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Alain Porte

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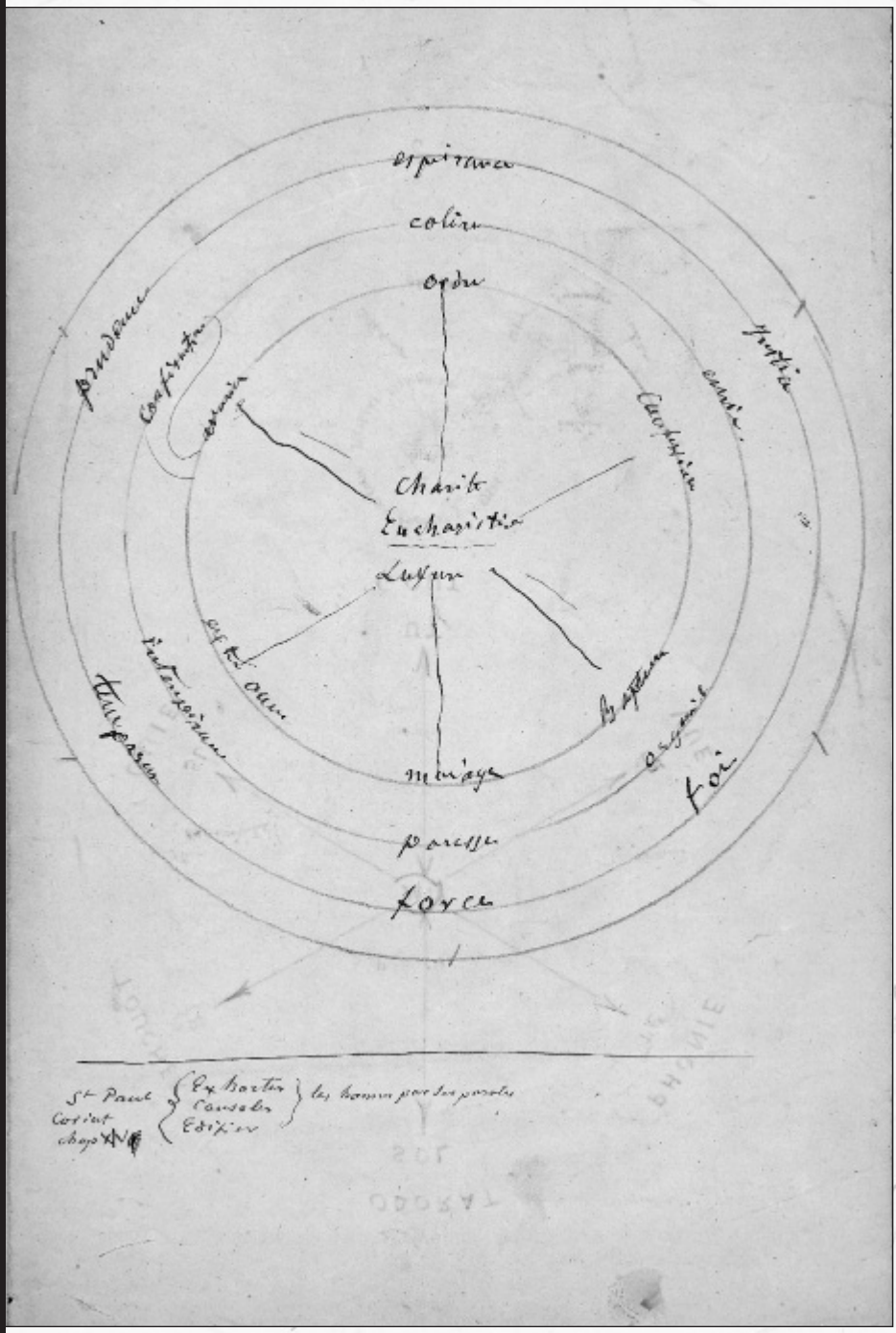
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Spirama



St Paul }
Corint }
chop }
Exhorta }
Consol }
Edific }
les hommes par les paroles

force

FOUR REFLECTIONS ON FRANÇOIS DELSARTE

Alain Porte

1. A passenger of Time

If, when I am dead, you want to write my biography,
there is nothing simpler,
it has only two dates—that of my birth and that of my death
between one and the other, all the days are mine.

—Alberto Caeiro (alias Fernando Pessoa),
Portuguese poet (1888–1935)

What discredits straight away the telling of a man's life, any man's life, is that he could, when he was still of this world, have thought about and believed in eternity. Consequently, dates are nothing but nails in his coffin. The life of a being is the book of its emotions, and those of Delsarte are mixed up with his work, the completely unfinished work of a remarkably unrecognized man. Delsarte absented himself in an artistic reverie. Ephemeral life was nothing more for him than the window from which to contemplate timeless beauty. As a very old Indian text says, "Once you have glimpsed the object of your search, what good is light?" We can also note an exemplary silence by Delsarte on the windows of his destiny, on the fragments of his biography. The flickers of experience become a light in his conscience. And perhaps, in delving into his papers, we are profaning the subtle solitude where this man, public by the exercise of his art, found his most sensitive refuge.

Even the nature of his work—pulling down the walls between the artistic disciplines by basing these disciplines on the liberated principles of all preexisting ideologies—led Delsarte to certainties as strongly affirmed

Drawing by François Delsarte.

