“Signs Diagnostick, and Prognostick”:
The Evolving Language of Temperament in the History of Physiognomy

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It is certain (whatever Stress may be laid on that trite Phrase “Fronti nulla Fides”), that, if we but duly consider, what is a great Truth, that the Countenance is the Nuncio of the Mind, and only become well versed in the proper Actions and Predominancy of its several Muscles, we shall have a great deal of Reason to reverse that Sentence; since also we must, from every Day’s Experience, see a Face promise what we afterwards find to be the real Disposition of the Person who wears it.

--James Parsons, 1747

Physiognomy belongs to a group of practices (including medicine) that revolve around the semiotics of the body. The physiognomist has always used the same analytical categories (colour, movement, shape, texture, temperature) that also help the physician determine a diagnosis. Now what really lies behind this symptomatic model shared in this case by medicine and physiognomy? Intuition? Access to occult knowledge? Or a solid theoretical framework, which can crown these practices with the desired diadem of the predicate “scientia”?

--Joseph Ziegler

The study of the language of the passions rests on the knowledge of the mechanisms of expression. But the perception of the signs of this language in action carries a symptomatology of the passions and a new profile of what can be perceived and enunciated.

--François Delaporte

In Molière’s 1669 farce, Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, several physicians cluster around a sickbed. One of them declares: “There’s no curing any Distemper without knowing it perfectly; since also there’s no perfect knowing of it, without well establishing the particular Idea of it, and true Species,—by Signs Diagnostick, and Prognostick.” Doctors recognize the signs of internal medical conditions readable on the body, he explains, providing them with a specialized language of physiological explanation. The patient under examination, Molière’s physician asserts, bears unmistakable marks of melancholy:
And for an incontestable Diagnostic thereof, you may only observe that great seriosity of Countenance with which he views us; that sorrowfulness of Face attended with Fear and Distrust, Signs pathognomic and individual of this malady, so well mark’d by the Divine old Man *Hipocrates*; that Physiognomy, those Eyes red and haggard, that Beard overgrown, that plight of Body wasted, washy, black, and hairy, the which Symptoms denote him very much touch’d with this Distemper arising from an error in the Hypochondria; the which Malady by lapse of time being naturaliz’d, antiquated, habituated, enrol’d and made free of his Body, might degenerate either into madness, or Ptisic or Apoplexy, or in fine, into Phrenzy, and Distraction.

In the usual manner of farce, Molière presents his character spouting nonsense—but it is nonsense of a particular sort. The physician’s discourse is founded on accepted views of medical practice in Molière’s day, the technical terms misapplied and stretched to the point of absurdity. The patient’s illness, originating from “an error in the Hypochondria,” without treatment could degenerate into all sorts of maladies. Now, the success on stage of this farcical passage requires of the audience a minimal notion of disease as it was understood at that time, as well as a notion that medical practitioners possessed a codified symptomology to help in recognizing and treating “Distempers.”

In the past, definitions of disease operated teleologically, in the sense that they assumed the natural state of the human constitution was health (both physical and mental). Disease was a falling-away from this ideal, orderly condition—hence the English terms *disorder* and *distemper*. Before the advent of the modern understanding of infectious disease, physicians most often approached illness as a matter of an imbalance in human physical constitution. The ancient and medieval physiology—traces of which lasted through the eighteenth century despite advances in
medical science—defined health in terms of balance of the four cardinal humours (blood, phlegm, cholera, and melancholy or black bile) in the body. The term “temperament” originally indicated the variation of the *qualities* (hot or cold, moist or dry) and the *humours* in certain proportions that determined the nature or “complexion” of individual people—the physical as well as the mental constitution. In health the constituent elements are in balance—*tempered*—and accordingly diseases were known as *distempers*.

Even after disease was no longer understood as a result of an imbalance of humours, the sense that health required a balance of bodily elements persisted. The term “Temperament” did not fade from common use over, time even as both medical science and physiognomy took new directions rendering the concept of humours obsolete. Gradually, “temperament” came to signify an overall quality of character or habit of mind or natural disposition, rather than a quality specific to bodily function. This shift in meaning affects the history of both physiology and physiognomy because it comprehends changes in the theory of human passion and its expression.

