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*Anthropology and aesthetics*

Contents

- 5 EDITORIAL  
**JOSEPH LEO KOERNER**  
The abject of art history
- 9 **JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER**  
"To make women weep": ugly art as "feminine" and the origins of modern aesthetics
- 34 **JULIET FLEMING**  
The Renaissance tattoo
- 53 **JOAN R. BRANHAM**  
Blood in flux, sanctity at issue
- 71 **SARAH BRETT-SMITH**  
The mouth of the *Komo*
- 97 **WILLIAM PIETZ**  
Death of the deodand: accursed objects and the money value of human life
- 109 **JOSEPH RYKWERT**  
The constitution of Bohemia
- 128 **VICTOR I. STOICHITA**  
Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* and the hermeneutics of shadow
- 139 **NICHOLAS GRINDLE**  
"Our own imperfect knowledge": Petrus Camper and the search for an "ideal form"
- LECTURES AND DISCUSSIONS
- 149 **CHRISTINE ROSS**  
Redefinitions of abjection in contemporary performances of the female body
- DOCUMENTS
- 157 **MEYER SCHAPIRO**  
A critique: Pevsner on modernity (1938), translated by David Craven
- 159 **MEYER SCHAPIRO and LILLIAN MILGRAM SCHAPIRO with DAVID CRAVEN**  
A series of interviews (July 15, 1992– January 22, 1995)







Figure 1. A.-L. Girodet Trioson, "The Origins of Painting." From *Oeuvres Posthumes* (Paris: J. Renouard, 1829).





# Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* and the hermeneutics of shadow

VICTOR I. STOICHITA

translated by Anne-Marie Glasheen

To the spirit of the Enlightenment, myths were nothing but fairy tales. Diderot, claiming to shed light on the dawn of painting, was no exception:

The imagination is well practised in seeking the origin of Painting; and it is based on this, that poets have written the most charming of fairy-tales. If we are to believe them, then it was a shepherdess who, wanting to have the portrait of her lover, first drew a line with her crook around the shadow that the young man's face cast on the wall.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation from the *Encyclopédie*, casually amalgamates sources in a venture destined to blur the issue rather than clarify it. It seems to highlight an uncertainty that was already apparent in Pliny the Elder: *picturae initiis incerta*! This is one of the reasons why the allusion to be found in the first chapter of Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781) conceals a particular importance. As regards the "historical" debate surrounding the invention of art, the author opts for a more theoretical approach:

It is said that love was the inventor of drawing. He might also unfortunately have invented speech; Dissatisfied with it, love spurns it, for there are more active ways of expressing oneself. She who so lovingly traced the shadow of her Lover had such things to impart! What sounds did she use to achieve these movements with her stick?<sup>2</sup>

This was the first time the Plinian fable had been explicitly regarded as a myth of love. Moreover, it was also the first time that the outlined shadow was considered to be—not a primitive mode of pictorial expression—but a primitive language through which love expresses itself.<sup>3</sup>

This is how, within the dream of origins that haunted the eighteenth century, the fable of Butades became one

of the major themes of painting.<sup>4</sup> Something of Rousseau's spirit still survived at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the way that Plinian iconography was addressed. In the engraving that illustrates Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson's *Oeuvres posthumes* (fig. 1), it is the god of love himself who illuminates the scene with a torch and who guides the hand of the Corinthian girl while she traces her lover's profile with an arrow probably from Cupid's quiver. The scene is like an unbroken circuit; beneath the vigilant gaze of the statue of Minerva, goddess of wisdom, the two lovers' hands and those of Eros form a continuous chain that leads from the torchlight to the black portrait that stands out on the wall. This complicated body language is also a transformed, exalted "language of love." Seated between the two lovers, the small Eros covers the young man's unseemly nakedness, but—because of his position and through his symbols (wings, torch)—there is an echo of flight and passion. Censure and sublimation, the real themes of the engraving, end up on the path mapped out by Rousseau; Girodet is probably aware that in love, "there are more active ways of expressing oneself" than through the actual art of drawing, but he elects to portray the love scene as a "transfer of power" (or as he calls it in a poem appended to the engraving—a "heavenly transport") steering its erotic energy (which to Girodet was basically masculine) towards the (feminine) creation of a surrogate image:

4. R. Rosenblum, "The Origins of Painting. A Problem in The Iconography of Romantic Classicism," *Art Bulletin* 39 (1957):279–290; G. Levitine, "Addenda to Robert Rosenblum's 'The Origins of Painting': A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism," *Art Bulletin* 40 (1958):329–331; H. Wille, "Die Erfindung der Zeichenkunst," in *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte. Eine Festgabe für H. R. Rosemann zum 9. Oktober 1960*, ed. E. Guldán (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1960), pp. 279–300; H. Wille, "Die Butades-Erzählung in der Kunst der Goethezeit," *Jahrbuch der Sammlung Kippenberg*, n. f., 2 (1970):328–351; E. Darragon, "Sur Dibutade et l'origine du dessin," *Coloquio Artes*, 2d ser., 52, no. 1 (1982):42–49; J.-Cl. Lebensztejn, *L'Art de la tache. Introduction à la Nouvelle Methode d'Alexander Cozens* (Paris: Éditions du Limon, 1990), pp. 277–300; H. Damisch, *Traité du Trait/Tractatus tractus* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux), pp. 61–76.

This is a chapter of *Short History of the Shadow*, by Victor I. Stoichita, translated from French by Anne-Marie Glasheen, in press at Reaktion Books, London.

1. Diderot, *Encyclopédie* (Neuchatel: Chez Briasson, 1765), t. 12, p. 267.

2. J.-J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Paris: Hatier, 1994), p. 35.

3. On this subject, see J. Derrida's commentary, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), pp. 327–344.



And still to this sketch she brought her vows  
In silent adoration, and the faithful image  
Accepted the troth she plighted the model.<sup>5</sup>

At the time when Girodet was producing his poem and engraving, it was already accepted that the drawing of the outlined shadow was a primitive language of love. We find an excellent example of this in the first conference paper given to the Royal Academy of London (1801) by the Swiss Johann Heinrich Füssli:

Greek painting took its first faltering steps, it was rocked in the cradle by the Graces and taught to speak by Love. If ever a legend deserved to be believed it was the love story of the young Corinthian girl who with her secret lamp drew the outline of her lover's shadow just before his departure, thus provoking our sympathy to trust in it, and leading us to make a few observations on the first complex effort at painting, as well as on this linear method which seems to have remained the founding act long after the agent for whom it was primarily conceived had been forgotten. . . . The earliest experiments in this art were the *skiagrams*, simple outlines of shadows—similar to those which have been circulated amongst the common people by amateurs and other parasites of physiognomy under the name of silhouettes.<sup>6</sup>

Füssli's observations connect early pictorial language to the fashion, during the second half of the eighteenth century, for cut-outs, which originated from a pun pertaining to Louis XV's Minister of Finance Etienne de Silhouette. It spread through the whole of Europe and was cherished by the upper classes as one of their most popular parlor games. Füssli's allusion is not without its ambiguities. Although he acknowledges that it is a legacy from Pliny's fable, he also seems to view the technique with obvious disdain, even though, a few years earlier, he had contributed to its popularity by helping to illustrate the English version of *Essays on Physiognomy* written by his compatriot Johann Caspar Lavater (published in London in 1792).

Lavater's book describes a new device for the creation of silhouettes (fig. 2). The illustration relating to this "machine" is much clearer in the English version than in the first German edition (published in Leipzig/Winterthur in 1776). If we compare the engraving in the *Essays on Physiognomy* with any

contemporary representation of the Butades fable (fig. 1), we see that the Plinian scenario of origins has been transformed into an actual posing session that aims to reproduce the profile through mechanical means. The allegorical décor has disappeared and the sexual roles reversed. The model—a woman—is seated on a special chair, which incorporates a screen mounted on an easel. On the other side of the screen stands the person who is capturing the contour of the model's profile projected by the candle burning nearby. For the method to succeed, the model must remain absolutely still and very close to the screen. As we can see, the process was devised in order to capture, as faithfully as possible, the profile's negative image, which is why it has often been regarded as one of the direct predecessors of photography.

We can only understand the functioning, or more particularly the function, of the "machine for drawing silhouettes" when we place it within the framework of Lavater's discourse on physiognomy, which we must now examine. I shall begin by quoting Lavater's definition of the shadow-image:

Shades are the weakest, most vapid, but, at the same time, when the light is at the proper distance, and falls properly on the countenance to take the profile accurately, the truest representation that can be given of man. The weakest, for it is not positive, it is only something negative, only the boundary line of half the countenance. The truest, because it is the immediate expression of nature, such as not the ablest painter is capable of drawing, by hand, after nature.

