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WENTZ (Jed), « 'And the Wing'd *Muscles*, into Meanings Fly'. Practice-Based Research into Historical Acting Through the Writings of Aaron Hill »

RÉSUMÉ – Aaron Hill était un dramaturge, un professeur de déclamation et un amoureux passionné des représentations tragiques. Son système pour jouer au théâtre a récemment reçu beaucoup d'attention de la part des spécialistes des pratiques scéniques. Cet article retrace le développement de ce système chez Hill, de 1716 jusqu'à sa mort en 1750, ainsi que son lien avec le style propre de Garrick. Il décrit également comment cet entraînement corporel a impacté l'auteur de cette étude.

MOTS-CLÉS – émotion, mimique, David Garrick, Londres, théâtre, passions dramatiques, imaginaire.

WENTZ (Jed), « 'And the wing'd *muscles*, into meanings fly'. Recherche à partir des écrits d'Aaron Hill et de la pratique historiquement informée »

ABSTRACT – Aaron Hill was a playwright, acting coach and passionate lover of tragedy on the stage. His acting system has received much attention from theatre scholars recently. This article traces the development of the system in Hill's writings from 1716 until his death in 1750, as well as its relationship to Garrick's own style. Wentz also describes the effects of training his acting body using the system.

KEYWORDS – emotion, facial expression, David Garrick, London, theatre, dramatic passions, imagination.

‘AND THE WING’D *MUSCLES*, INTO MEANINGS FLY’

Practice-Based Research into Historical Acting Through the Writings of Aaron Hill

Teach *passion*’s pangs—teach *bow* dis-
tresses *shake*;
How hearts, that *feel*, bid hearts, that
listen, AKE.
How *action* paints the *soul*, upon the *eye*,
And the wing’d *muscles*, into meanings fly.¹

INTRODUCTION

The English writer and entrepreneur Aaron Hill (1685–1750) was passionate about many things, but none more than the theatre. Throughout his adult life he turned his hand to managing theatres, criticising performers, writing plays, and coaching actors. Oddly, he seems never to have trod the boards himself, at least not as a professional. This, however, did not stop him from proclaiming, repeatedly, and from many a literary pulpit, that he possessed the key to success for actors, and that he could teach, through his system, a natural manner of acting that would engage audiences, facilitate the moral improvement of society and restore tragedy to its rightful place in the hearts of the public – a deservedly exalted place from which, he felt, low entertainments like opera and pantomime had driven it.

It is well-known that Hill proposed his technique for generating affect in the stage-player’s body in the 1730s, in his bi-weekly publication

1 Aaron Hill, ‘Prologue, for Mr. William Giffard, on his Benefit Night’, *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq.*, Vol. III (London: 1753), p. 113.

entitled *The Prompter*. However, he had articulated the key ideas of the system much earlier: a proto-version of the method can be found in the preface to his second tragedy, *The Fatal Vision: Or, the Fall of Siam* (1716). From this point onwards, with great consistency, Hill proposed the imagination as the fountainhead of good acting, and that a strong conception of actually *being* the character one portrayed, in the exact emotional situation the scene required, would naturally result in the voice and body harmonizing with the imagined theatrical affect. This is often referred to today as acting ‘from inside out’. However, by the 1740s, Hill had begun to suggest that if the player’s imagination needed help in the heat of the moment on stage, he could engage the body in specific ways in order to ‘kick start’ the imaginative process (such a method, emphasizing externals rather than imagination, is now known as acting ‘from outside in’).

Hill asserted that – following his system and aided initially and briefly by a mirror – an actor could in a very short space of time learn how to use somatic awareness to stimulate inner feelings. His system relied on the close interconnection of imagination, affect and muscular activity in the closed-system labyrinth of the actor’s body – which Hill called ‘the mazy Round’. The actor could start either from the mind *or* the body, which made acting easy, pleasant and natural:

See Art's short Path!—’tis easy to be found,
Winding, delightfull, thro’ the mazy Round!²

Although Hill never lost sight of the imagination as the wellspring of good acting, he believed that his somatic method enabled actors to get back on track quickly, if their imaginations failed them.

This article is divided into two parts: the first deals with the development of Hill’s system 1716–1753, as it reveals itself through his many writings (reviews, letters, essays, poems); the second part documents my personal experimentation with the ‘applications’ in ‘An Essay on the Art of Acting’ (1753) as a form of research through performance. I argue in Part I that Hill’s basic conception of his system changed over time: as he grew older his emphasis on the physical shifted from the voice to the eyes and countenance, and finally came to include the joints

2 Aaron Hill, *The Art of Acting* (London: J. Osborn, 1746), p. 11.

and muscles.³ The experiments described in Part II are illustrated by video material.⁴

PART I: THE DEVELOPMENT OF HILL'S ACTING METHOD

The primacy of the voice (1716–1733)

BARTON BOOTH

Before examining his ideas on acting, it will be useful to consider Hill's contact, from an early age, with one of the most famous tragic players of the early eighteenth century, one who arguably had a lasting influence on Hill's thought: Barton Booth (1681–1733). The two must have met as schoolfellows when Hill arrived at Westminster School ca. 1696. This initial acquaintance was not of long duration, for both boys left ca. 1698, Booth for the Dublin stage, and Hill for Constantinople. Before departing, however, Hill must have had opportunities to experience his fellow's nascent acting skills. As Benjamin Victor (d. 1778) tells us, Booth's thespian talent was already apparent at Westminster School:

he had then a very great Affection for Poetry, and delighted in repeating Parts of Plays and Poems; in all which he discover'd a very promising Genius for the Stage.⁵

Booth's ability to express the passions naturally with his face is explicitly mentioned in the following lines from a prologue spoken at Westminster School:

*Your Antique Actors, as we read,
No more than Anticks were indeed:*

3 In order to distinguish between the first publication of Hill's essay in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq.*, Vol. IV (London: 1753) and later, stand-alone editions, I will refer to the former thus: 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753). The titles of later editions will appear in italics. None of these should be confused with the poem, published in 1746, entitled *The Art of Acting*.

4 Video materials can be found here: <https://jedwentz.com/wentz-edps/> (last accessed 26-02-2022).

5 [Benjamin Victor], *Memoirs of the Life of Barton Booth* (London: John Watts, 1733), p. 4.

*With wide-mouth'd Masks their Babes to fright,
 They kept the Countenance from Sight.
 Now Faces on the Stage are shown;
 Nor speak they with their Tongues alone,
 But in each Look a Force there lies,
 That speaks the Passion to the Eyes.
 Say then, which best deserves our Praise,
 The Vizard, or the Human Face?
 Old Roscius to our BOOTH must bow,
 'Twas then but Art, 'tis Nature now.⁶*

This early talent for facial expression grew, in the course of Booth's career, to form part of 'a most accurate Knowledge of the various Passions, and the proper Peculiarities by which they express themselves'.⁷ Victor sums up the fully-formed actor as follows:

it is not enough to say, he was Graceful, acted Justly, and spoke with the greatest Harmony and Propriety; for those Qualities were peculiarly his own: But his manner of exciting all the noble and tender Passions gave such complete Delight as cannot be reach'd by Imagination, nor describ'd by Language.⁸

Aaron Hill knew the mature Booth's passionate style very well: Booth was acting in Thomas Betterton's company at the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields when Hill returned to London from the Middle East in 1703. It seems inconceivable that Hill would not have gone to see his old schoolfellow on the stage. What is certain is that the two men worked together in Drury Lane during the 1709–1710 season: Hill became the manager there, while Booth was the leading tragedian. In spite of the fact that Booth was a member of the group of actors who violently attacked him in June of 1710, during an over-heated dispute concerning matters of management, Hill always highly praised Booth as an actor: and it is in such warm colours that we find him painted in Hill's 1716 preface to *The Fatal Vision*.

6 [Victor], *ibid.*, p. 5.

7 [Victor], *ibid.*, p. 28.

8 [Victor], *ibid.*, p. 30.

THE DEDICATION TO *THE FATAL VISION* (1716)

In the dedication to his tragedy *The Fatal Vision: Or, the Fall of Siam*, Hill emphasises the links between an acting style that marked the passions and tragedy as a genre capable of improving the morals of its audience. For Hill, the goal of all dramatic poetry was instruction, rather than mere entertainment. Moral lessons could only be transmitted if the players profoundly moved the audience. Hill maintained this stance throughout his life. Therefore, it is worth looking more closely at the early expression of this standpoint that is afforded by the *The Fatal Vision's* dedication.

Hill argues that tragedy's power to instruct is thwarted when the passions are mismanaged by injudicious, unnatural actors. Monotonous, bombastic declamation could not, according to Hill, replace the variety of voice which naturally expressed the passions. He notes of the audience that:

*being never moved by the affected, vicious, and unnatural Tone of Voice, so common, on our Stages; They sink insensibly, from that Attention, into which judicious actors forcibly attract us; And, by that Means lose the Thread of the Design: and, consequently, all the Relish of the Entertainment.*⁹

An unmoved audience would neither be able to sustain their attention, nor to absorb the instruction intended by the playwright. Thus, acting, and most specifically the players' emotional manner of declamation – one that could 'sensibly alarm the soul' and shake an audience to its core – was essential to the success of tragic theatre as a means of moral improvement. Alas, according to Hill, the actors' 'horrible, Theatric' declamation rarely managed to capture the audience's attention:

I need not tell you, that, without Attention, 'tis impossible for any Play to strike. Now, where it does not strike, 'tis as impossible to please: and, if it does not please, it never can instruct. So, here, we find the very End of all Dramatic Poetry destroyed, by that one fundamental Evil of a Player's Ignorance. I might, more justly, call it Obstinacy. They cannot, if they think at all, but know what is Natural, from what is Monstrous: But they are so accustom'd to a horrible, Theatric, way of speaking, that, except in Mr. Booth, who is, indeed, a just and excellent Tragedian, you shall never hear so much as an Endeavor, at those thrilling Breaks, and Changes of the

9 Aaron Hill, *The Fatal Vision: Or, The Fall of Siam. A Tragedy*, (London: Edw. Nutt, 1716), p. vi.

Voice; *the only possible Expression of our Passions, in their Variations and Degrees, and, which so sensibly alarm the Soul, and challenge the Attention of an Audience.*¹⁰

Booth is here singled out for his ‘just’ use of the voice in expressing the passions. The resulting emotional thrill the audience experienced, kindled their attention and facilitated moral improvement, by alarming their souls. To Hill, it was not enough for an actor to energetically declaim his lines, but rather the player must attain a discriminating variety in the voice *naturally*, by acting ‘from inside out’:

*If Grief, which claims a low, and broken Voice, is utter'd in the Thunder of a Rant, what Mark has Rage to be distinguish'd by? Our Actors should industriously forget themselves, and the Spectators; and put on the Nature, with the Dress, of every Character they represent. They should not act, but really be, the happy, or the wretched, which we are to think 'em.*¹¹

In 1733 (after Booth’s death and before the advent of Hill’s theatrical paper *The Prompter* in 1734) Benjamin Victor asked Hill to write down his ‘sentiments, concerning what was chiefly remarkable in Mr. *Booth*, as an *actor*’.¹² This eulogy was drawn up by Hill more than fifteen years after he wrote the dedication to *The Fatal Vision*. However, Hill’s admiration for Booth is still vibrant. He claimed of the actor that: ‘he was the NEWTON of the *Theatre*; [...] Mr. *Booth*, as well as Sir *Isaac* discover’d *new* worlds, and demonstrated them’¹³ Hill describes Booth’s technique as one of harmony between thought, feeling, voice and attitude:

[Booth] had a talent at discovering the *passions*, where they lay *hid*, in some celebrated parts; having been buried under a prescription of *rantings* and *monotony*, by the practice of other actors: When he had *discover'd*, he soon grew able to *express* ‘em. And his secret, by which he attain’d this great lesson of the *Theatre*, was an association, or adaption of his *look* to his *voice*; by which artful imitation of *nature*, the variations, in the sound of his words, gave propriety to every change in his countenance. So that, among *Players*, in whom it is common to hear *pity* pronounc’d with a *frown* upon the forehead, *sorrow* express’d, by a *grin* upon the eye, and *anger* thunder’d out, with a look of unnatural *serenity*, it was Mr. *Booth*’s peculiar felicity, to be *heard*, and *seen* the same; whether as the *pleas'd*, the *griev'd*, the *pitying*, the *reproachful* or

10 Hill, *ibid.*

11 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. vi-vii.

12 See Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 115.

13 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 118.

the *angry*: one would almost be tempted, to borrow the aid of a very bold figure, and to express this excellence the more significantly, beg permission to affirm, that the *blind* might have *seen* him, in his *voice*, and the *deaf* have *heard* him, in his *visage*.¹⁴

Booth discovered passions in his lines which other contemporary actors had not noticed. Though Hill does not say so explicitly, it seems that this discovery of greater affective potential through the identification of numerous passions guided Booth's acting from 'inside out', by giving him more emotional 'marks' to hit in succession. To do so, he used his imagination to stimulate expression in his body, particularly in his 'look'. While it is clear that Booth already had extraordinarily expressive facial features at school in Westminster, Hill here describes them – apparently quite remarkably for the time – as being subservient to the *voice*. By adapting 'his *look* to his *voice*', the actor achieved a variety of countenance in complete harmony with the intended passion.¹⁵ Hill goes on to describe how this affective sequence progressed further into the actor's trunk and limbs, resulting in the appropriate gestures and, probably, attitudes: the imagination, having first worked on the voice and countenance, was in turn itself influenced by them. The re-stimulated imagination could then cause further changes throughout the player's entire body:

His *gesture*, or, as it is commonly call'd, his *action*, was but the result, and necessary consequence of this dominion over his *voice*, and *countenance*; for having, by concurrence of two such causes impress'd his imagination, with the stamp, and spirit, of a passion, his nerves obey'd the impulse by a kind of natural dependency, and relax'd, or brac'd successively, into all that fine expressiveness, with which he painted what he spoke, without restraint, or affectation.¹⁶

Interestingly, Hill here also attributes to voice and face the power of stimulating the actor's imagination. Clearly, even at this early date, both

14 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. 117–8.

15 Interestingly, Hill wrote to fellow-playwright Mallet many years later, in 1731: 'Let a man, for example, fix his eyes in an angry, or a sorrowful *look*, and then pronounce the softest, or the kindest speech of *love*, *joy*, or *friendship*, ———he will find, that, 'till his *look* is as kind as his *meaning*, his voice will sound nothing but *discord* and *harshness*.' Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 47.

16 Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 118.

acting ‘from outside in’ and ‘from inside out’ were part and parcel of Hill’s conception of the actor’s art. His conception of the actor’s body as a closed circuit – mind works on body, and body in turn works on mind – was already in place, if not yet as clearly articulated as it would be in his later didactic works *The Art of Acting* (1746) and ‘An Essay on the Art of Acting’ (1753).

BE, WHAT YOU SEEM: HILL’S THEATRICAL AMBITIONS, 1721–1736

HILL AS ACTING COACH

Hill’s management of Drury-Lane came to an end in June of 1710. In November of that year he became the manager, for less than one season, at the new Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket. There he produced operas, the most important and successful of which was *Rinaldo* – for which he devised the scenario – set to music by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759). Hill then temporarily stepped away from theatrical endeavours and occupied his ‘*Fertile Brain*’ and ‘*teeming Mind*’¹⁷ with other matters, notably a commercial scheme involving the extraction of oil from beechnuts. His next significant theatrical undertaking, apart from the moderately successful production (seven performances) of *The Fatal Vision* in 1716, was his unsuccessful attempt, in 1721, to set up an acting company in the newly-built Little Theatre in the Haymarket. Two more of his plays were produced in the 1720s: *The Fatal Extravagance* (which is today generally considered to be the best of his tragedies) was a success in 1721, while in 1723 *King Henry V* (a Shakespeare adaption) was not.

