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The role of *séméiotique* in François Delsarte's aesthetics

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Abstract: This article introduces the aesthetic theory of François Delsarte (1811–1870) and his conception of semiotics. Delsarte created his “applied aesthetics” as a modern scientific method for artists, particularly performers, to investigate the nature of human being. Delsarte’s approach to performance involved the actor in observing human behavior, interpreting it through categories of voice, gesture, and language, and rendering it in an expansive display of types. Delsarte’s applied aesthetics involves the performer’s attention to signs and sign action, a study he called *séméiotique*. We see Delsarte’s program for inquiry into truth in what I call the actor’s task, which develops his or her human being through observation, analysis, and creation. This was Delsarte’s “orthopedic machine for correcting crippled intellects” – the crippled intellects being those intellectuals and conservatory teachers whose ideas on aesthetics he found to be neither systematic nor attuned to God’s reason. While it is well known in theatre and dance scholarship that Delsarte’s ideas and methods advanced the training of actors, dancers, and orators, particularly in the United States, my paper instead introduces him as a voice in nineteenth-century thinking on signs and semiosis. Delsarte’s aesthetics are firmly based in Thomist assumptions about a triune god whose nature is reflected imperfectly in man. Yet it is striking that Delsarte characterizes the sign relation as mediated in a modern sense, prior to Charles Peirce’s development of his own triadic sign relation, and semiotics as a modern method of scientific inquiry.

Keywords: Delsarte, Peirce, aesthetics, semiotic, inquiry, actor training

In Gustave Flaubert’s 1856 realist novel *Madame Bovary*, the title character persuades her husband, a provincial doctor, to treat a boy’s misshapen foot by encasing it in a box. Designed to straighten the foot and restore the boy to a normal life, the device proves to be a fraud, and his now gangrenous leg must be amputated. Flaubert juxtaposes his laconic narration of this disastrous experiment with Emma Bovary’s self-recriminations over her increasing

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disappointment in her husband. The boy is fitted with a wooden leg, a much older technology, to which he quickly adapts. This episode, like others in Flaubert's path-breaking novel, was intended to shock the reading public. They were accustomed, like the character Emma Bovary herself, to the idealized scenes of Romantic poetry and fiction. Flaubert found such idealism dangerous, particularly in the realms of science and medicine.

Yet aesthetic idealism persisted in literature, as in everyday life, to the end of the century. Poetry, fiction and drama, many readers felt, should present an ennobled picture of life that would refine the sensibilities and habits of its readers. This aesthetic idealism "merged aesthetics and ethics, and usually religion too, since most (but not all) idealists also believed that God was the highest incarnation of the trinity of beauty, goodness, and truth" (Moi 2006: 4). Many aesthetic idealists saw the artist as a progressive force in society; allied with the scientist and the businessman, the artist led by offering ideas and inspiration that would improve human lives. In a new incarnation of the centuries-old dispute between the ancients and the moderns, mid-nineteenth-century aesthetic idealism looked backward in order to look forward.

In 1856 François Delsarte, who was born in northern France not far from the setting of Flaubert's novel, was established in Paris as a teacher of voice and declamation, well known for his remarkable course in "applied aesthetics." Unlike Flaubert's secular critique of aesthetic idealism, Delsarte sought to test such idealism, as he found it in established schools of performance training, with modern scientific methods. He felt that aesthetics brought man closer to God, but only through the right sort of artistic and scientific inquiry. Delsarte developed a mechanism, in a sense, that would allow the performer to modernize the ancient arts that best account for human-nature. The notion that a "machine," correctly designed and used, could straighten a foot – or a mind – informed Delsarte's development of applied aesthetics, a method he employed in training actors, vocalists, and orators, in observation and artistic creation. Philosopher and novelist Raymond Brucker deemed his friend Delsarte's innovative and unconventional approach to performance training "an orthopedic machine to straighten crippled intellects" (cited in Zorn 1968: 117; also in; Shawn 1973 [1963]: 21). Unlike Flaubert's fictional machine, Delsarte's system was innovative and successful in its day. Celebrated actors and artists sought out his studio to learn his methods. The crippled intellects in this case belonged to Delsarte's own teachers, and to academic instruction in general, which emphasized imitation of behaviors modeled by each instructor and produced a confusion of arbitrary, conflicting choices in their students' acting. Delsarte's teaching methods were indebted not to his own vocal training so much as to the intellectual framework he developed. This system was based on his study of human nature – physical, mental, and spiritual.

1 Delsarte's significance

This paper¹ introduces Delsarte's aesthetics and the role of semeiotic (*séméiotique*) in it. Throughout, I weigh key aspects of Delsarte's *séméiotique* against the theory of semiotic developed by Charles Sanders Peirce.² While it is well known that Delsarte's ideas and methods advanced the training of performers in France and, later, in the United States, my paper instead treats him as an earlier nineteenth-century voice in the developing understanding of signs, not merely as elements for classification but as sign processes that offer a method of inquiry.

