











Emma Lyon sometimes performed major dramatic roles, albeit silently: above left, her portrayal of Medea, with one of her murdered children. Right: Emma posed as Tamar, David's daughter raped by her brother Amnon.

subject matter ranged from the classical tradition, in which she performed Niobe, Pylades, and Medea, among others, to the Virgin Mary. Yet despite the diversity of her subjects, she needed only a classical robe – a 'drape' – in order to convey the transitions from one subject to the next, each of the poses lasting ten minutes or less (Holmström, p. 116).

We know that some practitioners of the *attitude* accompanied their work with narration and music,<sup>3</sup> but the extent to which this occurred in Emma's case is unclear. Sir William would occasionally explain poses as he narrated the performances, and the audience's reaction to a given pose would also indicate that it was complete and recognizable. Since Lyon would not withdraw behind a curtain between poses, and the costume seldom changed, the performances were fluid events and required the audience to make an effort at identifying the classical statue being imitated. There was something of the pantomime in Emma's work.

Technical support for Lyon's performances was limited to the domain of lighting. Sir William was responsible for this effect. He used torchlight to nuance Lyon's expressions and to attain the ominous effects of silhouette. Reports of her performances note a use of light that was rare at the time: if the performance took place by day, the windows were darkened so that the light came exclusively from Sir William's torch (Holmström, p. 117).

Lyon's use of light echoes a popular trend among *grand tourists* in the 1780s, when tourists and artists visited sculpture gardens and studios by night and illuminated the statuary with torches (p. 117). The spectators aimed to make the statuary seem as though it were alive; by the flickering of the torchlight, the contours of the marble would seem to take on the pulse of live flesh and veins.

### Goethe and the Attitude

Goethe arrived in Naples during the Spring of 1787, accompanied by his friend the

painter Johann Heinrich Tischbein (1751–1829). When he saw Emma Lyon perform her *attitudes*, he described his experience as follows:

Er hat sie bei sich, eine Engländerin von etwa zwanzig Jahren. Sie ist sehr schön und wohl gebaut. Er hat ihr ein griechisch Gewand machen lassen, das sie trefflich kleidet, dazu löst sie ihre Haare auf, nimmt ein paar Shawls und macht eine Abwechslung von Stellungen, Gebärden, Mienen pp., daß man zuletzt wirklich meint man träume. Man schaut, was so viele tausend Künstler gerne geleistet hätten, hier ganz fertig, in Bewegung und überraschender Abwechslung. Stehend, kniend, sitzend, liegend, ernst, traurig, neckisch, ausschweifend, bußfertig, lockend, drohend, ängstlich pp. eins folgt aufs andere und aus dem andern. Sie weiß zu jedem Ausdruck die Faltern des Schleiers zu wählen, zu wechseln, und macht sich hundert Arten von Kopfputz mit denselben Tüchern. Der alte Ritter hält das Licht dazu und hat mit ganzer Seele sich diesem Gegenstand ergeben. Er findet in ihr alle Antiken, alle schöne Profile der Sicilianischen Münzen, ja den Belveder'schen Apoll selbst. Soviel ist gewiß, der Spaß ist einzig! Wir haben ihn schon zwei Abende genossen. Heute früh malt sie Tischbein.  
 (Goethe, 1, 31, p. 55)

This rich passage from Goethe's *Italienische Reise* opens up several paths of inquiry. Emma Lyon emerges from this description as the practitioner of an appealing art form: Goethe's passage makes a strong link between Hamilton's activity as an excavator and his pleasure in Emma's performances. The description also mentions her use of the drape to bring about character changes very quickly and simply, and confirms that the performances took place at night with Sir William holding the torch.

The passage also indicates the easy rhythm and dream-like characteristics of Lyon's work: she appears to Goethe to exceed the efforts of thousands of painters who tried to represent the human body. He notes that with Lyon, the picture is 'ganz fertig, in Bewegung und überraschender Abwechslung'. In an odd description of Lyon as if she were the product of a painter's efforts, Goethe announces her the finer painting.

