture of calling on readers to look at bodies and characters not for confirmation of inherited, preconceived ideas, but with an open mind. That literary works, more specifically novels, provide an ideal environment for this exercise in critical evaluation is implied by the fact that readers understand the characters they read about much better than people in the story understand one another through face-to-face interaction. Importantly, then, La Roche's argument is that novelistic prose can make the body visible not in spite of its fictional nature, but due to it.

Let us now move to the other suitor's letter in order to get more insight into the impact of perspective on body and text. Midway through the second epistle about the country festival, as Seymour begins to describe the parsonage episode, his interest shifts from abstract ideas to documenting body language signals. He observes Sophie's "zärtlich[e] und sorgsam[e] Miene" (La Roche 2006: 144) as she looks back and forth between the festival participants and the parsonage, then notes "de[n] leichtesten, freudigsten Schritt" (ibid: 144) with which she hastens into the parson's garden. The adjectives chosen to describe these reactions betray a mounting displeasure on Seymour's part, but overall he maintains a calm tone up to this point, reflecting the attitude of someone in search of answers to the enigma of Sophie's disappearance. Once she returns to the party, however, the letter becomes openly condemnatory. Seymour denounces the heroine's blush as an "Ausdruck von Zufriedenheit und Beschämung" (ibid: 144) — an oxymoronic combination of pathognomic expressions that exacerbates, rather than relieves, his suspicions of a romantic rendezvous in the parsonage. It makes perfect sense to him that such an event should be a source of both embarrassment and satisfaction to the heroine, and this misinterpretation wins him over even more when the prince comes out displaying "in vollem Feuer" what Seymour takes to be delight in, and

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passion for, the young lady (ibid: 144). Wholly convinced by now that Sophie is pretending virtue, Seymour gives free rein to his disappointment and indignation:

> Mit wie viel niederträchtiger Gefälligkeit bot sie ihm Sorbet an, schwatzte mit ihm, tanzte ihm zuliebe englisch, mit einem Eifer, den sie sonst nur für die Tugend zeigte. […] alle Grazien [waren] in ihr vereinigt, so wie es die Furien in meinem Herzen waren! Denn ich fühlte es von dem Gedanken zerrissen, daß ich, der ihre Tugend angebetet hatte […] ein Zeuge sein mußte, wie sie Ehre und Unschuld aufgab, und im Angesicht des Himmels und der Menschen, ein triumphierendes Aussehen dabei hatte." (La Roche 2006: 144-45)

A side-by-side comparison with Derby's account of the same events brings sharply into relief the differences between these two men's perspectives and physiognomic approaches. Here is how Derby describes Sophie's interaction with the prince after they rejoin the festivities:

> Die reizende Art, mit welcher sie dem Fürsten etwas Erfrischung brachte; die Bewegung, mit der er aufstund [*sic*], ihr entgegenging, und bald ihr Gesichte, bald ihre Leibesgestalt mit verzehrenden Blicken ansah, und nachdem er den Sorbet getrunken hatte, ihr den Teller wegnahm, und dem jungen F* gab, sie aber neben ihn auf die Bank sitzen machte; die Freude des alten von F*, der Stolz ihres Oncles [*sic*] und ihrer Tante […] — alles bestärkte unsre Mutmaßungen. (ibid: 136)

Derby uses mild, non-effusive words to describe Sophie's behavior. He pays as much attention to the young woman as to other people whose pathognomic reactions he uses in order to gauge the veracity of certain assumptions about Sophie. The very structure of his sentence — in particular, the alternation of viewpoints, the gradual build-up of evidence, and the fact that the conclusion is formulated at the very end — mimics the workings of inductive reasoning. Derby's methodology resembles that of an experimental scientist who first formulates a theory, then tests it by gathering and analyzing experimental data, and finally mobilizes his findings to confirm or disprove the original hypothesis. All this suggests that Derby is a much more unprejudiced, evenhanded spectator than the volcanic, tempestuous Seymour, who focuses exclusively on Sophie and does not shy away from using strong words to qualify her conduct. His emotionally-charged diatribe indicates a highly subjective observer, with no patience or appreciation for piecing various parts together into a fuller picture of people and events.

