

*The Letters of Lavater to
Empress Maria Feodorovna*



The Letters of Johann Caspar Lavater to the Empress Maria Feodorovna, wife of the Emperor Paul I of Russia

Written in the year 1798, and translated from the original autographs. First published in *Lucifer*, Vols. VI & VII, May, June, August, October, 1890. Republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, XII pp. 205-11. Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna, at the age of 18 (1777) by Alexander Roslin, Hermitage

Johann Caspar Lavater, the famous Physiognomist, was the son of a skilful physician at Zürich and was born November 15th, 1741. As a child he was of a very lively imagination and gave himself up to silent reveries; while yet at school he believed that he had received direct answer to his prayers. Later on at Leipzig and Berlin he made the acquaintance of the scholars and theologians of Northern Germany, and on his return to Zürich was made deacon and subsequently first pastor of the orphan church there. Until he entered on his great physiognomic work, all his energy was devoted to the service of religion, although he also gained a sufficient reputation as a poet. His sermons were marked by such fine style, lively enthusiasm, and also by a certain mysticism which always characterized him, that they won large admiration even in foreign countries. His great work, entitled *Physiognomische Fragmente*, was based on the theory that there was a close connexion between the internal man and the outward expression of the face. This won him such fame that his name was speedily known all over Europe. During the Swiss Revolution, he boldly opposed the new views and the Directory, being decided in this by the spectacle of the French Revolution which had thoroughly disgusted him. For this he was imprisoned in 1799, but was soon set at liberty and died in 1801 of a wound received while assisting the distressed at the capture of Zürich by Masséna. In private life Lavater is said to have been one of the most virtuous and even saintly of men.

In presenting a translation of these letters, of which only a few have previously seen the light, we are guided by a desire to interest those of our readers who may be orthodox Christians or Spiritualists. For although the opinions of Lavater are greatly in advance of the narrow theology of his times, and in many places he gives utterance to ideas of great sublimity, still no Theosophist or Occultist can agree with his theology, psychology, or spiritualism, which are throughout characterised by very material conceptions, and remind us strongly of the “Summer Land,” and the literal interpretation of St. John’s *Revelation*. And now with regard to the letters themselves.

In 1881, in Nos. 3 and 4 of the German journal, the *Christian Reading*, appeared a letter from the Director of the St. Petersburg Imperial Public Library to the authorities of the University of Jena, congratulating them on the occasion of the completion

of the 300th year of the existence of its foundation, and concluding with the following words:

. . . We have collected some accidentally preserved pages belonging to the rich treasury of German literature, and have the honour to present them, as a jubilee offering, to one of the most active centres of German culture, traces of which are perceived in every place where science and learning are a care, and the remarkable monuments of which occupy the most prominent place in our Library, in whose name I now present the enclosed copies.

The St. Petersburg Imperial Public Library wishes the University of Jena success in its future undertakings, which have hitherto been so beneficial to science during the 300 years of its existence.

The Director of the St. Petersburg Imperial Public Library.

BARON KORF

Member of the State Council of the Secretariat

P.S. The copy of the enclosed was entrusted by the Council of the Library to its chief Librarian R. Meenoulof, who deems himself very happy to have had the good fortune of discovering, during the re-cataloguing of the private library of the Grand Duke Constantine Nikolayevitch, at Pavlovsk, this forgotten correspondence of Lavater.

The above letter was prefaced by the following explanation:

The palace of the Grand Duke at Pavlovsk is the residence where the Emperor Paul passed the happiest years of his life. Later on it became the favourite residence of his late august widow, the never-to-be-forgotten — for her philanthropy and beneficence to suffering humanity — the Empress Maria Feodorovna. The palace library, which owes its existence to this august pair, contains a collection of most remarkable and choice works. Among other things a small packet was found there containing some autograph letters of Lavater, which have hitherto remained unknown to the biographers of this famous man. These letters were written by him at Zürich, in 1798. Sixteen years before, Lavater had the opportunity of making the acquaintance of the Grand Duke Pavel (Paul) Petrovitch and his wife, during their travels incognito, under the titles of the Count and Countess Severni (North), when they visited Zürich and Schaffhausen.