The other major passage in Goethe's *Italienische Reise* devoted to Emma Lyon's

performances occurs during his second trip to Naples. After seeing Lyon perform once, Goethe left Naples for Sicily. He returned to Naples again afterwards, staying this time at the Palazzo Sessa, and on this occasion Hamilton showed Goethe the cellars in which his antiquities and various unsorted curiosities were stored. Goethe saw a casket-like box in the cellars which had been used in Lyon's previous performances (Fothergill, p. 233). He describes this container as black on the inside and framed in gold. The piece was large enough for a person: it was explained to Goethe that

Der Kunst- und Mädchenfreund [Hamilton], nicht zufrieden das schöne Gebild als bewegliche Statue zu sehen, wollte sich auch an ihr als an einem bunten, unnachahmbaren Gemälde ergötzen und so hatte sie manchmal innerhalb dieses goldnen Rahmens, auf schwarzem Grund vielfarbig gekleidet, die antiken Gemälde von Pompeji und selbst neuere Meisterwerke nachgeahmt.  
 (Goethe, 1, 31, p. 251)

This frame indicates that Emma Lyon's performances at Naples began as more static events than they would eventually become. The frame also makes clear that when Goethe compared Lyon's work to the work of thousands of painters, the comparison was grounded in the performances which Hamilton had been orchestrating with Lyon. The pictorial dimension of the performances that Goethe hinted at in his first description was the acknowledged aesthetic foundation on which the performances were built.

### Movements as Moments of Focus

First, then, Emma Lyon's performances need to be examined on the border between a static, composed visual art form – which I will call the pictorial – and the narrative mode of storytelling. Several points of comparison with other aesthetic debates make themselves available when we engage Lyon's work at this boundary between artistic genres, and specifically I will be concerned with Goethe's essay 'Über Laokoon' (1798).

Goethe suggests that the *Laocoon* is best viewed by torchlight in order to appreciate

the statue's latent sense of movement. Above, we noted that Lyon and Hamilton made strategic use of torchlight for the *attitudes*. Several other points in Goethe's essay contribute to a theory of the *attitude*. At root, Goethe seeks to develop a theory of performance in which the performer maintains the integrity of a static and idealized human figure. The performance event then engages that figure in a narrative sequence without compromising the performer's elevated classical presence.

We recall that the eighteenth century's fascination with the *Laocoon* centered on the larger *ut pictura poesis* debate between poetry and painting that originated with Virgil. Goethe wrote 'Über Laokoon' to be used as the first essay in the journal *Propyläen*, the organ of Weimar classicism. Hoping to emphasize the constraint and moderation in the *Laocoon* statue, Goethe argues that a plastic artwork is autonomous and self-sufficient, with no need for literary associations. Diverging from Lessing, who believed that the plastic arts were more limited than the narrative arts and argued for drama as the highest of all, Goethe contends that form alone is sufficient as an aesthetic experience (Flax, 1984, p. 8-9).

Although Goethe's position in the *Laocoon* debate is supportive of the pictorial rather than narrative, his essay also contributes to a theory of performance. In particular, there is one passage where he describes the statue as though it represented the most fruitful moment between two others: 'kurz vorher darf kein Teil des Ganzen sich in dieser Lage befunden haben, kurz hernach muß jeder Teil genötigt sein, diese Lage zu verlassen' (Goethe, 1, 47, p. 107). *Laocoon* thus functions as a short moment of focus. During those moments directly preceding and following the focused instant, the bodies in the group were somehow less interesting to behold. Either they were frantic, disorganized, or in some way less balanced than they are in the artifact as we have it.

Goethe supports *Laocoon's* static qualities, but he also admires the statue's ability to communicate movement despite the fact that it is immobile. He writes that if one

were to stand in front of the *Laocoon*, close one's eyes, then reopen them, it would seem as if the figures had actually moved: 'Man wird fürchten, indem man die Augen wieder öffnet, die ganze Gruppe verändert zu finden. Ich möchte sagen, wie sie jetzt dasteht, ist sie ein fixierter Blitz, eine Welle, versteinert im Augenblicke, da sie gegen das Ufer anströmt' (Goethe, 1, 47, p. 107).

