

### *Abstract*

This paper explores the role theatre played in the life of Charles Peirce and his second wife, Juliette, from 1884–1888. Peirce became acquainted with playwright and director Steele Mackaye, who trained Juliette in the acting techniques associated with “aesthetic expression,” a movement derived from the work of François Delsarte. I first trace the Peirces’ interactions with Mackaye during this period. The paper then demonstrates affinities between Peirce’s semeiotic account of cognition as mediated through feeling and sensation and the architecture of Delsarte’s system of actor training. The latter employs Delsarte’s semeiotique as an analytical tool for conveying the dramatic character’s inner life. A function of mind, semeiotique intertwines with the functions of life and soul to complete the actor’s task. The affinities between these two accounts of semeiotic emerge from the paper’s analysis of Peirce’s 1888 essay on aesthetic expression, “Trichotomic,” and related passages from *A Guess at the Riddle*.

*Keywords:* Charles S. Peirce, Juliette Peirce, François Delsarte, Steele Mackaye, aesthetic expression, Delsartism, Lyceum Theatre School, performance, semeiotic, semiotics, theatre

In the 1880s and 1890s, performance played a significant role in the lives of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and his second wife, Juliette Peirce (185?–1934). Having moved to Milford, Pennsylvania, in April 1887, Charles and Juliette were still adjusting to country life. Milford, situated on the Delaware River among forests that seemed inexhaustible, had been settled by Huguenot

## *Theatre at the Birth of Semiotics: Charles Sanders Peirce, François Delsarte, and Steele Mackaye*

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immigrants whose French language and cultural influence were still strong. When the Peirces arrived, the town was already shifting from the lumber industry to tourism, particularly as a summer retreat for the wealthy. Nearby Port Jervis offered relatively easy access by train to the cosmopolitan life in New York City, about seventy-five miles southeast, where the Peirces kept an apartment, saw friends, and attended the theatre. There Juliette had begun to pursue a career in acting by studying with theatre impresario James Morrison Steele Mackaye (1842–1894). In fact, it appears that in the mid-1880s performance of several types occupied the Peirces. Charles, who had lost his faculty position at the Johns Hopkins University, still gave public lectures and had a sustained interest in elocution. From Milford Juliette continued to seek out an acting teacher or theatre manager who could facilitate her entry to the professional stage. In the meantime, she and Charles participated in readings and acted in amateur theatricals among their new friends. It appears that the Peirces were centrally involved in a production in September 1887 (Brent 187) in which they may have employed elements of Juliette’s training with Steele MacKaye. He had introduced the couple to an acting theory based on a *semeiotic* strikingly similar to Peirce’s own.

Performance may have also become a significant factor in the development of Charles Peirce’s ideas. Professional and amateur theatre as well as the performance cultures of elocution and actor training played a surprising role in the development of semiotics in the late 19th-century United States. This article addresses one such performance community: Juliette’s actor training with Mackaye, which brought the Peirces into contact with “aesthetic expression.” This popular movement sought to put the actor’s craft on a scientific basis and transform theatre into a progressive social institution. The tenets underlying Mackaye’s training, drawn from the work of his teacher François Delsarte, were remarkably similar to Peirce’s philosophical account of human cognition as richly mediated through feeling and sensation. I demonstrate affinities between the unique and suggestive architecture of Peirce’s theory of *semeiotic* and the system of Delsarte. I also sketch the uses to which Mackaye put Delsarte’s ideas in his teaching and directing. By introducing the Peirces’ interest in Mackaye, I point to the rich context of embodied ideas that performance offered Peirce at a crucial period in his thinking.

### *A First Encounter: The Peirces and Steele Mackaye*<sup>2</sup>

Steele Mackaye was one of François Delsarte’s last students, and possibly his most important. Mackaye brought back to the U.S. a detailed understanding of his teacher’s vocal and gestural techniques and the philosophy that lay behind them. Born in 1811, Delsarte taught his system in Paris from 1839 to 1870. His influential course on applied

aesthetics, designed for opera performers and actors, also attracted artists, musicians, composers, and writers (Ruyter 6–7). For Delsarte, as for Peirce, semeiotic was a method of inquiry. While the actor in training, observing everyday behaviors, discerns emotion through movement (chiefly gesture), the faculty called *semeiotique*<sup>3</sup> extracts meaning from it. In performance, the actor also uses the semeiotic, by expressing emotion through a corresponding gesture; if executed properly, this outward sign plays a role in conveying the inner emotion to the audience. Thus both actor and spectator employ semeiotic as an analytical tool at various stages of the creation of dramatic character. As Claude Shaver notes, “The work of the student is to analyze through the semeiotic, then, through practice, to synthesize so that his movement becomes spontaneous and thus aesthetic” (Shaver 110). A function of mind, the semeiotic intertwines with the functions of life and soul to complete the actor’s task.

