

# Acting Archives Essays

ACTING ARCHIVES REVIEW SUPPLEMENT 14 - FEBRUARY 2012

Claudio Vicentini

## THEORY OF ACTING

### VI

#### THE CRITIQUE OF ACTING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONALISM D'AIGUEBERRE, CIBBER, AARON HILL AND RÉMOND DE SAINTE-ALBINE\*

1. *D'Aigueberre and the Founding of the Critique of Acting* 2. *Cibber's Autobiography and Garrick's and Foote's Essays* 3. *Aaron Hill* 4. *Rémond de Sainte-Albine's Treatise* 5. *The Functions of Technique* 6. *The Problems of Emotionalism*

#### 1. *D'Aigueberre and the Founding of the Critique of Acting*

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the separation of recitation from oratory was accompanied by the birth of a new critical sensibility towards the actor's performance. James Wright's *Historia Histrionica* of 1699 had taken pains to document the parts played by various actors and to provide a certain amount of biographical information.<sup>1</sup> Then, around 1710, the London periodicals began to publish occasional observations on the protagonists of the contemporary stage. Covering Betterton's funeral, for example, Richard Steele listed his most celebrated interpretations, a month later giving accounts of the equally famous Robert Wilks and Colley Cibber.<sup>2</sup> In Spring 1711 Addison published an article on Nicolò Grimaldi, the famous Neapolitan opera-singer, citing him as a model for the great tragic actors on the English stage.<sup>3</sup> Later, in France, Baron's return and the success of Adrienne Lecouvreur occasioned a series of articles and long letters, real or invented, to friends and correspondents.<sup>4</sup> And eventually in 1730 Jean Dumas d'Aigueberre, man of letters and magistrate in the Toulouse parliament, published the *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur de la Comédie de Roüen, au Garçon de Caffé*, to all intents marking the birth of the modern critique of recitation.

In July 1729 the Comédie Française had performed d'Aigueberre's curious *Trois spectacles*, comprising a tragedy, a comedy and a pastoral. This had elicited a certain amount of criticism to which d'Aigueberre replied in his *Lettre d'un Garçon de Caffé au Souffleur de la*

---

\* Translated by Anita Weston, Libera Università degli Studi per l'Innovazione e le Organizzazioni di Roma. From C. Vicentini, *La teoria della recitazione dall'antichità al Settecento*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2012.

<sup>1</sup> James Wright, *Historia Histrionica: an Historical Account of the English-Stage*, London, printed by G. Croom for William Haws, 1699.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Tatler*, no. 167 (4 May 1710) and no. 182 (8 June 1710).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Spectator*, no. 13 (15 March 1711).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the above-cited Elena Balletti, Luigi Riccoboni, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau and Guyot-Desfontaines (see C. Vicentini, 'Theory of Acting V. The Birth of Emonotionalism', *Acting Archives Essays*, AAR Supplement 5, April 2011) see Léonor-Jean-Christine Soulas d'Allainval, *Lettre a Mylord \*\*\* sur Baron et la Demoiselle Lecouvreur*, Paris, A. de Heuqueville, 1730, in *Mémoires sur Molière, et sur Mme Guérin, sa Veuve, Suivis des Mémoires sur Baron et sur Mlle Lecouvreur par l'Abbé d'Allainval*, Paris, Ponthieu, 1822 (anastatic edition Genève, Slatkine Reprints, 1968).

*Comédie de Roüen*, followed by the *Réponse du Souffleur*.<sup>5</sup> He had then written a *Seconde Lettre* dealing specifically with acting.<sup>6</sup> The *Lettre* gives a strikingly broad critical overview, analysing more than twenty performers on the Paris stage and going from the generation about to retire to the most recent actors to join the Comédie. It begins with Mademoiselle Duclos, followed by Beaubourg, Baron and Lecouvreur, also commenting on the merits and demerits of four member of the Quinault family (Jean Baptiste-Maurice, Quinault Dufresne, his wife Catherine and his sister Jeanne Françoise). He then moves on to Pierre Lenoir, or La Thorillère, Duchemin, Momtménil, Charles-Claude Dangeville, Marc Antoine Legrand, François Arnould Poisson, Armand, Mademoiselle Dubocage, Mademoiselle Desmares and her pupil Mademoiselle Balicourt, down to Sarrazin and Grandval, who had made their début in 1729, and Mademoiselle Dangeville, the niece of Charles-Claude, who had recently joined the Comédie in March 1730.

The work's importance lies above all in the premise in which d'Aigueberre posits the possibility of a critique of acting which is as rigorous and legitimate as critiques of other cultural activities. If a speech, book, or theatre script can be criticized, then so can the performance of an actor. All this is asked of the critic is to 'keep to his subject'. The critique should analyze the actor's art without interpolating extraneous factors regarding the person: character, behaviour, look, or general sympathy.<sup>7</sup> In this way acting becomes a specific object of observation, the description and evaluation of the actors comprising an autonomous discipline, with its own criteria and values and with the same dignity as the most discerning literary criticism.

The *Lettre* follows a precise strategy in expounding the above. It rejects the possibility of evaluating the performance from the audience's immediate reaction, since tastes vary and personal reactions are influenced by preferences and inclinations concerning the actor's person and not his art. A solid, general criterion must be applied: to evaluate how the actor involves the spectator, 'opening the heart, locking it once more and moving it', and using art to imitate nature.<sup>8</sup> D'Aigueberre follows three criteria in his analysis. He observes if and how the actor appears moved by the sentiments expressed; he gauges the effectiveness of gesture and expression, appraising the degree of emphasis and extent with which they are applied, and lastly evaluates how suited the actor naturally is to the role in which he is cast.

The exposition opens with a virtual phenomenology of emotive expressiveness as exemplified in the Comédie's traditional pillars of excellence. Duclos, greatly celebrated in the past, 'is inflamed, aggrieved, anguished' but, he objects, is never convincing, giving the impression of over-acting, producing 'the necessary demonstrations' of required feelings

---

<sup>5</sup> Jean Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre d'un Garçon de Caffé au Souffleur de la Comédie de Roüen, sur la pièce des Trois Spectacles*, Paris, Tabarie, 1729; *Réponse du Souffleur*, Paris, Tabarie, 1730.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur de la Comédie de Roüen au Garçon de Caffé, ou Entretien sur le Defauts de la Declamation*, Paris, Tabarie, 1730. The *Seconde Lettre* had passed critically reviewed all the Comédie's actors, and when injudiciously read out to them had created no small stir, as d'Aigueberre recounts in the premise. The reading appears to be a fact. The curator of the second edition of the *Lettre*, published nel 1870, Jules Bonnassies, mentions a handwritten note among the contents of a police report conserved in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal stating that on 14 June 1830 the 'approbateur des pièces', one Abbé Chérier, had read the *Lettre* to the actors who had strongly protested, while one actress was in despair at not having been mentioned. The Comédie probably destroyed all the copies it could intercept, Bonnassies opines: hence the rarity value of the few extant same. See *Notice* (pp. 3-4) and *Avis du Garçon de Caffé au Lecteur* (pp. 6-8), in *Lettre a Mylord\*\*\* sur Baron et la Dlle Le Couvreur par George Wink (l'Abbé d'Allainval). Lettre du Souffleur de la Comédie de Roüen au Garçon de Caffé (par du Mas d'Aigueberre)*, ed. by Jules Bonnassies, Paris, L. Willem, 1870.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Seconde Lettre*, pp.7-8 and p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

through ‘art, method and habit’, but never transmitting the emotions enacted on stage to the spectator. Only towards the end of the play, d’Aigueberre admits, when ‘the duration of the action’ begins to ‘heat’ and move her, can her acting be seen to improve and acquire convincing vigour.<sup>9</sup>

Beaubourg, for his part, is concerned with cramming every aspect of his acting with significance and sentiment. Each word is paired with its related ‘sigh, gesture, or particular movement’, to the extent that the actor seems to identify not with the character, but with the poet bent on foregrounding and enhancing textual beauties:

Not content with lamenting or raging, [Beaubourg] abandons himself to his transports with the enthusiasm of an author when composing; he opens his mouth like him, underlines what he pronounces, conveys the energy of his expressions and the brilliance of his thoughts, and exalts with emphasis the nobility of his sentiments.<sup>10</sup>

Beaubourg’s expressive intensity and excess end by removing all naturalness from the performance – all half-tones, nuances and variants. Every state of mind immediately becomes its histrionic extreme: pain is expressed as desperation as Beaubourg ‘moans violently, sighs furiously, clenching his teeth and compressing, as it were, his expressions like a man who suffers and dares not explode’. To express love he ‘enlarges his despairing shoulders, moans and weeps’, assuming an air which is ‘whining, naïve and infantile’, reducing to ridicule both actor and passion alike. In so doing, all difference of sentiment is eliminated, together with the different traits of the character who disappears behind the performance of a succession of over-intense and stereotyped, whatever the character or rank of the character expressing them.<sup>11</sup>

The faults in the acting of Mademoiselle Duclos and Beaubourg have a precise cause: the lack of ‘heart’, indispensable for ‘reaching sentiments that exist within nature’.<sup>12</sup> An actor naturally requires *esprit*, d’Aigueberre concedes, to penetrate the dramatist’s script, grasp the character, recognize the personality and decide how to render it correctly and effectively. Without heart, however, *esprit* is to no avail and can even overforce a performance’s naturalness and plausibility. It is sentiment – the actor’s emotional empathy – which regulates the intensity of the performance and adds further articulacy and complexity, avoiding reducing the character’s states of mind to a limited range of stereotypes and allowing them to emerge in all their delicacy as the actor reveals all the hidden lights and shades. The finer differences of characterization are woven into this close texture of gesture, attitude and expression, in communicating which the actor gives each character its own idiosyncratic identity: that which distinguishes one tragic hero from another, or a princess of Colchis from a Greek queen.

