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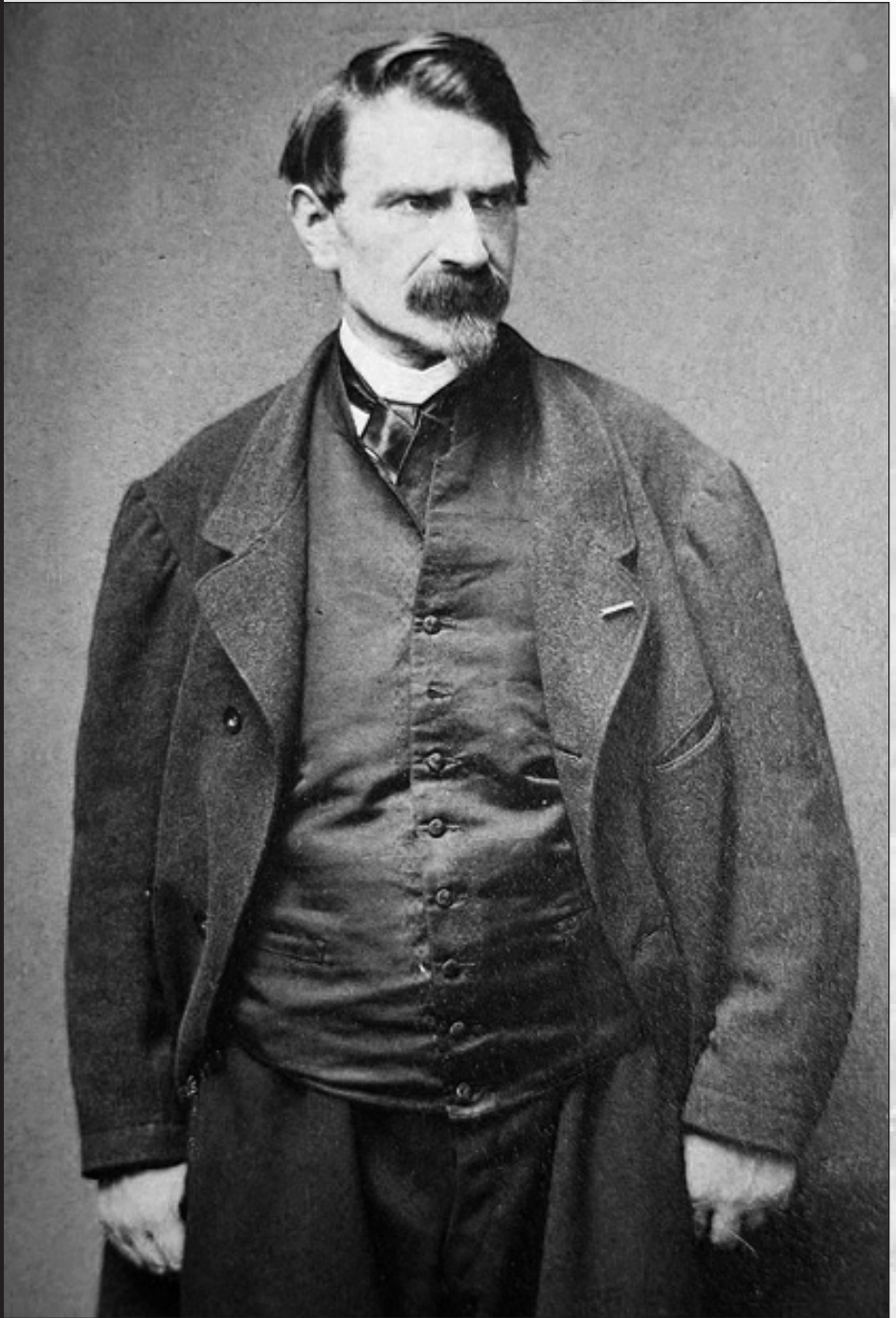
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# CONSCIOUSNESS AND INSPIRATION IN THE DELSARTEAN THEORY