Seduced by the mirage of first impressions, Seymour decides early on that Sophie must have been feigning virtue ever since he met her. Unlike Derby, he never strays from this misjudgment, letting it color the way he reads all of the heroine's subsequent actions. As a result, Seymour's perception of Sophie moves between two extremes that rely heavily on the young woman's physical appearance. He now compares her to a former love interest whose favors could be

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bought, and he also declares with pathos: "Itzt […] verachte, verfluche ich diese Sternheim und ihr Bild" (La Roche 2006: 145). Both of these rhetorical gestures signal Sophie's demotion from the embodiment of an abstract ideal to the only other role available to her: that of a fallen woman. The equivalence between physical virtue and moral virtue would later emerge as one of the aspects that detractors of Lavaterian physiognomics most took issue with. But, as Sophie von La Roche shows here, this problem had been plaguing women's lives well before the publication of *Physiognomische Fragmente*, and with devastating implications too. Equally important is the fact that Seymour's deductive mode of reasoning widens the metaphorical gap between him and Derby. This is not, as it may appear, a story only about one man having sharper observation skills or being more physiognomically literate than the other, nor even about who can better control his emotions. It is, rather, about two fundamentally different philosophies regarding the import of physicality and abstract thought, body and mind.

The addition of a third perspective, that of the observed person herself, relativizes even more the meaning of Sophie's body language. It also gives readers additional information and the necessary tools to develop a fuller picture of what is happening. For instance, from a lengthy description in the heroine's letter of the outfit she wore at the festival, we find out that she is not as indifferent to her looks as Derby's letter had intimated, nor as clueless about the power of physical beauty:

> Mein edel einfältiger Putz rührte mich; er war meinem die Ruhe und die Natur liebenden Herzen noch angemeßner als meiner Figur, wiewohl auch diese damals, in meinen Augen, im schönsten Lichte stund. Als ich völlig angezogen den letzten Blick in den Spiegel warf und vergnügt mit meinem ländlichen Ansehen war, machte ich den Wunsch, daß, wenn ich auch diese Kleidung wieder abgelegt haben würde, doch immer reine Unschuld und unverfälschte Güte meines Herzens den Grund einer heitern wahren Freude in meiner Seele erhalten möchte. (La Roche 2006: 146-47)

Contrary to what the archvillain of the novel believes, Sophie is self-conscious about her physical appearance and its effect on other people, even chastising herself for her vanity, to which she openly confesses toward the end of the letter: "ich war eitel und sehr mit mir zufrieden […]. Ich hielt mich für ganz liebenswürdig" (ibid: 152). This does not make Seymour's assumptions correct, however. He, too, misses the mark by surmising that Sophie is callously instrumentalizing her beauty. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Sophie's letter makes clear, her close interactions with the prince after the parsonage incident had been pre-arranged by others, making Sophie feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Additionally, the letter provides ample evidence that the heroine is too naïve about certain aspects of body language decoding to successfully use her looks for personal gain. Even

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though she understands that the impact of physical demeanor extends beyond herself, the young lady remains oblivious to the possibility of physiognomic and pathognomic misreadings and to the damage these can cause. Because she always assumes the best of everyone, it never occurs to Sophie that other people might think poorly of her by misconstruing her features, expressions, and gestures. She, too, misreads the non-verbal cues of others, thereby adding more fuel to the fire of her social troubles. In one instance, Sophie participates in a lottery, draws a miniature depiction of Daphne pursued by Apollo, sees some of the ladies around her make strange faces, and concludes that they must envy her for getting the most beautiful picture (La Roche 2006: 147-48). Knowing what we know from Derby's letter about the aunt's machinations to push Sophie into the prince's arms, a more plausible explanation is that these ladies' faces express pity or worry for a young woman in danger of sharing Daphne's fate. Similarly, after returning from the parsonage and interacting with the prince on several occasions, the heroine notices that everyone is giving her looks, but she mistakenly attributes them to envy and servility: "ihr Betragen gegen mich war, als ob ich eine große Würde erhalten hätte, und sie sich mir gefällig machen müßten" (ibid: 150).