In the 1880s, the philosopher Charles S. Peirce studied applied aesthetics as it had been communicated to the American public by one of Delsarte's students – the acting teacher, playwright, designer, and director James Steele Mackaye. As Peirce worked on *A Guess at the Riddle*, he drafted an essay, published posthumously under the title “Trichotomic” (1888, *EP* 1), that related the triadic categories on which Delsarte's aesthetics is based to his own categories of life and experience. The relations between Peirce's ideas and those of Delsarte allow me, in my larger project, to situate Peirce's developing ideas on semiotic as a method of scientific inquiry and to relate it to the contemporaneous movement in actor training, elocution, and physical culture called Aesthetic Expression, also known as American Delsartism or simply Delsarte. The movement, which began in the US around 1870 and flourished in the 1880s and 1890s, grew out of Mackaye's and others' interpretations of Delsarte's work in Paris. Elena Randi argues convincingly that Delsarte was one of the first modern thinkers in acting theory.³ Certainly his ideas formed the basis for the original curriculum of the first American acting studio, the Lyceum Theatre School, which became the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. The AADA

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2 For convenience and clarity, I have rendered Delsarte's *séméiotique* as “semeiotic” and Peirce's “semiotic,” which appears in his writings along with other usages.

3 While not directly asserting the modernity of Delsarte's *séméiotique*, Elena Randi characterizes the actor's task as that of “choos[ing] one hermeneutical slant and follow[ing] it from the beginning to the end of the part,” producing an “elliptic translation” (or “sub-text”). She concludes that Delsarte's “actor's art method anticipates, albeit in a small scale, the unifying features of the performance, which is one of the pivots of stage direction” in the twentieth century (Randi 2012: 244).

has trained generations of actors and contributed to the creativity and influence of American stage and film performance styles, but it seldom acknowledges its roots in Delsartism. Delsarte's ideas and methods took hold most firmly in modern dance, most visibly in the work of Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, and Ted Shawn. Shawn researched Delsarte intensively and disseminated his ideas, most notably in his book *Every Little Movement* (1954, rev. 1963), and that influence can still be found in current dance and movement training. While Delsarte is now little known in US theatre scholarship,⁴ the resurgence of interest in his aesthetics among European scholars in the last thirty years suggests that, as with the growing comprehension of Peirce's contributions to scientific method, it is time for scholars to consider the role and relevance of Delsarte's applied aesthetics in the historical development of semiotics.⁵

4 North American theatre scholarship on Delsarte and Delsartism has relied largely on the François Delsarte papers held at the Hill Memorial Library (Louisiana State University). Work on the collection was begun by Claude L. Shaver (1937) and his students, who translated key documents. Much of this work, undertaken in the 1930s and 1940s, remained unpublished as theatre scholarship in the post-World War II years turned to establishing the currency of modern drama and recent motivational approaches to acting and movement. After the 1968 publication of *The Essential Delsarte*, edited by John W. Zorn, E. T. Kirby's article "The Delsarte Method: Three Frontiers of Actor Training" appeared in *The Drama Review* in 1972, pointing to Delsarte as a pioneer in performance kinesics and semiology (Kirby 1972: 62, 66). Yet only a few discussions followed, such as James H. McTeague's brief account (drawing largely on Shaver) of Delsartist principles in *Before Stanislavsky* (1993). Reconsideration of Delsarte emerged once again in dance scholarship, primarily via the work of Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, whose best-known book, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (1999), has provided a useful new starting point for research, both on the development of Delsartism as a complicated set of US performance cultures and on their origins in Delsarte's and others' earlier practices.

5 Among European theatre scholars who have contributed to a resurgence of interest in Delsarte are Alain Porte, Elena Randi, and Franck Waille. In 2012 Waille and Matthias Spohr edited an important collection of essays about Delsarte's semiotics, called "Dance of the Signs: Bicentennial of François Delsarte's Birth," as a special issue of *Kodikas/Code*. (The journal's editor, Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich, has himself published extensively on theatre semiotics.) More generally, as Ruyter notes,

Interest in the Delsarte work has developed in Europe as well as in the United States. There have been publications, conferences, and exhibitions in France and Italy; sponsorship by the Centre National de la Danse in Paris of a translation into French of Shawn's *Every Little Movement*; and an issue of the *Mime Journal* devoted to Delsartian research. The latest evidence of the continuing importance of Delsarte's work and that of his followers has been the 2011 events in Stuttgart, Paris, and Padua to commemorate the 200 year anniversary of Delsarte's birth and to further research into and practice of the various aspects of Delsartism. (Ruyter 2012: 294)

2 Tradition and innovation: A brief biography

François Alexandre Nicolas Chéri Delsarte (1811–1871) saw himself as an artist and an inquirer. Trained as an opera singer at the *École royale de musique et déclamation*, Delsarte's voice became damaged early on, and he spent most of his career training other vocalists. He read widely in medicine, political theory, and philosophy, with particular attention to aesthetics. In later years, he gave lectures and courses on his system of applied aesthetics to large audiences. In small-group sessions, Delsarte taught well-known actors, such as Charles Macready and Rachel Félix, as well as clerics, writers, and artists. He spoke of art, not the arts, and of science rather than the sciences – seeing stage performance as a broad-based challenge to the human being rather than a specialist's narrow focus on technique. Acting, done correctly, produced truth. Thus the actor as an artist must also be an inquirer. Delsarte considered himself as such from his earliest course in 1839 to his final course in 1870, when he designated Steele Mackaye his intellectual heir (Delsarte c.1870).

