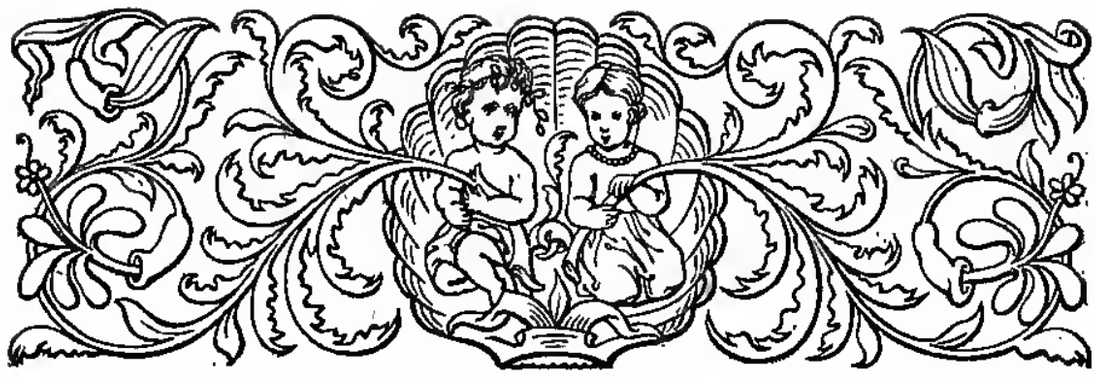
TALMA

ON

THE ACTOR'S ART.



PREFACE.

FEW things can be said about the stage at any time, which will not excite controversy; but I think one of the few is, that the influence of the drama to-day is wider than it ever was. There is a vast increase of playgoers; the intellectual interest in the stage is steadily growing; and there is a general conviction that the actor is placed in a position of trust which he cannot worthily fill without a strong sense of responsibility. Dramatic artists, as a rule, speak for themselves. Their work is constantly before the public, and it is judged on its merits. None the less is there a want of a permanent embodiment of the principles of our art; a kind of *vade mecum* of the actor's calling, written by one of themselves, and by an artist universally recognized as a competent expositor. Such a work, in my opinion, is Talma's Essay on the Actor's Art, the following translation of which was originally published in "The Theatre" of 1877 at my suggestion.

No one can read Talma's subtle yet simple description of the qualities and the course of study essential to the actor, without a conviction that acting is one of the most fascinating of the arts. To the actor the whole field of human nature is open. Whether in the ideal world of the stage or in the actual world of social intercourse, his

mind is continually accumulating impressions which become a part of his artistic being. This experience is common to the students of other arts, but the actor has this advantage, that all he learns is embodied in his own personality, not translated through some medium, like the painter's canvas or the novelist's page. At the same time, this purely personal art is subjected to the most severe tests. It is easier to detect a flaw in an actor's impersonation than an improbability in a book. The man enacts the character before many—a false intonation jars immediately upon the ear, an unnatural look or gesture is promptly convicted by the eye. The co-operation of sensibility and intelligence of which Talma speaks, has thus to be conducted under the most exacting conditions. There must be no suggestion of effort. The essence of acting is its apparent spontaneity. Perfect illusion is attained when every effect seems to be an accident. If the declamation is too measured, the sense of truth is at once impaired; if, on the other hand, it falls only the shadow of a shade below the level of appropriate expression, the auditor's sympathy is instantly checked. "The union of grandeur without pomp, and nature without triviality," is of all artistic ideals the most difficult to attain; and with this goal before him no actor can feel that his art is a plaything.

The end of all acting is "to hold the mirror up to Nature." Different actors have different methods, but that is their common purpose which can be accomplished only by the closest study and observation. Acting, like every other art, has a mechanism. No painter, however great his imaginative power, can succeed in pure ignorance of the technicalities of his art; and no actor can make much progress till he has mastered a certain mechanism which is within the scope of patient intelligence. Beyond that, is the sphere in which a magnetic personality exercises a power of sympathy which is irresistible and indefinable. That is great acting; but though it is inborn, and cannot be

taught, it can be brought forth only when the actor is master of the methods of his craft.

I am conscious that no words of mine can add any weight to the lessons which are set forth with such earnestness and brilliance in Talma's pages: but I venture to emphasize them by two golden rules. Let the student remember, first, that every sentence expresses a new thought, and therefore frequently demands a change of intonation; secondly, that the thought precedes the word. "The actor should have the art of thinking before he speaks." Of course there are passages in which thought and language are borne along by the stream of emotion, and completely intermingled. But more often it will be found that the most natural, the most seemingly accidental effects are obtained when the working of the mind is visible before the tongue gives it words.