This constitutes acting at its finest, as achieved by Baron and Lecouvreur, who could match the single passion with the character while sacrificing neither. The result was extraordinary. Not infrequently, d’Aigueberre reports, the audience was so enchanted by Baron as to be unable to applaud, but would sit immobile while a murmur of admiration gradually began to be heard in the theatre.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

The actor's authentic empathy, however, extends beyond a more complex interpretation of character and state of mind; it also governs the succession of expressions, tones of voice, facial signs, gestures and movements, blending them into a cohesive whole and marking the variations and shifts from one state of mind to the next. Lecouvreur never went on stage without having clearly entered into the part: she was able to 'dispose at her pleasure' of 'her heart and its sentiments', and her acting 'announced through her eyes what she was about to say', she could pass effortlessly 'from violence to perfect tranquility, from tenderness to fury, from instant fear to dissimulation'. Her face was variously 'serene, troubled, submissive, proud, dejected, threatening, irate, or full of compassion'. The blend of expressions, the succession of different intensities of emotion, and the different states of mind swept the audience along totally, so that 'they followed with no resistance', and 'feared, moaned and trembled with her, even weeping before seeing her tears begin to flow'.<sup>14</sup>

Empathy in itself, though, is not enough, d'Aigueberre explains, examining the case of Pierre Sarrazin who replaced Baron in 1729. Sarrazin entered into the role and its emotional charge completely, but was only weakly and inadequately able to transmit this to his audience. The spectator is moved at his interpretation of an unhappy father while 'feeling that something is missing from his sadness', and that when 'tears are about to appear in his eyes' he has the time 'to think again and hold them back'. The reason is that Sarrazin is deficient in *feu*: the fire and energy that courses through the empathetic actor, who is then able to transmit his feelings powerfully and convincingly. *Feu* can clearly carry all before it: united with a competent technique of expression it can take hold of the audience, surprise, amaze and disturb them, support the actor in all eventualities and generally hide a multitude of sins and mistakes. But its excesses can equally backfire. As demonstrated by the case of Quinault Dufresne, who d'Aigueberre cites in comparison with Sarrazin, *feu* can push the actor over the edge, making him lose 'the sense of things', and actually 'stop him from feeling'. Without emotional empathy, the actor is then animated by energy and *feu* alone, and may please the spectators still, but never touch their soul.<sup>15</sup>

Having established these basic criteria, the *Lettre* goes on to a technical aspect of acting: the ability to accentuate gestures and expressions according to the character represented. The characters of 'bas-comique', for example, which are close to those of farce, demand an exaggerated gestural and particular expressive force. This would explain the lack of success of an actor like Montménil, although his performance was otherwise unexceptionable. His physiognomy was too regular, d'Aigueberre observed: his characters are not sufficiently clear-cut, but are correctly and naturally represented, as their real-life equivalents would normally be portrayed onstage, while their function in this case is to amuse the public with coarse quips and gags.<sup>16</sup> Armand on the other hand, originally from travelling companies, errs in the opposite direction. A lively and talented actor, with all the gifts to please and amuse, he would be ideal for grotesques, servants, drunkards, etc., but his professional origins leads him naturally toward buffoonery so that instead of becoming 'a good actor', he remains merely 'a comedian of farces'.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-44.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

The same goes for interpreters of ‘rôles de caractères’: characters like the miser or the capricious female. Here too, obviously in quite different ways, the actor needs to bring out the distinctive features. In this context d’Aigueberre cites La Thorillière who with complete naturalness renders the hypocrisy of the religious hypocrite or the craft and ingenuity of a servant, concentrating in a gesture, movement, or wink the unmistakable trait of the character to be revealed. Too often, though, this degenerates into a series of smirks and grins which compromise the plausibility of the performance by simply playing to the pit.<sup>18</sup>

It is also possible for an actor with no consolidated technique or special qualities to acquit himself perfectly well if he possesses a repertoire of characteristics adapted to specific types of characters. Jeanne Françoise Quinault, for example, has her faults while possessing no particular compensating abilities: but her way of speaking, her obstinate rejoinders to anyone contradicting her, and an air of defiance and rebellion or simple vivacity in voice and gestures make her ideal for parts as a soubrette, the pert and knowing serving-girl, and excellent for similar ‘rôles de caractères’ requiring a brisk and animated performance.<sup>19</sup> Even the faults an actor should correct but often cultivates can find their ideal application in the right role. The rather pompous airs of another of the Quinault, Jean Baptiste-Maurice, can make an excellent stage philosopher, just as a number of his cultivated gestures marvellously morph into the cruelty and rage of a tyrant or the secret ambition and evil of the villain.<sup>20</sup>

This leads to a final consideration. Apart from the attitudes and characteristics, good or bad, which an actor can assimilate into his individual style, there exist actorly predispositions in favour of or against certain character-types. Cathérine Quinault inherited Lecouvreur’s roles and possesses undeniable gifts, but – d’Aigueberre notes – she has none of her temperament, stature or vocal range necessary for the violence of great passion. Grandval, completely at home with the transports of a lover, is ill-at-ease in the role of a headstrong and powerful hero such as Achilles: ‘his threats make no impression on us, his oaths fail to reassure, or his fury to terrify’. Balicourt, on the other hand, is perfect in the roles requiring fury, such as Medea, while her gestures, vocal range and vehemence make her unsuited to the ‘sweet and tranquil’ passions.<sup>21</sup> A further example is Duchemin, the ‘very image’ of a trader or fat banker but most definitely out of place in tragic roles, or Legrand, a fine actor with a pleasing and sonorous voice and always well-rehearsed and perceptive but totally unsuited, on account of his stature, for major roles.<sup>22</sup> And so on.

All this, d’Aigueberre concludes, explains the difficulty behind perfect casting. Often it is actorly caprice or self-importance which gets in the way of perfect casting, but there are other factors. Even when natural aptitudes are right they need honing and perfecting: the actor must work at eliminating the defects, even minimal, which erode the excellence of other gifts. This is where criticism comes into its own, as attentive and expert scrutiny. Its role is not so much to bring home to the public faults it had probably already spotted, or to pillory clearly incompetent actors, but to recognize the less obvious defects, ‘not apparent at first sight’, and to distinguish the good from the less good in the performances of actors who are not without merit.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57 and pp. 61-62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65 and pp. 70-71.

## 2. Cibber's Autobiography and Garrick's and Foote's Essays

After its beginnings in d'Aiguebierre's *Lettre*, theatre criticism developed steadily in the following years and after 1730 performance became an increasingly important component in theatre culture. In France, at the end of his fundamental *Recherches sur les théâtres de France, depuis l'année onze cent soixante-un, jusques à present*, Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps saw fit to draw up a list of actors, complete with short biographies and notes on their acting method.<sup>24</sup> In Britain, the deaths of three eminent stage personalities, Anne Oldfield, Robert Wilks and Barton Booth, occasioned the publication of a number of biographies with comments on their performances; at the same time the general interest of the periodic press in acting styles, techniques and individual performances was becoming increasingly more evident.<sup>25</sup> In October 1732, writing in the *Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer*, Thomas Cooke described the qualities of the era's greatest stage presences.<sup>26</sup> In March 1733 *The Grub-Street Journal*, the most widely-read periodical, included praise for the leading lady, Jenny Johnson Cibber, in its review of Charles Johnson's *Caelia*, afterwards analyzing those of James Quin and Colley Cibber.<sup>27</sup> It returned to Cibber in 1736, locking horns with Aaron Hill and William Popple's periodical *The Prompter*. At the end of the same year *The Prompter* was at variance with the *Daily Journal* over the merits of Susannah Cibber and Kitty Clive in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*.<sup>28</sup> At the end of the 1740s it was another periodical, *The Champion*, which published one of the most important analyses of Garrick's acting at a year from his London début on the stage of Goodman's Fields.<sup>29</sup>

The new critical sensibility was not of course confined to the pages of the periodicals. In the *History of the English Stage, from the Restauration to the Present Time* by William Oldys, in 1741, long passages of acting theory taken from Gildon's *Life of Betterton* were accompanied by a selection of contemporary actors, with biographical summaries and assessments of their interpretations.<sup>30</sup> It was, however, above all the autobiography of Colley Cibber,

<sup>24</sup> See Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps, *Particularités de la vie de quelques Comédiens François*, at the end of the third part of *Recherches sur les théâtres de France, depuis l'année onze cent soixante-un, jusques à present*, Paris, Prault Pere, 1735, pp. 163-180.

<sup>25</sup> Two biographies came out after the death of Anne Oldfield (*Authentic Memoirs of the Life of that Celebrated Actress Mrs. Anne Oldfield*, London, 1730; and William Egerton, *Faithful Memoirs of the Life, Amours and Performances of Mrs. Anne Oldfield*, London, Curll, 1731); three followed Wilks's death (*Memoirs of the Life of Robert Wilks Esq.*, London, Rayner, 1732, with various comments on his work; Daniel O'Bryan, *Authentic Memoirs of the Life and Character of that most Celebrated Comedian Mr. Robert Wilks*, London, 1732, a second edition of which came out the same year; and *The Life of that Eminent Comedian Robert Wilks Esq.*, London, Curll, 1733 which, significantly, contains an *Essay on The Action of the Stage particularly that of Mr. Wilks*, with a detailed analysis of his actorly style, pp. 37-48); lastly two biographies reviewed the life of Booth (*Life of that Excellent Tragedian Barton Booth*, London, John Cooper, 1733; Benjamin Victor, *Memoirs of the Life of Barton Booth Esq.*, London, John Watts, 1733). See Ines Aliverti, 'Teatro e arti figurative nella trattatistica della prima metà del Settecento: i presupposti di una teoria della figurazione teatrale', *Biblioteca Teatrale*, nos. 19-20 (July-December, 1990), 125-139.