Elena Randi

*Elena Randi observes how the analysis of the relationships between the moral and the physique constitutes a main theme in Delsarte's theory. As far as the general subject of his study is concerned, Delsarte draws inspiration from the thought of the French idéologues. But as regards the nature of the intérieur, he takes a similar position to Degérando's or Maine de Biran's. These intellectuals, after participating in the movement of the idéologues, started investigating the same issues, but argued against their conclusions. Combining some views of Biran's with concepts taken from the late eighteenth century debate on physiognomy and with Engel's theories, Delsarte builds up a theory and a very structured system of acting. Randi illustrates some major issues therein expressed.*

Recurrent themes in François Delsarte's theoretical writings are the relation between linguistic signs and human inner life; the influence of habit on body language and the intellect; and the examination of the relationship between the *moral* and the *physique*. These themes are clearly related to those of the French *idéologues*.<sup>1</sup>

Besides an interest in such themes, Delsarte shares the idea of the irreducible correlation between the body and the psyche with "orthodox" *idéologues*, particularly the philosopher and physiologist Pierre-Jean-George Cabanis (1757–1808) and the politician and philosopher Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt, Comte de Tracy (1754–1836). Taking inspiration from the School of Montpellier,<sup>2</sup> Cabanis investigated what might be the ideal in the field of

**Photograph of François Delsarte** by Étienne Carjat.  
*Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris.*

medicine. He concluded that it cannot be separated from a vision of man considered as a whole: the physical and the “higher” life, that is to say, are the two poles of an inseparable unity. Cabanis asked himself how a doctor could ignore the mechanisms of man’s psychic faculty, such faculty having so much influence on anatomical conditions; how could he turn his back on the study of the emotions, when the extent to which they act on the body is so evident. The knowledgeable doctor cannot, therefore, neglect the spirit and the heart; he cannot help acting at times as a psychologist and at others as a moralist. On the other hand, the knowledge of the workings of the intellect and affectivity cannot be complete and grounded if the physical aspect is not considered. The discipline which combines both spheres is called “science of man,” or “anthropology.”

But Cabanis, just like Tracy, believed that there is an ontological unity between them in the sense that *moral* is reduced to an organic, corporeal entity. Intellect and feeling (the *esprit*) are material organizations, matter. Even the more “spiritual” affective dynamics like love and joy are reduced to physiological mechanisms, dissolving into them (see Cabanis).

None of this is in Delsarte. For this reason, when he refers to the *idéologues*, it is only in strongly hostile terms.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the nature of the *intérieur*, he takes a similar position to that of French philosophers Joseph-Marie Degérando (1772–1842) or François-Pierre Maine de Biran (1766–1824) who, after participating in the movement of the *idéologues*, started investigating the same issues, but argued against their conclusions. Degérando and Biran mainly moved away from the materialistic vision of the *idéologie*. They conceived the *intérieur* as an intangible force differing ontologically from the *physique*, thus anticipating Spiritualism, but they also theorized an intense correspondence between the two. This vision raised a series of new issues and led them to develop a new set of answers to the topics studied by the *idéologues*.

One aspect in particular of Biran’s philosophy seems to offer Delsarte new grounds for reflection. Biran highlighted the difference between the *être sensitif* and the *Moi intérieur*, between *sensibilité* (connoted by instinctiveness) and will, between passivity and free will, two functions “belonging to two distinct forces,”<sup>4</sup> whose interactions are the object of reflection for many romantic intellectuals, such as Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), although along different lines. If *sensibilité*, the faculty through which we experience

phenomena, is passive,<sup>5</sup> the *Moi intérieur*—observed Biran—is an active instrument of knowledge. In order to recognize an impression, transforming it into a perception or into a concept, without abandoning it to the unconscious, we require the intervention of an active inner force (such premises led Biran to his reflections on the difference between seeing and watching or between hearing and listening).

Thus Delsarte accepts on the one hand the idea of a correspondence between the inside and the outside, and on the other, the revision, offered by the *idéologique* “heresy,” according to which psyche is an immaterial force and the human being includes two poles—one passive and unconscious, the other dynamic and conscious. Integrating Cabanis’s suggestion with the reflection on the double nature of human essence, he begins to observe the existence of both conscious and involuntary body motions, to study their connection with the interior sphere, and to examine the relations between gesture as governed by reason and gesture as not ruled by it.

Cabanis had already observed that the will is able to produce an enormous number of physical actions, but cannot stimulate or suspend others, or cause any alteration (Vol. I, 93–94). Among the latter he mentioned the circulation of blood and the peristaltic action of the intestine. Delsarte is able to add further significant considerations to Cabanis’s hasty observations on the subject, thanks to Biran’s new and stimulating reflections.

