

The Arrival of American Delsartism in London:

A presentation given at the ‘The London Stage and the Nineteenth-Century World IV’  
conference at New College, Oxford, 6-8 April 2022<sup>1</sup>

My presentation builds upon research I presented last year at “The London Stage and the Nineteenth-Century World III” conference where I explored how the Delsarte System of Expression came to London directly from France, first, through the teachings of Manuel Garcia Jr., who, along with his son Gustave,<sup>2</sup> taught at all of the major music institutions in London between 1848 and the turn of the century,<sup>3</sup> and second, through the teachings of the Alsatian *basso profundo* Richard Deck, a singer working at the Royal Opera who taught the system to George Bernard Shaw.<sup>4</sup> What I was able to discover was that the system which had arrived in London directly from France remained a specialized form of training for opera singers for almost 40 years, Shaw being somewhat of an anomaly, learning the system from Deck in order to overcome his fear of public speaking.

This year, my research focuses on a distinct branch of Delsarte’s teachings which arrived in London by way of America, known as “Delsartism.” In the summer of 1886, the husband-and-wife team of Edmund and Henrietta Russell arrived in the city for what would become a three-year sojourn focused on spreading the gospel of American Delsartism, a review of their first lecture in the *Pall Mall Gazette* reading:

Delsarteism has at last reached this country. In America it flourishes; has hundreds of professors and thousands of disciples, a literature of its own, and even a newspaper. Here it is absolutely unknown. [...] At Moscheles’s studio a lecture was given to a crowded audience, including many celebrities of the art

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<sup>1</sup> This conference paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

<sup>2</sup> Gustave published a treatise based on Delsarte’s teachings. See Gustave Garcia, *The Actor’s Art: A Practical Treatise on Stage Declamation, Public Speaking and Deportment* (London: T. Pettit & Co., 1882).

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Garcia Jr. taught at the Royal Academy of Music for 48 years, from 1848-1895, and at the Royal College of Music for 12 years, from 1883-1895. Gustave Garcia taught singing and acting at the London Academy of Music from 1868-1904; he was Director of the Operatic Class (Dramatic) at the Royal Academy from 1880-1894; he taught at the Guildhall from 1883-1910, and the Royal College from 1884 until his retirement.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches* (London: Constable and Company, 1949), 64.

world. Mr. Russell gave the biography of his hero, and then Mrs. Russell explained and illustrated his teaching. Her extra-ordinary gracefulness caused her remarks to be interrupted by constant applause. The cult seems certainly to have in it the elements of a London success.<sup>5</sup>

First, I will provide an overview of what was happening in America with the dissemination of Delsarte's teachings prior to the Russells' arrival in London, then look at what I was able to discover about their time in the city, and finally I will draw some initial conclusions about the impact their visit had in both England and America.

Delsarte's teachings arrived in America shortly after his death in the summer of 1871, brought there by his only American student, actor and playwright Steele MacKaye. MacKaye had been studying with Delsarte in Paris when on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1870 the war with Prussia was announced. MacKaye left for America shortly after, and it was his friend, William Alger, a Unitarian minister, who travelled to France after the war in the summer of 1871 in the hopes of studying with Delsarte; however, Delsarte died prior to his arrival.<sup>6</sup> Alger was tasked by MacKaye with purchasing Delsarte's papers, which he had shipped to Boston. Alger studied for a season in Paris with Delsarte's son, Gustave, and upon his return to America, he introduced the system to Lewis B. Monroe, the founding head of the Boston University School of Oratory, who, in turn, introduced the system to his student, Samuel Silas Curry, the eventual namesake of Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts. It is these four men who are credited with first disseminating Delsarte's teachings in America, MacKaye and Alger establishing the system as a method of training for actors, and Monroe and Curry establishing it as a method of oratorical training in the educational system. And so, for about a decade after its arrival in America, Delsarte's system remained a professionalized method of training. However, one of the main differences between the original French system and the Americanized system was that the American system lacked a musical foundation. MacKaye

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<sup>5</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, "Occasional Notes," 29 June 1886, 6641, 3.