HENRY IRVING.

22nd March, 1883.

TALMA ON THE ACTOR'S ART.

I HAVE no pretension to be an author: all my studies have been directed towards my calling, the object of which is to afford at once pleasure and instruction. Tragedy and Comedy, the one by the portraiture of virtue and crime, the other by the exposure of vice or folly, interest us, or make us laugh, while they correct and instruct. Associated with great authors, actors are to them more than translators. A translator adds nothing to the ideas of the author he translates. The actor, putting himself faithfully in the place of the personage he represents, should perfect the idea of the author of whom he is the interpreter. One of the greatest misfortunes of our art is, that it dies, as it were, with us, while all other artists leave behind them monuments of their works. The talent of the actor, when he has quitted this stage, exists no longer, except in the recollection of those who have seen and heard him. This consideration should impart additional weight to the writings, the reflections, and the lessons which great actors have left; and these writings may become still more useful if they are commented upon and discussed by actors who obtain celebrity in our day. Doubtless it is this motive which has induced the editors of the "Mémoires Dramatiques" to request me to add to the notice of Le Kain

some reflections on his talent and on the art which he illustrated.

Le Kain had no master. Every actor ought to be his own tutor. If he has not in himself the necessary faculties for expressing the passions, and painting characters, all the lessons in the world cannot give them to him. Genius is not acquired. This faculty of creating is born with us; but if the actor possesses it, the counsel of persons of taste may then guide him; and as there is in the art of reciting verse a part in some degree mechanical, the lessons of an actor profoundly versed in his art may save him much study and time.

Le Kain, from the commencement of his career, met with great success. His *début* lasted seventeen months. One day, after he had performed at Court, Louis XV. said, "This man has made me weep,—I, who never weep!" This illustrious suffrage procured his admission amongst the French actors. Before appearing with them he had acquired some reputation at private theatres. It was in one of these that Voltaire first saw and noticed him, and there commenced his connection with that great man.

The system of declamation then in vogue was a sort of sing-song psalmody, which had existed from the very birth of the theatre. Le Kain,—subjected, in spite of himself, to the influence of example,—felt the necessity of breaking his shackles, and the pedantic rules by which the theatre was bound. He dared to utter for the first time on the stage the true accents of nature. Filled with a strong and profound sensibility, and a burning and communicative energy, his action, at first impassioned and irregular, pleased the young, who were enchanted by his ardour and the warmth of his *début*, and, above all, were moved by the accents of his profoundly tragic voice. The amateurs of the ancient psalmody criticised him severely, nicknaming him "the bull." They did not find in him that pompous declamation, that chiming and measured declamation, in which a profound respect for

the cesura and the rhyme made the verses always fall in regular cadence. His march, his movements, his attitudes, his action had not that liveliness, those graces of our fathers, which then constituted a fine actor, and which the Marcels of the age taught to their pupils in initiating them in the beauties of the minuet. Le Kain, a plain plebeian, a workman in a goldsmith's shop, had not, it is true, been brought up on the laps of queens, as Baron said actors ought to be; but nature, a still more noble instructress, had undertaken the charge of revealing her secrets to him. In time he succeeded in overcoming the bad taste which his inexperience had at first naturally thrown into his acting. He learnt to master its vivacity and regulate its movements, yet he dared not at first entirely abandon the cadenced song which was then regarded as the beau ideal of the art of declamation, and which the actor preserved even in the burst of passion.

It was to this false taste that we must attribute the little progress which costume had made in the time of Le Kain. There is no doubt that he regarded fidelity in costume as a very important matter. We discover it in the efforts he made to render it less ridiculous than it was at that period. In fact, truth in the dresses, as in the decorations, contributes greatly to the theatrical illusion, and transports the spectator to the age and the country in which the personages represented lived. This fidelity, too, furnishes the actor with the means of giving a peculiar physiognomy to each of his characters. But a reason still more cogent makes me consider as highly culpable the actors who neglect this part of their art. The theatre ought to offer to youth in some measure a course of living history; and does not this negligence give him entirely false notions of the habits and manners of the personages whom the tragedy resuscitates? I remember well that in my early years, on reading history, my imagination always represented to itself the princes and the heroes whom I had seen at the theatre. I figured to