The 1730s saw Hill intensely, perhaps even obsessively involved in the London theatre scene as a playwright, critic, acting coach, would-be manager and reformer. After the failure of his tragedy *Athelwold* in 1731, he turned his attention to the training and coaching of stage players. Various letters written in 1733 to actors working at Drury Lane show Hill helping them to prepare their roles (by means of marked-up part books), and coaching their performances. Thus, on November 16th,

17 Anonymous, ‘An Ode. Inscrib’d to Aaron Hill Esq.’, *The British Apollo*, Vol. III, Numb. 3, April 3rd, 1710, n.p.

1733 he wrote to Elizabeth Hollyday (fl. 1723–1755) of her appearance in Rowe's *Tamerlane*:

When I saw you, in *Selima*, there was nothing to be wished, more *lovely*. But I long'd for something more *miserable*. [...] you filled our *eye* with your *sweetness*, where our hearts should have been *shook*, for your *sufferings*: And, particularly, in that scene, where you pleaded with *Bajazet* for life, tho' your *action* was beautifully *just*, it was not *strong* enough, nor so *wild* and *distracted*, as it ought to have been. Let me beg you to remember it, to-night, and throw yourself, with an unreserved boldness and freedom, into the liveliest attitudes of *distress*; fully assured, that a form, so finished as *yours*, can have nothing to fear, from too spirited an excess of action; since the more *lights* it is shown in, the more *charms* it discovers.¹⁸

So too, on October 19th, 1733, Hill sent a letter to actor James Marshall (d. 1773?), analysing his performance in Dryden's *The Spanish Friar* and including a hastily marked-up part for the character of Torrismond. Hill's haste was caused by the fact that Marshall was due to perform the role again that very evening. In his annotations, Hill proposed specific passions for the actor to embody:

I take the *knowledge of the passions* to be the only thing necessary, to make a *finished actor*, where the *voice*, and the *figure*, have such advantages, as you are possessed of; and I have pointed them out as distinctly, as I had room to do it, in the marginal blanks of the Play, which I, herewith, send you; to which I have added (besides lines under the emphatical words) little strokes, in this manner, I in the places, where pausing is proper: First, for the sake of the sense; and next, for a *saving* to the *voice*, which will always, by that help, be able to maintain its strength, and escape those displeasing *cracks*, which are, else, so frequent, and unavoidable.¹⁹

Although he felt that Marshall needed his help to identify passions and manage the voice, Hill felt that the concomitant gestures, being the natural consequence of a proper conception of affect, would then flow unaided from the embodied state:

As to *action*, its excess, either way, is, I think, equally faulty; but of this, I am sure, that the changes of the passions being once found and felt, the proper movements of the body must be the necessary consequence.²⁰

18 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 183–4.

19 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. 153–4.

20 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 154.

Marshall seems to have put Hill's remarks to immediate good use, for the latter was satisfied with the evening's performance. In a letter to Marshall dated October 24th, 1733 he noted 'you pleased me extremely, in Torrismond' and offered to annotate two more roles for the actor: the 'Earl of Essex' and Hamlet.²¹

The energy Hill invested in actors during this period reflected his anxiety concerning the artistic and moral state of London's theatres: he was outraged that operas, pantomimes and light entertainments had overrun the stage. His convictions motivated him to try to become a theatre manager once again. In 1733 he unsuccessfully attempted to buy his way back into Drury Lane.²² Thereafter, more than once, he schemed to set up a theatre dedicated to the training of tragic actors. He believed that this would create a new generation of superior actors whose technique would be suited to the genre. Moreover, the scheme's avowed didactic intent would allow the actors to perform, under Hill's direct supervision, outside the official jurisdiction of the patent theatres. Hill's last attempt to found a 'Tragic Academy' came in 1735. As Thomas Davies (c. 1712–1785) noted in his *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.*:

Mr. Hill's repeated attempts, to reform the action of the players, not having answered his intention, about the year 1735 he indulged his fancy, which, indeed, was warm and enthusiastic, with a new scheme, which was to form a race of actors who should by far exceed all that went before them. To this end he proposed the founding of a tragic academy.²³

Davies then cites a letter by Hill, describing his plan to create a:

Tragic Academy, for extending and regulating theatrical diversions, and for instructing and educating actors in the practice of *dramatic* passion[s], and a power to *express* them strongly, the success of which laudable purpose might establish the *reputation of the stage*, by appropriating its influence to the service of wisdom and virtue.²⁴

21 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. 155–6.

22 See: Christine Gerard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector, 1685-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 149.

23 Thomas Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.*, A New Edition, Vol. I (London: for the Author, 1780), p. 143.

24 Davies, *ibid.*, pp. 144–5.

Davies informs us, however, that the project 'died in its birth; the prince of Wales refused to lend the influence of his name to it, and the projector made no further progress in it'.²⁵

HILL AS JOURNALIST: *THE PROMPTER*

But the indefatigable Hill was in this period not only busy pursuing his dream of an acting school: in 1734 he, together with playwright William Popple (1700/07–1764), founded a bi-weekly paper entitled *The Prompter*, which dealt extensively, though not exclusively, with theatrical subjects. As Christine Gerard put it: 'During the course of 1734 Hill must have concluded that the best way to disseminate his views was by starting his own theatrical journal.'²⁶ The first issue appeared on November 12th. He chose the pen-name 'Sir Lionel Broomstick, *Knight*, Prompter of Great Britain', to designate his own contributions.²⁷ The second number of the periodical contained a menacing explanation for this choice of name, assuring readers that Broomstick intended to clean up the theatres, particularly the managers:

I shall, in such Cases, shew no Regard to Distinction of Persons, but sweep the Front, and Side, *BOXES*, with as little Ceremony, and Respect, as is shewn, before the Curtain, by *Broomsticks* of inferior Degree, to obtruding Apples, and Orange Peels. [...] I would not advise the Managers of any of the *Theatres* about Town, to be too *secure*, [...] I, therefore, give them this early Notice, that They may take Care to be *cleaner*, and more *decent*, than They have been, for some Time past; or I shall spring out upon them, where they least expect me, and cover them, with the Contempt of the Publick, and the *Dust*, which Themselves have been gathering.²⁸

Players were warned that Broomstick was resolved to sweep among them too, lamenting that there the 'Rubbish lies so thick, I must either be choak'd, or work in a Muffler.'²⁹

He soon made good on these threats, antagonizing the players with biting criticisms of their work. Indeed, the very next number of

25 Davies, *ibid.*, p. 145.

26 Gerrard, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

27 Initially, he was just called 'Broomstick'. He received his grander nomenclature later on; see, for instance: Aaron Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. XLVIII, Friday, April 25th, 1735.

28 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. II, Friday, November 15th, 1734.

29 Hill, *ibid.*

The Prompter contained criticism of the well-known actors James Quin (1693–1766) and Colley Cibber (1671–1757): ‘Mr. *Quin* must be confess’d to be, *sometimes, wrong*, in his *Tragick* Characters; Mr. *Cibber*, to be, *always so*’. Hill compared Cibber’s *actio* to the ‘distorted *Heavings* of an *unjointed Caterpillar*’ and attributed to his facial expression ‘a contracted Kind of *passive*, yet *protruded*, Sharpness, like a Pig, half roasted’.³⁰ The attacks on thespians went on with some regularity. In 1735, an actor whom Hill mockingly called *Mr. ALL-WEIGHT* was chastised for his passionless and therefore monotonously smooth delivery:

To *pause*, where No Pauses are necessary, is the Way to destroy their Effect, where the *Sense* stands in need of their Assistance. And, tho’ *Dignity* is finely maintain’d, by the Weight of *majestic Composure*, yet are there Scenes, in your *Parts*, where the *Voice* shou’d be sharp and impatient, the *Look*, disorder’d, and agoniz’d, the *Action*, precipitate and turbulent—for the Sake of *such Difference*, as we see, in some *smooth Canal*, where the *Stream* is scarce visible, compar’d with the *other End* of the same Canal, rushing rapidly down a *Cascade*, and breaking into Beauties, which owe their *Attraction* to their *Violence*.³¹

Apparently, not all the actors appreciated the attentions paid to them by *The Prompter*: Davies tells us that Quin, angered by the criticisms, came to blows with Hill in public.³² The theatre managers, too, must have resented the sting of Broomstick’s prose: on June 20th, 1735, *The Prompter* (Numb. LXIV) launched a scathing attack on both players and managers. Blaming the actors first, Hill refers Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d*, which had been performed at Drury Lane on June 9th with William Milward (1702–1742) and Mrs Thurmond (d. 1762) in the roles of Jaffeir and Belvidera:

I have seen *Belvidera* DESERVE all her *Misery*, and *absolving* the Insensibility of the Audience, by *whining* them out of their *Power* to *pity* her: while *Jaffeir*, too amorous, and humble, to *outswell* the Low Pitch of *his* Lady, has sunk, *lovingly, like* her, and forgot all those *Violences*, those *Starts*, and those *Frenzies*, which, in *writing* the Character, must have *shaken* the Poet’s Heart, like a *Whirlwind*: but, in *acting* it, are so kind to *fall flat enough* to fit their *Speaker*, and forgo all Pretensions to *discompose*, or *disorder*, an Audience.³³

30 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. III, Tuesday, November 19th, 1734.

31 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. XCII, Friday, September 26th, 1735.

32 See: Davies, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 138.

33 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. LXIV, Friday, June 20th, 1735.

Ultimately, however, the broomstick was pointed at the 'Unpoetic Managers, at the Head of a Theatre'. Hill, himself a would-be manager, let his readers know that the actors needed help in recognizing, in their lines, the potential for expressing the passions:

It were impossible such Errors shou'd be so commonly committed as they *are*, were the Players either qualified, Themselves, to *know* and *distinguish*, the different *Passions*, in their Parts, or had They Directors, of Capacity to *help* them in the Discovery.

FOR Want of this Skill, They can receive but little Benefit from being *told*, that Every Passion has it's [sic] *peculiar*, and *appropriated* LOOK; and Every *Look*, its adapted, and particular GESTURE. That the *Heart* having communicated it's [sic] *Sensation* to the *Eye*, Every *Muscle*, and *Nerve*, catches Impulse, in a Moment, and concurs, to *declare* the Impression.³⁴

PRESENTING THE SYSTEM: 'THE ACTOR'S EPITOME' (1735)

Hill, thereafter, attempted to present his system more generally to the readers of *The Prompter*. On December 9th, 1735, Broomstick recommended that tragic actors '*lay up*, in their *Memories*, an auxiliary Copy of Verses' entitled 'The Actor's Epitome'.³⁵ The text of this didactic poem, published in the same issue, advises the actor to prepare his body by cultivating a state neither rigid nor slack, but rather at once free of muscle tension and highly alert ('Pointedly *Earnest*'). Hill here works 'from outside in', but in an unconventional manner. Rather than imposing stereotypical signifiers of affect directly onto the body, he advises the actor to prepare the body to receive impulses from the imagination:

*On the rais'd Neck, oft mov'd, but ever strait,
Turn your unbending Head, with easy State.
Shun rambling Looks.—Fix your Attention, high;
Pointedly Earnest; meeting Eye, with Eye.*³⁶

Hill believed that this configuration of a straight but limber neck and a raised and active eye created a distinct mode of expressive potential (facilitating the addition of '*nature* to your *meanings*') and had technical

³⁴ Hill, *ibid.*

³⁵ Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXIII, Tuesday, December 9th, 1735.

³⁶ Hill, *ibid.* For an affirmation of the importance to Hill of this relationship between neck and eye see Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 157–8.

and artistic consequences throughout the body, as can be seen in his advice to an actor in 1733:

I would wish to see you assume that gracefulness, weight, and easiness, which must follow, from your keeping a more raised eye; and erect, yet easy, neck; — It will add *nature* to your *meanings*, and *majesty* to your *words*, and your *actions*; whereas the contrary practice gives the appearance of *levity*; loses the noble openness of the *breast*, and contributes to scatter and confound the *voice*; much of which it throws *inward*, from the audience.³⁷

Indeed, reverse confirmation can be found in ‘*The PLAYER’S Epitome*’ – a satire on poor acting published in *The Prompter* in 1736 – which inverts the precepts of ‘*The Actor’s Epitome*’. It purported to represent the ‘*SYSTEM*’ used by bad actors: ‘*POKE a slunk Neck; and, with your Chin, ELATE*’.³⁸ The specific physical starting point for good acting of a long, loose neck, low chin and raised eyes has strongly influenced the practical research into Hill’s system which is described in the second part of this article.³⁹

In ‘*The Actor’s Epitome*’, Hill further invited the actor’s entire body to participate in this easy state of being, stressing an experience of passive somatic awareness:

Spread, *be your opening* Breast; *oft* chang’d, *your* Face:
Step, *with a slow SEVERITY* of Grace.
Pausingly WARM, (*Significantly*) rise;
And Affectation’s *empty SWELL despise*.⁴⁰

Hill here remarked favourably on a continuous ‘opening’ of the breast and the constant play of facial muscles. Stage deportment is to be neat and graceful (*‘SEVERITY of Grace’*). From within this body at ease, the actor can then allow the kinaesthetic experience of the affect to dictate meaningful pauses in the declamation, giving a naturalness to

37 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. I, p. 214.

38 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXXIX, Tuesday, February 3rd, 1736.

39 For the relationship between the work of F. M. Alexander and historical acting see, in this volume: Anne Smith, ‘Reflections on Historical Acting and the Alexander Technique’. See, also, Anne Smith, ‘Standing with Ease and Grace: On the Difficulties of Reading Historical Acting Treatises Objectively’, https://jedwentz.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Smith_Standing-with-Ease-1.pdf (last accessed 25-02-2022).

40 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXIII, Tuesday, December 9th, 1735.

the expression of the text, and avoiding 'Affectation's *empty SWELL*'. Hill's explication of what he means by 'Pausingly WARM' is as follows:

TO *pause*, as some Actors do, at the End of Each Word or two, is to speak, like the Minute Hand of a *Clock*, that measures TIME, not MEANING.—All the *Pauses*, in Utterance, shou'd, like the *Pointings*, in Reading, serve to *mark out the Sense*, and give Harmony and Force, to the *Cadence*: and, to do This effectually, the *Pause*, in the SOUND, must be accompanied with *no Pause* in the ACTION: but fill'd out, by such agitated Perturbation, in the *Look*, and the *Gesture*, as may (instead of *interrupting* the Course of the Passion) seem but the *Struggling*, of its inward *Emotion*; *preparing* for the *Utterance* of What arises to the *Conception*. It is with a View to this expressive *Discontinuance* of Speaking, that the Author makes use of the Word WARM, after *pausingly* [...].⁴¹

In the final octet of the poem, Hill details just how the imagination acts upon the body:

Be, *what you seem*.—*Each pictur'd Passion weigh*;
 Fill, *first, your Thoughts, with All, your Words must say*.
 Strong, yet distinguish'd, *let Expression paint*:
Not straining mad, nor negligently faint.
On rising Spirits, let your Voice take Wing:
And Nerves, elastic, into Passion, spring.
Let ev'ry Joint keep TIME; each Sinew bend:
And the Shot SOUL, in every Start, ASCEND.⁴²

Here thought becomes primary, and the acting mode switches from 'outside in' to 'inside out'. Nerves, joints and sinews respond to the impressions of the imagination. The actor's body now allows the properly conceived passion to register with a natural intensity, neither overwrought nor lax. Hill chooses the passive mood: '*let Expression paint*', '*let your Voice take Wing*', '*Let ev'ry Joint keep TIME*', etc. His system invites the actor to *allow* passion to manifest itself in the prepared body by means of a heightened somatic ease and awareness, rather than encouraging him to force passion's signifiers onto the body from outside.

⁴¹ Hill, *ibid*.