Delsarte remained remarkably consistent over his thirty years of teaching. His views on vocal training ran counter to those of his conservatory teachers, a position that deepened as the French academic world grew more specialized. Delsarte had turned to teaching in the 1830s after recovering from laryngeal tuberculosis, an event that effectively ended his professional performance career. He focused his energies on learning the skills needed to teach a type of theatrical and vocal art that would, in reviving the work of selected old masters, shape the aesthetics of the modern age. He studied physiology and phonology, did anatomical studies of the larynx, and devoted many hours to observation of people's physical behavior and social interactions in public. He sought to develop scientific methods of observation, training, and performance that would inspire, refine, and teach. Delsarte distrusted institutional instruction in voice; he gave credit to few of his professors. One who received praise, Deshayes,⁶ revealed to him the importance of affinities, or “agreements between gesture and the inflection of the voice,” which Delsarte deemed the moment of his “discovery ... of his truly scientific method” (Harang 1945: 33, 38). The paradoxical juxtaposition of Delsarte's avant-garde attitudes with his adherence to tradition and authority strongly marks his form of inquiry. In many ways it

⁶ This may have been François-Georges Fouques Deshayes (1733–1825), known as Desfontaines or Desfontaines-Lavallée, a French writer and playwright.

reflected the paradoxes of French society as it lurched back and forth between monarchy and republic.

Ironically, Delsarte's lifelong claim to scientific methods may have found support in his conversion to Catholicism and involvement with the Paris church of the Abbé Chatel. Established in 1835, Chatel's independent *Église catholique française* followed socialist principles derived from Henri de Saint-Simon's vision of a society transformed by scientific and technological advances. Saint-Simonism clearly influenced Delsarte's ideas on the progressive role of the artist. Matei Calinescu notes that

Saint-Simon regarded artists, along with scientists and industrialists, as naturally destined to be part of the trinitarian ruling elite in the ideal state ... [T]he artist is the 'man of imagination' and, as such, he is capable not only of foreseeing the future but also of creating it. His grandiose task is to take the 'Golden Age' of the past and project its magic glow into the future ... the triumphant march toward the well-being and happiness of all mankind. (Calinescu 1977: 102)

Delsarte embraced the didactic role that Saint-Simon and his followers envisioned for the artist as leader. His conversion to Catholicism produced a new philosophical orientation in his thinking about art and propelled him on a mission to study, inquire, and teach (Waille 2011: 142). He felt compelled to devise a scientific method to investigate God's principles in man, demonstrated most clearly by the human body (2011: 143). Delsarte's was a quiet revolution, scarcely perceivable in French society at large. While Chatel went on to support the workers' uprisings of 1848, Delsarte became a teacher of voice who presented his students at private concerts for audiences of wealthy and well-born music lovers.

Delsarte seems to have been in greatest demand as an instructor between 1845 and 1855. By championing Gluck's concept of lyric tragedy, Delsarte furthered his own intent to create the future of performance from the genius of such neglected artists. To this end he published the *Archives of Song* (*Archives du Chant*), which documented songs and hymns, some ancient and medieval, which would give new life to lyric tragedy. Delsarte saw no distinction between secular and sacred music in his mission to use vocal performance for the individual performer's (and spectator's) attainment of purity, enlightenment, and spiritual well-being.

As an inquirer, the Delsartean actor avoids conventional theatrical techniques, instead beginning with close observation of human behavior. In his 1859 course, Delsarte rejects his contemporaries' accounts of aesthetics as a mere "assemblage of considerations on beauty"; instead, he identifies aesthetics as "the study of the manifestations of feelings [*sentiments*]" (Delsarte

1859: A120). As an alternate or synonym he offers *sensation*, both of which can refer to the external aspects of internal feelings. “The study of the manifestations of feelings” suggests that Delsarte was keenly aware of the actor’s need to distinguish not just between the actor’s own feeling and the character’s, but also between these two and the character’s affect or manifestation of feeling. Delsarte criticizes those who teach performers to match stage gestures to conventional concepts of emotion: “Love [is] a hidden substance, visible only by the sensory expressions which correspond to the unlimited number of transformations to which you are susceptible and which give as many different physiognomies. Here [your teachers] have reduced you to a term – here they have measured you – you who are infinity!” (Delsarte 1859: A121, adapted from; Levy 1940: 12). By such “infinite” manifestations appearing as gestural signs, the actor can reveal to the audience a complex inner life to the character that is often not visible, within the world of the play, to the other characters. But truth in acting involves more, claims Delsarte. The playing of the fictional inner life must produce signs of inner lives as the actor and audience presumably have experienced them – that is, as they are discovered in their great variety in nature.

Here, then, lies an additional key to Delsarte’s significance in theatre history. As early as 1839 he championed a modern approach to the creation of dramatic character, one that emphasized rigorous physical, mental, and spiritual preparation, a heightened realism both in terms of technique and artistic effect, and the corresponding development of the actor as a human being. Thomas Leabhart points out that, in theatre history, Delsarte’s practices and principles were known to directors Constantin Stanislavsky, Sergei Volkonsky, and Mikhail Chekhov, and through them Jerzy Grotowski, all significant figures in twentieth-century acting theory (Leabhart 2004–2005: 18–19). Delsarte’s profound influence on modern dance filtered into interdisciplinary theatre practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Most recently, as scholarly interest in Delsarte re-emerged in the 1990s, several directors have revived his work as founding principles for their own theatres.⁷

7 The chart “Héritages de Delsarte vers le monde de la danse moderne” in Anne-Marie Drouin-Hans (2011 [1991]: 64) includes well-known artists such as Pina Bausch, Trisha Brown, and the company Pilobolus. Among current directors of Delsarte-inspired theatres are Franck Waille, Luane Davis, and Joe Williams. Outside theatre, Delsarte’s account of sign-creation connects him to modern science-based semiotics, particularly research on embodied cognition.

