

Lavater and Physiognomy in English Fiction 1790–1832

Graeme Tytler

The study of physiognomy in the novel has become an established domain of literary criticism, with scholars intent on showing ways in which novelists of different nationalities were influenced by the physiognomic theories of Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801).¹ The present essay, while consistent with earlier studies in aims and methods, surveys a transitional period in the development of physical character description in the English novel, and suggests some of the hazards as well as the benefits of comparative studies of this kind.

Until recently, critics of the major works of English fiction seldom came across Lavater's name and were thus unaware that he was practically a household name in Britain from the moment in 1789 when the first English translations of his *Essays on Physiognomy* appeared.² His fame should not, however, obscure the fact that by the time his theories became known in Britain, physiognomy had not only had a history

1 For a recent bibliography of such studies, see Graeme Tytler, "Lavater and the Nineteenth-Century English Novel" in *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater*, ed. Ellis Shookman (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993), pp. 163–64n.

2 The growing awareness of Lavater is suggested by two recent editions: Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), in which the editor comments upon a reference to physiognomy: "the judgment of character by the face was a particular form of interest at the end of the eighteenth century: at least two different English translations of Johann Caspar Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–78) were published in the course of the seventeen-eighties" (p. 388n); and Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, or the Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), where Lavater is mentioned in connection with a physiognomic reference in the text (p. 210n).

stretching back to classical antiquity but had also been a preoccupation of the literary world since the early eighteenth century.³ Addison and Steele discuss physiognomy now and again in the *Spectator* and, like many of their contemporaries, notably Fielding, who gives the science careful consideration in his "Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men" (1743), they regard Aristotle as the leading authority on the subject. The topicality of physiognomy before 1790 can also be seen when fictional characters display "skill in physiognomy" or awareness of it, as, for example, in Susannah Minifie Gunning's *The Histories of Lady Frances S*** and Lady Caroline S**** (1763) and *Barford Abbey* (1768), William Hutchinson's *The Hermitage* (1772), Thomas Cogan's *John Bunclie, Junior, Gentleman* (1776) and Elizabeth Blower's *Maria* (1785).⁴ Physiognomic ideas may also be found well before 1790 in personal descriptions where narrators speak about appearances in general, or the interest of a face for an observer and, using phrases such as the "Index of the Mind," the "Index of the Soul," the "human face divine," the particular moral virtues revealed by a face, the display of someone's soul in his or her countenance, the effects of the inner life on the appearance, and so on.

Although most novelists would have agreed with Uncle Toby's claim that there are indeed "a thousand openings ... which let a penetrating eye at once into a man's soul," there is no doubt that physiognomy itself continued to arouse controversy in the literary and philosophic worlds, as it had done since Zopyrus's notoriously unfavourable reading of Socrates' face. Much eighteenth-century fiction before 1790 is strongly imbued with a spirit of *fronti nulla fides*, a dictum which was of crucial importance to Le Sage and Fielding in their portrayal of society as made up of deceivers and victims of deceit.⁵ That this scepticism towards physiognomy may have influenced character description is suggested by the occasional association of handsomeness with treachery (Lovelace is perhaps the best-known example) and, especially after mid-century, by the presentation of heroes, heroines, and some sympathetic secondary characters with less than impeccable looks. A typical instance is the description

3 For a compendious history of Western physiognomy, see Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 35–47.

4 Susannah Minifie Gunning, *The Histories of Lady Frances S*** and Lady Caroline S**** (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1763), 3:67 and *Barford Abbey* (London: T. Cadell, 1768), 1:80; William Hutchinson, *The Hermitage* (York: C. Etherington, 1772), p. 40; Thomas Cogan, *John Bunclie, Junior, Gentleman* (London: J. Johnson, 1776), 1:137–38; Elizabeth Blower, *Maria* (London: T. Cadell, 1785), 1:84–87.

5 See Graeme Tytler, "Letters of Recommendation and False Vizards: Physiognomy in the Novels of Henry Fielding," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 2 (1990), 93–111.

of the heroine of Edward Bancroft's *The History of Charles Wentworth* (1770): "Her features, when considered separately, are not perfectly regular, or exactly proportioned; but they exhibit such a pleasing variety, that the composition of the whole, with a considerable part of mankind, produces a more happy effect, a more agreeable object than the most regular beauty."⁶ Those words anticipate Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796), in which we have a most important reappraisal in eighteenth-century fiction of the relationship between beauty and character in the description of three sisters, one beautiful but soulless, another very plain but with a good heart, and the third, the heroine, representing the *juste milieu*.⁷