Francois Alexandre Nicolas Delsarte Papers, Mss. 1302, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA

as his humility as a human being. He observed before he reasoned, and when he reasoned, he did nothing more than observe his observations, an effective means of avoiding any rhetoric. There is an abyss between the fruits of pure thought and the flowers of quiet observation. To Delsarte, it was sensitive perception that nourished reflection. No concept ever surpassed experience. He did not know what he felt. "I prefer living asses to dead scholars," he shot at a visitor who was astonished at the unconventional education that he gave his seven children. This was because he knew, in his bones, the price of liberty, and even more so the tragedy of poverty. His path went from the gutter to the stars. In Chaillot, on rue des Batailles, in the house he occupied, in which Honoré de Balzac had lived, his table was open to the needy, and his salon to aristocrats. The truth was his personal theatre, and since it was a question of truth, this theatre had the dimensions of the totality of the world. "As an artist, I live the life of the times, and because of that I am the free contemporary of every century," said Delsarte (qtd. in Porte 259). He saw himself infinitely more as energy than as image; thus, he never left himself open to any real destiny. He never had any social status to provide him with official recognition, and the security which accompanies it. Without being unknown, he was an outsider. He felt himself to be essentially a passenger of time. Perhaps that explains his silence about himself during his sojourn here. At age ten, he found himself alone in the world, in Paris. He had just buried his brother Louis, age eight, in a communal grave. His mother, Albertine Rolland, had entrusted them both to an innkeeper, with a sum of money. She herself returned to her mother's home, in the north, with the two other children, Aimée, who was six, and the future mother of Georges Bizet, and Camille, a three year old boy. Her fifth child, Benjamin, had died at the age of seven months, on 7 June 1821, 2, place du Caire, in the Bonne Nouvelle quarter.

Albertine had fled her home in Solesmes (North) with all of her little world. The father, Jean Nicolas Toussaint Delsarte, managed his skills as an inventor more passionately than his business affairs. He happily formulated essential questions: "space, a morsel of infinity." This father, however, buried with disapproval and debts, kept in touch with François, who, after surviving by working for a rag picker, an apothecary, and a porcelain painter, was taken in by a priest who was passionate about music. He wrote to his son on 5 July 1825, at the home of Monsieur Bambini, professor of music, 5, rue du Garlais. Bambini introduced François to the music of Gluck. This musical encounter would turn out to be decisive. Thanks to his protector, and to his own remarkable natural gifts, François was admitted as a boarder to the Ecole Royale de Musique et de Déclamation Lyrique, of which Chérubini was the director. François had a pretty tenor voice. On 6 August 1828, he earned the second prize for vocal exercises. The following year, on 5 August 1829, he lost the first prize to Adolphe Nourrit, who would become his friend. Five months later, on 28 December 1829, he accepted an audition before a jury headed by

Chérubini. The results were a death knell: “his voice had undergone an alteration so great that it led to an almost total extinction” (qtd. in Porte 267). Delsarte was dismissed. On 1 March 1833, he was hired for three months as an actor for the Opéra Comique. But he soon gave up his theatrical ambitions in order to devote himself to teaching. One must be aware that, since leaving the Ecole Royale, Delsarte worked long months to regain his voice, which Doctor Bennati—a famous figure of the epoch—had pronounced incurable. He succeeded in keeping his larynx immobile, no matter how high the sounds he produced. He could sing again, and without suffering.

After such a personal success, he felt that it was his “mission” to pass it on. And for eight years, he stopped singing in public in order to instruct singers who, for the most part, had been refused or dismissed by the Conservatory. Learned observers mocked the method he taught. They aggravated him by describing it as a *sunken voice*. In fact, he was using the Italian Method, which he had rediscovered by immobilizing his larynx, to produce sound. His students were weighed down by the barbs. But just at this point, Gilbert Duprez, successor to Nourrit, arrived on the scene of the Opéra. His magnificent voice relied on precisely this same Italian Method. This was one in the eye for detractors of Delsarte, who suddenly saw him glowing with an unexpected prestige.

Once again, students poured in, captivated by the example of Duprez. Blind to their real abilities, the students only had the larynx for the chest high C that Duprez produced with fascinating ease. Delsarte had warned them of the danger, showing his students that the “merit of Duprez was due more to his style and the strength of his projection than to the intensity of his voice,” but to no avail. They wanted the chest high C, nothing but the chest high C. The chest high C was the unique gargling of the novice singers, “the greatest bawlers in France,” Delsarte protested. To hinder the progress of this disastrous “audio-mania,” he introduced into his courses elements of anatomy, psychology, aesthetics. Immediate allergic reaction by his students. Rumor had it that Delsarte was mad, had been committed to Bicêtre [Parisian hospital famous in the nineteenth century as an asylum for the senile].

To cut through the slander, he decided to start singing again. His interpretations of Gluck—Bambini’s heritage—earned him, to his great surprise, an immediate success. Around 1840, he carried an entire concert alone at the Tuileries Palace. The king was overcome. Again, Delsarte had to curb the infatuation he had set off, or, as he put it, “cut short the obsessions of which I had become the object.” He drastically reduced his public appearances. He barely tolerated audiences who were completely closed to “the sweet and gentle delicacies of the art.” It was not the egotism of a capricious diva who had been hurt, it was the lucidity of an artist conscious of his means of expression. Broken and feeble voices never ceased to flock to his studio, to demand, and obtain, a healing of their shortcomings. His renown increased

tenfold his clientele of the infirm from every walk of life. "My home was quickly converted into something of an infirmary," he said. Gossip confused the entrance of incurable cases and exits of cripples (Porte 176–184).

Delsarte was a penetrating, open, and generous master, at least as long as one did not speak of "eclecticism" to him, which he rejected completely: "Each man's trick is no more than each man's tic," he liked to say (qtd. in Porte 262). But Delsarte enforced no social segregation at all. His daughter, Madeleine, related in an unpublished manuscript:

we saw a constant parade of learned men, theatre people, actors and singers, painters, sculptors, men of the world, and, among them, deputies, lawyers, preachers, and brokers—yes, brokers! I remember, among others, an exchange officer who came regularly to talk numbers for a half hour every week.

Caroline Barbot, chosen by Verdi to produce *The Force of Destiny* in Russia, was his pupil. An artist become famous, she wrote to him from St. Petersburg, witnessing her gratitude for the lessons she received, from which her voice profited as much as her acting.