3 Applied aesthetics: Performance as orthopedic machine

3.1 Delsarte's mission

Delsarte began teaching in 1839. His first course, a “moral and scientific school of singing” (Neely 1942: 180),⁸ exhibited many of the traits that characterized his teaching throughout his career: a triadic metaphysical framework, based on a concept of God as a single entity in three persons – father, son, and holy spirit; a parallel account of the human being as a whole organism characterized by mind, life, and spirit; and a division of performance into corresponding triads indicating the expressive range of each part of the body, and the effects created by their interactions. Notable from the first is Delsarte's placing of man as the central focus of art, as well as his emphasis on bodily movement and gesture (not voice or language) as the most certain guide to the truthful representation of man. With this emphasis Delsarte casts the performer as embodied inquirer, consciously investigating the world through the lens of human being. Here Delsarte seems a rather subtle psychologist. In his 1865 speech to the Philotechnic Society of Paris, he asks the audience to consider how an art work moves them: “You admire it, gentlemen, when you re-find yourselves in it; and if you applaud, it is only on the condition of your recognizing in it something of your own character” (Delsarte 1877 [1866]: 24). Far from being described as universally appealing, art provokes feeling only if it does not depart from the habits, passions, and prejudices that form the viewer's “stamp of ... individuality” (Delsarte 1977 [1866]: 24).

As we will see, the actor's task (as I call it) involves a kind of body-mapping: working from outside in, the actor observes the manifestations or signs of feeling in others; working at the same time from inside out, the actor consciously applies his or her feelings and reactions. By means of Delsarte's mapping of the human body, the actor can intuit as well as understand the rightness of his or her own gestures and movements in order to create a truthful representation. In this way Delsarte's applied aesthetics fulfills his mission of showing human beings to themselves because the actor addresses the complexities of human feeling, experience, and reasoning *in terms of the body's role as mediator*. In a sense, Delsarte is asking: how do feeling, body-life or sensation, and thought

⁸ My summary of Delsarte's 1839 course is based on Neely 1942, who summarizes and translates excerpts from a notebook written by several of Delsarte's students and notated by Delsarte. The translation of the course title is my own.

function in man, understood as a reflection of God? To what extent can a human being follow his sublime nature and approach perfection? Or, to what extent has a human being's animal nature drawn him away from the *summum bonum* – the ideal of goodness, truth, and beauty? Delsarte seeks to represent human being not only if it approaches perfection but also if it is riddled with imperfection. The actor embodies knowledge of man's three natures (life, mind, and spirit) by mapping them onto his or her own body. In this way Delsarte sets out to craft a nineteenth-century formulation of aesthetics, as he had inherited the concept from the eighteenth-century thinkers who devised it.

3.2 The paradox of reason in Delsarte's applied aesthetics

While as early as 1839 Delsarte had outlined applied aesthetics as the method by which the artist produces the sublime in art, by 1858 Delsarte's course, based on his developing theory of triadicty in man's relations with God and nature, had taken on new dimensions. Having broadened his course's scope from voice training to applied aesthetics, he was able to teach declamation – the recitation of verse or a dramatic scene – along with vocal music and acting. Speaking of art rather than the arts (as he spoke of science rather than the sciences), his teaching drew not only well-known singers and actors, but also philosophers, musicians, and literary figures. After hearing Delsarte present his synoptic tables, one listener wrote, "we understood ... that divine harmony of things whose distant echo came formerly to the ear of Pythagor[as]." Dramatic truth was to produce a path to knowledge: "Delsarte is above all ... a grand and beautiful mind in search of the truth, that he has revealed at least in part, for it is not given to one man to discover everything in entirety" (quoted in Harang 1945:19, 64). Indeed, in the absence of a direct statement of scientific method, Delsarte's critique of his conservatory teachers offers his sense of it: it consists of a "community of belief" organized according to systematic principles and founded on a "determined scientific basis." Such a "school" would have "settled principles, ... established doctrine, [and] ... definite instruction" (Delsarte 1977 [1866]: 39). None of these were employed in his own conservatory education, he claimed, which operated according to chance, specifically the actor's inspiration (or lack of it) and the vagaries of stage convention.

