Historical Background

Preamble

As the 18th century drew to a close, a German-born Swiss-naturalized artist working in the style of William Hogarth (1697-1764) and James Gillray (1756/7-1815) produced a collection of satirical etchings that highlighted the incongruities of the Age of Reason. Balthasar Anton Dunker (1746-1807) published *Das Jahr MDCCC in Bildern und Versen* (1800) in response to the invasion of his adopted country by French forces — a move which flew in the face of the ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality that the French Revolution had championed not even a decade earlier. One of the etchings in this collection (Fig. 1) depicts a magic lantern show in which images of mysterious characters parade under a Latin motto commonly found in churches and on old tombstones: "Hodie mihi, cras tibi" (*My turn today, yours tomorrow*). Most of the tableau is taken up by this procession and by what the intradiegetic audience does not see, namely the magic lantern itself and the man operating it, on whose identity the meaning of this emblem-like allegory depends. The halo above his head, the left hand arrested in mid-air, and the book at his feet entitled *Aussichten in die Politik* would have made clear even to those unfamiliar with the profile of Johann Caspar Lavater that the projectionist in Dunker's etching was the Swiss minister and author of *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit* (1768-73/78) whose work on physiognomy sparked a wave of controversy in late eighteenth-century Europe.

On the surface, Dunker's etching refers to the last and less talked-about phase of Lavater's life. By the time the French occupied Switzerland in 1798, the theologian's influence was beginning to wane. Not so his fervor, which he thenceforth poured into criticizing the effects of French expansionism on the political, religious, and economic life of Switzerland. Lavater did recognize that this foreign intrusion was facilitated by an internal movement against Bern's supremacy over the other cantons, but he believed this division could be overcome "wenn keine fremde Einwirkung, kein Trotz und keine Gewaltthätigkeit mit ins Spiel kömmt [*sic*]" (1801-02, 1: 99-100). As the year 1798 rolled around, Lavater saw his hopes for a peaceful resolution to the inner-Swiss conflict shattered by the French invasion and by the ensuing dissolution of the Swiss Confederacy into

Fig. 1 Etching from Balthasar Anton Dunker's "Das Jahr MDCCC in Bildern und Versen" (Bern, 1800). Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Lavater is depicted putting on a magic lantern show under the symbolic supervision of Niklaus Friedrich von Steiger (1729-1799). The last mayor to rule Bern before the dissolution of the Old Swiss Confederacy in 1798 looks on benevolently from a portrait on the left-hand wall while Lavater enchants the audience with his moving images.

the Helvetic Republic. In a series of politically charged sermons and letters, he condemned the reprehensible conduct of "Freiheits-Heuchler" (Lavater 1801-02, 3: 180), even threatening the French with public exposure if they did not alter their

predatory, violent treatment of the Swiss (ibid, 1: 64-65). But Lavater also imparted hope in his writings — sometimes by encouraging an internal reconciliation "zwischen Stadt und Land" (ibid, 1: 95), other times by predicting the fall of the French government[1] and of the new abuse-prone Helvetic Directory,[2] and still other times through prophecies of the coming of the Kingdom of God.[3]

Dunker masterfully captures this combination of provocative and comforting, secular and religious rhetoric that characterized all of Lavater's endeavors, not just his anti-French crusade. Read in a political key, the visual narrative woven by the Swiss pastor in Dunker's etching divines that just as Bern (symbolized by the bear) had been brought down by the two revolutionaries Peter Ochs and Frédéric-César de la Harpe (represented by the ox and the harp-playing devil), the same fate would one day befall the insurgents. This political interpretation does not exhaust the complex meaning of the picture, however. Judging by his posture, Lavater could just as well be preaching from a pulpit about the ephemerality of life, delivering a speech before an audience, or performing on stage. This conflation of religion, politics, and theatricality — doubled by a blurring of boundaries between entertainment, education, and horror that was typical of magic lanterns in their heyday — intimates that bodies, images, and texts operate on several levels of signification, not just one, as Lavater professed in *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (1775-78). There is deep irony in the fact that a man whose entire lifework hovered between disciplines had such low tolerance for semiotic versatility. This is precisely why Dunker cast Lavater in the role of magic lantern showman. What is being ridiculed in the etching is not the pastor's confidence in the liberation of Switzerland, to which Dunker subscribed whole-heartedly, nor the positive effect that Lavater's message of hope could have

1 In a letter from 1798 to Jean-François Rewbell, a member of the French Directorate, Lavater foretells with brash confidence and uncanny accuracy a development that did come to pass within the timeframe he provided: "Mir sind die jetzigen Directoren, mir sind Sie, bester Mann! — wie unstürzbar Sie sich auch glauben mögen — schon wie gestürzt vor Augen. […] Sie haben das Recht, über dieß Wort zu lachen. Aber es wird […] keine zwey Jahre anstehen, Sie werden an Ihre Brust schlagen, und froh seyn, wenn Sie bey uns einen sichern Zufluchtsort finden […]. So manches Unglaubliches ist geschehen, was ich ahndete […]. Auch dieses könnte geschehen; was sage ich — könnte? Es wird geschehen" (1798: 23-24).

2 In a letter from April 1799, Lavater uses historical examples to warn the Helvetic government about the outcome of its leader's efforts to centralize power and suppress opposition: "Terrorismus ist das unverkennbare Siegel innerer Schwäche; eine Zeitlang kann er sich halten und imponieren, in die Länge geht's nicht! Siehe Kromwels [*sic*] und Roberspieres [*sic*] Geschichte! Werde unsere Regierung doch nicht der dritte Band dieser Geschichte!" (1800: 39-40).

3 See, for instance, Lavater's poems "Zürich am Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts; oder die Hoffnung am Neujahrstag 1800" and "Zürich am Anfang des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. Lavaters Schwanengesang" (1801-02, 3: 180-95).

had on Swiss people, but rather his belief that everything — from the human body to the future — can be read, that there is only one correct way to do so, and that this act of reading falls under divine purview.

In order to make the extradiegetic viewer cognizant of this triple fallacy, Dunker deprives an owl figure of its rightful place in the magic lantern show, relegating it instead to an obscure position under the table. From Lavater's viewpoint, salvation can only be obtained, literally and figuratively, from above — through the *deus ex machina* intervention of a mythico-religious creature that brandishes a flaming sword.[4] In reality, Dunker suggests, liberation from the French was more likely to come from the decorated owl that tries to draw the projectionist's attention by standing close to his feet and our attention by looking straight at us. In all probability, this animal character is a stand-in for Baron von Thugut (1793-1801), the Austrian foreign minister whose physiognomy repeatedly invited comparisons with an owl and who had promised to protect Switzerland from the French. Dunker depicts the ever-mystical Lavater gazing off into the distance, too engrossed in his prophecy to notice the one who can truly 'do good.' The pulpit may have been replaced with a sturdy table for support, and the Bible may have ceded its place to a technological invention, but Lavater's vision is as colored by theology as ever. In his hands, the magic lantern becomes a medium for mysterious revelation, rather than a rational instrument. From the lofty confines of his religious dogma, the would-be prophet can only conceive of a transcendental solution to Switzerland's political crisis, leaving the owl alone and dispirited in the netherworld of invisibility. What more bitter irony is there than a master seer with poor eyesight? If Lavater cannot, or will not, see what lies before him unless it fits into his worldview, how can he be trusted to read the future?