Henri Blanchard, critic of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*, practically followed Delsarte during his entire career as a singer (from 1844 to 1862, the year of his "adieux"). In March of 1858, Blanchard detailed the content of a concert, which was to Blanchard alone an anthology of the musical tastes of Delsarte, who had published his own choices in his *Archives of Song* (*Archives du Chant*). This collection went from the fourth century until the time of Grétry: Saint Ambrose, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Palestrina, Orlando de Lassus, Bach, Lully, Rameau, Gluck. Delsarte sang, in this concert, the Terrors of Thoas, which Henri Blanchard described as "that somber and dramatic scene of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, by Gluck, which he interprets as an exceptional singer, eloquent mime, and admirable lyric tragedian" (qtd. in Porte 273). This was not at all Berlioz' point of view. If he did hail with enthusiasm (in "Through Song") the Guide-Accord [a piano-tuning machine invented by Delsarte], he also wrote to Joseph d'Ortigue, on 16 March 1854, to relieve himself of the chore of an article:

Must we fire the canon of the Invalides (this would be perhaps an allusion) because of the appearance of M. Delsarte, who wanted to sing, with the voice of a tattered boot, the crumbs of recitatives measured in old verse? (qtd. in Porte 271)

Well put, but was it well considered? A rage or just head-butting?

Adolphe Guéroult (1810–1872), in 1839, published, in the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*, an article in two parts [25 August and 20 October]: "M. Delsarte's Lessons in Voice and Dramatic Stance." Therein he recounts in great detail his trials as a novice singer. The lessons he received at the Conservatoire led him, just like Delsarte, to the brink of losing his voice. In Delsarte he found

his savior. He found in him “a series of precepts based on study and the observation of natural laws.” And to deliver what appeared to him to be the originality of Delsarte’s courses, his three-language approach:

affective language, of which the voice is the organ; elliptical language, which is expressed through gesture; philosophical language, which is translated into articulated language.

He concluded: “There is an art to making use of one’s natural gifts, and M. Delsarte possessed this art to the highest degree.”

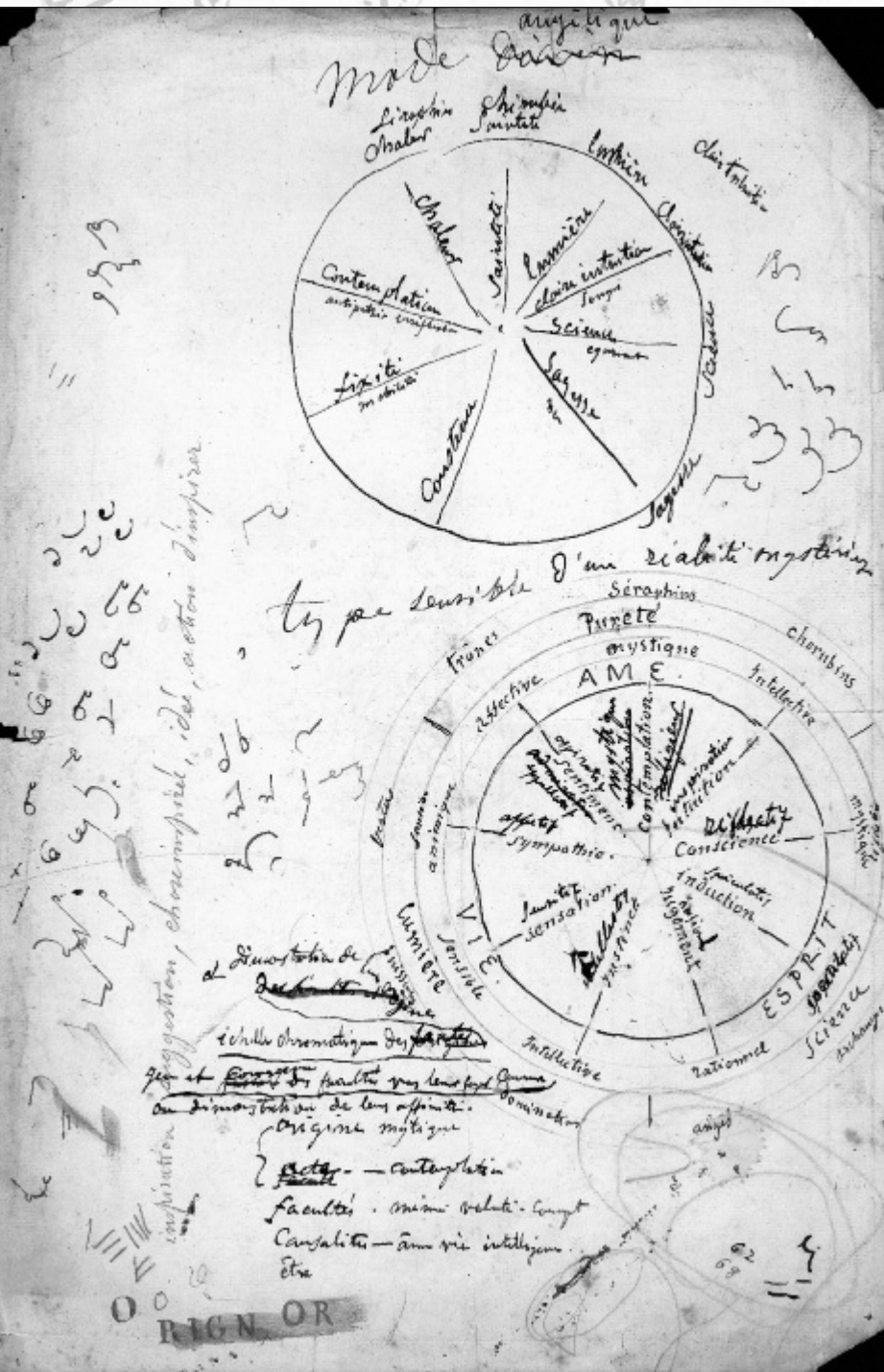
Saint Saëns, for his part, cut his losses. Delsarte was “a disastrous and deadly teacher of singing. No voice could stand up under his methods, not even his own, although he attributed its loss to teaching at the Conservatoire” (Saint Saëns 180). Clearly, Saint Saëns was unaware that Delsarte did not invent his method *before* losing his voice, but rather *after*. He added: “But he studied deeply the arts of speaking and gesture, and he was a past master in them” (ibid.). Even more than that, Saint Saëns assigns Delsarte an exceptional place in the musical life of his time, because he championed with an unmatched talent the music of which Blanchard spoke in his review, that of the old masters.