The statue as Goethe represents it is always fresh and self-renewing despite its static condition. Its stasis tricks the eye's ability to discern movement by seeming to move in those instants when the eye is closed. Deferring the statue's movement out of the realm of the visible and into a moment of sightlessness, Goethe portrays a compelling statue that performs without moving.

We can sum up Goethe's model of how to view the *Laocoon* with the cinematic concept of a film still. When one film still is isolated from its adjacent stills, the image captures a moment full of motion that has been taken out of a continuum. Yet we know that even when a reel of film plays, there are gaps in the motion portrayed from still to still. If the reel were played slowly enough, these gaps would become perceptible to the human eye. Motion has occurred in these gaps, though imperceptible to the eye: if the film is to be effective it requires a momentary 'blink' as we jump from still to still.

Goethe foretells the cinematic phenomenon by suggesting a much slower equivalent, not with thousands of still images, but with one solid statue. The viewer closes his eyes, and when he reopens them he suspects that the statue has moved, although its physical properties remain unchanged. The *Laocoon* communicates movement – it fairly radiates it, in Goethe's description – but it is fixed.

The 'Über Laokoon' essay is most useful to us here for its term *fixierter Blitz*. This term captures the two-dimensional nature of the classical body's effect on the viewer. Though it is an immobile object, the statuary emanates a force as strong as a flash (*Blitz*). A *fixierter Blitz* extends the paradoxical but rewarding notion that light can flash at an

unceasing rate. The flash itself is a term we think of as quick and finite: it begins, intensifies, and subsides. However, Goethe's adjectival addition, *fixiert*, denotes an incessant flashing that has no dimmer or brighter luminosity, only the constant, intense quality of light we associate with the term *Blitz*.

To appropriate the *fixierter Blitz* to a performance aesthetic, the simple opposition of terms in the *ut pictura poesis* debate is insufficient. Goethe's *fixierter Blitz* is an example of a static formal property whose emanation is kinetic. The term spans the contradictory ideas that a flash, which is blinding but intermittent, can also be a constant. Goethe's sense of the *Laocoon* divides according to the same counterintuitive characteristics of the *fixierter Blitz*. All static, material dimensions of the object fall under the term *fixiert*, while the figure's content emanates from within as though it were a light from antiquity, a *Blitz*.

We acknowledge that what motion there is in the *Laocoon* group is deferred to a secondary level. Goethe's essay makes clear that some form of movement manifests itself to the viewer, but such movement takes place on a secondary level, while the eye is closed. This secondary motion is truly abstract: it does not manifest itself in discrete visual terms. As an abstraction, the statuary captures movement more beautifully than a moving phenomenon itself could. Deferring to a secondary realm of vision, movement occurs on an abstracted and non-referential level of perception only.

Neil Flax has claimed that Goethe's 'Über Laocoon' essay presents a 'syntactic' order for viewing the statue. He states that, for Goethe, the *Laocoon* 'is a conditional sentence in stone, an occasion to think a grammatical relation and to see it at the same time' (Flax, 1984, p. 10). Flax chooses grammatical terms in order to explain the secondary level on which motion takes place in Goethe's model. The viewer is able to 'think a grammatical relation' because he perceives motion while his eyes are closed. When he opens his eyes, he is looking at a conditional phrase: if it were to be moving, this statue would move as it seemed to move while the eye was closed.

### 'Fixierter Blitz' and Emma Lyon

While there is no mention in Goethe's 1798 essay of his experience in Lyon's audience in March 1787, there are strong thematic parallels between his journal entry in *Italienische Reise* and the critical essay 'Über Laocoon'. The texts correspond on the issues of motion and stasis. I will make two comparisons.