<sup>26</sup> See *Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer*, no. 7 (October, 1732).

<sup>27</sup> See *Grub-Street Journal*, 8 March 1734, 31 October 1734 and 7 November 1734.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Charles Harold Gray, *Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1971, pp. 81-83.

<sup>29</sup> See *The Champion*, no. 455 (October, 1742).

<sup>30</sup> William Oldys and Edmund Curll, *The History of the English Stage, from the Restauration to the Present Time. Including the Lives, Characters and Amours, of the most eminent Actors and Actresses. With Instructions for Public Speaking; wherein the Action and Utterance of the Bar, Stage, and Pulpit are distinctly considered. By Mr. Thomas Betterton. Adorned with Cuts*, London, E. Curll, 1741. Containing information and appraisals of the most eminent actors of the period, it ends with some eighty pages dedicated to Anna Oldfield, *Memoirs of Mrs. Anne Oldfield*, an abbreviated version of the text by William Egerton (possibly a pseudonym of Curll), *Faithful Memoirs of the Life, Amours and Performances of Mrs. Anne Oldfield*.

whose career on the Drury Lane stage spends more than four decades, from 1690 to 1733, which consciously and conscientiously developed the practice of theatre reviewing. In the pages dedicated to the work of his colleagues, Cibber expounded closely-argued theoretical reflections with a series of references, examples and concrete evaluations which were the result of the appraisal of a professional eye. His general considerations on the use of the voice were then used to define the precise excellence of Betterton's art, the stylistic characteristics of Elizabeth Barry and Anne Oldfield, and the qualities and limitations of Booth and Wilks;<sup>31</sup> while the features of simple and natural acting served as benchmark against which to praise the skills of James Nokes, to assess the performances of Anthony Leigh and Cave Underhill, to celebrate Mary Betterton, to describe the style of Elinor Leigh, Charlotte Butler and Anne Bracegirdle, and so on.<sup>32</sup>

The figure of Betterton soon emerged as the central model in this growing body of theoretical reflections and critical observations, bringing into focus the most vital of the talents required onstage: the ability to create the character and to render it in a form beyond that of painting or literature:

The most that a *Vandyke* can arrive at, is to make his Portraits of great Persons seem to *think*; a *Shakespeare* goes farther yet, and tells you *what* his Pictures thought; a *Betterton* steps beyond 'em both, and calls them from the Grave, to breathe, and be themselves again, in Feature, Speech, and Motion.<sup>33</sup>

This ability, as it emerges in the comments on Edward Kynaston, William Montfort and his wife Susannah Montfort, is that of 'transformation' into the figure to be represented.<sup>34</sup> And here there arises the problem of negative characters. Enacting them is particularly complicated, as illustrated by the case of Samuel Sandford, a short, somewhat stooping actor who therefore was the iconic ideal for malign and degenerate characters. Cibber deals with this complexity very acutely, underlining the skill necessary to earn the applause of the audience which is automatically more inclined to approve the creation of good characters, actually reading the successful enactment of evil as a quasi-endorsement of vice and immorality on the actor's part.<sup>35</sup>

The personality of the interpreter, his ability to morph into the most diverse figures, and the human essence of the character thus enter into a complex equilibrium which determines the final plausibility of the performance; and here the actor's private behaviour, or at least the public's perception of it, inevitably weighs in the balance of the effect produced on the spectators. Cibber writes that he had seen expressions 'of the most tender sentiment of love' provoke laughter in spectators as they compared them with the actual private life of the actor impersonating them.<sup>36</sup>

The impersonation of the character clearly, however, extends beyond the actor's transformation into the figure represented. It also requires an expression of the character's feelings experienced in the course of the play, as elicited by the script. This called for

---

<sup>31</sup> Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian, and Late Patentee of the Theatre Royal. With an Historical View of the Stage during his own Time*, London, Printed by John Watts for the Author, 1740, now edited by B. R. S. Fone, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1968. See pp. 66-67, p. 91 and pp. 314-315.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 82-90, pp. 93-94 and pp. 97-98.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 73-74, pp. 75-76 and pp. 94-95.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 77-79 and pp. 123-124.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

extreme precision, as recognized by Richard Estcourt, an excellent actor with an extraordinary power of mimicry who, in his own copy of the script, would jot down ‘the true spirit of the humour’ of the character in correspondence with every speech, together with ‘voice, look, gesture’ to be adopted. Even this was not enough. At the end the effect onstage would still be ‘languid and unaffecting’.<sup>37</sup> For full effect of pause, movement and expression, it was necessary to go to exemplary scenes of Betterton’s, such as Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost, analyzed by Cibber with awed admiration.<sup>38</sup> In his opinion, ‘the Talents’ that will ‘infallibly form an actor’ are ‘one of Nature’s Secrets’ and they alone can confer the ‘genius’ producing achieved art on stage.<sup>39</sup>

Cibber’s observations were reprised some years later by Anthony Aston, with the aim of revising the evaluations and adding details of actors’ performances of the period.<sup>40</sup> In the meantime theatre reviewing was developing, concentrating above all on analyses of the characters’ psychological situation and the actors’ solutions. A welter of observations, criticisms and judgments were expounded with that lingering over minute detail which was to characterize the line of attack, defense and general evaluation of performances in English theatre reviews, in a debating climate which was always intense and polemical and often humorous and ironic.

In 1744 Garrick took on the role of Macbeth and, pre-empting possibly negative criticism given that his *physique* was not exactly *du rôle*, and therefore unsuited, by traditional canons, to a tragic hero, published a short, anonymous piece entitled *An Essay on Acting*. Writing as a pedantic and presumptuous reviewer, out to condemn ‘a certain fashionable faulty actor’, Garrick took up the more clichéd attacks that had been levelled at him before going on to a ‘short criticism’ of his interpretation of Macbeth. The first part is a provocatively meticulous study of two scenes, one comic and one tragic: the breaking of a urinal by Abel Drugger, a character in Ben Jonson’s *Alchemist* which Garrick had played the previous year, and Macbeth’s murder of Duncan. The “critic”’s method is exemplary. A minutely detailed inventory is given of the two characters’ internal reactions to his very different situation and the expressive means to be adopted onstage:

When *Aber Drugger* has broke the *Urinal*, he is *mentally absorb’d* with the different Ideas of the *invaluable* Price of the *Urinal*, and the Punishment that may be inflicted in Consequence of a Curiosity, no way appertaining or belonging to the Business he came about [...] His *Eyes* must be revers’d from the Object he is most intimidated with, and by dropping his *Lip* at the some time Time *to* the Object, it throws a trembling *Languor* upon every *Muscle*; and by declining the right Part of the Head *towards* the *Urinal*, it casts the most *comic Terror* and *Shame* over all the *upper* Part of the Body, that can be imagin’d, and to make the *lower* Part equally ridiculous his *Toes* must be *inverted* front the *Heel*, and by *holding* his *Breath* he will unavoidably give himself a *Tremor* in the *Knees*<sup>41</sup>

Now to *Macbeth*. When the *Murder of Duncan* is committed, from an immediate *Consciousness* of the Fact, his *Ambition* is *ingulph’d* at that Instant, by the Horror of the Deed; his *Faculties* are intensely riveted to the *Murder* alone [...] He should, at that Time, be a *moving Statue*, or indeed a *petrifi’d Man*; his *Eyes* must *Speak*, and his *Tongue* be *metaphorically Silent* [...] his *Attitudes* must be *quick* and *permanent*; his *Voice* *articulately trembling*, and *confusedly intelligible*; the Murderer

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Aston, *A Brief Supplement to Colley Cibber, Esq., his Lives of the late Famous Actors and Actresses*, London, Printed for the Author, 1747.

<sup>41</sup> David Garrick, *An Essay on Acting*, London, W. Bickerton, 1744, pp. 7-8.



should be seen in *every Limb*, and yet every *Member*, at that Instant, should seem *separated* from his *Body*, and his *Body* from his *Soul*<sup>42</sup>

Abel Drugger is then abandoned, in the second half of the essay, for an identical analysis of further scenes from *Macbeth*, directives as to how to act them and criticism of Garrick's hypothetical mistakes.