Delsarte, a singer without a voice, an imperfect musician, a doubtful scholar, guided by an intuition that approached genius, in spite of his numerous faults played an important rôle in the evolution of French music in the Nineteenth Century. (Saint Saëns 188)

Saint Saëns spoke of an “apostle.” He concluded:

It is only right that we should pay tribute to Delsarte’s memory. He was a pioneer who, during his whole life, proclaimed the value of immortal works, which the world despised. That is no slight merit. (ibid.)

One day in October, 1869, a young actor of twenty-seven, American, James Steele Mackaye, entered Delsarte’s drawing room. It was the meeting of flame and fire. The actor found his spiritual father, the master believed his son Xavier, who had died of cholera in 1863, had reappeared—the most talented of the seven children he had had with Rosine Andrien, a very talented musician. The war of 1870 put an end to their passionate communion. Delsarte exiled himself to Solesmes. He felt himself stagnating there. Mackaye returned to the United States, where he moved heaven and earth to organize a visit by his master. To his disciple’s request for documents about his life, Delsarte responded on 30 January 1871 [see Mackaye I, 144–45 for part of this letter], six months before his death: “I wonder if my life, however irregular it has been, can be very interesting to a reader unfamiliar with my work. I don’t believe it can” (qtd. in Porte 23). His life was one of a man mixed up with his work, for whom “the artist is one who gives permanence to instantaneity and reality to things that no longer exist”—Delsarte was too rooted in eternity to negotiate with history.



2. James Steele Mackaye (1842–1894): The American Dream

One starts to see when one stops playing the spectator, when one invents that of which one has need: this tree, this wave, that shore.

—Emil Nolde (alias Emil Nansen), in S. Lenz,
“La Leçon de Allemand” (“The German Lesson”)

It is he, and none other, who is the true ambassador of François Delsarte on American soil. Because of all the Delsarteans—from the earliest converts to the last-minute opportunists—he was the only one to have ever met Delsarte during his life, shared his intimacies, and gained his friendship, his affection and, truly, his love.

James Steele Mackaye overflowed with gifts, burned with intelligence, and seemed a one-man symphony to the glory of life, which, for him, was bound up with art and truth. He was first and foremost a man of theatre, who found everything else fascinating to an extreme degree. He dabbled in everything without having either the soul of a dilettante or the arrogance of a specialist. He traversed the artistic world with the flexibility of a snake. “He was a perfect ophidian” (Alger qtd. in Mackaye I, 151), it must be said of his actor’s physique. He played many roles simultaneously: painter, designer, actor, director, dramatic author, troupe leader, director of a school of expression, lecturer, inventor, philosopher, architect and promoter of an American Bayreuth, the Chicago Spectatorium, a twelve thousand seat theater whose development his premature death, at age fifty, stopped short.

His meeting with Delsarte, in 1869, was more the culmination of a maturation than a lightning bolt of revelation. The same drive to capture the eternal truth hidden in a fleeting reality united the two men.

Mackaye wrote, in 1856, at the age of fourteen:

As the currents of our being flow toward the sea of eternity, we should prepare ourselves for the higher school of knowledge by learning elementary lessons in the pantomimic language of the leaves, and in the silent language of the clouds as they pass over our stream of life, teaching us the philosophy of eternity, the uses of delight.
(qtd. in Mackay I, 62)

More unusual still is what follows, and reinforces, through anticipation, his affinities with Delsarte: “Open your eyes to the fact that Religion is first, Art next, Science last” (ibid.).

Two years later, in 1858, at age sixteen, Steele Mackaye was already in Paris (he was oriented toward painting) to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and in the studios of Bouguereau, Meissonnier and Troyon. It even happened,

Drawing by François Delsarte.

François Alexandre Nicolas Delsarte Papers, Mss. 1302, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA

in 1866, that he signed a contract which made him the exclusive agent for the entire American continent for French painters. Among the signatures can be found the names of Théodore Rousseau, Eugène Fromentin and Gustave Moreau (Mackaye I, 79).

In 1860, James posed several times for a statue of Shakespeare, currently in Central Park, by the sculptor J.Q.A. Ward.

“Jim, I’ve been working like the devil on this pose but I can’t get what I want. I want the old bard to be thinking—but he *ain’t!* What ails him?”

“That’s simple, J.Q.” said Jim, “instead of making him pensive you’ve made him sleepy. The difference in pose is slight but radical. It affects the whole body—legs, torso as well as head. The posture of thought should be like *this*.” And Jim illustrated by assuming a posture of absorbed thinking.

“Hold it! Don’t move!” (ibid.)

At the same time, in France, Delsarte was taking apart a tableau of the Resurrection of Lazarus with humor and perspicacity, explaining to the painter that his Lazarus was everything but dead, much more merely asleep, because Lazarus’ thumb was not folded up towards the palm of the hand, the unmistakable sign of death!

It was in 1862, as a soldier of the 7th regiment, based at Ford Federal Hill, Baltimore, that Mackaye took his first steps into the world of theatre, playing Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, and assuming the title role in *Hamlet*, “the melancholy Dane,” as the *New York Tribune* wrote.

He proved himself to be so convincing and talented that professional troupes wanted to hire him. In fact, Mackaye had already put significant effort into developing his “instrument,” that is to say, himself. (“When a man can place his confidence in himself, rules are superfluous,” he wrote at the time). As evidence, consider a notebook in which, in 1861, thus eight years before he met Delsarte, he recorded schedules of his intensive work. After having painted and drawn from ten to two o’clock, he devoted himself to exercises in voice, physical flexibility, and pantomime, topping it all off with a session of emotional expression.