Most recent work on physiognomy has focused on patterns of consequent influence—the influence of physiognomical theory on major writers and visual artists. It is not within the scope of this study to pursue this topic; rather, it is my intention to trace a popular history of physiognomy in English letters and thought (primarily), including and extending beyond the major physiognomical theorists to include writers on religion or ethics, essayists, literary figures, and medical writers. In this sense, I am investigating gradual shifts in what Thomas Mautner has called the “climate of opinion,” a prevailing or influential ideology that “enters into the mentality of a society, into the spirit of the times.” This climate is resistant to change, a point sometimes missed by historians used to moving from one canonical-figure to the next. To demonstrate certain features of this shifting climate of opinion, I would like to offer some observations on the
way certain key terms illustrate a long dialectic of evolving concepts. In order to do so, it will be necessary to discuss briefly ancient precedents before moving into early modern and enlightenment instances.

It will not be necessary to trace the physiognomic tradition all the way back to its ancient sources, or even to work our way through its manifold resurgences. One early modern instance should suffice. According to the fifteenth-century Italian scholar Bartolomeo della Rocca, called Cocles (1467-1504), the body is affected by the mixture of powerful physical forces. Physiognomy or “knowledge of bodyes” is the most reliable mode of studying the relation of body and spirit or mind because it depends on observation of the outward effects of the admixture of constituent elements. Physiognomy, then is “Body skyl, or the knowledge of the temperaunce of bodyes by theyr shape & fourmes.”6 The factors in need of tempering are the elements (earth, air, fire, and water), the qualities (heat and cold, moisture and dryness), and the four humours. A temperate body has a good appetite and digestion, is “meanelye fat”—that is, of an ideal weight—sleeps easily, seldom sneezes, supports appropriate emotions, has appropriately acute senses and energy, and displays a healthy colour in the face. Conversely, the unhealthy or “distemperate” body has poor appetite and digestion, tends toward overweight, sleep poorly, often yawn and stretch or sneeze, is emotionally heavy, weak in the senses, soon wearied, ill-mannered, and overly pale or flushed in the face.7 Having established the connection between the balance of the constituent elements and the character, Cocles goes on to list the marks of these effects upon the face, without providing any detail about how the elements, qualities, and humours promote these effects:

The face very fleshye, declareth that man to be ferefull, congruentlye merye, large in expenses, discrete, luxurious, of an euill memory, sone credityng thynges harde,
sufficiently faythfull to one, of an importunate wyll in desyryng vayne and impossible things in (vnwished happ) enuious or frowarde, and sufficiently conuertible to good or euill, and very presumptuouse or haute of mynde.

The face leane declareth that man to be warye or wittie, circumspect in hys doinges, fatigable, of a good vnderstandyng as the mercuriales haue: more cruell or enuiouse, then godly, of a tender capacitie, and dysdaynfull.  

Cocles is vague about the means that make men fleshy, fearful, merry, and prodigal, or lean, wary, tender, and envious. All he can say is that as a general rule balance (or imbalance) has something to do with it:

The fealyng temperate and good consysteth in the dewe proporsyon of the firste qualities, and more approcheth to caliditie and lenyty, then to coldnes or aspernes, and more to fleshynes, then to leannes: suche a felyng verely argueth the goodnes of the complexcyon, yt is, the equal complexcyon wyth the goodnesse of the wytte, and vnderstandyng.

In all the well-known and oft-reprinted early modern physiognomists—Cocles, Indagine, Erra Pater, and even Porta—there occurs an intuitive leap from general physiological principle to a scheme of particular diagnostics. Curiously, the absence of clear-cut explanation of how corporeal processes produce the catalogued effects in no way weakens the presentation; indeed, it could be argued that the ex cathedra mode of schematic presentation increases the impression of authority, an impression underscored by references to classical authorities.

The influence of Aristotle’s ethics, with their location of virtue in a mean between deficient and excessive extremes, is evident in the role proper balance plays in the thought of these writers, beginning with the anonymous Aristotelian authors who wrote the Physiognomics
once attributed to Aristotle. Originating with the ancient physiological authorities—the pseudo-Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Adamantius, Polemon—and recurring across the ages well past the end of the eighteenth century, are a set of what might be called legacy terms: balance, equilibrium, crasis, temper, temperance. In what follows, I will discuss the way the import of these terms shifts, through semantic broadening, narrowing, and redefining. These shifts, which I will outline by examining briefly a range of texts, tracing the use of key terms developments in the understanding of physical and mental constitution.