Notwithstanding such counter-examples, the physical presentation of fictional characters before 1790 is generally based on a fundamental, "Lavaterian," principle of physiognomy: beauty is equated with virtue and ugliness with vice. Even Fielding, for all his caution about physiognomy, pays homage to that principle throughout his fiction. Yet in doing so, he was, like his contemporaries and predecessors, probably far less influenced by the physiognomic theories of, say, Aristotle, Porta, or Le Brun (though the idea of such influences cannot be altogether ruled out) than by certain time-honoured literary conventions. Long descriptions of handsome heroes and heroines in eighteenth-century fiction owe much to ancient classical concepts of beauty, the medieval "blason" and "effectio," and especially to French historical romances of the seventeenth century, where novelists equated moral perfection with regular facial features. This imitation is evident in the repetitive use of words such as "symmetry," "sweetness," "sensibility," and "tout ensemble," in the fashioning of heroines of "middle height," and in the comparison of characters to well-known paintings or statuary, especially Greek models. Convention also underlies portraits of ugliness, which, though fewer in number, turn up regularly in the novel and often show typical caricatural elements. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, some writers began to feel that physical portraiture had reached an impasse, as the narrator of Richard Cumberland's *Arundel* (1789) suggests when explaining his reluctance to describe a lady whom he has known for only five days: "I abhor such affectation, and I like it the less for the surfeit I have of descriptions in my short acquaintance with the novelists: their pourtraits [sic] of beauty, and their daubings of deformity are

6 Edward Bancroft, *The History of Charles Wentworth* (1770; New York: Garland, 1975), p. 93.

7 Frances Burney, *Camilla* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 1:146-47, 194-95, 242-43; 2:363-64, 370-73.

so overcharged as to give me no idea of nature."⁸ Cumberland's complaint is curiously timely, occurring as it did in the same year the first English translations of Lavater's physiognomic essays were published.

Although it might be tempting to see 1789 as a turning-point in the history of the outward person in English fiction, it would be unwise to draw such a demarcation line because of the extent to which physiognomy and physiognomic principles obtain in earlier fiction. Nevertheless, Lavater's physiognomic ideas had an obvious relevance to the art of literary portraiture, and, in their seeming freshness of content in English translation, must have been a source of inspiration to novelists of the pre-romantic generation. It is unnecessary here to elaborate on the sensational publication history of the *Essays on Physiognomy* or the enthusiasm with which they were received by British literary figures as well as the public at large.⁹ Whatever the reasons for Lavater's amazing success in Britain, no physiognomist before him had argued the principles of physiognomy as forcefully or gone into such detail. His geometrical analyses of skulls and foreheads, categorical equating of beauty with virtue and ugliness with vice, his comments on individual facial and bodily features, together with his discussions on first impressions, attraction and repulsion, moral and external influences on the appearance, the four temperaments, painting and sculpture, family, national and animal physiognomies, and the nature and function of the physiognomist, offered a strong challenge to the prevailing scepticism about physiognomy. Lavater was also astute enough to anticipate practically every conceivable objection that had been, or could be, raised against the science and to make cogent rebuttals.¹⁰ This richness of content goes a long way towards explaining why the *Essays on Physiognomy*, despite their shortcomings in

8 Richard Cumberland, *Arundel* (London: C. Dilly, 1789), 1:193. The hero of Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* makes a similar complaint. See Denis Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. J. Assézat (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875-77), 2:249. Lavater's apparent influence upon Cumberland's treatment of the outward person is suggested by the latter's portrayal of Dr Zachary as a judicious physiognomist in *Henry* (1795) (see note 15)—and that despite having received a letter (4 October 1791) from his brother George saying: "You liked the looks of my Swiss, so did I and thought him perfectly sober and honest the good for little beside—since he left me which was last Tuesday I have discovered that he has always been a petty thief and that at last he carried off a watch and a pair of Silver Buckles ... now this lad had an excellent Character, good Physionomy [sic], civil carriage, appear'd religious, sober and clean.—O Lavater! What is Physionomy?" Cumberland, VII. British Library Add. MSS 36, 497 (July 1791-94), 55-56.

9 For a list of English translations of Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente* (Leipzig and Winterthur, 1775-78) and their reception in Britain, see John Graham, *Lavater's Essays on Physiognomy: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Berne, Frankfurt am Main, and Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1979), pp. 45-90, 103-8.

10 For a detailed discussion of the content of Lavater's *Essays*, see Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, pp. 64-73.

style and structure, led to a general revival of interest in physiognomy as a serious branch of knowledge and why Lavater himself displaced Aristotle as the chief authority on the subject. In a word, "physiognomy" and "Lavater" became practically synonymous, especially in the realm of *belles-lettres*.¹¹



Lavater's impact in England was nowhere more conspicuous than in the novel, where his name was often mentioned, as it had been in German and French fiction of the previous two decades. As might be expected, writers of pot-boilers tended to grasp at the fashionableness of physiognomy and incorporate it uncritically into their work. Thus a character judging a face is depicted as "a disciple of Lavater" or as "a sort of Lavaterion [sic]"; or regards Lavater as an "oracle" and keeps his "Physiognomy" in a pocket "ready in any emergency" in order to estimate characters "always in strict consonance with rules therein laid down"; or cites Lavater's authority when deciding whether to trust the face of a new acquaintance. In some descriptions it is taken for granted that Lavater would have shared the narrator's pleasure in a particular face, while in others the features of an ugly face are euphemistically declared to have "trespassed unrelentingly beyond which Lavater designates the line of beauty." There are narrators and characters who appeal to Lavater's authority when underlining the significance of a momentary facial expression, when justifying a bias against someone's appearance, or when assessing the merit of someone's beauty, even though they have "never studied Lavater." There are also characters who decline to describe themselves for fear of being condemned by "the sage Lavater" or who claim that "the Lavaterian study" is necessary in "the choice of a wife or even a flirt."¹²

11 Some latter-day critics have even credited Lavater with inventing physiognomy. See Tyler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, pp. 7, 329n. For references to Lavater in English *belles-lettres*, see Graham, *Lavater's Essays*, pp. 61-74. For early nineteenth-century publications on physiognomy, see: Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1806); John Cross, *An Attempt to Establish Physiognomy upon Scientific Principles* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1817); John Varley, *A Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy* (London, 1828); and Thomas Price, *An Essay on the Physiognomy and Physiology of the Present Inhabitants of Britain* (London: Rodwill, 1829).