While Delsarte, in France, was fleshing out a sort of scientific description of the correlations existing between sentiment and its expression (passion and its sign), Mackaye was writing down in a notebook his vision of a poet: “the poet is a prophet because, taking the fact and finding the cause, he foretells the effect” (qtd. in Mackaye I, 91). An almost premonitory portrait of Delsarte.

While in America, still in 1861, Mackaye wrote in his essay “Of the Use of Man”:

the highest destiny of man is his highest use—the exercise of his highest faculty; the means by which he is to obtain that destiny are *the proper organization and cooperation of all his faculties and forces*. (Mackaye I, 125–6)

In France, Delsarte, as a specialist of a sort of metaphysical physiology, scrutinized man, as an object of art, to affirm: “each of the three elements—Life, Soul, Spirit—must understand the other two, *in a word, there must be co-necessity between them*” (qtd. in Porte 6).

And yet, it was Steele Mackaye who, in October of 1869, in Paris, stayed with his fixed idea: to work with Régnier, then director of the Conservatory.

It was his father, Colonel Mackaye, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, who suggested to him to go ask advice of Delsarte. One of Steele’s sisters had taken voice lessons with him the previous year. Steele turned a deaf ear.

The day before going to take his first course at the Conservatory, he was awaiting the arrival of a carriage. Out stepped his father, who had come to try one more time. The previous day, he had met Delsarte at the Parc Monceau, and had seen fit to warn him that his son intended to visit. The young Mackaye gave in a little. He would go, but not immediately, he had things to do. And yet, suddenly, as soon as his father had gone, he changed his mind. He turned to his wife, Mary (impulses and visions were inherent to Mackaye’s character) and exclaimed: after all, why not go see this Delsarte *right now*, and have done with it once and for all? Mackaye was introduced at Delsarte’s in a salon plunged into obscurity. He was cracking open a shutter to throw a bit of light onto the objects in the room when a voice rang out behind him: “My son! O my son!” It was Delsarte, who then showed him the bust of his son Xavier, dead of cholera in 1863 (Mackaye I, 135). The resemblance between James and Xavier was a deeply unsettling one.

One could smile over the touching emphasis of affectionate epithets that punctuated their letters, but a strong connection united the two men, a literally inexpressible connection.

The war of 1870 forced Mackaye to return to the United States. It seemed to him that the New World was the ideal place to propagate the artistic vision that Delsarte had championed tirelessly for forty years, but without any true audience in his own country. He wanted to create a school of art for which Delsarte would serve as a living font.

In the ardent speeches which he delivered to captivated audiences, Mackaye was already translating into practical terms what Delsarte had named in more philosophical terms. While the Frenchman placed importance on the Trinity of the three essential principles of man: Life, Spirit, and Soul, whose harmony is necessary to an artist, the American put the accent on Hand, Head, and Heart.

Their natural and legitimate nuances (one sixty, the other twenty-seven years of age) mattered little; the same spiritual ardor possessed them both. Delsarte offered to Mackaye a ladder to the heavens, Mackaye offered to Delsarte a bridge back to earth.

But on July 1871, Delsarte died.

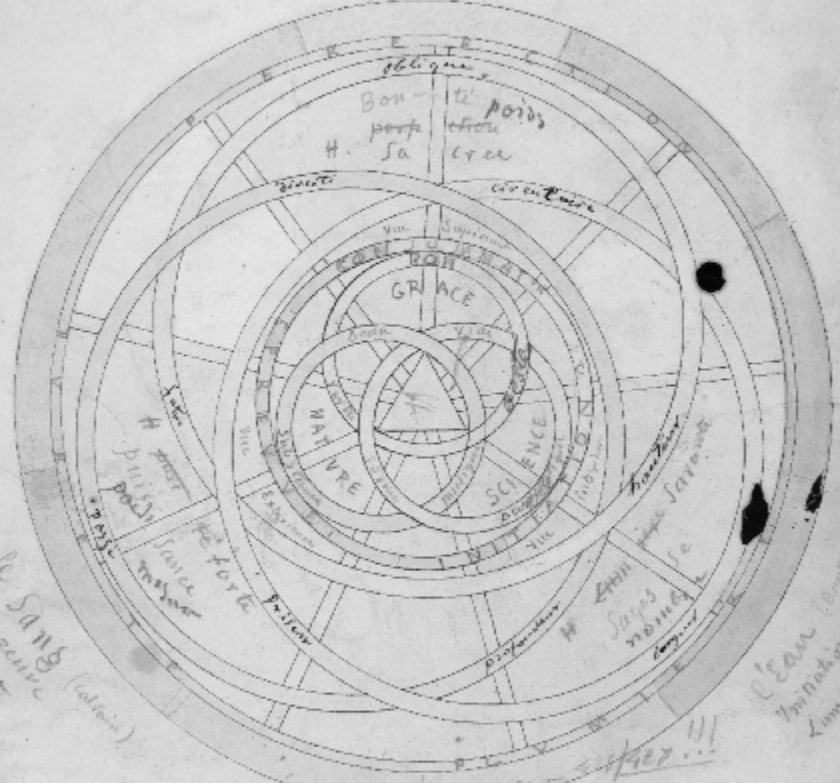
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57

Chaque des deux
Sens est dans l'autre
sur l'autre

perfection
conservation

Le feu (spirit)



le SANG (certain)
esprit
purité

le Eau (certain)
l'humidité
l'humidité

1 signillon
 2 le rayon
 3 le feu
 4 création
 5 impression
 6 glorification

la purification
 l'illumination
 la perfection

△ Sublime

3. The Struggle with the Angel

In the end, there is no constant existence, neither of our being, or of other things. And we, and our judgment, and all mortal things continue to roll and flow ceaselessly.

—Montaigne, cited by Thomas Bernhard,
as an epigraph to *The Cave*.

The *intellect* always has the noise of a pair of clippers decapitating roses; *life*, the tumult of a Bacchanalia that makes the guests roll on the table; and the *spirit* the emotional accents of a hymn.

