

*The Faces of Physiognomy:
Interdisciplinary Approaches to
Johann Caspar Lavater*

*Edited by
Ellis Shookman*

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Lavater, Stereotype, and Prejudice

Judith Wechsler, Tufts University

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Nahum N. Glatzer

That there is a national physiognomy, as well as national character, is undeniable. Whoever doubts of this can never have observed men of different nations, nor have compared the inhabitants of the extreme confines of any two.

Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*¹

DISCUSSIONS OF RACIAL AND national traits are often fraught with difficulties. In our time, there is a heightened sensitivity to stereotyping, both in daily life and in academic discourse. There is also increasing assertion of characteristic traits among various ethnic groups. We need to distinguish, however, between genetic traits shared within a group and the negative associations made on the basis of such traits.² Distinctions need to be drawn as well between observations made from inside such groups, the positive or negative predispositions of outsiders, and scientific objectivity. Johann Caspar Lavater elides these distinctions and assumes that his personal response to racial and national traits is universally true. The study of his work is informed by our own ethnic concerns and sensitivities.

It is easy to dismiss Lavater's stereotypes of races and nationalities

I wish to thank Christopher Ricks, for suggesting certain lines of argument, and Karen Kennedy, who did considerable research for this paper.

¹ Lavater, 339. Unless otherwise stated, excerpts from Johann Caspar Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe*, 4 vols. (Leipzig and Winterthur: Weidmann, Reich, and Steiner, 1775–78; reprint, Zurich and Leipzig: Orell Füssli, 1968–69) are quoted from Thomas Holcroft's translation, *Essays on Physiognomy; Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, 3d ed. (London: Blake, 1840). Page numbers from this translation henceforth appear in parentheses in the text.

² The description of race has to do not only with shared traits but also, as Sander Gilman points out, with implications about social organization. Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), 171–72.

as merely prejudicial, but we must also beware of stereotypes about stereotypes. One needs to distinguish between his original German text and its subsequent editions and translations, which add and delete in varying degrees. Lavater writes that his effort is meant to gain "knowledge of predominant character, capacities, talents, powers, inclinations, activity, genius, religion, sensibility, irritability, and elasticity of men in general" (267). Were these intentions also those of his editors and translators? In answering this question, it would be worthwhile to compare translations of his *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–78) and to study what we consider their prejudicial language. An initial survey of its nineteenth-century editions suggests that each emphasizes certain nationalities at the expense of others. The French edition by J.M. Plane, *Physiologie, ou l'art de connaître les hommes sur leur physionomie* (1797), expands the section on Jews and is considerably more vitriolic.³ In Holcroft's English edition of 1840, the English are given more attention. Our reading of Lavater's prejudices should not overlook such shifts in emphasis due to his editors' and translators' own notions of nation and race. The purpose of this paper is to clarify such reading by relating Lavater's basic principles of national and racial types to his specific remarks on Jews, especially Moses Mendelssohn.

Lavater's Basic Principles of National and Racial Types

National and racial stereotypes appear throughout the *Physiognomische Fragmente*. Though Lavater believes that all people are God's people, he regards certain nationalities as superior to others. (Throughout human history, each national group has tended to assert its own superiority.) It is worthwhile looking at both the criteria that Lavater uses in his characterizations and the contradictions and confusions imbedded in some of his distinctions. Nationalities and races are intermixed in his discussions. Consider, for example, the following comparison: "Compare a Negro and an Englishman, a native of Lapland and an Italian, a Frenchman and an inhabitant of Terra del Fuego. Examine their forms, countenances, characters, and minds. Their difference will be easily seen, though it will sometimes be very difficult to describe scientifically" (339). Basic differences among ethnic groups seem obvious to Lavater, though he doubts that they can always be explained. He often cites other writers as

³ J.M. Plane, *Physiologie, ou l'art de connaître les hommes sur leur physionomie*, 2 vols. (Meudon: Demailly, 1797).

sources of more detailed observations, with which we can assume he concurs. He quotes, for example, the naturalist Georges Buffon: "There are as many varieties among the race of Negroes as among Whites ... The Blacks on the coast of Guinea are extremely ugly, and emit an insufferable scent. Those of Sofala and Mozambique are handsome, and have no ill smell" (345). Rather than assume that all blacks look alike, Lavater here indirectly recognizes significant differences among them. By means of sources like Buffon, he loosens his habit of lapsing into generalizations.