⁴² Hill, *ibid*.

THE PROMPTER'S 'REGULAR SYSTEM OF ACTING' (1735)

Later that month, on December 26th, *The Prompter* resumed its didactic mode, publishing a detailed explanation in prose of how Hill's 'regular SYSTEM of ACTING' physically functioned. Hill again promoted a close relationship between the actor's imagination and his body, declaring that 'the *Mien* is no other, than this *muscular IMPRESSION*, of some Disposition in the purposing *Mind*'. His understanding of the body is at least in part Cartesian, in that he believes the pineal gland to be the seat of the soul and sluice gate of the animal spirits:

WITHOUT entering into the Disputes of *Philosophers*, concerning the SEAT of the *Soul*, It will suffice for my present Intention, to assign a Throne to the IMAGINATION, upon her little *Gland*, in the Middle of the *Brain*: whence the *Animal Spirits*, (surrounding her, like *Life-Guards*) are *detach'd*, for Execution of her *Orders*, into Every Part of her Empire, the *Body*, by a Conveyance, with the *Blood*, and the *Humours*.⁴³

What is interesting here is that the route by which affect manifests itself in the body is different from that which Hill had delineated in 1716 when describing Booth's voice-first technique: in the *Prompter* article, the animal spirits, which medical theory at this point still considered to be the prime initiators of moving muscles, first made their presence known in the *face*; most specifically, in the eye:

THE first, and obvious, Effect, of such a Surplus Effusion of *Spirits*, about the *Brain*, is a sparkling Impression of the Purpose, breaking into the EYES, as the *nearest* Remove, from their *Master*.

BUT the *Eyes*, wanting *Space*, to retain so redundant a Tide, The FACE becomes (all over) stamp'd, with Marks of the *same Character*, by a Receipt, (into its *Muscles*) of those *Spirits*, so charg'd by the Imagination, with Execution of that *Specific Purpose*.⁴⁴

From the eyes and face, the spirits carried the imaginative 'Purpose' or conception downwards throughout the body, affecting the voice by the time they reached the chest. This is in contrast to Hill's description of Booth matching his face to his voice. *The Prompter* sums up the acting system in four points:

⁴³ Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXVIII, Friday December 26th, 1735.

⁴⁴ Hill, *ibid*.

1st. — The *Imagination* assumes the *Idea*.

2dly. — It's [sic] *Marks*, and characteristic Impressions, appear, first, in the *Face*; because nearest to the *Seat* of the *Imagination*.

3dly. — THENCE, impell'd by the *Will*, a commission'd Detachment of the *Animal Spirits* descending, into the dependant Organization of *Muscles*, and *Swelling*, and *adapting* them, in its Progress, bends, and stimulates, their Elastic Powers, into a *Position*, apt to *execute* the Purpose, (or express the Warmth of) the *Idea*.

4thly. — THUS, the *Look*, *Air*, *Voice*, and *Action*, proper to a Passion, preconceiv'd, in the *Imagination*, become a *mere*, and *mechanic*, NECESSITY; without Perplexity, Study, or Difficulty.⁴⁵

Far from being static or rigid, Hill described this 'inside out' system as capable of expressing all the nuances of the imagination itself. Formed to a purpose by the mind, the force and quality of the movement of the animal spirits produced concomitant muscular reactions:

there are DEGREES, in the Motions here assign'd to the *Spirits*, conformable to their different Purposes. — In the *soft*, and *desirable* Passions, They SLIDE, *Sweet* and *serenely*; while, in the *Angry*, and *Violent*, they RUSH, *stormy*, and *turbulent*; swelling, wild, and irregular, like the *Starts*, they produce, in Mens [sic] *Tempers*.⁴⁶

Hill, in the two issues of *The Prompter* examined here, proposed a picture of a body that is, in its freedom and ease, open to the effects of the animal spirits. These, directed by the imagination and the will to act, produced the physical expressions of emotion: 'that is to say, an *Elastic Operation* of the *Muscles*, by Influx of the *Animal Spirits*, pressing through, with the *Nervous Juice*, and disposing them for *Agitation*.'⁴⁷ The resulting acting was natural because it activated the body's natural affective system, and would cause the audience to feel those alarms and distresses that Hill believed were necessary for their moral improvement, and for the success of tragedy on the stage.

45 Hill, *ibid*.

46 Hill, *ibid*. that Hill here refers to the concupiscible and irascible passions of Thomas Aquinas throws the purity of his Cartesianism into question.

47 Hill, *ibid*.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HILL'S SYSTEM: ZARA (1735–1736)

TWO PRODUCTIONS OF ZARA: 1735 AND 1736

On February 25th, 1730, Robert Wilks (c.1665–1732) wrote to Aaron Hill:

permit me to say, that, without Exception, I think you the best Judge of Dramatic Performance, in all its Branches, I have ever known. It were to be wish'd, that every Spectator had your Penetration, and could so justly distinguish the different Passions, and the Manner of working 'em.⁴⁸

Such high praise from a man who was the manager of Drury Lane Theatre, as well as one of the most celebrated actors in London, gives us pause for thought. Was Wilks merely flattering Hill? If not, we need to take Hill's system very seriously indeed. I now turn to the premiere, at Drury Lane, of Hill's *Zara*, an adaptation of *Zaire* by Voltaire (1696–1778). This performance can serve as a case study of Hill's system since in it two young performers trained by him took the starring roles. Hill's mordacious attacks on London's theatre companies, published in *The Prompter* in the months leading up to *Zara*'s Drury Lane premiere, combined with the antics of the play's tumultuous opening-night audience, lent notoriety to the event that it otherwise would not have enjoyed. This in turn resulted in the publication of a detailed review of the acting that can be used as a case study to test whether or not Hill's system was efficacious in preparing actors for the stage – at least by eighteenth-century standards.

Hill published one scene of his translation/adaptation of Voltaire's tragedy *Zaire*, which had premiered in Paris in August, 1732, in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in May of 1733. He spent the next two years trying to persuade the managers of the patent theatres to produce his play, without success. John Rich (1692–1761) turned it down flat. The management of Drury Lane had promised to put it on in 1734, but perpetually postponed doing so. Hill ultimately settled for an amateur

⁴⁸ In *A Collection of Letters, Never before Printed: Written by Alexander Pope, Esq; and other Ingenious Gentlemen, to the late Aaron Hill, Esq;* (Dublin: Richard James, 1751), pp. 72–3.

performance at the York Buildings, for the benefit of his friend William Bond (c. 1675–1735), who was gravely ill. Despite his poor health, Bond took the role of Lusignan in the play. He collapsed onstage during the first night, dying the next day, on May 30th, 1735.⁴⁹

The death of Bond, however, did not mean the end of the run. For the following performances, the gentleman who was playing the role of Osman took on the role of Lusignan as well, and played both characters. This young man came in for great praise in *The Prompter*:

the Spirit, and astonishing *Propriety*, (in Look, Voice, and Action) wherewith, amidst the universal and deserv'd *Applauses* of the Audience, I saw the Parts of *Osman*, and of *Lusignan*, perform'd, by *One, and the same, Actor*—The Part of *Osman*, a gay, violent, imperial, amorous *Conqueror*—and the Part of *Lusignan*, an old, dejected, miserable, *Captive*, —BOTH, perform'd, full up to all the elevated Grace of *Nature, Attitude, Force, Glitter* and *Perfection*—by a *Youth*, quite *new* upon the *Stage*—and who has scarce seen *twenty* Years of Life, yet!⁵⁰

This remarkable young gentleman was Aaron Hill's nephew, also named Aaron Hill (c. 1715–1739). The older Hill was quite proud of his relative, and may have coached him at least as early 1733, when the youth twice performed a prologue, at Drury Lane, on August 20th and 21st, 1733.⁵¹ The prologue seems to have been written especially for him by his uncle in order to display his talents in expressing the passions.⁵² Three weeks later, Broomstick published a general description of good acting, in which we can surely see a portrait of the younger Hill:

Thus, the happiest Qualification which a *Player* shou'd desire to be Master of, is a *Plastic Imagination*.—This alone is a FAUSTUS for the *Theatres*: and conjures up *all Changes*, in a Moment. —In one Part of a *Tragic Speech*, the conscious Distress of an Actor's Condition stamping *Humility* and *Dejection*, on his FANCY, strait, His *Look* receives the Impression, and communicates Affliction to his *Air*, and his *Utterance*. —Anon, in the same Speech, perhaps the Poet has thrown in a Ray or two, of HOPE: At This, the Actor's *Eye* shou'd suddenly *take Fire*: and invigorate with a *Glow* of *Liveliness*, both the

49 See: Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. LX, Friday, June 6th, 1735.

50 Hill, *ibid*.

51 For this complicated history see Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), Vol. 7, p. 306.

52 See Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 119–122.

Action, and the *Accent*: till a *Third* and *Fourth* Variety appearing, He stops short, upon *pensive* PAUSES, and makes *Transitions*, (as the Meanings vary) into *Jealousy*, *Scorn*, *Fury*, *Penitence*, *Revenge*, or *Tenderness*! All, *kindled* at the *Eye*, by the Ductility of a *Flexile Fancy*, and APPROPRIATING *Voice* and *Gesture*, to the very *Instant* of the *changing Passion*.⁵³

Yet Aaron Hill the younger must not have merely activated standard passions within himself for both Osman and Lusignan: Hill the elder expresses his admiration for his nephew's ability, despite his youth, to act the characters and passions of both a young and an old man. Surely the injunction 'Be, *what you seem*' includes actual characterization, an embodied conception not only of general passions but of their particular manifestation in individual characters?

Zara's success in 1735 in its amateur dress led to it being accepted for professional performance at Drury Lane in January of 1736. The young Hill reprised his role of Osman. In the title role, Susannah Cibber (1714-1766) made her debut as an actress in spoken theatre (she had already made a promising start as a singer). The elder Hill coached both young people. His expectations were high. He pointedly predicted that the performances of the novices would once and for all prove the worth of his acting system to the world.⁵⁴ The belligerent tone he adopted in *The Prompter* in December, 1735, the detailed public explanation of the workings of his system, can be read in the light of what he believed to be his approaching vindication. Hill appears to have been ramping

53 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. LXVI, Friday, June 27th, 1735.

54 Reports of the occasion had a long life in France: 'On lit dans une Préface des Œuvres de M. de Voltaire, qu'un jeune Lord de vingt ans, & une jeune personne de dix-huit, qui n'avait jamais récité de Vers ni l'un ni l'autre, jouèrent l'un Orosmane & l'autre Zaïre, la première fois que cette Pièce fut représentée sur le Théâtre de Londres, que loin de suivre le mauvais goût, qui dominait en ce Temps tout les Comédiens Anglais, ils ne consultèrent que la saine raison & leur âme, & réussirent cependant à tel point que les Comédiens furent obligés de changer leur manière de jouer, & d'adopter la belle simplicité.' ['One reads in a preface to the works of M. de Voltaire that a young Lord of twenty years, and a young woman of twenty-eight, who had never either of them recited verses, played Orosmane and Zaïre the first time that this play was presented in the London theatre; and far from following the bad taste which dominated all the English actors in this period, they only consulted healthy reason and their soul, and yet succeeded to such an extent that the actors were obliged to alter their manner of acting, and to adopt a beautiful simplicity.'] Tournon de la Chapelle, 'L'Art du comédien vu dans ses principes' (1782), *Écrits sur l'art théâtral (1753-1801)*, Vol. I, ed. by Sabine Chaouche (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), pp. 689–773, p. 699. All translations by the author.

up his criticisms of the theatre establishment as preparation for what he believed would be a great moment of triumph, in which his future as a playwright and manager, so long thwarted by the London patent theatre managements, would be assured.

In this context, the jubilant tone of the preface to the text of *Zara*, published on 28 January, 1736, is striking. Hill claims that a young actor following nature can reach perfection on his very first performance on the stage. Hill challenged the idea that only great experience made great actors, asserting that stage experience merely engrained affectation and unnatural mannerisms. He pretended that his was not the hand guiding Broomstick's plume, in order disingenuously to assert that he had been inspired to present a passionately acted *Zara* by the bellicose essays of *The Prompter*:

I had (of late) among the Rest of the Town, been depriv'd of all rational Pleasure from the Theatre, by a monstrous, and unmoving Affectation: which, choking up the Avenues to Passion, had made Tragedy FORBIDDING, and HORRIBLE!

I was despairing to see a Correction of this Folly; when I found myself, unexpectedly, re-animated, by the War which The PROMPTER has proclaim'd, and is now, Weekly, waging, against the Ranters, and Whiners, of the Theatre; after having undertaken to reduce the Actor's lost Art, into PRINCIPLES, with Design, by reconciling them to the touching, and spirited, Medium, to reform those wild Copies of Life, into some Resemblance, at least, of their Originals.⁵⁵

Hill believed that the public, being moved by his mentees, would consequently demand better acting from other performers on the London stage. His prediction partially came true: both the play and Susannah Cibber's portrayal of the heroine were hugely successful and *Zara* enjoyed 14 performances. Only one of these, however, included the young Aaron Hill. He met with such an aggressive reception from audience members, who came armed with whistles to drown out his speeches, that he withdrew from the production after the premiere. Later writers, in discussing the failure, have often assumed that the nephew simply was not good enough, that he was too inexperienced to take his place on the professional stage. Young Hill was not, however, wholly inexperienced. Not only had he had seven performances of *Zara* with the amateur cast in June and July of 1735, he had also performed the role of Marcus in a

55 Aaron Hill, *The Tragedy of Zara* (London: John Watts, 1736), second edition, np.

professional production of Joseph Addison's (1672–1719) *Cato* at Drury Lane in September of that year.⁵⁶ Why then did he fail so miserably in January 1736 that he withdrew from an otherwise extremely successful production?

REVIEWS: ZARA IN DRURY LANE (1736)

What precisely happened at the premiere of *Zara* can only be deduced by examining documents of later date. Broomstick took his time to comment on the premiere, hinting in *The Prompter* of January 23rd, 1736 that he was prepared to discuss 'an Affair, that concerns, in particular, some of the *modest* Gentlemen of *Drury Lane Theatre*'.⁵⁷ This 'discussion' finally appeared in the issue on February 3rd, which contained both commentary by Broomstick and a letter attributed to the hand of the young gentleman who performed the role of Osman. The tone of this issue is exceedingly bitter. It begins with Broomstick speaking of punishment for the malicious actors who organised the young actor's miscarriage. After all, he had performed in a manner 'beyond all Comparison, *Superior*, to the *Bunglers*, I hint at, in an Art, which they are *paid*, for *disgracing*.'⁵⁸

The letter, signed 'Osman', then proceeds to thank the group of 'kind, good-natur'd *Players* ' who had organized a hissing, laughing, whistle-blowing cabal to accompany Osman's speeches, providing 'the *persuasive* Influence of a Musical Society, call'd *Penny Trumpeters*'.⁵⁹ Apparently another part of the audience had supported the young actor with applause, but the insult took and the actor withdrew from further performances. The letter was further accompanied by an ironic reply to 'The Actor's Epitome', called 'The Player's Epitome' (see above). Thereafter, Broomstick again showered lavish praise on the younger Hill, and wrote very unkindly of William Mills (1701–1750), who took over the role of Osman on the 19th of January. Though it might seem a

56 Joseph R. Roach is incorrect in asserting that Hill 'was so confident in the scientific rightness of his acting "system" that he cast his nephew, a complete neophyte who had never been near the stage, in the leading part of Osman in his own translation of Voltaire's *Zaire* (1736)'. See: Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion* (Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 82.

57 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXXVI, Friday, January 23rd, 1736.

58 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXXIX, Tuesday, February 3rd, 1736.

