Chapter 1

THEATER AND PAINTING

The Legible Face:
Romantic Antitheatricality and the Legacy of Garrick

The shock experience of modernity, as defined in my introduction, derives from the perceived realism of popular visual-cultural phenomena. Such a phenomenon was David Garrick. His first biographer, Thomas Davies, relates the impression Garrick made on his stage debut in October 1741:

Mr. Garrick's easy and familiar, yet forcible style in speaking and acting, at first threw the critics into some hesitation concerning the novelty as well as propriety of his manner. . . . But after he had gone through a variety of scenes, in which he gave evident proofs of consummate art, and perfect knowledge of character, their doubts were turned into surprise and astonishment, from which they relieved themselves by loud and reiterated applause.¹

The audience's response to Garrick anticipates the psychological phases of the sublime later described by Kant. The spectators move, by collective degrees, from an initial negative moment of “hesitation” and “doubt,” to a pitch of “astonishment,” to the psychical “relief” of approbation. The object of wonder in this case is not the natural sublime, but Garrick’s naturalistic style. Although no conclusive visual evidence of his stage technique is available, first-hand accounts attest to the reality effect integral to a Garrick performance:

So when great Shakespeare to his Garrick join's,
With mutual aid conspire to rouse the mind,
‘Tis not a scene of idle mimickry,
‘Tis Lear’s, Hamlet’s, Richard’s self we see. 2

Garrick’s friend, Samuel Johnson, marveled at his complete impersonation of a role, and explored further the critical distinction between “mimickry,” represented in this case by the comic actor Samuel Foote, and Garrick’s new standard of psychological realism:

Foote was even no mimic. He went out of himself, it is true, but without going into another man. He was excelled by Garrick even in this, which is considered as Foote’s greatest excellence. Garrick, besides his exact imitation of the voice and gesture of his original, to a degree of refinement of which Foote had no conception, exhibited the mind and mode of thinking of the person imitated. 3

In short, the attraction of a Garrick performance lay not merely in his ability to suspend the disbelief of his audience, as Coleridge would later define the effect, but to defy disbelief altogether in his adoption of a persona not his own.

Although their individual styles differed markedly from each other, the great actors of the generation after Garrick—Kemble, Siddons, and later Kean—shared a common inheritance in Garrick’s natural technique and emphasis on psychological depth. 4 Like Garrick before her, Sarah Siddons did not seem to “act” when onstage, but to be in “downright earnest.” 5 But this association of the theater with psychological realism disturbed many of the early nineteenth-century writers who make up the Romantic canon. Wordsworth, for example, felt his imaginative powers “languish” at the theater’s “gross realities” (The Prelude VII.509). Even for so influential a promoter of the Regency stage as William Hazlitt, a Shakespearean hero—a sublime, infinitely rich character on the page—could become an “unmanageable reality” when impersonated on the stage. 6 The positive appeal of the reality effect, on which purveyors of visual entertainment from Garrick to Belzoni depended for their door receipts, was the thrilling shock it provided the spectator. But Charles Lamb, watching Edmund Kean play Macbeth, felt his literary sensibility suffocate under “the too close pressing semblance of reality.” Instead of thrill, Lamb experienced a “pain and an uneasiness” at Kean’s performance of Shakespeare’s text, “which totally destroy[ed] all the delight which the words in the book convey.” 7

In addition to the disturbing effects of naturalistic acting, the new fashion for visual spectacle on the London stage threatened the theater’s tradi-