First there is Goethe's description of Emma Lyon's work, which evokes a hazy, dream-like atmosphere in which facial gestures and body poses alternate in a surreal sequence. When Lyon moves, she 'macht eine Abwechslung von Stellungen, Gebärden, Mienen pp., daß man zuletzt wirklich meint man träume'. When Goethe compares the viewing experience to that of dreaming (*träumen*), he supports the claim that the *Laocoon* is best appreciated on a secondary level, with closed eyes. Literally, then, the viewer's eyes are closed in both the journal entry and the critical essay.

The second point of comparison is the ease with which Emma Lyon takes on different poses. Since she is able to alternate poses and expressions so smoothly, Goethe perceives her performance as a glut of images that need to be focused. He uses no less than twelve descriptive terms to explain her performance, stringing them together in an enthusiastic spurt: 'Stehend, kniend, sitzend, liegend, ernst, traurig, neckisch, ausschweifend, bußfertig, lockend, drohend, ängstlich'. The poses pass over the viewer with great frequency and variation, forcing him to make an effort to focus.

Goethe wrote that he experienced a similar tension between focus and a flow of gestures when he viewed the *Laocoon*. He described the statue as though it represented the most fruitful moment between two others: 'kurz vorher darf kein Teil des Ganzen sich in dieser Lage befunden haben, kurz hernach muß jeder Teil genötigt sein, diese Lage zu verlassen' (Goethe, 1, 47, p. 107). The *Laocoon* focused Goethe's vision on one particular stance, but he believes he perceived the statue in several other stances. The statue's paradoxical quality of latent



movement allows Goethe to see the preceding and following stances; these adjacent stances are then blocked out once he is able to focus on the *Laocoon* as we know it.

Emma Lyon appears in *Italienische Reise* as the manifestation of one pose among many; again, Goethe needs to make an effort at focusing in order to bring her out of the implied haze of a dream. Emma Lyon samples through a series of expressions, and holds certain ones for extended periods. Yet as I stated when I described the details of her performance, it is never patently clear when her pose has actually begun or ended. We cannot be sure if a pose begins once the performer has ceased to move or ends when she resumes movement. Just as the *Laocoon* struck Goethe with the power of latent movement, so Emma Lyon unsettles the viewer's perception by making him question one discrete unit, the pose, among many.

Next, we may compare those passages in Goethe's essay that draw a direct comparison between Lyon's *attitudes* and painting. Goethe describes the performances as a manifestation of a high goal that thousands of painters aspire to, but cannot achieve. His admiration for Emma Lyon's achievement is based on the three criteria of completion, variation, and movement. Comparing her performance to a painter's work, Goethe writes: 'Man schaut, was so viele tausend Künstler gerne geleistet hätten, hier ganz fertig, in Bewegung und überraschender Abwechslung'.

In order to glean as much as possible from Goethe's comparison, we should recall the pictorial aspects of Lyon's performances. She often took the themes of her poses from ancient murals, renaissance paintings, or classical statuary. Furthermore, Emma Lyon had been a professional painter's model before becoming Charles Greville's companion. The subjects of her performances in addition to her own professional background make clear that the performance event was close to a *tableau vivant*. The *tableau* genre is useful to us here because it foregrounds the painterly aspects of performance. Though Lyon's performance was too varied, improvisational, and bare to be

called a *tableau*, the term does explain why Goethe would compare the event he witnessed in Naples to a painter's endeavour.

Goethe uses three criteria to compare Lyon's work to a painter's: completion, variation, and movement. As I discuss these three criteria below, it will soon become apparent that the terms contradict each other. It is important to realize that these three terms exist in tension, because (as with the *Laocoon*) Goethe describes the aesthetic moment as if it existed on the paradoxical threshold of both movement and stasis. After I have examined all three of these criteria, it will become clear that the Lyon experience is paradoxically both static and dynamic – in effect, the performer has the effect of radiating.

### First Criterion: Completion

First, Goethe claims that Lyon's performances attain completion. They are *ganz fertig*. This comment implies that most painters are unable to evoke the total presence of a human figure in their work, but that Emma Lyon is able to do so in hers. She is literally able to embody those figures that she represents on stage while a painter attempts to represent the human form on canvas with pigments. The question of embodiment in performance, however, is decidedly more complicated than simply having the actor's body physically present on stage and calling it total embodiment.