12 For these and other direct references to Lavater in English fiction, see Robert Bage, *Man as He Is* (London: William Lane, 1792), 2:177; [Charles Henry Wilson], *The Wandering Islander* (London: J. Ridgway, 1792), 1:50; Charlotte Smith, *Marchmont* (London: Sampson Low, 1796), 2:174; Agnes Maria Bennett, *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* (London: William Lane,

Despite all such deference to his authority, it was perhaps inevitable that Lavater should have also fanned the perennial flames of controversy over physiognomy. This is reflected most patently in Azil  d'Arcy's *Prejudice, or Physiognomy* (1817) and Mrs Ross's *The Physiognomist* (1818). But whereas *The Physiognomist* is a mild satire on a staunch disciple of Lavater, *Prejudice, or Physiognomy* presents a heroine who, having long proved herself a loyal Lavaterian, decides in the end that, since physiognomy "begets a host of prejudices," she will henceforth "not look in the eyes of a man to read his character," but will be "contented to observe his deeds."¹³ Similar objections are more or less explicit in Harriet Lee's *Canterbury Tales* (1799), with its sardonic reference in the preface to "the new race of physiognomists"; in Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington and Ormond* (1817) when Mrs Harrington asserts her anti-Semitic prejudice against the appearance of her son's future father-in-law by fallaciously exclaiming, "Does not Lavater say that even a cock-chaffer and a dish of tea have a physiognomy?"; and in Susan Ferrier's *The Inheritance* (1824), in which a character is doubtful whether "the study of physiognomy is likely to be productive of beneficial results to society."¹⁴ Most of these criticisms, however, have an earnestness about them that reminds us of minor fiction in which characters presented as physiognomists are seldom found wanting in their judgments of the human appearance—Dr Zachary in Richard Cumberland's *Henry* (1795), Agnes in Amelia Opie's *The Father and Daughter* (1801), Lorenzo in George Walker's *Don Raphael* (1803), Mrs Burrows in Elizabeth Helme's *Modern Times* (1809), and the eponymous heroine of "My Uncle Oddy's" *Maria* (1823).¹⁵ One looks in vain in such works for that marvellous

1797), 1:130, 3:186; [Anon], *A Marvellous Pleasant Love Story*, 1:38; Henry Whitfield, *A Picture from Life* (London: S. Highley, 1804), 1:72; Susannah Gunning, *The Exile of Erin* (London: B. Crosby, 1808), 2:35; [Elizabeth Berger], *Marian* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1812), 1:196; Thomas Brown, *Bath* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1818), 1:83; [Quintin Poynt], *The Wizard Priest and the Witch* (London: A.K. Newman, 1822), 1:197; James Sheridan Knowles, *The Magdalen and Other Tales* (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), p. 131. For other references to Lavater in European fiction before 1790 and after 1832, see Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, pp. 155–62, 385n and "Lavater and the Nineteenth-Century Novel," 168–69n.

- 13 See Azil  d'Arcy, *Prejudice, or Physiognomy. A Novel* (London: A.K. Newman, 1817), 3:220–23; and [Mrs. Ross], *The Physiognomist: A Novel* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1818), 1:i–ix.
- 14 Harriet Lee and Sophia Lee, *Canterbury Tales* (London: G. and J. Robinson, 1799), 1:ix; Maria Edgeworth, *Harrington, A Tale and Ormond, A Tale* (London: R. Hunter, 1817), 1:180–81; Susan Ferrier, *The Novels* (London: J.M. Dent, 1894), 3:51.
- 15 For references to characters possessing, or knowing about, "skill in physiognomy," see Robert Bage, *Man as He Is*, pp. 42–43; Richard Cumberland, *Henry* (London: Charles Dilly, 1795), pp. 10–15; Elizabeth Helme, *Albert* (London: Sampson Low, 1799), 1:127–28 and *Modern*

ambivalence with which Fielding treats physiognomy in his fiction. Nevertheless, by reflecting the Lavaterian vogue in their different ways, they cannot but possess an immense documentary interest for us today.