59 Hill, *ibid.*

bad case of sour grapes for *The Prompter* to attack young Hill's successor, Hill's dislike of Mills's acting had, in fact, a longer history: for instance, on February 23rd, 1731 Hill wrote to David Mallet (1705–1765):

in the midst of all his startings, and convulsive agitations of body, he [Mills] looks not, as if he were in earnest: —at least, he wants weight, and appears too light, for the solemn *dignity* of his sorrow, which is occasioned by his *not knowing*, or *remembering*, the harmony between the *eyes*, and the organs of the *voice*.⁶⁰

In 1732, Hill again wrote of Mills' inability to properly perform tragedy, warning an anonymous correspondent that: 'I know, he [Mills] will be very well receiv'd by the town; but there is a distress, a heart-rending tenderness – a weight, and a *something to be felt* – which Mr. *Mills* will no farther enter into, than a *Snail* into a *pavement*.'⁶¹

It is worth noting that Hill was not alone in these sentiments. The playwright and novelist Henry Fielding (1707–1754) remarked of Mills that:

He was at all times a very safe actor; and as he never shocked you with any absurdity, so he never raised horror, terror, admiration, or any of those turbulent sensations to that dangerous height to which Mr. *Garrick* [...] hath been guilty of carrying them.⁶²

It is no wonder, then, that Hill was anguished to see a leading role in his play pass from the youth he himself had trained to display fully embodied passions, to an actor noted only for an amiable mediocrity. *The Prompter* laments that Mills 'LEFT OUT the *Passions*, in the Character, because He cou'd not *reach* them; and *be-butcher'd* all the *Softnesses*, because He cou'd not *comprehend* them.' Hill ends the issue bitterly:

'For my Part, I begin to look upon the *Stage*, as a DEAD BODY, *without Hopes of Resurrection*: —It's *Managers* [...] provided they GET MONEY enough, are quite *indifferent* to the *Plays*, or *Playing*, whence they *draw* their Profit: and, if, in such a prostituted State of Management, neither *Court*, nor *Town*, COMPELS a *Reformation*, farewell all Prospect of *Reviving SENSE!* ——*Hail, Harlequin!* and *Wantonness!* and *Darkness!* and *Corruption!*'⁶³

60 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. I, p. 47.

61 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. 113–4.

62 Cited in *The Criticism of Henry Fielding*, ed. by Ioan Williams (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1970), p. 167.

63 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXXIX, Tuesday, February 3rd, 1736.

The controversy had not yet been brought to an end, however, for on Thursday, 25 March, 1736 the Grub-Street Journal published a letter, signed Meanwell, attacking both the Hills, but especially the elder:

Amongst other laudable attempts that have been made of late for the improvement of the English Stage by our Theatrical *Projectors*, I must confess, I was somewhat surprized at one, which was started by an * *extraordinary Genius* in that way some time ago.—The Scheme seemed to me to be built on no less a *Postulatum* than the following, That it might be an easy thing for him (the *Projector*) through his own *uncommon Discernment* in all requisites for the Stage, to fix on some young persons with good capacities, who, on their first appearance, would exceed all those whom we, in our present depravity of taste, call *good Actors*; and would infallibly convince the world, that long study and experience were not necessary to form a Player; and that, provided a man would put on the *resolution* to BE for an hour or two, the very person, he would seem, he could not miss success.⁶⁴

Clearly Hill's acerbic tone and blunt criticism of the London actors and managers had caused deep anger, and not only recently. Someone signing off as Meanwell had written earlier to *The Prompter* (February 25th, 1735) in an aggressive manner and been even more aggressively rebuffed by Hill, who noted that Mr. Meanwell was 'very *scurrilous*', 'very *ill-bred*' and 'very *ignorant*', summing it up: 'In short, Mr. Meanwell MEANS VERY ILL'.⁶⁵ Meanwell now gave both the Hills a lashing, referring the reader to provocative statements that appeared both in *The Prompter* and in the preface to *Zara*. Unfortunately for us, Meanwell's criticism of young Hill's acting is too general to be of any use in determining the efficacy of his uncle's acting system. Meanwell mocks the young gentleman using theatrical clichés: 'decked out in all the pomp of tinsel and dramattick finery, stalking about the Stage, *sawing the air with his hands, and tearing a passion to rags* some of the Audience laughing, and all of his friends pitying him; whilst he, confident of his own superior merit, and careless of the sentiments of the Spectators, persists undaunted, alternately whining and bellowing'.⁶⁶

Luckily for us, on April 1st, 1736, *The Grub-Street Journal* published a response to Meanwell's letter by a certain J. English. The letter contains an

64 The asterisk is refers to the following footnote: 'See *Preface to Zara*.' *The Grub-Street Journal*, Numb. 326, Thursday, March 25th, 1736.

65 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. XXXI, Tuesday, February 25th, 1735.

66 *The Grub-Street Journal*, Numb. 326, Thursday, March 25th, 1736.

extensive review of young Hill's acting that shows greater nuance than either Meanwell or Hill displayed in theirs, and is worth looking at in detail here. The writer describes young Hill's first entrance as the character Osman:

The Young Gentleman's first Appearance, gave me reason to believe Him very Conceited, He coming on, with a Haughty, Grandeur of Step, and a Look, that really Spoke an *Imperious, Self-dependant EASTERN Emperor*: [...] but I must own I began to alter my Opinion, [...] when he left his Attendant, and address'd himself *zara*, [sic] he fell from that Haughty Air, into a Genteel Easy Attitude, and a Voice quite chang'd from the Stern, and Commanding, to the Soft, Easy, and Natural.⁶⁷

This description shows the influence of Hill's system on his nephew's acting: the young player admirably displayed, in his first scene, his ability to change affect in body and voice in order to suit the passion of the text. The haughty character of his entrance may also have been dictated by his uncle. In 1733, the older Hill, coaching an inexperienced actor in the role of Othello, wrote:

But, as the first appearance strikes most strongly, and it is easier to receive than to remove, a bad impression, I could wish, you would assume, from your very first step on the stage, all the warlike boldness of air, that arises from keeping the nerves (as well of the arms, as the legs) strongly braced, and the visage erect and awful [sic]; carrying marks of that conscious superiority, inseparable from a character, so dignified as *Othello's*.⁶⁸

It therefore is unsurprising that in the role of Osman, the young Hill would adopt a similar style of entrance. However, the adverse circumstances of the evening may have led to an exaggeration of the affect, as J. English notes in his review:

when He first Appear'd, and they began to *Hiss* before He had *Spoke*, He threw an Indignant Eye, round the House; rather *too* much in the Character of the Emperor: but considering He had no Dependance on the Audience, as appear'd by the Preface of *Zara*; I think, a Man of any Spirit, cou'd not have done less.⁶⁹

English also remarked that Hill's portrayal of various passions was judicious and laudable:

67 *The Grub-Street Journal*, Numb. 327, April 1st, 1736.

68 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. I, p. 217.

69 *The Grub-Street Journal*, Numb. 327, April 1st, 1736.

He knew very well what he said and laid down all the Sentiments in his Part (which are very many, and very strong) with great Weight, and Judgement; [...] I find, all that Gay, Spirited Majesty he put on, is absolutely necessary, to give a just Idea of the Character, and certainly deserves Praise instead of Censure, and if so, the *Letter* sign'd MEANWELL, has certainly a Meaning quite contrary to what the Author wou'd have it understood.⁷⁰

Despite this warm praise, however, English admitted 'I am far from thinking the Gentleman deserv'd the Character, which a *Prompter* of last May or June, somewhat too partial, gave of him, he committing [sic] many Faults, which, as an Impartial Person, I shall take Liberty to mention.'⁷¹

The first fault concerned young Hill's declamation: 'He was continually laying such strong Emphasis on single words, such as *I, my, thee, thy*, &c. that destroy'd the sound of the remaining sentence, gave pain, to the Hearers, and made Himself appear Unnatural, and Conceited.'⁷² This is a serious charge, for the elder Hill was very concerned with proper emphasis in declamation. We have seen that he underlined the emphatic words, when marking up the actors' parts. Indeed, Davies, in his *The Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.*, noted of Susannah Cibber that Hill 'interlined her part with a kind of commentary upon it; he marked every accent and emphasis'.⁷³ However, the printed text of *Zara*, which does contain italicised words for emphasis, does not very abundantly italicize '*I, my, thee, thy &c.*' in Osman's speeches. This passage from Act I may serve as an example:

Not so—I love—and wou'd be lov'd, again;
 Let me confess it, I possess a Soul,
 That what it wishes, wishes, *ardently*.
 I shou'd believe, you *bated*, had you *Power*
 To *love*, with *Moderation*: 'Tis my Aim,
 In every Thing, to reach supreme Perfection.
 If, with an equal Flame, I touch your Heart,
 Marriage attends your Smile—but know, 'twill make
 Me wretched, if it makes not *Zara* happy.⁷⁴

70 *The Grub-Street Journal*, *ibid.*

71 *The Grub-Street Journal*, *ibid.*

72 *The Grub-Street Journal*, *ibid.*

73 Thomas Davies (1780), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 137.

74 [Aaron Hill], *The Tragedy of Zara*, The Second Edition, (London: John Watts, 1736), pp. 8–9.

Here 'I', 'you' and 'my' are left unitalicized; while the italicized 'Me' in the last line makes perfect rhetorical sense, balanced as it is against an italicised 'Zara'. It seems likely, then, that the unnatural and too frequent emphases English complained of in the young Hill's declamation did not reflect the elder Hill's tutelage.

English further criticised the young actor for mismanaging his voice, staying too long at too high a pitch ('upon an Unnatural Stretch, beyond what the Passions requir'd'). This is certainly something of which Hill the elder would *not* have approved. Indeed, we have seen the importance he placed on the use of the voice as a signifier of affect, starting as early as 1716 in his preface to *The Fatal Vision*. English did, however, offer an excuse for the young Hill's high-pitched declamation, noting that his tormentors were consciously challenging the power of his voice by using their penny trumpets: 'the Audience had an Inclination to try whether it [Hill's voice] was strong enough to be Heard, above the *Musick*, they brought to keep him Company.'⁷⁵ English's final criticism is on a matter of stagecraft, and again he blamed the aggressive behaviour of the audience at least in part:

He [Hill] also, kept, almost, a continual *Profile* to the Audience, (except in Soliloquies) which threw his Voice, in, among the *Scenes*, and made it in some Places, come imperfect to the Audience. [...] which in some measure, might proceed from their ill-usage of him.⁷⁶

It is possible that the young Hill, when addressing his fellow actors on stage, turned away from the abuse he was receiving from the auditorium. His uncle certainly would not have approved of an actor standing in profile under normal circumstances. The elder Hill had, in fact, chastised an actor for doing just that in 1733: 'Sometimes, either by turning your *face* too much from the *front*, or not enough raising the articulation of your *voice*, we lost a line, or half a line, in the *boxes*.'⁷⁷ Otherwise, in terms of stagecraft, English found much to praise in the young Hill's performance:

I believe no Disinterested Auditor, will deny, that he Trod the Stage with a Grace, and Majesty, which I really cou'd wish to see equall'd by some of our best Performers [...]. I must own, I never saw Action better Adapted, and

⁷⁵ *The Grub-Street Journal*, Numb. 327, April 1st, 1736.

⁷⁶ *The Grub-Street Journal*, *ibid*.

⁷⁷ Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 218.

with more Grace, and Spirit; and throughout his whole Part, he had not the least Action, or Movement [...] but what was as free, and disingag'd, as if it had been his Practice from his Infancy.⁷⁸

Although there is every chance – despite his assertion ‘I assure you, I am intirely unacquainted with the young Gentleman’ – that J. English was in fact someone from the Hill circle, and that the letter is a disguised puff of the young man’s performance, I take it at face value here, because it does sound notes of criticism as well as of praise. Yet, perhaps the most convincing remark that indicates the quality of Hill’s system and coaching comes from a snide dig made about Susannah Cibber, who played the title role in *Zara*. On January 27th, 1736, while *Zara* was nearing the end of its run, the *Daily Journal* announced that Mrs. Cibber would soon appear in *The Beggar’s Opera*, remarking that she had:

during the Run of *Zara*, shewn her natural Genius, by never any one Night varying in either Tone of Voice or Action from the Way she was taught: and it is not doubted that Mrs. Cibber will on this Stage rise as much in the Opinion of the Town by her Acting, as she did on several others (when Miss Arne) by her Singing.⁷⁹

This certainly makes it look as if the actress, doggedly following the instruction she had received from Hill, was a smash hit in the role of *Zara*, while the poor nephew, as *Osman*, served as a sacrificial lamb offered up to the animosities Hill himself had provoked in the theatre world with his acerbic attacks in *The Prompter*.

LIKE GNATS IN A SUNBEAM (1736–1749)

HILL’S *THE ART OF ACTING* (1746)

The last issue of *The Prompter* appeared on July 2nd, 1736. However, undaunted by its mixed success – and that of *Zara* – as a tool for

⁷⁸ *The Grub-Street Journal*, Numb. 327, April 1st, 1736.

⁷⁹ *Daily Journal*, Issue 5592, January 27, 1736. See also Hill, *The Prompter*, February 6th, 1736.

promoting his ideas, Hill had not yet exhausted his efforts to disseminate his acting system. In May of 1743, he confided to fellow-dramatist David Mallet:

I am very *busy*, but it is, like the *Gnats*, when they people a *sun-beam*: My excursions are various, but short: one pursuit [sic] meets and crosses, another: I begin many starts, but end nothing: Imagination is a kind of *wife* to the judgment; she attracts, and delights by her beauties; but then she quite spoils all relish of a coarser society, however, solid or dirtily useful.

I AM proceeding by fits, in my *Essay on expressing the passions*.⁸⁰

Although Hill had difficulties finishing the projects he started in this period, in 1746 he did publish the first part of a didactic poem entitled *The Art of Acting*. This work – four hundred and sixteen lines in length – claimed to derive 'RULES *from* a NEW PRINCIPLE, for Touching the PASSIONS in a Natural Manner'. The work is prefaced by an extensive dedication (to Philip, Earl of Chesterfield) which tells us that there was to be a second part, also in verse, that would treat 'the COMIC Walk in the dramattick Passions, [...] as also, All the numerous COMPOUND PASSIONS, in their several Natures; – their entangled Mixtures with, and intricate Dependencies on, One Another.'⁸¹ Hill further states that this two-part *The Art of Acting* in verse would serve as an abstract of a future 'prose Tract, which I prepare upon this Subject, for a fuller Explanation of these Hints, with all the requisite Variety of Reasonings, Demonstrations, and Examples', adding 'I have hopes to leave the System undeniable.'⁸² Such were his ambitions. They would not be realized. The promised poem on comic acting never appeared. The 'prose Tract' may have been the same text that was published posthumously in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq.* (1753) as the unfinished 'An Essay on the Art of Acting'. If this is so, then Hill may have begun work on it as early as 1743, when, as we have seen in his letter to Mallet, he mentioned that he was writing an '*Essay on expressing the passions*'. I, at any rate, conclude from all this that in the 1740s Hill was working simultaneously, by fits and starts, on various acting treatises in prose and verse, but that at the time of his death in 1750 he

80 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. II, p. 15.

81 Aaron Hill, *The Art of acting* (London: J. Osborn, 1746), p. vi.

82 Hill, *ibid.*

had only completed the first part of the 1746 *The Art of Acting*: ‘Gnats, when they people a sun-beam’, indeed!