The reasons that Lavater cites to explain physical differences among ethnic groups are reminiscent of those given by other authorities on nationality and race in the eighteenth century. He echoes Montesquieu when he writes that "no man is perfectly like another" yet finds that the populations of certain nations "will resemble each other that have commercial intercourse; they being acted upon by the effects of climate, imitation and habit" (242). Indeed, he believes geography and climate play a major role in the formation and character of racial traits. Still concerned with blacks, he quotes Kant to confirm that a hot and moist climate is "favorable to the growth of animals, and produces the negro, who, by the providence of nature, perfectly adapted to his climate, is strong, muscular, agile; but dirty, indolent, and trifling" (349). Such juxtaposition of blacks and animals is supported by a similar quotation from the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann. As E.H. Gombrich has pointed out, Winckelmann was one of the first to exemplify the "physiognomic fallacy" in the history of art by attributing "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" to the ancient Greeks.⁴ In a remark on blacks, Winckelmann goes to the opposite extreme: "The projecting mouths of the Negroes, which they have in common with their monkeys, is an excess of growth, a swelling, occasioned by the heat of the climate" (350).

Lavater finds some nationalities easier to characterize than others. The English and the Germans strike him as more distinctive than other Europeans. English women, he explains, stand out especially well, not least because they "appear to be composed of marrow and nerve. They are inclined to be tall, slender, soft, and as distant from all that is harsh, rigorous, or stubborn, as heaven is from earth" (340). By contrast, the Swiss "generally, have no common physiognomy, or national character" (340), though he does distinguish them by canton. With people living closer to home, then,

⁴ E.H. Gombrich, "On Physiognomic Perception," *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 51.

Lavater refrains from jumping to conclusions as general as those he reaches when ranging farther afield. Much of his bias seems to depend on how well acquainted he is with the countries in question. The better he knows a place, the less likely he is to judge its inhabitants hastily.

Many of Lavater's remarks are comparative, pitting one nation against another. "[The French] have no traits so bold as the English, nor so minute as the Germans. I know them chiefly by their teeth, and their laugh. The Italians I discover by the nose, small eyes, and projecting chin. The English, by their foreheads, and eyebrows. The Dutch, by the rotundity of the head, and the weakness of the hair. The Germans, by the angles and wrinkles round the eyes, and in the cheeks. The Russians, by the snub nose, and their light-colored, or black hair."⁵ The English and the Germans seem slightly superior to the Swiss, French, Italians and Russians (fig. 1). Although Lavater elsewhere finds fault with the physiognomy of each of these nations, his criticism is minor compared to the deficiencies he finds among groups like Africans, Laplanders, and Calmuck Tartars. He ranks a German "with all the marks of an European head," for example, above "an East Indian skull ... formed for more rude and sensible, and less delicate and spiritual enjoyment than the former" (243). A Dutchman is compared favorably to a Calmuck, whom Lavater describes as "rude and gross" (242). At times, Lavater regards non-Europeans as degraded and even bestial. In a sequence based on the anatomical drawings of Petrus Camper depicting the evolution of life from a frog to Apollo, he points out that the negro of Angoia and the Calmuck have facial angles below seventy degrees and that "a further diminution soon loses all trace of resemblance to humanity" (495). The Calmuck Tartar likewise has a "forehead, with respect to lowness, ... [which] resembles the forehead of a monkey" (243). Lavater then goes on to describe the orangoutang and ape.⁶ He is rather indiscriminate in his comparisons of continents and races,

⁵ Lavater, 339-40. In one case showing such generalizations in greater detail, Lavater quotes a "man of literature at Darmstadt" (i.e., Johann Heinrich Merck) as saying: "In the temperament of nations, the French class is that of the sanguine. Frivolous, benevolent, and ostentatious ... At all times disposed to enjoy life, he [the Frenchman] is the best of companions ... No other man has so little of the firm, or deep traits, or so much motion. He is all appearance, all gesture; [witness] his deafness to true music; his blindness to the higher beauties of painting" (Lavater, 357).

⁶ As noted earlier, Lavater's "savages" include a black, a native of Lapland (Buffon, too, mentions Lapland in his contrasts), and an inhabitant of Terra del Fuego.