Within Delsarte’s theory Biran’s suggestions seem to combine with those arising from the late eighteenth century debate on physiognomy, in particular from the “quarrel” between its two greatest exponents: the Swiss Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), a supporter of physiognomy proper, and the German Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799), a champion of what should more correctly be termed “pathognomy.” The former, analysing the “fixed” features of human body (the shape of the nose, the distance between the hair and the eyebrows, or the proportion between the size of the neck and that of the chest), believed in the universal character, eternal and immutable, of the relation between the interior sphere and the exterior signs, regardless of geographic, temporal, or social context. On the other hand, the latter, pathognomy, in its investigation of body movement, saw motion as a changeable mode of expression, linked with history, and therefore affected by changing socio-cultural and individual conditions.

Delsarte integrates the two theories, developing a suggestion included in *Ideen zu einer Mimik*, by German dramatist, theatre director and theorist Johann Jakob Engel (1741–1802) and, years later, in the writings of French author Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850).<sup>6</sup> Delsarte believes that the gesture language in the primordial world was marked by an “un-mediated” relationship with the psyche and that such gesture language (this term must be understood both in the strict sense of the word and as a phonetic sign-system) was universally known and used by everyone. He also believes that it had a character of “truth” and “beauty.” But he also thinks that, among modern men, it has been buried under a mass of corrupt signs, adopted in the deliberate attempt to lie or caused by incorrect habits acquired over time by the individual or by the whole species. In spite of the general mendacity of gesture, however, in everyone of us at least one detail would always be preserved, no matter how small, reflecting the individual’s very soul (a slight wrinkling of the brow, a faltering of the voice, the contraction of a certain muscle). In other words, a micro-gesture would always exist, a detail revealing the archetypal language, an indication of the subterranean life transpiring, unknown to us, even from the most “shielded” body. Therefore, one can say that the corporeal vocabulary changes with variations in history, but that, between its folds, it is possible to discover the prints of a universal language that had absolute purity only in the earliest times of humanity, before its contamination.

To be more precise, there are corruptible signs together with others, less numerous, whose degeneration seems impossible to Delsarte. Involuntary movements are unchangeable; the danger of alteration arises when *ratio* (rationality) intervenes between the interior impulse and its exterior manifestation, *ratio* being a “human, all too human” faculty, not subjected to the authority of the Almighty. Among the uncontrolled dynamics, Delsarte places the movement of the shoulders: obviously not what anyone can accomplish as a normal gymnastic exercise, but rather a much more reduced and presumably different action, stimulated by the diaphragm when the individual experiences a strong emotion.

Once applied to the work of the actor, these ideas seem to lead to a system foreshadowing some modern solutions.

In the first place, in Delsarte’s opinion, the artist’s goal is to reproduce the “Adamic model” since, for him, “art is the movement of the fallen soul toward its primitive purity or its final splendor,” and “the search for the eternal model”<sup>7</sup> here and there emerging in nature among the debris sedimented in the course of history. According to an idea cherished by

Christian neoplatonism and frequently revived in the romantic age, the aesthetic product is therefore a “correction” of nature, something into which you must pour “scattered traces of beauty,” the “undeniable traces”<sup>8</sup> of a dazzling greatness.

As Delsarte’s *Épisodes Révélateurs*<sup>9</sup> and other Delsartean writings demonstrate, the first stage in the uncovering of the Beautiful consists in the recognition of the genuine gesture, an identification that can come in a “flash of lightning” or from a state of contemplation. The researcher must have gifts of observation and reflection, constancy, tenacity, concentration, perseverance, but here his personal involvement ends. The discovery of the immutable laws requires an inner mood of open-mindedness and an aptitude to receive, a kind of emptying out that permits the taking in of a higher knowledge. After many years’ work, the artist will have identified the correspondence between every human gesture and the inner dynamics by which at the beginning of time it was necessarily produced—and consequently master a very rich phonetic and gesture vocabulary bearing the character of “truth.”