As attractive as Delsarte's applied aesthetics, with its emphasis on methodical training and inquiry into the relations of mind, body, and spirit, has been to modern artists, its underlying principles were bound to tradition and authority. At a time when scientific advances were changing public attitudes on human nature and man's place in the world, Delsarte insisted that reason should not be elevated above

other human faculties. How does Delsarte account for reason and why does he distrust it? What is the paradoxical role of reason in the Delsartean actor's task? Consider his definition of art:

Art is at the same time the acquaintance, possession, and free direction of agents by virtue of which are disclosed life, soul, and mind. It is the deliberately adapted application of the symbol to the thing. Art is not, as is sometimes said, the imitation of nature; it is the idealistic reproduction of it. It is the synthetic relation of the scattered beauties of nature to a superior and definite type. (trans. from Delsarte 1859: A125)

What sort of acting would accord with this definition? Delsarte is working within the tradition of melodrama, an inclusive genre that extends from vaudeville sketches to full-length plays, even to certain forms of opera. Melodrama involves the creation of broad character types. Nineteenth-century melodrama's appeal lay in its emotional realism and physical sensation – if its characters seem artificial by today's standards, its inclusion of hitherto unmentionable social classes, rigorous plotting, and spectacular effects made it seem modern when it appeared early in that century. Popular melodrama, though, fell in Delsarte's estimation far below its nobler cousin, lyric tragedy, as a theatrical form that could do justice to the highest forms of life, soul, and mind. The tragic figures of Hamlet and Medea offered the “superior and definite type” that synthesized “the scattered beauties of nature” rather than imitating them. Delsarte's approach emphasized the three-step process of acquaintance, possession, and free direction, effected by agents. These were bodily, mental, and spiritual tools by which the actor synthesized nature into the dramatic character.

We see most clearly the paradoxical character of Delsarte's aesthetics – that is, his tendency to return to ideas from Thomas Aquinas and other philosophers in order to assert the modern, revolutionary character of his aesthetics – in his rejection of the actor's reliance on reason. Instead, the actor must use his or her intelligence (intuition or instinct), which discovers *reasons* in nature. Delsarte often illustrated this point with an account from his own experience. As a young actor he had played a soldier encountering his mentor, whom he had not seen for some time. Delsarte struggled to render the simple line, “Hello, Papa Dugrand!” in a natural and convincing way. He had been taught to imitate his teachers' pronunciation, tone, and gestures, but he could please neither his teachers nor himself. He found their approaches contradictory and oppressive, producing a “slavish and servile imitation” (Delsarte 1859: A124; trans. Levy 1940: 23). Yet he struggled to reason out the reading of the line. He continues,

One day, I met a cousin whom I had not seen for a long time and I [said] to him without thinking: “Well, hello, cousin!” The involuntary gesture that I had made impress[ed] me ... I noticed that my body had had a movement of retroaction, that my eye had been mobile and not fixed, that my shoulders were considerably raised. (Delsarte 1859: A124; Levy 1940: 24)

Delsarte maintains that, in order to render the line convincingly and move his audience, “it was necessary to be on guard against my reason, against my logic” (Delsarte 1859: A124; Levy 1940: 24). In observing his own gesture when greeting his cousin, his body’s involuntary movement showed him nature, in this case the sort of gesture he would commonly use. For Delsarte, the trained actor’s choice is based on insights he or she draws from observation of everyday behavior rather than a reliance on logic. In some respects this approach seems pedestrian or naïve. American method acting, based on Stanislavsky’s influential early work, has emphasized the need for a lengthy process of self-study on which the actor builds techniques for expressing emotion and rendering behavior. Yet Delsarte’s approach to acting also emphasized self-study in its own way, along with analysis and technique.

Delsarte distrusted reason because he considered it a “purely discursive faculty” (Delsarte 1859: A124), as did Aquinas, whose works he studied closely. In his 1870 essay “The Attributes of Reason” Delsarte asserts that “reason does not constitute a primary principle in man; for a primary *principle* could never mistake its object” (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 505). The primary principle in this case is intelligence, the discursive form of which is reason:

Between reason and intelligence, although there be inclusion and co-essentiality in these terms, there is a great difference in the mode of cognizance; for ... intelligence is shown by simple perception, and reason by the discursive process. Thus, while intelligence acts simply, as in knowing an intelligible truth by the light of its own intuition, reason goes toward its end progressively from one thing known to another not yet known. (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 513)

Delsarte drew on Aquinas’s definition of intelligence as “an intimate penetration of truth” (Aquinas 1947–1948 [1269–1272]). Delsarte’s word “object” above refers to man’s origin and cause, God, who created reason in man as his “noblest power ... free from subjection to the principle that enlightens it; free, too, to escape from it” (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 505). Hence reason is subject to “error or possible blindness”; its potential genius lies in its “free and spontaneous subordination” to its object (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 505). While intelligence serves as reason’s “principiant and guiding faculty” (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 506), it is also flawed. When intelligence fails, reason “make[s] clear that which is not evident” (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 508) or supplements it, just as a telescope expands the visual reach of the human eye. But the telescope cannot be considered superior to the eye. Thus for Delsarte reason is a necessary but supplemental power; if mistaken as primary, it becomes dangerous, for it “frequently obscures even the very evidence itself” (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 510).

Time-bound and imperfect, reason acquires knowledge, claims Delsarte; intelligence, not dependent upon experience, possesses it. (I will return to this

interesting term, possession, when I discuss the semiotics of the actor's task.) If reason is properly illuminated by its principle, it can be exercised in three ways: common sense (reliance on others' experience, or tradition); science, understood as "train[ing] by personal experience to the knowledge of principles"; and wisdom, or "contemplation of principles and perfection of the intellect" (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 514).