Dunker must have found Lavater's tunnel vision problematic not just politically and ethically, but also aesthetically by virtue of the reduction of semantic complexity that it engendered. Theorists of satire opine that much of the appeal of this genre to practitioners like Dunker derives precisely from its complexity. Gilbert Highet's description of the skills required of a literary or pictorial satirist makes clear how complex the creative process is at every stage, from choosing a topic and approach, to finding the right balance between denotation and connotation, humor and seriousness, authorial intention and readerly freedom:

4 One contemporaneous source interprets this character as the angel of destiny ("Nachtrag" 1800: 176), but the iconography matches more closely that of Uriel, an archangel who plays different roles in Jewish and Christian apocryphal texts and is commonly associated with fire, light, and the flame of regeneration. This is in keeping with his Hebrew name, which meant "fire of God" or "God is my light." In the Christian tradition, he is described as standing at the gate of Eden with a fiery sword. Oftentimes, Uriel is also portrayed as a sharp-sighted interpreter of prophecies and as an angel of salvation, both of which cohere with the pictorial message that Lavater conveys through the magic lantern in Dunker's etching.

> [The satirist] needs a huge vocabulary, a lively flow of humor combined with a strong serious point of view, an imagination so brisk that it will always be several jumps ahead of his readers […]. He must appear to be improvising, and yet afford us the satisfaction, when we reflect on his work, of seeing an underlying structure. (1972: 242)

Anton Dunker had a passion not just for satire but also for allegory, *Bilderrätsel*, and *Hieroglyphenschriften*[5] — in other words, for "alle möglichen Arten von diskursiven und kodifizierten Bildern" ("Dunker, Balthasar Anton"). All the more reason, then, for him to value and want to defend the metaphorical possibilities of visual and body language that Lavater tried to repress. Dunker's illustrations, etchings, and vignettes often reveal unexpected connections between image and text that would not have been possible in the Lavaterian straitjacket of monosemiosis. As will be argued in subsequent chapters, literary authors like Sophie von La Roche also recognized that Lavater's physiognomic theory threatened the plurality of signification and the inexhaustibility of interpretation on which their own work depended, and they reacted variously against it. Through the mode of reading that he practiced, Lavater cultivated an attention to detail, to human nature, and to form that resonated with literary authors, especially prose writers. But unlike them, the Swiss minister did not allow for a polychrome palette of interpretations. And that made all the difference.

Readability and Corporeality in Lavater

Lavater's unapologetic vehemence has always been an easy target for disparagement. Whether on account of what he said, who he said it to, or how he said it, almost everyone who was someone in the late 18th century distanced themselves from this tempestuous *Schwärmer*. Perhaps the best description of his ambivalent effect on people as famous as Johann Joachim Spalding (1714-1804), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), and Elisa von der Recke (1754-1833) can be found in a letter by Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg (1744-1796), author of the earliest German theory of the novel: "Ich glaube, dass von den Menschen, welche im geselligen Verkehr, sich ein wenig durch das Herz leiten lassen …, wenig[e], auf Dauer, Lavatern widerstehen; aber auch wenig[e] auf Dauer seine Freunde bleiben werden, welche gesunden Menschensinn ehren und suchen." (qtd. in Sang 1985: 196-97) Between his efforts to convert Goethe and Mendelssohn, his wild goose chases for miracles,

5 Dunker uses this designation for page-long hybrid texts in which small images are used instead of words or word parts. The result is a textual riddle guaranteed to boost intellectual engagement. A few examples of this can be found in *Das Jahr MDCCC in Bildern und Versen*.

and his heated exchanges with Lichtenberg over the merits of physiognomy and with Nicolai over the nature of evil,[6] Lavater never tired of supplying grist for the controversy mill. It would be repetitive and unproductive to rehash here over two centuries' worth of criticism mounted against the Swiss pastor. The more rewarding pursuit is to employ his own thinking as a lens through which to excavate Lavater's historical moment in all its complexity. What was it about this man's theories that made them compelling and problematic in equal measure? What discursive forces did he galvanize, and what larger transformations lurk behind his success and failure? What trends, inconsistencies, and contradictions do Lavater's ideas and the debates surrounding them reveal?

With these questions in mind, let us return to the fixation on readability for which Balthasar Anton Dunker takes the Swiss pastor to task. That the idea of visual literacy indeed haunted Lavater is apparent from the titles of works such as *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit* (1768-78), *Geheimes Tagebuch von einem Beobachter seiner selbst* (1771-73), and *Unveränderte Fragmente aus dem Tagebuch eines Beobachters seiner selbst* (1772-73). The words *Tagebuch*, *Beobachter*, and *Aussichten* gesture toward an interplay of seeing and reading, perception and cognition whose aim, as articulated repeatedly in Lavater's writings,[7] is to attain knowledge — of oneself, of other people, and, ultimately, of God. Lavater suggests that a gaze trained to read the physical world can pierce through what is otherwise inaccessible or undecipherable [*geheim*] — for instance, God and the afterlife. Just as character can be read from visible material form, so too the transcendental is immanent in the empirical.

If, as proposed above, we want to inquire why Lavater would develop a religious epistemology grounded in visual literacy, the most immediate explanation has to come from his theological outlook, which Dunker brings into the picture with good reason. Lavater criticized the idea of a transcendent God espoused by rationalist Enlightenment thinkers. In the Pietist spirit of yearning for a direct, personal connection with the divine, he saw God not as some abstract, distant entity, but as a living, immanent force whose presence humans can experience directly. In *Christlicher Religionsunterricht für denkende Jünglinge*, for instance, Lavater rejects the notion of "[ein] unsichtbare[s], unendliche[s], unvergleichbare[s], ein Erste[s], ewige[s], allgegenwärtige[s], Alles in Allen wirkende[s] Wesen aller Wesen" (1788b: 63) and suggests instead that we think of God as "ein gedenkbares, begreifliches, der menschlichen Natur analoges Wesen" (ibid: 80), "ein freythätiger,

6 For more information about the curious case of wine-poisoning that triggered this heated debate with Nicolai, see Freedman 2002.

7 In addition to *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (1775-78) and to *Vermischte unphysiognomische Regeln zur Menschen- und Selbstkenntnis* (1788c), the idea also appears prominently in *Aphorisms on Man* (1788a), an English-language collection translated by Johann Heinrich Füssli (commonly known in England as Henry Fuseli) and annotated by William Blake.

sich offenbahrender [*sic*], Alle die Ihn suchen, unmittelbar und augenscheinlich beglückender Gott" (ibid: 78). The lavish use in these excerpts of adjectives and adverbs related to seeing (*unsichtbar*, *offenbahrend*, *augenscheinlich*) and thinking (*gedenkbar*, *begreiflich*) is not idle. It makes clear just how important Lavater deemed these two processes that come together in the act of reading.

We find the same symbiotic relationship between sight and intellect in a passage from *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit* in which Lavater envisions meeting Jesus: "Was wird dann ein Tag, eine Stunde bey Christus, dem leibhaftigen Ebenbilde Gottes für uns seyn! Ihn hören; ihn sehen; in seinem Angesicht, in seinem Geiste lesen; — Ihn — ihn selbst sehen; Gott in ihm unmittelbar erkennen, wie wir erkennt [*sic*] sind." (1770-73, 2: 33) The tableau painted here by Lavater centers on vision in its many literal and figurative senses: as an act of foresight, imagination, perception, understanding, and revelation. The pastor sees the encounter with his mind's eye. In this vision, he scrutinizes Christ's face, recognizes in it physiognomic manifestations of God's presence, and realizes that he is reciprocating the gaze of the Almighty. This scopic triangulation has a cognitive component that is indispensable to the spiritual outcome of the experience. The pastor does not just see Jesus. He also hears and 'reads' him. This means that, after entering the body via the ear and eye, the sensations triggered by Christ's visage undergo an interpretation or apprehension which, in turn, brings about a double revelation: of God and of oneself. This revelation is fittingly captured in the text by a verb with resonances in both the perceptual realm and the cognitive one: *erkennen* ("to make out, to discern" or "to understand, to cognize"). It remains unclear if hearing, seeing, reading, and recognizing are successive stages in a hierarchical progression from perception through cognition to spiritual illumination, or, rather, if they are meant to be concurrent processes. But the crux of the matter is that, for Lavater, coming face to face with divinity engenders an act of reading in which body and mind join forces for the salvation of the soul. What we have here, in other words, is a perceptive event that relies on a cognitive apparatus and makes reading the locus of felt spirituality.

