

ON EXPRESSION IN NATURE

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On Expression in Nature by Wm. Main

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WM. MAIN

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BY
William
W. M. MAIN, M.D.

"The knowledge of the old is God's guiding star for the young, which it is alike the duty of the old to impart, and the bounden duty of the young to profit by."—*The Liverpool Daily Post.*

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1894

Dedicated

TO

THE HONOURED MEMORY OF THE LATE

MR ANDREW CLARK, BART., M.D., P.R.C.P. LOND.,

ETC. ETC. ETC.,

IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE

OF

ENCOURAGEMENT, SYMPATHY, AND MUCH KINDNESS

TO

ME AND MINE.

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PREFACE.

THAT the philosophy of the Expression of Emotion is a very difficult matter to elucidate, the very numerous works on the subject abundantly prove. The earlier authors made little attempt at explanation, but confined their attention almost entirely to establishing rules in physiognomy. Sir Charles Bell was the first in this country to treat the subject in a philosophic spirit, followed after many years by the late Mr. Charles Darwin, and more recently by Professor Mantagazza and Dr. Warner. With the exception of Sir Charles Bell, all these authors have studied expression chiefly from a physical point of view. Many years ago my attention was directed to this branch of inquiry from an artistic aspect by my having read some rules in art regarding the relation of a particular direction of lines and expression. These rules were to the effect that lines tending upwards suggested power and progress; that on the contrary, lines tending downwards indicated weakness and sadness; whilst horizontal lines were indicative of repose and peace. These rules appeared to me very remarkable, and I began forthwith to test their truth. During the investigation I found that, while the directions of lines were very important factors in expression, there appeared to be others, namely, the signs of energy, which had perhaps the greatest power in arresting our attention, and which were not necessarily included under the terms given. It is true that up lines are almost always associated with energy; yet

we have also marked energy in certain motions and sounds which, though they contribute powerfully in expression, cannot be represented by any lines.

Dr. Warner, in his able and elaborate work on "Physical Expression," writes:—"Expression in its widest signification is the outward indication of some inherent property or function. An expression is a physical sign which is accepted as a criterion of the property, because the two are found by experience to be more or less uniformly co-existing phenomena." This is, perhaps, as philosophic and clear a definition of expression as we could wish. It would imply that any contraction of the face muscles which produces expression must be preceded by an emotion affecting the nerve centres. Now these expressions are, and probably have ever been, pretty nearly the same in man; and since they indicate more or less accurately the emotions of the mind, they necessarily must always have had, and still have, a great interest for man, and consequently we watch them with great keenness and attention. The contraction of any of the muscles of the face, even to a very small extent, is sure to be noticed and its meaning questioned. Now there is, at least, one indication which can always be drawn from all muscular contractions visible in the countenance, and that is nervous energy. Whatever else may be inferred, this energy we are sure of. But it is a curious and interesting fact that this energy is almost uniformly accompanied by uptending lines. This assertion may not at first be accepted, so far as the human face is concerned, for there the lines are so exceedingly minute and delicate. However, in the present work I hope to make it clear that energy in animal and vegetable life is almost always indicated by uptending lines as the art rules assert; and that, even in the human face, these rules are found to hold true.

But while uptending lines are thus intimately associated with energy, it is equally true that downtending lines are as closely allied with weakness, as I shall be able to show.

So very generally are these lines found in nature a true indication of the two conditions, that artists have come to state them in the formula I have given.

It is evident that a rapid and correct appreciation of these signs of strength and weakness must have been of the very greatest consequence to man from the beginning in regard to self-preservation—to attack and defence. In very early times, doubtless, the only law observed by man was that which regulates the lower animals now, namely :—

“The good old rule ; the simple plan,
That they should take who have the power,
And they should keep who can.”

Though man is living under very different laws now, yet he has only arrived at these by slow degrees ; and even now these signs are of great importance to him, while they are as urgently necessary as ever they were to the lower animals. If we accept the dicta of modern philosophers that man has risen by slow stages from a low and rude condition of animalism ; and that, nevertheless, in that low condition he was possessed of all the principles of mind which distinguish him now, though in an undeveloped state ; and that, moreover, his varying and rude emotions must have been expressed in a manner similar to what they are now, and by the same organs ; we can have no difficulty in supposing that the appreciation of signs of power and of weakness would be one of the very first lessons he would learn in his intercourse with his fellows.

Though the following pages are little more than the accumulated notes taken from time to time amid the engrossing duties of a professional life, yet they will, I trust, prove beyond a doubt that the art rules referred to are true in nature generally, so true and so nearly universal that man and animals have come unconsciously to accept them

as the intuitive language of emotion, and to direct their judgment and actions in accordance with them.

I will not attempt to enter fully into the reason why a certain direction of lines should suggest certain emotions; or, perhaps, rather, why the expression of certain emotions should always be accompanied by a certain direction and combination of lines. I take a superficial glance at this point,¹ but must leave its fuller development to more profound physiologists than I am.

Mr. Darwin, writing in reference to the difficulties of understanding the cause of expression and if our explanations of them are trustworthy, remarks:—"I see only one method of testing our conclusions. This is to observe whether the same principles by which one expression can, as it appears, be explained, is applicable in other allied cases; and especially whether the same general principles can be applied with satisfactory results both to man and the lower animals. This latter method, I am inclined to think, is the most serviceable of all." The following remarks will be found to afford to the full the advantage which Mr. Darwin suggests, for I have been in the habit of applying the art rules to vegetation and the lower animals in general, as well as to man, his customs, and gestures. The reader will therefore be able to judge of their applicability to all kinds of animated objects.

To me the continuous observations have been a source of great interest and amusement, and I trust my accumulated notes may interest and amuse others. If I have managed to throw a single ray of light on any point connected with the expression of emotion, I shall feel amply rewarded; for it is a subject, like most questions in nature, so difficult that, after passing under the careful study even of the late Mr. Darwin, he still acknowledged that "very many points remain inexplicable."

¹ See page 35.