While Delsarte’s techniques never dominated French actor training, in the United States his ideas, transmitted by Mackaye and others, shaped the early development of professional acting. Delsarte’s semeiotic methods of actor training were extracted from his theory of acting (itself part of his speculative philosophy of God and man) and quickly penetrated American theatre practice, as well as performance cultures such as oratory. This “Delsartism” shaped the development of voice training and public speaking in the latter half of the 19th century. As Nancy Ruyter points out, “there were [Delsartist] elocutionary schools, performance venues, publications, and a national network of professional associations. . . . [S]ome elocution instructors increasingly emphasized gesture and bodily motion, and the term ‘expression’ came into vogue for work that included physical culture, pantomime, acting, and interpersonal communication as well as training for the speaker’s ‘platform’” (Ruyter xvii). Delsarte’s integration of vocal, buccal, and gestural expression, based on his “scientific” close observation of human behavior, satisfied the American desire for modern, realistic alternatives to Romantic-era performance conventions. Professional schools of acting and elocution, private tutoring in comportment, as well as health-oriented courses in “harmonic gymnastics,” proliferated for both men and women. This Expression movement flourished from the 1870s through the 1910s, then lost currency. Konstantin Stanislavsky’s ideas on naturalistic or motivational acting came into play in the 1920s. Motivational acting, known simply as “The Method,” became the dominant training method. Interest in Delsarte flagged until the 1960s, when a few performers and teachers, trying to escape motivational approaches, reached back to such pre-Freudian thinkers for rigorous non-psychological acting techniques.

Peirce was traveling in Europe from June 1870 to March 1871, but it seems unlikely that he encountered Delsarte, who at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in July 1870 retreated to his family home in northeast France and died in 1871. Instead, a series of events in the mid-1880s brought Delsarte's ideas to Peirce's attention through his encounter with Steele Mackaye. The youngest son of wealthy and well-connected Col. James Morrison McKay<sup>4</sup> of Buffalo, New York, Steele (then known as "Jimmy McKay") was sent in 1857 to boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island, where on summer vacations he enjoyed the company of the young William James (1842–1910) and his brother Henry James (1843–1916). It appears the Peirce family did not know the McKays. Similarly, in Cambridge, the Peirce home was less than a five-minute walk from the Jameses', but William and Charles seem not to have become friends until 1861 (Brent 27, 364).

Although intrigued from the first by theatre, young Steele Mackaye initially chose art as his profession. In Newport, William Morris Hunt became his first painting instructor, and he sketched by the sea with his friend, the young Winslow Homer. At sixteen he studied painting in Paris with Thomas Couture (Sokalski 4–5). When the Mackaye family sojourned in New York (as early as 1859), Mackaye and his siblings went to the more refined theatres to see stars such as Laura Keane, Charlotte Cushman, and (Mackaye's favorites) Edwin Booth, Adelaide Ristori, and Matilda Heron. At home in upstate New York, where family disapproval of theatre ran high, Mackaye privately "practiced what he called 'dramatic art' using a self-regimented training routine of exercises" (Sokalski 16). In the early 1860s he came to believe that the arts, particularly acting, could benefit from scientific methods of observation; he employed these in performing selected roles from Shakespeare's plays. In the 1860s, though, Mackaye primarily painted and sculpted, served in the U.S. Army's Seventh Regiment Amusement Association, and at war's end became an art broker. He returned to his study of acting only in 1869, on his second trip to Paris, when he met Delsarte. The two men immediately recognized each other as kindred spirits. For the next eight months, Mackaye studied Delsarte's system of aesthetic expression intensively, finally teaching Delsarte's methods under the master's eye. Perhaps most crucially, Mackaye devised a training system, "harmonic gymnastics," that allowed him to grasp and communicate Delsarte's series of gestures—"very beautiful and expressive in character . . . but exceedingly intricate and difficult of imitation." Mackaye attributed his unusual success to

close study of the physical obstacles existing in my own [spiritual, mental, and bodily] organization to the realization of these motions in my own action. . . . While I was with Delsarte I lectured . . . and taught many of his pupils his series of gestures—*applying my own*

*system of training to them* with results that excited the greatest astonishment and the deepest enthusiasm in Delsarte. He realized that I could understand and apply all that he taught. [my emphasis]<sup>5</sup>

Delsarte, who never published his course, considered Mackaye the inheritor of his legacy. Returning to the U.S. in 1870, he disseminated his teacher's ideas widely. Yet Mackaye's public lectures and published interviews presented only the ideas that U.S. audiences would find most compelling. He died in 1894 without leaving behind a full account that would have introduced Delsarte's teaching properly. Other U.S. acting and elocution teachers, some claiming falsely to have studied with Delsarte, had in the meantime popularized competing Delsartian approaches.