myself Bayard elegantly dressed in a chamois-coloured coat, without a beard, and powdered and frizzled like a *petit maître* of the eighteenth century. Cæsar I pictured to myself highly buttoned up in a fine white satin coat, his long, flowing locks fastened with rosettes of ribbon. If in those days an actor occasionally approximated to the antique dress, the simplicity of it was lost in a profusion of ridiculous embroidery, and I fancied that silks and velvets were as common at Athens and Rome as at Paris and London. Statues, monuments, and ancient MS. adorned with miniatures, existed then as well as now; but they were not consulted. It was the time of the Bouchers and the Vanloos, who took care not to follow the example of Raphael and Poussin in the arrangements of their draperies. It was only when David appeared that painters and sculptors, especially the younger of them, occupied themselves, under his inspiration, with these researches. Connected with most of them, and feeling the utility this study might have for the theatre, I applied myself to it with no common zeal; in my own way I became a painter. I had many obstacles and prejudices to overcome, but success at last crowned my efforts, and without fearing an accusation of presumption I may say that my example has had a great influence over all the theatres of Europe. Le Kain could not have surmounted so many difficulties; the time was not come. Would he have dared to risk naked arms, the antique sandals, hair without powder, long draperies, and woollen stuffs? Such a toilet would have been regarded as very offensive, not to say indecent. Le Kain did all that was possible; he advanced the first step, and what he dared to do emboldened us to do still more.

Actors ought at all times to take nature for a model, to make it the constant object of their studies. Le Kain felt that the brilliant colours of poetry served only to give more grandeur and majesty to the beauties of nature. He was not ignorant that persons deeply affected by the stronger passions, or overwhelmed with great grief, or violently agitated by great

political interests, have a more elevated and ideal language; but that this language is still that of nature. "It is, therefore, this nature—noble, animated, aggrandized, but at the same time simple—which ought to be the constant object of the studies of the actor, as well as of the poet." I have frequently heard persons of authority state that tragedy is not in nature, and this idea has been repeated without reflection until it has become a kind of maxim. The world, occupied with other objects, has not sufficiently studied all the workings of the passions. It judges too lightly, and indifferent authors and actors, who pay but little attention to their art, serve to accredit this error. But let us examine any of the impassioned or political characters of Corneille and Racine. How often their language is at once simple and elevated! How pathetic and natural is Voltaire when he is inspired by a passion! It is not the negligence and carelessness of a vulgar conversation that we find in the beautiful scenes of those great poets. It is the simple language, the aggrandized but exact expression, of nature itself. Let as examine from every point of view the exposition and *dénouement* of Rotrou's "Vauceslas," the fifth act of "Rodogune and Cinna," the part of Horatius, the scenes of "Agamemnon and Achille," the parts of Joad, Œdipe, the two Brutuses, César, the part of Phèdre, Andromaque, Hermione, &c. I defy any person to give them a finer or more natural form of expression. Take away the rhyme, and all these personages would have expressed themselves in the same manner as in real life. It is the same with some actors who have adorned the French stage, as Le Kain, Mdlle. Dumesnil, Molé, and Monvel. It was only by a faithful imitation of truth and nature that they succeeded in creating those powerful emotions in an enlightened nation which still exist in the recollection of those who heard them. It must, however, be confessed that, amongst the great actors of all countries, only a few have sought after this truth. Molière, and Shakspeare before him, had given excellent lessons to their brethren, the one in his "Impromptu de Versailles"

and the other in "Hamlet." How comes it, then, that in spite of the advice of these two great masters, and no doubt, of that of many of their contemporaries, the false system of pompous declamation has been established in almost all the theatres of Europe, and proclaimed as the sole type of theatrical imitation? It is because truth in all art is what is most difficult to find and seize. The statue of Minerva exists in the block of marble, but the chisel of Phidias alone can discover it. This faculty has been given to very few actors, and mediocrity, being in the majority, has laid down the law.

I may here be permitted to make an observation which has been suggested to me by the great event of the Revolution, for the violent crises of which I was a witness have often served me as a study. The man of the world and the man of the people, so opposite in their language, frequently express the great agitations of the mind in the same way. The one forgets his social manners, the other quits his vulgar fancies. The former descends to nature, the latter remounts to it. Each puts off the artificial man to become natural and true. The accent of each will be the same in the violence of the same passions or the same sorrows. Picture to yourself a mother intently looking on the empty cradle of a child she has just lost: a sort of stupidity in the features, a few tears flowing down her cheeks at distant intervals, piercing cries and convulsive sobs bursting forth from time to time, will represent the sorrow of a woman of the people the same as that of a duchess. Suppose, again, a man of the people and a man of the Court to have both fallen into a violent fit of jealousy or vengeance: these two men, so different in their habits, will be the same in their frenzy; they will present in their fury the same expression; their looks, their features, their actions, their attitudes, their movements will assume all at once a terrible, grand, and solemn character, worthy in both of the pencil of the painter and the study of the actor. And, perhaps, even the delirium

of passion may inspire the one as well as the other with one of those words,—one of those sublime expressions,—which the poet would conceive. The great movements of the soul elevate man to an ideal nature, in whatever rank fate may have placed him. The Revolution, which brought so many passions into play, has had popular orators who have astonished all by sublime traits of untutored eloquence, and by an expression and accent which Le Kain would not have been ashamed of.