Delsarte measures the value of philosophical and scientific advances of his day through this triadic lens. Nominalist framing of methods in the normative and positive sciences Delsarte considers invalid because their purposes are not properly framed in metaphysical terms. Instead he outlines a Thomist framework based on doctrinal and a priori principles: "Man purifies himself by the constancy and fixedness of a way of living that contemplates his cause; he enlightens himself by the science and ... wisdom of a mind that has clear intuition of his principle, and he perfects himself in the light and warmth of a soul that aspires to his purpose" (translated from Delsarte 1859: A134). For Delsarte science should seek the light cast not only by intelligent inquirers who have come before, but crucially by man's cause, principle, and object, which is God. With this aid human beings come to possess knowledge, rather than discover it. In this way Delsarte places himself in opposition to scientists who shaped concepts of reason and inquiry within the limits of the physical world. Nor would Delsarte find acceptable Peirce's realist views on truth and reality in regard to the normative sciences. Truth, Peirce asserts in 1901,

is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief, which concordance the abstract statement may possess by virtue of the confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness, and this confession is an essential ingredient of truth. ... Reality is that mode of being by virtue of which the real thing is as it is, irrespectively of what any mind or any definite collection of minds may represent it to be. (*CP* 5.565)

For Peirce, science advances by building on knowledge uncovered by previous inquirers. Principles, like the real thing, must be independent of what we might think them to be. Juxtaposed with this truly modern account of truth and reality, Delsarte's adherence to existing doctrines seems less than scientific. Peirce might add that, as metaphysics can have no bearing on the normative or positive sciences, Delsarte's metaphysical views have reduced his conception of science to an absurdity.

Susan Haack, building on the fourth of Peirce's 1898 Cambridge lectures, summarizes four ways in which metaphysicians block inquiry: (1) "absolute assertions," (2) "claims that something can never be known," (3) "claims that something is utterly inexplicable," and (4) "claims that a law or principle 'has

found its last and perfect formulation” (Haack 2014: 322). These are useful tools for a careful measuring of Delsarte’s commitment to scientific inquiry. As a metaphysician, Delsarte is guilty of all four at various points in his writings. As a practicing and teaching artist who encouraged his students to embrace the actor’s task as a form of inquiry, however, Delsarte seems to escape Haack’s fifth block to the scientific attitude, which she calls “sham reasoning,” or “undertaking inquiry from other motives than the genuine desire to learn” (Haack 2014: 327). Essential to the scientific attitude is the effort to replace false beliefs with new ones: “We can filter out false beliefs more efficiently if we make the effort to imagine in which circumstances our experiences might force us to abandon a hypothesis, and then seek out those circumstances.” She suggests “going to the Arctic, say, to check for non-black ravens, rather than searching temperate regions over and over; trying the experiment at very high and at very low altitudes rather than repeating it over and over at sea level; and so on” (Haack 2014: 331). Abandoning his false belief in the methods of his conservatory teachers, Delsarte set out to find and document the truth of human nature in a way freed of hardened convention. In this sense, acting for Delsarte involves the “effort to imagine” circumstances in which the actor sees experience differently, and then to “seek out those circumstances” by creating them on stage.

3.3 Synthesizing embodied knowledge: The mechanism of applied aesthetics

From this perspective, and acknowledging the limits of his account of inquiry, let us not devalue Delsarte’s aesthetics or the historical importance of applied aesthetics as the first systematic form of actor training. Through his three-step process – observation, possession, and free direction – the actor seeks the *summum bonum* of nineteenth-century aesthetic idealism. Delsarte, among many other artists, understood truth, goodness, and beauty to be one ideal, the parts of which are not separable in the work of art. A beautiful performance is necessarily a moral and truthful one; “to call a work ugly,” as Toril Moi points out, “was to question its ethics as well as its aesthetics” (Moi 2006: 4). In keeping with his view that reason is a discursive, thus inferior, faculty, Delsarte emphasizes gesture as the most beautiful and thus the most truthful form of expression. Truth is not a logical value for Delsarte, but it cannot be dismissed as a synonym for sincerity; it is best described as *justesse* – exactness or appropriateness. In vocal performance, *justesse passionelle* meant exactness under the influence of the passions, or a performance in which tone, word, or gesture is directly connected to the performer’s internal state (Waille 2011: 470).

The actor's gesture, in particular, has the potential to convey *justesse*. As Delsarte's idealist artist, the actor not only points the way to the ideal but also incarnates it. The actor far surpasses the scientist in importance due to his or her potential ability to embody the ideal. The first step – *observation* or the gathering of knowledge through signs – is necessary but not sufficient. Next the actor takes *possession* – that is, he or she translates those observations into newly created signs – and then, in *free direction*, synthesizes that embodied knowledge in the creation of the role.

Elena Randi summarizes these three steps in practical terms that accord roughly with Waille's account:

First the players define very precisely their gesture score based on the text interpretation done earlier; then they repeat it so many times as to make it flow 'automatically'; lastly, emotional involvement is triggered, which allows the execution of involuntary gestures ... The players would really feel the emotions of their character[s] and feel them on demand, in a 'scientific' non-random way. (Randi 2012: 243)

Randi points out, though, Delsarte's effort to recapture in performance the “two seemingly irreconcilable categories” of self-awareness and involuntary gesture (2012: 243), or the lost world of Eden, in which “existed a non-mediated relationship between the psyche and gesture” (Randi 2012: 241). In Randi's view Delsarte sought to distinguish between such “genuine” signs and those worn and conventional signs offered by acting tradition. “The curtain was to open on a fragment of heaven, on a portrait of the life existing before the corruption brought about by history and not, as according to a realistic provision, on a *tranche de vie*; it should not have been the imitation of the ordinary, but the copy of the archetype” (Randi 2012: 242).