Mentored by popular English playwrights Tom Taylor and Charles Reade, Mackaye became a popular playwright, producing melodramas, tragedies, historical dramas, and romantic comedies. He directed and acted in many of these; other titles were commissioned. Mackaye adapted French plays and sought to establish an American school of dramatic art similar to that of the Comédie française. He designed innovative theatre spaces and co-invented remarkable stage machinery, such as the vertical double stage built for his own Madison Square Theatre. He enhanced the comfort and safety of theatre audiences with the folding seat, which improved traffic flow, and a ventilation system for better circulation of air. The theatre was to be an environment healthful for body and mind. No less important, his lectures convinced audiences of the social benefits of aesthetic expression.

It is likely that Peirce and Mackaye knew one another and discussed aesthetic expression, but it is certain that Peirce was familiar with Mackaye's approach as an acting coach and director. Peirce's unfinished essay "Trichotomic," written in early 1888, compares and contrasts his own categories of experience with Mackaye's. This essay, unpublished in Peirce's lifetime, outlines Mackaye's ideas as well as Peirce's own awareness of how these ideas played out on stage. Particularly exciting is that Peirce recognized the affinities between the developing architecture of his categories of thought and nature,<sup>6</sup> and Mackaye's division of the principles of experience. Oddly, Peirce does not attribute those principles to Delsarte, although Mackaye certainly did, publicly and repeatedly.

In December 1885 the Peirces were ending their sojourn in the upper Midwest, where Charles did work for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. At Cornell University he gave a lecture on his pendulum work. Meanwhile, community leaders in the region invited Mackaye to speak on the role that theatre might play in higher education. A December 4 article in the Cornell student newspaper announced Mackaye's lecture on the "Philosophy of Expression." "Mr. Mackaye will show," the

article asserted, “the great laws underlying all art expression. As an actor of fascinating skill and power, he will illustrate his lecture from scenes by the great dramatists, wherein he will do much to bring about a new interest in the literary work of the University” (Percy Mackaye, II, 58). On December 11 Mackaye presented his lecture demonstration at Cornell’s Library Hall. A Utica newspaper account described Mackaye in these terms: “No speaker could have held more the undivided attention of his hearers. Commanding, tall, well-formed, Mr. Mackaye possesses rare dignity. His features bespeak a noble nature. His utterance, slow and impressive, carries conviction” (Percy Mackaye, II, 59). A report from Syracuse, where he spoke at a Presbyterian church, shows that Mackaye could command a pious audience:

In his masterly lecture . . . Steele Mackaye told the clergymen how to preach. . . . The trickery of the theatre he condemned as unsparingly as the sing-song of the parson. Actor and preacher alike, he said, should so sink their own personalities that there be only the impression of the uttered words. . . . [W]ith a classic face not unlike Edwin Booth’s, [Mackaye] embodied in his own methods the beauties of the philosophy he advocates. . . . He is doing . . . what Herbert Spencer did for the art of composition. . . . [He] places the art on a philosophic basis. . . . The speaker rose above the position of mimic to that of instructor, and held the breathless attention of his hearers, while he entered the realm of the practical and the philosophical. At the close, a full house greeted him with immense applause. (Percy Mackaye, II, 60)

Despite this hyperbolic prose, evidence suggests that Mackaye was a remarkable performer on the lecture platform. In addition to his reputation as philosopher, playwright, and theatre impresario, he had just founded in 1884 a new theatre, the Lyceum, connected to an acting school of a sort never seen before in the U.S.: one based on modern, scientific principles of applied aesthetics. That said, Mackaye did not share his contemporary Henrik Ibsen’s interest in skeptical, realist social critique; rather, his aesthetics remained conservative. In such surviving “aesthetic idealism” “the task of art . . . [was] to uplift us, to point the way to the Ideal. . . . [Aesthetic idealism] merged aesthetics and ethics, and usually religion too, since most (but not all) idealists also believed that God was the highest incarnation of the trinity of beauty, goodness, and truth” (Moi 4). Mackaye was convinced that theatre, approached correctly, could inspire and ennoble the citizenry of the Republic. Many who still shunned the wickedness of theatre were reassured by his passionate rhetoric. To put acting on a scientific basis also helped to allay the fears of businessmen and ministers whose children longed to appear on the stage. Circulars for Mackaye’s Lyceum Theatre School had found their way across the country. Advertisements and articles in

*The Nation* (to which Peirce contributed) and *Werner's Voice Magazine* were read by untutored hopefuls who sought to be well versed in public speaking or go on the stage, as Juliette did. Steele Mackaye was a celebrity artist, philosopher, and scientist combined—a charismatic Renaissance man whom everyone would want to see and hear.