For instance, consider the legacy term crasis (κρασις), a Greek word originally denoting any blend or combination, and for ancient and medieval medical writers useful in describing the balance or imbalance of humours, elements, or qualities. In later medical literature, as Steven Blankaart notes in his late seventeenth-century Physical Dictionary, the term had come to indicate any “Union and Mixture” of corporeal entities, resulting in the quality known as “Temperament.” The prominent late seventeenth-century English physician Thomas Sydenham describes how the distemper known as Flux takes hold: “the Crasis of the Blood is so weaken’d and broke by an over-hot Regimen . . . that it is no longer able to eject leisurely the inflammatory Particles.” The term crasis is still in use at the end of the eighteenth century, as when Lewis Mansey advises his readers to eat their vegetables, for “Health depends almost wholly on a proper crasis of the blood; and to preserve this a mixture of vegetables, in some degree, is always required.”

The definition of the word “physiognomy” itself was not determined in any period. Initially the term indicated a particular discipline or skill in judging character by correlating the features of an individual subject with a codified set of significant marks. Then the term underwent semantic broadening when it began to be used to indicate any particular facility for
discerning character in the face. This facility may be little more than an instinctive response to appearance, requiring neither physiognomical theory nor a taxonomical system for classifying observed marks. Lavater explained that physiognomy begins as a “talent of discovering the interior of Man by his exterior—of perceiving by natural signs, what does not immediately strike the senses.” In 1776, one of the earliest British reviewers of Lavater’s *Philosophische Fragmenten* adduced the everyday experience of forming judgments of others based on visual impressions to corroborate the truth of Lavater’s founding principles:

> We know, by experience, that nobody is to be found, be he ever so sensible or ever so stupid, on whom something, at least, of the outside of the people does not, in so far, make impressions, as to determine his opinion of them, and in some measure to regulate his behaviour towards them. Every one acts towards persons whom he does not know, in consequence of his physiognomical sentiments or judgment.

In this sense physiognomy is impressionistic, a feeling that somehow takes on the status of judgment. In eighteenth-century English literature, instinctive physiognomical sentiment was a common literary device by which a fictional character or narrator lays claim to a special aptitude for discerning character. Oliver Goldsmith, for instance, writes that upon first seeing the president of the club of “Choice Spirits,” he could not avoid “making use of all my skill in physiognomy” to discover his “superiority of genius.” In literary usage, the discernment is generally reliable—unless the subject’s powers of dissimulation are stronger than the observer’s powers of discrimination. Examples may be found nearly anywhere in British fiction, wholly independent of reference to systematic physiognomy. Typically, as the true nature of the character “Sir Peter Rueful” emerges in Anne Dawe’s 1770 epistolary novel, *The Younger Sister,*
a letter-writer expresses concern that her friend’s “skill in physiognomy—i.e., her suspicious impressions or fears—“will prove true.”¹⁶

Through semantic narrowing, or a kind of metonymic distillation, the term “physiognomy” and its familiar, usually jocular abbreviation “phiz,” come to denote the face itself, first as a locus of disclosure—as in Thomas Blackwell’s 1748 *Letters concerning Mythology*, where an amateur reader of faces reads terminal dissipation in the “imbittered excorate look” of a gentleman, exclaiming “An old exhausted sickly Rake! Dismal! A most forbidding Phiz. I would have thee drawn and set up a *Memento mori* in St. J[ames].”¹⁷ Though literary historians have sometimes attempted to connect such terms to various physiognomical authorities, the usage is so widespread as to be proverbial, and not necessarily related to any system. Later still, with the ultimate broadening, the “phiz” is just a face—no more.

The proverbial function of the word “physiognomy” demonstrates the status of the physiognomical process as a received idea, so much so that students of human physiology and behaviour found ways to accommodate the general principle of a correspondence between body and mind (or spirit or emotion) with new anatomical discoveries. Jacques Pernetti, for instance, lays claim to detailed anatomical knowledge as the basis for physiognomic diagnosis:

> We Physiognomists, at first Sight, fail not to have to have an intellectual Sight of the hidden Springs, whereby they are produced, though these same Springs be quite hid from our Eyes. The certain and universal Knowledge of the interior Parts of the Body, fits us to pass our Judgment of what is within from external Tokens.¹⁸