Three years later Samuel Foote, an actor of some standing on the English stage of the time, reviewed the performances of four famous colleagues: Garrick as Lear, Quin and Spranger Barry as Othello, and Macklin as Iago. This time the intention is wholly serious, with not a trace of parody or spoof. Foote's eye is particularly sharp and his close textual analysis precise and perceptive. The procedure, however, is identical: after a short introduction to the various passions, he concludes that they are 'so very different in different Men', and presented in 'so complicated and mixed' a fashion as to thwart any exhaustive account of their interconnections or effects.<sup>43</sup> He gives a scene-by-scene analysis of the characters' inner attitudes, the complicated meshing of passions and states of mind, the means of expression to be adopted and the different actors' solutions. His criticism of Garrick, for example, in the madness scene in *King Lear* (act IV) is as follows:

How then is this mad Monarch to be employed in picking Straws, and boyish Trifling, or in Actions more *a-propos*, more suitable to his imaginary Dignity, such as frequent Musings, with the Finger on the Brow, as if the Welfare of Kingdoms depended on his Cure [...] if my Advice might be taken, every Motion, every Look, should express an Extravagance of State and Majesty; and when mad Tom is consulted as a learned *Theban*, *Lear* should not [...] pull his Rags, play with his Straws, or betray the least Mark of his knowing the real Man; but with great Solemnity, a contracted Brow, one Hand on *Edgar's* Shoulder, his Finger on his Breast, or some Action that should denote Superiority, seem to consult him on a knotty Point, but no Sign of Equality, no Familiarity<sup>44</sup>

Needless to say, Foote's essay and comments on his colleagues did not pass unnoticed. Significantly, however, even the most polemical responses argued in identical procedural terms, based on a careful close-reading, with possibly a comment on the version to follow; a definition of the passions and observations on the actor's gestures and expressions, evaluating if and how he managed to express them in relation to character and situation.<sup>45</sup> All this was predicated on the principle which for the English contemporary stage was obvious and unquestionable: that the actor's basic task is the perfect expression of the passions, to be extrapolated with maximum precision from a careful close-reading of the script. This is solemnly reiterated by Macklin in his opening to *The Art and Duty of an Actor*, an essay intended to introduce a series of lectures on the theatre, classical and modern, on Shakespeare's plays and on acting, to be held at the British Inquisition, a sort of academy Macklin had founded in London in 1754.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Foote, *A Treatise on the Passions, So far as they regard the Stage*, London, C. Corbett, 1747, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>45</sup> For reactions to Foote's essay see [T. J.], *A Letter of Compliment To the ingenious Author of a Treatise on the Passions, So far as they regard the Stage; With a critical Enquiry into the Theatrical Merit of Mr. G---k, Mr. Q---n, and Mr. B---N, & c. with some further Remarks on Mr. M---N. and a few Hints On our Modern Actresses, particularly Mrs. C---R and Mrs. P---D.*, London, C. Corbett, 1747; and *An Examen of the New Comedy, Call'd The Suspicious Husband. With Some Observations upon our Dramatick Poetry and Authors; To which is added, A Word of Advice to Mr. G---rr-ck; and a Piece of Secret History*, London, J. Roberts, London, 1747. For details as to the Shakespeare text used, see the *Examen*, particularly p. 26 and pp. 35-37.

It is the duty of an Actor always to know the Passion and the Humour of each Character so correctly, so intimately, and (if you will allow the expression) to feel it so enthusiastically, as to be able to define and describe it as a Philosopher; to give its operations on the looks, tones, and gestures of general nature, as it is ranked in classes of characters; and to mould all this knowledge, mental and corporeal, to the characteristic that the poet has given to the Character.<sup>46</sup>

### 3. Aaron Hill

The same conception lies behind the writings of Aaron Hill – poet, man of letters, journalist, playwright, director of Drury Lane, later manager of the Opera House, and the scholar responsible for the most cogent attempt at theorizing a system of acting in the 1730s and 1740s. His reflections are to be found in a collection of letters; articles published in *The Prompter*, a periodical co-founded with William Popple, which came out between 1734 and 1736; a first version of ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, a twenty-line poem on the subject of acting which appeared in *The Prompter* (December, 1735); a second *The Actor’s Epitome*, this time of eighty lines and uncertain date; *The Art of Acting* from 1746, and lastly, unfinished, *An Essay on the Art of Acting* published posthumously in 1753.<sup>47</sup>

A number of Hill’s points repeat long-founded convictions such as the actor’s need for grace and elegance of movement and expression but, at the same time, the need to violate formal prescriptions when the plausibility of the action requires it.<sup>48</sup> He also reiterates the need for the actor to keep eyes and attention trained on the action and not on the audience,<sup>49</sup> and to carry on acting, remaining within his stage character, even when he has no lines to speak and is simply silent.<sup>50</sup> The example of a painting, particularly of historical subjects, is again reprised to illustrate the proper disposition of the actors onstage, in a unified ensemble (‘one living group of figures’), each with his own expressive attitude ‘which would charm and animate the world by the force of passion and propriety’.<sup>51</sup> More pondered attention is given to the length of pauses in speaking in accordance with vocal force, the meaning to give to lines, the overall expressive force of words accompanied by gestures, and the time to be accorded the mental processes of the actor and spectator.<sup>52</sup>

All these technical observations, however, are secondary to a general system which leads to a singular result, using the more radical instances of emotionalism within the precepts of a rigorously-defined code of expression. Hill’s observations are predicated on a clearly

---

<sup>46</sup> Charles Macklin, *The Art and Duty of an Actor*, in James Thomas Kirkman, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Macklin*, 2 vols., London, 1799, I, pp. 362-365. Macklin had expounded his own theory of acting in *The Science of Acting*, the manuscript of which was lost in a shipwreck in 1771. See also pp. 46-47 in the second volume.

<sup>47</sup> *The Actor’s Epitome* in eighty lines was published posthumously in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq; Consisting of Letters on Various Subjects, And of Original Poems, Moral and Facetious, With an Essay on the Art of Acting*, 4 vols., London, Printed for the Benefit of the Family, 1753, IV, pp. 76-80. This also contains *An Essay on the Art of Acting* (IV, pp. 353-414). *The Art of Acting* had appeared in London in 1746, published by J. Osborn.

<sup>48</sup> See Aaron Hill, ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, *The Prompter*, no. 113 (9 December 1735), vv. 1-12; and no. 64 (20 June 1735), on the prohibition on lifting the arms above eye-level; no. 92 (26 September 1735) on scenes in which the voice has to be ‘sharp and impatient’, the expression ‘disordered’, the action ‘precipitate and turbulent’; no. 95 (7 October 1735), for the debate on the title role in *King Lear* (II, 4).

<sup>49</sup> See Aaron Hill, Letter to Samuel Stephens (October 23, 1734), in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill*, I, pp. 219-220.

<sup>50</sup> See *The Prompter*, no. 62 (13 June 1735).

<sup>51</sup> *The Prompter*, no. 556 (23 May 1735).

<sup>52</sup> See Aaron Hill, Letter to Samuel Stephens (October 23, 1734), p. 219; *The Prompter*, no. 113 (9 December 1735); and Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill*, IV, pp. 367-368.

emotionalist conviction. The actor, he was already declaring in 1716, should forget himself and the audience, and put on both the character's costume and its 'nature': the point is not to 'act' but to 'really be' the person he is representing.<sup>53</sup> Later on he criticized those actors who attempt to reproduce the marks of the different passions on their faces by following painting manuals, which can only produce grotesques, 'distorting their faces into a scholastic and technical confusion between the ridiculous and the horrible'.<sup>54</sup> Even the expressive codes of the ancient oratorical tradition can be of no assistance. Actors are quite wrong if 'instead of examining nature, they look into Quintilian', who was establishing norms for pleading in the tribunal, and not for acting on stage.<sup>55</sup>

Acting had to follow a completely 'natural' procedure, which Hill expounds in his *Essay on the Art of Acting*, taking as an example lines from Torrismond, the protagonist of Dryden's *The Spanish Fryar*. In reciting them the actor was 'to endeavour the effacement of all note or image of himself and forcibly bind down his fancy to suppose, that he is, really, Torrismond – that he is in love with Leonora, and has been bless'd, beyond his hope, by her kind declaration, in his favour'. To apply this, however, Hill realistically recognizes, is 'most difficult'.<sup>56</sup> Hence the need of 'an easy and practical theory' which was also universally valid, to give the actor all possible help.

The actor's task is to 'represent, to the eyes and ears of an audience, the whole diversity of passions whereby human life is distinguished', requiring both a knowledge of these passions and 'a power to put on, at will, the marks and colours which distinguish them'. But, Hill stresses, these marks are spontaneously sparked by inner processes which must be immediately retrievable as an automatic stimulus-response method. To externalise a passion in visible, physical form, it is enough to 'recollect' by means of a 'strong and decisive' imagination.

Let a man, for instance, recollect some idea of sorrow, his eye will, in a moment, catch the dimness of melancholy, his muscles will relax into languor, and his whole frame of body sympathetically unbend itself into a remiss and inanimate lassitude.<sup>57</sup>

This entails a completely natural four-part process, Hill explains: the 'strong idea' of the passion is conjured through the imagination, then impressed on the face, before descending into the bodily muscles, at which point the exact expression of look, air, voice and action proper to the passion is produced.<sup>58</sup> Quintilian's procedure here becomes a mechanical operation in which spontaneity and expressive naturalness are transformed into a chain of transmission which is rigidly predetermined at each step.<sup>59</sup> Hesitation, variation and uncategorised reactions are virtually impossible. Once the imagination has adequately conceived a 'strong idea' of sadness, an actor would be simply unable to produce an arrogant tone of voice because 'the modification of his muscles has affected the organs of

---

<sup>53</sup> Dedication to the tragedy *The Fatal Vision: or The Fall of Siam*, in *The Dramatic Works of Aaron Hill*, 2 vols., London, 1760, I, p. 149. See Chiara Barbieri, *La pagina e la scena*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2006, p. 134.

<sup>54</sup> *The Prompter*, no. 118 (26 December 1735).

<sup>55</sup> *The Prompter*, no. 64 (20 June 1735).

<sup>56</sup> Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, p. 359.

<sup>57</sup> *The Prompter*, no. 66 (27 June 1735).

<sup>58</sup> See *The Prompter*, no. 118 (26 December 1735) and Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, p. 356.