While Sophie's letter rectifies some of Derby's and Seymour's assumptions, her account cannot lay claim to correctness or completeness either. Seeing the story from the two men's perspectives is crucial to understanding the parsonage affair in all its ramifications. Every new letter about the country festival forces us to readjust our eyesight and weigh a new interpretation of events — not in order to find the most accurate one, but to broaden our own grasp of events and characters. Similar to different interpretations of a literary work, the three festival reports are neither correct nor incorrect; they are disparate and equally valid. There are no ethical or epistemological absolutes anymore. The absence of a Kantian thing-in-itself, of an authoritative version of events compels readers to develop their own reading of Sophie's blush and of her physical interactions with the prince by integrating different vantage points. After seeing the parsonage incident through the eyes of three different focalizers, we no longer take the meaning of bodily cues for granted. Instead of looking past or through Sophie's body for ideas espoused by her observers, we visually record its presence and give it due consideration. Her body exchanges transparency for visibility, if only for a brief moment before individual readers settle on a particular interpretation.

Experimenting with Multiperspective Narration

If seeing things from several viewpoints restores the body's visibility in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, it is also the case that the body, in turn, forms the precondition for the multiperspectivism showcased in the novel, which it enhances

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to a degree notable among La Roche's contemporaries. A brief detour through the larger contemporaneous debate about the import of perspective, as well as through the history of the epistolary novel up to 1771 is necessary here in order to gauge how unique the multiperspectivity was that La Roche modeled in the three letters analyzed above.

By turning their attention to the issue of perspective, eighteenth-century novelists took part in a comprehensive cross-disciplinary conversation about the growing importance of visuality, which complicated, if not altogether undermined, pre-existing notions of truth and meaning. In response to the large-scale visualization of knowledge during the Enlightenment, two different reactions emerged. On the one hand, efforts were mounted to retain control over the process of signification, as can be gleaned, for instance, from theories of language and semiotics developed during this time. As Michel Foucault (1994) and others (Wellberry 1984, Kuzniar 1986) have shown, the meaning of signs during the eighteenth century, be they natural or arbitrary, was deemed immediate. Each sign acted as a mediator between representations and things-in-themselves, and this mediation was supposed to be transparent so as not to impede intuition. With the transition theorized by Foucault from a ternary sign system to a binary one, the gap between sign and meaning closed even more, as did the possibility of an equivocal interpretative system. According to the prevalent one-sign-equals-one-meaning dogma, reading signs involved recognition, rather than interpretation, and ambiguity did not factor into the semiotic systems developed at that time. Eighteenth-century semiotic thinking did not admit of signification problems, least of all that there may exist any "transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification […] has no limit" (Derrida 1978: 281).

On the other side stood those who did not perceive the shift to a visually dependent culture as a threat, but as a gateway to new epistemic possibilities; those for whom the universalization of vision did not invalidate knowledge per se, but opened people's eyes to alternative ways of acquiring it. People like Leibniz, in whose theory of monads the idea of a perspectival universe plays a defining role (Leibniz 1989: 46-47)[4] and who would later inspire Nietzsche to declare in no uncertain terms that a thorough understanding of the world is not possible outside an embodied, perspectival viewpoint:

> Es gibt *nur* ein perspektivisches Sehen, *nur* ein perspektivisches »Erkennen«; und *je mehr* Affekte wir über eine Sache zu Worte kommen lassen, *je mehr* Augen, verschiedne Augen wir uns für dieselbe Sache einzusetzen wissen, um so

4 Leibniz's ideas on the perspective character of human perception would later be developed in psychology by Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) and in philosophy by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961).

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> vollständiger wird unser »Begriff« dieser Sache, unsre »Objektivität« sein." (Nietzsche 1964: 362)

Or someone like Goethe, who emphasized the need for history and, by extension, all grand narratives to be rewritten periodically. This was necessary, according to him, not on account of changes in the object of study — for instance, through the discovery of new information about the past — but rather in recognition of the fact that the lens through which we judge the world at any given moment is historically determined and variable:

> Daß die Weltgeschichte von Zeit zu Zeit umgeschrieben werden müsse, darüber ist in unsern Tagen wohl kein Zweifel übrig geblieben. Eine solche Notwendigkeit entsteht aber nicht etwa daher, weil viel Geschehenes nachentdeckt worden, sondern weil neue Ansichten gegeben werden, weil der Genosse einer fortschreitenden Zeit auf Standpunkte geführt wird, von welchen sich das Vergangene auf eine neue Weise überschauen und beurteilen läßt. (Goethe 1949: 413)

Literature did not remain untouched either by this preoccupation with the role of perspective in knowledge formation. Under pressure to prove their worth and relevance, novels were particularly eager to leave their mark on topical debates. Questions of perspectivism gained special resonance in the novel also due to the importance of focalization to this literary genre. Novelists want readers either to see events from a character's perspective or to resist identifying with any single point of view, and they mobilize specific narrative resources toward this goal. Acutely aware that discussions of perspectivism in the wider cultural circles of the 18th century were of immediate relevance to their literary endeavor and that they had much to contribute to the topic, writers of novels entered the conversation in the best way they knew how: through their craft. This is where epistolary novels come in.