The certain knowledge he claimed as the basis of physiognomic insight was the concrete, tangible body of physiological data, built up over decades of scrupulous anatomical dissection, illustration, and publication. Pernetti is something of a Janus-figure, at the same time claiming
the privileged clarity of modern empirical science and defending the rational origin of “the most absurd Sciences”—astrology is merely an “abuse of Astronomy.” Thus, he asserts that occult versions of physiognomy spring from the abuse of the instinctive and just correlation of mental processes with bodily expression.¹⁹

The British anatomist most influential on physiognomical thought in the latter half of the eighteenth century was James Parsons, whose 1746 Crounian Lectures on Muscular Motion were published by the Royal Society as *Human Physiognomy Explained*. His purpose was to “demonstrate and explain the Actions of the Muscles on the Countenance as a Standard for Physiognomy.”²⁰ Parsons considers the musculature that serves “to form and move the Skin of the Face, or change the Countenance” (Parsons, 3). He accounts in minute detail how certain muscles effect familiar changes of facial expression, as when the *Occipito Frontalis* smoothes the forehead, or “when it acts more forcibly, it serves to wrinkle the skin of the Forehead between the Eye-brows; as it happens when we frown, or knit them”—earning its familiar name, “the Corrugator” (Parsons, 7, 9). Then he proceeds to demonstrate the mechanics how muscles act both to maintain “the Symmetry of the Countenance” in a state of balanced “Composure,” and to express “those Passions of Joy, Grief, Fury, Ill-nature, and such-like, as the Mind is often prone to suggest” (Parsons, 32). After briefly reviewing the history of physiognomy and physiognomical anatomy up to his time, Parsons discusses the expressions found in illustrations, linking them to literary descriptions and providing the specific muscular movements that produce the marks of passion. Parson’s physiology is limited to charting these movements, without touching on the processes by which the musculature is brought into action. Some thirty years later, in the first British notice of the work of Lavater, one Dr. Marcard allowed that Parson’s muscular physiognomy had previously been “the best thing” of its kind since the days of
Aristotle, but pointed out that Parsons had limited his study “only to the action of the muscles, and to the effects which this action causes on the countenance,” and so his is “merely the physiognomy of the passions.”

Other approaches sketched causal explanations of the action of the muscles, as well as their effects. One such fusion of mechanical physiology with physiognomy may be seen in the work of Swiss anatomist Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777). The sensory stimuli provided by external objects strike or impress “the tender pulp of the nerve,” the “nervous spirits” conveying a change “to that part of the brain where the impressed fibres of the nerve first arise from the arteries.” Out of this doctrine of transmission of stimuli emerges a physical theory of the somatic origin and effect of the passions:

Some of these ideas, by which the felicity of our mind is either increased or diminished, arise merely from the mechanism of the perfect body; and amongst these corporal pain, is a sorrowful sense or perception in the mind, to which every violence or over-strong sensation in any nerve, seems to serve as a foundation; while pleasures consist only in the more moderate impressions or tensions of the nerves. Itching stands related as a medium, either to pleasure or to pain; but to pleasure it is related, inasmuch as both have an increased flux of blood and spirits into the parts in which either the pleasure or the titillation is perceived; but in pain, these are increased to a great degree of tension, or to an over violent sense of the nerve. Anguish or anxiety is from an over distention of the vessels, because the blood is hindered from passing freely through the lungs.

The “violent commotion of the spirits” associated with anger produces heart palpitations, increased heart-rate, increased muscular strength, and a therapeutic expulsion of bile. Grief weakens the nerves, slows the pulse, destroys the appetite and causes alimentary stagnation and
disease. The physical changes produced by the passions in the mind are caused by nerves sheathing “the vessels like sphincter muscles, so as by contracting them suddenly, they increase the course of the blood, or by relaxing and weakening their tone, retard and vitiate the circulating juices.” The degree to which these “nervous bridles” control the flow of blood depends upon the tenderness or sensibility of an individual’s nerves, producing more or less irritation of the arteries. The flow of blood to various organs or corporal regions thus affects the passions of the mind. Of course, the brain works best in a state of balance: “The integrity or soundness of the judgment, depends upon a perfect and healthy constitution of the brain.” Certain systemic dysfunctions—“compressure, irritation, or a deficiency of blood”—can harm the “fabrick of the encephalon,” disrupting all rational processes. Implicitly, then, extreme excess of passion can produce harmful results.