<sup>6</sup> See Percy MacKaye, *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye*, 2 vols. 1 (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), 139–62.

was not a musician, and so it seems he did not learn the musical aspects of the system while studying with Delsarte. And so, when the system arrived on American soil, it was already fragmented and incomplete. Around 1879, publisher Edgar S. Werner, of *Werner's Voice Magazine*, became interested in the system, which led to the first publication, *Delsarte System of Oratory*, in 1882.

The widespread popular appeal of Delsarte's teachings in America, which became known as Delsartemania, is attributed to three second-generation practitioners: Henrietta Hovey, also known as Henrietta Crane and Henrietta Russell from previous marriages; Edmund Russell, Henrietta's second husband, with whom she travelled to London; and Genevieve Stebbins, an early student of MacKaye. In 1881, Stebbins was selected by Werner to write a practical treatise on the system,<sup>7</sup> which was published under the title *Delsarte System of Expression*, which became much more popular with the American public than *Delsarte System of Oratory*.<sup>8</sup> It was Stebbins who developed the system along the lines of physical culture, pantomime, and dance, and who seems to have popularized the art of Greek statue posing in America, believing as she did that the foundation of Delsarte's aesthetic system was neo-classical. Statue posing in the manner of the ancient Greeks became popular with women groups across the country and was eventually parodied in *The Music Man* in 1957 in the number "One Grecian Urn."<sup>9</sup> It was Stebbins also who inspired a young Ruth St. Denis to take up dancing, her mother purchasing Stebbins' treatise and giving Ruth her first Delsarte lessons as a child.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Stebbins' treatise went through six printings between 1886-1902. The title of the first edition, *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, was shortened to *Delsarte System of Expression* in subsequent printings. For the sixth and final edition, Stebbins included additional writings, as well as thirty-two illustrations from Greek art, thus erroneously promoting the aesthetics of Delsarte's system as neo-classical.

<sup>9</sup> See Marian Wilson Kimber, "Iowa's Nymphs, Naiads, & Graces: Performing Delsarte for the Masses," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 92, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>10</sup> See Suzanne Shelton, *Ruth St. Denis: A Biography of the Divine Dancer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 11.

Henrietta and Edmund, however, developed the system along different lines, applying Delsarte's aesthetic principles to everyday life. In 1868, still in her early twenties, Henrietta joined the popular movement of women's clothing reform in America, designing her own outfits and giving public lectures on dress reform. To improve her speaking skills, in the mid-1870s Henrietta entered the Boston University School of Oratory under Lewis B. Monroe where she learned of Delsarte's teachings, and in 1878, she travelled to Paris in order to study with Gustave Delsarte. Upon her return a year later, Henrietta presented herself as one of a handful of experts on the Delsarte system in America.<sup>11</sup>

Edmund Russell was a self-fashioned poet, painter, sculptor, and orator who became enamoured with the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde on his American tour in 1882. A year later, Edmund himself began travelling across the country, giving lectures on home decorating, the art of dress, and artistic expression, and soon became known in the press as "The American Oscar Wilde," and the "beautiful" Edmund Russell.<sup>12</sup> In 1884 Henrietta and Edmund met, joined forces as a lecture team, and married a year later. It was from Henrietta that Russell learned the Delsarte system, and it is owing to the efforts of the Russells that "Delsartism," as they called it, was promoted as the basis for a revolutionary aesthetic transformation of everyday life. The American clothing companies soon caught on to the trend set by both Stebbins and the Russells, and so names like "The Delsarte Corset Company," and "The Delsarte Manufacturing Company" began to appear, marketing everything from Delsarte branded corsets, waists, braces, strophiums, and girdles, women being encouraged to take Delsarte lessons in their new and improved undergarments which allowed the body to move more freely. Also marketed to consumers was the Delsarte shoe, with the name Delsarte standing for "everything that is new and desirable." For men, there was the Delsarte suit,

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<sup>11</sup> Biographical information on Henrietta Russell taken from Ruyter, *Cultivation*, 31–44.