Lavater's obsession with reading the visible world for signs of divine presence may also have grown out of his frustration with not having any visions of the world beyond. We know this from two letters he sent to the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who is also present symbolically in Dunker's etching through a little inscription close to Lavater's body that reads "Das neue Jerusalem," in reference to Swedenborg's famous treatise *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* (1758). The letters in question concerned the death of Felix Hess (1742-1768), with whom Lavater had attended the Collegium Carolinum and undertaken a study tour through Germany. Struggling to cope with the loss of his friend (see Weigelt 1991: 15) and knowing Swedenborg's reputation for seeing and talking with angels, demons, and other spirits, the 27-year-old Lavater turned to the Swedish

mystic for help in establishing a channel of communication with the deceased. In the first letter, dated August 24, 1768, he asked Swedenborg if and when Hess would keep his promise of revealing himself to his friend. Additionally, Lavater wanted to find out how he could acquire for himself the privilege to "converse with Angels and Spirits without delusion" (qtd. in White 1867, 2: 457). After not hearing anything back for more than a year, the self-proclaimed "minister of the Gospel" must have feared that he was asking too much, so he abated his requests and drew up another letter. This time, he no longer sought predictions about the future or to be initiated into the mysteries of channeling spirits. Taking himself out of the equation, Lavater now called on Swedenborg to establish contact with the world beyond and describe to him Hess' postmortem condition in accurate visual detail: "paint to me his figure, state, *etc.* in such words, that I may know that God in truth is in thee" (ibid, 2: 458). We find the same emphasis on visualization at the end of this second letter, when Lavater entreats Swedenborg to reply "in such a manner, that *I may see* [*sic*] what I am believing upon the testimony of others" (ibid, 2: 458-59). What this suggests is that, since Lavater himself could not (learn to) have visions, he hoped that reading Swedenborg's first-hand account would put him in a trance-like state of receptivity akin to that of the Swedish mystic. In other words, he wanted to read himself into a surrogate visual/visionary experience. Despite the fact that both letters exude caution vis-à-vis Swedenborg's transcendental powers, it is clear from Lavater's requests that he was invested in a visual idiom and reading practice that gave pride of place to empirical observations but at times also exceeded the limits of human perception and rational thought.

If Lavater's focus on the visible can be traced back to his unique brand of mystical-pietistic theology, so too can his preoccupation with reading faces, albeit with a detour via his experiences attending to people in the throes of death. As a pastor, Lavater would often visit the sick and dying. Given that five of his children did not live to adulthood, he also encountered death at home, as well as among his friends. During the many hours he spent observing the moribund, the Swiss pastor began to see a common denominator in their faces. The profiles of two friends bearing no resemblance to each other during life all of a sudden looked alike shortly before and after death (Lavater 1775, 1: 8-9), as did fathers and sons "whose countenances seemed to be of a quite different class" when they were alive (Lavater 1840: 370). From this, Lavater concluded that, at the end of their earthly existence, all people, no matter how noble or ignoble, return to a common physiognomic blueprint in which the image of God "break[s] forth and shine[s]" (1840: 371). With this reading, the Swiss pastor returned to his own and only interpretive blueprint, according to which all physiognomic roads lead to divinity. The problem, as many people at the time saw it, was not simply that he kept rehearsing the same argument, or that this argument was heavily inflected with religion, but that Lavater did not conceive that his empirical observations could be interpreted

in different, equally valid ways. The one-dimensional hermeneutic enterprise that he developed throughout his career threatened to suffocate the freedom of thinking on which not only literary and artistic representation depended, but also the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment as articulated in Kant's famous dictum: "Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit." (2000: 9)

Reading in the Eighteenth Century

If Lavater's ideas had not struck a chord with his contemporaries, his name would never have found its way onto the lips of so many people, nor would it have stayed there until today. Out of fairness to the Swiss pastor, it is important to look past his personal quirks and put his obsession with the legible, the visible, and the physical in a larger historical context. With this in mind, my analysis in this section and the next will move in two directions simultaneously. In one, I shall engage with the question of legibility during Lavater's time. In the other direction, we will explore why interest in the body escalated and how views of the body shifted in the 18th century.

Lavater's penchant for reading and observing was anything but an anomaly in his day. Two and a half centuries after the invention of the printing press, developments were still afoot that grew and shaped print culture in significant ways. In a first instance, the rise of literacy during the 18th century fueled — and was in turn fueled by — an explosion in the number and type of publications. Newspapers, periodicals, and encyclopedias are only some of the new additions that, in conjunction with smaller, cheaper formats and higher print runs afforded readers unprecedented access to textual media and information. Equally beneficial for the establishment of a reading public was the growth of lending libraries and subscription reading rooms, as well as the increase of materials written in the vernacular, rather than Latin. The Enlightenment also marked a period of consolidation in the history of print culture, not just of diversification. With every century and every innovation in book manufacturing after Gutenberg, the output of books in Europe more than doubled. In Germany in particular, it is estimated that during the 18th century the number of books published each year increased tenfold (Jones 2015: 919). Over time, this led to an accumulation of knowledge that allowed scientists to build on the work of previous generations and pave the way for future progress.

Noteworthy during the 18th century was also the professionalization of book publishing. Under the pressures of the marketplace, a wide range of career paths emerged in the book trade. The role of publisher separated from that of printer and bookseller, and authors could more easily make a name for themselves due to

the elaboration of literary property regimes and the establishment of anti-piracy alliances (cf. Johns 2003). In Amsterdam, new social identities came into being on which a transnational learned community depended — such as the editor, the international publisher, and the literary agent (Goldgar 1995: 35-41). All these changes solidified the primacy of the printed word in creating and disseminating knowledge, in setting down history, in connecting readers otherwise separated by geography, ideology, or confession, and in making possible a competing source of authority in the form of a reading public. It was only a step from this to Enlightenment and revolution, as French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794) noted in his defense of print as a unique force for ushering in new political and epistemic forms (2012: 70). Deidre Lynch throws economy into the mix as well. According to her, the idea of imprinting a surface in order to render it distinct from another made its way from typography and numismatics into physiognomics, the novel, and philosophy — particularly John Locke's account of cognition as a process whereby experience inscribes itself on the mind (Lynch 1998: 34). In light of this, we can conclude that, during the 18th century, texts became more and more entrenched in Western culture, and reading established its dual importance as a precondition and vehicle for seismic cultural, economic, and socio-political transformations. One cannot overestimate the role that print played, especially in intellectual culture. It influenced the development of philosophical concepts and forms of literary writing, but it also shaped the mechanics of visual and cognitive processing in ways that spilled over into daily social interactions, as the example of physiognomics shows.

The large-scale expansion of reading did not just present opportunities; it also created anxiety about what and how people read. This is apparent, on the one hand, from developments in censorship, and, on the other, from debates—sometimes quite heated—over different aspects related to the writing, publication, and reception of texts. To be sure, censorship did not originate in the Enlightenment. The term *censor* existed already in ancient Rome, where it designated a magistrate in charge of overseeing public manners and morals. Measures against the circulation of ideas deemed dangerous were in place well before the invention of the printing press, but they required a more robust institutional apparatus post-Gutenberg (Lærke 2009: 3). What makes the 18th century interesting in a Prussian context is how differently Frederick the Great and Frederick William II approached censorship. Whereas the former instituted permissive regulations upon ascending to the throne in 1740, his successor imposed a stringent censorship regime beginning in 1788. On the surface, Frederick William justified his harsh stance on certain publications and authors — most famously, Kant — by invoking the need to protect Christianity from *Aufklärer.* Underneath, however, political anxiety had begun to brew post-1789 over a possible migration, through reading, of revolutionary ideas from France to the German-speaking lands. For an example of

how authorities tried to minimize the danger of contamination in the aftermath of the French Revolution, one need look no further than lending libraries and reading rooms, which were placed under police monitoring in Hanover in 1793 and altogether banned in Vienna in 1798. Newspapers, too, were scrutinized more closely by Prussian police in the 1790s (Jones 2015: 919).