What can be less the image of a living man than a shade? Yet how full of speech! Little gold, but the purest.<sup>7</sup>

To Lavater, the outlined profile of the shadow is the minimal image of man, his *Urbild*. And thanks to this quality it can also become the favored object of a hermeneutic of human nature. Through the ancient tradition of physiognomic studies, Lavater believed that a person's face bore the marks of his soul. He deviated from that tradition because he considered the outlined profile to be important:

I have collected more physiognomical knowledge from shades alone than from every other kind of portrait, have

5. A.-L. Girodet-Trioson, *Oeuvres posthumes* (Paris: J. Renouard, 1829), t. 1, p. 48.

6. J. Knowles, ed., *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831), vol. 2, pp. 26–27.

7. J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe. Eine Auswahl* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Lavater are taken from *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: Ward Lock, 1840). Where the translator was unable to find the English version, she did them herself, basing them on the French version.





Figure 2. Thomas Holloway et al., "A Machine for Drawing Silhouettes." From Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (London, 1792).

improved physiognomical sensation more by the sight of them, than by the contemplation of ever mutable nature.

Shades collect the distracted attention, confine it to an outline, and thus render the observation more simple, easy, and precise. The observation, consequently the comparison.

Physiognomy has no greater, more incontrovertible certainty of the truth of its object than that imparted by shade.<sup>8</sup>

8. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (see note 7), pp. 188–189.



Through this assertion, the author of *Essays on Physiognomy* makes an important conceptual leap. In fact, according to him, it is not—as was accepted by tradition—the human face that is the reflection of the soul, but the shadow of this face. This is a fundamental difference since it exploits—probably subconsciously—another ancient tradition: the one which recognized in man's shadow his soul and in his soul, a shadow (fig. 4). The implications of this deviation are manifold. To analyze the shadow is tantamount to a *sui generis* psychoanalysis. To Lavater, the outlined profile is a hieroglyph that has to be deciphered. This work is regarded as a veritable hermeneutic, which has all the hallmarks of a translation from one language into the other:

The true physiognomist unites to the clearest and profoundest understanding the most lively, strong, comprehensive imagination, and a fine and rapid wit. Imagination is necessary to impress the traits with exactness, so that they may be renewed at pleasure; and to range the pictures in the mind as perfectly as if they still were visible, and with all possible order.

Wit is indispensable to the physiognomist, that he may easily perceive the resemblances that exist between objects. Thus, for example, he sees a head or forehead possessed of certain characteristic marks. These marks present themselves to his imagination, and wit discovers to what they are similar. Hence greater precision, certainty, and expression, are imparted to his images. He must have the capacity of uniting the approximation of each trait, that he remarks; and, by the aid of wit, to define the degrees of this approximation. . . . Wit alone creates the physiognomical language; a language, at present, so unspeakably poor. . . . All that language can express, the physiognomist must be able to express. He must be the creator of a new language, which must be equally precise and alluring, natural and intelligible.<sup>9</sup>

We may therefore be justified in referring to the formation of a Lavaterian "shadow-analysis," which was to become the focus of attack from enlightened circles heralded by George Lichtenberg:

Nobody would laugh more than I, at the arrogance of that physiognomist who should pretend to read in the countenance the most secret thoughts and motions of the soul. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Despite all the criticism aimed at Lavater's method, it was widely practiced around 1800 and situated somewhere between entertainment and scientific experimentation. As a method, it regarded the shadow as a personal emanation more capable than the individual concerned of supplying us with authentic information on the person's inner self. Physiognomy does not interpret a person's "expression" (the model must remain absolutely still, immobile), but his "traits." Unlike expression (*der Ausdruck*), which reflects the soul's temporary state, traits (*die Züge*) relate to its deep structure.<sup>11</sup> It is for this reason that the captured shadow is more precious to the physiognomist than the actual living face in front of him. What the person conceals, the shadow reveals. This is one of the reasons why it was so popular as a parlor game; all those who took part, did so with a mixture of apprehension and anticipation—apprehension because they were worried they would reveal some terrible disorder of the soul, anticipation because they hoped they would reveal for all to see, inestimable, hidden qualities.