These ideas suggest the possibility of an interpretation of the Delsartean method as belonging to a romantic frame of thought, since they put an emphasis on the twilight states of consciousness: Delsarte seems to be a partisan of those impalpable faculties whose origins are metaphysical, even though he does not call them *inspiration*, a term which in Delsarte’s vocabulary is always connected with the concept of individuality.

The presence of human material and intellectual activity, in which transcendent forces are instilled, can be found in the actor’s work too. As demonstrated in *Il Magistero perduto di Delsarte* (Randi 1996, 123–53), the Delsartean actor is in possession of a hermeneutic scheme able to give consistency to his part. This consistency regards both logic and affectivity. After he has identified the character’s fundamental emotion, he must “pour” it into the micro-sections of the text, and then build a score translating the personal interpretation of his script into physical and phonetic gestures. This score is reached through a complex and thorough elaboration. Then it must be rehearsed until the actor masters it completely.<sup>10</sup>

But if the player must acquire such a mastery as to be able to repeat the fixed score of a whole part “without thinking,” Delsarte does not require him to play in a state of cold estrangement. This is demonstrated not only by the several references to “enlightenment” or to “enthusiasm” (from the

Greek *én theòs*, full of God) included in his theory, but also by another—and subtler—consideration. If some fundamental genuine signs, being involuntary, cannot be controlled by consciousness, how can the actor set them in motion if he remains the hypercontrolled player cherished by the Enlightenment? Can Delsarte really persevere for over forty years in defining a gesture vocabulary, while thinking that a part of the items he classified is irreproducible during a play? Why would he persist in cataloguing the deep roots of gesture language if only a reduced section of the accumulated inventory can in actual fact be used on stage?

If anyone doubted the unavoidability of involuntary gestures in Delsarte's theory of the actor, we can underline a passage of his manuscripts about painting, but which, adapted to the different context, is also referable to performance. In a painting portraying Moses who makes water gush out of a rock—a painting attributed to Raphael—the men surrounding the prophet raise their eyes and arms to the sky, but not their shoulders. The painter's intention is clear: he wanted to express the bystanders' amazement in front of the miraculous event. Since in Delsarte's opinion vivid surprise always involves an involuntary movement of the shoulders, the absence of such detail in the iconic context startles him and leads him to complain about the painter's ignorance of the codes of expression.<sup>11</sup>

If unconscious gesture language is an essential part of the artistic product, a way for reproducing it on stage must evidently exist. Therefore, the problem is to reconcile the need of mastery and control of the preparatory part of the actor's work—a need strongly underlined by Delsarte—with the emotional "inflammation" necessary to perform those gestures that cannot be renounced and are unreproducible by the recourse to conscious control.

The only credible hypothesis is that Delsarte may be thinking of a solution similar to the one proposed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, where, as a pedagogue, he addressed the actor not enlightened by genius (Vol. VI, 21–26). Delsarte seems to conceive the great actor as one who on the stage performs all the voluntary gestures provided by the inner "score" of his character, reproducing a sequence rehearsed so many times, that it automatically flows, without resorting to conscious thought. The actor would attain his identification with the character by that curious phenomenon (well known to Konstantin Stanislavsky) in which the physical actions affect the soul, exactly as the soul is the secret motor of the action. In other words, the actor, "cold" and controlled in the beginning, would intimately begin to feel what before was just a mere exterior sign. When he reaches a sufficiently intense degree of feeling, the spring of the involuntary body movements will be released.

It is necessary to add that without modifying the theatrical practice, it clarifies an aspect of Delsarte's theoretical conception. The diving into the character's pains and joys seems to be possible only because the actor



employs the rebuilt “Adamic language”; only thanks to its direct contact with man’s “depths,” reflecting his essence in a non-mediated way, can the actor kindle an emotion in himself. If the gesture score consisted of “historical” signs, it would not be possible to establish a communication with one’s own intimate sphere and therefore the feelings would not be engaged. This way, Delsarte establishes a system enabling man to open a chink into *anima mundi*: the soul, a term standing for the sphere of feeling in Delsartean terminology, is the doorway to the extra-mundane world, the passage through which “enlightenment” can penetrate.