<sup>59</sup> On this point see Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passions. Studies in the Science of Acting*, Anna Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp. 79-81. On Quintilian's procedure and its use in the treatises see C. Vicentini, 'Theory of Acting V. The Birth of Emotionalism', *Acting Archives Essays*, AAR Supplement 5, April 2011, pp. 12-13.

the speech’, so that whatever words are pronounced ‘his voice shall sound nothing but tenderness’.<sup>60</sup> If the process is correctly set up, any error is out of the question and the exact and effective command of expressions, in principle, guaranteed; the actor has only to recognize the passions as they appear in his lines, and carefully distinguish subtle, moment-by-moment changes.<sup>61</sup>

Indispensable at this point is a systematic table of the passions, which Hill is at pains to provide, illustrating them and listing their components in various of his writings. *The Prompter* explains that there are six main dramatic passions which can be ‘strongly expressed’: joy, sorrow, fear, scorn, anger and amazement, each with its own expressive signature. There follows a series of ‘auxiliary’ passions such as jealousy, revenge, love and pity, produced through a combination of the six main ones. Jealousy, for example, is a mixture of fear, scorn and anger; love combines joy tempered by fear, etc.<sup>62</sup>

Subsequently, shame is added in the eighty lines of *The Actor’s Epitome* and finally, in *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, the dramatic passions become ten: joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder and love, all principal passions, each with its own set of distinctive characteristics.<sup>63</sup> The expression of joy, for example, requires the forehead to be ‘open and raised, his eyes smiling, his neck stretched and erect, his breast inflated and majestically backed’.<sup>64</sup> The characteristics of all ten passions and derivatives are painstakingly described in the ‘applications’ which constitute the body of the *Essay*.

What re-emerges, then, is the rather unwieldy presence of a pre-established expressive code to be learnt by heart. Certainly, the basic principle of acting remains the initial act of imagination: no actor wishing to express joy, Hill admonishes, must ‘upon any account’ attempt ‘the utterance of one single word till he has first compelled his fancy to conceive an idea of joy’.<sup>65</sup> Command of the code, however, is necessary for the outcome. Once his imagination had done its job and he assumed the required expression, ‘naturally’, the actor should stand in front of a mirror. If the position and aspect of the forehead, neck, chest, arms and the rest of the body fail to correspond to expectation, then ‘he has too faintly conceived the impression’.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, knowledge of the code ends up by influencing the inner workings of the expressive process, greatly to the actor’s benefit. The attitude assumed externally, Hill writes in a letter of 1733, not only influences the emotive reactions of the audience, but is a two-way process, and ‘actually warm[s] the player himself, into a real feeling of the passions he is acting’.<sup>67</sup> While he fails to draw all the possible conclusions from this, Hill formulates some useful advice to obviate a possible lack of the imagination. When this is not sufficiently ‘ductile’ to conjure up a strong impression, the actor may help his defective

<sup>60</sup> *The Prompter*, no. 66 (27 June 1735).

<sup>61</sup> Hill had assigned his nephew, neither the most experienced nor the most gifted of actors, the part of Osman in his tragedy *Zara*, staged at Drury Lane in January 1836. For all his uncle’s coaching the results were less than exhilarating and after the first night the would-be actor declined the role, which was read by a series of stand-ins until a new actor could learn it. For accounts of the young actor’s performance see the *London Daily Advertiser*, 14 January 1736; *The Prompter*, no. 129 (3 February 1736) and no. 130 (6 February 1736); and the *Grub-Street Journal*, 1 April 1736 and 9 September 1736.

<sup>62</sup> *The Prompter*, no. 66 (27 June 1735).

<sup>63</sup> Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, p. 357.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 360-361.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 359-360.

<sup>67</sup> Aaron Hill, Letter to Marshall, the actor (October 24, 1733), in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill*, I, p. 158.

idea, ‘by annexing, at once, the look to the idea, in the very instant, while he is bracing his nerves into springiness: for so, the image, the look, and the muscles, all concurring, at once, to the purpose, their effect will be the same, as if each had succeeded another, progressively’.<sup>68</sup>

All the more reason, then, for the actor to be able to reproduce the different passions ‘in cold blood’ as it were, with the assistance, again, of practice and a mirror. Even the best of actors should effect a mirror test at least once, Hill writes in a letter to Garrick, and should practise ‘till he has attain’d the habit, by ten great changes in his brow and muscles, to call out upon a moment’s warning, any picture of the passions’.<sup>69</sup>

So far so feasible: but the actor must also be careful not to possess over-delicate muscles and facial features, which an audience could hardly perceive at a distance, or dark eyes, the varied expressions of which would similarly not project from far-off in the candlelight.<sup>70</sup> However with marked features, robust muscles and blue or brown eyes, the actor should have no problem properly rendering the passions his part demands – as long, of course, as he is able to distinguish them in the first place and memorize them faultlessly. Here, too, Hill has a method. His advice to Garrick was to mark the script in red and black beside his lines, put a progressive number in the margin, then transfer the numbers into a notebook, with related passions, poses, pauses and various aspects of delivery generally from which he could recreate the performance thereafter.<sup>71</sup>

In the case of other actors Hill was happy to offer the service personally. In 1733 he offered the leading man of John Banks’s *The Unhappy Favorite* help with the script by inserting a series slips listing all required passions clearly marked, an offer he repeated for *Hamlet*.<sup>72</sup> Susannah Cibber was apparently coached in the same way for her leading role in Hill’s *Zara*, staged at Drury Lane in February 1736.

In short, then, armed with a script marked passion by passion in red and black; trained in the stimulus-response mechanism linking the imagination with the facial and bodily muscles, the outcome of which has been duly verified in a mirror; groomed to produce, at the drop of a hat, the ten movements of the facial muscles which would elicit the required expression, and endowed with well-defined features, including the requisite eye-colour, clearly visible from the back rows, the actor is finally ready to tread the boards with some hope of success. The system is hardly one to leave space for creativity. Paradoxically, however, it was elaborated as a short-cut to the same results as those produced by the more direct method of the emotionalist acting technique.

#### **4. Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s Treatise**

The emotionalist theory reached full expression in mid-century in the work of Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, journalist, playwright and chief editor of the *Mercure de France*, his *Le Comédien*, published in 1747, was destined to become a compulsory touchstone in the whole European debate on the art of the stage.

The treatise had been preannounced by the publication of its *Préface* in the *Mercure* (October, 1745). The following issue contained the *Introduction*, the first part of the first

<sup>68</sup> Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, pp. 361-362.

<sup>69</sup> Aaron Hill, Letter to Garrick (August 3, 1749), in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill*, II, pp. 378-379.

<sup>70</sup> See *The Prompter*, no. 66 (27 June 1735).

<sup>71</sup> See Aaron Hill, Letter to Garrick (August 3, 1749), p. 384.

<sup>72</sup> See Aaron Hill, Letter to Marshall (October 24, 1733), p. 156.

book (*Des principaux avantages que les Comédiens doivent tenir de la Nature*) and the two chapters which were indicated as the third chapter of book one and the second of book two. When the work was finally published in November 1747, however, the paper was at pains to underline that the previously published excerpts had been considerably revised.

The treatise was in two parts, besides the *Préface* and *Introduction*: the first divided into two books (thirteen chapters in all and two *Réflexions* in appendix to the first book) and the second into nineteen chapters, the last acting as conclusion. A second, expanded edition came out in 1749, with an *Avertissement de l'Auteur*, three new chapters and a totally revised conclusion.<sup>73</sup>

Riccoboni's influence is very evident. It is improbable of course that Rémond de Sainte-Albine actually knew *L'arte rappresentativa*, but they share a number of issues. Like Riccoboni he deplores the lack of a theory of acting, underlines the need for one, offers his own text as the first tentative but bold attempt, ignores any link with oratory, avoids any mention of gestures and expressions defined by a pre-established code, puts emotional empathy at the centre of interpretation, and envisages technique for solving specific problems and fine-tuning details of expression.<sup>74</sup> In parallel with Riccoboni's conceptual substructure operate the notions expounded by d'Aiguebierre on the subject, *esprit*, *feu* and *sentiment*, which Rémond de Sainte-Albine discusses at the very beginning of his treatise before treating a series of questions which are now the base-line of the critical tradition, such as the differences between comic and tragic acting, or exploiting an actor's specific gifts when casting.

The theory of acting expounded in the *Comédien* follows d'Aiguebierre's line in considering it a typically intellectual discipline, at some remove from the actors' practical experience and any immediate accounts they might give. It is far from the case, Rémond de Sainte-Albine states, that to write about an art one should be able to practise it; and then, an actor's comments on his trade are suspect to say the least: few of them would claim the need for any quality they themselves did not happen to possess.<sup>75</sup> What the treatise claims to be is a study of the qualities required for acting, with a distinction between 'natural' or innate qualities and technical skills or 'tools' to be acquired through study and practice. Both are indispensable: only nature can provide the raw materials of an actor, while only art can develop and polish them.<sup>76</sup>

The natural qualities include both outer and inner gifts. The former concern above all voice and appearance, which have to suit the character and have marked features visible from a distance.<sup>77</sup> Although the character is always to be conceived as an ideal figure, never identical to any actual human, the actor must possess characteristics which are more or less compatible with the image to be portrayed.<sup>78</sup> The voice, then, for example, must be

---

<sup>73</sup> Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Le Comédien. Ouvrage divisé en deux parties. Par M. Rémond de Sainte Albine*, Paris, Desaint & Saillant et Vincent fils, 1747. Second edition: *Le Comédien. Ouvrage divisé en deux parties. Par M. Rémond de Sainte Albine. Nouvelle édition, Augmentée et corrigée*, Paris, Vincent Fils, 1749. There also exist copies containing the frontispiece of the second edition but with the printed pages of the first: probably a publishing ruse to use up the remainders. The Slatkine anastatic edition reproduces this latter (Genève, 1971). The present work has used the second edition.