We would be mistaken if we believed that reading the four volumes of the *Essays on Physiognomy* would give us the key to deciphering the human profile. Lavater was in effect constantly revising the essays. They are a collection of repeated attempts to codify a language although the author never succeeded in establishing its grammar. And despite Lavater's efforts to interpret the line that runs from the brow to the chin (fig. 3) these remained experimental and intuitive. That is why our own investigations involve the origin and structure of Lavater's hermeneutic rather than its practical conclusions, since these belong in the realms of fantasy. Our task is not to judge whether the process is sound or absurd but to reflect on the fundamental fact that Lavater's hermeneutic aim was to understand man as a moral being, through his shadow. The symbolic significance of the method can only be understood if we bear in mind that the study of physiognomy, to Lavater, was the result of a religious vocation, which led him to train to be a Protestant pastor. Goethe, who was initially involved in the development of this physiognomic interpretation, admitted quite openly when speaking with Eckermann: "Lavater's method entails morals, religion."<sup>12</sup>

9. Ibid., p. 65.

10. G. C. Lichtenberg, *Werke in einem Band* (Stuttgart: Walter Hädecke Verlag, 1935), from *Remarks on an Essay upon Physiognomy*, in Holcroft's edition of *Essays on Physiognomy*, p. 267.

11. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (see note 7), p. 60 (translator's version).

12. J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1984), pp. 273–274 (17 February 1829).



This is why Lavater maintained that the practice of physiognomic deciphering was an act of love, committed to searching out the divine in a human being. The full title of the work is more like a warning against possible slander: *Physiognomical fragments for the advancement of man's knowledge and his love for his fellow men* (*Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*).

The aim of Lavater's "shadow-analysis" is that it should be a new "cure for the soul" (*Seelensorge*). It starts off with a notion of man who takes his divine origins into account. Man was made in God's image and likeness. But sin drove him to lose his divine likeness. His relationship with the divinity was overshadowed by flesh.<sup>13</sup> Taking this kind of reasoning into account, we might wonder whether Lavater's claim that it was his search for the divine in man that led him to practice physiognomy was made in good faith. Or to be more precise, it raises the following question: are we really likely to encounter God in a *man's shadow*? We have every reason to believe the contrary; what Lavater was actually looking for was not the positive, divine side of man, but the negative, sinful side. This is a serious contention and needs to be justified.

Let us therefore examine once more the significance that the outlined profile assumed with Lavater. It only had a synechdocal value (*pars pro toto*) and was based on the notion that the human shadow is a meaningful image:

I am of the opinion that a man seen in silhouette from all angles—from head to foot, from the front, from the back, in profile, in half-profile, three quarters, would allow fundamentally new discoveries to be made on the omniscient nature of the human body.<sup>14</sup>

13. For information regarding this problem, see E. Benz, "Swedenborg und Lavater. Ueber die religiösen Grundlagen der Physiognomik," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 3d f., 57 (1938):153–216; B. M. Stafford, *Body Criticism. Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), pp. 84–103; E. Shookman, ed., *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater* (Drawer/Columbia: Camden House, 1993); K. Pestalozzi and H. Weigelt, *Das Antlitz Gottes im Antlitz des Menschen. Zugänge zu Johann Kaspar Lavater* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).

14. J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, vol. 2 (Leipzig/Winterthur: Bey Weidmanns Erbe und Reich, 1776) p. 132 (translator's version).

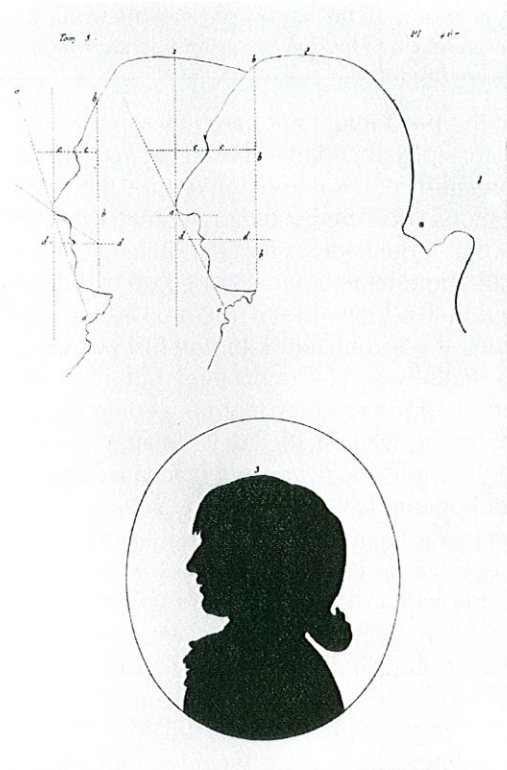


Figure 3. "Physiognomic Study." From Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (Leipzig/Winterthur: Bey Weidmanns Erbe und Reiche, 1776).