<sup>12</sup> Biographical information on Edmund Russell taken from Kevin Taylor and Courtney McKillop, "The American Oscar Wilde," *Aimée Crocker*, 28 February 2021, <https://aimeecrocker.com/people/the-american-oscar-wilde/>.

marketed as a fact, not a prophecy, and something that your tailor might be able to make “if you gave him a proper theoretical explanation.” And so, by 1886 when the Russells travelled to London, “Delsartism” was quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon, having already taken New York City by storm.

While lecturing in New York City, the Russells met painter and writer Felix Moscheles, who invited them to London. It was at his studio on the 22 June 1886 that they gave their first lecture, “Expression in Art,” with Robert Browning, Thomas Hardy, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, James McNeill Whistler, and Oscar Wilde in attendance – the lecture being well received in the press. The couple’s second lecture, “The Harmony and Expression of Motion,” was given at the Drury Lane Theatre on the 31 July, hosted by actor and impresario, August Harris. This time in attendance was George Bernard Shaw, who wrote a review of the lecture in *Our Corner*:

I learned from a newspaper paragraph that Mr. Russell was a professor of Delsartism. This probably conveyed no definite idea to more than two or three score people in London; but I was by chance one of the two or three score. [...] My impression of the lecture was that its delivery would not have satisfied Delsarte except at a few points. [...] How Delsarte’s ghost, if present and capable of utterance, would unravel the confusion between representation and persuasion, concentration and irrelevance, which had led the speakers astray! [...] However, if Mr. and Mrs. Russell will make a start in transforming a nation of bad speakers, bad walkers, vile singers, and prematurely stale athletes into healthy, lasting, and graceful creatures, I, for one, am quite ready to take their mission seriously, believing, as I do, that what Delsarte taught had an important bearing on moral, as popularly distinguished from physical, welfare.<sup>13</sup>

The lecture at Drury Lane received generally favourable reviews, and soon the Russells were invited to lecture in many London studies and drawing rooms. There was also talk in the press of the couple opening an actor training program in the city the following year, but which never came to pass.

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<sup>13</sup> George B. Shaw, “Art,” *Our Corner*, 1 September 1886, 181–83.

On 30 November 1886, the Russells gave the first lecture in a nine-week lecture series on “Art Principles and Criticism,” at St. James’s Hall. The first lecture was on the life and teachings of “Delsarte.” The second on “Light and Shade, Sitting for a Photograph, and Costumes and Accessories.” Three, “The Building of a Picture, and Music.” Four, “Colour, Hangings, Carpets, etc.” Five, “House Decoration,” and Six, “Dress reform.” This lecture drew the largest crowd, the hall being sold out, and the press reporting only three men in attendance.<sup>14</sup> Lectures seven, eight, and nine dealt with “Table Decoration,” “Sculpture,” and “Dramatic Gesture and Costume.”<sup>15</sup>

And, to give an idea of what the Russells taught, Delsarte’s aesthetic theory is based on the idea of unity, that everything is in everything, everything is connected, and that nothing is pure or absolute, except for God. As a foundation for his theory, Delsarte adopted a scientific law that was discovered by chemist Michel Chevreul, the law of simultaneous contrast of colours, which was published in 1839.<sup>16</sup> The law states that “if we look simultaneously upon two stripes of different tones of the same colour, or upon two stripes of the same tone of different colours placed side by side, the eye perceives certain modifications which in the first place influence the intensity of colour, and in the second place, the optical composition of the two juxtaposed colours.”<sup>17</sup> And, here you can see one of Chevreul’s experiments where the colours look slightly different depending on the colour they are contrasted with.<sup>18</sup> According to scholar Jennifer Phillips, Chevreul’s law signalled “the ascendancy of the comparative over the absolute”<sup>19</sup> in nineteenth-century art, meaning, for example, that there was no such thing as an absolute shade of red, or absolute shade of blue,

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<sup>14</sup> *Warwickshire Herald*, “Lady’s Letter,” 27 January 1887, 6.