Von Haller notes that somatic processes produced by the passions of the mind are registered in the external appearance of the body:

Nor is it to be denied, that the creator has affixed certain characteristic marks or evident signs to the passions of the mind, that in mutual society, one man might not impose upon another. For the respective muscles, more especially of the voice, face and eyes, do naturally express the several passions of the mind, so faithfully, that they may be even represented by a painter. . . . From the actions of these muscles, oftener repeated by the affections, follows the features or physiognomy of a person’s face, which, if not dissembled, is a perpetual index to the state of the mind.23

Von Haller’s observation that physiognomy providentially affords the virtuous an advantage over the vicious is a characteristic acknowledgement of the First Cause common to all devout natural philosophers studying Secondary Causes. The mid-eighteenth-century state of
physiology—von Haller studied with Boerhaave and Lipsius—is readily discernible in this account. What I would like to stress is his accommodation of scientific explanation to certain structural themes belonging to a tradition of physiognomy from which von Haller silently distances himself. His theory of mental passions is founded on a notion of tempering conflicting physiological elements. Though the operative mechanism is no longer humoural, certain phrases appear to explain processes difficult to pin down—the “nervous spirits” that convey change to the brain—that appear to parallel legacy-terms.

Another attempt to integrate the notion of an equilibrium of physiological components with a mechanistic physiology is found in Jean Paul Marat’s first published work, the 1773 *Philosophical Essay on Man. Being an Attempt to Investigate the Principles and Laws of the Reciprocal Influence of the Soul on the Body*. Marat explains that the passions “produce very singular effects on the body, and display themselves by some outward mark or other to the attentive observer,” most noticeable in the countenance, which he calls a “living tablet whereon every emotion of the soul is represented with equal energy and force.” Interconnected facial muscles “form all the expressions of physiognomy, and display every affection of the soul. The repose of all the muscles expresses serenity of mind, and their different motions, its different passions.” Each passion produces the same pattern of muscular contraction; the muscular responses to changing sentiments are ephemeral, but “when the soul is habitually resigned to any one passion, the features are constant, and become the characteristics of the physiognomy.” Marat postulates a sort of hydraulic theory of nerves—i.e., the motion and circulation of “nervous fluids”:

The power of the understanding over the body is exercised by the same mechanism as that of sensibility; that is, ever by an impulse communicated to the nervous fluid. By
determining a greater quantity of this fluid to the nervous fibres, it produces a greater degree of tension; thus it happens to all our muscles, to the *plexus cardiaci*, and especially to the *meninges* during meditation. This increase of the organic elasticity of the fibres strengthens the oscillatory motion of the vessels, and renders the circulation more rapid.

In tranquility or deep meditation, both circulation and the tension of the fibres and the circulation increase dramatically, while “the contraction of the nervous plexus enveloping the blood vessels” impedes the circulation of the blood, producing “that heat and those anxieties, which ever accompany profound application.” Marat explains that when the soul impels “a greater quantity of fluid into the nervous fibres,” they become more sensible, preparing the organs to respond (contract) “at the slightest impression. Such is the method imagination uses to strengthen our sensations.”

Motion is the essential component of characteristic expression; therefore the more mobile parts of the face are more significant—the nose the least, and the lips, mouth, cheeks, eye-lids and eye-brows the most. The eyes are the most expressive of all, forcefully registering the emotions and sentiments of the soul and revealing “by the most energetic lineaments, the image of its secret agitations.”

As the eye is formed of many nerves, or rather, as it is only a large nerve expanded, and as it abounds with nervous fluid, to this organ therefore the impressions of the soul must be principally determined. It being likewise very contiguous to the brain, and moreover diaphanous, the power of the soul must be there less weak and more apparent: hence it is evident, that the passions will be represented in this organ with the greatest energy.
Marat defines individual constitution or temper in terms of a balance of bodily functions, particularly the regular circulation of fluids. Because proper circulation “results from the equilibrium between our fluids and solids,: the human body is susceptible to disequilibrium resulting from “shocks from external objects, from the impulse of fluids penetrating it in every part,” overwhelming the delicate balance, reducing the flow of blood, and producing “a kind of stupor and indeterminate pain,” disease, infirmity, pain, and “that sense of agitation we call inquietude.”