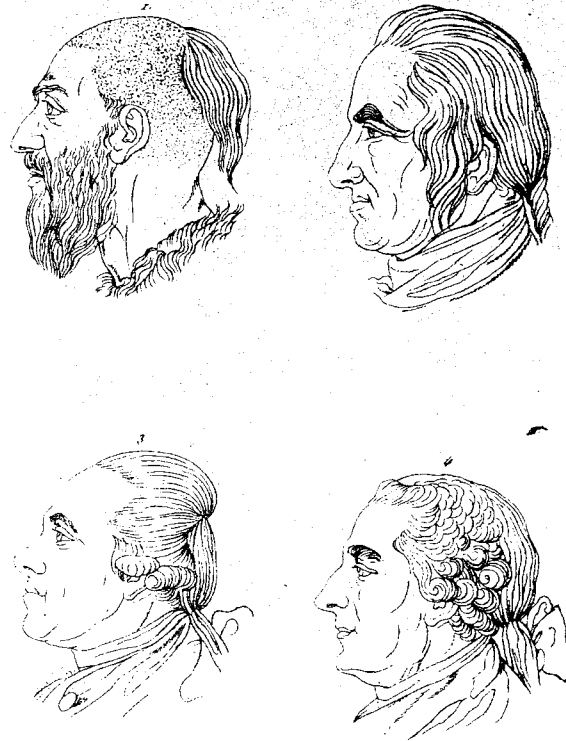


Figure 1

National Types

Johann Caspar Lavater,
L'Art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie,
 ed. Moreau de la Sarthe (Paris: Prudhomme, 1806-09), vol. 4, p. 112

suggesting that non-Europeans subsisted in a combination of swamp and jungle.

In other remarks on national and racial types, Lavater associates beauty with moral quality. Here, too, he thinks certain nations and races distinctly inferior. Such facile linkage of the aesthetic and the ethical is dangerous, but Lavater is not alone in assuming it; most cultures draw a clear distinction between "us" and "them." Lavater's equation of beauty and morals should be read as beauty of one's own kind.⁷ In the section of his *Fragmente* entitled "On the Harmony between Moral and Corporeal Beauty," he summarizes his position: "The morally best, the most beautiful. The morally worst, the most deformed."⁸ This correlation of faces and morals holds not only for individuals, but also for entire communities, he explains: "I constantly find that the vulgar, collectively, whether of nation, town, or village, are the most distorted" (104). In keeping with their relative facial beauty, Europeans suffer least from such vulgarity and distortion. Europeans are not necessarily virtuous, Lavater argues, but at least they are capable of a greater degree of improvement than other nations. He does not make it clear whether this capability is due to heredity or environment, though he does set limits to it, as well as to its opposite, a good-looking moral lapse: "The most beautiful countenance is capable of excessive degradation, and the most deformed of like improvement; but each form, each countenance is only capable of a certain kind and degree of degradation or improvement" (157). Although allowing for moral change, Lavater sticks to his basic claim that physical features show moral character.

Lavater "rationalizes" theology through pseudo-science. His observations are influenced by theological belief and racial prejudice.⁹

⁷ The equation of truth with beauty was challenged in Lavater's time. Shortly after the publication of the first volume of Lavater's *Fragmente*, Moses Mendelssohn wrote *Random Ideas on the Harmony of Inner and Outer Beauty*, which was not published until 1820. Alexander Altmann describes how Mendelssohn admitted that "natural organic beings ... have a physiognomy in the sense that their outer appearance corresponds to their inner quality," but how he "severely restricted its applicability. The correspondence between interior fitness and exterior beauty could not be considered a general rule of nature. Both beauty and its absence could be deceptive ... Mendelssohn felt that national character played a part in the preferences of taste." Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 318-19.

⁸ Lavater, 99. Lavater similarly asserts that "the most deformed expressions also betoken the most deformed states of mind" (Lavater, 98).

⁹ Marcia Allentuck writes that "Lavater immersed himself in ethical and apocalyptic speculations, combining the mystical and esoteric tendencies of the illumi-

Some of his enlightened contemporaries, particularly the aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, thought his theories unfounded and his style inflated. Lichtenberg was concerned with the uncritical popular embrace of Lavater's theory. In 1777, he published an essay later titled "Über Physiognomik," in which he took issue with Lavater's notion of physiognomy and its basic premise that there is a causal relationship between physical appearance and moral character. Lichtenberg countered that society and environment play a significant role in the development of character. He also distinguished between physiognomy and pathognomy, referring to facial expressions which are more indicative of fleeting emotions than of underlying character and which, he claimed, teach us far more than the fixed features studied by Lavater. In a satire on Lavater's style, "Fragment von Schwänzen" (1783), Lichtenberg depicted various forms of pigtailed, ironically praising their physiognomic qualities.¹⁰ One description of a drawing given there reads: "Almost the ideal pigtail. The shaft teutonic, steel-like, the flag noble, the rose of aggressively loving tenderness. It snarls death to the philistine and to the unpaid bill. Certainly more power than prudence."¹¹