Yet, we must be grateful for what Hill did achieve: *The Art of Acting* Part I presents the idea of the ‘mazy Round’ or the circular nature of the emotional pathway available to the actor (from imagination to body and from body to imagination), a concept which, as we shall see in the second part of this article, proved to be as controversial to posterity as it was useful to my experiments:

See Art's sbort Path! —’tis easy to be found,
Winding, delightfull, thro’ the mazy Round!
[...]
Still, as the *Nerves* constrain, the *Looks* obey,
And what the Look enjoins, the *Nerves* display:
Mutual their Aid, reciprocal their Strain,
[...]
’Tis Cause, and Consequence⁸³

Hill then treats ten ‘dramatic passions’ (joy, grief, fear, anger, compassion, scorn, amazement, hatred, love and jealousy) with close attention, discussing the quality of imagination, the look in the eye and the physical muscle tension associated with each. The final lines of *The Art of Acting* offer a summary of the system, underscoring its close relationship to that proposed in *The Prompter* a decade earlier:

Previous to Art’s first Act—(till then, *All, vain*)
Print the *ideal Pathos*, on the *Brain*:
Feel the Thought’s Image on the *Eyeball* roll;
Behind that *Window* sits th’attentive SOUL:
Wing’d at *her* Beck, th’obedient MUSCLES fly,
Bent, or relaxing, to the varied Eye:
Press’d, moderate, lenient, VOICE’S organ’d Sound,
To Each felt Impulse, tones the tunefull Round:
Form’d to the Nerves, concurring MIEN partakes, —
So, the mov’d Actor MOVES — and Passion SHAKES.⁸⁴

⁸³ Hill, *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁴ Hill, *ibid.*, p. 22.

AARON HILL'S LETTERS TO DAVID GARRICK (1746–1749)

On April 20th, 1744, a year before William Hogarth (1697–1764) painted his famous portrait of Garrick as a startled Richard the Third (see Fig. 1), Hill wrote to Mallet:



FIG. 1 – *Mr Garrick in the Character of Richard III^d*. Nineteenth-century print, T. Clark after William Hogarth (1745). Author's collection.

One day, last week, I was at *Macbeth*, and saw, for the first time, your *favourite*, Mr. Garrick: — He is natural, impressed, and easy; has a voice articulate, and placid: his gesture never turbulent and often well adapted; is untouched by affectation. His peculiar talent lies in pensively preparatory attitudes; whereby, awakening expectation in the audience, he secures and holds fast their attention.⁸⁵

Hill was not yet prepared to declare in David Garrick's (1717–1779) favour, however:

⁸⁵ Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 34–5.

He gave me no occasion to discern, what *strength* he has in the more agitated passions; —what power of compass, in indignation, extasy, love, scorn, joy, or furious and unbridled anger. If his voice can reach the *swells* peculiar to those sharper transports, with the same propriety and gracefulness, where-with he touches the soft *falls* of sorrow, terror, and compassion; and, if his motions, in such risings, are as nervous and majestic, as the mien requires, in active changes, from the pensive, or the mournful, into the indignant and elastic—I shall then take great pleasure, in pronouncing him, an amiable and accomplished Actor.⁸⁶

Although Hogarth's 1745 portrait shows an energetic Garrick making use of muscle tension (the spread fingers, grasping hand and arched back) in order to express surprise, it seems that in 1744 Hill had been treated to a rather bland portrayal of Macbeth. However, by 1749 his assessment of the actor's powers had changed radically, for that year he wrote to the man himself:

Such heart-thrilling changes, as you touch in the display of manly passions, such mark'd action, painted purpose, eloquence of look, and agitated force of attitude, are rare, and noble qualities, but of two [sic] wide a compass for a *letter*, or a *conversation*. I will endeavor to convince you, in a fitter place, how little I say of you to yourself, compar'd with what you make me *feel*, upon the *subject*.⁸⁷

The extant letters from Hill to Garrick do not allow a detailed reconstruction of the course of their relationship, but there seems to have been a certain bond of trust between the two that allowed them to discuss, in detail, matters of acting. By October 14th, 1746 Hill was offering to help Garrick prepare the role of Othello by marking up a part book for him.⁸⁸ In the same letter Hill admits that he had not been to the theatre in years: 'for the last time I was in any Theatre, was, when I saw *you* in *Macbeth*, and that is now almost three years ago; and, I believe, the next will hardly be before *you* call me thither.'⁸⁹

The 1740s were difficult years for Hill, marked by illness, pain, significant financial troubles and personal tragedy. During the course of 1749, Hill's health deteriorated; he died on February 8th, 1750. In

86 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 35.

87 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 363.

88 See: Hill, *ibid.*, p. 266.

89 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 264.

the final year of his life, he seems to have decided that Garrick's stage performances offered the best means of disseminating his system: Garrick himself was to lead by example, showing the way to other actors through his practice. Hill penned a letter to him on the 29th of March, 'under torture of a pain, in the left side, that I can hardly sit to write':

you are *legion* in yourself; the sure and *single hope* of our *theatric* world: [...] there is no promise of a likelihood, that I shall ever live, to see *another* actor rise, with *your* capacity, to taste, improve, or even to comprehend, the *use* of such a system, as I had designed to *publish*, that I am, now, determined against *printing* it at all, but will abstract the *essence* of it, in a course of private letters, for your own inspection singly; and they shall be sent you, as I can have leisure to select, and abridge their subjects.—You will find things useful, and not common, in 'em: and whatever you think proper to *illustrate*, by your *practice*, will be better understood and *propagated*, by effect of your *example*, than from all the *theory* of a dead reasoning.⁹⁰

Hill, in fact, believed that Garrick was already making use of his system. Given that he had mentioned *The Art of Acting* to Garrick in 1746, the latter could have been implementing some of its principles. If so, they would have provided a link between the acting of Barton Booth and Garrick. Hill, at any rate, felt sure Garrick really was utilizing his method:

I lately saw, how sure a *consequence* this will be found when, you repeated a strong speech, or two from *Lear*, and *Tancred*: I observ'd, with great delight, how, paintedly, you brought the *passions*, first, in your *eye*, before you *spoke* a syllable: and thence with what adapted, and *pathetic force*, your voice receiv'd and threw out, the *sensation*. By this single mastery, you have, at once, conceiv'd, and executed, *nature's* noblest scheme of *excellence* in *acting*; and you are the *only actor*, who has ever felt or understood it, rightly.⁹¹

On the August 3rd, Hill, in order to explain the system to Garrick in greater detail, wrote a lengthy letter: it was an abridged version of the first part of the prose text which would be published in 1753 as 'An Essay on the Art of Acting'. It is worth mentioning that Hill's letter to Garrick contains some interesting insights absent from the 1753 publication, for instance, a discussion of the proper use of French

90 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 372.

91 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. 372–3.

artworks in the actor's training and advice on how to create notebooks to prepare a role. Hill mentioned the 'ten great *changes* in [the] *brow* and *muscles*' that presumably correspond to the ten 'dramatic passions' of 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753), but he also wrote about mixed passions, showing that his system encompassed many (up to at least 25) possible emotions:

THERE are *other* passions, of a *complex* kind; which cannot be reckon'd as *dramatic* ones, and yet are to be represented, by *subtracting* from 'em. As, when you are painting *hope*, you borrow *half* your colouring from *joy*; but take the other half from *grief*, because *hope* is not *certainty*: 'tis mixed with *doubt*, and therefore, tho' it asks a *smiling* face, and *elevation* of the *eye-brow*, yet it leaves a kind of *languid* tone upon the *muscles*. There are twelve, or fifteen of these complex passions, which I will *distinguish* in another letter.⁹²

THE 'ESSAY ON THE ART OF ACTING' AND ITS RECEPTION (1753–1801)

THE WORKS OF THE LATE AARON HILL, ESQ. (1753)

The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq., published in four volumes in 1753 by Hill's daughter Urania, contained a number of works that promoted and explicated Hill's system, including the prologue to *The Tuscan Treaty*, which his nephew may have spoken as a young man in 1733, *The Art of Acting* and the unfinished prose work entitled 'An Essay on the Art of Acting'.⁹³ The latter contains practical instructions illustrated with select passages from plays to be used as exercises to teach actors how to generate affect in the performing body. It was this work which Hill had abridged for Garrick in a letter from 1749.

The inclusion of these key acting texts in the *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq.* meant that they were very widely disseminated indeed: the publication had a subscription list of 1,400 names, which Pat Rogers

92 Hill, *ibid.*, pp. 383–4.

93 The prologue to *The Tuscan Treaty* published in *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq.* is not the same as that published in *The Tuscan Treaty: or Tarquin's Overtthrow* (London: J. Watson, 1733), though both were written by Aaron Hill.

has qualified as 'impressive' and ranked at 'about twentieth among known eighteenth-century subscription lists'. Rogers further notes the high number of celebrities who subscribed, including:

Handel, Hogarth, Pitt the elder, Samuel Johnson, Horace Walpole, John Wilkes, Lord Chesterfield, Edward Young, David Garrick, Colley Cibber, Peg Woffington, Kitty Clive, Charles Macklin, Samuel Foote, William Boyce, Lord Rockingham, Beau Nash, Rysbrach the sculptor, and very many others.⁹⁴

No matter how tempting it may be, however, to suppose that because important theatrical people had subscribed to the edition they also had read it, caution is needed here: the list can perhaps better be seen as a sign of solidarity with Hill's surviving family, for whose benefit *The Works* was published. The simple fact of possession does not guarantee that Hill's system was known by those who owned the books.

'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753) declares itself to be 'a short abstract of the Art, in its most comprehensive and reduced idea. But there must follow *Applications* of the general rule, by particular references, for the practical use of the actor'.⁹⁵ Hill further qualifies the scope of his treatise by noting that 'there are only ten dramatic passions; – that is, passions, which can be distinguished by their outward marks, in action; all others being relative to, and but varied degrees of, the foregoing'.⁹⁶ These 'ten dramatic passions' are: joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder and love. They are the same ones Hill treated in the 1746 poem *The Art of Acting*.⁹⁷

Hill seems to have struggled with the categorization of the passions over a long period. Indeed, as early as 1725 Hill had singled out nine passions as being discrete and recognizable on stage, if the actor's words were:

pronounc'd with a tuneful *Voice*, and inlivened by expressive *Gesture*, painting naturally the Passion, or Condition, of the Mind; and *graphically delineating*, as it were, to the *Eye* (as well as addressing to the *Ear*) the Bounds, Distinctions,

94 Pat Rogers, 'Richardson and the Bluestockings', *Samuel Richardson: Passion and Prudence*, ed. by Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London/Totowa, NJ: Vision Press, 1986), pp. 147-162, p. 152.

95 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 356-7.

96 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 357.

97 I take pity and compassion to be synonymous in Hill's system.

and peculiar Attributes, of *Joy, Grief, Wonder, Fury, Jealousy, Compassion, Fear, Love, Hatred*, and the rest of those Emotions, which the acted Mind is subject to.⁹⁸

In 1735, in *The Prompter*, Hill had limited the number of ‘dramatic passions’ to only six: joy, sorrow, fear, scorn, anger and amazement.⁹⁹ However, as has been mentioned, both the prose ‘An Essay on the Art of Acting’ (1753) and the rhyming *Art of Acting* (1746) treat ten dramatic passions, which further supports the idea that they date from the same period, sometime after the demise of *The Prompter* in 1736. Perhaps one can sum up the complex history of Hill’s texts thus: Although he had written about how to act in 1716 in his preface to *The Fatal Vision*, he felt it necessary in 1735 to try again repeatedly in *The Prompter*, at one point noting that: ‘It is practicable, unless I greatly deceive myself, to reduce the total *Theory* of such an *Art*, into the Compass of a *single* PROMPTER; by an *Essay* on the *Dramatic* Passions, that is to say, on the *Power* of EXPRESSING *them*’.¹⁰⁰ Yet these attempts, too, proved unsatisfactory, leading to the plans of the 1740s. By the end of that decade, however, Hill had given up on the idea of successful transmission through the written word and pinned his hopes on Garrick’s acting.

This means that it was necessary for me as practice-based researcher to collate various bits and pieces scattered throughout Hill’s works and letters in order for the unfinished ‘An Essay on the Art of Acting’ of 1753 fully to make sense to me. That is to say, I pieced together a version of Hill’s system that could function as a starting point for practice-based research. Before proceeding to Part II, however, I will briefly trace the fate of Hill’s system in the long eighteenth century.

THE RECEPTION OF HILL’S SYSTEM (1775–1801)

Hill’s system received attention after his death, but only, as far as I am aware, as presented in the posthumous and unfinished text of ‘An Essay on the Art of Acting’ (1753).¹⁰¹ William Cooke (d. 1824) wrote

98 [Aaron Hill], *The Plain Dealer*, no. 94, Friday, February 12th, 1725.

99 See Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. LXVI, June 27th, 1735.

100 Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXVIII, Friday, December 26th, 1735.

101 The following re-worked versions of Hill’s text will not be discussed here: *The Actor or Guide to the Stage* (London: John Lowndes, 1821); *The Actor or Guide to the Stage* (New York: Circulating Library and Dramatic Repository, 1823); *The Actor or Guide to the Stage*

about it in his *Elements of Dramatic Criticism* in 1775, in the chapter entitled 'General Instructions for Succeeding in the Art of Acting':

The most methodical treatise on this subject, we have ever remembered to have seen, is Mr. Aaron Hill's "Treatise on the Art of Acting," where he has distributed the whole into ten dramatic passions, joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder, and love. Each if these he has afterwards defined, and added to this definition, particular directions how to accommodate the voice and action; so that, from so copious a treatise, one would be led to imagine he had exhausted the subject.¹⁰²

Cooke speaks of *accommodating* the voice and action to the passion, which implies that he believed Hill intended the suggested muscular configurations themselves (working exclusively with the 'outside') to be sufficient to express the passions on stage. This has been a common misunderstanding of what Hill meant since the publication of the treatise, usually leading to the unfair accusation of pedantry and over-regulation, as when Cooke continues:

But he [Hill] has, in our opinion, rather mistaken the manner of treating it; attempting to give a rule for everything, he has reduced those things to a standard of mechanism, which should be left to *nature and observation*; and when he talks of the *stretching of the neck*, the *inflation of the breast*, the *erection of the backbone*, the *minute* disposition of the *arms, wrist, fingers, hip, knee, ankle*, &c. he writes more like a Martinet on Tactics, than a philosopher in the investigation of the human passions.¹⁰³

This is not fair to Hill, who more often describes the muscular tension around the joints than '*minute* dispositions' of each. Even more disturbing is that Cooke admits that what Hill is advocating is in fact valid in the case of William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) 'tiger' speech (from *Henry V*, Act III, Scene 1). Hill had used this text as a step-by-step guide for awakening anger in the actor's body, and Cooke admits:

Shakespeare, however has given us a specimen of this kind of instruction in the passion of anger, which is at once so much a *rule* and an *example*, that 'tis

(Philadelphia: Turner & Son, 1825); *The Actor or Guide to the Stage* (Philadelphia: Turner & Son and C. Neal, ca. 1830); 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' in James E. Murdoch, *A Plea for Spoken Language* (Cincinnati/New York: Van Antwerp, Bragg & Co., 1883).

102 William Cooke, *Elements of Dramatic Criticism* (G. Kearsly: London, 1775), p. 179.

103 Cooke, *ibid.*, pp. 179–180.

impossible for a man of feeling to express the speech otherwise than he has directed [...]. Lessons containing such admirable instructions as this speech gives us, we would recommend to the serious perusal of every actor; but this great natural preceptor, was too busy in drawing the passions themselves to leave us many rules how they should be mechanically expressed; hence this knowledge must principally be obtained by every performer's own observation and natural feelings.¹⁰⁴

In his zeal to praise Shakespeare, Cooke delivers a final blow to Hill: 'rules, so exceedingly exact, (except, perhaps, in the hands of so inimitable a master as Shakespeare) would be the fetters, instead of the aids of genius'.¹⁰⁵

This negative review, however, did not stop J. Dixwell of London from printing *An Essay on the Art of Acting* in 1779. Dixwell's edition of Hill's text was supplemented with a newly devised table summarizing the system, described as an 'ANALYSIS, whereby the Manner in which any particular Passion is to be expressed may be instantly seen, with References to its Definition, &c.'¹⁰⁶ The publication was further enriched by the addition of a poem by Hill entitled *The Actor's Epitome*, in which ten dramatic passions are once again described in terms of their physical-mental manifestation.¹⁰⁷ This, however, is not the same poem that was published under the identical title in *The Prompter*. Dixwell had not '*the least doubt of a general approbation for the author's labors*' and claimed to have republished the whole with a view more to facilitating improvements to acting rather '*than in expectation of any pecuniary return*'.¹⁰⁸ An altered version of *An Essay on the Art of Acting* appeared in London in 1801, published by J. Smeeton, who, seemingly more interested in a pecuniary return than Dixwell had been, edited that charitable remark out of the foreword.