While the face may thus reveal the workings of the passions, eighteenth-century scientists, artists, and writers with a physiognomical interest had to confront the difficulty of reaching an accurate diagnosis, just as their forbears had done. The great moral and satirical artist William Hogarth (1697-1764), acknowledging the popularity of the maxim that “the face is the index of the mind,” warns that some instinctual impressions may be relied on, but others should not. By hypocritical practices a truly bad man “may so manage his muscles, by teaching them to contradict his heart, that little of his mind can be gather’d from his countenance.” Ordinarily, Hogarth insists, “the natural and unaffected movements of the muscles, caused by the passions of the mind,” would write every man’s character in his face by the age of forty. The constant frowning of an ill-natured man transforms the muscles of the mouth into a mark of his ill-nature—but such transformations may be forestalled with the “constant affectation of a smile.” By Hogarth’s time, the anatomical basis of this observation was generally accepted: nervous agitation of the facial musculature produced marks of character:

It is incontestible, that the frequent repetition of certain motions of the muscles, which are inseparable from certain passions and dispositions of the mind, leaves visible tracks, which are sufficiently perceptible to become the object of science.
This science was to be the purview of Swiss divine Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1781). Lavater’s method involves a complex fusion of the sum total of physiognomical history and a somewhat questionable claim to an entirely new beginning of empirical inquiry. Significantly, he too takes up the legacy terms in his *Philosophische Fragmente*, and in a very curious manner he neither sanctions nor abandons the associations of these terms with the ancient physiology. Lavater wishes to observe the admixture of affective components in human behaviour.

Stipulating what is required of the artist whose drawings are to be of use for physiognomical investigation—the same requirements for a practising physiognomist—Lavater insists on a thorough knowledge of anatomy and physiology,

or the science of the human body, in health; not only that he may able to remark any disproportion, as well in the solid as the muscular parts, but that he may likewise be capable of naming these parts in his physiognomical language. He must further be accurately acquainted with the temperaments of the human body. Nor only its different colours and appearances, but also the constituent parts of the blood itself, and their different proportions.

Temperament originates in a balance of the diverse components of blood and the “external symptoms of the constitution, relative to the nervous system.” Though Lavater does not appear to use the term *crasis*—or at least it does not appear in the English translations of his work—the notion is very much present in his thought. Indeed, he offers a disclaimer, insisting he is incapable of extending the work of earlier writers on the temperaments (Haller, Zimmerman, Kaempf, Oberreit, “and a multitude of others, ancient and modern, from Aristotle to Huart, from Behmen, and from Behment to Lawatz.” Lavater acknowledges he has not studied them “sufficiently to understand them perfectly” or to test their principles against his own
observations, he is confident that the subject “requires new investigation.” He begins his essay on the temperaments by declaring the traditional characterization of the four temperaments disgraceful because it denies the diversity of human character. Reasoning from the variety of human bodies and countenances, all “composed, after a determinate manner, of various congruous and incongruous ingredients,” Lavater insists the denial of diversity is a repudiation of the providential dispensation of individual creation. Employing a pharmaceutical metaphor, he explains that every person is created with

a particular receipt, or form of mixture, in the great dispensatory of God . . . by which his quantity of life, his kind of sensation, his capacity, and activity, are determined; and that, consequently, each body has its individual temperament, or peculiar degree of irritability.

But having established the infinite variability of individual temperament, Lavater reverts to tradition, declaring that the principal qualities of the body—“the humid and the dry, the hot and the cold”—are “undeniable.” Hence emerge the four principle temperaments: the choleric, originating from the hot, the phlegmatic from the moist, the sanguine, from air, and the melancholic, from earth.

Incorporating with the “blood, nerves, and juices,” one the four temperaments may predominate, or it may be so intermingled that it is difficult to gauge which has the greatest influence. Even more complications arise when combinations of influences produce “a new power” distinct from the component parts, nameless, but sufficiently different that “none of the customary appellations are proper.”29 He then proceeds to expand the list of naturally active “elementary ingredients” that could create new classes of temperament—“Oil, for instance, quicksilver, æther, the electric and magnetic fluids.—(The acidum pingue of Mayer, the frigorific matter of Schmidt, the fixed air of Black, and the nitrous air of Abbe Fontana)”—all these could intermingle in infinite
varieties of earthy temperament. To emphasize this multiplicity, Lavater lists some of the many mixtures of the “element of viscosity”—“the oily, resinous, gummy, glutinous, milky, gelatinous, butyrous or buttery, caseous or cheesy, inflammable, phosphoric, sulphureous, fuliginous, carbonous or coaly.”