Lavater's Remarks on Jews

Like his statements on national and racial types, Lavater's remarks on Jews indicate degrees of prejudice. A distinction should be drawn between his general comments on Jews, specific texts that he quotes, his comments on the representation of Jews in painting, and his direct encounters. His general comments seem consistent with historical stereotypes of Jews. In one passage, Lavater observes "characteristics of the national Jewish countenance, the pointed chin, pouting lips, and well-defined middle line of the mouth" (353). His focus on these features is hardly surprising, given their importance in his larger scheme. He elsewhere explains that lips closely

nati with the rationalistic, quasi-scientific leanings of the Encyclopaedists, while assimilating many of the *schwärmerisch* aspects of his surroundings." Marcia Allentuck, "Fuseli and Lavater: Physiognomical Theory and the Enlightenment," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 55 (1967): 92.

¹⁰ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, "Fragment von Schwänzen. Ein Beitrag zu den Physiognomischen Fragmenten," in his *Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Wolfgang Promies, vol. 3 (Munich: Hanser, 1967), 533.

¹¹ Quoted in Gombrich, 46.

parallel character. If they are firm, it is, too. But flaws in such features do not necessarily indicate moral deficiencies. Lavater remarks, for example, that "The pointed chin is generally held to be a sign of acuteness and craft, though I know very worthy persons with such chins" (396). He evaluates parts of the body according to their moral function.¹² The mouth and chin suggest animal life, the nose and cheeks, moral and sensual life.¹³ For him, the nose is "the foundation, or abutment, of the brain" (390) and thus an especially important clue to character: "A nose physiognomically good is of unspeakable weight in the balance of physiognomy: it can be outweighed by nothing whatever" (471). Like other ethnic groups, however, Jews seem to fall short of this strange ideal: "The Tartars, generally, have flat, indented noses; the Negroes broad, and the Jews, hawk noses."¹⁴ Without specific reference to Jews, Lavater remarks that such "hawk" noses seldom bode well: "Noses which are much turned downwards are never truly good, truly cheerful, or noble, or great. Their thoughts and inclinations always tend to earth. They are close, cold, heartless, incommunicative; often maliciously sarcastic, ill humoured, or extremely hypochondriac, or melancholic. When arched in the upper part, they are fearful and voluptuous" (472). Lavater is not alone in making such noses seem morally odious. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the expression "hawk nose" is often used in scorn or derision, derived as it is from the traits of the hawk that can be "applied to a person, in various senses derived from the nature of the bird of prey: e.g. one who preys on others, a rapacious person, a sharper or cheat; one who is keen and grasp-

¹² Such correlation of physical and moral qualities is especially clear when Lavater derives "the lowest and most earthly ... from the rim of the belly to the organs of generation ... The middle or moral life would be seated in the breast, and the heart would be its central point. The intellectual life ... would reside in the head, and have the eye for its centre. If we take the countenance as the representative and epitome of [these] three divisions, then will the forehead, to the eye-brows, be the mirror, or image, of the understanding" (Lavater, 10).

¹³ Lavater also notes that "the nose [indicates] taste, sensibility and feeling; the lips mildness and anger, love and hatred; the chin, the degree and species of sensuality" (Lavater, 194).

¹⁴ Lavater, 392. *Aquilin* is used in the French edition, *L'Art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie*, ed. Moreau de la Sarthe, 10 vols. (Paris: L. Prudhomme, 1806-09), 2:201. By contrast, Lavater writes that "The noses of Englishmen are seldom pointed, but generally round. If we may judge from their portraits, the Dutch seldom have handsome or significant noses. The nose of the Italian is large and energetic. The great men of France, in my opinion, have the characteristic of their greatness, generally, in the nose" (Lavater, 392).

ing."¹⁵ According to various nineteenth-century writers on racial distinctions, the nose and nostrils are considered one of the most distinctive features of Jews, along with dark hair and eyes.¹⁶ Indeed, most caricatures of Jews from the fifteenth to the twentieth century show the hook nose.¹⁷ The Jews depicted in Lavater's physiognomic volumes are shown, with one exception, in profile — the better to delineate their noses.