"Le Kain felt that the art of declamation did not consist in reciting verse with more or less emphasis, and that this art might be made to impart a sort of reality to the fictions of the stage. To attain this end it is necessary that the actor should have received from nature an extreme sensibility and a profound intelligence, and Le Kain possessed these qualities in an eminent degree. Indeed, the strong impressions which actors create on the stage are the result only of the alliance of these two essential faculties. I must explain what I mean by this. To my mind, sensibility is not only that faculty which an actor possesses of being moved himself, and of affecting his being so far as to imprint on his features, and especially on his voice, that expression and those accents of sorrow which awake all the sympathies of the art and extort tears from auditors. I include in it the effect which it produces, the imagination of which it is the source,—not that imagination which consists in having reminiscences, so that the object seems actually present (this, properly speaking, is only memory), but that imagination which, creative, active, and powerful, consists in collecting in one single fictitious object the qualities of several real objects, which associates the actor with the inspirations of the poet, transports him back to the past, and enables him to look on at the lives of historical personages or the impassioned figures created by genius,—which reveals to him, as though by magic, their physiognomy, their heroic stature, their language, their habits, all the shades of their character, all the movements of their soul, and even their

singularities. I also call sensibility that faculty of exaltation which agitates an actor, takes possession of his senses, shakes even his very soul, and enables him to enter into the most tragic situations, and the most terrible of the passions, as if they were his own. The intelligence which accompanies sensibility judges the impressions which the latter has made us feel; it selects, arranges them, and subjects them to calculation. If sensibility furnishes the objects, the intelligence brings them into play. It aids us to direct the employment of our physical and intellectual forces,—to judge between the relations and connections which are between the poet and the situation or the character of the personages, and sometimes to add the shades that are wanting, or that language cannot express,—to complete, in fine, their expression by action and physiognomy.

It may be conceived that such a person must have received from nature a peculiar organization for sensibility, that common property of our being. Every one possesses it in a greater or less degree. But in the man whom nature has destined to paint the passions in their greatest excesses, to give them all their violence, and show them in all their delirium, one may perceive that it must have a much greater energy; and, as all our emotions are intimately connected with our nerves, the nervous system in the actor must be so mobile and plastic as to be moved by the inspirations of the poet as easily as the Æolian harp sounds with the least breath of air that touches it.

If the actor is not endowed with a sensibility at least equal to that of any of his audience he can move them but very little. It is only by an excess of sensibility that he can succeed in producing deep impressions, and move even the coldest souls. The power that raises must be greater than the power raised. This faculty ought ever to exist in the actor—I will not say greater or stronger than in the poet who conceived the movement of the soul reproduced on the stage—but more lively, more rapid, and more powerful. The

poet or the painter can wait for the moment of inspiration to write or to paint. In the actor, on the contrary, it must be commanded at any moment, at his will. That it may be sudden, lively, and prompt, he must possess an excess of sensibility. Nay, more, his intelligence must always be on the watch, and, acting in concert with his sensibility, regulate its movement and effects; for he cannot, like the painter and the poet, efface what he does."

"Therefore, between two persons destined for the stage, one possessing the extreme sensibility I have defined, and the other a profound intelligence, I would without question prefer the former. He might fall into some errors, but his sensibility would inspire him with those sublime movements which seize upon the spectator and carry delight to the heart. (The superior intelligence of the other would render him cold and regular.)" The one would go beyond your expectations and your ideas; the other would only accomplish them. "Your mind would be deeply stirred by the inspired actor; your judgment alone would be satisfied by the intelligent actor." The inspired actor will so associate you with the emotions he feels that he will not leave you even the liberty of judgment; the other, by his prudent and irreproachable acting, will leave your faculties at liberty to reason on the matter at your ease. The former will be the personage himself, the latter only an actor who represents that personage. Inspiration in the one will frequently supply the place of intelligence; in the other the combinations of intelligence will supply only feebly the absence of inspiration. To form a great actor, like Le Kain, the union of sensibility and intelligence is required.