<sup>15</sup> The list of lectures is compiled from a series of articles that appeared in *The Stage*, 3 December 1886 to 4 February 1887.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Eugène Chevreul, *de la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (Paris: Pitois-Levrault, 1839).

<sup>17</sup> Michel Eugène Chevreul, *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors: and their applications to the arts* (West Chester, PA: Schiffer, 1987), 52.

<sup>18</sup> Experiment shown, Chevreul, “Colour Plate III,” *Principles*, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Phillips, “Relative Color: Baudelaire, Chevreul, and the Reconsideration of Critical Methodology,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 33, 3/4 (2005): 344.

because any shade of colour we see is dependent upon our surroundings. And so, based on Chevreul's law, the Russells developed a system for the painting of rooms in one's home as a background for the flesh tones of the people most inhabiting those rooms, arguing that "the colour in which a room is to be painted ought to be mixed a little dirtier than flesh, so that everyone looks clean and fresh against it; or, a little greener than flesh, so that everyone looks pink and clear against it, or a little lighter than flesh, so that everyone looks richer against it,"<sup>20</sup> depending upon the desired effect – the idea being that the colour of everything in the room is affected by the predominant colour of the room itself. And so, it is from the application of Chevreul's law that the Russells did in fact teach a valid application of Delsarte's aesthetic principles, which they applied to everyday life.

In terms of Delsarte's theory of performance, the couple taught members of the companies of the Drury Lane Theatre, Covent Garden, and the Carl Rosa Opera Company, as well as actors from other companies, and a number of clergymen and lawyers. They gave lectures at Cambridge University, the Church and Stage Guild, Sir Percy Shelley's private theatre, Walter Crane's studio, and lectured in the drawing rooms of John Strange Winter, Lady Dorothy Nevill, and many others. And so, by all accounts, the Russells' trip was a great success. Within two years, the London press was reporting that American Delsartism was taking London by storm, as it had done in New York City.

However, in April of 1888, the couple made a grave mistake. With no formal training in acting or experience in the theatre, Mrs. Russell took on the role of Phèdre in Racine's tragedy, and Mr. Russell the role of Ion in Talfourd's, in order to demonstrate the usefulness of Delsarte's theories for the stage. The reviews were scathing. "Mrs. Edmund Russell cannot act. Indeed, her attempt was about as hopeless a display of conceited incompetency as it was

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<sup>20</sup> *Cheltenham Examiner*, "A Lady's London Letter," 8 September 1886, 2.

ever my fate to witness.”<sup>21</sup> “If what we saw and heard is to be regarded as the outcome of the Delsartean method, we may express the hope that the English stage may long be spared its general adoption.”<sup>22</sup> “Edmund Russell is about as good as a very bad amateur, and the consolation to be derived from his performance is the reflection that Delsarteanism has now been so hopelessly and unmercifully guyed that we are not likely to hear any more of the nonsense for a considerable time to come.”<sup>23</sup> Two more productions which had already been announced, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*,<sup>24</sup> in which the couple were to perform together, were subsequently cancelled, apparently along with any plans the couple may have had of opening up an acting school in London.

However, what the critics don’t seem to have noticed, or at least what no one seems to have commented upon, was that Delsarte’s theories had been applied to the London operatic stage for over thirty years by this point, both as taught by the Garcias in the music schools, and as performed by Delsarte’s own students on stage, the difference being that no one in the opera world called what they were doing “Delsartism,” they were simply applying a method of training developed by Delsarte, which had been adopted by many other singing teachers – there is a report from Manuel Garcia at this time that nearly all of the teachers currently working at the Paris Conservatoire were former students of Delsarte.<sup>25</sup> So, apparently by 1887, the Delsarte system was the dominant training method for opera singers in Paris, if not London as well.

