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Mapping the face: Anatomy of passions by J. Parsons, P. Camper and C. Bell

FROM THE MID-18th TO THE END of the 19th century, scientists produced treatises on facial expression intended for artists. These studies attempted to use anatomical knowledge to identify and classify the various expressions which the passions impart to the face, and sought thereby to provide painters, sculptors and actors with infallible means to represent emotional states on the human face.

This paper will focus on three figures in this tradition of research: the British physician and surgeon James Parsons (1705–1770);¹ the Dutch anatomist and natural historian Petrus Camper (1722–1789);² and the British anatomist and physiologist Charles Bell (1774–1842).³

My purpose is to show how the shift between these authors' approaches paralleled the change that occurred at the same time in the biological sciences, gradually transforming natural history into comparative anatomy. Whereas Parsons and, to some extent, Camper would classify facial configurations in the same way as botanist would classify plants — through their visible characteristics — Charles Bell introduced an underlying functional dimension in his approach to the face, comparing the facial structures of different animal species and the various biological functions they served.

I will argue that this shift implied important consequences for what one may call the moral status of facial expressivity. Parsons and Camper classified the expressions according only to the corresponding passions (such as surprise, joy, tears, anger). Bell additionally distinguished noble expressions (spiritual, disinterested, and peculiarly human) from despicable ones (sensual, selfish, and animal), depending on the parts of the face set into motion. For Parsons and Camper expression was a natural and universal language designed by Providence to unite mankind (as well as the various animal species); it proved the unity between man's physical organisation and its social and moral nature. For Bell, on the contrary, the face became the mirror of man's duality (being both animal and spiritual) and thus polarised between purely biological functions that were shared with animals, and purely spiritual manifestations which were the privilege of man alone.

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¹ James Parsons (1746), "Human physiognomy explained", Cronian Lecture, *Supplement to the Philosophical transactions*.

² Petrus Camper (1792), *Sur le moyen de représenter d'une manière sûre les diverses passions qui se manifestent sur le visage*, (French translation ; original conference in Dutch: 1774)

³ Sir Charles Bell (1844), *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as connected with the Fine Arts* (3rd edition, London: Murray).