"The actor who possesses this double gift adopts a course of study peculiar to himself. In the first place, by repeated exercises, he enters deeply into the emotions, and his speech acquires the accent proper to the situation of the personage he has to represent. This done, he goes to the theatre not only to give theatrical effect to his studies, but also to yield

himself to the spontaneous flashes of his sensibility and all the emotions which it involuntarily produces in him. What does he then do? In order that his inspirations may not be lost, his memory, in the silence of repose, recalls the accent of his voice, the expression of his features, his action—in a word, the spontaneous workings of his mind, which he had suffered to have free course, and, in effect, everything which in the moments of his exaltation contributed to the effect he had produced. His intelligence then passes all these means in review, connecting them and fixing them in his memory, to re-employ them at pleasure in succeeding representations. These impressions are often so evanescent that on retiring behind the scenes he must repeat to himself what he had been playing rather than what he had to play. By this kind of labour the intelligence accumulates and preserves all the creations of sensibility. It is by this means that at the end of twenty years (it requires at least this length of time) a person destined to display fine talent may at length present to the public a series of characters acted almost to perfection. Such was the course which Le Kain constantly took, and which must be taken by every one who has the ambition to excel on the stage. The whole of his life was devoted to this kind of study, and it was only during the last five or six years of his life, "between 1772 or 1773 and 1778," that he reaped its fruit. It was then that his fertile sensibility raised him to the tragic situations he had to paint, and his intelligence enabled him to display all the treasures he had amassed. It was then that his acting was fixed on such bases, and was so subservient to his will, that the same combinations and the same effect presented themselves without study. Accent, inflexions, action, attitudes, looks, all were reproduced at every representation with the same exactness, the same vigour; and if there was any difference between one representation and another, it was always in favour of the last. Sensibility and intelligence, therefore, are the principal faculties necessary to an actor. Yet these alone will not

suffice. Apart from memory, which is his indispensable instrument, and stature and features adapted to the character he has to play, he must have a voice that can be modulated with ease, and at the same time be powerful and expressive. I need scarcely add that a good education, the study of history—(not so much the events as the manners of the people, and the particular character of historical personages)—and even drawing, ought to add grace and strength to the gifts of nature.

It will be well understood that I here speak only of tragedy. Without entering into the question whether it is more difficult to play tragedy or comedy, I will say that to arrive at perfection in either, the same moral and physical faculties are required, only I think the tragedian ought to possess more power and sensibility. The comedian does not require the same energy; the imagination in him has less scope. He represents beings whom he sees every day—beings of his own class. Indeed, with very few exceptions, his task is confined to the representations of folly and ridicule, and to painting passions in his own sphere of life, and, consequently, more moderate than those which come within the domain of tragedy. It is, if I may so express it, his own nature which, in his imitations, speaks and acts; whereas the tragic actor must quit the circle in which he is accustomed to live, and plunge into the regions where the genius of the poet has placed and clothed in ideal forms the beings conceived by him or furnished by history. He must preserve these personages in their grand proportions, but at the same time he must subject their elevated language to natural accents and true expression; and it is this union of grandeur without pomp, and nature without triviality—this union of the ideal and the true, which is so difficult to attain in tragedy. I shall, perhaps, be told that a tragic actor has a much greater liberty in the choice of his means of offering to the public objects whose types do not exist in society, while the same public can easily decide whether the comedian furnishes an exact

copy of his model. I would reply that the passions are of all ages. Society may weaken their energy, but they do not the less exist in the soul, and every spectator is a competent judge from his own feelings. With regard to the great historical characters, the enlightened public can easily judge of the truth of the imitation. It will therefore appear from what I have laid down that the moral faculties ought to have more force and intensity in the tragic than in the comic actor.

As to the physical qualities, it is evident that the pliability of the features and the expression of the physiognomy ought to be stronger, the voice more full, more sonorous, and more profoundly articulate in the tragic actor, who stands in need of certain combinations and more than ordinary powers to perform from the beginning to the end with the same energy a part in which the author has frequently collected in a narrow compass, and in the space of two hours, all the movements, all the agitations, which an impassioned being can feel only in the course of a long life. I repeat, however, that not fewer qualities, though of a different kind, are required in a great comedian than in a great tragic actor; each has need of being initiated into the mysteries of nature, the inclinations, the weaknesses, the extravagances of the human heart.