But under Delsarte's gaze, these three forces were united, founded and balanced themselves to compose a trinity that he used like "an optic field across which he examined one by one all the objects of the universe" (Porte 260). Delsarte had only to engage in intellectual mastication or contemplative rumination. On the one hand, the rhetoric of a windmill, on the other, the stupor of a prayer mill. Delsarte sought to apprehend the totality of the world of figures, imagining an adventure of knowledge where the whole would be conserved with its original integrity, building a concept, a teacher of creation, which he called "Monosophy." For Delsarte, the stake was not the distinguished man, but the being, the entire being. To him, it was the soul that thought, and the spirit that felt. Nothing was stranger to him than the idea that the universe "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury." (Thank goodness, Shakespeare was a poet.)

That God should be so completely bound up as an absolute reference in his quest did not by any means signify that he considered the theological wild card necessary to the logic of his system. Delsarte did not bribe the facts to transform them into proofs. He would have been a sectarian, and consequently, in the expression of his artistic views, he would have been dogmatic. Delsarte was above all in a constant state of marvel before creation, and above all before man, the permanent object of his observation

Drawing by François Delsarte.

Francois Alexandre Nicolas Delsarte Papers, Mss. 1302, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA

and his study. Between his gaze and the object of his examination, no ideological spectacles interposed themselves. Also, we witnessed from him the progressive construction of a language that could translate, without either fading or distorting, the complexity and beauty of the human being. The Trinity was the showpiece, the golden egg in some sense. It allowed him to understand that which he loved. Where is the evil in that?

With Delsarte, every word was revisited. His step shook their void, but his voice renewed its echos. He knew very well that when something was recorded in writing, it took on a fictive presence, that it was a matter of an indiscreet burial in a white shroud. It is nothing more than the close and indissoluble cooperation of the three essential energies of the being: Life, Spirit, and Soul, founded on the selfsame organic reality that transmits the truth. Man as he stands is laid down, literally, on paper. Delsarte never ceased to give voice to this idea.

If he did determinedly attack the mythical and scholarly substance of the author's spirit, it was to declare:

that which is commonly called the author's spirit is absolutely in-transmissible outside of his current and direct action, even if this author had left the most scrupulously detailed commentary.

And when he remarks that this "actuality" took place decades, even centuries, ago, and that it was a new event at that time, condensing into itself treasures of thought and of talent in order to offer them in a single real act, he has these words to say:

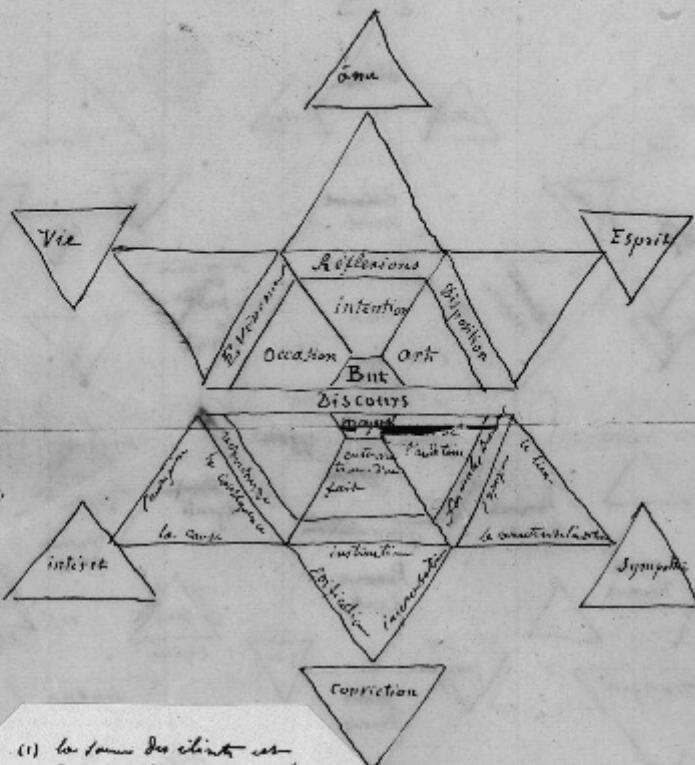
But you will tell me, a composer leaves at least his works to posterity. Stop deceiving yourselves, sirs; he leaves a dead letter. The spirit that animated his works disappears with him, and the exhumers, traditional arrangers, the moment they touch these works, their pretensions become the kiss of death.

Of course, Delsarte was engaged as an integral part of the artistic domain. But for him, this domain encompassed the entire universe, so much so that creation itself became a work of art. It is easy to imagine at what height in the atmosphere he placed himself, toward what degree of possible ambition he aimed, but neither height nor ambition had in his case an ounce of pertinence. Delsarte felt himself to be inhabited by something that surpassed him more than he tried to dominate it, by human excess: "I have caused my miserable individuality to disappear in everything. If I have pride, it is only that I bear the scars of lightning" (qtd. in Porte 260).

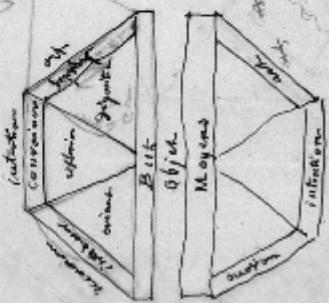
It was this thirst for knowledge that brought him, through the clear and passionate examination of living forms, to pay no heed to the little quarter systems, the pontificating phraseology of "philosophers" (his private enemies) (Porte 262), to reclaim before earth and sky his "possession of a criterion before which no fact protests." This was his definition of science. He wanted something absolutely true, infallible. And mere logical reason did not know how to give it to him; rationality is incurably myopic.

Even if reason is a telescope, at the end of the day it is the "intellect" that sees: "the intellect proceeds directly from this true light that enlightens each man upon entering the world, while reason is nothing more than the fruit of experience." These words must not be taken literally. What Delsarte called "Intellect," we would more readily call awareness or vision: "The angels do not reason, they see" (qtd. in Porte 250), wrote Delsarte in his "Treatise on Reason" (Porte 247–57). For him, it was a matter of suggesting the existence in man of this "faculty of an outside spectator to the rest of his being." People would take note of the intensity of spirit with which Delsarte attempted to paint man, more a question of watching than believing. "If faith is outside of reason, that is because of the perfection of its vision" (qtd. in Porte 250). It would be hard to illuminate with more intelligence the mysteries of a religious conviction that, for Delsarte, bathed the entirety of his field of experience. For him, the soul had the simple modesty of the stars that remain immobile in the sky and shine.