If the growth of print culture triggered the implementation, not just in Prussia, but all over Western Europe, of stricter and more pervasive censorship mechanisms, the latter, in turn, produced a vigorous backlash. As historians of the book like Mogens Lærke and York-Gothart Mix have shown, the Enlightenment was innovative for questioning the fundamental justification of censorship as such, not just of particularly abusive cases. Put plainly, censorship had to legitimize itself for the first time under the pressure of manifestos like John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) and Christoph Martin Wieland's 1785 defense of the freedom of the press as "ein Recht der Menschheit," indispensable to people's emancipation from ignorance, oppression, and barbarism (1785: 194-95). The spike in censorship and the resistance to it are strong evidence that a general awareness developed during the Enlightenment about the subversive potential of texts. Far more than a source of information or entertainment, reading had the power to liberate minds and effect socio-political change. This is why the question of its value and effect became a prime battleground between those who wanted knowledge to remain a privilege and those who saw in it a right. At its core, the polemic was driven by concerns over the diversity of reading audiences and the interpretive freedoms they might assume. This is evident from the numerous warnings in conduct books, sermons, and moral treatises about the corruptive effect of novels on young women, as well as from eighteenth-century debates over the propriety of the novelistic genre. The nub of the matter was not that novels were being read. Rather, it had to do with *who* read them, *how* they interpreted the material, and *with what effect* for the socio-political status quo. Given that a sizeable portion of the newly emerging constituency of readers was represented by women, who occupied "a newly charged semiotic space of private life and domestic subjection" (Duncan 1992: 12), there was no telling how a particular text might be interpreted. The days had long gone when writing and reading were the exclusive prerogatives of men and when books could be understood only in a limited number of officially sanctioned ways.

Lavater's efforts, as derided by Dunker, to constrain interpretation into predetermined channels of discourse must be seen precisely in the context of this power struggle that ensued from the decentralization of book production and consumption. His attempt to will meaning into a one-dimensional tedium was, however, also a reaction to other intellectual, socio-economic, and political developments that broke up the internal coherence of former times. The new emphasis on rationality, empiricism, secularism, and individualism led to a loss of harmony that would never again be regained. There was no well-knit unity

of religion, moral philosophy, and natural philosophy anymore, no homogenous ensemble. Rather, multiple disciplinary viewpoints proliferated with which Lavater's mono-hermeneutic theology was poorly equipped to deal. Instead of exploring the opportunities that came with this change of paradigm, the father of modern physiognomics chose to safeguard a bankrupt worldview by policing the boundaries of interpretation.

The Readable Body in the Eighteenth Century

Having examined how reading — both in a literal and in a figurative sense — assumed a key position in the ethos of the 18th century, we come now to the more specific questions of why physical legibility was important and how the body was read at that time. This will allow us to more precisely situate Lavater's thinking in the discursive contexts from which it drew sustenance, and it will also prepare the ground for a discussion of Sophie von La Roche's break with the Lavaterian model of reading.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, I wish to pass in review here several interconnected factors that helped the body garner semiotic cachet during the 18th century. In the first place, physical appearance was of prime importance in the medical sciences as one of two main sources of information about disease. Without any viable technological means to look inside living bodies, doctors had to evaluate illness from outside based on patient narratives, which were considered subjective, and on observable signs of ill-health in patients' eyes, countenance, posture, skin color, manner of breathing, and behavior (Reiser 1978: 2). To be sure, the seeds of technology had been sowed, but it would take another century for them to sprout into fully functional, accurate, and practical equipment that could be employed in a clinical setting. The microscope, for instance, was already in existence, but because of technological imperfections, it was used throughout the 18th century mostly in private homes for recreational purposes and did not achieve its full potential as a scientific tool until the 19th century (Turner 2003: 525), which is also when the stethoscope and X-rays were invented. Similarly, even though a type of thermometer had been developed in the 1600s, this measuring device was plagued by limitations and could not be put into clinical practice until the mid-1800s. Given this dearth of medical technology, doctors had to employ their sense of touch in order to feel the pulse, approximate the body's temperature, and probe tissues beneath the skin. But even physical examinations of this kind were the exception rather than the norm. For the most part, physicians relied on what the patient looked like to the naked eye. To quote one of Lavater's rhetorical questions on this point: "Der Arzt, sieht er oft nicht mehr aus der Physiognomie

des Kranken, als aus allen Nachrichten, die man ihm von seinem Patienten bringt?" (1775, 1: 48)

Interestingly, in this, the heyday of what researchers have called "semiotic medicine,"[8] the term *pathognomy*, which initially referred to the study of the signs and symptoms by which diseases were distinguished, migrated from medicine into the realm of human emotions. There, it became a rallying cry for those who, like Lavater, believed in a connection between external appearance and internal substance, but who did not see eye to eye with him on the nature of that interiority. Whereas physiognomists maintained that anatomical contours were mapped onto an immutable moral character, Lavater's nemesis Georg Christoph Lichtenberg proposed that facial expressions were an indicator of complex and changing emotional processes: "die ganze Semiotik der Affekten oder die Kenntnis der natürlichen Zeichen der Gemütsbewegungen nach allen ihren Gradationen und Mischungen [soll] Pathognomik heißen." (1972: 264) Lichtenberg did not dispute "[die] absolute Lesbarkeit von allem in allem" (ibid: 265); what he resisted was the idea of *univocal* legibility that physiognomics rested on. Pathognomy, by contrast, appealed to him and his adherents precisely because it promised some semiotic leeway. In reality, the process by which doctors read physical appearance was not as open-ended as Lavater's detractors imagined. More on this later. For now, let it be noted that the semiotic procedures in effect in medicine resonated not just with the Swiss pastor's adversaries. Lavater himself espoused some of the ideas common in eighteenth-century medical practice, for instance that bodily expressions are symptoms whose internal causes need to be determined, investigated, and classified, similar to what nosography did with diseases. Seeing that physicians achieved all this simply by observing patients from a distance, Lavater took the idea to an extreme. The fact that in his treatise he physiognomizes people whom he had never met in person or who did not even exist in real life animates the message that reading outward appearance does not require interacting with the observed person or taking into account their individual circumstances. To put the point another way, for physiognomists of that time, the human body was unquestionably legible, and its meaning could be deciphered without much, if any, recourse to a personal or social frame of reference. The idea of "signification without context" has been coded positively by Emmanuel Levinas for freeing the face and, by extension, the entire human body to convey "meaning all by itself" (1985: 86), unadulterated by any outside reference. But this potential for unmediated signification could not be realized in the tumultuous reality of the German-speaking lands post-1750. Like the other problem that marred Lavater's theories, namely his one-interpretation-fits-all approach that would not admit of alternatives, the lack of concern with context bespeaks a privileging

8 On the history of medical semiotics, see Eich 1986, Hess 1993, Eckart 1996, and Kistner 1998.

of the universal over the particular that made physiognomics susceptible to appropriation by ideologues of every stripe — including those keen on racial taxonomies that objectified human beings by sorting them into types.

The emphasis on observation and analysis that fueled interest in the eloquence of the human body was not exclusive to medicine. Rather, it figured in many branches of philosophy and experimental science and reflected the rise of empiricism in the 18th century. As theology lost its explanatory power, the observation of experience became fundamental in studying the material world. Hans Blumenberg has argued that reading and observing also became a form of experiencing the world, where experience is understood as "disziplinierteste Form von Weltumgang, weil sie auf geradem Weg zum Urteil und damit zu jenen vorläufigen Endgültigkeiten führt, aus denen die Geschichte von Theorien und Wissenschaften besteht" (1993: 3). Whatever the ultimate goal and end result, it is clear that experience prompted a recalibration of discourse in the 18th century.