When we consider all the qualities necessary to form an excellent tragic actor, all the gifts which nature should have bestowed upon him, can we be surprised that they are so rare? Amongst the majority of those who go on the stage, one has penetration, but his soul is cold as ice. Another possesses sensibility, and intelligence is wanting. One possesses both these requisites, but in so slight a degree, that it is as if he did not possess them at all. His acting is characterized neither by energy, expression, nor confidence, and is without colour. Sometimes he speaks in a loud and sometimes in a low key, quickly or slowly, as if by chance. Another has received from nature all these gifts, but his voice is harsh, dry and monotonous, and totally incapable of ex-

pressing the passions. He weeps without drawing tears from others; he is affected and his audience is unmoved. One has a sonorous and touching voice, but his features are disagreeable; his stature and form have nothing heroic in them. In short, the requisites for a really great actor are so many, and so seldom united in the same person, that we ought not to be surprised at finding them appear at such long intervals.

It must be confessed that Le Kain had some faults, but in literature and the arts of imitation genius is rated in proportion to the beauties it creates. Its imperfections form no part of its fame, and would be forgotten if they were not allied to noble inspirations. Nature had refused to Le Kain some of the advantages which the stage demands. His features had nothing noble in them; his physiognomy was common, his figure short. But his exquisite sensibility, the movement of an ardent and impassioned soul, the faculty he possessed of plunging entirely into the situation of the personage he represented, the intelligence, so delicately fine, which enabled him to perceive and produce all the shades of the character he had to paint—these embellished his irregular features and gave him an inexpressible charm. His voice was naturally heavy, and by no means flexible. It was to some extent what is called a veiled voice, but that very veil imparted to it, defective as it was in some respects, vibrations which went to the bottom of the hearer's soul. However, by dint of application, he contrived to overcome its stiffness, to enrich it with all the accents of passion, and to render it amenable to all the delicate inflexions of sentiment. He had, in fact, studied his voice as one studies an instrument. He knew all its qualities and all its defects. He passed lightly over the harsher to give fuller effect to the vibrations of the harmonious chords. His voice, on which he had essayed every accent, became a rich-keyed instrument, from which he could draw forth at pleasure every sound he stood in need of. And such is the power of a voice thus formed by nature attuned by art, that it affects even the foreigner who does not understand the words. Frenchmen who

are totally unacquainted with English, have been affected even to tears by the accent of the touching voice of Miss O'Neill.

At the commencement of his career, Le Kain, like all young actors, gave way to boisterous cries and violent movement, believing that in this way he triumphed over difficulties. In time, however, he felt that of all monotonies that of the lungs was the most insupportable; that Tragedy must be spoken, not howled; that a continual explosion fatigues without appealing; and that only when it is rare and unexpected can it astonish and move. He felt, in fine, that the auditor, shocked by the ranting on the stage, forgets the personage represented, and pities or condemns the actor. Thus Le Kain, often fatigued in long and arduous scenes, took care to conceal from the public the violence of his efforts, and at the very moment when his powers were nearly exhausted they seemed to possess all their strength and vigour.

Le Kain has been reproached for having been heavy in his recitation. This defect was natural. He was slow, calm, and reflecting. Besides, Voltaire, whose actor he peculiarly was, would not, perhaps, have readily consented to sacrifice the pomp and harmony of his verse to a more natural tone. He wished him to be energetic, and as he had decked out tragedy a little the actor was obliged to follow in the track of the poet. Again, during the time of Le Kain, a period so brilliant from the genius of its writers and philosophers, all the arts of imitation had fallen into a false and mannered taste, and Le Kain, perhaps, thought himself sufficiently rich in all his gifts and attainments to make a slight concession to the bad taste of his day. Yet his style, at first slow and cadenced, by degrees became animated, and from the moment he gained the high region of passion he astonished by his sublimity.

Notwithstanding the bad taste alluded to, there existed in society at that time, and among the friends of Voltaire, a great number of persons whose ideas in matters of art were more correct, and their advice was of great service to Le Kain.

Voltaire also, though he was a very indifferent actor, even when he played in his own pieces,[1] possessed a good theatrical knowledge of the stage; this he communicated to Le Kain, who profited greatly by it. During one of the actor's visits to Ferney Voltaire made him totally change his manner of playing Genghis-Khan, in *L'Orphelin de la Chine.* On his return to Paris it was the first character he played. The audience, astonished at the change, was for a long time undecided whether to praise or blame the performance. They could not but think that the actor was indisposed. There was nothing of the fracas or the trickery which had previously procured him so much applause in the same part. It was only after the fall of the curtain that the audience felt that Le Kain was right. Public opinion was formed instantaneously, and by an electrical movement it manifested itself in long and loud applause. "What's the matter?" asked Le Kain of Rougeot, a servant of the theatre. "It's applause, monsieur; they are at length of your way of thinking."