A year after the appearance of Dixwell's edition, Thomas Davies (c. 1712–1785) published *The Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.* (1780) in which he wrote at length about Aaron Hill, 'almost the only

104 Cooke, *ibid.*, p. 180.

105 Cooke, *ibid.*, pp. 180–1.

106 Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting; in which the Dramatic Passions are Properly Defined and Described, with Applications of the Rules peculiar to each, and selected Passages for Practice* (London: J. Dixwell, [1779]), title page.

107 For a discussion of the various versions this poem, see: Claudio Vicentini, *Theory of Acting from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Napoli: Marsilio & Acting Archives, 2012), p. 152.

108 Hill (1779), *op. cit.*, n. p.

gentleman who laboured assiduously to understand the art of acting, and who took incessant pains to communicate his knowledge of it to others.'¹⁰⁹ Davies was himself an actor and he thus very briefly writes about: 'a fragment called an Essay on the Art of Acting, which, it is much to be lamented, that he did not live to complete. What remains is worth an actor's consideration.'¹¹⁰

More interestingly, John Walker (1732–1807), who also had been a professional actor, published an extensive review of Hill's system in the second volume of his *Elements of Elocution* in 1781. It is an odd, contradictory assessment. Walker places it in a chapter entitled 'The Passions', which he begins by prioritizing changes in the voice as expressions of passion – as is only meet for a work on elocution. He begins with the question of timing that is at the very heart of Hill's system:

When we speak our own words, and are really impassioned by the occasion of speaking, the passion or emotion precedes the words, and adopts such tones as are suitable to the passion we feel; but when we read, or repeat from memory, the passion is to be taken up as the words occur; and in doing this well, the whole difficulty of reading or repeating from memory lies.¹¹¹

Finding the appropriate quality of voice for each passion, Walker admitted, can be a challenge. He offered examples of good practice taken from the ancients: using mental images or reliving emotional moments from one's own experience. Indeed, the story of Polus animating his grief on stage by lamenting over the ashes of his own son makes its somewhat predictable appearance. Walker, however, continued:

our natural feelings are not always to be commanded; and when they are, stand in need of regulation and embellishments of art; it is the business, therefore, of every reader and speaker in public to acquire such tones and gestures as nature gives to the passions; that he may be able to produce a semblance of them when he is not actually impassioned.¹¹²

This formed a perfect introduction to Hill's system, and indeed seemed to presage a positive critique; but Walker instead turned to a related and highly relevant passage by 'Mr. Burke':

109 Davies, op. cit., p. 157.

110 Davies, *ibid.*

111 John Walker, *The Elements of Elocution*, Vol. II (London: 1781), pp. 272–3.

112 Walker, *ibid.*, p. 276.

Mr. Burke [...] observes, that there is such a connection between the internal feeling of a passion, and the external expression of it, that we cannot put ourselves in the posture, or attitude, of any passion, without communicating a certain degree of the passion itself to the mind. The same may be observed of the tone of voice which is peculiar to each passion: each passion produces an agitation of the body, which is accompanied by a correspondent agitation of the mind: certain sounds naturally produce certain bodily agitations, similar to those produced by the passions, and hence music has power over the mind, and can dispose it alternately to joy, or sorrow; to pity, or revenge. When the voice, therefore, assumes the tone which a musician would produce in order to express certain passions or sentiments in a song, the speaker, like the performer on a musical instrument, is wrought upon by the sound he creates; and though active at the beginning, at length becomes passive, by the sound of his own voice on himself.¹¹³

This must surely refer to Part IV of Edmund Burke's (1729–1797) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, wherein are discussed 'certain affections of the mind, that cause certain changes in the body; or certain powers and properties in bodies, that work a change in the mind.'¹¹⁴ Walker thus prefaced his discussion of Hill by citing Burke's support for an 'inside-outside-inside' or 'mazy round' model for affect in the human body. It is surprising, then, to see that Walker, turning his attention to 'An Essay on the Art of Acting', clearly admired and somehow also deeply distrusted Hill's system:

Aaron Hill, in his *Essay on the Art of Acting*, has made a bold attempt at such a description of the passions as may enable an actor to adopt them mechanically, by shewing, that all the passions require either a braced or relaxed state of the sinews, and a peculiar cast of the eye. This system he has supported with much ingenuity, and it were to be wished he had lived to give his original idea the finishing he intended; and to have seen it combated by opposite opinions, that he might have removed several objections that lie against it, and render the truth of it a little doubtful. It must be owned, however, that this writer deserves great praise for the mere attempt he has made to form a new system, which, under some restrictions, may not be without its use.¹¹⁵

Walker thereafter, like Cooke before him, waxed lyrical about Shakespeare's depiction of anger, reprinting the 'tiger' speech from *Henry V*, and

113 Walker, *ibid.*, pp. 278–9.

114 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), p. 119.

115 Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–2.

noting that the playwright had 'given us an admirable picture of this passion in its violence, and has made this violent tension of the sinews a considerable part of its composition.'¹¹⁶ Walker, however, went on to criticize the *intellectual* underpinnings of Hill's ten dramatic passions, questioning not the effectiveness of the combination of eye and nerves, but rather Hill's justification as to why each combination produces the desired effect. Walker admitted, when discussing Hill's description of scorn as 'negligent anger', that 'This seems a very accurate picture of the passion, and the slackness of the nerves appears necessarily to enter into the proper method of expressing it.'¹¹⁷ Yet, in discussing Hill's description of joy, he fell back on tradition: 'No author I have ever yet met with, has supposed pride to be a necessary part of the composition of joy'. In discussing pity, Walker once again censured Hill's definition for being non-standard:

Pity, he [Hill] defines to be active grief for another's afflictions; but this definition seems not to include the most leading trait of pity, which is, benevolence and love; and though pity is always accompanied with a degree of sorrow, which often excites us to assist those we pity, yet pity is often bestowed on objects we neither can nor endeavour to assist. The poets have always strongly marked this alliance between pity and love, and with great propriety.¹¹⁸

Walker also questioned whether it is 'conceivable that the eye can express an emotion directly contrary to the feelings of the whole frame?'¹¹⁹ Such abstract queries strike the practice-based researcher as very odd indeed: why did Walker, a trained actor, not simply try out the exercises and deliver an opinion based on practical experience? Instead, having already agreed that braced and unbraced nerves are essential physical elements of the passions, he cast doubt on what he had previously confirmed via Burke:

The distinction, therefore, of braced and unbraced muscles, upon which his whole system turns, seems at best but a doubtful hypothesis; and much too hidden and uncertain for the direction of so important a matter as the

116 Walker, *ibid.*, p. 283. Samuel Foote also mentions this speech in relationship to anger in the actor's body, noting 'in every Degree of this Passion, the Muscles are contracted'. See: Samuel Foote, *A Treatise on the Passions, so Far as They Regard the Stage* (London: C. Corbet, [1747?]), pp. 12–3.

117 Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

118 Walker, *ibid.*, p. 286.

119 Walker, *ibid.*, p. 288.

expression of the passions. Modelling the attitude, countenance, and voice, to the expression of a passion, may not only give the beholder an idea of the passion we imitate, but serve, in some measure, to awaken a feeling of it in ourselves; this is agreeable to experience and sound philosophy; but bracing or relaxing the sinews seems to be entering too boldly into the sacred recesses of nature, and taking her peculiar work out of her own proper hands.¹²⁰

One cannot help feeling that Hill's system made its reviewers uncomfortable because it demonstrated all too clearly the very mechanical nature of emotions in the body. This is something that I will discuss in Part II, as I too, in trying out the system, was sometimes confronted with a kind of horror or bewilderment in experiencing this: Hill's system, offering such a 'delightful' and 'easy' path into the 'mazy round', did indeed at times seem to be 'entering too boldly into the sacred recesses of nature', causing me to question my sense of self.

PART II: RESEARCH THROUGH PRACTICE

Kinds of Scholarship

On October 29th, 1746, the novelist Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) wrote to Aaron Hill describing his aborted attempt to read Hill's didactic verses entitled *The Art of Acting*. Richardson confessed that he was:

not aware, that I should be so mechanically, as I may truly say, affected by it: I endeavoured to follow you in your wonderful Description of the Force of Acting, in the Passion of Joy, Sorrow, Fear, Anger, &c. And my whole Frame [...] was shaken by it: I found, in short, such Tremors, such Startings, that I was unable to go thro' it.¹²¹

Paul Goring, writing in 2005 in *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, attributed ambiguity to this passage:

It is not absolutely clear what Richardson intends when he writes that he 'endeavoured to follow' Hill in his account of how the 'passions' should be

120 Walker, *ibid.*, p. 288.

121 *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. by John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 74-5.

performed on stage. Does he mean he tried to 'follow' Hill's argument and instructions in an intellectual sense? Or is he suggesting that he went some way towards actually acting out the signs of the emotions as described in the poem? Or is he referring to a type of reading practice that falls somewhere between these two senses of 'follow'?¹²²

The ambiguity Goring attributes to Richardson's text helps him to identify the parameters of his book's topic of inquiry: it allows him more generally to pursue questions of embodiment, emotional arousal, and the performance of affect in the eighteenth century. From perceived ambiguity he creates a 'framing' that allows him to pursue his research as he sees fit. This is an approach to which we have grown accustomed in the humanities in recent times. As Brian Massumi put it, in reference to the work of Deleuze and Guattari: 'The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think?'.¹²³ Whether or not Goring would agree with Massumi's statement, his framing of Richardson's experience of *The Art of Acting* serves as a useful wedge for opening up his chosen path of academic inquiry.

When I first read this passage from Richardson's letter, on the other hand, I never doubted for a moment that he had simply tried out Hill's prescriptions to see if they would work, before subsequently breaking off the attempt in a state of alarm. I took the text to mean what it said. This is in part because when I tried out these ten 'dramatic passions' for the first time, I myself had had a similar abortive experience. Overwhelmed and shocked by the effectiveness of Hill's system, and disconcerted by my trembling and affected body, I abandoned the experiment after the fourth 'application'.¹²⁴

The point I would like to make here is that there are different kinds of scholarship, and that they can lead to differing research outcomes: I here place more traditional academic study in contrast to

122 Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge University Press: 2004), p. 1.

123 Cited in William Condee, 'The Interdisciplinary Turn in the Arts and Humanities', *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, No. 34, (2016), 12-29, p. 20.

124 Hill presents ten 'Applications', one for each of the ten 'dramatic passions'. I have taken them as exercises, although he does not use that word. The research was begun in 2018, when fellow Dutch Historical Acting Collective member Anne Smith and I read 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' out loud and tried out Hill's system. Both of us found the experiment so startling that we had to stop.

practice-based research. Hill's 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753) has certainly received a good deal of scholarly attention, both before and since Goring's work, quite recently by academics who take performance and its implications very seriously indeed: both David Wiles in his *The Player's Advice to Hamlet* (2020) and James Harriman-Smith in *Criticism, Performance and the Passions in the Eighteenth Century: The Art of Transition* (2021) look deeply into Hill's system, taking the performer's perspective into account. The results are important and stimulating. However, I am not aware of anyone as yet having put Hill's system physically to the test in order to disseminate the results by means of video recording.

The work documented here was crafted to answer a single, specific research question: could Hill's system be of use to actors today? I therefore chose to use the methodology of *research through performance*, or practice-based research, which I felt was more suited to answering this question than a non-somatic approach would have been. What follows is a description of the manner in which my research was carried out. I further document, with video recordings, my performance of Hill's 1735 version of *The Actor's Epitome* and the first thirteen 'exercises' (the ten 'applications') in 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753). The answer to the research question about the relevance of Hill's system for actors today can be answered individually by the viewers and readers examining my work, based on their own aesthetic standpoints: however, as far as my own acting practice is concerned, I am convinced that Hill's system has been of great use.

Practice-based research should always present its findings as documenting a purely subjective experience, one that can have *implications* for scholarly work, but which produces results which at best point towards historical *possibilities*. I do not, for instance, believe that I felt *exactly* what Richardson felt in trying out Hill's system simply because the words he uses in his account also accurately describe my own experience. In this sense one could argue that the outcomes of practice-based research, too, belong in Massumi's 'does it work?' category of scholarship, as they can rarely answer the question 'is it true?'. At any rate, I have tried to carry out my research using a carefully crafted and historically grounded methodology. I lay the methodology itself bare for scrutiny here because I believe it is as significant as the embodied outcomes themselves.

'AN ESSAY ON THE ART OF ACTING' (1753)
AS A TRAINING METHOD FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY ACTOR
Hill's Text

We have seen that Hill struggled to promote his acting system from the 1730s until his death in 1750 – through poems and in prose, through public performances, publications and in private letters – without ever succeeding in creating a definitive, all-encompassing didactic text. As William W. Appleton and Kalman A. Burnim noted:

His twenty-line poem, "The Actor's Epitome" (*The Prompter* No. 113), grew into an eighty-line poem. And subsequently into a four hundred and sixteen-line poem, "The Art of Acting." Still later it was expanded into a prose *Essay on the Art of Acting*, published posthumously in his 1753 *Works*.¹²⁵

The research undertaken here is based on the 1753 'An Essay on the Art of Acting', although the other works by Hill cited in the first section of this article have also contributed to my interpretation of that text – in particular, 'The Actor's Epitome' from which I here too will draw citations. In the opening pages of the 'Essay' Hill begins by proposing the following as 'an absolutely necessary, and the only general rule':

To act a passion, well, the actor never must attempt its imitation, 'til his fancy has conceived so strong an image, or idea, of it as to move the same impressive springs within his mind, which form that passion, when 'tis undesigned, and natural.¹²⁶

As Hill himself emphasizes this rule above all others, it has formed the basis for my work. I understand it in the following way: the actor, through a 'picture' in his imagination ('fancy'), tricks the body into triggering the physical response natural to the image, had it been real. When Hill speaks of a *passion*, I understand it to be a psychosomatic state – that is to say, one in which the body takes part. Therefore the 'impressive springs' within the actor's mind mould, shape or form the

125 Aaron Hill, *The Prompter*, ed. by William W. Appleton and Kalman A. Burnim (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), p. XIII.

126 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 355.

body, conjuring up a natural psychosomatic, affective state from an intentional act of imagination or thought. This is corroborated by the opening lines of the 1735 version of ‘The Actor’s Epitome’:

*He, who wou’d act, must THINK:—for, Thought will find
The Art to form the Body, by the Mind.*¹²⁷

I take the meaning of ‘*THINK*’ here to be the broadest category of mental activity, encompassing and combining the rational and the imaginative: the body follows the thought, and is formed into a passion.

Hill continues his *Essay* by proposing a four-step process for the actor:

1st, The imagination must conceive a *strong idea* of the passion.

This ‘idea’ could incorporate such varying stimuli as the actor’s imagining that she or he actually is the character being portrayed; the mental image of the actor’s own natural facial expression while experiencing a passion; or the use of specific personal memories to access emotions that had been felt in the past by the actor in his or her private life.¹²⁸ The following two points in Hill’s four-step process indicate that these mental stimuli affect the body:

2dly, But that idea cannot *strongly* be conceived, without impressing its own form upon the muscles of the *face*.