Montesquieu, Rousseau, and especially Richardson had popularized multi-perspective narration in England and France around mid-century. In the German-speaking lands, however, this was still a relatively new endeavor when *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* appeared in 1771. Writing around the same time as La Roche, Friedrich von Blanckenburg, the first German theorist of the novel, dismissed the epistolary form as "der schlechtere Roman" (1965: 287). The reason was that its large cast of changing characters supposedly hampered the text's ability to establish causal connections between inner and outer developments.[5] Only one year later, Blanckenburg would radically revise his opinion of the epistolary genre

5 "Es dünkt mich […], daß dieser Zusammenhang [von Wirkung und Ursache] mit Wahrscheinlichkeit nicht anschauend erhalten werden kann, wenn die Personen selbst den Roman schreiben, das ist, wenn er in Briefen geschrieben ist. Die Personen sind […] oft in zu großer Bewegung, als daß sie in sich selbst zurück kehren, Wirkung und Ursach [*sic*]

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in the positive review of Goethe's *Werther* that he published in *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* (1775). The theorist's swift change of heart suggests that his initial objections against the letter novel did not grow out of a deep-seated conviction about what this genre could or could not do. Rather, they had to do with the lack of epistolary novels in German, which posed a problem for people like Blanckenburg, who were trying to establish a German national literature free of foreign influence. Why attempt to explain the absence of a homegrown epistolary tradition and run the risk of casting German writers as inferior? Dismissing, instead, the entire epistolary genre as inconsequential appeared a better alternative, because it kept Blanckenburg out of contentious waters until the likes of Goethe came along and gave him cause to alter his opinion. It was a short-lived rhetorical move, but one that speaks volumes about the state of epistolary novel-writing prior to La Roche's arrival on the literary scene.

A few novels in letter form had been published on German soil before, but none had risen to the level of their foreign prototypes. A case in point is *Das Leben der Schwedischen Gräfin von G.* by Christian Fürchtegott Gellert. This novel from 1747/48 was considered, even in its time, a weak imitation of Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), because it tried, with mixed results, to reinscribe the new aesthetic of multiperspectivism into an older Baroque model of novelistic narration. Richardson ushered in narrative elements which have, since then, come to define the epistolary genre, but which three centuries ago were at the forefront of innovation: "elliptical narration, subjectivity and multiplicity of points of view, polyphony of voices, interior monologue, super-imposition of time levels, presentation of simultaneous actions" (Altman 1982: 195). Concurrently with, but in contradistinction to Richardson, Gellert was holding on to the previous century's idealized characters and improbable situations. Under these circumstances, the way was open for Sophie von La Roche to write the first Richardsonian epistolary novel in German. And that she did, even adding her own original touches to it. Derby, Seymour, and Sophie deliver not just complementary, but competing, versions of events — and that is the mark of true polyphony, as Mikhail Bakhtin has argued as part of his work on Dostoyevsky (cf. Bakhtin 1984). The three letters from *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* that I have analyzed previously offer a poignant example of polyphonic dialogue. In their accounts of the country festival, all three correspondents focus on the heroine's facial expression upon exiting the parsonage. Their readings of it are starkly different, and for this reason, they provide a good measuring rod for the disparity of perspectives in La Roche's novel. To Derby, whose report comes first, the mysterious change in Sophie's demeanor makes her even more attractive and him more resolute in his evil purpose. In a

gegen einander abwiegen, und das Wie bey dem Entstehn ihrer Begebenheiten so aufklären könnten, wie wir es sehen wollen." (Blanckenburg 1965: 285)

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move to criticize society's obsession with appearances, La Roche casts the villain, of all characters, as the only one with sufficient common sense and trust in Sophie's integrity to move beyond first impressions. Seymour, by contrast, takes Sophie literally at face value and concludes that she is dissimulating. In turn, Sophie mistakes Seymour's and the public's inquisitive looks for a sign of fascination with her. Coming as it does after the two men's reports, from which we already know what people think of the episode, Sophie's letter underscores the magnitude of her naiveté and foreshadows the downward turn in her fortunes.