Randi locates Delsarte's modernity elsewhere in his teaching, as a unifying method for the actor to offer a personal interpretation of the role. Choosing a “predominant word or expression” from the part,

the actor will go on to define the identifying sentences of each scene in which ... the expression [appears] ... Lastly, he will have to determine the sense underlying each single line, writing beside each one the sentence that “translates” it, and each one will have to include the chosen key-word. Thus, the actor will find himself with an *elliptic translation* of the part (today we would call it a *sub-text*), characterized by a solid *unitarity* and pivoting around *one* dominant concept radiated over multiple and variegated nuances. (Randi 2012: 244)

Randi contrasts this approach with the less exact *art théâtral* taught by Isidore Samson, a contemporary of Delsarte and a prominent teacher at the École royale, who sought to create “a suggestive climate which captures the player's imagination, dragging him/her into an atmosphere” (Randi 2012: 245). Such

reliance on inspiration was rejected by Delsarte, who perceived its contradictions. Because Samson advocated the actor's adherence to the author's view of the character, to which the teacher provided no certain access, Samson also provided no certain method for creating a unified character. By contrast, in a new and modern way Delsarte focused on "a gestural and psychological dominant motive [that] shows the presence of a design made up by each player according to a unifying overall perspective in the construction of the part" (Randi 2012: 245–246). Thus Randi locates Delsarte among those acting teachers who in the 1830s anticipated certain aspects of a modern unified stage conception (Randi 2012: 247).

3.4 *The role of sémiotique in the actor's task*

As a public figure in mid-nineteenth century Paris, Delsarte embodied both residual and emerging concepts of art. His aesthetics spoke most directly to a conservative element of French society that sought, as he did, to rescue ideas from neglected traditions and resituate them for innovative, scientific approaches to contemporary aesthetics. Embedded in his concept of reason, sign action and interpretation are necessary if secondary tools in Delsarte's aesthetics. Yet it is because of the paradoxes involved in his aesthetics, not in spite of them, that his ideas should be included in the history of modern semiotics. His applied aesthetics incorporates an extensive system of signs, well known in Paris intellectual circles by the 1850s, as was his use of the term *séméiotique*. Both precede by decades the earliest appearance of Peirce's theory of logic as semiotic and Saussure's linguistics-based semiology.

Delsarte taught that language can only confirm what gesture conveys. His discussions of sign action appear, within his account of gesture, as three points of view on the human body: the static, the dynamic, and the semeiotic (*séméiotique*). The static and the dynamic – not my immediate concern here – involve harmonic oppositions in a performer's stance and movement relating to the adjacent space or performer; study from these viewpoints reveals the actions of life and soul respectively. Semeiotic – my present concern – is that branch of study devoted to mind and meaning:

The semeiotic presents to our scrutiny a triple object for study. It sets forth the cause of the acts produced by the dynamic and static harmonies. Moreover, it reveals the meaning of the types which form the object of the system. It offers to us a knowledge of the formal or constitutional types, of the fugitive or accidental types, and, finally, of the habitual types. (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 467).

Speaking of these types in terms of human development, Delsarte characterizes a formal or constitutional type as the “form assumed by the being at birth” or a kind of potential. “Under the sway of custom forms undergo modifications,” he continues, producing habitual forms, which are conventional. The second type, or fugitive forms, which one might expect to intervene between potential and convention, Delsarte actually situates as “[accidental or transitory] modifications of the constitutional form, which are produced under the sway of passion” (Delsarte 1892 [n.d.]: 463). These seem to act as correctives to habitual understanding, restoring mediated access to the Edenic archetype, as Randi has explained above. As in other parts of his applied aesthetics, Delsarte drew up detailed charts by which his students could identify types of gesture, and by extension the nature of the character expressed through them. Much has been written on the difficulties these charts present, including some performers’ tendency to replicate mechanically in their gestures what they perceived as models for imitation. As Delsarte notes, however, the types form the “objects” or the originating classes of phenomena perceived in examples from nature. The actor, having learned the classifications, uses that knowledge to develop a related, idealized type for performance. The translation from perceived object-type to idealized performance type, while not the creative culmination of the actor’s task, constitutes an essential part of it.

It appears that Delsarte drew his understanding of *séméiotique* as the science of signs primarily from medicine’s attention to the distinction between the signs and symptoms of pathology, but he used the term in a broader sense: studying connections between exterior signs and the person’s internal state (*donnée interne*, cf. Waïlle 2011: 466). As a student of human physiology, Delsarte sought to discover evidence of intention or “the hidden source of action” (Jeannerod quoted in Waïlle 2011: 466). In physiological terms, intention has a material reality manifested by the exterior sign (gesture, in this case), by which one can trace back the sign to the nerve-action within. Waïlle notes that Delsarte departs from the physiology of his day to assert that intention, understood as nerve-action, has an ontological dimension: “the signs of the body could reveal the inner being of the person, and not just a passing state” (Waïlle 2011: 466). Further, as nineteenth-century physiology distances itself from metaphysical causes, Delsarte persists in analyzing movement in reference to the soul, or, as Élisabeth Schwartz-Rémy puts it, “an internal process of active being” (quoted in Waïlle 2011: 466) in which intention is anchored. Thus physical movement begins within and is fulfilled through the powers, faculties, and agencies of the embodied individual. Analysis of movement and the discovery of intention, also part of *séméiotique*, begin externally with the visible sign and proceed to interpretation of “interior invisible movements.” Using Saussure’s terminology, Waïlle calls this aspect of Delsarte’s *séméiotique* “a catching up of the

