

6. Reading the Face: Lavater in the Twenty-first Century

In 1982, Graeme Tytler wrote the following in his preface to *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes*: 'Physiognomy is a word seldom used nowadays in ordinary discourse; indeed, such is its rarity that even academics, on hearing it mentioned, tend to be unsure of its meaning.' (Tytler xiii) He goes on to bemoan the lack of gifted physiognomists:

unlike our nineteenth-century forebears, who took this science seriously enough to keep physiognomic books in their libraries, we are hardly more proficient at telling character or predicting behavior from a consideration of the outward man than we are at forecasting the weather from a glance at cloud formations. (Tytler xiii)

Tytler cursorily dismisses what he refers to as the 'homely instructions on the art of reading the face' that have been fostered by the popular press as part of the 'same mediocrity as the cult of astrology.' (Tytler xiii) Yet it is odd that Tytler has so little tolerance for the contemporary popular practice of 'face-reading,' when the premise of his book has everything to do with the popular cult of physiognomy from the time of the 1775-1778 publication of the Zurich pastor Johann Caspar Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beforderung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe* or *Essays on Physiognomy* to the later decades of the nineteenth century as suggested by the subtitle of his book, *Faces and Fortunes*.¹ Tytler's disdain for the entertainment provided by self-trained physiognomists in the nineteen-eighties is discredited by his enthusiastic acknowledgment of 'an extraordinary physiognomic cult' in the seventeen-eighties as Lavater's contemporaries Fülleborn and Wezel² both confirmed in their work. To quote Fülleborn, 'How quickly Lavaterian ideas and language influenced literature as well as everyday life can be easily imagined.' Wezel's 1785 testimony is no less convincing: 'Almost everybody has his own physiognomic alphabet, according to which he deciphers the nature and activities of his fellow men.' (Tytler 78) Publishing on Lavater at the turn of the last century, scholar Heinrich Maier added even more wood to the fire: 'Physiognomy became very