From 1796 to 1800, Lavater sent his physiognomic discoveries to Russia and along with them letters, or rather fragments in the shape of letters, of a spiritualistic tendency, with the object of giving the best possible general conception about the state of the soul after the death of the body. Lavater allows that the soul of the dead can transmit its thoughts to a receptive and chosen mind (now called a medium), and thus communicate with and write letters to the friends it left on earth, and give them an idea of its existence in the realm of the spirits. In his letters Lavater speaks of his religious convictions with great enthusiasm. The publication of a few of these letters with the permission of the Grand Duke Constantine Nikolayevitch, will enable the public to become better acquainted with the sympathetic and lofty soul of Lavater. As

to the rest, and the correspondence which contains his physiognomic observations, owing to their private nature and length they cannot be made public property.¹

Those now offered to the public were translated directly from the autograph letters at St. Petersburg.²

[. . . every spirit, co-ordinately with his personal character] Evidently, the great Swiss physiognomist was better acquainted with the nature of living men than with that of *disembodied* spirits, since he attributes to the latter a personality of human characteristics!

[. . . each Spirit . . . ennobling his personality] What would Lavater, with such exalted and lofty, though rather too anthropomorphic ideas about disembodied souls, say, to the inane and often senseless “messages” from the Spirit World through the modern professional medium? What would he think of the materializations of “three-toed” Lillies, punch-and-tea-drinking John Kings and the rest of the astral crew? Thus it seems, that Spirit-letters were known before modern Spiritualism was born.

[. . . our light radiates softly around the head of every good, loving, and true Christian] Sectarian feelings even in Spirits

[. . . we stimulate in him ideas, which without our influence could otherwise never have entered his head] Such are the ways and the *modus operandi* of the Planetary Dhyānis and the Nirmānakāyas, but not quite those of disembodied spirits of “personalities.” Yet, great and saintly, indeed, must be the man or woman who becomes worthy of such visitants! As a general rule such an influence is exercised on the lower self by one’s own Ego, a Spirit surely, yet not “disembodied.”

[. . . thus a highly worthy man . . . becomes in this manner an . . . agent for the spirit] Which of the *professional* mediums answer this description? Is it the drunken sots and epileptics we all know, or have heard of, who are such “highly worthy” people?

[I soar over, and light upon him . . .] The “Spirit” is hardly of the modest class. The style of his letters is that of Lavater himself; and we have little doubt but they were written by him in trance condition, unknown to himself.

[Spirits . . . live bereft of their free will, subject to the will alone of the Almighty] Surely such a state of irresponsibility is nothing to be envied nor desired. What kind of “liberated” Spirits are these!

[. . . following a particularly phantastic passage full of visions] One would hardly recognize the genius and remarkable intellect of Lavater in the above gush. It might be more appropriate to sign this letter with the name of one of General Booth’s “Army.”

[. . . at last speech returned to us] What kind of conception of *Spirit* and *Spirits* had the great Lavater, if he could accept all this *physiological* description of *post-mortem* emotions, as a *bona fide* narrative of a disembodied soul? A queer “Spirit” this!

¹ Thus only two or three of the Lavater letters were sent for publication in 1881, the rest being withheld.

² [H.P. Blavatsky has appended footnotes to various expressions of Lavater, and to certain statements which occur in the three letters purporting to have been written by a discarnate “Spirit” who signs himself “Makarizenagath.” The expressions to which the footnotes are appended appear in square brackets.]

[. . . a Being before whom bows the whole Universe] This we fear, is a slight exaggeration of facts. The Spirit seems to forget the millions of the “heathen.”

We are, indeed, forced to suspect the venerable Spirit Makariozenagath of being the disincarnated Spirit of a Methodist preacher.

[. . . out of thousands of things . . . there may be hardly one that I dare mention] This is but in the order of things. Who is there who can boast of having received from a communicating “Spirit” any entirely new information, never heard of before, yet correct and useful to either science in general, or mankind in particular?