It would be tempting for the comparatist to look upon the foregoing as reason enough to assume that Lavater had influenced all English fiction after 1789 where physiognomic descriptions are conspicuous. Such an assumption would, of course, be difficult to defend if only because "Lavaterian" elements are not necessarily distinguishable from "traditional" methods of personal description, which persisted in fiction well beyond the eighteenth century and may be deemed no less physiognomic. Once the cultural impact of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* is recognized, however, it becomes reasonable to postulate that certain aspects of physiognomy in the English novel after 1789 which were rare or perfunctory in earlier fiction somehow bespeak a new climate of observation. For though it may be rightly asserted that physiognomy in fiction derives from any number of sources, both ancient and modern, it is interesting to note the extent to which the treatment of the outward person in the English novel after 1789 seems to match the substance and spirit of Lavaterian physiognomy. Yet in attempting to discern Lavater's impact, especially in fiction where his name is not mentioned, rather than looking for evidence of his direct influence on individual novelists, it is probably better to point out certain general patterns of fictional character description that have an evident bearing on the *Essays in Physiognomy*.

One example of this affinity may be seen in descriptions of momentary or temporary changes in the human appearance, which Lavater would designate as "pathognomy" as distinguished from "physiognomy," the study of the permanent features. Although Lavater attached greater importance to the latter, most English editions of the *Essays* contain numerous illustrations of facial expressions, gestures, postures, and stances.¹⁶ There are, of course, many passages in fiction before 1790—notably in the novels of Richardson and of Charlotte Lennox—where blushing, turning pale, averting eyes, contracting brows, and changing tones of voice reveal (or betray) the inner self. It was not until after 1789, however, that pathognomy came into its own, in the Gothic novel appropriately,

Times (London: J. Budd, 1809), 1:229; Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1800), 1:36; Amelia Opie, *The Father and Daughter* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1801), p. 17; George Walker, *Don Raphael* (London: Walker and Hurst, 1803), 3:119; "My Uncle Oddy," *Maria* (London: John Hatchard, 1823), pp. 100-101.

16 For Lavater's distinction between physiognomy and pathognomy, see his *Essays on Physiognomy for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789), 1:19-21.

where the grim psychology of villains such as La Motte in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and the mental anguish of their victims are underlined by references to facial expressions.¹⁷ Novelists also began to make complex use of pathognomy to show the decline or degradation of characters by changes in their facial features, thereby honouring Lavater's reiterated comments on the effects of the moral life and other influences on the human physiognomy.¹⁸ One of the earliest and most striking examples of this technique may be seen in the presentation of Falkland in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794).¹⁹ In an unusual twist, the idea was carried further in James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) when the Devil, masquerading as Peter the Great, addresses the hero as follows: "If I contemplate a man's features seriously, mine own generally assume the very same appearance and character. And what is more ... by assuming the likeness I attain to the possession of his most secret thoughts."²⁰ The more complex aspects of Lavater's theories find their way—usually without acknowledgment—into some of the best novels of the period. Indeed, one may almost assume that a critical, thoughtful attitude towards physiognomic analysis—in the narrator or in the characters—is a marker of similarly serious, thoughtful fiction.

There are other physiognomic innovations in the novel after 1790 that may be ascribed to Lavater's influence. We note, for example, that, when depicting Fergus the Chieftain in *Waverley* (1814) or drawing a physical contrast between the Christian and the Saracen in *The Talisman* (1825), Scott makes appropriate use of national physiognomies, a concept which, though of great interest to classical physiognomists, re-emerged through Lavater's agency to appear in fiction as well as travel books.²¹ Interesting too, because virtually without precedent in the English novel, is Ann

17 See Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, pp. 89, 229; and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée and Frederick Garber (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990),

pp. 157, 171, 192, 236.
18 See especially "Of the Harmony of Moral and Corporeal Beauty" in Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, I: 175–208.

19 William Godwin, *Things as They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, ed. Maurice Hindle (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 7–12, 33, 93, 112–25, 138, 155, 290–94, 329–36.

20 James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. Patrick Grant (London: Cresset Press, 1947), pp. 113–14.

physiognomies in fiction, see Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, pp. 110–11, 159. See also Walter Scott, *Waverley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 139; *Quentin Durward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 43; *Woodstock* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 288. Comments on national or regional physiognomies, sometimes with reference to

Radcliffe's dramatic treatment of the notion of family physiognomy in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.²² Although the narrator is careful to remark on the heroine's resemblance to her mother as to "symmetry of form," "delicacy of features," and blue eyes "full of sweet tenderness," we begin to wonder about the legitimacy of Emily St Aubert's birth whenever characters such as the servant Dorothea remark on the resemblance between Emily and the woman depicted in the miniature that Emily's father wept over shortly before his death. The portrait, it turns out, is not that of a woman Emily has long suspected to be her father's mistress (and, therefore, possibly her real mother), but of her father's sister, the Marchioness de Villeroy, who was murdered by the Marquis and his mistress Laurentini. The climax occurs in the moment when Laurentini, now a nun, recognizes "the family resemblance" and, in her delirious state, mistaking Emily for the woman she has helped to murder, succumbs to a "phrensy" brought on by renewed guilt and shortly afterward dies, having already bequeathed her considerable estate to the heroine by way of compensation.²³

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* we are struck by Ann Radcliffe's skilful use of physiognomy to thicken the plot and keep us in suspense; but our reading also makes us aware of something aesthetically much more interesting—a new kind of physiognomic awareness in narrators and characters that transcends both the rhapsodic reactions to beauty of early eighteenth-century heroes and heroines and the shrewdly perceptive analyses of the outward person made by narrators in the novels of Marivaux and Diderot.²⁴ Something of this physiognomic sensitivity is already conspicuous, albeit ironically, in good-natured characters such as Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and the heroes of *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) and *The Man of Feeling* (1771), who, though blundering face-readers, can be said to represent Lavater's concept of the ideal