Twentieth-century performance studies have been preoccupied with the notion of embodiment since Brecht, and today, with the advent of virtual reality, the debate is even more intense. The eighteenth century also showed some concern for these questions. For instance, Joseph Roach presents two opposing schools of acting in the later part of the century. One camp believed that acting was a mechanical task, so that emotions have no real existence apart from their physiological manifestations (Roach, p. 84). The opposing camp endorsed a vitalist philosophy of acting, arguing that the performer's body contains a 'mine' of emotions within it. To act was to 'spring' this mine

(Roach, p. 96) and free a narrative that was embedded within the body.

The debate between the mechanical and the vitalist theories of acting gives one context in which to locate Emma Lyon's work. Goethe, for instance, would have been firmly allied with the mechanical school if we take his 'Regeln für Schauspieler' (1803) as indicative of his theatrical practice. There, he dictates the stance the actor must take whenever on stage, and goes so far as to suggest the precise way he should arrange his fingers: 'At Weimar the actor danced to the *regisseur's* tune . . . pressing his body into kinesthetic templates fashioned for him by the director' (Roach, p. 167).

Lyon's work, however, stands slightly outside the mechanical/vitalist debate because her performances were mute. The emotions she represented were purely gestural and the subject matter she chose was not only based on specific historical and mythological characters, but precise moments in those character's lives. Lyon did not have any narrative sequence within which to develop an emotion and then perform it, nor was she working with a contemporary playwright's rendition of a classical event. Her poses were prescribed by iconographic precedent and as a subset of that precedent her emotional gestures were prescribed as well.

### Second Criterion: Variation

In order for us to analyze the question of embodiment in Emma Lyon's performances, Goethe's criterion of completion needs to be considered together with a second criterion he mentions in the same sentence, variation. Goethe admires the *überraschende Abwechslung* in Lyon's work, the ease with which she varied her poses. These frequent, accomplished variations place in doubt whether any of her given poses could be said to be complete. Goethe's descriptive term, *ganz fertig*, implies that each pose attains fulfillment and stasis. Further, Goethe's prioritizing of the *attitude* over a painting suggests that, in addition to being complete, the pose was also a moment of total embodiment, usually unavailable to visual artists.

A tension exists in Goethe's description of Lyon's work; he values both the claim to 'complete' embodiment as well as the pleasing variations the performer is able to effect. Holmström's account of the performances states that Lyon held her *attitudes* for ten minutes (p. 116). However, Goethe's description of his two evenings in Naples with Tischbein suggests a more frequent variation between *attitudes*. The exact rate of variation is not worth dwelling on here; instead, this tension between motion and stasis refers us back to Goethe's 'Über Laokoon', in which he aestheticized a similar tension between two states of movement. We recall Goethe's belief that, on viewing the *Laocoon*, the statue moved while his eyes were closed. Though the statue was immobile when he opened his eyes, it seemed to quiver before him, pushing past the boundary of immobility.

Our analysis of Emma Lyon's work also benefits from a tension felt around the boundary of immobility. Though it would be difficult for her body to attain the composure and balance of a composition in stone, her performances still trick the human eye by blurring the distinction between one *attitude* and the next. Since there is no way of locating the precise coordinates of one single and discrete *attitude* among her movements, a latent sense of motion pervades her body even when it comes to rest.

This perspective on Lyon's performances also has a retroactive effect. The boundaries between immobility and variation are most vague when Lyon is placing the final touches on a given *attitude*; the viewer is unsure when the discrete unit of the *attitude* has begun. However, Lyon's transition out of the *attitude* must have been obvious. She would break out of one *attitude* and start the longer process of arranging her costume and body for the next *attitude*. As she emerges out of one *attitude*, Lyon demarcates it as complete since it is now past. However, the viewer may well have been focusing on the fine-tuning and adjusting that Lyon had been engaging before the break. Retroactively, Lyon accomplishes total embodiment, but no one was aware of this achievement until it had passed.