This specification does not involve any alteration to the following observation made in *Il Magistero perduto*: the method proposed by Delsarte justifies the simultaneous presence of two poles that cannot be seemingly assimilated: on the one hand a model of an actor perfectly aware of himself, and, on the other, the pressing reference to an involuntary body language which, as such, cannot be subject to the control of the reason. Only if the actor is emotionally involved, can he produce such signs as the mind cannot control. But this surreptitiously reached emotional involvement does not exclude the perfect mastery of the fixed score. If the part is played using a basic series of gestures defined down to the smallest detail—a series remaining unalterable during repeat performances—the unconscious movements gradually begin to emerge. These are possible only thanks to the emotional involvement.

This method would achieve emotional involvement according to controllable criteria; it would not be accidentally reached, it would not depend on chance and fortuitous occasions. This way, Delsarte overcomes a fundamental objection raised by philosopher and man of letters Denis Diderot (1713–1784) in *Paradoxe sur le comédien*: the actor who relies on this un-controllable afflatus is irresistible whenever inspiration flashes, but he is poor and tedious on other evenings, when the state of grace in which, while on stage, he is carried away by passion, keeps mysteriously silent; it intervenes only in some happy and unforeseeable moments, and the more the repeat performances proceed, the less likely such an event is to happen, because the part gets increasingly boring to the performer, turning into “habit” and *routine*. Diderot’s praises of Hippolyte Clairon (1723–1803) arose just from that: being “cold,” detached and in possession of a very good technique, she makes the spectators believe she is really moved, angry or in love, whereas she merely has a good command of the script.

Some romantic authors accept Diderot’s pertinent objection, and suggest some rudimentary solution so as not to renounce the intensity infused into the play by emotion and, at the same time, in order to stimulate inspiration on stage. Actually, it is not true—as someone said—that Romanticism naively supports a kind of actor stirred up by the fire of a passion whose source is

unfathomable and not excitable at will; the inaccuracy of such a critical standpoint is confirmed by the various philosophical reflections of the age about the relationship between sensitivity and will and about their repercussion on the aesthetic product.

Let us consider two authoritative romantic playgoers: men of letters Stendhal (1783–1842) and Théophile Gautier (1811–1872). No doubt both prefer the actor emotionally living his part (Edmund Kean instead of François-Joseph Talma), but both suggest the player stratagems so as to avoid giving in to an uncontrollable fortuitousness.<sup>12</sup> The first expedient concerns the artist's everyday life. Stendhal and Gautier think that getting used to intensely feeling all passions, including the less common—i.e. passions polite society would not allow—encourages, in the actor himself, the aptitude of generating them during performance, whatever the requested shade of feeling may be. In other words, both think that the repeated unleashing of deep and unusual feelings in everyday life creates a kind of inclination to inspiration. Therefore, the artists must not let themselves be entangled by the bourgeois style of life, or by moralism and conformism, to whose rules they have wrongly started to conform.

Moreover, Stendhal insists on the necessity of keeping some interpretative elasticity. The actor should refrain from defining the rendering of the part in detail. This way, he will allow improvisation a chance to intervene. If necessary, he should also allow himself the luxury of modifying the text, of devising some unforeseen line during the show, and, while on stage, of changing the tone devised during rehearsals, of deleting some passages, because this freedom would help the emotional warming up. Stendhal adds that the actor should allow himself the possibility of offering the character a different emotional inflexion from the modulation previously proposed, if on a particular evening this better matches his mood.

Gautier has in some respects a different idea. He also believes that a reasonable amount of improvisation in the phonetic-gesture score is advantageous, but in his opinion it must be supported by a very clear and precise definition of the character's nature, feelings and thoughts. Only when the actor has clearly defined the development of the inner dynamics of the *dramatis persona*, can he get into the part and let himself be carried away with the joys and the pains affecting it, and consequently perform them properly.

Therefore, Delsarte is not isolated: the complex and highly structured method by which in practice he answers a series of pressing questions, is contemporary to some solutions aiming at solving analogous problems to Delsarte's, although such solutions are more sketchy, less organised and not concretely tested.