<sup>74</sup> On Luigi Riccoboni's emotionalist theory see C. Vicentini, 'Theory of Acting V. The Birth of Emotionalism', 19-27.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Le Comédien*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>78</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 52-63 and p. 121.

variously strong, weak, light, or flexible according to the part played, while an impressive appearance will better suit tragic heroes, an attractive and personable appearance the part of a lover, etc. In general no actor should play a character not suiting his own physiognomy.<sup>79</sup>

This inevitably feeds into the question of older actors and actresses who are still obstinately attached to roles of adolescents. Rémond de Sainte-Albine admits that the results can be embarrassing but fails to condemn it outright, explaining that youthfulness can be expressed in other ways than appearance alone, and that a truly gifted actor can, within limits, overcome the age-limit with results that can be more than adequate:

It is not sufficient to present Iphigenia devoid of wrinkles and Britannicus devoid of grey hairs. The princess and prince must be exhibited to us with all the charms of youth. Actors who are older than their characters are able to produce a yet more pleasing effect by uniting the art of acting well their parts with that of eliminating the difference in age. And the more shall we appreciate them, since they procure for us the pleasure of a double illusion.<sup>80</sup>

The character as projected, then, is a construction of the actor's physical appearance combined with his behaviour, gestures and bodily movements in performance: all forms of expression able to condition audience perception of the actor's natural traits.

Essential to the expressive forms which comprise the projection of a character however are inner qualities, equally innate and natural. First among these is the ability to fully penetrate the work. The actor, Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes, must of course completely understand the script; but beyond this, he must grasp the requirements and full potential of its staging. He must make the script tell him when the acting should become impassioned, to what degree, the indispensable nuances and shifts of tempo, the points where one state of mind morphs into another (fear into anger, for example), and of course the variations in the character's tone and action in relation to the changing scene-by-scene situation. Hence the requirement for natural *esprit*, which directs the performance as 'a pilot' guides 'a ship'. Experience is not enough: the most expert actor, if he lacks *esprit*, shipwrecks on the rocks of error and contradiction.<sup>81</sup>

Once the actor has touched the nerve of the part, with the help of *esprit*, another gift is then required to enact it: *sentiment*, i.e. the 'ability to feel in one's own soul the passions to which man is susceptible', associated with the gift of 'moving rapidly from one passion to the next'. In the course of the same play – or even of the same scene – the actor is obliged to act out 'an infinity of impressions', 'the one immediately expelling the other, to be expelled in its turn by a third'; and unless the actor actually feels the emotion, he can never offer more than an 'imperfect' image. 'Art', Rémond de Sainte-Albine sentences, is never able to replace *sentiment*. Without this, all the actor's other gifts are in vain and he 'remains as detached from his character as is the mask from the face'.<sup>82</sup> The passions should be present and 'real' in his soul: the retrieved memory alone will never suffice.

---

<sup>79</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 110-116, pp. 117-124 and p. 196.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126. This is an ability possessed more by actresses than actors, Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes: an actress towards the end of her career can still create the impression of a young girl on stage (p. 127). This should never be abused, he adds: however gifted, no actor/actress is completely acceptable when the gap between their face and the age of the character is too wide (see also pp. 74-77 and pp. 126-127).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-27.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-36.

The memory of past impressions is not enough to render them again to us [...] To produce this effect, it is necessary that the objects appear to us as they then were, yet we have not the same eyes still.<sup>83</sup>

The actor's *sentiment* remains inert, however, unless animated by *feu*, this inner energy which galvanizes the expressive potential of the emotive condition. Passion is indispensable, naturally, but constitutes an inner state which is only externalized by the actor's living *feu*. '*Feu*', writes Rémond de Sainte-Albine, 'is for *sentiment* what a draft is for a flame'.<sup>84</sup>

These three essential inner qualities, *esprit*, *sentiment* and *feu*, correspond of course to the cardinal notions d'Aigueberre applies to analyze an actor's performance. The *Comédien* however is very specific, using them as technical terms and removing the ambiguity which in d'Aigueberre seems still to be linking *esprit* to the sometimes stultifying efforts of intellectual exercise, and *feu* to a kind of vivacity unsuited to the part. For Rémond de Sainte-Albine, on the other hand, they constitute gifts which are absolute, essential and specific components of acting; they can never come into conflict or be wrongly applied. Thus unlike d'Aigueberre, he maintains that the use of *esprit* can never be 'excessive', and potentially misleading, nor *feu* so intense as to reduce the actor's ability to 'feel'. As long as *feu* is not confused with expressive 'vehemence' and agitation producing unseemly excess, but is properly interpreted as energy creating impressions which are 'immediate' and 'vital', then an actor can never be accused of having too much, Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes, since 'the impression can never be too immediate, nor too vital'.<sup>85</sup>

The performance is effective, then, when the three interior gifts, all equally necessary and perfectly compatible, converge. From this point of view *sentiment* has no special status, a fact which might undermine the reading of the *Comédien* as the fundamental emotionalist text, although two famous pronouncements by Rémond de Saite-Albine are adduced in support of it: 'art can never replace *sentiment*' and 'when an actor is devoid of such quality all other gifts of nature and of application are for him as nothing'.<sup>86</sup> These, however, were general, canonical observations of the period and contain nothing which is specifically emotionalist.

The *Comédien*'s emotionalist slant emerges in other ways, most significantly in two passages emphasizing the role of *sentiment*. It is by actually experiencing the passions to be expressed, Rémond de Sainte-Albine explains, that the actor finds the 'measure' to enable him to avoid excess.

It is necessary that the passions be depicted vividly on the face of the actor. Yet must they not be distorted [...] We may at least and with reason demand that anger be not represented by convulsions, or affliction made to seem fearful instead of interesting. These errors are habitually incurred when we are not truly irritated or moved as the situation or the character requires. Do you strongly feel any one of these impressions? They will show effortlessly in your eyes.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>85</sup> See Jean Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Seconde Lettre*, pp. 21-22, p. 24 and p. 43; and Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Le Comédien*, pp. 44-47.

<sup>86</sup> Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Le Comédien*, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 148-149.



This empathy or involvement then not only spontaneously models the actor's features, but ensures that expressions are correctly rendered onstage, with the right degree of intensity. In a second passage, reflecting on the actor's need for *esprit*, and considering the cases of famous actors who instead appeared to possess only 'instinct and *sentiment*', Rémond de Sainte-Albine concedes that 'in extremely sensitive souls, *sentiment* can at times become *esprit*'.<sup>88</sup> And although this only happens in extreme cases, *sentiment* at its maximum potential takes over the functions normally supplied by another essential acting component. An actor deficient in *sentiment*, however much *esprit* he may possess, can never produce a satisfactory performance, although the opposite is not true.

The two passages, certainly, do no more than hint at the *Comédien*'s emotionalism, which emerges far more directly in a very different way, constituting the turning-point in the development of emotionalism and laying the foundations for the entire modern conception of acting. Until Rémond de Sainte-Albine, emphasis had essentially been on the correspondence between the actor's *external* features – physiognomy, carriage, gestures and movements – and the figure of the character, the actions to be performed and the expressions to be assumed. Character typology rigorously dictated the *physical* requisites of the actor and corresponding behaviour: tragic characters required imposing and dignified actors, their movements intense and solemn; lovers in comedies required graceful and pleasing interpreters, etc. What Rémond de Sainte-Albine does is to apply the same principle to the inner actor, which must correspond to the inner nature of the character: it is this which constitutes the essential and revolutionary principle of the *Comédien*. The metamorphosis demanded of the actor to turn himself into the character no longer regards appearance alone, but the whole of his inner world. Two consequences derive, in part contradictory. On the one hand, where once actors like Garrick were appreciated for being able to take on the somatic and behavioral features of the character to such extent as to be unrecognisable, they were now required to transform their inner selves and reconfigure all their natural predispositions. The actor must have the gift of 'bending' their nature, transforming it unresistingly, like 'melted wax', into very different characters and personalities. If you are unable to undergo 'these metamorphoses', Rémond de Sainte-Albine warns, 'do not venture onto the stage'.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, the actor's psychological inclinations can be a significant help in interpreting particular character-types, just as his physical features, according to traditional doctrine, may be particularly suited to the external figure of a king but not a confidante, a mischievous maid rather than a sage widow, etc. To play a tragic hero the actor must possess 'an elevated soul',<sup>90</sup> and only those 'born to love' can play the role of lovers,<sup>91</sup> while to play a comic part the actor must be naturally predisposed to 'gaiety of temper': it would be too great a risk for an actor 'born serious of character'.<sup>92</sup>

This opens up a new exploration of the world of the passions and their enactment. Rémond de Sainte-Albine starts from the habitual binary opposition of tragedy and comedy. Tragedy requires a restricted range of passions:

---

<sup>88</sup> Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Avertissement de l'auteur sur la seconde édition*. Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 85 and p. 255.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 79 and p. 82.