[1] Talma is probably under a misapprehension here. Voltaire's talent as an actor, especially in the characters of venerable men, were the delight of the courts of the Duchesse du Maine at Sceaux, of Stanislaus Leczinska at Luneville, and of Frederick the Great at Berlin. "I remember," writes Marmontel, "that when he had just written the beautiful scenes of Cicero and Cæsar with Catiline," in *Rome Sauvée*, "he read them to me with a perfection to which no actor ever approached—simply, nobly, without any affectation." Fleury's testimony is still more to the point. On one occasion *Zaïre* was to be played in the little theatre at Ferney. For the benefit of the actor to whom Lusignan was allotted Voltaire went through the part. Fleury writes: "He divested himself of his ordinary expression of countenance as easily as he would throw aside a mask; he was Lusignan personified. His attenuated form seemed to derive a sort of supernatural animation from the expression of his eye and the tones of his voice; his meagre hand was tremulously extended to draw towards him the child whom he wished to save: in short, it is impossible to conceive a more accurate and forcible expression of Christian faith mingled with parental affection." Such testimony, to which it would be easy to add, must overbear the opinion of Talma, who had never seen Voltaire except on the day when the *furore* created by the philosopher's last visit to Paris was at its height.

Experience had taught Le Kain that all the silly combinations of mediocrity, the contrast of sounds, and ranting and raving might evoke great applause and many "bravoes," but conferred no reputation. The amateurs of noise and vociferation fancy their souls are wooed, while only their ears are stunned. There is a certain number of artists, connoisseurs, and intelligent persons who are sensible only to what is true and conformable to nature. These persons do not like much noise, but an actor's reputation depends upon their opinion, and Le Kain despised those plaudits which torment and often distract an actor. He resolved to study only that part of the public who were worth pleasing. He rejected all the charlatanism of his art, and produced a true effort; he always rejected the claptraps which so many others seek to discover. He was, consequently, one of the actors the least appreciated in his day, but he was the most admired by competent judges, and he rendered tragedy more familiar without depriving it of its majestic proportions.

He knew how to regulate all his movements and all his actions. He regarded this as a very essential part of his art. For action is language in another form. If it is violent or hurried the carriage ceases to be noble. Thus, while other actors were theatrical kings only, in him the dignity did not appear to be the result of effort, but the simple effect of habit. He did not raise his shoulders or swell his voice to give an order. He knew that men in power have no need of such efforts to make themselves obeyed, and that in the sphere they occupy all their words have weight, and all their movements authority. Le Kain displayed superior intelligence and great ability in the varied styles of his recitation, which was slow or rapid, as circumstances required; and his pauses were always full of deep significance. There are, in fact, certain circumstances in which it is necessary to solicit one's self before we confide to the tongue the emotions of the soul or the calculations of the mind. The actor, therefore, must have the art of thinking before he speaks, and by introducing

pauses he appears to meditate upon what he is about to say. But his physiognomy must correspond also with the suspensions of his voice. His attitudes and features must indicate that during these moments of silence his soul is deeply engaged; without this his pauses will seem rather to be the result of defective memory than a secret of his art.

There are also situations in which a person strongly moved feels too acutely to wait the slow combinations of words. The sentiment that overpowers him escapes in mute action before the voice is able to give it utterance. The gesture, the attitude, and the look ought, then, to precede the words, as the flash of the lightning precedes the thunder. The display adds greatly to the expression, as it discovers a mind so profoundly imbued that, impatient to manifest itself, it has chosen the more rapid signs. These "artifices" contribute what is properly called by-play, a most essential part of the theatrical art, and most difficult to acquire, retain, and regulate well. It is by this means that the actor gives to his speech an air of truth, and takes from it all appearance of measured speaking.

There are also situations in which a person transported by the violence of feeling finds at once all the expression he wishes. The words come to his lips as rapidly as the thoughts to his mind; they are born with them, and succeed each other without interruption. The mind of the actor, then, ought to be hurried and rapid; he must even conceal from the audience the effort he makes to prolong his breath. This effort he must make, since the slightest interruption or the slightest pause would destroy the illusion, because the mind would seem to participate in this pause. Besides, passion does not follow the rules of grammar. It pays but little respect to colons, and semicolons, and full stops, which it displaces without any ceremony.

Le Kain had a long illness a few years before his death, and it was to this illness that he owed the perfect development and refining of his talents. This may appear strange, but it is literally true. There are violent crises and certain

disorders in the animal economy which often excite the nervous system and give the imagination an inconceivable impetus. The body suffers, but the mind is active. Persons stricken down by illness have astonished us by the vivacity of their ideas; others remember things completely forgotten; others seem to pierce the veil which hangs between them and the future. Perhaps Chénier was not wrong in saying,

"Le ciel donne aux mourants des accents prophétiques."