It is likely that Charles and Juliette Peirce were in Mackaye's audience at Cornell. The Peirces admired the uplifting effects of classical theatre and fine public speaking. Moreover, Mackaye, fluent in French and familiar with Parisian cultural life, would have inspired curiosity in Juliette. She and Charles attended the theatre in New York and elsewhere, perhaps as early as 1877.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars believe that Juliette may have been an actress herself. It is more likely, though, that Juliette's stage ambitions arose in the first years of her marriage to Charles. In fact, the coaching she received from Mackaye may have directly resulted from this encounter in December 1885. For the next three years, stage business—whether theatre, public speaking, or the oratory of great men—occupied the Peirces' thoughts.

### *Juliette's Study of Acting*

Juliette may have already begun her study of acting in October 1884, as a student in Mackaye's Lyceum Theatre School. In that month she and Charles were back in Washington, D.C., after their time in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Charles was in charge of the Office of Weights and Measures from October through February 1885, but he traveled several times to various places on the East Coast. The Peirces could have been in New York on October 4 when Mackaye opened the Lyceum School. That fall, the school accepted 120 students from across the country. Among Mackaye's extant papers are class lists that include a "Mrs. Pierce" who apparently was enrolled for all or part of the school year.<sup>8</sup> Documents from the Lyceum School<sup>9</sup> identify this student actor as appropriate for roles as "character" and "walking lady," i.e., secondary or crowd roles. Although Juliette aimed somewhat higher—namely, female leads of a serious, emotional nature—she would have begun in smaller parts. Among first-year courses were pantomimic expression, harmonic gymnastics, voice building, articulation, and orthoepy or pronunciation. Twice a week she would have attended Mackaye's lectures on the principles of aesthetic expression (or "Expression"), while other instructors applied these ideas in relaxation exercises developed by Mackaye. In keeping with Delsarte's teaching, Mackaye opposed modeling gestural and vocal techniques for the students' imitation. "Pupils were encouraged to discover the best form of acting through their own natural development[.] . . . [I]ndividual expression and spontaneity were advocated" (McTeague 31). Evaluation of a student's progress, then, was based on her or his unique understanding of the theory and ability to put it into practice. Instructor William Seymour

reported that Mrs. Pierce had a standing thus far of “very fair.” An annual report for 1884–85 proudly announced that “the students have appeared notably as the mob and in minor roles of Mr. Mackaye’s play *Dakolar*,” which opened in April 1885 (Mackaye Papers, Box 3, Folder 4). We have no evidence, though, that Juliette was involved. Over that summer Mackaye was forced out of the Lyceum organization. Some students remained for the second year of instruction, others dropped out, and still others followed Mackaye and became his private pupils, as Juliette did.<sup>10</sup>

Circumstantial evidence also places Juliette at the Lyceum School in 1884. She may have first met Mackaye’s wife, Mary Medbery Mackaye (1845–1924), who was in charge of the “Ladies’ Division” and whose later letters to Juliette indicate a friendship of several years. In the extant correspondence Mary consistently misspells “Peirce” as “Pierce” as the name appears in the school’s records. (CSP Papers, Juliette Peirce Correspondence, Robin L542<sup>11</sup>). Also, the Mackayes sought applicants interested in self-improvement as well as theatrical training. The language of the 1885 brochure for “Mackaye’s School of Acting and Expression in Art,” which emphasized the physical and cultural benefits of such study, was designed to appeal particularly to women who considered themselves refined but were in poor health, as Juliette frequently was.

Peirce as a scientist would have approved such a course of study for Juliette. In line with Delsarte’s teaching, the actor’s inventiveness depended on the cultivation of an almost scientific attitude of hypothesizing, observing, and testing. In an 1886 article published in *The New York Mirror*, Mackaye notes that orthoepy (an interest of Peirce’s) was to be taught at the Mackaye School of Acting, following the policy of *The Century Dictionary*. Alluding to a gentleman involved with the writing of the *Dictionary*, Mackaye concludes:

The German grammarians had recently decided that in future the pronunciation of any doubtful modern word was to be decided by the usage of the most intelligent portion of the community as exemplified on the stage of the leading theatres. This is the position which the American stage should occupy, and I believe it will in time. A general idea will also be given in the School of the pronunciation of French, German and Italian words. (Mackaye Papers, Box 8, Folder 6)

At that time Peirce was engaged in writing entries for the *Century Dictionary*; moreover, Mackaye’s statement that pronunciation “was to be decided by the usage of the most intelligent portion of the community” accords with Peirce’s perspective on scientific inquiry, which moves knowledge forward only in the context of informed investigation and debate that take place in such a community. The principles on which Mackaye founded his teaching would have appealed, in various ways, to both Charles and Juliette.