Some theorists consider multiperspectivity a form of epistemological skepticism, a way to question the singularity of truth. Bakhtin would fall in this category, criticizing as he does the widespread misconception that, if two people disagree, at least one of them must be in error. Other critics highlight the split in multiperspectivity between subject and object positions. For her part, La Roche uses this technique as a tool for psychological analysis and social critique, but also in order to render the body visible and to stage a pretend competition for narrative authority. Since the novel ends with the words of a latecomer to the plot (Lord Rich), no one can reasonably be said to emerge a winner from this rivalry. This gestures toward an extreme form of plurality being modeled in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*. The result is a much more radically polyphonic novel than those by La Roche's compatriots, and even than those of Richardson.

La Roche more radical than the crowned master of epistolary fiction? Let me unpack this by taking recourse to an important distinction that narratology makes in the nature of multiperspectivism. Narrative theorists Ansgar and Vera Nünning emphasize that irrespective of the number of characters, focalizers, and viewpoints, there are two possible multiperspectival structures in prose fiction: closed/monologic and open/dialogic (Nünning/ Nünning 2000: 60-62). The former is characterized by the convergence of perspectives into a single authoritative voice, as in the case of omniscient narrators. By contrast, dialogic multiperspectivity thrives on divergence, on the simultaneous presence of several voices that comment on and relativize one another. When the same event is narrated by two or more narratorial instances, as in the epistolary novel, disparities are bound to appear at the level of emplotment, but they do not necessarily amount to different standpoints. If characters' voices merge into a single perspective or are subordinated to the voice of the author, then the respective novel is not polyphonic. In a dialogic novel, each voice must have its own validity, its own narrative weight, be borne of its own separate consciousness, and put forth its own distinctive interpretation of events. As far as Richardson is concerned, Bakhtin and the Nünnings place him in the tradition of the monologic novel, where the relationship among character voices is deliberately orchestrated by an author. The same can be argued for Christoph Martin Wieland on the German side. To be sure, La Roche's mentor did use perspective narration, especially in

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his early works (cf. Kurth-Voigt 1974). But the examples analyzed by Lieselotte Kurth-Voigt in her 1974 study also demonstrate that Wieland consistently ends up either with a narrator who is not really neutral or with a hierarchy or convergence of perspectives, all of which go against the idea of true polyphony.

Sophie von La Roche, by contrast, takes Richardson's model and radicalizes it by means of three innovations — two structural and one qualitative. In the first place, she eliminates all reply letters. The main correspondents in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (Derby, Seymour, and Sophie) never write to one another, and their addressees remain silent throughout. This does not undermine "die Fiktion des vertraulichen Dialogs" (Wiede-Behrendt 1987: 328) that epistolary novels cultivate, since letter addressees function as stand-ins for the reader anyway. What it does is draw attention to reading as an act of what Paul de Man has called "supplementation," whereby readers supply what is missing from the text (1986: 3-20). The lack of reply letters means that, while messages do circulate between people, as can be implied from what they write, we do not see that process unfolding before our eyes. The parallel here between textual and human physiology is striking. In the latter case, too, we believe that blood flows through the body even though we cannot see it with the naked eye. What we think we know and believe to be true is oftentimes based on subjective interpretation, rather than observed facts. Similarly, how we 'read' bodies and texts is as much a product of the imagination as of perception. To borrow Viktor Shklovsky's language again, the omission of reply letters from La Roche's novel exposes the narrative "device," i.e., it lays bare the logic governing epistolary fiction and transfers more hermeneutic responsibility to readers. In the absence of any real epistolary exchanges, attention shifts from what is being said and its effect on the recipient to how, why, and by whom it is said. This focus on the writing act and agent is exacerbated by the omission of all dates from the letter headings. To be sure, there is a chronology of letters, just as there is a timeline of narrated events. But to the extent that one can work out a temporal sequence, one has to do so internally, from the letters themselves. This presupposes the same kind of engaged work that La Roche encourages in readers when decoding body language: to go beyond conventional ordering parameters that limit analysis, such as numbers, labels, and taxonomies. Instead, we must pay close attention to what is in front of us and derive our own chronologies, causalities, and connections — that is to say, our own meanings. Not knowing when each letter was written makes it hard to anticipate whether a new one will move events farther along the chronological axis or, rather, provide a different version of something we already know. The uncertainty that comes with each new missive keeps readers in a constant state of vigilance and emphasizes the ineluctable connection that exists between content and perspective in an epistolary novel in which external coordinates of time have been suspended.