[. . . their religious feeling penetrates our being and their infidelity repels us] We demur to the last proposition, while quite ready to agree with the first. The respective religious beliefs of their mediums *must* “penetrate,” the communicating “spirits,” if we are allowed to judge by the results. While one “returning” *angel-guide* vouchsafes, say, to a Roman Catholic medium and audience the blessed truths of the immaculate conception and teaches reincarnation, another “angel-control” will, in the presence of protestants and English Spiritualists, denounce the latter doctrine as “unphilosophical heathen rubbish” and make high fun over the doctrine of rebirth.

[. . . light is . . . the mystery . . . which cannot be understood by any mortal] And yet it is pretty well known to Occultists and even many an advanced Kabbalist, without mentioning those who realize the true meaning of Alchemy and its transmutations.

It is evident that the word “light” is used for aura, or that radiant emanation from animate and inanimate objects which is called by Reichenbach *Od*. But the presence of such in living persons, at any rate, is well known even to good clairvoyants and sensitives, or mediums, who see it, though they are rarely able to understand and analyze correctly its coruscations.

[. . . we have no authority to compel by, or subject to, our power any human being, whose will is entirely independent from our will] The *angel-guides* and *controls* of the modern medium speak differently. What they demand of those whom they “overshadow” and break into, like a midnight burglar, is absolute passivity and no exercise of free will, as it is fatal to spooks.

[. . . the “Spirit” quotes *Matthew* xvi, 19: “And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”] Just so; only these words scarcely apply to Peter the Apostle, but rather to *Peter*, the symbol of the mystery between Soul (the earthly, *lower* manas) and Spirit (the Higher Manas or Ego), the *Christos* within man.¹ The “Spirit of God” spoken about is evidently our “Higher Ego,” the only divine Entity upon which act and react all the deeds of the terrestrial *Personality*. But this is a theosophical teaching with which too few are acquainted, to make of it a subject of any lengthy dissertation.

¹ [See “Paul an Initiate and founder of Christianity” and “Peter not an Initiate and the enemy of Paul,” in our Buddhas and Initiates Series. — ED. PHIL.]

Editor's Note

Two words to the unwary, who believe in the communion of disembodied spirits with mortal men. We have translated the above Letters *verbatim* in spite of their weary repetitions, and have laid them in all their *goody-goodness* and gigantic gush before the readers of *Lucifer*. And now we ask; is there one sentence in them that could be regarded as new or useful for mankind, or even for the mortal Empress for whose benefit they were written? Has the pious and Christo-gushing Makariozenagath given the smallest information on that *bourne* “from which no traveller returns,” added an atom of fresh information to the general knowledge of the world, or benefited thereby man, woman, or child? Written by Lavater, who was undeniably a man of genius, and great scientific knowledge; one whose sincerity could no more be questioned than his horror of an honest man for any deception of that kind — what are we to think of these letters written by the *spirit of a dead man to a friend* on earth? How difficult is it for a mind, warped by theological prejudices, to exercise a right judgment, or vision, in the psychic experience of which it may be the subject! We see this strongly in the case of Swedenborg who ruined what might otherwise have been true vision, by clothing everything he saw in this same miserable theological garb. So with the friend of Lavater; the moment he had experience of the realm beyond five senses, he immediately thought himself with the God and angels of his imaginary heaven and worked in the details with his own preconceptions. It is curious how all these untrained psychics see each in the terms of his own religion or theory, and because they experience some new sensation, are straightway convinced of the absolute truth of their experience. We know a dozen people who believe with all their souls that they have made the intimate acquaintance of Jehovah (!), and will tell you how he is dressed, even to the minutest details of his toilette; others again, a still more numerous class, who are the bosom psychic friends of Jesus Christ (!!); and so on. The “cruel, hard-hearted” world calls them “cranks” and *Lucifer*, little as he values the opinion of the many as a rule, must endorse its verdict, adding that the communications of the “dear Spirits” up to date must be roughly catalogued under the heading of “flapdoodle.”