The majesty of tragedy allows [the actor] to concern himself only with weighty actions, so that he is constantly obliged to furnish the forces most able to enact them. Principal of these are love, hate, and ambition. Thus works of tragedy offer little beyond tender lovers who are like to bathe with tears the road leading to the end of their ills; generous avengers who seek to appease parental hands or restore liberty to their homelands [...] famous criminals who trample over the most sacred duties to ascend a throne from which they in their turn will soon precipitate.<sup>93</sup>

These passions are limited not only in number but in nature, and tend to conform to the expectations of tragedy by becoming generally ‘violent and melancholy’.<sup>94</sup> The tragic paradigm, then, requires of the actor not so much the representation of varied states of mind as the ability to immerse himself with particular force and intensity in the feeling to be expressed.<sup>95</sup> The intensity of this empathy elicits a like intensity in the audience: it is in interpreting tragedy that actors are turned into ‘sovereigns who dominate our souls as absolute lords’.<sup>96</sup>

This is not the only aspect to condition audience-response however, which also depends on the quality of the passion manifested. The most contagious is sadness, which operates like ‘an endemic disease, the progress of which is as rapid as it is astonishing’. Other passions are less effective. We remain perfectly untroubled, Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes, when observing anger and serious before expressions of great joy.<sup>97</sup>

The study of character-identification follows two parameters then: the intensity of the actor’s empathy and the properties of the passion expressed. The situation becomes more complex in the case of comedy. Here the actor’s natural inclinations are paramount; not only must he possess ‘gaiety of temper’ but with an extrovert’s wish to enjoy himself and be applauded.

When an actor plays a comic character without enjoying himself, he has the air of a mercenary who plies the trade of actor for lack of other resources. Conversely, when he shares the enjoyment of his audience, he is almost always certain to please. Gaiety is the true Apollo of the comic actor.<sup>98</sup>

With this premise as ground rule, the comic actor must also be able to produce a far greater variety of emotions, if not with the intensity required of the tragic actor, certainly with considerably more speed, often changing his state of mind from one line to the next.<sup>99</sup> There also exists a passion which more than any other demands full and immediate involvement: love. If the other passions reveal themselves in facial expression, ‘creating as it were an alteration of the features’, love ‘confers on the physiognomy a kind of beauty, and corrects its blemishes’. Consequently, it is possible to imitate the other passions ‘in cold blood’, albeit imperfectly, but not the ‘sweet inebriation’ of being in love: so that those acting a love scene must actually feel mutual attraction, if only momentarily. This is the

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>95</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>99</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

reason why when, as often in comic plots, the male part in a love scene is played by a woman in disguise, the result is uninspiring and ‘insipid’.<sup>100</sup>

### 5. *The Functions of Technique*

Having dealt with the actor’s natural qualities, from physical features to the use of *esprit*, *sentiment* and *feu*, the whole second part of the *Comédien* looks at the technical skills to be developed with training and experience. Luigi Riccoboni had opined that technique became necessary when the actor had to impersonate a character too remote from his own personality, or if his empathy failed and theatrical sensitivity failed him. It was also required for silent acting, in by-play, or when a split reaction was called for, one for the audience and another for the stage partner (fake tears). It also conferred some of the elegance to meet the aesthetic requirements of the part and translate them into theatrical terms, with the requisite traits and expressions.

Similar considerations return in the *Comédien*. The actor relies on technique for silent actions in by-play,<sup>101</sup> or when more than one attitude is required at the same time:

Divers parts require yet more delicate treatment. These are those in which, while the character is moved by two different interests, the actor must needs exhibit to the audience an attitude at variance with that manifested to the characters acting with him.<sup>102</sup>

For Rémond de Sainte-Albine, too, technique assists with aesthetic requirements: the character must resemble people of his condition, but must resemble them ‘for the better’, which calls for the ability to render ‘nature elegant even in her defects’.<sup>103</sup> An interpretation which restricted itself to an exact imitation of nature would, in any case, appear ‘insipid’, so the actor should slightly over-emphasize some aspects of the character.<sup>104</sup> Another function of technique is to prepare and regulate the different emotional states as they appear throughout the scene, and the passage from one to the other.<sup>105</sup>

Technique in the *Comédien* also has a very different and considerably more fundamental function however. Technique alone will enable to actor to meet the dramaturgic requirements of his role: suiting the character’s behaviour to ‘his age, his condition, his character, and his situation’ and his actions ‘to what he would or should do in each of the circumstances in which the playwright places him’.<sup>106</sup> It is also through technique that the actor fine-hones the expression of feelings, varying them from character to character:

As actor intending to represent the effects of a passion should never, if acting truthfully, content himself with assuming those movements which the passion elicits equally in all men. It must take that specific form which distinguishes it in the subject whom the interpreter would copy.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 103-106.

<sup>101</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 296 and pp. 301-305.

<sup>104</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 216-226.

<sup>105</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 197-198, p. 202 and p. 207.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., pp. 136-139.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

Although emotional empathy produces the immediate expression of a *sentiment*, a feeling, it remains in a general form, Rémond de Sainte-Albine seems to suggest; technique must then differentiate it according to the characteristics of the part. An actress playing Phèdre, maddened by love, can call up and recite the requisite motions of the passion, but only technique can make it Phèdre's passion, suited to her age, condition and situation, through meticulous study of the various typologies of age, character, condition and nationality:

In a young person love flares out in impetuous transports, but in an old one is like to contain itself with circumspection and greater regard. A high-ranking person will give to his regrets, his laments, his threats, a greater discretion and lesser impetus than an individual devoid of birth and upbringing. The affliction at the loss of some treasure will show itself on the face of a miser in more vivid colours than on the face of a generous man, and a proud person will blush in quite other way than a modest person.<sup>108</sup>

The stage would benefit greatly if actors attempted to study not merely differences of the kind, but those which distinguish the manners of men of different centuries and different countries. Generally, in our theatres Egyptians, Parthians, Germans, all have a French air.<sup>109</sup>

The premise behind all the applications of technique to character and the passions is critical acumen regarding the text. To exercise his technical skills the actor must first have applied the closest of readings of inferencing, ambiguity and intratextuality, since the text for Rémond de Sainte-Albine is a grid of indications from which other elements can be deduced, all perfectly consistent and necessary, but as yet unexpressed.<sup>110</sup> Even the most meticulous writer 'is unable to think of everything'. This can derive from stylistic difficulties: the rhythm and metre may prevent him from 'saying all that he feels', and a missing word may come between a large section of the public and the subtlety of an idea, unless the actor 'helps them to discover it'.<sup>111</sup> Above all, the truly outstanding interpreter is able to 'represent sentiments not expressed in the words of the text, yet consonant with the personality and situation of the character'. What 'is missing from the dialogue' is thus supplemented 'by the acting'.<sup>112</sup> An inflection, or variation in pronunciation of the words in a line, can tease out an aspect which is simply implicit in the text, while meticulously studied actions can complete the characterization of a part, or take it to a higher level of perfection.<sup>113</sup> Rémond de Sainte-Albine gives the following examples.

You must represent a miser? Two candles are burning in the room. Naturally he must extinguish one. You must represent one who would be thought generous? He is forced to make a donation, and happens to drop some coins. He must pick them up and hurriedly put them into his purse.<sup>114</sup>

The actor's technique, however, goes beyond assistance in fleshing out and perfecting the work: it must also correct the defects. Technique can shorten an over-long and tedious

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>110</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>113</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 232, p. 267 and pp. 270-273.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

speech by passing over parts of it very rapidly and then stressing the next lines.<sup>115</sup> A pompous and over-wrought speech can be reduced to a semblance of greater directness and simplicity if delivered in a subdued, unemphatic tone, and textual inadequacy or redundancy in a particularly intense and tragic scene can be compensated through a studiously emphatic and significant delivery.<sup>116</sup> In Rémond de Sainte-Albine's opinion 'that error must be marked indeed which cannot be concealed'.<sup>117</sup>

They are, however, numerous: and at this point the actor's jurisdiction extends to direct action. Where necessary he may cut, even in the case of classics, such as in a number of Corneille's plays, which contain obsolete expressions. Better to excise a line, Rémond de Sainte-Albine opines, than expose it to a public which would find it ridiculous. But more drastic intervention might be called for, requiring the cutting of 'a great number of empty declamations which make the scene drag, and weary the spectators' or in some cases even excising a whole character.<sup>118</sup> The actor's task might even extend to employing 'a poet' to 'correct several speeches which are faulty but necessary' and 'to cut dialogues at points where a character must naturally be interrupted by his interlocutor'.<sup>119</sup>

For the *Comédien*, then, acting has taken a further step in being not only totally emancipated from oratory, but a directly creative activity in its own right. An interpreter in a more complete sense of the word, the actor assumes full responsibility for the character, from script to stage: interpreting the text, extrapolating its scenic potential, empathising with the role authentically and precisely, projecting it with direct energy and perfecting it with all the resources of an informed and systematic technique. He must never, Rémond de Sainte-Albine writes, 'be content to follow the author faithfully', 'like an automaton', or to 'execute' rather than 'create', but must use all proper means to become 'an author himself'.<sup>120</sup>

Study, practice and technique, far from being superfluous in this theoretical framework, are indispensable if the actor is to put this potential creativity onto the stage. What the *Comédien* depicts is actually the activating of several functions resulting from the strict co-ordination of natural qualities and acquired abilities. At the centre is *sentiment*, the dynamic impetus behind the whole acting process, directed by *esprit* and animated by *feu*. Together they draw on this co-ordination of qualities and abilities to perfect the rendering of the character and the final enactment.

## 6. *The Problems of Emotionalism*

A series of issues derive from Rémond de Sainte-Albine's intricate meshing of capabilities and were destined to underscore the whole debate on emotionalism in following decades. The first was a very obvious objection. Emotionalism bases acting on real feelings, and argues the impossibility of a convincing performance without them. Yet in real life, he argues, it is far from difficult to successfully communicate a faked emotion, citing the many actresses who fake for their lovers transports they are far from feeling. If these actresses are so skilled in private, it is feasible to presume they would perform equally

---

<sup>115</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 243 and p. 246.