## Notes

- 1 The *idéologues* are the exponents of a philosophical movement operating in France between the end of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century. The term *idéologie* was coined by Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt, Comte de Tracy, the main exponent of the movement together with Pierre-Jean-George Cabanis.
- 2 This is a vitalism-oriented School of Medicine born in the first half of the eighteenth century and active in the ancient and prestigious Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier. Théophile Bordeu (1722–1776), Louis La Caze (1799–1869) and Paul-Joseph Barthez (1734–1806) are among the main exponents of this School.
- 3 See the lectures given in Paris in 1855 at Salon du Cercle des Sociétés Savantes (Quai Malaquais, 3). Their content is handwritten in a document titled *Cours de Mons. Delsarte*, in the Delsarte Collection, LSU (box 12, folder 86). I have learned the place and date of these lectures from Alain Porte, who consulted another transcript of the same lectures. It is now possible to find these lectures in Porte and in Randi 1993. There are specific references to the *idéologues* on p. 120 in Porte and p. 171 in Randi. On the *idéologues*, see also the handwritten copybook, *Esthétique Appliquée. Cours de F. Delsarte. Exposition en neuf leçons de l'Art de l'Orateur, du Peintre et du Musicien*, the Delsarte Collection, LSU (box 11, folder 40). It contains the transcript by Alphonse Pagès of a series of lectures given by Delsarte in 1859 at Salon du Cercle des Sociétés Savantes. There are notes and corrections by Delsarte himself. See specifically, p. 54. Another mention of the *idéologues* is in *Traité de la Raison* (1870), a text found by Alain Porte in the private archives of the Delsarte family and now published in Porte 247–57. Its handwriting is not Delsarte's, but its content very probably is. (See p. 251).
- 4 "Décade philosophique," an XI, vol. 36, p. 14. Qtd. in Moravia 490.
- 5 Delsarte employs the term *sensibilité* like Maine de Biran, not in the meaning of "a mood to feel intensely," but in that of "the faculty through which sensations penetrate into us."
- 6 The French translation of Engels *Ideen* dates back to 1794. For Balzac, see *Théorie de la démarche* (1833).
- 7 *Cours de Mons. Delsarte*, pp. 18, 19, 21. (See note 3 above); Randi 1993, pp. 162–63. The same words are in Delsarte's "Esthétique Appliquée. Des Sources de l'Art" in Battaille 136.

- 8 Fol. 1v of the manuscript whose opening words are *L'âme humaine*, Delsarte Collection, LSU (box 1, folder 36b, item 3). The manuscript probably is by Delsarte. An indication on the folder suggests that it may date back to about 1850. On neoplatonic ideas in Delsarte's thought, see Artioli.
- 9 The first two paragraphs of Delsarte's unfinished manuscript *Mes Épisodes Révélateurs, ou Histoire d'une Idée appelée à constituer la base de la Science et de l'Art* are in the first two folios of box 1, folder 26b, item 7 of the Delsarte Collection, LSU. The other part of the manuscript is in box 1, folder OS 36c, item 2. Written between 1869 and 1871, this text was published in English in "All the Literary Remains of François Delsarte (Given in his own Words)," in *Delsarte System of Oratory*. It is published in French in Porte 55–88. This version differs slightly from the one in the Delsarte Collection. A sizeable portion has also been published in Italian in Randi 1993, 218–41.
- 10 This Delsartean principle is confirmed, for example, by its conformance with the opinion of noted eighteenth-century English actor David Garrick: an actor who, while on stage, waits to be taken by inspiration, is lazy and ordinary (cf. *Cours de Mons. Delsarte*, p. 2. See note 3 above). It is also confirmed by the fact that Delsarte defended Talma's way of working: in Delsarte's opinion, the latter used to plan his character in every detail. In particular, Delsarte describes a passage from *Cinna* by Corneille as performed by Talma. The scene was so carefully studied and rehearsed that the player could perform it while simultaneously doing an arithmetic operation without any relation to the plot. Nevertheless, the public did not perceive Talma's emotional detachment from his character (*Cours de Mons. Delsarte*, pp. 2–3). Against inspiration, see also, for example, the damaged folio in the Delsarte Collection, LSU whose first legible words are *n'est qu'un insigne contresens* (box 1, folder 36a, item 10). It was handwritten by Delsarte around 1833.
- 11 *Esthétique Appliquée. Cours de F. Delsarte*, p. 73; *Cours de Mons. Delsarte*, p. 140 (both in Delsarte Collection, LSU; see note 3 above). The passage about Raphael in *Cours de Mons. Delsarte* can also be found in Porte 134.
- 12 See Randi 2001, particularly chapters I and IV.

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