After returning to New York in early 1886, Mackaye taught pupils privately at his home. Despite notable stage successes, he struggled to make a decent living and juggled his teaching and playwriting with directing, inventing, and developing new projects. He astonished audiences with his training of amateurs to use his methods of pantomimic gesture in large crowd scenes. One reviewer wondered, “what is necessary to bring a half hundred supernumeraries to such an understanding of their task that they act together and yet move as by individual impulses—in a word, to appear like sentient beings and not like manikins” (quoted in Sokalski 176). Living in New York in late 1886, Charles and Juliette may have seen the first production in which Mackaye trained large numbers of amateur actors: *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, an open-air show that Mackaye restaged for its star, William F. Cody. Mackaye turned Cody’s assemblage of historical scenes and demonstrations of riding and shooting into the wildly popular extravaganza *The Drama of Civilization*, which opened in November. Here popular entertainment met educational theatre on a grand scale. That winter, Mackaye took on pupils once again (Percy Mackaye, II, 126), including Juliette. Given that “Mrs. Pierce” had been deemed suitable for refined roles in crowd scenes, the handling of such scenes would have been of interest to her.

By April 1887, the Peirces were preparing to move to Milford. Living so far from New York made it impossible for Juliette to sustain her study of acting on a regular basis. Yet, during that summer in Milford the Peirces continued to be actively interested in matters of the stage. In late September they participated in a production presented at Grey Towers, the Milford home of their new friends James and Mary Pinchot. The play may have been Ernest Legouvé’s *Medea*, a partial translation of which has survived in Charles’s handwriting (R 1562:1–19).<sup>12</sup> Certainly Juliette remained eager to continue her study of acting. Money was plentiful: Juliette had her own income, and in October Charles inherited from his mother’s estate. In March 1888 he benefited again, this time from the estate of his Aunt Lizzie.

But as the fortunes of the Peirces were rising, those of the Mackayes had begun to fall. Mackaye traveled frenetically creating work. He began to avoid the sort of labor-intensive tutoring that Juliette had been receiving. Of the six extant letters between Juliette Peirce and the Mackayes (from June 1887 through November 1888), Mackaye wrote only one, a letter of reference that he sent to Juliette in March 1888 after receiving her repeated requests for the name of another teacher or a theatre manager.

Now a “country woman,” Juliette must have been frustrated in her isolation from the New York theatre world. Her correspondence with the Mackayes appears to end with the one letter we have from Juliette to Mary, dated 24 November 1888. As in 1887, Juliette had seen little or nothing that year of her friend Mary, but she reports that she has

continued her studies “in [her] own way.” Juliette goes on to say, in somewhat fractured English:

I have recited for the Pinchots & Mrs Pinchot was so much impressed that she said she regretted [the celebrated actor Edwin] Booth could not see me. She thought I ought to go on the stages. . . . [I] feel I can do pretty good work of the kind wich satisfied Mr Mackaye, for Mrs Pinchot said [s]he could understand Mr Makays letter[.] I scared them & made them feel a good deal. Mr Peirce said himself I do much better work than last year. . . . Now I think I had better go on the stage for reasons I will explaine to you when we meet. Could you not advise me what manager to apply to? Tell me one who favors Mr Makays scholars, for I shall want to begin lik[e] our friend Maud[e] for a little while to get accustomed to the stage. ([spelling and punctuation as in original] Mackaye Papers, ML-5 (136):23)

Juliette’s continuing hope of an acting career was fanned by the advancement of fellow students such as Maude E. Hosford. Percy Mackaye names Hosford as one of his father’s “gifted pupils” and mentions that she later acted with leading lady Maude Adams (II, 131). In May 1887 Mackaye cast Hosford in the minor role of Scarlotte in the Buffalo premiere of *Paul Kauvar*. Hosford presented the perfect example of a Mackaye-trained actor on the verge of success.

On the other hand, James and Mary Pinchot, from their country villa overlooking Milford, clearly offered an important tie to the urban, culture-filled life the Peirces had enjoyed. The Pinchot circle played at charades, read from literature, history, and philosophy, sang to accompaniment, and staged scenes. Legouvé’s popular *Medea* was probably familiar to both couples in the original French. The pages of translated dialogue from the first act establish Medea’s despair at her exile from her homeland and her desperate search for Jason, her children’s father. This is heavy material for an evening’s entertainment, but Medea’s situation of exile may have felt familiar to Juliette. Peirce inserted rehearsal markings in the manuscript apparently to help Juliette find the right inflections and timing in her adopted language (R1562:1–19). Whether he took a role, as Brent suggests, is unclear.

Mackaye’s letter, which may have revived Juliette’s hopes six months later, is instructive for an understanding of his own interest in the semiotics of the actor’s task:

Among the many who have come under my instruction I cannot recall one who possesses, in so high a degree as yourself, that psychological faculty of self-loss in the part assumed—which is the distinct attribute of genius. In this you have at times reminded me of Rachel [Elizabeth Rachel Félix (1820–1858), a celebrated French actress]—and I sincerely believe that if you could receive the physical care

essential for the development of organic force—and careful training in roles of a poetic emotional character—that you would succeed in doing work of the highest artistic quality. (RL 542)

The actor's faculties of self-loss and dramatic instinct must be supported by physical strength. In his public lectures Mackaye spoke of the necessity for the actor to lose himself in the role in order to achieve the ease from which a powerful performance could emerge. As he told his students, "The true secret of power is ease in force. [The actor must develop] command of his body [in order to] express . . . passion with the least sense of effort" (quoted in Sokalski 24).

