



R E V I E W

Sibylle Erle. *Blake, Lavater and Physiognomy*. London: Legenda–Modern Humanities Research Association/Maney Publishing, 2010. Studies in Comparative Literature 21. xii + 232 pp. £45.00/\$89.50, hardcover.

Reviewed by Tristanne Connolly

TRISTANNE CONNOLLY (tristanne.connolly@uwaterloo.ca) is associate professor in the English Department of St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo. She is the author of *William Blake and the Body* (2002) and co-editor of the essay collections *Queer Blake* (2010) and *Sexy Blake* (2013) with Helen P. Bruder and *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture* (2012) with Steve Clark and Jason Whittaker.

- 1 “SURELY gold-dust may be descried in these notes,” Gilchrist wrote about Blake’s annotations to Lavater’s *Aphorisms on Man*. “To me they seem mentally physiognomic We, as through a casually open window, glance into the artist’s room, and see him meditating at his work, graver in hand” (1: 66-67, cited in Erle 8). Sibylle Erle’s book explores how professional work on Lavater’s publications may have inspired Blake’s meditations as he, “graver in hand,” worked on the Urizen books. What is most impressive about her study is the careful detail on the publication history of Lavater’s work and the personal relationships involved. These practical aspects of the development of physiognomy inform Erle’s theorizing as much as the concept itself does. She uses physiognomy as a framework for thinking through a range of metaphysical and textual relations: original and copy, body and soul, (divine) creator and creature, text and image, work and edition, writer and reader.
- 2 This is very much a focused study in which Lavater predominates (perhaps even slightly over Blake) and discussion of Blake’s works concentrates on *The Book of Urizen*. The book is less strong on placing these figures in a wider contemporary context, but it seems unfair to demand this when the restricted focus paradoxically brings Blake out of his familiar geographical context, famously limited to London, except for his “three years slumber on the banks of the Ocean” (E 145) and, of course, frequent forays into Eternity. Erle’s thorough knowledge of the German and British settings puts her in an exceptionally good position to elucidate a Blake connected to international literary, philosophical, and artistic circles, participating in collective publication projects that circulate knowledge between Britain and the Continent. Indeed, one of the most attractive features of the book is its attention to the intellectual exchanges and emotional bonds between men. In Erle’s view of the annotations to Lavater, we see a Blake who is, perhaps surprisingly, as eager to please, heartily agree, and find affinities as he is to denounce Error. As Erle points out, the heart he draws around his name and Lavater’s “is an unusual choice for Blake” (99). We also see, in Lavater’s and Fuseli’s impossibly large-scale ambitions for their work, and their unashamed resentments, that Blake is not the only one who can come across as a crank.
- 3 The close concentration sometimes leads to exclusive claims, such as “Lavater’s physiognomy prompted Blake to explore the body’s relationship with the soul” (5) and “the publication history of *Essays on Physiognomy* would have introduced Blake to the idea of a self-reflective author . . . as well as an open text to which he expects his readers to contribute” (164), as if these things would not have occurred to Blake without Lavater, or from any other source. However, the arguments themselves are more convincing and nuan-

ced than such overstatements suggest. Erle's prose also has a pleasing directness, but there are abrupt shifts of topic that can be somewhat bewildering, and that leave many enticing suggestions for the reader to extrapolate. Because Erle is placing so much detail in multilevel juxtaposition, there is a sense that she has all the facts and parallels present in her mind, while the reader must gradually catch up as the book builds momentum. And from this there is an eagerness in her readings, a desire to get to the "gold-dust."