Lavater, are to be found in the following travel books: Thomas Cogan, *The Rhine; or, a Journey from Utrecht to Francfort* (London: J. Johnston, 1794), 2:97; Samuel Pratt, *Gleanings through Wales, Holland and Westphalia* (London: Longman and Seeley, 1795), 2:213n and 276; Thomas Holcroft, *Travels from Hamburg through Westphalia, Holland and the Netherlands* (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), 1:114, 126; Archibald Alison, *Travels in France during the Years 1814–15* (Edinburgh: Macredie, Skelly and Mackerry, 1815), 2:225. For a discussion of national physiognomies in classical antiquity, see Elizabeth C. Evans, *Physiognomics in the Ancient World* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1969), pp. 11–23.

22 For Lavater's comments on family physiognomy and heredity, see *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:196ff and 3:128–47.

23 See Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp. 5, 104, 489, 491, 497, 498, 523, 524, 529, 533, 578, 596, 645, 650, 663.

24 For Marivaux and Diderot, see Tytler, "Letters of Recommendation," p. 100n15.

physiognomist—someone ever alive to the good in human appearances. After 1790, however, that concept begins to assume a new dimension in English fiction. Thus, although Madame La Luc might demur at Clara's favourable physiognomic interpretation of the heroine of *The Romance of the Forest*, and Madame Cheron at her brother's positive assessment of Valancourt's appearance in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, their objections to physiognomy turn out to be less valid than those which, say, the gentle hero of *The Man of Feeling* has to put up with from his "harsh-looking maiden aunt" for cherishing an undue faith in the science.²⁵ Even though some novelists revived the notion of *fronti nulla fides* after 1789, they also indicated the problems confronting those characters who put their knowledge of Lavaterian physiognomy into practice. Examples of this may be seen in *The Romance of the Forest*, when the heroine suddenly realizes that she has been betrayed by the very people in whose faces she first read "esteem and kindness," and in *The Monk*, when Don Raymond, having taken an instant dislike to the wood-man's wife but judged the wood-man as "calculated to inspire esteem and confidence," finds these first impressions flatly contradicted by subsequent events.²⁶ The patent realism of the physiognomic misjudgments in these novels is confirmed by Lavater himself, who speaks time and again of the deceptiveness of the human face. With similar realism, Godwin, an admirer of Lavater, describes a moment in *Caleb Williams* when the hero learns that he can no longer count on the help of an elderly man whose "whole countenance was strongly expressive of good-nature," and, later, in *Fleetwood* (1805), presents another hero who is destined to reap disastrous consequences by failing to abide by his initially unfavourable impression of Gifford's appearance, simply because he has been all too taken with "the admirable subtlety" of the latter's mind.²⁷

Although, for dramatic purposes, novelists make realistic use of their characters' physiognomic skills, the capacity for intelligent and sensitive observation is now usually a sure sign of moral depth and humanity. Such a capacity exists, albeit with grim irony, in the hero of *The Monk*, who, in his aesthetic appreciation of a portrait of the Madonna (not to mention the physiognomic comparison he makes in his mind between Antonia

25 For details, see Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 44; Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, p. 256 and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp. 111–12.

26 Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. Howard Anderson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 100; Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, pp. 13–14.

27 William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, p. 255 and *Fleetwood* (London: Bentley, 1832), p. 284. For Godwin's respect for "Lavater's system of physiognomy," see Graham, *Lavater's Essays*, p. 81.

and Matilda), has become the plaything of a tussle between chastity and sensuality that will have fatal consequences for him in the end.²⁸ It is, however, most particularly in Ann Radcliffe's fiction, permeated by the principles and values of sensibility, that this new spirit of observation echoes the enthusiasm and optimism underlying Lavater's physiognomic thought. Physiognomic sensitivity is an essential part of the goodness of her main characters, a sensitivity to form which is confirmed by their Rousseauesque love of nature and landscapes, as seen in the heroine of *The Romance of the Forest*, and also in Emily St Aubert, her father, and Valancourt in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Montoni's villainy is similarly underlined for Emily by the fact that he "cared little about views of any kind."²⁹ Interesting, too, is the way in which, probably for the first time in English fiction, a love relationship (between Emily St Aubert and Valancourt) is enhanced by the lovers' constant awareness of one another's facial features and voices and by their alertness to changes in outward appearance.³⁰ It is surely also in Emily that can be found the beginnings of that physiognomic awareness which was to come into its own in the nineteenth-century novel. Emily is presented as someone easily attracted or repelled by physical appearances, and yet ready to be on her guard against first impressions, tentative in her physiognomic analyses of people seen in person or in portrait paintings, but never truly mistaken in her physiognomic estimate of those with whom she is thrown into close relationship. In this way, Ann Radcliffe created a heroine of a maturity that was both rare in fiction before 1790 and prototypical for numerous fictional heroines and heroes to come.³¹

Sir Walter Scott described Ann Radcliffe as "the first poetic novelist." Judging by the tendency of the main characters in, say, *The Heart of Midlothian* (1816) to analyse and interpret one another's appearances, we may surmise that Scott was influenced by Radcliffe's dramatic use of physiognomy.³² Although there is no mention of Lavater in his writings, Scott's detailed analyses of facial and bodily features suggest that

28 Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, pp. 80–81, 242–43.