Thus rhetorical multiplication is intended to emphasize the oversimplification and inaccuract of the elemental categories of temperament.

In their place Lavater optimistically projects “a better mode of considering temperament,” one which bypasses strictly internal analysis for what he calls a “barometric, or thermometrical, manner” of measure. Rather than attempting to identify the temperaments as they operate internally, Lavater proposes to measure the degree of “irritability” they cause in the mixture. This allows him to redefine the four traditional temperaments in new terms, height, depth, distance, and proximity:

Thus the irritability of the choleric takes flight at whatever is on high, without dread of danger. Fearful melancholy digs, and fortifies itself, wherever it supposes it can find security. The sanguine roam thoughtless and headlong, without once considering consequences; while the phlegmatic neither sinks, soars, nor removes, and is only irritable to that which he can with difficulty be drawn.

Lavater defines temperament as the “nervous irritability of organized life,” producing definite outlines in the face. To form a true estimation of the temperament of a subject, he cautions the observer to learn how to distinguish between “momentaneous tension, and general irritability, or the physiognomy and pathos of the temperament.” Proper diagnosis of temperament operates by measuring the difference between “the body at rest” and motion of the expressive features and the “momentary complexion.” The “pathos of temperament”—one of Lavater’s more obscure
terms—apparently means the way bodily “qualities and form” generate muscular motion, or, rather, the effect of passion on muscular movement.

Lavater’s ingenious explanations are deserving of some credit, and yet it is not easy to discern how this explanation revises in any substantive way the traditional categories, other than insisting on a degree of variability he does not pursue. Rather, he has invented a new set of metaphors, and though it is clear that he believes he has provided a new, broader definition, in fact he has only offered a different way of expressing the same processes. It is fitting, therefore, that he concludes his essay with a series of practical questions that remain to be answered—“What temperaments are most capable of friendship?”—and so forth.

Thus we can see that the recurrence of legacy terms produces a disjunction between claims for a new empirical physiognomy and the traditionally-inflected language of practical diagnostics. If the categories of humoural behaviour and conduct remain after the ancient physiology was long abandoned, it often indicates a semantic shift by which a personality trait—the sanguine or melancholic character—remains a viable concept even when stripped of the original causative explanation. In some cases, however, there appears to be a tendency toward ambiguity and vagueness, as when Lavater circles around the original denotations of terms and a claim to transforming them into something new. And finally, it is also possible to see in this historical progress an attempt to rescue the science of physiognomy from its past follies by developing a new terminology at once loosely connected with precedent and—through redefinition—newly relevant and in accord with enlightenment definitions of human character.
NOTES:

1 James Parsons, *Human Physiognomy Explain'd in the Crounian Lectures on Muscular Motion for the Year 1746* (London: Printed for C. Davis, Printer to the Royal Society, 1747 [Supplement to the *Philosophical Transactions*, 44 (1746-1747), pp. 1-82.]), p. 33


6 Bartolommee della Rocca, known as Cocles. *A brief and most pleasau[n]t Epitomye of the whole art of Phisiognomie, gathered out of Aristotle, Rasis, Formica, Loxius, Phylemo[n], Palemo[n], Consiliator, Morbeth the Cardinal and others many moe, by that learned chyrurgian Cocles: and englished by Thomas Hyll Londoner* (Imprinted at London : By Iohn Waylande, [1556]), no pagination or signatures.

7 Cocles, sig. A.ii.r-v.

8 Cocles, sig. D.iii.v.

9 Cocles, sig. E.i.v-E.ii.r.


12 Lewis Mansey, The Practical Physician; or, Medical Instructor (London: Printed by W. Stratford, for J. Stratford, [1800]), p. 14. See also The Edinburgh Practoce of Physic and Surgery (London: Printed for G. Kearsley, 1800), on the “stagnation” of the blood in extreme cases of scurvy, by which “its crasis comes to be destroyed” (p. 514).


19 Pernetti, pp. 36-37.

20 James Parsons, Human Physiognomy Explain’d in the Crounian Lectures on Muscular Motion for the Year 1746 (London: Printed for C. Davis, Printer to the Royal Society, 1747 [Supplement to
In the Philosophical Transactions, 44 (1746-1747), pp. 1-82.), p. v. Further references will be indicated in the text.

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29 Lavater, III, 63-64.


31 Lavater, III, 68.

32 Lavater III, 70.