Also, Mackaye thoughtfully compares Juliette's aptitude for "roles of a poetic emotional character" to that of Rachel Félix, whose reputation rested on her powerful performances of neo-classical tragic roles. Legouvé had written his *Medea* expressly for her. As John Stokes notes, "Rachel was known for her passion and fierceness[.] . . . [B]y emphasizing these qualities rather than dignified submission [to her character's fate,] she reinterpreted the ways the characters were understood, partly because the audience was able to see 'signs of an inner life of which the other characters remained, for the most part, oblivious'" (quoted in Russell 324). Thus Mackaye admired Rachel not only for her self-loss in the part, but the ability, in such a familiar role, to communicate to the audience unseen areas of the character's "inner life." When Juliette remarks that in her recitation to the Pinchots she "scared them & made them feel a good deal," it's clear that the seemingly childlike nature of her vocabulary cannot convey the complexity of her thought. To make an audience "feel a good deal" involves a complex application of semeiotic tools to create the aesthetic effect.

### *Affinities among the Ideas of Peirce, Delsarte, and Mackaye*

A year earlier, in January 1888, Mary Mackaye sent Charles and Juliette tickets to see the New York production of *Paul Kauvar*. As playwright-director, Steele Mackaye was probably in the house the night they would have attended; on February 22 he also took over the lead role. Mackaye's *Kauvar* is a noble upholder of the French Republic: he does not bend to the influence of the wealthy, the demands of the mob, or the violent actions of anarchists. At the 100th performance, Mackaye, still in costume, received a standing ovation. If the Peirces encountered Mackaye at the theatre, Juliette may have pressed him for the promised letter of reference. And what was Peirce doing? Perhaps gathering ideas for his essay "Trichotomic."

In this essay, written in early 1888, Peirce defines "trichotomic" as "the art of making three-fold divisions." This opening suggests that Peirce set out to examine the categories as seen from Mackaye's perspective, that of art, or aesthetics. More specifically, Peirce's essay describes

an art of “making,” specifically the performer’s use of his or her material, intellectual, and emotional capacities to embody the categories’ manifestation in human life. Not surprisingly, Peirce casts acting in familiar terms: representation or mimesis. Yet he gestures toward the presentational aspects of the performer’s task—the *making* of the sign. Mackaye was deeply engaged in that making—finding, through observation, signs of the basic categories of experience that the performer could learn through physical and mental training for imaginative presentation on the stage. He knew that such sign making involves the audience’s participation and the character of the performance space. Remarkably, in “Trichotomic” Peirce tried to account for this sense of presentation in theatrical representation as well.

Much about his unfinished essay seems tentative. While it may have been written for private use or separate publication, the material could have been intended for *A Guess at the Riddle*, where art and aesthetics are mentioned occasionally.<sup>13</sup> In Chapter I, for example, Peirce broaches several types of signs degenerate in the second degree, or “thirds of comparison.” Among them are playwright Christopher Marlowe’s diction, as compared to Shakespeare’s and Bacon’s, and scientific diagrams. Photographic portraits “mediate between the original and the likeness” (W6:179). In Chapter IV’s discussion of cognition, as in “Trichotomic,” Peirce addresses “synthetical consciousness degenerate in the second degree.” “The work of the poet or novelist,” he notes, “is not so utterly different from that of the scientific man.” Both exhibit the “genius of the mind”—“the regarding of the abstract in a concrete form, by the realistic hypostatization of relations; that is the one sole method of valuable thought” (186–187). Notably, Peirce includes the poet and the novelist but omits the playwright or actor. Perhaps “Trichotomic” was designed to account for the missing circumstances of performance.

In “Trichotomic” Peirce extrapolates from the categories of experience aesthetic divisions that could articulate the performer’s task. More to the point of Peirce’s own philosophic interests, articulating the performer’s task might illuminate the categories. Perhaps sensing affinities between Mackaye’s acting theory and his own ideas on “the genius of the mind,” Peirce tries out the divisions of Expression Mackaye employed in his acting and teaching by dressing them in his own categories as applied to cognition. “Dressing” is more than a metaphor. The actor’s genius makes visible (i.e., stages) what might not be so apparent in the cognition of the poet, the novelist, and the scientist: that the “one sole method of valuable thought” lies in intuition as “the realistic hypostatization of relations,” or *embodied* cognition. “Trichotomic”, in other words, may attempt to characterize cognition in terms of performance.