3dly, Nor *can* the look be muscularly stamp’d, without communicating, instantly, the same impression to the muscles of the *body*.

The actor therefore is not coldly to assume an attitude, or expressive posture, but rather warmly to experience the somatic results of his strong conception of the passion. In ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, Hill speaks of this warmth as essential to verisimilitude. Moreover, he uses the passive imperative voice, bidding the actor to ‘let *Expression* paint’, to ‘let your Voice *take* Wing’ and to let ‘Nerves, *elastic*, into Passion, *spring*’; as well as to ‘Let *ev’ry* Joint keep TIME; [let] *each* Sinew bend’ and finally to let ‘*the* Shot SOUL, in every Start, ASCEND.’ I have found this passive

¹²⁷ Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXIII, Tuesday, December 9th, 1735.

¹²⁸ For becoming a character, see ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, line 13 in Hill, *ibid.* For the use of mirrors to catch facial expression mid-affect, see: Hill (1753), *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 378. For personal memories, see: Hill (1746), *op. cit.*, p. 11, lines 9–10.

imperative voice to be very important in achieving the proper mental state in which the actor both *wills* and *allows* something to happen. Experimenting with this process has led me to different conclusions from those reached by scholars like Earl R. Wasserman and Joseph R. Roach, who see Hill's system as a purely Cartesian one in which the will works on the passive body: I, on the other hand, see the system as one promoting, through terminology influenced by Descartes, an approach combining a prompt to imagine (an act of volition) with a psychosomatic receptivity to the resulting imagery.¹²⁹ This shall become particularly apparent when we discuss Hill's 'shortcut'.

In both the *Essay* and 'The Actor's Epitome' this fourth and final step (taken 'to act a passion well') results in qualities of gesture and voice appropriate to the passion to be expressed. In the *Essay* Hill writes:

4thly, THE muscles of the body, (brac'd, or slack, as the idea was an active or a passive one) must, in their natural, and not to be avoided consequence, by impelling or retarding the animal spirits, transmit their own conceived sensation, to the sound of the *voice*, and to the disposition of the *gesture*.¹³⁰

Here muscle tension is correlated with the idea or image of the affect to be portrayed. The effect of the concomitant muscle tension on the voice and gestures is what makes the acting style natural. Hill's system thus promotes a rapid sequence running along a physical path from the brain (imagination) into facial expression, then into the torso and extremities (muscle tension) and finally into the 'acting' itself.

Now the 'Essay' gets really interesting, for Hill goes on to propose a shortcut to the four-step sequence. He first describes ten 'dramatic passions' (which he defines as 'those which can be distinguished by their outward marks, in action'¹³¹), assigning to each of them a specific bodily state consisting of two (or sometimes three) components: active or passive muscles (body tension), a look (facial expression), and a specific 'look in the eye'. In the four-step sequence, if the imagination is strong

129 For instance, I feel uncomfortable with the use of the verb 'enforce' in the following quotation: 'Hill, therefore, made acting little more than an act of the will in enforcing the idealized concept of the emotion upon the plastic imagination'. See Earl R. Wasserman, 'The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Acting' in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July, 1947), 264-272, p. 267. See also Roach, op. cit., p. 85.

130 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 356.

131 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 357.

enough, the eye, look and tension specific to each of the ten dramatic passions will follow as natural consequences of the actor's thought (mental image). If, however, the actor's imagination is for some reason not strong enough to trigger the body into an affect, Hill encourages him or her to aid the transition by entering directly into the distinct physical state produced by the intended passion, meaning any one of these ten combinations of muscle tension, look and eye. Here is how he describes the 'shortcut' to joy (which he says combines 'muscles intense, and, a smile in the eye'¹³²):

the actor [...] may help his defective idea, in a moment, by annexing, at once, the *look* to the *idea*, in the very instant, while he is bracing his nerves into sprightliness: 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.¹³³

Hill's 'shorter road', then, is consciously to combine steps two and three (face and body) of his four-step system, allowing them to occur simultaneously with step one (the imagining). This conscious act of somatic adjustment permits the imagination to act upon a body that is prepared to receive it, thus facilitating the transition into any given passion. It is tricky to describe this sequence in terms of the acts of volition (will) to which the actor subjects himself in order to carry it out. Writing about the artistic experience is notoriously difficult, without falling into a vocabulary of ecstatic personal imagery – which is, after all, how it works. It takes many words – rational, grammatical, logical – to describe events that occur like flashes of lightening in the consciousness. To verbalize that which looms up as a non-verbal image in the actor's 'Thoughts', is to deform a very intimate and familiar embodied experience into something foreign, abstract and even confrontational.¹³⁴ However, I will try my hand at this difficult task. What follows will take much longer to read than it does to occur in the body, where the transitions are rapid, sometimes nearly instantaneous. My analysis is also personal: I do not – indeed cannot – speak for other actors. Nor

132 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 402.

133 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 362.

134 Artist-Researcher Anna Scott describes this as a kind of grieving, see, in this volume, Paul Craenen, 'Roundtable: The Artist-Researcher Inside Out: Strategies, Methodologies, Refractions'.

do I propose that mine is the right way, or even is what Hill intended (which ultimately is unknowable). In short, it should be read as descriptive, and not as prescriptive.

In transitioning from one strongly affective state to another specifically using Hill's shortcut – for instance from anger to pity without intermediary relaxation (i.e. a return to 'normal') – I have found that I must first 'feel' when the timing is right to start the transition. This 'feeling' has both an artistic and a technical component: by 'artistic' I mean an active aesthetic sense striving towards an expressive goal; by 'technical' I indicate a conscious somatic awareness of how this goal might best be achieved. At the moment of transition, I *sense* or *feel* a psychosomatic pause or a slowing of the performative arc that indicates the moment that the text for anger has been fully expressed. My aim is to *sense* when the audience has had a chance to absorb the meaning and beauty of the words, the artistic-performative qualities of poetry and voice; simultaneously I allow myself to *feel* when the internal performative energy has ebbed propitiously, creating an opportunity for me to begin the transition, without allowing the energy to dip, which would break the flow and create an 'unnatural' gap, making a smooth transition difficult to achieve. Thus, at this tipping point, there is an artistic/technical choice to be made, in which embodied acting experience plays a decisive role. I agree with dancer-researcher Suzan Tunca when she describes her experience of such delicate moments during performance thus:

How does a performer know what is the 'proper' point? I am always fascinated by these 'artistic' insights. [...] it feels almost like an 'absolute' kind of knowing, implying some kind of agency of the artistic work that 'commands' certain choices into being, I think it's something larger that just incorporated skills through training, it is a kind of intuitive 'knowing of'...¹³⁵

At the proper point, I begin the process of transition from anger to pity, by first experiencing the general state of muscular tension in my body, thereafter – if need be – by focussing on any lingering manifestations of muscle tension that are natural to anger but that would be detrimental to the 'painting' of pity in the body. For me this often (but not inevitably) involves muscles of the back, neck and shoulders,

135 Suzan Tunca, private communication (26-07-2021).

as well as the eyelids and temples. In a cold, calculating, technical act of volition, I imagine-request these muscles to move from 'brac'd' to 'slack'. As soon as I perceive that the slackening has started, and feel that the muscles have begun to respond, I (in a warmer, gentler act of artistic will) summon up images associated with pity. Now both the *imagined* sound of the voice and facial expression that I associate with pity, as well as the *imagined* situation in which the character (in this case, Belmour, from *The Fatal Extravagance*) finds himself, work further on the muscles – but they in turn also affect the *imagination*. Acts of imagining result in changes not only in the body, but also in the mind and thus in the very imagination itself. In Hill's shorter way, the role and nature of consciousness oscillates between active and passive as the transition becomes increasingly physical. The actor's path, the 'mazy round', leads back and forth, round and round, from artistic to technical to artistic and so on. From thinking-imagining how to get to the new affective state, to imagining-feeling the psychosomatic state as it manifests itself, the roles of 'ghost' and 'machine' are involved in a neat choreography, and, like Fred and Ginger, are inseparable, indeed at times nearly indistinguishable.

However, it should be noted here, particularly in relation to the role of the will in this process, that having achieved what I believe to be the state of receptivity in the body promoted in 'The Actor's Epitome' (see hereafter), two modes of imagining are possible: sometimes a specific image of pity can be consciously chosen (an act of will), while at other times images – answering the mind's more general call – become perceptible all on their own. That is to say, my mind may simply be moved towards an indeterminate sensation of pity, rather than call up one specific image associated with it. This notion might then trigger the manifestation of a more specific image from all the images possible. The selection process is not, in this case, conscious and is seemingly random. I often experience such an impulse as 'spiritual', as being both 'outside of time' and yet somehow determined by the artistic/technical timing of the transition process described above. All of this makes me question current criticisms of eighteenth-century acting for being 'mechanical', as when Roach notes of two such different figures as Hill and Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781): 'They saw mind, which for them consisted of conscious thought, acting on body, which consisted

of matter, and body acting on mind, but they saw little or nothing in between.¹³⁶ Having experimented extensively with Hill's system, and experienced a good deal 'between' body and mind that I cannot put adequately into words, I refrain from endorsing such statements.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

THE ACTOR'S EPITOME (1735)

Although I had been working with *An Essay on the Art of Acting* on and off for about three years before embarking on this specific project, there are a number of factors which distinguished this most recent engagement from previous ones, and which have significantly affected the outcome. First of all, I prepared my body to experiment with the 'Essay' by first working on the 1735 version of 'The Actor's Epitome'. It appeared, as has been noted, in *The Prompter* on December 9th, 1735, and Hill, who delighted in 'every Opportunity of furnishing *Them* [the actors] with *new Lights*; and the *Publick* with new *Reasons*, why they ought to be esteem'd and encourag'd', introduced the poem thus: 'I recommend to the (*Tragic*) Incumbents of the Stage, a Resolution to *lay up*, in their *Memories*, an auxiliary Copy of Verses, which lately fell into my Hands, and seems, (like *Homer* in his *Nut-shell*) to contain THE WHOLE, in a LITTLE.'¹³⁷

I decided that this poem could be used to bring the acting body into a specific state of alert awareness and muscular ease which in turn could serve as a propitious starting point from which the passions as described in the *Essay* could be developed. I first studied, annotated and memorized the text, and then began working on it as a declamatory piece to be performed with gesture. During this process I made choices about how much word painting to use, and which affects to paint, as these strongly influence the energy level of the actor in any given line.

¹³⁶ Roach, op. cit., p. 85.

¹³⁷ Hill, *The Prompter*, Numb. CXIII, Tuesday, December 9th, 1735.

By means of this practice, I felt that I improved my ability to excite the imagination, rendering it more ‘ductile’ (a quality Hill deems essential in ‘An Essay on the Art of Acting’) through somatic memory and repetitions of visual imagery (*‘each pictur’d Passion weigh’*). After much practice, I found myself – by the time I came to the last four lines – in a state of excited anticipation for the final declamatory ascent, which I performed in a monotone, rising the musical interval of a fifth to the line ‘And the Shot SOUL, in every Start, ASCEND’. This final climbing declamation, and Hill’s brilliant imagery, indeed more often than not, affected my body in an electric and thrilling manner.

Hill’s language and the density of images in this poem make it something of a challenge to interpret. In attempting to determine what Hill meant by ‘Shot SOUL’, I was struck by the link made both in Samuel Johnson’s (1709-1784) *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Noah Webster’s (1758-1843) *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) between ‘shoot’ and a sprouting seed. This, in turn, reminded me of a passage from Hill’s 1746 *The Art of Acting* that I had hitherto found very obscure:

Mark, when th’expanding *Seed*, from Earth’s moist Bed,
 Starting, at Nature’s Call, prepares to *spread*;
 First, the prone ROOT breaks downward—thence ascend
 Shot *Stems*—whose *Joints* collateral *Boughs* extend:
Twigs, from those *Boughs*, lend *Leaves*. —Each *Leaf* contains
 Side-less’ning *Stalks*, transvers’d by *fibry Veins*.
 So, from injected Thought, shoots *Passion’s* Growth;
 No Sprout spontaneous—no *chance Child*, of Sloth:
 IDEA lends it ROOT. —Firm, on touch’d Minds,
 Fancy, (swift Planter!) first, th’Impression binds;
 Shape’d, in *Conception’s* Mould, *Nature’s* prompt Skill
 Bids subject *Nerves* obey th’inspiring WILL:
 Strung to obsequious Bend, the *mus’ly* Frame
 Stamps the shown Image—*Pleasure—Pity—Shame—*
Anger—Grief—Terror, catch th’adaptive *Spring*,
 While the *Eye* darts it! —and the *Accents* ring.¹³⁸

Taken together with the final line of the 1735 ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, I began to see the image of the shot seed or shot soul as very important. I came to understand this passage in an Aristotelian sense: just as the

¹³⁸ Hill (1746), op. cit., pp. 10-11.

essence of a cherry pit is its potential to become a huge, fruit-bearing tree, so too the essence of each thought/image of a passion is its potential to manifest itself in great detail and variety in the actor's body as it 'sprouts' in the 'soul'. I began using this imagery in carrying out Hills 'applications' and found it yet quicker and more effective in most cases than my initial method, described in detail above. This 'sprouting' conception of the art of acting as *a triggering of the innate potential of affect-images to manifest themselves – perceptibly and in diverse abundance – in the body*, however, stands in stark contrast to the view many theatre scholars have today of historical acting practices and styles. The determination to develop an overarching and linear scholarly narrative leading from the supposedly more objective 'oratorical style' of the Restoration period to our current efforts at naturalism in acting has in some cases, in my opinion, led to an oversimplistic view of the first half of the eighteenth century as a time in which all the stage had to offer was static poses with predetermined meanings, accompanied by inflated declamation – at least, we are told, before the arrival of Garrick in 1741. Hill's lush, leafy imagery, however, so full of growth, movement and manifold possibilities, strongly suggests the potential for a variety of 'natural' outcomes in the actor's body.

All in all, then, my work on *The Actor's Epitome* proved to be a rich experience both on a scholarly and on a practical level. Making use of the resulting (embodied) knowledge while performing the 'applications' from the *Essay* undoubtedly influenced the final outcome of the project.

AN ESSAY ON THE ART OF ACTING

Hill wrote lengthy prose descriptions of each of the ten dramatic passions (joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder, love), and chose one or two appropriate theatrical texts for the actor to memorize and declaim. James Harriman-Smith has noted that:

Hill does not see these ten 'dramatic passions' as stable monoliths, but rather as elements of a dynamic experience [...]. The actor should not seek out the passions as a static background for a scene or speech, but rather focus on the process by which that emotion rises, evolves in the moment, and departs.¹³⁹

139 James Harriman-Smith, *Criticism, Performance, and the Passions in the Eighteenth Century: The Art of Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 33.

The preparations for this particular round of engagement with Hill's 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' were both scholarly and performative. Researching and writing the first section of this article formed an important basis and allowed me to draw new conclusions about how Hill's texts could be understood and used. Only thereafter did I begin warming up the texts, which I had retained quite well in my memory from previous experiments. I practiced them every day for several weeks.¹⁴⁰ The final stage involved presenting my work to the Dutch Historical Acting Collective during a week-long meeting in August 2021, and filming 'The Actor's Epitome' as well as the sequence of passions from the 'Essay'. The feedback I got from the members of DHAC, and the experience of presenting my work before them (after a pandemic – a live audience!), led me to change my intentions: where I had originally used Hill's texts purely technically, as springs to inner feeling, I now began to incorporate the tools of the actor, such as declamation, gesture and attitude. Thus, I stopped using the exercises merely as a training ground for a ductile imagination, and began seeing them as *études*, or performance pieces whose underlying theatrical affects were generated by means of Hill's specified somatic configurations. It was therefore necessary to take the larger dramatic context of these excerpts into account.