- 4 The first few chapters seem torn, having their own arguments to make while they must also serve introductory purposes and lay factual and theoretical groundwork. Chapter 1 considers what is a good copy, in light of the problem of an elusive original. Erle introduces parallels between God's creation of Adam and Eve, Lavater's search for authentic physiognomical portraits, and Blake's claim to "copy Imagination" (E 574, quoted in Erle 27). Chapter 2 looks at portraits in book illustration and takes on, with reference to Reynolds, the aesthetic issue of the general versus the particular, clearly crucial to physiognomy, where features of individual faces typify shared character traits. It is in chapter 3 and its accompanying interlude that the book begins to take off. In *Physiognomische Fragmente*, Lavater chooses to use silhouettes as a faithful and objective form of likeness. Erle describes the "silhouette chair" often used to trace these images, and tracks Lavater's failed efforts to invent a "Stirnmesser," or forehead-measuring device, that could be employed by any learner of physiognomy (70). She then ingeniously applies this to *The Book of Urizen*, reading it as a satire of "Lavater's attempts at combining perfect likeness with perfect measuring devices" (78): the shadows and nets in the poem are analogous to the silhouettes and the measuring grids imposed upon them in Lavater's book. When the Eternals look at the "shadow of horror," name him "Urizen," and classify him as a "Demon," they form their estimation of his character based on examining Urizen's silhouette (79). When Los shapes Urizen with "nets & gins," these tools do not serve him very well in making good likenesses; the body always resists (82). The implications are intriguing as they apply to Orc's birth. Since the flaming child emits light, the tent imposed by the Eternals becomes a screen for silhouettes (89). It comes out at the end of Erle's study that perhaps Orc is not, after all, one of the very few in Blake born in the ordinary way: she argues he is a case of "creation by shadow-casting" (195), with comparison to the Incarnation. While Lavater's oeuvre moves from silhouette to portrait in a quest for good likeness, Blake shows it is Enitharmon's body, not Los's machines, that can turn a shadow into flesh and blood (197).
- 5 Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to *Aphorisms on Man*, first examining Fuseli's role as translator and very hands-on ed-

itor, justified by his intimate knowledge of the author in this "labour of love" for Lavater (99). It is interesting that the instructions for annotating *Aphorisms* were an addition by Fuseli (98), turning the text into an interactive exercise also based on fellowship: agreeing or disagreeing amiably with the personality who wrote the aphorisms, and showing the resulting textual physiognomic profile to friends. Chapter 5 analyzes the layers of Blake's annotations, seeing him as more than merely responding, playing the role of friend and editor, noting not only "where he differs from Lavater" but also "where Lavater failed to understand himself" (121). One notable point made in this chapter is that Nathaniel Tucker, in his translation of Swedenborg's *The Wisdom of Angels, Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* in 1788, refers in a footnote to *Aphorisms on Man* before Fuseli's translation was published, revealing an earlier awareness of the book in England, and among Swedenborgians. This is particularly excellent textual history sleuthing, as the "footnote disappeared from the second edition" in 1816. Another fine offering in this chapter is an extended and multifaceted explication of Blake's rather puzzling biblical reference to the Ark of the Covenant against aphorism number 533.

- 6 Erle's insights on "tensions between text and image" (146) are at their most incisive in chapter 6, tracing the publication project of Henry Hunter's translation of *Essays on Physiognomy*. One curious detail is that, in the production of this multi-volume opus, "because the full-page designs were issued as soon as the engravers had finished them, and not necessarily in the same order that the printed text was published, they frequently appear in fascicles with unrelated text" (135), drawing attention to a way in which Blake's seemingly bizarre disjunctions have more in common with conventional printing than might be expected. Hunter's edition made much of the improvement of the illustrations from previous versions, but this emphasis, as Erle's analysis shows, only underscores how often Lavater's accompanying text criticizes the flaws in the designs. His text is a supplement to correct the image that fails to represent the elusive original. This, of course, is personal, since it affects the reputations of the artists involved (especially Fuseli, as criticism of the previous French translation had targeted his illustrations). Further, personal knowledge is appealed to: where Lavater knows the person being represented, his physiognomical conclusions can be verified, and the inaccuracies of the portrait revealed, by reference to the actual person. Comparisons with the original are invited also in a debate over heads engraved after Raphael (143). In both cases, access is quite exclusive. Blake, for one, was not in the position to test a Raphael engraving against a Raphael.