Notably, in 1887, two of the leading singers performing in *Lohengrin* at the Carl Rosa Opera Company were former students of Delsarte – Edward Scovel and Marie Rôze – both of

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<sup>21</sup> *The Sporting Times*, “Scenes and Not to be Scenes,” 21 April 1888, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *The Era*, “‘Phedre’ in Fun,” 21 April 1888, 8.

<sup>23</sup> *The Sporting Times*, “Scenes and Not to be Scenes,” 28 April 1888, 3.

<sup>24</sup> *The Queen*, “The Drama: Between the Acts,” 25 February 1888, 234.

<sup>25</sup> See *A Delsartean Scrap-Book: Health, Personality, Beauty, House-Decoration, Dress, etc.*, ed. Frederic Sanburn (New York: John W. Lowell Company, 1890), 43.

whom had received rave reviews for their acting skills. A review of Scovel's performance noted that:

His teachers of dramatic action were many, and he finished his course under the celebrated Delsarte of Paris. [...] It is as Lohengrin that Mr. Scovel is, perhaps, to be seen at his best. [...] his acting is marked by dignity, refinement, and exquisite taste of the highest order. A noticeable and pleasing feature in Mr. Scovel's performances is his perfect intonation, while he is to be commended for his avoidance of unpleasant mannerisms and the distinctness of his enunciation.<sup>26</sup>

And:

Madame Marie Rôse has realised the poetic side of Elsa in the fullest measure. Her acting is entirely free from conventionalism; she moves and enounces the words and sings the music as she feels, and in thus following the bent of her nature she very nearly realises the composer's ideal.<sup>27</sup>

And so, the system Delsarte developed was certainly applicable to both the stage and to public speaking. However, it must be remembered that what the Russells possessed was an incomplete form of the system, and second, as Shaw had pointed out in his review, the couple didn't seem to understand the difference between representation and persuasion, which is the difference between conventual acting and genius. For Delsarte, art did not merely represent, great art was capable of persuasion, of transforming and converting one's own beliefs. But what the Russells had done, according to Shaw, was to merely substitute gesture for genius. Nevertheless, the couple's ability as orators seems to have been sufficient enough to persuade many people in England of the importance of Delsarte's theories.

The Russells remained in London for another year, continuing to lecture in drawing rooms and studios, leaving for America in June of 1889. In terms of their cultural impact, the first advertisements for Delsarte teachers in London began to appear in 1888, some teachers claiming to be students of Mrs. Russel, others using Delsarte's name simply to attract students. Around 1890, professional elocution schools in London began advertising the

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<sup>26</sup> "Chevalier Edward Scovel, the American Tenor, Now Appearing with the Carl Rosa Opera Company," *The Owl: A Journal of Wit and Wisdom* 17, no. 422 (1887): 10.

<sup>27</sup> "Mr. Carl Rosa's Opera at Drury Lane," *The Musical World* 65, no. 23 (June 1887): 437.

system as part of their training programs. And, in 1904 the Delsarte System was officially adopted by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art upon its establishment, where it was taught until the mid-1920s.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of a cross-cultural influence, the Russells seemed to have acquired knowledge about Delsarte's original system while in London, likely from those they met who had been personal friends with Delsarte – voice teacher Manuel Garcia, the president of the Royal Academy at the time, Sir Frederick Leighton, and statesman Lord Lytton. When the couple first arrived in London, there are reports of Edmund dressing in the style of the ancient Greeks while painting, and that the drapery of Henrietta's dresses were made to resemble Greek statues – notably, American Delsartism to this day is seen by scholars as a neo-classical movement. However, what the Russells seem to have learned in London is that Delsarte's aesthetic system was not neo-classical, but neo-gothic. Delsarte's manuscripts reveal a passion for medievalism and the writings of Thomas Aquinas. He also dismissed the entire Renaissance as nothing more than a return to paganism, arguing that it was the artist Raphael who was the cause of a great darkness and chaos in the world of art.<sup>29</sup> Delsarte developed his theory in opposition to the models of antiquity which were being forced upon students training at both the Paris Conservatoire and the School of Fine Arts in the early