Another symptom of this empirical turn, which similarly increased the appeal of the body as a rhetorical site, was Enlightenment's infatuation with the confluence of visuality and knowledge. We see this preoccupation with a visual epistemology in sustained efforts at that time to make the invisible visible by way of gaining knowledge.[9] A case in point is the growing popularity of optical devices that bestowed or enhanced vision, such as amplifying glasses, telescopes, microscopes, peep-boxes, and magic lanterns. More than objects of private entertainment, these instruments became part of public lecture demonstrations that brought science to lay audiences and helped establish the professions of scientist and scientific instrument-maker (cf. Turner 2003). Sophie von La Roche herself attended such demonstrations during her 1786 visit to London and reported on them as follows: "Unser Abend verfloß bei physikalischen Experimenten, welche gewiß auch zum Gottesdienst gehören, indem sie uns so viel von den innern [*sic*] Eigenschaften der Wesen zeigen, wodurch ein fühlbares Herz zu vermehrter vernünftiger Verehrung seines Schöpfers geleitet wird." (1788: 293) Beyond the idea, reminiscent of Lavater, that experimental natural philosophy will lead to a deeper understanding of the glory of God, La Roche's diary entry illustrates the premium placed on techniques and instruments promising to open up to scrutiny an internal domain that was otherwise visually and epistemically inaccessible. Lavater attributes the same effect to the visual arts, in particular to figure drawing and portraiture, which he describes as conduits of epistemological-revelatory experiences, rather than aesthetic ones: "Durchs Zeichnen fieng [*sic*] mein dunkels [*sic*] Gefühl an, nach und nach sich einigermaßen zu entwickeln. Die Proportion,

9 See Barbara Stafford's *Body Criticism* for a detailed study of the "generalized somatic visibilization of the invisible" (1991: 26) that came with the shift from a text-based to a visually dependent episteme.

die Züge, die Ähnlichkeit und Unähnlichkeit der menschlichen Gesichter wurden mir merkbarer." (1775, 1: 8) In a later passage from his physiognomic treatise, the Swiss pastor elucidates that the art of drawing imparts the kind of knowledge that can neither be gained nor communicated through other means:

> Zeichnung ist die erste, die natürlichste, die sicherste Sprache der Physiognomik; das beste Hülfsmittel [*sic*] für die Imagination; das einzige Mittel unzählige Merkmale, Ausdrücke und Nüances [*sic*] zu sichern, zu bezeichnen, mittheilbar zu machen, die nicht mit Worten, die sonst auf keine Weise zu beschreiben sind. Der Physiognomist, der nicht zeichnen kann, schnell, richtig, bestimmt, charakteristisch zeichnen — wird unzählige Beobachtungen nicht einmal zu machen, geschweige zu behalten und mitzutheilen, im Stande seyn. (ibid, 1: 175)

As can be gleaned from this excerpt, the rising importance of visuality during the Enlightenment threatened the hegemony of the printed word. This does not mean that it displaced the paradigm of legibility. If anything, the shift toward visualization reinforced the norm of transparency by valorizing the easily discernable and the intelligible over the inscrutable and the equivocal.

In this period of heightened sensitivity to all things visible and legible, it is no surprise that the body took center stage. As Barbara Stafford has argued pointedly, "for the age of encyclopedism, the human body represented the ultimate visual compendium, the comprehensive method of methods, the organizing structure of structures. As a visible natural whole made up of invisible dissimilar parts, it was the organic paradigm or architectonic standard for all complex unions" (1991: 12). The idea expressed herein that the Enlightenment's interest in the body derived not only from its visual immediacy but also from the fact that it served as a model of organization for all "man-made assemblies and artificial compositions" (ibid: 12) brings us to important socio-economic developments that created a need for organization and classification in eighteenth-century society,[10] thereby adding fuel to the fire of physical legibility. The transition to an industrial economy that began in the mid-18th century brought with it an influx of serially produced goods and a mass exodus of people from rural areas. The loss of uniqueness that arose from being faced with never-ending numbers of similar-looking objects and faces made everyone insecure about their identity and place in society. Compounding the problem were changes in the social class structure, which also made people anxious about the identity of those around them and fearful of deception. Questions likewise proliferated about how one might be able to cope with and make sense of this rapidly changing environment. In the overcrowded, socially complex spaces of the dawning industrial age, calls

10 In his book *The Order of Things* (1994), Michel Foucault discusses at length this transformation in discourse, but he does not concern himself with why this shift came about.

for mechanisms that could set people apart and produce order, coherence, and comprehensibility were on the rise. This is where Lavater's promise of turning physical legibility into reality comes in. In the post-Gutenberg era in which the centrality of reading signaled a loss of *Selbstverständlichkeit* and *Selbstmitteilung* (Blumenberg 1993: 164), physiognomics allayed epistemological, psychological, and social fears of the unknown by assuring its followers that transparency was still within reach. Lavater's recipe for reading bodies offered a quick means to navigate the increasingly congested, opaque urban landscape, but it also played an important role in the still extant aristocratic courts, as Sophie von La Roche's novel *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* shows. Furthermore, physiognomics was readily available to anyone and could be implemented in everyday interactions without prior specialized training, since, according to Lavater, "jeder, jeder, jeder Mensch, wer er auch sey, [ist] mit einem gewissen Grade des physiognomischen Sinnes geboren" (1775, 1: 165). A coping mechanism it was, and a double one at that. Reassurance came not just from being able to position oneself vis-à-vis others, but also from the fact that, by participating in this process of legibilization, one fostered the swift exchange of information that kept commercial society going.

Reading the Body in the Eighteenth Century

For all the widespread appeal of physical reading practices during the 18th century, there was no consensus on how much importance to ascribe to the body and how exactly to read it. With the empirical revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries came a diversification of disciplines, methodologies, and perspectives that is on full display in the area of body semiotics. Opinions on this topic varied widely between, as well as within, fields and cannot be fully captured in the limited space of this chapter. Nevertheless, an outline — albeit schematic — of various disciplinary approaches to the body, is necessary for tracing some of the differences and similarities among physicians, philosophers, and physiognomists, which in turn will help situate Sophie von La Roche within the larger debates of her time.

The two core medical sciences of physiology, which studied the normal functioning of the human body, and pathology, devoted to the investigation of disease, underwent many changes throughout the 18th century but remained separate from each other in some important respects. Whereas physiology, acting as a linchpin between medical science and natural philosophy, had to account for phenomena in ways that reflected the natural-philosophical precepts of the time, pathology was not beholden to such parallelisms between universe and man. Instead, by virtue of its role in connecting medical theory to practical bedside experience, pathology focused on training doctors to recognize and interpret the signs of disease (Broman 2003: 481-82).

As a result of these divergent doctrinal positions, physiologists and pathologists looked at the body with different eyes. Following the turn to mechanism in natural philosophy during the 17th century, mechanistic explanations of the body gained widespread currency among Enlightenment physiologists such as Friedrich Hoffmann (1660-1742) in Germany, Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738) in Holland, Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) in France, and Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777) in Switzerland. Echoing a sentiment that had been building since René Descartes' *Treatise on Man* (1633), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz had already proclaimed in the 1680s that "the human body, like the body of any animal, is a sort of machine" (qtd. in Smith 2011: 290). The same idea continued to gain traction in the 18th century, when Isaac Newton's theories became firmly established in physics, when self-acting machines were starting to appear, and when, according to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, calls arose for paradigms that would facilitate the socio-political control of human beings. The Hippocratic view of the body as a receptacle filled with four humors on whose quantitative balance good health depended was on its way out, and in its place arose an understanding of the human frame as a vast apparatus governed by mechanical laws. To be sure, there also existed alternative doctrines (most notably, animism and vitalism) which insisted that the coordination of physical and chemical processes in the body lay beyond the reach of purely mechanical explanations — in other words, that there is more to life than mechanists could account for. As with any period of transition, the boundaries between these competing narratives were porous, so that oftentimes echoes of various theories intersect in the works of one and the same author.[11] But overall, for most of the 18th century, the view prevailed among physiologists that "medicine is the art of properly utilizing physico-mechanical principles, in order to conserve the health of man or to restore it if lost" (Hoffmann 1971: 6).