29 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 171. For references to the (usually female) appreciation of landscapes and nature in general, see Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, pp. 10, 22, 37, 48; and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp. 43, 45, 49, 213.

30 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp. 42, 49, 104, 502.

31 For his comments on first impressions, and attraction and repulsion, see John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy Calculated to Extend the Knowledge and Love of Mankind*, trans. C. Moore (London: H.D. Symonds, 1797), 2:371.

32 See Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. viii; and Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), pp. 127, 163, 367, 380, 432, 545, 557–59.

he was affected by the Lavaterian vogue.³³ It is useful here to remember that, despite his immense gifts as a novelist and his profound influence on his contemporaries and successors, Scott was to be severely criticized for excesses in describing his characters' physical features (not to mention their clothes, houses, house interiors, and so on). Fiction of the period sometimes includes elaborate conversations about physical appearance which were much more "physiognomic" than similar discussions occurring in fiction before 1790.³⁴ Again, leaving aside the hyperbolic utterances which continue to preface many a facial description and which, by 1800, have begun to seem trite, we notice narrators and characters talking about faces that "fix the attention," "speak to feeling eyes," or "give pleasure in their contemplation"; faces one has been accustomed to seeing, or comparing favourably or unfavourably with a face seen for the first time, sometimes from the viewpoint of "a superficial observer," "an observant eye," "a good judge of men and manners," "a very experienced judge of outward signs," and so on.³⁵ Even Richard Cumberland's "daubings of deformity" are now considered to possess an intrinsic aesthetic interest, especially in Scott's novels, partly as a consequence of the cult of the picturesque.³⁶

33 For references to physiognomists in Scott's fiction, see *Waverley*, p. 139; *Rob Roy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 54; *Ivanhoe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 229. For his attitude to phrenology, which was disparaging, see Walter Scott, *The Journal*, ed. D. Douglas (New York: Harper, 1891), p. 215.

34 For discussions on personal appearances in fiction after 1789, see Jane Austen, *Love and Friendship* (London: Women's Press, 1984), pp. 53-54; idem, *The Watsons*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London and Dover, NH: 1985), pp. 25-26, 106-7; Charlotte Smith, *The Young Philosophers* (London: T. Cadell, 1798), 1:167; Edward Du Bois, *A Piece of Family Biography* (London: J. Bell, 1799), 1:149-50; Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (London: J. Johnson, 1801), 3:36-37; Mrs Hunter, *Lady Macclairn* (London: W. Earle and J.W. Hucklebridge, 1806), 1:166-75, 228-31; Maria Regina Roche, *Alvondown Vicarage* (London: Lane, Newman, 1807), 2:258; Richard Cumberland, *John de Lancaster* (London: Lockingham, Allen, 1809), 1:163-64; Jane Harvey, *Memoirs of an Author* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1812), 1:107; Margaret Roberts, *Duty* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1815), 1:41; Mrs J. Jenner, *Melmoth House* (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1816), 1:26; [Anon], *The Woman of Genius* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1821), 1:217-21.

35 See, for example, Charlotte Smith, *Desmond* (London: G. and J. Robinson, 1792), 3:35; Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, pp. 39, 68, 243; William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, pp. 7, 187, 199; John Moore, *Edward* (London: A. Stralia, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 1:25; Frances Burney, *Camilla*, 2:371; Regina Maria Roche, *The Children of the Abbey* (London: William Lane, 1797), 1:19; Richard Barham, *Baldwin* (London: A.K. Newman, 1820), 2:48-49; Susannah Gunning, *The Hair Apparent* (London: James Ridgeway, 1802), 1:214; Maria Edgeworth, *Harrington and Ormond*, 1:6; Mary Anne Hedge, *Life* (London: A.K. Newman, 1822), 1:94; [Quintin Poyntet], *The Wizard Priest*, 1:20-21; Alicia Lefanu, *The Tales of a Tourist* (London: A.K. Newman, 1823), 1:62; Walter Scott, *Woodstock*, p. 41; Bulwer Lytton, *The Disowned* (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), 1:89-91; G.P.R. James, *De L'Orme* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), 1:54-55; Thomas Lister, *Arlington* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1832), 1:34-35.

36 See, for example, Walter Scott, *Kenilworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 39 and

As indicated by the increasing use of the term "physiognomy" in personal descriptions, and by occasional references to anonymous real-life physiognomists, to "craniology" or "phrenology" and their votaries, the literary portrait at the beginning of the nineteenth century had already become conspicuously "physiognomic," as the following excerpt from a long description of a character in the anonymous novel *The Priest* (1821) suggests: "An air of mingled gravity and shrewdness, expressed by a quick eye, glancing through a shaggy, overhanging brow, and a mouth contracted, in moments of important deliberation, considerably within its usual dimensions, superseded that fatuity which is generally the physiognomical characteristic of faces of this form."³⁷ This passage is typical of the manner in which, by virtue of abundantly detailed descriptions of one, two, or even several individuals in succession, the literary portrait had become, by the early 1830s, a *tour de force*, impressive in physiognomic analyses and masterly turns of phrase, but otherwise of little structural significance.³⁸ This is especially true of the novels of Bulwer Lytton and G.P.R. James, both of whom may be lumped together with those other, mainly historical, novelists who, like Scott himself, helped to give the physical portrait a bad name.³⁹

Woodstock, p. 288. For a discussion on the relationship between personal description and the concept of the picturesque, see Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, pp. 177-78, 376 and Marcia Allentuck, "Scott and the Picturesque" in *Scott Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Alan Bell (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), pp. 188-98.