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The second means whereby La Roche gives Richardson's format a more polyphonic quality is the introduction of an intra-diegetic editor, whose presence is needed precisely because the epistolary experience is no longer reciprocal or punctuated by dates. Since there are no reply letters and no external markers of time to impose order from outside, a new principle must be found for arranging the non-sequitur epistles. This is where the editor comes in. The fictional editor's voice is heard in between letters, commenting on them, transitioning from one to the next, or providing contextual information – in a word, facilitating the narrative flow. For much of the novel, it is impossible to determine the exact identity of this editor. (Only later do we infer with certainty that it is Rosina, Sophie's former chambermaid.) But we do know from the very beginning that this editor is female, and also a character in the plot. Her participation in the story diminishes the threat of centralization posed by a fictional editor. As a character, Rosina might very well be writing her own letters. And, in fact, she is probably doing just that, if one bears in mind the words with which the novel opens: "Sie sollen mir nicht danken, meine Freundin, daß ich so viel für Sie abschreibe" (La Roche 2006: 19). Some critics cite the inconsistency in Rosina's interventions as a major structural defect of the novel. The intra-diegetic editor plays a more visible role in the beginning and fades from view toward the end. But this is, I argue, yet another way in which La Roche prevents the editor from turning into a dictatorial presence and drowning out the interplay of voices in the text. If anything, Rosina's presence contributes in an essential way to the multiperspectivism of the novel by extending its scope beyond the level of the main characters.

Last but not least, La Roche develops her own brand of multiperspectivity, paradoxically by allowing for overlap among the main correspondents. Derby's, Seymour's, and Sophie's viewpoints are fundamentally different, but not polar opposite in nature. As the country festival reports evince, the three focalizers are strikingly similar in certain respects. Derby and Seymour both judge women by their physical appearance, and the conclusions they draw — albeit through different approaches — are equally flawed, taking a big emotional and social toll on the heroine. Resemblances also exist between Sophie and the two men. Like Derby, she understands the importance of physical appearance, and yet, like Seymour, she displays a dangerous naiveté regarding the incidence and perils of misinterpretation. It may be said, then, that *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* develops a variant of multiperspective narration that foregrounds both the divergence and the convergence of individual viewpoints, thereby complicating the black-and-white division that Ansgar and Vera Nünning postulate between monologic and dialogic novels. Highlighting the connections among various focalizers alongside their disparities enhances the novel's multiperspectivity by showing that there is no single, correct physiognomic interpretation, no objective,

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absolute truth to be uncovered and adopted uncritically, but rather multiple epistemic possibilities to which readers should add their own.

This brings us to another reason why La Roche's approach to the body and to multiperspective narration, as illustrated by the three different readings of Sophie's blush, was singular and consequential in the late 18th century. It was not just because epistolary novels were scarce in the German-speaking lands or because La Roche developed Richardson's model further, but also because she thereby took a firm stance in a heated literary polemic of the day. In essence, the disagreement revolved around the changing balance of power in the interpretive process as a result of more people reading new kinds of literature. But larger issues were at stake if one bears in mind that developments in the literary sphere went hand in hand with broader changes in society, such as the increase in literacy and education (especially among women and the lower classes), and the religious and political move away from authoritarian rule to democratic forms of agency. On one side of the debate stood the Leipzig theoretician Johann Christoph Gottsched, and on the other the Swiss philologists Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger. All three men embraced the Enlightenment ideas of education and emancipation through knowledge, and they all believed that the form and content of literary representation played a crucial role in achieving these goals. What they disagreed on was how much control and, by extension, how much autonomy each of those involved in the literary process should have. According to Gottsched, the theoretician must first lay down the rules by which the writer and, finally, the reader, perform their respective tasks (1751: 125). Gottsched may have fought to release literature from the patronage of religion, but he was not ready to share his victory with non-theoreticians, least of all with readers, who in his poetics become the object of a double mechanism of disenfranchisement. Not only is the public relegated to the bottom of the literary heap, but, in order for its opinions to have any weight at all, they must be squeezed into a pre-given mold, modified so as to conform to someone else's rules. Bodmer and Breitinger, on the other hand, advocated a return to poetic fantasy through the author's imaginative faculties. They highlighted the role of *Einbildungskraft* in art (Bodmer 1891: 92-93) and believed that excessive dependence on an authority figure limits the imagination's capacity to liberate the individual. For this reason, they reacted vigorously against Gottsched's ideas that poetry should derive from rules and that theoreticians must oversee the production of literary meaning. But even these two theorists did not focus on the reader. To be sure, emancipating the writer was a step forward compared to Gottsched. But the fact that Bodmer and Breitinger did not envisage any freedom trickling down to the reading public places them in a moderate position when it comes to salvaging the mind from intellectual tutelage through reading.