The shift from a hydraulic to a mechanistic paradigm exacerbated physiology's focus on the inner workings of the human body. We see this in the fact that the number of anatomical atlases reached its peak during the 18th century (Porter 2001:163), in part owing to developments in visual representation and in printing. This rekindling of interest in the interior of the body was matched by an almost complete lack of concern with its exterior surface, at least among physiologists. The atlases in question show that the two related disciplines of anatomy and physiology treated the skin as invisible, hence unimportant. As Albrecht Koschorke has argued, it was not until the later part of the 18th century that the epidermis began to be perceived as a necessary protective barrier from harmful environmental factors (2008: 474-75). Until the mid-18th century, by contrast, the skin was viewed

11 A good example is the Dutch anatomist Herman Boerhaave, who famously proclaimed the new mechanistic dogma in medicine, but also modeled the human body in terms of its chemistry, thereby preserving some of the old theory of humors.

as "a passageway for the influx and reflux of humoral substances" (ibid: 475), as a membrane permeable from both outside and inside, with positive as well as negative effects. Before long, this osmotic conception of the body expanded into the visual realm. If the body's exterior was susceptible to permeation by fluids, how could it resist the piercing gaze of a knowledgeable observer? That in reality physicians could see inside the human frame only postmortem, through autopsies, did not matter. Neither did the fact that doctors dissected away at corpses while claiming, as a way to distance themselves from the pre-existing humoral doctrine, that the body was a unitary entity, no longer divided into hierarchical realms and substances. What did matter was for the idea of complete legibility to reach outside medical circles. Why else, if not to coopt laypersons into the utopia of physical transparency, would Boerhaave have supervised the re-publication in 1725 of Andreas Vesalius' *De humanis corporis fabrica libri septem* (*On the Fabric of the Human Body in Seven Books*, 1543), in which transparent bodies are depicted in daily activities against realistic landscape backgrounds (Fig. 2)? It is not difficult to see that the subliminal message conveyed by such illustrations meshed well with Lavater's physiognomic project, which also professed to get under the skin of the observed person and similarly tried to hide its fragmenting effect on the body, albeit through a rhetoric of total harmony between outside and inside.

Pathology, on the other hand, paid close attention to the surface of the body for symptoms and signs of disease in living patients.[12] It had to do this not only by virtue of its role in connecting anatomical knowledge with medical practice, but also because the armamentarium by which doctors could tell what was happening inside the patient's body was extremely limited in the 18th century. Additionally, the fact that the humoral theory had lost its sovereign explanatory power bred anxiety among physicians, who tried to compensate for this epistemological *Verunsicherung* through the only mode of inquiry they could still rely on: visual observation. As Michel Foucault puts it, "the formation of the clinical method was bound up with the emergence of the doctor's gaze into the field of signs and symptoms" (1975: 91). Under these circumstances, medicine turned into an *Erfahrungswissenschaft*, and medical semiotics grew in importance. To deduce from this constellation of developments, however, that the body received full attention would be to simplify the situation dramatically. In reality, the status of human morphology was complex and multifaceted. Indeed, pathology endorsed a close inspection of the body's exterior, but the doctor's gaze was selective and reductive. In the first place, not all signs were deemed important and studied, only those indicating a departure from good health. Secondly, as intellectual and medical historians have pointed out, semiotic thinking of the 18th century was marked by a belief in absolute

12 For the difference, semantic as well as morphological, between symptoms and signs, see Foucault 1975: 90-91 and Reiser 1978: 1.

Fig. 2. Full-page illustration from the 1725 edition of Andreas Vesalius' "De humanis corporis fabrica libri septem," curated by Herman Boerhaave and Bernard Albinus.

transparency and intelligibility (cf. Foucault 1994, Hess 2003). Signs had only one meaning, and reading them involved recognition, rather than interpretation. The outer surface of the body, then, was not so much read as read *through*. It had no meaning of its own — only a functional one deriving from its role as a gateway to an otherwise inaccessible interior. Underneath the sensitivity that pathologists

professed to the body's signals lurked the same belief in a transparent exterior and in transparent knowledge that drove physiologists. And also like physiologists, pathologists relied heavily on manipulating dead bodies and on violating their integrity. The number of dissections increased in the 18th century, especially after Giovanni Battista Morgagni published *The Seats and Causes of Diseases Investigated by Anatomy* in 1761. This treatise popularized the idea that judgments made on the living were not enough to classify and study diseases, but had to be linked with characteristic lesions exposed after death by the pathologist's knife (Foucault 1975, 124-48 and Engelhardt 1996: 176-84). In a morbid irony, this meant that the most eloquent body was the one from which all signs of life had been erased. The corpse became "the scene of revelation" (Leder 1992: 22) for that which life "hides and envelops," namely truth (Foucault 1975: 166).

The doctrinal summations outlined above suggest that even though eighteenth-century physiology and pathology differed in their views of the body, some important common threads existed between them. Both disciplines evinced an orientation to the empirical — physiology by drawing on mechanical conceptions to give an account of how the human organism functioned, and pathology by foregrounding visual observation. Secondly, whereas the doctrine of the humors had painted an image of the body as externally consonant with the cosmos yet internally divided, the shift to a mechanical model lent the body identity with itself but dissolved "the mutual sympathy between the world and ego in favor of their polarization" (Koschorke 2008: 471). No longer a conglomerate of immiscible substances, human form came to be viewed as a system of elements that worked in concert with one another. With this newly gained unity, however, came an inflexibility regarding the interpretation of physical signs, which in turn precluded a full consideration of the body's expressive possibilities. The human frame that medicine studied and tried to heal was unified, but it was also a lifeless, objectified entity modeled on the workings of inanimate machines, with only one possible truth and one way to obtain it: dissection. The overestimation of corporeal interiority fueled a disregard for extrinsic articulations and invited the dissection — literal as much as metaphorical — of the body's outer surface in order to get to its innards. That is to say, while claiming to make physical appearance more legible, medicine erased it from view. Epistemologically, this corresponded to an analytical model in which knowledge is gained by breaking up wholeness and in which the findings are considered absolute, with no regard for alternative explanations or for the role of the interpretive agent.

In a different way, debates in philosophy also undermined the body's claim to visibility. The introduction of the experimental method in the sciences created both inter- and intra-disciplinary rifts during the Enlightenment, and philosophy is a pertinent case in point. Not only did it separate from science and theology, but it also became split internally between empiricists (John Locke, George Berkeley,

David Hume) and rationalists (René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza). The ideological division between these two camps turned on whether and how much humans depend on sense perception to gain knowledge. The prime bone of contention, then, was the status of physical experience and/in its relation to the mind. Rationalists maintained that some concepts or truths exist or can be ascertained outside the realm of experience, solely through the application of rationality. This valorization of immaterial reason and its attendant marginalization of corporeality was meant in big part to allay fears stirred up by the mechanistic doctrine, of a self-acting body that could get out of control. Empiricists, on the other hand, believed that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience, not from abstract *a priori* reasoning. As John Locke explains in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the mind is like "white Paper, void of all Characters," and it comes to be furnished with ideas "from *Experience*: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self [*sic*]" (1975: 104).