Lavater's general comments on Jews are negative; for example, he writes of "the pusillanimous face of a stupid and debased Pharisee" (fig. 2), and the inscription under one illustration in the German edition of his *Fragmente* reads "Hard-hearted rabbi."¹⁸ But Lavater's tone is never as scurrilous as that of prevailing anti-Semitic literature, such as Johann Andreas Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judenthum* (1711). Lavater's citations of other sources similarly show that he tended to generalize such judgments less readily than some of his contemporaries. Consider this quotation of the eccentric dramatist J.M.R. Lenz: "It appears to me remarkable that the Jews should have carried with them the marks of their country and race to all parts of the world; I mean their short, black, curly hair, and brown complexion. — Their quickness of speech, haste, and abruptness in all their actions, appear to proceed from the same causes. I imagine the Jews have more gall than other men."¹⁹ It is significant that Jews, in this description, have negroid features — black, curly hair and a brown complexion. Sander Gilman points out that Jews were regarded as "black" or at least "swarthy" in nineteenth-century ethnographic literature: "The blackness of the Jew," Gilman writes, "was not only a mark of racial inferiority, but also an indicator of the

¹⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "hawk."

¹⁶ S.v. "The Nose," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols., ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906–07). Gilman quotes Georges Jabet, writing as Eden Warwick in *Notes on Noses* (1848), who "characterized the Jewish or Hawknose" as "very convex, and preserv[ing] its convexity like a bow, throughout the whole length from the eyes to the tip. It is thin and sharp ... It indicates considerable Shrewdness in worldly matters; a deep insight into character, and facility of turning that insight to profitable account." Gilman, 181, also points out that the Jewish nose was associated with the moral nature of Jews. As he explains, it "came to be the sign of the pathological Jewish character for Western Jews."

¹⁷ See Eduard Fuchs, *Die Juden in der Karikatur* (Munich: Guhl, 1921).

¹⁸ Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* 4:307 ("ein hartsinniger Rabbi").

¹⁹ Lavater, 352–53. Gall, or bile, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, denotes rancor, bitterness of spirit, and in certain metaphorical uses, poison or venom.



Figure 2

A Pharisee

Johann Caspar Lavater,
L'Art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie,
 ed. Moreau de la Sarthe (Paris: Prudhomme, 1806–09), vol. 5, p. 221

diseased nature of the Jew."²⁰ Unlike Lenz, Lavater refrains from implying such charged racism with regard to Jews.

Let us now turn to the issue of visual representation and the extent to which Lavater's descriptions of individuals and types, specifically Jews, are based on his understanding of paintings, prints, or illustrations. Lavater himself notes that there is an intimate and direct connection between physiognomy and painting. One needs to examine the relation of word to image, the relative contributions of the visual artists to Lavater's text. It is not always clear whether Lavater is commenting on a given illustration, or whether he refers to his own mental image of the character of the person it depicts. Moses, for example, is pictured with horns and a long beard, in profile, facing left (fig. 3). Lavater's description of this figure reads: "This ... face is very base, the nose has no character, the eye is bad, and the eyebrows are miserable."²¹

Comments on paintings sometimes pertain only to their reproductions in his *Fragments*, which often distort, exaggerate, or simply lack commensurate skill. Lavater expressly criticizes some illustrations, and his criticism cuts both ways. Sometimes he finds that an illustration flatters its subject too much. Rejecting an engraving based on Rembrandt's *Ecc Homo*, for example, he writes, "I believe that if there were people worse than the Pharisees and Sadducees who raged against Jesus, they would look even worse than these."²² Other illustrations exaggerate their subjects' faults. Regarding Holbein's depiction of Judas in *The Last Supper*, illustrated by an engraving based on that painting (fig. 4), Lavater comments: "Who can persuade himself that an apostle of Jesus Christ ever had an aspect like this, or that the Saviour could have called such a countenance to the apostleship? And whose feelings will be offended when we pronounce a visage like this base and wicked? Who could place con-

²⁰ Gilman, 171-74, writes that Jews were regarded as a mixed race having "hybridized" with blacks during the Alexandrian exile. Robert Knox, who wrote extensively on anatomy and anthropology, observed that the Jewish physiognomy has "lips very full, mouth projecting, chin small, and [that] the whole, physiognomy, when swarthy, as it often is, has an African look." Robert Knox, *The Races of Man: A Fragment* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1850), 133.

²¹ Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* 1:124 ("dieß ... Gesicht [ist] sehr gemein, die Nase ohn allen großen Character, das Auge schlecht ... und die Augenbraunen [sind] erbärmlich").

²² Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* 1:86 ("Ich glaube, daß wenn es Menschen gäbe, die noch schlimmer wären, als die wider Jesum rasenden Pharisäer und Sadducäer, daß sie noch weit schlimmer aussehen würden.").



Figure 3

Moses

Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig and Winterthur: Weidmann, Reich, and Steiner, 1775-78), vol. 1, p. 124



Figure 4

Judas (after Holbein)

Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig and Winterthur: Weidmann, Reich, and Steiner, 1775–78), vol. 1, p. 79

fidence in such a man?" (36). Lavater wants more subtle portraits. In the original German text, his description of Holbein's *Kiss of Judas* (fig. 5) states that one needs to feel both the terrible betrayal and the greatness of the fallen Apostle, adding that "Holbein shows us only the betrayer. Raphael would have shown us the apostle at the same time."²³ This desire for complexity should not be overstated; Lavater also observes that Holbein's Judas has "the true physiognomy of a stingy person" and "the basest [face] that one can imagine."²⁴ The French edition makes things even worse by noting that Judas possessed "neither generosity, nor tenderness, nor nobility of spirit. The sordid Jew ..."²⁵ Given only in the French translation, however, such harsh remarks show why we cannot always attribute the prejudice found in his texts to Lavater himself.

Such caution in interpreting Lavater's illustrations is necessary both when stereotypes of Jews seem perpetuated and when they are rejected. Later in his text, there is another comment on Holbein's Judas, but not directly by Lavater, who does not identify his source. Its stereotypical association of Judas and Jews is striking: "This Jew has not the smallest respect for the legislature, or his superiors; he scourges the people, who have done him no injury, with whips; he goes to banquetings, wherever he is invited, and makes merry; he is a very mischief maker; and lately he said to his companions, *I am not come to send peace, but a sword*" (448). Conversely, more careful and differentiated remarks on Judas do not always come from Lavater himself. In his "Remarks on an Essay upon Physiognomy by Professor Lichtenberg," he quotes Lichtenberg commenting more sanely on this same image of Judas: "Judas scarcely could be that dirty, deformed mendicant painted by Holbein. No hypocrite, who associates with the good, betrays with a kiss, and afterwards hangs himself, looks thus. My experience leads me to suppose Judas must have been distinguished by an insinuating countenance, and an ever

²³ Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* 1:82 ("Holbein zeigt uns nur den Verräther. Raphael würde uns zugleich den Apostel gezeigt haben.").

²⁴ Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* 1:81 ("Die wahre Physiognomie eines Geizigen ... das niederträchtigste, das sich gedenken läßt.").

²⁵ Lavater, *L'Art de connaître les hommes* 5:367 ("... ni générosité, ni tendresse, ni noblesse d'âme. Le Juif sordide ...").

ready smile."²⁶ Nonetheless, the fact that Lavater also offers his readers more reasoned assessments like this suggests that he was not consistently hostile to Jews.

Moses Mendelssohn

The relationship of Lavater to Moses Mendelssohn, the most important Jewish philosopher of the Enlightenment, suggests that he might have had a more appreciative attitude toward Jews when he encountered them personally. Lavater was impressed by the theology of the Enlightenment and eager to meet Mendelssohn. After doing so, he noted on 18 April 1763 that Mendelssohn was "an affable, radiant soul ... generous and obliging. A brother to his brethren, the Jews, complaisant and respectful to them, loved and honored by them in return."²⁷ Their relations, however, were not always so cordial. Lavater's German translation of Charles Bonnet's *La Palingénésie philosophique ou Idées sur l'état passé et sur l'état futur des êtres vivans* (1769) is dedicated to Mendelssohn, but with a missionary purpose. Spurred on by theologians who debated the possibility of converting Mendelssohn to Christianity, Lavater demanded that Mendelssohn actually do so unless he could refute Bonnet's argument describing revelation as a miracle. Lavater put this alternative in language that combines tolerance and zealotry:

Most venerable Sir! I know no better way of expressing the respect instilled into my mind by your excellent writings and your even more excellent character, which is that of an *Israelite in whom there is no guile* ... than dedicating to you the best *philosophical* examination of *Christianity* known to me ... Refute it publicly in case you find the *essential* arguments adduced in support of the facts of Christianity to be incorrect.²⁸

Mendelssohn was deeply embarrassed and angered by this public



Figure 5

The Kiss of Judas

Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig and Winterthur: Weidmann, Reich, and Steiner, 1775–78), vol. 1, p. 84

²⁶ Lavater, 272–73. The French translation, 3:221–222, begins "Il n'est pas croyable, dites-vous, que Judas ait ressemblé à ce hideux et sale personnage, à ce juif mendiant que Holbein a peint." The Holcroft translation shows an exotic man in a turban, with a large nose and thick lips, of whom Lavater writes: "The conformation of the head, the overhanging of the forehead, alone, decidedly speak stupidity, incapable of instruction; and not less so the position of the nose to the mouth, perfectly brutal, without affection or mental enjoyment: the eyes, chin, and beard, all correspond" (Lavater, 273).