When the illness passes away something of this excess of sensibility always remains imprinted on the nervous system; the emotions are more profound, and all our sensations acquire more delicacy. It would seem as if these shocks purified and renewed our being, and this was the effect which his illness had upon Le Kain. The inaction to which he had been reduced became of service to him; his rest was that of labour. Genius does not always require exercise, and, like the gold mine, it forms and perfects itself in silence and repose.

He reappeared on the stage after a long absence. The audience, instead of having to show indulgence to a man enfeebled by suffering, saw him, as it were, ascend from the tomb with a more perfect intelligence, seemingly clothed with a purer, more perfect existence. It was then that he rejected what his intelligence disapproved. There were no more cries, no more efforts of the lungs, no more of those ordinary griefs, no more of those vulgar tears, which lessen and degrade the personage. His voice, at once pleasant and sonorous, had acquired new accents and vibrations which found responsive chords in every heart; his tears were heroic and penetrating, his acting—full, profound, pathetic, and terrible—roused and moved even the most insensible of his hearers.

It was also at this latter period of his life that, having acquired a greater knowledge of the passions, and having himself perhaps witnessed deep anguish, he was the better able

to paint it; and if he frequently, to express great sorrow, suffered his melancholy and dolorous voice to escape through sobs and tears, often, too, in the highest degree of moral suffering, his voice changed: it became veiled, and uttered only inarticulate sounds of woe. His eyes appeared dull with sorrow, and shed no tears, which seemed to be chased back on the heart. Admirable artifice! drawn from nature, and more calculated to move the soul than tears themselves; for in real life, while we pity those who weep, we feel, at least, that tears are a relief to them; but how much more is our pity excited at the sight of the unfortunate being whom the excess of deep despair deprives of voice to express his suffering, and of tears to relieve him.

Le Kain was the creature of passion; he never loved but to madness; and, it is said, he hated in the same manner.

He will never rise to excellence as an actor whose soul is not susceptible of the extremes of passion. In the expression of the passions there are many shades which cannot be divined, and which the actor cannot paint until he has felt them himself. The observations which he has made on his own nature serve at once for his study and example; he interrogates himself on the impressions his soul has felt, on the expression they imprinted upon his features, on the accents of his voice in the various states of feeling. He meditates on these, and clothes the fictitious passions with these real forms. I scarcely know how to confess that, in my own person, in any circumstance of my life in which I experienced deep sorrow, the passion of the theatre was so strong in me that, although oppressed with real sorrow, and in spite of the tears I shed, I made, in spite of myself, a rapid and fugitive observation on the alteration of my voice, and on a certain spasmodic vibration which it contracted in tears, and, I say it not without some shame, I even thought of making use of it on the stage, and, indeed, this experiment on myself has often been of service to me.

The contrarieties, the sorrows, and melancholy reflections

which an actor may apply to the personage he represents, in exciting his sensibility, place him in the degree of agitation necessary for the development of his faculties. Le Kain thus found, in his own passions, display for his talents. As to the odious characters and vile passions, of which the type was not in him—for no man was more honourable than Le Kain—he painted them by analogy. In fact, amongst the irregular passions which disgrace humanity, there are some which possess points of contact with those which ennoble it. Thus, the sentiment of a noble emulation enables us to divine what envy may feel; the just resentment of wrongs shows us in miniature the excess of hatred and vengeance. Reserve and prudence enable us to paint dissimulation. The desires, the torments, and the jealousies of love enable us to conceive all its frenzies and initiate us in the secret of its crimes.

These combinations, these comparisons, are the result of a rapid and imperceptible labour of sensibility, united with intelligence, which secretly operates on the actor as on the poet, and which reveals to them what is foreign to their own nature—the viler passions of guilty and corrupted minds. Thus Milton, a man of austere probity, and so full of the divine power, created the personage of *Satan*. Corneille, the simplest and the worthiest of men, created *Phocas* and *Felix;* Racine, *Nero* and *Narcissus*. Voltaire has painted the effects of fanaticism with a frightful truth; and Ducis, whose taste was simple, and whose life was religious, painted, in *Albufar*, in traits of fire, all the transports of incestuous love.

These terminate my hasty reflections on Le Kain and our art. I have thrown them together without order; but I hope, in the quietude of silence and repose, to resume the subject, and give, for the use of my successors, the result of a long experience in a career devoted entirely to the advancement of the beautiful art I love so deeply.

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