37 [Anon], *The Priest* (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1821), 1:31. References to physiognomists as real-life authorities apparently begin to occur in fiction only after 1789. See Robert Bage, *Man as He Is*, p. 8; William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, p. 274; Samuel Pratt, *Family Secrets* (London: T.N. Longman, 1798), 3:314; Emily Clark, *Tales at the Fireside* (Brentford: P. Norbury, 1817), 1:93; Susan Ferrier, *Marriage in The Novels*, 4:43-44; [Anon], *The Orientalist* (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1820), 1:312. For references to and discussions on craniology, phrenology, Gall, Spurzheim, etc. in the novel before 1833, see [Anon], *The Revealer of Secrets* (London: A.K. Newman, 1817), 1:13-18; Humphrey Hedgehog, *The Pavilion* (London: J. Johnston, 1817), 1:179-80; Thomas Brown, *Bath*, 1:83; [Anon], *Castles in the Air* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1818), 1: 112-22; James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs*, p. 225.

38 See especially Samuel Pratt, *Family Secrets* (London: T.N. Longman, 1798), 3:5-10; Emily Clark, *The Banks of the Douro* (London: Lane, Newman, 1805), 1:58-63; John Brown, *Memoirs of Prince Alexy Haimatoff* (London: T. and E. Hookham, 1813), 1:20-26; William Henry Hitchener, *The Towers of Ravenswood* (London: C. Chapple, 1813), 1:98; [Anon], *The Woman of Genius* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1821), 2:119-20; Alexander Balfour, *The Farmers' Three Daughters* (London: A.K. Newman, 1822), 1:36-38; [Quintin Poyntet], *The Wizard Priest*, 1:12-18; Edward Bulwer Lytton, *The Disowned*, 1:89-91; G.P.R. James, *De l'Orme*, 1:30-31, 44-46; William Godwin, *Cloudesley: A Tale* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), p. 95.

39 For the objections of Goethe, Stendhal, Eichendorff, Carlyle, Taine, and Tolstoy to descriptions in Scott and his successors, see Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, pp. 205-6, 379; Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zürich: Artemis, 1948), p.

Although these excesses might be laid partly at Lavater's door, there are, of course, other scholarly explanations for such a state of affairs. Thus it has been generally assumed throughout this century that the expansion of the physical portrait is largely a by-product of the ineluctable growth of realism in English fiction from the time of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett, and, therefore, an element to be understood as part and parcel of the intrinsic development of the novel *qua* form. Such thinking is understandable when we consider that, like landscape description, physical character description has tended to be looked upon as a minor aspect of fiction, and hence one to be conveniently subsumed under general designations for the genre. That the development of physical character description in the English novel after 1789 can now no longer be quite so simply explained away has been part of the thesis of this essay. But however questionable our comparative method might appear to some scholars, one of its signal benefits is that, in making us thus conscious of the historicity of physical character description in English fiction after 1789, it may also alert us to the presence of physiognomy in novels which, unlike many discussed in the foregoing, deserve permanent critical attention, but in which references to the outward person may be too easily taken for granted, if not altogether ignored. This is especially true of Jane Austen's fiction. Although Austen makes no specific references to Lavater or physiognomy anywhere in her writings, and a direct comparison between her treatment of the outward person and Lavaterian physiognomy would, in any case, be of little scholarly interest, it is certain that she was quite as well aware of the Lavaterian vogue as any of her contemporaries, and probable that she brought something of that vogue into her fiction.⁴⁰ More important, through our knowledge of Lavaterian physiognomy, we may also discover that, notwithstanding its historical implications, Jane Austen's treatment of physiognomy in the novel sometimes possesses a markedly structural significance. And since Jane Austen is one of the few great writers of our chosen period whose novels form a vital link between the best of eighteenth-century English fiction and the finest of the nineteenth, it seems fitting that we should end our discussion by briefly considering her treatment of physiognomy in *Emma* (1816).

470; and J. B. Bullen, *THE EXPRESSIVE EYE: FICTION AND PERCEPTION IN THE WORK OF THOMAS HAYDAY* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 168.

40 The short-lived weekly periodical *The Loiterer*, which was edited by Jane Austen's brothers James and Henry, contains an article entitled "The Science of Physiognomy not to be depended on." See *The Loiterer* (Oxford: Prince and Cooke, 1790), 2:51 (16 January 1790).