Vie



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2. les autres des agents critères de mesure
3. la forme des Produits-Critères



4. The Creative Instant

As long as an author contents himself with the telling of events or with tracing the imperceptible turns of a conscience, we can suppose him to be omniscient; as soon as he stoops to reasoning, we know that he is fallible.

—Jorge Luis Borgès, cited by Georges Perros,
in *Papiers Collés II*, page 34, collection l'Imaginaire, Gallimard.

It is neither in speeches nor in ideas that one perceives the heartbeat of the uninterrupted flow of life, but rather in the world of forms. But man forgets very quickly that he is made of the same fluidity as the fleeting miracle where, his hands full, he believes himself to be drawing on the very substance of eternity. But, like all artists, François Delsarte was not unaware that it is living emptiness from which creation springs. He knew that one must look at infinity to be able to love all the instants that compose it; he saw that it was from silence that words were born, and from stillness that gesture was born.

But then who is this man who upset silence and stillness to make himself heard and seen? Is he not already the peddler of a reality fatally altered in his flesh because he has chosen to transmit it? And what truth does he dare to try to deliver? Is it not he, man, who becomes his own first traitor in becoming the prophet of his vision?

Such a dilemma may have led some young people to suicide, but not Delsarte, who had never suffered the neurosis of metaphysical convulsions, but instead put back into the hands of his intelligence the swoons of his sensibility.

Otto Rank, in *Art and the Artist*, recorded some perceptive meditations on this dilemma over “the ideological conflict between beauty and truth” (Delsarte would have gladly specified: between Art and Science). Rank noted that if a creator has a deficiency in his attempts to bring order to “his psychic chaos” by the means of art and, consequently, of a form, he will be tempted, in order to neutralize the possible sterility, to become the legislator of his art, expounding the “psychological laws in the material of creation or aesthetic effect.” Rank strengthens the conciseness of his thought: “it is a question of

Drawing by François Delsarte.

François Alexandre Nicolas Delsarte Papers, Mss. 1302, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA

a deviation of creation into knowledge, of artistic expression into a science, essentially psychology." We have the sensation of being present, though Rank does not say it, at the most distressing of shipwrecks.

It is precisely this rivalry between art and thought that Delsarte lived. The early change of his voice was like a barometer of his artistic disintegration. He was barely eighteen years old, and if we can risk such cloudy evidence, his entire future was before him. Except that he could no longer preach even in the desert. The sun had exploded into innumerable fragments of stars, and Delsarte devoted himself to the task of collecting the scattered bits to restore to them their lost unity.

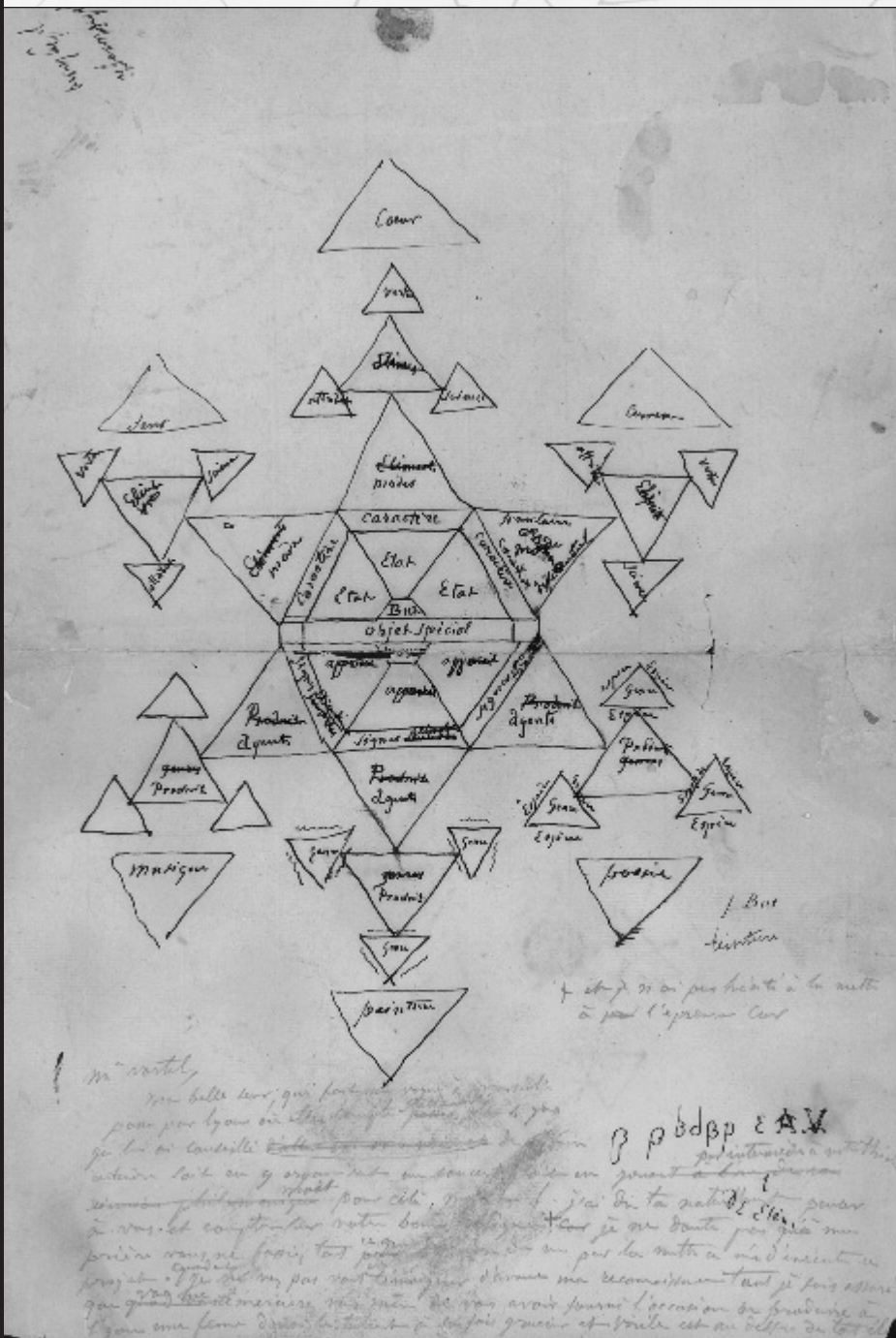
Whether the loss of his voice had been due, as he said, "to the murderous influence of a contradictory and often unintelligent education" (qtd. in Porte 157), or whether a laryngeal affliction—but of what sort?—had gotten the better of his vocal cords, what was important and decisive was that Delsarte was catapulted toward the freest and most passionate of reflections. One could perceive his rebellion against "the servile imitation to which I had been trained" as the resentment of a student who judged unjust his *sine die* dismissal from the Ecole Royale de Musique et Déclamation Lyrique. That was not at all the case. He looked much farther and deeper. And to see him harass "the empire of the platitude," to hear him stigmatize what he called "stylomania" (Porte 216), that is, an immoderate and exclusive love of the form, makes one want to hold a hand out to him across the centuries, telegraphing to him all the spiritual dynamic contained in this phrase of Henri Michaux's in *Poteau d'Angle*: "Go far enough in yourself so that style cannot follow."