²⁷ Quoted in Altmann, 201.

²⁸ Quoted in Altmann, 209.

challenge. When they met in 1763, he had spoken reluctantly about theological matters and with the understanding that their conversation would remain private. With a lack of discretion, Lavater brought those matters out into the open. They then exchanged a series of diplomatic but impassioned letters until Lavater retracted his challenge. Lavater's tone, in response to a letter from Mendelssohn, sounds conciliatory: "Let me now proclaim, in homage to truth, that I meet in your letter with sentiments which I more than revere; sentiments, which have beguiled me into tears, which — pardon my weakness — drew forth the ejaculation, 'Would to God that he were a Christian.'"²⁹ Nevertheless, since Lavater thought that the Jewish philosopher had seen the truth of much else, his refusal to acknowledge the truth of Christianity must have seemed a slight or rejection of Lavater's beliefs.

Perhaps that is why Lavater kept on proselytizing even after his personal meeting with Mendelssohn led to such embarrassment. In his *Fragmente*, he reproduces a silhouette of Mendelssohn (fig. 6) and describes it in terms showing how committed he remained to converting the Jewish philosopher.³⁰ In a rhetorical question addressed to his reader, Lavater "reads" the silhouette with his usual enthusiasm:

Supposedly you know this silhouette? I can hardly conceal from you that it is exceedingly dear to me! Most expressive! ... Can you say, can you hesitate a moment as if wanting to say: "Perhaps a fool! A vulgar, tactless soul!" One who could say a thing like this or could bear another saying so should close my book, throw it away — and permit me to stop thinking lest I pass judgment on him! I revel in this silhouette! My glance welters in this magnificent curve of the forehead down to the pointed bone of the eye ... In this depth of the eye a Socratic soul is lodged! The firmness of the nose; — the magnificent transition from the nose to the upper lip — the height of both lips, neither protruding beyond the other, oh! how all this chimes with one another to make the divine truth of physiognomy perceptible and visible to me. Yes, I see him, the son of Abraham, who some day, in unison with Plato and Moses, will recognize and worship the crucified Lord of Glory!³¹

²⁹ Quoted in M. Samuels, *Memoires of Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish Philosopher; Including the Celebrated Correspondence on the Christian Religion with J.C. Lavater, Minister of Zurich*, 2d ed. (London: Sainsbury, 1827), 84.

³⁰ Lavater writes in his chapter on "Shades" (i.e., silhouettes) that he places more faith in them as a true record of nature: "They express ... but little; but the little they do express is exact. No art can attain to the truth of the shade, taken with precision" (Lavater, 188).

³¹ Quoted in Altmann, 319.

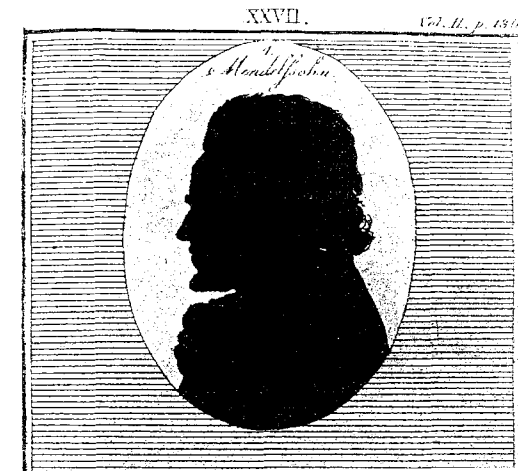


Figure 6

Silhouette of Moses Mendelssohn

Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, ed. Thomas Holcroft (London: Symonds, 1804), vol. 2, p. 136

Mendelssohn is also rendered in profile in the *Physiognomische Fragmente*, presumably an image not commissioned for the book (fig. 7). Lavater thinks that this profile, unlike the silhouette just described, does not capture Mendelssohn's spirit (*Geist*). The eyebrows, he explains, lack a characteristic sharpness, the forehead lacks precision, the eye seems without reason, and the mouth without wisdom.³² There is no doubt that Lavater faults the artist here, not Mendelssohn. This criticism of a poorly drawn profile confirms Lavater's sincere respect for its sitter, regardless of their religious differences.