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How radical, then, La Roche must have seemed in using a polyphonic format that stressed the reader's importance in negotiating among multiple perspectives. Almost half a century after Gottsched, a critic poised to aid literary creation instead of defending the supremacy of theory would, similar to La Roche, treat readers as active creators of meaning. The theorist in question is Friedrich von Blanckenburg, who, at the end of his review of *Werther*, encouraged the novel's readers to be better friends in real life than Wilhelm was to Werther — in other words, to filter what they read through their own conscience (1975: 85). Both La Roche and Blanckenburg indirectly stressed that literary meaning is not exhausted in the process of creation and that the literary work continues, even after its completion, to act as a reservoir of potential interpretations that readers actualize in their own individual ways. However, La Roche's contribution to this topic runs a little deeper — not simply because her text preceded Blanckenburg's treatise by three years, but because she located the novel's potential to produce critical thinkers in the very form and style of this genre, instead of relying solely on the common sense and moral compass of readers, as Blanckenburg proposed. La Roche's approach, therefore, highlighted in more specific and practical terms the unique qualities of this new narrative genre. It is precisely this kind of evidence that the novel needed in order to succeed in its bid for legitimacy throughout the 18th century and beyond.

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The symbiosis between multiperspectivism and the body that I have outlined for *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* indicates that, whether we encounter someone in real life or on the written page, the way we see them is always embodied and subjective — not in a privative, but in a creative sense. If any act of reading, whether textual or physiognomic, involves interpretive mediation and is inherently perspectival, then there is no absolute meaning, no univocal answer to what a body or text signifies. This realization is liberating both for the subject and for the object of the reading gaze. For readers, because it validates and stimulates their interpretive efforts, opens them up to being changed by the experience of reading, and also because it highlights the responsibility that comes with such analytical work. In turn, the object of the reading — be it the body or the text — becomes free to stand for itself, visible and autonomous; to invite exegesis and resist it too; to be the *how,* not the *what* of interpretation; to generate ever new questions without providing answers; to be meaningful at every moment, and to refuse the closure of a final verdict; in other words, to stay open, incomplete, protean.

Bodies and texts that expose the multiperspectival structure of looking and being looked at demystify monadic conceptions of identity, relishing instead in the "unfinalizability and indeterminacy" (Bakhtin 1984: 63) that modern novels have been trying to render in various ways. One of the benefits to be gained from fostering this unfinalizability of body, self, and text, as La Roche does in *Geschichte*

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des Fräuleins von Sternheim, is the preservation of life itself. As Lichtenberg notes in his answer to those taking him to task for "invent[ing] intentions in Hogarth's work such as never had occurred to him" (1970: 10), reading something into a text that its author never foresaw is not detrimental, but advantageous and even necessary. In fact, he goes on to say, the more readers see themselves as arbiters of that text's creation, the better. A "plurality of observers," "insights and ideas" (ibid: 13) ensures that the text is recreated over and over again. And through this unending work of remaking, readers-exegetes help "maintain [the] vitality" of texts (ibid: 13). This line of argument can be extended to include the human face and body as well, if we bear in mind that a similar manifesto for perceptual and interpretive openness underlay Lichtenberg's critique of Lavater's physiognomic doctrine.

Not unrelated to the notion of multiperspectival reading as a life-sustaining endeavor are two other cornerstone issues whose fate is similarly decided by whether or not novelists and readers honor the indeterminacy of bodies and texts. One may not expect this of a literary genre that relies heavily on recounting past events, but at stake in multiperspective novels is humanity's future and freedom. To speak with Bakhtin again, at the end of a polyphonic novel "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future" (1984: 166). It is precisely in this pre-linguistic, not-yet world of endings-turned-beginnings — a world à la Sophie von La Roche, ripe with possibilities and interpretations — that the body regains its visibility, freedom, and semantic potential.

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