What is quite implicit here is the notion that in the projection of the shadow, man is above all "himself." The importance bestowed on the profile resides in the fact that it is considered to be a direct externalization of the soul: his actual composition. The nose in particular with its more or less pronounced protuberance, is one of the most remarkable creations of internal forces; it is—Lavater believed—"the buttress, or abutment of the brain" (*Widerlage des Gehirns*).<sup>15</sup> The parallel, outline profile/ human soul, is in Lavater's opinion, so perfect that the expressions are interchangeable and often indiscriminately used. The outlined profile *is* the external soul, and physiognomy is an exercise capable of moving from the profile up to the psychic energies it is composed of:

15. J. C. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (*Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, vol. 4, (Leipzig/Winterthur: Bey Weidmanns Erbe und Reich, 1778), p. 390.



Physiognomy, in the narrow sense of the word, is an interpretation of the forces, or the science which studies the signs of the forces. . . .<sup>16</sup>

But the most important question remains unanswered. If Lavater's physiognomy is based exclusively on the interpretation of the *line of the profile*, then why do the illustrations show the whole of the man's head in the shape of a large dark stain rather than as a linear outline? The dilemma had cropped up earlier when, assisted by his friend Zimmermann, Lavater was finalizing the technicalities for the first edition of his *Essays*. Initially he was undecided, but he finally opted to have shadows rather than empty contours. It was Zimmermann who decided that "images of shadows should be dark" (*Schwarz sollen Schattenbilder sein*). Lavater appeared at first to be somewhat reticent, or to be more exact, cautious: "the silhouettes must be precise; we must distance ourselves from the black arts" (*Die Silhouetten sollen genau sein, können nicht Schwarzkunst sein*). He came up with the compromise solution of the grey shadow, only to abandon it at the last minute.<sup>17</sup> The first volume of the 1775 edition of *Essays on Physiognomy* was illustrated in the main with black outlined shadows, as were the three following volumes. But his initial reservations and final choice together demonstrate that the shadow-image, far from being devoid of symbolic implications, was so imbued with them that Lavater himself was worried that they were being over emphasized.

This point marked the birth of the fame Lavater's illustrations were about to gain; the context of the rhetoric of color that distinguished the final quarter of the eighteenth century allows us to understand Lavater's indecision. When in 1778, Alexander Cozens wanted to portray "simple beauty" (fig. 5), he chose a purely linear profile of a face, which resulted in the white background becoming integrated into the drawing's symbolism. He was aware however that his image was the product of a purely "statistical," intellectual process.<sup>18</sup> Cozens would probably never have dared to depict his *simple beauty* as a black shadow because black at the time was strictly

16. J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (see note 7), p. 275 (translator's version).

17. See the texts in C. Steinbrucker, *Lavaters Physiognomische Fragmente im Verhältnis zur bildenden Kunst* (Berlin: W. Borngraber, 1915), p. 168.

18. A. Cozens, *Principles of Beauty, Relative to the Human Head* (London: James Dixwell, 1778), pp. 1-3, 7-10.



Figure 4. "The Man's Soul." From Commenius, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (Nürnberg, 1629).

codified as a key color within the framework of another aesthetic category: the sublime. Edmund Burke claimed that "darkness is one of the sources of the sublime," which, we should not forget, is a source of "aesthetic displeasure," combining admiration and fear, even terror. In one of the most important chapters of his treatise, devoted to the "power of black," Burke compares the perceptive power of black to the shock of a fall.<sup>19</sup>

The "danger of the precipice," which Burke discovered in the attractiveness of black, is in no way alien to Lavater who was quick to perceive the quasi-

19. E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, sections XIV-XVII (1757; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), vol. 1, pp. 55-219. See also M. Armstrong, "The Effects of Blackness: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetics Theories of Burke and Kant," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996):213-236.