7 Chapter 7 brings out what is implied in Lavater's (and Blake's) taking on the task "to edit and illustrate the sixth day of creation" (173). Like biblical editors such as Alexander Geddes, "physiognomists are obliged to identify and omit" what appears to be corrupt in the received versions of God's works (182). The overview of Geddes and Lowth, Paine and Priestley seems somewhat obligatory, though the references to Paine emphasize the idea of being able to agree and disagree with the Bible as a text like *Aphorisms on Man*, and suggest that Lavater's books on physiognomy might function, in light of Paine's arguments, as "proof for revelations" or "evidence" that "God created man in his likeness" (173). This chapter adds anatomical illustration as another parallel attempt at accurate representation. The figures Erle discusses are William Hunter as professor of anatomy at the Royal Academy when Blake studied there, and Lavater's son Johann Heinrich Lavater, who published an introduction to anatomy for artists in 1824. He visited the Royal Academy in 1789, so Erle imagines Blake might have encountered him then through Fuseli. It is unfortunate that there doesn't seem to be a definite connection between Blake, or Lavater, and the other figure Erle considers on this topic, Ebenezer Sibly, because the material is intriguing. Also, given her attention to the reputation of physiognomy as a pseudoscience, one would be curious to hear what Erle makes of Sibly's preoccupation with the occult: the full title of his *Key to Physic* (given in the bibliography) is *A Key to Physic, and the Occult Sciences, Opening to Mental View, the System and Order of the Interior and Exterior Heavens*, which sounds as if it would have rather more affinity with Swedenborg's perspective than William Hunter's. Erle is most interested in the formation of the bones in the foetus, because of Blake's foetal skeleton in *Urizen*, and because of the physiognomical problem of accident and essence, related to the surface and depth structures of flesh and bone. The quotation from Sibly's *Medical Mirror, or Treatise on the Impregnation of the Human Female* (1796, frustratingly later than *Urizen*'s title-page date of 1794) explaining how "the foetus loses its transparency"—"the nucleus of the bone ... is ... the centre from which ossification proceeds, till it reaches the circumference" (quoted in Erle 179)—begs for a connection to the imagery of center and circumference, translucence and opacity, running through *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. For instance:

every-thing in Eternity is translucent:
The Circumference is Within: Without, is formed the
Selfish Center
And the Circumference still expands going forward to
Eternity. (*Jerusalem* 71.6-8, E 225)

8 There is also much artistic imagery in the passages from Sibly that could fruitfully be explicated, as the effect of the

interior passions and even "material organs" of the body on its appearance is envisioned as a canvas being painted (Sibly, cited in Erle 180). Most remarkably, there is engraving imagery in a quoted passage from Lavater's own *Essays on Physiognomy*:

It is the pressure ... of the muscles, and that of the parts adjoining to the bones, which engrave upon their surface, and even in their substance, all sorts of designs and furrows. On the surface of the scull chiefly are to be found distinct marks of the manner of life followed by the party to whom it belonged. (2: 149, quoted in Erle 179)

Erle comments on essence, but there are interpretive possibilities lurking here: the pressure of Blake's own muscles as he works the metal, as well as Blake's plates as textual bodies, and the "scull" enclosing each "cavern'd Man" in his own identity. That last sentence of Lavater's is like a description of the frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

9 The final interlude, along with the conclusion, brings together Erle's overall interpretation of the *Urizen* books. The divine original is not perfect or stable; indeed, we do not know what *Urizen* looked like to start with. Back in the first interlude, Erle points out that "many worried they might be included into *Physiognomische Fragmente*" as silhouette examples "against their will" (79), a kind of eighteenth-century identity theft that reflects on the intensely unwilling nature of *Urizen*'s binding. Physiognomy is a two-way street: "identity is confirmed by looking" (189), but as Blake, and Erle, insist, there is always somebody looking back.