Although the heroine of *Emma* is introduced to us as “handsome, clever, and rich,”⁴¹ it is only when Mr Knightley and Mrs Weston are discussing her character that we are given the first full description of her physical appearance. What leads up to it is Knightley’s disapproval of Emma’s efforts to pair Harriet Smith with Elton and his criticism of her lack of application and industry, though she is, as he says, the cleverest member of her family. That Knightley should be concerned with Emma’s character is not only necessary for the plot (as an early sign of his interest in her), but also in keeping with his particular function in the novel; he is, after all, the touchstone for right social and moral conduct. Knightley’s criticism of Emma is, however, presently countered by Mrs Weston’s defence of her in a detailed physiognomic analysis that foreshadows the idea of the heroine’s fundamentally wholesome character:

Such an eye!—the true hazle eye—and so brilliant! regular features, open countenance, with a complexion! oh! what a bloom of full health, and such a pretty height and size; such a firm and upright figure. There is health, not merely in her bloom, but in her air, her head, her glance. One hears sometimes of a child being “the picture of health”; now Emma always gives me the idea of being the complete picture of grown-up health. She is loveliness itself. Mr. Knightley, is not she? (p. 39)

That Emma’s essential nature is, as Mr Knightley’s complaints suggest, obscured by a certain wrong-headedness is confirmed for us by the alacrity with which she rises to the defence of Frank Churchill against Knightley’s criticism, mainly because Frank (whom she has never seen or met) has long been rumoured to be very handsome. Indeed, when she is first introduced to Churchill, local gossip about his good looks is confirmed:

—he was presented to her, and she did not think too much had been said in his praise; he was a *very* good-looking young man; height, air, address, all were unexceptionable, and his countenance had a great deal of the spirit and liveliness of his father’s; he looked quick and sensible. She felt immediately that she should like him. (p. 190)

Nowhere will Jane Austen have more ironically impugned one of the basic principles of physiognomy than by showing through that rapturous

41 Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 5. References are to this edition.

first impression how far the observant young heroine is from foreseeing that she will, in fact, be disappointed in the character of that "very good-looking young man."

Another instance of the heroine's tendency to be governed by physiognomic illusions may be seen in her treatment of Harriet Smith, which begins with Emma's conviction that Harriet is "the natural daughter of somebody" (p. 22), a conviction based entirely on her admiration of Harriet's beauty and manners. Because of this, Emma is determined to match Harriet with Mr Elton and so prevent her from succumbing to the blandishments of Mr Martin, a member of the yeomanry. Thus, while mildly acknowledging Martin's good qualities, she tries to draw Harriet's attention to his humble physiognomic characteristics: "I am sure you must have been struck by his awkward look and abrupt manner—and the uncouthness of a voice, which I heard to be wholly unmodulated as I stood here" (p. 33). A dialogue then takes place between the two women, during which they agree on the uncomparable merits of Mr Knightley (an ironic foreshadowing that both will fall more or less in love with him). At the same time, Emma tries to divert Harriet's interest to Elton with such remarks as: "In one respect, perhaps, Mr. Elton's manners are superior to Mr. Knightley's or Mr. Weston's. They have more gentleness" (p. 34). But compelling as Emma's social assessments may sound to an innocent ear, they prove in the end to have been all too subjective; for, not only does Elton turn out to be a disappointing fop and Martin a man of commendable character and education, but Emma also learns that Harriet is after all only the daughter of a tradesman. The narrator comments with gentle irony: "Such was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been so ready to vouch for" (p. 482).

But when Emma is not labouring under her usual illusions, she can be remarkably objective in her physiognomic judgments, as may be seen in her unexpectedly favourable analysis of Jane Fairfax's appearance, "which for two whole years she had been depreciating" (p. 167), and again when she discusses Jane's complexion with Frank Churchill. Thus, to Frank's criticism of Jane's complexion, Emma gives the following reply as reported by the narrator: "It was certainly never brilliant, but she could not allow it to have a sickly hue in general, and there was a softness and delicacy in her skin which gave peculiar elegance to the character of her face." Frank then says he has heard all this before, "but yet he must confess that to him nothing could make amends for the want of the fine glow of health. Where features were indifferent, a fine complexion gave beauty to them all; and where they were good, the

effect was—fortunately he need not attempt to describe what the effect was” (p. 199). Frank’s remarks are calculated to suggest that he is not at all interested in Jane; that he is, in fact, free to court Emma herself. But the irony of Frank’s disparagement of Jane’s complexion is made plain at the end of the novel, first, when it is revealed that he has all along been engaged to her, and, later, when, in his final conversation with Emma, we find him coming round to the latter’s point of view with a complete revision of his earlier physiognomic judgment:

Did you ever see such a skin?—such smoothness! such delicacy!—and yet without actually being fair.—One cannot call her fair. It is a most uncommon complexion, with her dark eye-lashes and hair—a most distinguishing complexion!—So peculiarly the lady in it.—Just colour enough for beauty. (p. 478)

We can see from these few episodes that, in making physiognomic judgments in *Emma* dependent for their validity on the motives and attitudes of her characters, Jane Austen treats physiognomy in a manner typical of the great English comic tradition represented by Fielding, while managing at the same time, again like her great predecessor, to effect a reconciliation between the two age-old conflicting views of physiognomy.

Southeastern Louisiana University