signifier to the signified; it ‘will express the reason for being of those movements’.” (Waille 2011: 467) Waille’s expression “catching up” (*remontée*) is instructive, but his Saussurean vocabulary constrains a full explanation of the triadic character of Delsarte’s version of semiosis. Peirce’s account of the sign relation (while not referring to Delsarte) does better justice to the physical and metaphysical dimensions of Delsarte’s thinking:

A Sign is a Cognizable that, on the one hand, is so determined ... by *something other than itself*, called its Object ... while, on the other hand, it so determines some actual or potential Mind, the determination whereof I term the Interpretant created by the Sign, that that Interpreting Mind is therein determined mediately by the Object. (Peirce 1909, *EP* 2: 492)

Just as Delsarte’s object, considered as a final cause, bears some resemblance to Peirce’s Object, it is possible to find in *séméiotique* glimpses of a concept of mediate determination. Delsarte proposes that not only does the sign determine meaning, but in the course of the actor’s task the sign “catches up” with its originating intention and the principle that illuminates it. In this sense the observing actor can possess and translate the intention, rooted in “invariables of the psycho-spiritual order in a multiplicity of expressive human situations” (Waille 2011: 467).

In order to apply Delsarte’s aesthetics successfully, actors must be thoroughly versed in *séméiotique*. At that point opens the opportunity for free direction, or the actor’s spontaneous creation and combination of signs. This type of acting, many Delsarte followers believed, can do justice to human beings’ infinite variety. Creativity relies on *séméiotique* and builds the character’s inner life with it. As Delsarte asserted, art aims to take possession of all the elements that constitute human being: to excite the senses, interest the mind, and persuade the heart (Delsarte 1859: A129).

4 Conclusion

Just as Delsarte has garnered more attention from theatre scholars in recent years, so his ideas on sign action deserve scrutiny from those interested in science-based semiotics. Current investigations of mind-body interaction, such as Antonio Damasio’s research in neuroscience, employ twenty-first-century methods that refer back to nineteenth-century studies in psychology, physiology, and pathology and thus continue that inquiry into the body’s role in cognition. As Damasio remarks, “the most stable aspects of body function are represented in the brain, in the form of maps, thereby contributing images to the mind” (Damasio 2010: 21). Building on work done on mirror-neurons, Damasio continues,

The network in which those neurons are embedded achieves conceptually what I hypothesized as the as-if body loop system: the simulation, in the brain's body-maps, of a body state that is not actually taking place in the organism ... [T]he brain's representation of the body [implies that,] because we can depict our own body states, we can more easily simulate the equivalent body states of others. (Damasio 2010: 110–111)

According to Damasio, representation leads to simulation, which creates the possibility for empathy. He suggests that consciousness produced by the mapping effected by mirror neurons leads to an embodied sociality of thought. Damasio's humanist conception of the self, as an effect of coordinated operations between brain and nervous system, harks back to Delsarte's focus on the actor, whose manifestations of feeling create interpretable signs of unified character.

Can it be argued that within Delsarte's aesthetic idealism there lay the beginning of the modern concept of the sign relation as mediated? I would offer a qualified yes. To date I have found no diagram of a sign relation in Delsarte's writings, despite an abundance of charts outlining the signifying agencies of individual parts of the body. The word *séméiotique* appears only in regard to the science of gesture, not of language or voice. In fact, Delsarte may not have conceived of sign action as a complete triadic relation in Peirce's sense. Delsarte's account of the actor's task outlines a three-step process, but he is not concerned, as Peirce will be, with the sign relation as the foundational element in thought. Rather, thought and body-life serve feeling, or the soul. Later, after 1870, when American Delsartists began to build on applied aesthetics, it appears that semiosis as a complete triadic relation emerged in their thinking, even as Peirce was developing and refining his own account.

In an 1890 collection of Delsartist recitation exercises appears an image of the young François Delsarte playfully scratching signs in the sand with a stick (Wilbor 1890: xiii). This image represents an iconic moment in the myth of Delsarte's life and career, when the boy – often portrayed in American publications as homeless and hungry but with a genius for music – is notating a melody being played by an orchestra just out of view. The gentleman observing is Father Bambini, who recognizes Delsarte's artistic genius, takes him home, and tutors him in music. For Delsarte the boy's notating might depict a Thomist act of intelligence, when observation gives way to possession, and thence to an act of creativity. I read this scene a little differently, as a scene in the history of science-based semiotics. The notating constituted a form of semiosis in which the young Delsarte, intrigued by the music he hears, is seen engaging bodily in the play of musement. For Peirce, inquiry begins with creative moments such as these – when the reality of our world captures our attention and produces emotional, physical, and intellectual responses, many of them signs.



Figure 1: “Delsarte and Father Bambini” (Wilbor 1890: xiii). Courtesy of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries.

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