It warrants mentioning that these two ideological streams were not nearly as far apart as standard histories of philosophy make them appear. Locke, for example, did not dispute the role of the intellect in the formation of ideas. According to him, sense perception is the primary process by which we obtain knowledge about the world, but it is not sufficient; it suggests to us primary ideas, but needs reflection in order to give rise to abstract thoughts. On the other side of the divide was a similar scene, with the rationalist Leibniz conceding in his rebuttal of Locke's work that "the senses are necessary for all our actual knowledge" and that some "particular or singular truths" may depend on experience, on "induction and instances" (1982: 49). Even in its radical iterations, empiricism maintained an affinity with rationalism. The French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780), for instance, radicalized Locke's thoughts by admitting not two, but only one possible origin of ideas, namely sensation. As an explanation for reducing the number of ideatic sources, he contended that reflection is in principle nothing but sensation or the channel through which ideas flow from the senses (1798, 3:13). By eliminating reflection from the picture, the French philosopher did not, as one might suppose, drive another wedge between feeling and reason. On the contrary, Condillac actively tried to overcome the body-mind opposition by arguing that sensations can be treated as ideas since they too are "as representative as any other thought of the soul" (2001: 15).

Another attempt at synthesizing empiricism and rationalism can famously be found in German philosophy. Convinced that neither the empiricist blank slate model of the mind nor the rationalist notion of pure, *a priori* reason could adequately explain the formation of knowledge, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) exposed some of the fundamental problems of both dogmas in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In response to these insufficiencies, he proposed a broader focus of

inquiry — not simply on *how*, but also on *what* we know. Kant put forth a new epistemological doctrine, called transcendental idealism, which drew on the work of empiricists and rationalists alike. Furthermore, he extended their thinking into hitherto unexplored areas, for instance by positing that there are limits to what we can know and that the human mind, far from being passive, plays an active role in structuring reality. For all his groundbreaking contributions to epistemology, Kant did not problematize an important limitation of both empiricists and rationalists, namely the fact that they all took for granted the separation between body and mind that Descartes's axiom of innate ideas had proclaimed in the 17th century. Over time, this separation translated into the removal of perceptual experience from the sphere of intellectual and public importance, which in turn has served to legitimize the dominion of mind over body and emotions. In theory, Kant's views could have provided a basis for challenging this blind spot of philosophy. By drawing attention to the limits of legibility and knowability and by turning toward the mind of the knower, Kant's transcendental method had the potential to undermine the Cartesian theory of meaning according to which concepts are more important than things. In practice, however, in his work too, the lion's share of attention goes not to the observed body, but to the observer, to the relationship between sense perception and knowledge, eye and I.

The discounting of the body's surface by certain disciplines helps explain the avidity with which Lavater's doctrine was adopted. Not only did physiognomics pledge undivided attention to what everybody simultaneously looked at and overlooked, namely the human face and body, but it did so in a methodologically hybrid way that appealed to people of different intellectual persuasions, foregrounding both their differences and their commonalities. Over the past decade, scholars have complicated the traditional narrative about knowledge formation in the long 18th century by arguing that pursuits which hovered between 'rational' scientific disciplines and retrograde practices such as alchemy, hermeticism, and esotericism were integral, rather than marginal, to the project of the Enlightenment.[13] Physiognomy always figures prominently in such discussions about the role of esoteric sciences in drawing up new disciplinary maps during the Age of Reason. I want to take this line of reasoning one step further and argue that the appeal of *Physiognomische Fragmente* derived not only from helping other fields come into their own through interdisciplinary debates on the topic of physical legibility, but also from bringing these fields together one last time before they separated for good. Therein lay also the weakness of Lavater's brainchild. For what this bringing together did at the same time was reveal the inability of physiognomics to negotiate among the different doctrines on

13 See, for instance, Adler/Godel 2010, Edelstein 2010, Neugebauer-Wölk/Geffarth/Meumann 2013, and Baker/Gibbs 2016.

which it drew. Lavater's theory combined words with images, scientific theory with everyday practical application, older physiognomic models with newer ones, empirical observation and analysis with esoteric thinking, religious mysticism, and moralistic judgment. However ambitious, these combinations were anything but seamless and generated tensions with which Lavater was ill-equipped to deal.[14] His composite model of reading may have created favorable conditions for a meeting of the minds, but it did not engage with the ideological contradictions that arose in the process, preferring instead to evade them through an intermediary for which enthusiasm had begun to wane in many quarters: Christian theology.

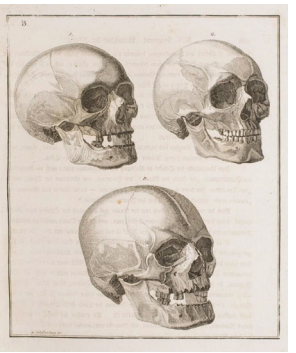
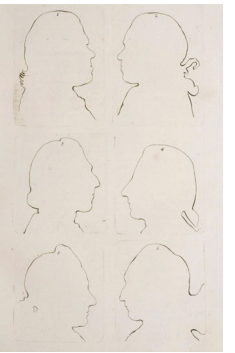
As I have argued in the preamble to Part One, Lavater's suppression of semantic pluralism by means of religious dogma is satirized in Anton Dunker's etching from 1800 and historically corroborated by the many controversies in which the Swiss pastor tried to impose his one-sided view on others, rather than cultivate dialogue. Dunker's etching also captures another reason for which physiognomics did not live up to the promise of its early days. The flagrant absence from this picture of any visual or textual reference to Lavater's magnum opus, *Physiognomische Fragmente*, mirrors the lack of genuine attention to the body that plagued physiognomic theory. Nowhere is this oversight more apparent than in Lavater's reliance for visual evidence on skulls (Fig. 3), profile outlines (Fig. 4), and silhouettes, as well as in the boost he gave to the latter form of visual portraiture. Powered by the Swiss pastor's creed of legibility, silhouette images purported to make the essence of character visible. In point of fact, however, they blended all bodily features into a solid mass of grey (Fig. 5) or black (Fig. 6), thereby erasing all signs of individuality and life, and reducing the human form to an empty shell. The malleable, expressive surface of the body became an obstacle to be surmounted either mechanically through the use of a silhouette machine such as the one Lavater owned (Fig. 7) or, in the absence of this contraption, through a physiognomically trained gaze.

At times, even simple silhouettes were not empty enough for Lavater, leading him to experiments like those in Figures 8 and 9. In the former instance, the sitter is not depicted in profile, but from the front. The result barely looks human anymore. Morphology has been reduced to geometry, individuality has been defaced, forever lost in the black hole of anonymity, and elaborate artistic figuration has given way to a non-descript one-line, monochromatic blot. In other words, every possible effort has been made to neutralize complexity — the kind of complexity that characterizes and sustains art, literature, interpretation, and life itself. The same strategy of undercutting individuality and wholeness is at work in Figure 9, where seven silhouettes are overlaid on one another like coins, leaving no profile intact — not even the one in the right-most margin. In addition to visual integrity, each profile loses semantic independence through incorporation in this

14 For an in-depth discussion of these tensions, see Graczyk 2016.

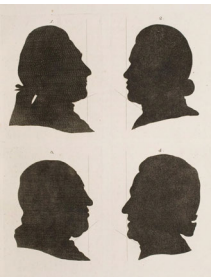
series. The meaning of each silhouette no longer derives from its relation to the depicted person, but from its place in a collage.

Fig.3. Images of human skulls from Lavater's "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 2 (1776), facing p. 159; Fig. 4. Profile outlines from "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 2 (1776), facing p. 100; Fig. 5. Female silhouettes from "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 3 (1777), facing p. 309.