Figure 5. Alexander Cozens, "Simple Beauty." From *Principles of Beauty Relatiave to the Human Head* (London: James Dixwell, 1778).

magical undertones that the manipulation of shadows contained:

I teach no black art; no nostrum, the secret of which I might have concealed. . . .<sup>20</sup>

This statement is probably circumstantial. We know that Lavater elaborated a complete set of secret rules (*Geheimregeln*) so that the whole of the shadow could be read, however it was "not destined for the impure hands of the Public."<sup>21</sup> We also know that there were strange events in his personal life and immediate environment—these were not without their neuroses, suicides, and exorcisms. But since this is the stuff of

biographies,<sup>22</sup> we need only establish that, according to all probability, the short-lived success enjoyed by Lavater's physiognomy was largely due to the fact that it was another form of divination. While some of his contemporaries went in for palmistry, read the lines of the brow or coffee grounds,<sup>23</sup> Lavater read the shadow.

Paradoxically the process is a follow-up to investigations into myths undertaken in the spirit of Enlightenment. The momentous event that took place while Lavater was developing his method of examining the contours of shadows in order to understand the human soul and which indirectly explains it, was what could be referred to as "the death of the Devil."<sup>24</sup> The year 1776 was important in the history of demonology, for there appeared in Berlin, an anonymous work entitled *On the non-existence of the Devil (Ueber die Non-Existenz des Teufels)*. It was soon discovered that the author was Pastor Christian Wilhelm Kindleben,<sup>25</sup> who stated with unprecedented clarity that it was his opinion that the Devil only existed in the minds of theologians and in the hearts of evil men: "Do not seek the Devil outside, do not seek him in the Bible, he is in your heart" (*den Teufel nicht ausserhalb, suche ihn nicht in der Bibel; er ist in deinem Herzen*).<sup>26</sup> A significant step had been taken; the Devil makes way for Evil and becomes a psycho-philosophical principle that dwells in the heart of man.<sup>27</sup>

Lavater's shadow is therefore quite literally a shadow engendered by the Enlightenment. It is not a substitute for the Devil, but a physical manifestation of him.

In the light of these assertions, let us return to Lavater's "machine for drawing silhouettes" (fig. 2). It is

22. G. Gessner, *Johann Kaspar Lavaters Lebensbeschreibung von seinem Tochtermann G. G.*, 3 vols. (Winterthur: Steiner, 1802–1810); R. C. Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe*, 2 vols. (Munich: Fink, 1969–1979), vol. 2, pp. 213–234.

23. For example, C. A. Peuschel, *Abhandlung der Physiognomie, Metoskopie und Chiromantie* (1769).

24. See H. D. Kittsteiner, "Die Abschaffung des Teufels im 18. Jahrhundert. Ein kulturhistorisches Ereignis und seine Folgen," in *Die andere Kraft. Zur Renaissance des Bösen*, ed. A. Schuller and W. von Rahden (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), pp. 55–92.

25. Anonymous (C. W. Kindleben), *Ueber die Non-Existenz des Teufels. Als Antwort auf die demüthige Bitte um Belehrung an die grossen Männer, welche an keinen Teufel glauben* (Berlin: Bey Gottlieb August Lange, 1776), pp. 4, 17ff.

26. C. W. Kindleben, *Der Teufelein des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts letzter Akt. . . .* (Leipzig, 1779), p. 50.

27. Kittsteiner (see note 24), p. 73.

20. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (see note 7), p. 47.

21. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (see note 7), pp. 377–394 (translator's version).