In fact, Peirce’s essay seems on the verge of engaging Delsarte’s aesthetics, which lay behind Mackaye’s semeiotic techniques. Delsarte’s larger system was perhaps not known to Peirce, for in his teaching Mackaye tended to focus on the practicalities of actor training and theatrical

staging. Peirce does not name Delsarte, nor does he address directly Mackaye's tendency to work from Delsarte's theological assumption of tradicity rather than developing a triadic lens scientifically, in terms of irreducible logical categories. Instead, Peirce puts Mackaye's triads in the framework of his own developing sense of embodied cognition.

As in *Guess*, Peirce begins with one, two, three. His categories are logic-based, non-hierarchical, and intertwined in terms of how we experience them. "First is the beginning, that which is fresh, original, spontaneous, free. Second is that which is determined, terminated, ended, correlative, object, necessitated, reacting. Third is the medium, becoming, developing, bringing about" (W6:211). In Secondness, a genuine relation between the two terms is described as dynamical. Two people facing one another with right hands extended, for example, form a dynamical relation of proximity, or "forces [subsisting] between pairs of objects" (211). At the level of Thirdness, though, a mode of connection exists that Peirce describes in his essay as "vital"—not only essential, but also having vitality, capable of change, life giving. Each of the relation's three terms "has a character which belongs to it only so long as the others really influence it" (211). Thus, the act of giving (an example Peirce himself used occasionally) does not combine two dynamical relations, but forms an irreducible triadic relation that involves giver, gift, and receiver at once. Even if we crop the image of the two figures with hands outstretched to that of the receiver's open hand, that image, taken as a sign of receptivity such as an impending handshake, involves a triadic relation.

In his essay Peirce goes on to discuss types of thirdness, or this vital relation, in regard to systems of convention such as Expression, a term he may have borrowed from Mackaye. Expression, he notes, relies *most* heavily on degenerate forms of signification. Degenerate signs are those that do not exhibit a completely conventional relation. Signs are degenerate in the first degree when they "demonstrate the reality of things" by drawing the mind's attention to the "right object." He provides examples from three types of performance: a staged play, a Sunday church service, and vaudeville or circus entertainment.

So a desired frame of mind on the part of the audience is often brought about by the dramatist in a forcible way by directly affecting the nervous system, without appealing to association; or the attention of the audience may be awakened, as a clergyman shouts out the commencement of a new head to his sermon, or [the audience's attention at a circus or variety show] may be directed to a particular part of the stage, as the jugglers do. (W6:212)

The most characteristic form of thirdness for theatre, though, is degenerate in the second degree: that is, a relation of likeness or resemblance. Peirce continues, "[T]he idea in the mind addressed, the object

represented, and the representation of it, are only connected by a mutual resemblance. . . . [T]he mind floats in an ideal world and does not ask or care whether it be real or not” (212–13). We can see how Peirce might have become aware of this floating as he viewed *Paul Kauvar*. Although Kauvar was derived from history (an instance of the “right object,” or “unartistic” degeneracy in the first degree), the audience’s enjoyment rested even more on the actor’s negotiation of the character. As a public figure admired for his own high ideals, Mackaye seemed to “become” Paul Kauvar in the role. Conversely, in the audience’s imagination, the historical Kauvar became wedded to the public image of Steele Mackaye. This type of star turn exhibits a special form of degeneracy in the second degree. If the audience called “Author! Author!” and Mackaye appeared still in costume, Peirce might have noted with amusement the multiple layers of degenerate and genuine Thirdness at work.

Omitted in my quotation above is Peirce’s intervening sentence: “The sign is a likeness; and this is the main mode of representation in all art. Here there is no sharp discrimination between the sign and the thing signified. . . . This character makes a striking point of difference between this kind of representation [degenerate in the second degree] and the second [degenerate in the first degree]; and that is why the use of the second mode of representation [such as the clergyman’s shout] is so unartistic” (213). But the reality of the performer does matter to the spectator. It is not purely “unanalytic,” as Peirce calls representation in the second degree. Art may “present . . . the total object as it exists in the concrete, and not merely abstract relations and points in that object” (213), as a conventional sign would. Yet by seeming to restrict Expression to “a kind of representation or signification” (212), Peirce also seems to discount the ways in which it was designed to operate at all levels—thought, sensation, and feeling. Oddly, Peirce seems to cast art as wholly aesthetic, wholly fictional. Like any other experience, though, it participates in reality and has other characteristics.