<sup>116</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22 and p. 27.

well on stage, before a wider audience. Rémond de Sainte-Albine demurs with disarming logic. It is *amour propre* which makes the lover complicitous: love, apparently, is in the eye of the beholder, and the eye of a man who wishes to be deceived would be taken in by the most ham performance. In the theatre, on the other hand, the spectator observes the actress with a critical eye and considers it a point of honour not to cede to easy expressions of cheap emotion.<sup>121</sup>

There also exists the opposite problem: that the actor will project his own feelings instead of empathising with those of the character. This is particularly likely when the character presents conflicting emotions, as happens with Chimène in *Le Cid*, torn between love of the hero and anguish at the death of the father whom he has killed. Here it is easy for the actress to make the mistake of oversimplifying the situation by manifesting only one state of mind: the one which would come most naturally to *her*, were she to find herself in the same position.

Hitherto few actresses have made Chimène speak with her own tone of voice. In playing the part, some have privileged over-much love with regard to the natural sentiments, while others have privileged the natural sentiments over love. Chimène in their mouths has been only a woman in love, or not sufficiently so. In accordance with whether, in the selfsame situation, these interpreters would yield more to the passion for their lover, or to the tender respect for the memory of a father killed by that lover, do they make of their heroine an unnatural daughter or a cold mistress, in whom reflection regulates all the motions of the heart.<sup>122</sup>

Personal feelings, then, can be an obstacle for an actor projecting the whole of their emotional sphere onto the inner world of the character. In particular, every residual emotion not required for the part to be played can constitute a problem, and compromise the performance. This is equally true of reactions, negative or positive, to the events of daily life, which the emotionalist actor must suppress during his performance, exercising total control over his state of mind – no easy matter for an actor whose job-description requires an acute sensibility.

A man or woman of the theatre may not be too careful to ensure that events which occur, whether happy or unhappy, have the least effect possible on him or her. When they are too sensitive to the slightest motion of affliction or of happiness procured by private matters, then seldom will they seriously abandon themselves to the diverse impressions demanded by the part. With difficulty will they succeed in banishing the sentiment produced by personal affairs to take on those of the character.<sup>123</sup>

If, however, it is necessary to ‘banish’ any emotion extraneous to the part, it is indispensable to draw on all one’s inner emotional reserves which are cognate with the character. The ‘elevated soul’, ‘predisposition to happiness’, or ‘predisposition to love’, mandatory for the interpreters of tragedies, comedies and lovers’ parts, are all irreplaceable gifts in an actor, whose personal characteristics constitute the basis from which to steadily identify with the character. The consequences are immediately clear. An actor can only give a superlative performance in parts ‘which have the closest possible relation to his

---

<sup>121</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

character'.<sup>124</sup> His repertoire, then, is considerably restricted, in theory, reducing itself, if not to one single character, certainly to a very limited range:

it is necessary to conclude that a perfect performance may only be enjoyed only if almost as many [different] actors are available not only for each type of work, but also for each particular type of part. It is lamented that excellent actors, reciting an infinity of different parts to meet the needs of the theatre, fail at times to give convincing performances. We should conversely be astounded that, incessantly obliged as they are to study new parts, they should ever succeed in acting so well such a large number.<sup>125</sup>

Rémond de Sainte-Albine is also aware of another question which was to prove relevant to succeeding debates: the “mobility” of the performance founded on emotional involvement. The actor who expresses truly-experienced feelings will never reproduce exactly the same performance in repeats. The inner sentiments evoked by the actor can never be completely stable and identical from night to night, and the intonation, movements and gestures dictated by the sentiments will equally vary.

This he considers an undoubted merit. It is not enough, he writes, ‘for the actors to change their performance when acting different but similar parts: they must equally change the performance when acting the same part’. It is precisely the lack of attention given to this matter which constitutes ‘one of the principle causes of our repugnance at seeing the same work on several successive occasions’. Emotionalist procedures, on the other hand, guard against this very monotony:

nothing is more insupportable than the constant habit actors have of utilizing the same inflections, gestures, and attitudes at the same moments [in the play]; it were as well to observe the return of the same movement at the same instant in a clock [...] Men of the theatre are wont to be so uniform since they recite more from memory than from *sentiment*. When an actor who possesses *feu* is absorbed into the situation; when he has the gift of transforming himself into the character, he has no need of study to change. While obliged, in playing the same part, to appear the same person, yet does he find the way to appear ever new.<sup>126</sup>

There remain two further passages in the *Comédien* which touch on central issues in emotionalist theory. The first concerns the evil character, the ‘baddy’, or at least the part which runs the risk of compromising the actor playing it. Colley Cibber had already noted how difficult it was for Samuel Sandford, an excellent interpreter of villains, to earn the applause of the public. Luigi Riccoboni had taken the vilest possible figure, that of the devil, as example of a character with which the actor would be unable to identify, and would therefore have to pretend. Rémond de Sainte-Albine merely glances at the issue, citing the figure of a ‘cruel’ character which a skilful actor would still be able to render, albeit ‘imperfectly’, without empathy. The problem however remains. It would seem to be impossible to identify with the whole category of vile and villainous characters who tread the boards of theatres. All the actor can do is resort to his ‘art’.

The second observation, conversely, concerns comic characters. We have seen that the actor is expected to have difficulty here unless animated by high spirits and a love of applause: but it is not necessary for his enjoyment to show in the expression of the

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., pp. 323-324.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 293-294.

character. It is ‘in the performance’ of the actors, ‘and not on their faces’ that we expect to perceive the high spirits generated by the part, Rémond de Sainte-Albine insists:

In the theatre a sad physiognomy is brooked with difficulty. Yet an actor who proposes to cheer us often appears more comic when trying to be serious. I would say to tragic actors, *weep if you would wish that I weep*. And to the other I would say, *laugh but rarely, if you would that I laughed*.<sup>127</sup>

A short-fall is realized, then, between the actor’s inner attitude and the character’s final expression. Two possibilities result from this and were to be explored, not without some difficulty, in the treatises of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The first is to recognize that the actor’s inner disposition is articulated on different planes and levels, in a complexity of attitudes which variously influence the final creation of the figure represented. A basic attitude such as the pleasure and love of acting can be reflected in the whole stage presence of the actor, while the evocation of particular feelings and emotions can be projected into the single expressions of the character. The second possibility is simpler: to admit that the very nature of certain types of character elicits an unstated complicity between actor and spectator, as it were ‘behind the character’s back’. This means that complete identification is impossible and limits the ability to identify with the comic effects produced.<sup>128</sup>

There is one last question quietly underscoring the treatise: the problem of the characterization of the character’s feelings and expressions. The actor’s involvement produces the immediate expression of the necessary state of mind, but it is his technique which then refines it, differentiating it from part to part according to the characteristics of the category – moral, social, generational – to which it belongs.

At some points of the *Comédien*, however, the necessary distinctions would seem to exceed the divisions of the traditional typology. If the sentiment produced cannot be limited to general expressions (as it would appear in all human beings), then nor can it be reduced to those of a whole human category – old people, noblemen, misers, etc., alike. It must be unique and reflect all the singularity of one character.

It is this requirement which transpires from the reasons adduced against Du Bos’s proposal to fix the tones and tempos of theatrical declamation within one precise notation. There cannot be one ‘true tone’ per sentiment, Rémond de Sainte-Albine objects: every individual possesses their own ‘inflections’ to express impressions received. He then proceeds with a consideration that closely reflects the argument Riccoboni had expounded in the *Pensées sur la declamation*.

Without doubt the diverse inflections arising from the same impression have something in common, but necessarily vary according to the different organs, just as the accent of a nation varies infinitely in the various persons which comprise it. Moreover, these vary according to their different characters.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84.

<sup>128</sup> The most significant contribution here is an article by Charles Lamb, published in the *London Magazine* (August, 1825), under the title ‘Imperfect Dramatic Illusion’, later republished as *Stage Illusion* in Charles Lamb, *The Last Essays of Elia*, London, E. Moxon, 1833 (pp. 22-28). It is now included in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. by E. V. Lucas, 7 vols., London, Methuen, 1903-1905, II, *Elia and the Last Essays of Elia*, pp. 185-187.

<sup>129</sup> Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Le Comédien*, p. 159. On Luigi Riccoboni’s position in his *Pensées sur la déclamation* see C. Vicentini, ‘Theory of Acting V. The Birth of Emotionalism’, pp. 24-25.



It is impossible, then, to treat the art of declamation methodically, which would require ‘as many rules as there are diverse types of voice and different ways of feeling the same passion’.

It is nature which dictates those [forms of intonation] which are most suited, and it is only feeling which may teach the secrets of this eloquent magic of sounds, through which it is possible to excite in the listeners those movements with which it is desired they be agitated.<sup>130</sup>

The end result of the whole question comes with something of a surprise. The actor’s emotional empathy serves initially to produce a feeling in its general form, common to all humans. Technique subsequently characterizes it, modeling it according to the traits belonging to the single categories, of which the character is then an adequate representative. Only the living feeling within the actor, however, can go on to generate a further, more specific and customized expressivity which can produce that unique trait which is the unique hallmark of the single individual. A circle, then, emerges, containing two different potential processes of empathy: to render a feeling in its most generalized form, shared by all humanity, or at the opposite extreme, to “reduce” it to the unique singularity of individual expression.

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-162.