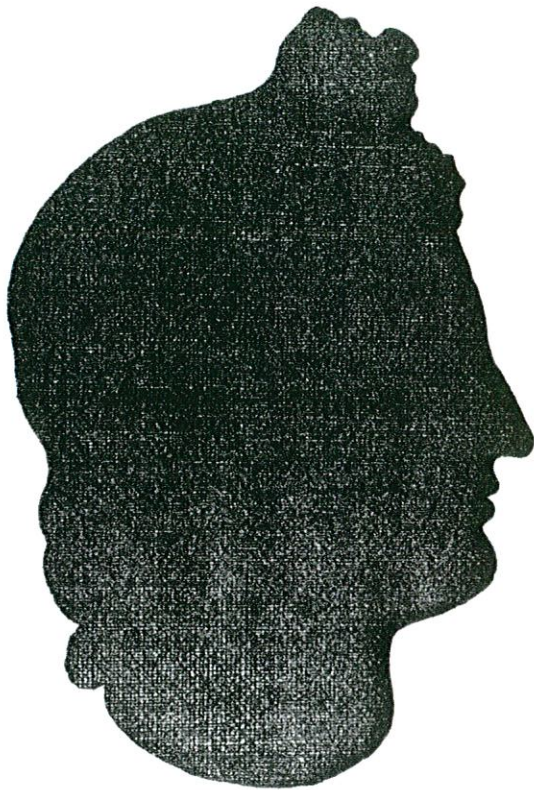


Figure 6. "Physiognomic Study of Apol of Belvedere." From Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* (Leipzig/Winterthur: Bey Weidmanns Erbe und Reiche, 1776).

possible that the lady in the chair, might not have sat down had she known that the man behind the screen was engaged in a practice verging on the unlawful. He was attempting to capture an image of her soul, as a first step in a hermeneutic process. It is interesting to note how Lavater's "machine" incorporates ideas inspired by the Plinian fable with an instrument traditionally used in Christianity (but abolished by Protestants) for the "therapy of the soul": the confessional.

The scene could *grosso modo* be regarded as a translation into visual terms of a confession. The verbalization of the inner life (common during confession) is replaced by the internal being projected to the external with the help of the shadow. Through the projection screen, the physiognomist watches the proffered image in much the same way that the priest listens to the anonymous voice that comes to him, filtered and without body, from the other side of the

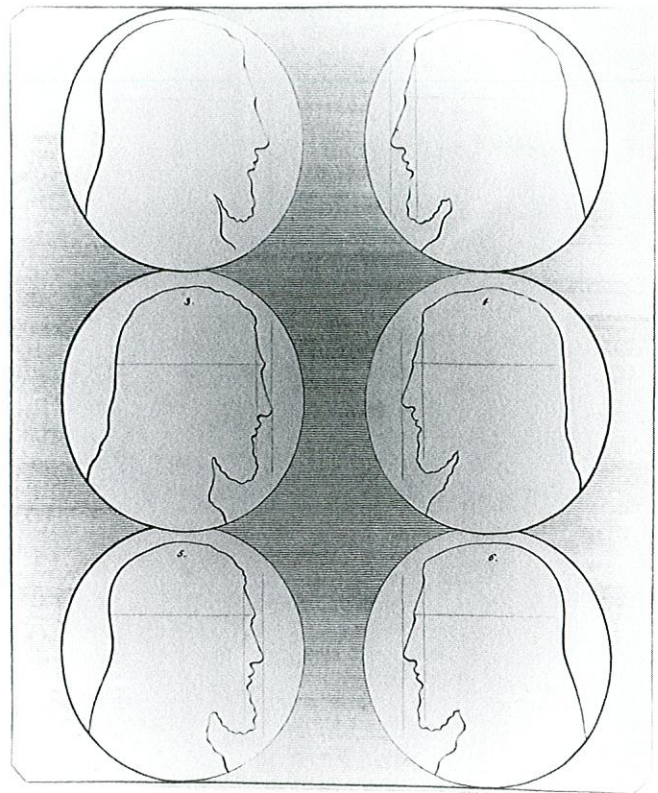


Figure 7. Thomas Holloway et al. after J. H. Fuseli, "Silhouettes of Christ." From Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (London, 1792).

grill. Just like the confessor, the physiognomist has access to the secrets of the soul and just like him, he is more likely to discover the fallen man than the one created "in God's image." Lavater had this kind of process in mind when he described the physiognomist as a "Christian seer":

He (the good physiognomist) must possess the character of those Apostles and early Christians who possessed the gift of recognizing spirits and reading the thoughts of the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Lavater, however, did not read the souls of men; rather he read their shadows. To him, the shadow was the imaginary area where the soul revealed itself to be full of sin. That is why the physiognomical hermeneutic

28. J. C. Lavater, *Von der Physiognomik* (Leipzig: Bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1772), p. 79.



can be regarded as an exercise through which the shadow-soul is questioned and interpreted. To a certain extent it can also be seen as an act of love, but on one condition only: that we take into account a basic pessimism as regards human nature. This was not a feature of Lavater's philosophy alone, the pessimism was inherent to the Enlightenment. Diderot had something to say on this subject:

In the whole world there is not a single perfectly formed, perfectly healthy man to be found. The human species is just a mass of more or less deformed and sick individuals.<sup>29</sup>

We should not be too surprised, therefore, that Lavater went so far as to subject an image—which at the time was considered to be perfect—to a physiognomical analysis: Apollo of Belvedere (fig. 6). He does so with full knowledge of the facts since he quotes the enthusiastic appraisal of the statue made by Johann Winkelmann in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764):

Observe in spirit the kingdom of ethereal beauties and endeavour to guess the creator of this celestial nature and to fill your spirit with beauties which transcend nature. For nothing here is mortal and nothing has human means. No vein warms nor nerve animates this body. No, it was a celestial body which, flowing like a gentle stream, filled the whole contour of this figure.<sup>30</sup>

Lavater half listens to Winkelmann's appeal; it is a double illustration. The first contour, filled with the white of the page, is reminiscent of Cozens's illustration of "simple beauty" (fig. 5). The second reduces Apollo's head to an outlined shadow—not a very orthodox way to treat an immortal god. The beginning of the analysis is fairly positive, the conclusion borders on catastrophe:

Twice have I drawn this head of Apollo based on the shadow then reduced it and I think I have been able to bring to it something which confirms Winkelmann's feeling. One never tires of contemplating these contours. Really, we

can say nothing about them, we tremble and anything we say is intolerable. Nevertheless, from the confused mass we can highlight:

The sublimity of the forehead, how the forehead relates to the face as a whole; the curve of the brow in relation to the lower part of the face; the way the chin curves into the neck.

I believe that if the contour of the nose were a perfectly straight line, this profile would give the impression of even greater **noble power**, even greater **divine power**. The nose being completely concave to the contour of the profile is always indicative of a certain weakness.<sup>31</sup>

The effect of this final observation of Lavater's can be compared to the collapse of the entire structure that supports the moral values founded on the kind of aesthetic values Winkelmann had tried to construct around his fetish image. Everything hinges on Apollo's nose, whose weak character is *unveiled* by the shadow.

Let us examine Lavater's approach more closely. It is based on reductions that fit one inside the other. The statue is reduced to the head, the head to its shadow, the shadow of the head to the line of the nose. The problematic line demystifies a body (that of Apollo's) considered to be a model of perfection. The polemic is directly targeted against Winkelmann's text and the use he made of the notion of contour. In effect, to the art historian, the contour (*die Umschreibung*) was a *significant line*, since it was imbued (*ergossen*) with a divine spirit (*himmlischer Geist*). But if the divine spirit was, to Winkelmann, manifested through the contour of the body (*die Umschreibung der Figur*), to Lavater, who unscrupulously eliminated the body from the value system, another contour—that of the nose—cancels out the very existence of a divine power (*göttliche Stärke*) that could have been one of the founding principles of this "god" (of light), now reduced to a "shadow."

The process is symbolic and we must continue to examine it. Apollo is, indeed, the god of light. Lavater's reduction places shadow in direct antithesis to light thus directly targeting the Pantheon of the Ancients. It was not for another year that the key to the problem raised by the "shadow-analysis" of Apollo of Belvedere was finally found. It was in the second volume of his *Essays* (in 1776) that Lavater unveiled his prototype of

29. D. Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, ed. J. Mayer (1778; reprint, Paris: Librairie M. Didier, 1964), p. 266. Regarding this issue, see B. M. Stafford, "From 'Brilliant Ideas' to 'Fitful Thoughts': Conjecturing the Unseen in Late Eighteenth-Century Art," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 48 (1985):329–363, esp. 345.

30. On this question, see W. Sauerländer, "Überlegungen zu dem Thema Lavater und die Kunstgeschichte," *Idea* 7 (1988):15–30.

31. J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, vol. 1 (Leipzig/Winterthur: Bey Weidmanns Erbe und Reich, 1775), p. 134 (Lavater's emphasis; translator's version).

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physiognomical perfection (fig. 7). A glance at these illustrations, where he displays (in an overtly stereotypical manner) six profiles of Christ, instantly reveals the line of the nose whose absence in the Belvedere Apollo was so deplored by Lavater. The same glance will reveal that what differentiates the six silhouettes of Christ from the other plates in the book, is that they are all—could this have been otherwise?—what we could paradoxically term “profiles of shadows without shadows.”







# res 31 spring 1997

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