What the examples discussed above show is that, in physiognomic theory, making the body legible became synonymous with its dissolution. In Koschorke's words, "der Körper [wird] durch sein Abwesendwerden sichtbar gemacht" (1999: 149). Lavater himself acknowledged that rendering the body visible by hiding it from view sounded like a contradiction in terms, but he did not see this contradiction as irreconcilable. His view failed to convince, however, because it lacked supporting evidence. For instance, in a side-by-side comparison of four different techniques for visually rendering the profile of one and the same person (Fig. 10), Lavater announces from the beginning that "Wahr ist keines, als der Schattenriß 4" (1777, 3: 249), with nothing to support this assertion other than a couple of non-specific, effusive exclamations disguised as axioms: "Wie viel mehr Gelenksamkeit hat dieß — allein ganz wahre Profil! wie viel mehr Geist!" (ibid, 3: 251) Similarly, in the chapter dedicated to silhouettes, the Swiss pastor proclaims that, despite the reductive effects of silhouette portraiture ("keine Bewegung, kein Licht, keine Farbe, keine Höhe und Tiefe; kein Aug', kein Ohr — kein Nasloch, keine Wange, — nur ein sehr kleiner Theil von der Lippe," Lavater 1776, 2: 90), no form of artistic expression "reicht an die Wahrheit eines sehr gut gemachten Schattenrisses" (ibid, 2: 90). The problem is that he does not adduce any evidence for this claim, pretending instead to defer to the reader's authority: "der Leser soll bald urtheilen — hat schon im I. Theile häufigen Anlaß gehabt, sich davon zu überzeugen, und sein Urtheil zu üben." (ibid, 2: 90) That Lavater did not really

Fig. 6. Male silhouettes from "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 2 (1776), facing p. 104; Fig. 7. Depiction of an apparatus for taking silhouettes. From "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 2 (1776), p. 93; Fig. 8. Silhouette from "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 2 (1776), p. 134.



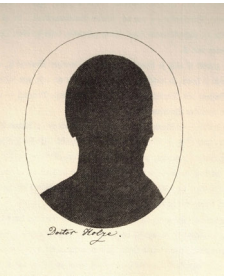
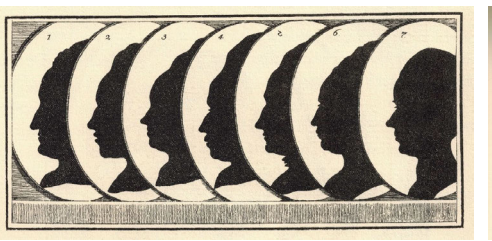


Fig. 9. Series of female silhouettes from "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 3 (1777), p. 311; Fig. 10. A comparative study in how to best portray human form. From "Physiognomische Fragmente," vol. 3 (1777), facing p. 249.



grant readers the freedom to form their own judgments is evident from the conflation in this quote of the verb *urtheilen* ("to reason"), which presupposes a neutral, open-minded attitude vis-à-vis the object of reasoning, with the more limiting verb *sich überzeugen* ("to convince oneself"), which conveys an expectation that the reader will agree with one particular insight or perspective.

In the end, then, Lavater's approach to the body did not differ much from that of physiologists, pathologists, and philosophers. Physiognomy failed to deliver on its initial promises because the Swiss pastor, used as he was to preaching from the pulpit, took more interest in seizing the spotlight for himself than in shedding light on aspects of human physicality that had been relegated to obscurity. This erasure of the outer body corresponds epistemologically and hermeneutically to a model of interaction with the source text that discounts the importance of form, which in turn severely limits the number and scope of conclusions one can draw about content. I want to argue that some late eighteenth-century literary authors were alienated by this double reduction of complexity that turned the text, much like the body, into a phantom of itself — invisible on the outside and hollow inside as well. Sophie von La Roche, for example, resisted by narrative means the X-ray-like vision that Lavater modeled in his theory, and she did so not only for literary reasons. At stake in the trivialization of external form were important ethical considerations having to do with the negation of difference and alterity that this gesture of erasure entailed. To treat the appearance of those one encounters as transparent is to see in the Other nothing but oneself, i.e., to not really see the Other. In his critical analysis of Rousseau's works, Jean Starobinski (1988) has argued that despite the French author's salutary intent to put the individual at the center of attention, his desire for transparency effaced the Other's alterity. The same paradox applies to Lavater's physiognomic project, which purported to focus on the human body and see it for what it was, but instead saw through it. This conflation of visibility and transparency amounted to a denial of the Other's radical difference, of his/her ability to resist the assimilating, objectifying gaze of the Self. La Roche understood that this danger was not confined to physiognomics alone, but lurked in all endeavors that presuppose a movement between external form and internal content, expression and meaning.

Any act of interpretation involves a peeling back of layers in which as much promise resides as peril: the promise of profundity and ambiguity, but also the peril of fostering a tunnel vision that glorifies the acquisition of some ultimate hermeneutic truth, disregarding all the way-stations one may go through en route to that goal. To be sure, reading always implies reading *for* something. The problem occurs when one reads *past* the text. La Roche thought the late 18th century was particularly ripe for a warning against this pitfall because the European novel was just then entering a new phase of development, away from the idealized protagonists that had previously been the norm to depicting the intricacies of human psychology, which ushered in a mode of reading that valued depth over surface. To be clear, this does not mean that La Roche advocated a return to two-dimensional characters and formulaic storylines. What she did, instead, was draw attention to the danger that connotation poses to denotation, symbolism to materiality, and conceptual to non-conceptual thinking. In so doing,

she reaffirmed the commitment to human existence that had been a staple of the novel since its inception in the late 16th century. This commitment became all the more urgent in the 18th and 19th centuries, when, according to Edmund Husserl, man's worldview began to be determined entirely by fact-minded sciences that excluded "precisely the questions which man […] finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence" (1970: 6). That is to say, the conceptual and disciplinary permutations effected by the rise of the positive sciences drove man away from, rather than closer to, himself.

Following Husserl's line of reasoning, it makes perfect sense that the novel's popularity would have soared at this precise juncture in time, as a way to compensate for the growing loss of interest in subjectivity. In the words of Milan Kundera, "if it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being" (1988: 4-5). It should be noted that it was not blind opposition to the sciences which led the novel to resist "the forgetting of being" (ibid: 5). If anything, novelists were driven by the same thirst for knowledge as scientists and philosophers. La Roche, for example, described herself as coveting erudition ("nach Gelehrsamkeit lüstern," 1987, 1: 425) and mentioned repeatedly "die Wißbegierde und der Geschmack an Kenntnissen" (ibid, 1: 421) that followed her from a young age and that she, in the absence of an education like the one reserved for boys, did not repress, but tried to satisfy through writing. Where fiction writers, indeed, differed from scientists was in their unwavering focus on humans and on life, as seen in the way La Roche defined the study of the physical universe: "Die wahre Kenntnis der Erde und ihrer Gewächse zieht unsere Vernunft unausbleiblich zu dem Nachdenken über ihre Bewohner — Thiere und Menschen. — O was ein ewigreicher Stof [*sic*] zu Beobachtungen! — wie reich für mich!" (La Roche 1987, 1: 424) The end of this quote makes clear that La Roche saw in the observation of (human) existence an opportunity to overcome the limitations imposed on women and to participate, if not in the production of new scientific knowledge, at least in its application and dissemination. By emphasizing that "Thiere und Menschen" should be the object of any serious investigation, she also reminded scientists that people need subjectivity, experiential knowledge, and non-conceptual thinking in order to make sense of the world. This implicitly amounts to advocating for literature as one of the channels through which humans acquire knowledge, gain truth, and derive meaning. Significantly, La Roche achieved all this in a conciliatory, rather than divisive, manner vis-à-vis the sciences. As she transitions in the span of three brief lines from an abstract description of the scientific modus operandi to ardent expressions of enthusiasm for the prospective contributions of a writer like herself, the emphasis settles on the common space between these two spheres. According to La Roche, the observation of life brings writers and scientists together in a way

that allows for disciplinary autonomy in point of methodology and result analysis. A close look at the sentence structure and use of pronouns in the afore-quoted passage suggests that the actions of *Beobachten* and *Nachdenken* are common to scientists and literary authors. They lay the foundation for a community of thought — an 'Us' ("unsere Vernunft") — that does not impede the existence of individual I's ("mich"). At stake for La Roche, then, in making the outer body truly visible was a change of literary paradigm with far-reaching implications in the realms of ethics and disciplinary relations. How exactly this goal translated into her narrative practice will concern us in what follows.