Two videos are available of my work with Hill. Neither of them fully documents the process described above.¹⁴¹ A single skirmish cannot encapsulate the entire war. In the longer video, I return my body to neutral in between the ten dramatic passions, rather than transitioning directly from one to the next.

MY CONCLUSIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

I finish by comparing my conclusions and experiences to what some scholars have written about Hill's system in the last fifty years. This serves not only as a manner of comparing my embodied research to academic opinions on the topic, but also points out the uses of practice-based research in the arts.

The most important conclusion, for me at least, is that Hill does not propose that the specific combinations of muscle tension and facial

¹⁴⁰ See Fn. 8.

¹⁴¹ The videos can be found here: <https://jedwentz.com/wentz-edps/> (last accessed 23-02-2022).

expression he advocates comprise the art of acting *as such*, but rather that the actor can consciously use them to awaken affect in the body through intentional (willed) imaginings. On the other hand, some scholars have taken the somatic combinations as an end rather than a means, which has led them to undervalue both Hill and his system. Take for instance Thomas R. Preston:

At the end of his *Essay*, Hill supplies an abbreviated version of the rules for representing the ten major passions, and except for the look in the eye, six of the rules are identical. They deserve listing to show how the rules for representing a particular passion inevitably led to their application to nearly all passions indiscriminately.¹⁴²

Preston understands Hill's system as rules for *representing* the ten major passions, rather than as a somatic shortcut to triggering multifarious manifestations of affect in the body, and he greatly undervalues the importance of the look in the eye in stimulating the actor's imagination. More recently, the reviewer of a facsimile edition of *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill Esq.* sardonically dismissed Hill's system on the same grounds:

Volume 4 concludes with "[An] Essay on the Art of Acting." As with many pages throughout the four volumes, the reprint is very lightly inked, and many words are lost to illegibility. At times, however, one does not really mind not being able to read Hill's thespian insights, such as the fact that love is shown by "muscles intense, – and respectful attention in the eye" while fear would have the "muscles and look both languid – with an alarm in eye and motion," and jealousy "by muscles intense, and the look pensive; or the look intense and the muscles languid, interchangeably." At times the century embarrasses even its staunchest defenders.¹⁴³

Paul Goring's understanding of Hill is more nuanced than these, but he still sees Hill's writing as prescriptive:

Hill advances an acting technique in which the performer should attempt to *feel* the emotions which the fictional character would feel in the various situations engineered by the playwright – a technique akin to that famously promoted much later by the Russian actor and producer Konstantin

142 Thomas R. Preston, 'The "Stage Passions" and Smollett's Characterization', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January, 1974), 105-125, p. 120.

143 [Anonymus], *The Scriblerian and the Kit-Kats*, Vol. 40, Numbers 1-2, (Autumn 2007-2008), p. 146.

Stanislavsky and also later by 'method' actors. But while Hill promotes such an internalised technique, he is at the same time partly prescriptive when it comes to illustrating the bodily signs that feelings actually produce. [...] There is then, a certain methodological tension in *The Art of Acting*, as Hill invites his trainee actors to follow not only their imagined emotions but also his own illustrations of moved bodies moving.¹⁴⁴

The problem here is that while Hill is certainly filling the actor's 'Thoughts' with images so that she or he may '*each pictur'd Passion weigh*', he is both encouraging the actor to make a psychosomatic *shortcut*, and describing a range of physical consequences which may arise from triggering the natural responses of the body to any given affect (particularly in the 1746 poem *The Art of Acting*). To return to the imagery of the germinating seed, the leaves and shoots of passion need not be identical with each sprouting.

Claudio Vicentini, too, sees prescription in Hill's work, writing of the: 'rather unwieldy presence of a pre-established expressive code to be learnt by heart.'¹⁴⁵ Vicentini sums up Hill's thought by bringing together, quite incongruously, the physical characteristics Hill considered most suitable for stage actors (eye colour) with the principles of his acting system, in order to declare the whole paradoxical and stifling:

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.¹⁴⁶

Vicentini seems to find embodiment ('groomed', 'at the drop of a hat') and preparation ('marked passion by passion in red and black') as stifling to creativity, but this was far from my experience in carrying out my research. In fact, my extensive training and performance experience as

144 Goring, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

145 Vicentini, op. cit., p. 154.

146 Vicentini, *ibid.*, p. 155.

a musician makes this kind of reasoning seem quite naïve: professional musicians devote many years to repetitive practice, in order to be able to carry out complex sequences of movements in a precise order and with a predetermined affective flow and timing; and yet we do not generally feel artistically or emotionally stifled by our embodied technique. On the contrary, we gain confidence from it, knowing that embodiment helps us to be creative – for the sake of expression – in *how* these predetermined sequences of notes, phrases and affects are to be performed. Furthermore, for a practical performer rather than a theoretician, there is no paradox between Hill's method and goals in 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753). His shortcut – as I and other members of the Dutch Historical Acting Collective who have experimented with the system have found – really is a shortcut. It has enabled us to feel somatically the transitions between affects, and practicing it has also increased our receptivity, which in turn has resulted in a *greater* variety of expression in the acting.

Joseph R. Roach, much like Vicentini, seems to have thought of Hill's system as cumbersome or laborious. In *The Player's Passion*, he rather fancifully wrote that actors using Hill's system might have resorted to (and irritated Garrick with) 'offensive offstage rituals'.¹⁴⁷ This is somewhat odd, as it is clear that Hill's intention was to train actors to summon up affect easily, quickly and naturally on stage, that is to say, mid action. Roach, however, lays a more serious charge against Hill when he argues that quick transitions are incompatible with certain principles of Cartesian philosophy:

For all their elaborate physiological descriptions, Aaron Hill and the mechanists [...] had ignored an important passage in *Les passions de l'âme*, article 46, entitled "The reason which prevents the soul for being able wholly to control its passion." Here Descartes described the slowness with which the strong passions, once stirred, relinquish their grip. This tends to make hash out of imaginative ductility.¹⁴⁸

It is possible that Roach is here using Descartes to pass judgement ('hash') on one of Hill's basic principles. If so, my experience leads me to an opposite conclusion, for Hill's shortcut actually *solved* the problem of the

¹⁴⁷ Roach, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁴⁸ Roach, *ibid.*, p. 112.

tyranny of the stronger passions, and resulted in more rapid transitions than ‘nature herself’ would allow. I would propose that when the actor intentionally changes his or her look and muscle tension at the same time as the imagination produces the image of the passion, the resistance described by Descartes – which I interpret as that stubborn muscular tension which impedes transition like a kind of ‘somatic inertia’ – is removed, clearing the way for a new affect rapidly to manifest itself.¹⁴⁹ It seems to me that this is the very crux of Hill’s method, and for this reason it does not surprise me that Hill considered Garrick (that master of transitions) to be the avatar of his system.

It is possible, however, that Roach – rather than using Descartes to discredit the efficacy of imaginative ductility in and of itself – is actually reproaching Hill for being inconsistent in his application of Cartesian concepts. One of the differences between Roach’s approach and my own is that I do not expect, nor do I actively look for, paradigm shifts when reading historical sources. Indeed, I am, as a performer, generally more interested in continuity and the gradual metamorphosis of performative traditions. As Alan S. Downer noted: ‘Styles of acting change, but the change is gradual. Not only the actor but the audience must change, for the spectator must be prepared to believe what he sees.’¹⁵⁰ That is why I have pointed out (in the first part of this article) that the influence of Barton Booth on Hill should be taken into account when examining the latter’s system, and why I have proposed that Hill’s work might be seen as a bridge between the acting of the first half of the eighteenth century and the second. It is dangerous to assume that just because a writer makes use of ideas and images from Descartes, that said writer was therefore in all things consistently Cartesian. As Jennifer Montagu pointed out in her work on the *Conférences sur l’expression Générale et particulière* of Charles Le Brun (1619–1690): ‘Le Brun’s debt to Descartes has often been cited, and the *Traité sur les passions* was certainly the most

149 In article 46 of *Les passions de l’âme*, Descartes writes that ‘the passions are not only caused but maintained and strengthened by some particular movement of the spirits.’ He describes in article 11 how the spirits cause muscles to shorten or lengthen. See ‘The Passions of the Soul’ in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings* tr. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 235 and 222. See also the description of unsuccessful grief in Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. 4., pp. 364-5, starting at ‘His muscles must fall loose’.

150 Alan S. Downer, ‘Nature to Advantage Dressed: Eighteenth-Century Acting’, *PMLA*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Dec. 1943, p. 1005.

important source from which Le Brun borrowed material for his lecture. But it was not the only one.¹⁵¹ Montagu then goes on to point out that Le Brun also quotes from Marin Cureau de la Chambre's (1594–1669) *Les Caracteres des Passions* (the first volume of which appeared in 1640), a work 'firmly in the Scholastic tradition'. Indeed, the chain of sources Le Brun used stretched back as far as 1585 with Guillaume de Vair's (1556–1621) *La Philosophie morale des Stoics*. Robert D. Hume has argued against Roach's methodological approach to theatre studies and I will not retrace his steps here.¹⁵² My point is merely that I have reached different conclusions than Vicentini or Roach because of my chosen methodology, general starting points and embodied outcomes.

Finally, Christine Gerard, in her biography of Hill, raises a few issues that I feel should be discussed. The first has to do with the idea that Hill was a progressive acting coach:

Hill considered himself progressive and modern in his views on acting. Many of the *Prompter* essays anticipate the 'realistic' approach espoused by Macklin and Garrick in the 1740s, where less emphasis was placed on set formulas for character representation and more on the need for the actor to cultivate empathy for the character he was playing.¹⁵³

One can understand Gerrard's remarks. Indeed, in reading *The Prompter* one might even draw the conclusion that Hill promoted an entirely naturalistic style of acting, one that arose purely and spontaneously from the psychosomatic state of the actor. After all, Hill scoffed at actors who followed the rules for orators laid down by Quintilian, discouraged the extensive use of mirrors to train the actor's body and warned in *The Prompter* against painting and drawings being used as guides for attitudes and facial expressions. And yet, Hill suggested to Garrick – in the same letter in which he confined the use of mirrors to a 'few day's practice'¹⁵⁴ – that the great actor himself could profit from studying French painting. Hill first makes a case for relying entirely on nature:

151 Jennifer Montagu, *The Expressions of the Passions: The origin and influence of Charles Le Brun's Conférence sur l'expression Générale et particulière* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 156.

152 See: Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford, OUP, 1999), pp. 166-170.

153 Gerrard, op. cit., p. 168.

154 Hill (1753), op. cit., Vol. II, p. 381.

For in natural consequence of an impression, muscular and mental, every attitude that offers, cannot fail to be a proper one; and those, that best become a passion, aim'd at, will arise spontaneously; as fast, as they are wanted; just as *words* invest *ideas*: more, or less, indeed, expressively, as the conception of their *utterer*, is a clear, or a confused one.¹⁵⁵

A bit further on, however, and quite out of the blue, he brings up French history painting:

If ever any *painter, statuary or engraver*, in the world, had such *creative* power, as one *life-painter* has, whom *nature* lodged in Mr. GARRICK's fancy, 'tis in *France*, he must be looked for. They have their innumerable *prints*; all filled in masterly perfection, with whatever is, or was, most celebrated, in the *history-pieces*, and *fine statues*, of antiquity, And a well-chosen *collection*, from the *best* of these, would furnish infinite *supply* of *hints*, to so compleat a *judge* of *attitudes*, as I here, wish 'em *viewed* by. I say *hints*, because, in many of the *finest* of 'em all, there are *defects*, which *you* could rectify.¹⁵⁶

Hill then goes on to flatter the actor:

For you will see, with pleasure, they grew chiefly (as I everywhere observed, in *Italy*) from some *unnerved* remissness, in the *joints*, that lamed the purposed *animation*, in the *posture*; and you cannot fail to draw a *proof* from that remark, how much the *painters* may improve, by copying Mr. Garrick, and what little room there is, for *his* improving, by the *painters*.¹⁵⁷

Even as he compliments, he still seems to be insisting that there is at least something ('what little room there is') that Garrick could learn from the study of painting. It seems that Hill did indeed expect actors to learn about attitudes from painting.

This leaves some room for speculation as to the 'newness' of Hill's acting aesthetic. Once again, I would return to the idea that Hill greatly admired the acting of Barton Booth, and indeed that his acting theory was inspired by having witnessed Booth's performances. This brings us to the acting style in vogue around the turn of the eighteenth century, and particularly to Thomas Betterton, with whom Booth worked. Although one might question exactly what Betterton himself might have made of the words attributed to him in Charles Gildon's (ca. 1665–1724) *The*

155 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 382.

156 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 385.

157 Hill, *ibid.*, p. 385.

Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, there is no reason to discount it as a source; and as it was published in London in 1710, Hill certainly would have had every opportunity to read it. An examination of the propositions in Gildon's book regarding acting reveals many points that would later be promoted by Hill as essential to his own acting system. There were, of course, differences: Gildon, for instance, advocates the use a mirror and observes the rule that actors not raise their hands above their eyes.¹⁵⁸ However, on key points there is enough agreement between Gildon and Hill to see in the latter a continuation of certain aspects of the acting style of the late seventeenth century. This all makes it very difficult for us at a distance of 300 years to determine in what ways and to what degree Hill should be called progressive. Perhaps he could better be described as an advocate for the renewal of a manner of acting that was temporarily lost (during a period in which superb actors were scarce), rather than the creator of something that was entirely new?

Two final quotations from Gerrard's biography to be examined here concern possible reasons why Hill's system has not been more positively received by some academics. I do not want to hang a generally negative assessment exclusively on Gerrard. I believe her feelings are shared by others when she writes:

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of Hill's theory was its confident but over-simplistic identification of the mind with conscious thought, acting on body, which consisted of matter: a Cartesian dualism which took no account of the subconscious or unconscious part of the imagination.¹⁵⁹

As has been mentioned above, Roach's *The Player's Passion* also contains a passage proposing that Hill 'saw little or nothing in between' mind and body. My response is that such statements tell us more about the assumptions of contemporary scholars than about the shortcomings of Hill's system. One should be wary of denying the participation of the unconscious simply because it is not explicitly mentioned in Hill's text. As I have pointed out, in my experience the unconscious seems somehow to participate in raising images in the imagination: whether or not Hill could conceive of the unconscious is irrelevant to what an actor using his system experiences.

158 See Gildon, *The life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, the Late Eminent Tragedian* (London: Robert Gosling, 1710), pp. 54-5 and p. 76.

159 Gerrard, op. cit., p. 170.

However, the final quotation I examine from Gerrard's biography of Hill – one that itself cites Roach's *The Player's Passion* – seems to go quite a way towards explaining the current antipathy to Hill's 'mechanical' approach: 'Pushed to an extreme, there was also something faintly repellent about Hill's vision of the actor as 'a hydro-dynamic passion mill, all springs, and cogs, pulling strings and pushing gears'.¹⁶⁰

Here then we come full circle, returning to Richardson's shaken frame as a metaphor for what appears to be a persistent discomfort experienced by humans when they are confronted with the mechanical, that is to say, somatic nature of feelings. I am convinced that the very real effects of this 'faintly repellent' vision are exactly what Richardson actually *felt* in 1746, when his whole body was shaken by 'Tremors' and 'Startings'. I too was struck by a kind of horror, as if I had learned something most unpleasant about myself, when I first engaged with 'An Essay on the Art of Acting' (1753). Yet, the most important thing I have gleaned from this research trajectory – and it is something that will certainly be useful to me in my future practice-based work on historical acting – is to welcome the *feeling* of these consciously triggered physical manifestations of the passions: learning first to tolerate, then to manipulate and finally to relish, the pushing and pulling of nature's most admirable affecting cogs and springs.

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160 Gerrard, *ibid.*, p. 170. See also Roach, *op. cit.*, p. 85.