Delsarte fled the vanity of fashion, the futility of appearances, seeking asylum in the infinity of possibility. This is not a stereotyped paradox, but at most a pragmatic utopia: establishing in the human body the existence of a mystical atlas. Not affirming *ex cathedra* the unverifiable dogmas of divine obedience, but caressing with the tactile tenderness of perceptiveness the radiating sense that emanates from all creation, not rationally demonstrable. For Delsarte, it was an undertaking just as staggering as it was unselfish.

Delsarte's approach could be considered surprising. "Approach" is an evasive term for a man whose "scientific" investigation of the expressive body should logically lead to a system or a method. He explained himself in a manuscript located in Baton Rouge, in Louisiana: "I cannot, like Descartes, say: my method, because God himself is its author." And he added the following precision explaining to what point his image as a public man, a professor and an artist, could be a burden to him: "I must, on this path, flee myself, and reject as unworthy everything that more or less resembles my own individuality" (qtd. in Porte 260).

Delsarte's approach was to always make a connection between coherence, adequacy, and also with harmony, a gesture and an emotion, "a signal and a passion." But as long as the intellectual hum of scholarly application leeches away spontaneity, there is no truth. As long as the personality of a singer or actor leaves the idea of the figure that he wants to embody to flounder about his psychological twists and turns, there is no art, only artifice. One sees only the invisible thread from which knowledge is sewn. One is not entirely seized by beauty, which is nothing other than the show of the evidence. That is "perfection."

One could be inclined to think that Delsarte was an impenitent idealist, closer to a timorous religiousness than to a living existence. There again, such was not at all the case. With a debater's pen, he lost his temper with the waste that was progress. On a paper, he made an inventory of the gains of civilization, that added up to so many steps backward. He noted that paper had replaced words; casting, sculpture; philanthropy, charity; the fortress, the convent; whey, milk; suicide, again the convent; the steamboat, the horse; and finally, the genius of man had replaced God! For him, progress was the illusory pursuit of improvement, and not of perfection, that completely turned its back on the most elementary level of authenticity. When he shot at his students, "I'm waiting for you to believe in the reality that you are no longer in progress. You're keeping me from sitting down, admiring, etc.," he was pronouncing something unexpectedly simple: the true state of the artist, and of man, in fact, is the state of repose, the state which he calls "normal," and which is that of the soul.



M. vertel

ma belle terre qui fait un pays si fertile
 pour peu que on s'occupe de la faire
 qu'on la travaille bien on en tirera
 un grand parti on y organisera un bon
 gouvernement pour elle. Je dirai ta nation
 à mes-les comptes tu n'as rien de plus
 précieux que ce pays, tout ce que tu en
 fais est à toi. Tu ne l'as pas fait
 que pour te servir toi-même. Tu n'as
 rien de plus précieux que ce pays, tout
 ce que tu en fais est à toi. Tu ne l'as
 pas fait que pour te servir toi-même.

B p b d b p e A V

il est si au pas honte à la suite
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It is difficult for us to imagine what Delsarte's work could have been. Each student was a unique case, a lighthouse in some sense, potentially lit by the same original light. Delsarte, who was not the manager of his pedagogical office, would have had difficulty in wording his promotional signs. On the other hand, Steele Mackaye (in his unpublished essay "A Glimpse of Delsarte's Scientific System of Dramatic Expression") gives a concise idea of the immobile horizon where Delsarte always wanted to go:

Delsarte aimed for something higher and more important than the mere presentation to the public of the actor's personality. He sought to make of the actor an artist to allow him to empty himself of his own personality, so that he could assume as faithfully as possible the personalities of his diverse roles.

But this "emptiness" of his own personality was not exploited in him as an efficient technique, it was *par excellence*, for Delsarte, the spiritual tone most natural to man. It was the pure liberty of consciousness from which each form emerges and in which each form immerses itself, so that the artist is never his own puppet, or the puppet of an ideology, or a style.... In the end, Delsarte faded noiselessly before the manifestation, prepared but impossible to predict, of life: "A student of my method is a quiet observer of the phenomena that surround him and manifest themselves inside of him" (qtd. in Porte 260).

These articles originally appeared in Rambad and Vincent, eds. Alain Porte is editor of François Delsarte, une anthologie, and is a leading Delsarte authority as well as a scholar of Indian religion and philosophy. Translated from the French by Lisa Molle.

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