When Mendelssohn was asked to comment on Lavater's physiognomic treatise, his response was critical and ambivalent:

It is true that undigested philosophy and insipid, sentimental twaddle *à la mode* form the major part of his work. Yet if one discounts all this, there still remain good observations in larger number than have ever been made on physiognomy. I admit that much in it is still incomprehensible to me, and I find, after all the tests suggested by Lavater and applied by myself, that I have not the least talent for physiognomy. From the little I understood, however, which pleased me I draw conclusions as to the rest, and I wish I could read more often the things that are good in this excessively expensive work.³³

Beyond such personal feelings about the value of Lavater's book, Mendelssohn also expressed doubts about its method. For him, most of those doubts could be traced to Lavater's lack of talent for serious science:

The empirical approach requires cool-headed circumspection, perhaps a spirit of moderate warmth, if some subtlety is to be achieved. It soon vanishes altogether in the heat of Lavater's imagination ... Enthusiasm presents to us the symptoms [*Zeichen*] as more expressive than they really are. Such a disposition of soul must dispose us toward reading in the physiognomies by far more than is contained in them ... However, the fault may not

³² Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente* 4:387. Not even all the commissioned illustrations followed Lavater's instructions. The Swiss artist Henry Fuseli, who did many illustrations for Lavater, insisted on some measure of freedom in his drawings, though remaining faithful to Lavater's general principles. In turn, Lavater wrote to Fuseli: "I give you liberty not only to make improvements, but to omit what you think false or unimportant." Quoted in Allentuck, 98.

³³ Quoted in Altmann, 334. Altmann observes that Mendelssohn's "remarks on Lavater's enthusiasm were, perhaps, to some extent provoked by the manner in which his own features in the silhouette had been described." Altmann, 319.



Figure 7

Profile of Moses Mendelssohn

Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig and Winterthur: Weidmann, Reich, and Steiner, 1775–78), vol. 4, p. 387

be Lavater's alone. It seems to me that our language and our psychology are as yet not sufficiently developed for [the purposes of] physiognomy.³⁴

Mendelssohn appeals to reason and tolerance. He knows the dangers of stereotyping and the price it exacts. Lavater's exchanges with and descriptions of the one Jew with whom we know he had personal contact are basically positive, but Mendelssohn is both more reasonable than Lavater and, in Lavater's eyes, an exception among his people. Sadly, Lavater makes little attempt to reconcile his ambiguous stereotypes of Jews with his own, more favorable, experience and observation.

Conclusion

Physiognomical studies are regarded with suspicion and generally dismissed as superficial and prejudicial, yet character is still largely read by courtesy of generalization, type and category. Strong and legitimate objections can be raised to Lavater's reading character from people's faces, but does that mean one cannot or does not read faces oneself? Is it wrong to try to analyze such traits? Are we allowed to do so only in popular media like feature films and drama on television, which are physiognomic, as are character descriptions in novels from Dickens's day to our own? All portraits, painted and photographic, assume that we *can* read human character from facial expressions; we are all in the business of producing, projecting, and decoding such visual signs. But to isolate specific facial characteristics and to seek psychological truths in them is dangerous, and it is not surprising that Lavater's hierarchies of national and racial types nowadays seem objectionable. Is the objection to hierarchies as such? Distinctions are routinely drawn among such general types, and every culture tends to promote its own traits and qualities above others. As an educated, eighteenth-century European, Lavater was Eurocentric. Given this cultural bias, how could he not view its products as superior? To raise this question is not to excuse the motives or the effects of physiognomy as Lavater preached and practiced it. His reading of facial traits confused his religious zeal and personal impressions with empirical, less subjective claims to scientific method. Nineteenth-century city-dwellers found Lavater's insights compelling in societies undergoing rapid change; he may well have contributed to their patterns of prejudice and exclusion.³⁵ In our

³⁴ Quoted in Altmann, 319.

³⁵ See Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th*

own century, we have seen far greater dangers posed by racial theories that conflate ideology and pseudo-science.

The way we read Lavater reading facial traits and types is still open to interpretation. E.H. Gombrich, who dismissed much of Lavater's approach as nonsense, admitted that physiognomy at least enables us "to perform the first unstable act of categorization which serves as a starting point for subsequent probes."³⁶

Century Paris (London: Thames and Hudson; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³⁶ Gombrich, 50.