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<sup>28</sup> The first Delsarte teacher at RADA was Elizabeth Earle (1875-?), who appears to have taught the system from 1904-1910. However, it must be noted that the earliest evidence Earle taught the system at RADA dates from 1908, as surviving records are scarce, and so I have assumed here that the system was taught by her when the school opened in 1904. Earle left the position in 1910 when she was forced to move to Australia after being involved in a scandal – her ex-lover was mysteriously murdered in a vacant flat beneath her own. See Richard Whittington-Egan, *Mr Atherstone Leaves the Stage: The Battersea Murder Mystery* (Stroud: Amberley, 2015). The second teacher, Rose Meller O'Neil, taught the system from 1911 to 1919(?), publishing an article and a full treatise on the system. See Rose O'Neill, "The Living Work of a Forgotten Master," *The Occult Review*, August 1925; and Rose Meller O'Neill, *The Science and Art of Speech and Gesture: A Comprehensive Survey of the Laws of Gesture and Expression, Founded on the Art and Life Work of Delsarte, with His Exercises*. (London: The C.W. Daniel Co., 1927). In her treatise, O'Neill mentions that she learned Delsarte's system from a "Mrs. E," who is likely Elizabeth's mother, Josephine Earle (1841-?) a teacher of elocution, and whose name appears to have been withheld by O'Neill owing to the scandal (see Whittington-Egan, 88). The third Delsarte teacher at RADA, Enid Rose, taught the system in the 1920s, also publishing a treatise on acting (but not specific to Delsarte). See Enid Rose, *First Studies in Dramatic Art* (London: University Tutorial Press, 1926).

<sup>29</sup> See François Delsarte, "Chapitre II: le peintre," in Delsarte Papers MS1301, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La., box 1, folder 36b, items 9-12.

nineteenth century. And so, significantly, by the time the Russells arrived home in America in 1889, they had adopted a neo-gothic aesthetic, the aesthetic under which they continued to teach Delsartism in America after their time in London. Here is a photograph of Edmund Russell later in life, the date of the photograph is unknown.<sup>30</sup> However, we also possess a description of Henrietta shortly after her arrival back home in America:

Reclining upon a sofa... [was] the high priestess of the most aesthetic cults of London, the fair exponent of the Delsartean principles of colour, form, and gesture, the concentrated embodiment of the aesthetic ideals of William Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and the other pre-Raphaelite artists of London.<sup>31</sup>

How or from whom in London the Russells learned that Delsarte's aesthetic theory was, in fact, neo-gothic, I have not yet been able to discern. However, the point is that it was Henrietta who, in 1915, taught the Delsarte system to modern dancers Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and the Denishawn Company, including Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, and so the aesthetic foundation of American modern dance was heavily influenced by what Hovey taught these dancers, Delsarte's teachings becoming the aesthetic foundation for the company.<sup>32</sup> If Hovey's understanding of Delsarte's aesthetic system had shifted from a neo-classical perspective to a neo-gothic owing to her time in London, this would have significant implications for our understanding of the history of American modern dance today, as it could explain why American modern dance did not simply develop along the neo-classical lines set by Genevieve Stebbins, and also Isadora Duncan, but focused much of its expression and practice on medieval themes, such as Gregorian Chant, and Christian mysticism. Thank you.

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<sup>30</sup> The photograph shown, "Edmund Russell in his Bohemian lair," appears in Taylor and McKillop, "The American Oscar Wilde."

<sup>31</sup> Bradshaw, William R., "An Interview with Mrs. Edmund Russell." *The Decorator and Furnisher* 19 (April 1891): 181-183, quoted in Ruyter, *Cultivation*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> See Ted Shawn, *Every Little Movement: A Book About François Delsarte* (Pittsfield, MA: The Eagle Printing and Binding Company, 1954), 12.

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