Fortunately Peirce’s essay goes deeper by engaging Mackaye’s “division of the principles of being” (W6:215) underlying these issues of audience and actor. It is important to distinguish between Peirce’s account and Delsarte’s principles as Mackaye explained them. (Figure 1.) In his December 1885 lectures, which Peirce probably heard, Mackaye outlined three forms of experience, those of sensation or the vital principle; perception or the mental principle; and affection or the motive principle. Being or consciousness “manifests itself in the body” in these ways. There are interesting similarities here with Peirce’s categories if one considers a crude division of feeling, sensation, and thought. Peirce was obviously struck by them as well. More interesting at the moment, though, are the apparent differences. Mackaye, like his teacher Delsarte, put the semeiotic in the service of the aesthetic, and both of these

Figure 1.  
Comparison of “Divisions of the Principles of Being”  
(without revision)

<p>Mackaye on experience, 1885</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vital principle (sensation)</li> <li>• Mental principle (perception)</li> <li>• Motive principle (affection)</li> </ul>	<p>Peirce on consciousness, 1888</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pure feeling</li> <li>• Action and reaction (dual consciousness)</li> <li>• Reason</li> </ul>
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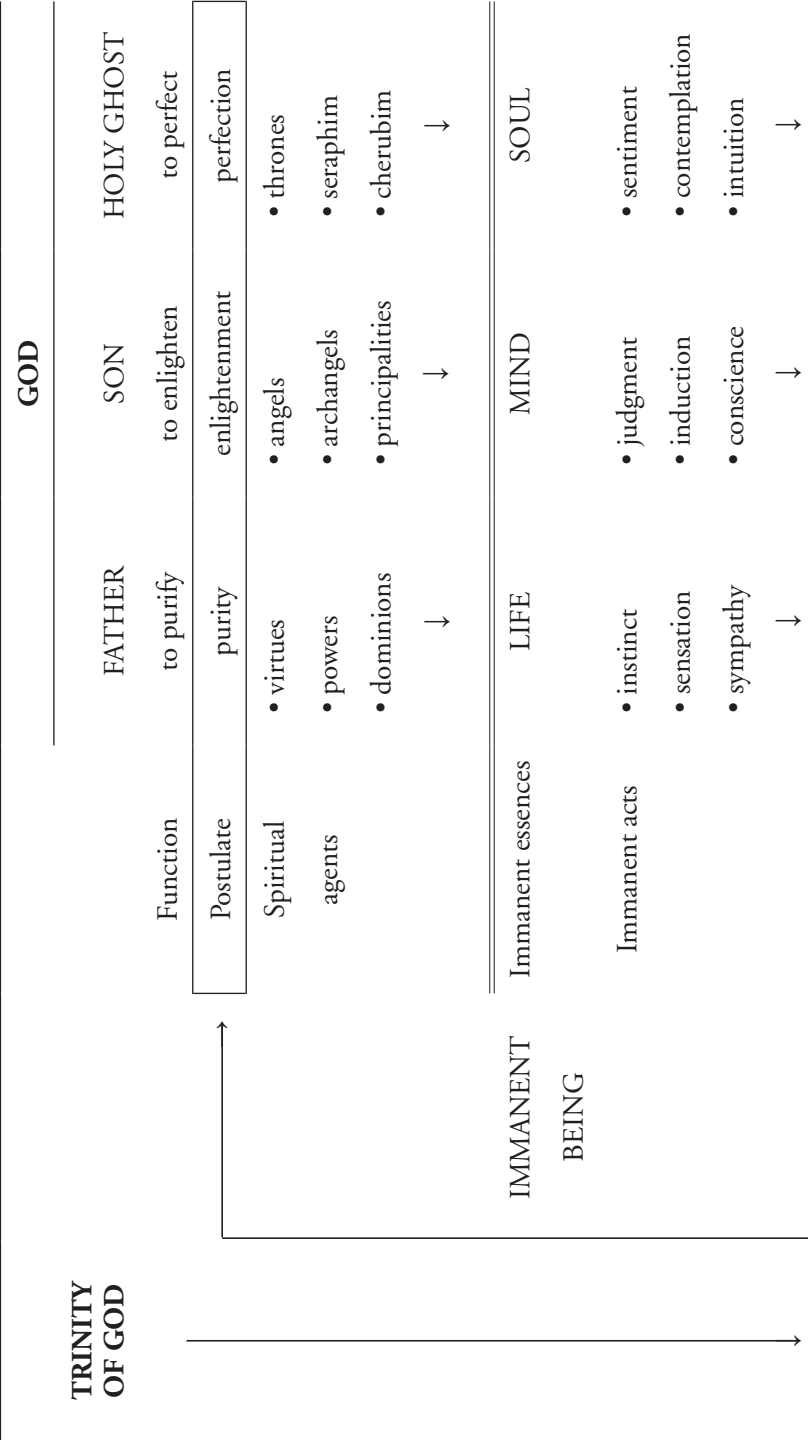
within a framework of Christian (in Delsarte’s case, Roman Catholic) theology. Mackaye’s ordering of the principles as sensation, perception, and affection reflects Delsarte’s architecture of categories that link being and consciousness to the nature of God. (Figure 2.) The triune deity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost reveals itself in, first, the Trinity, with its own functions, postulates, and spiritual agents; second, the “immanent beings” of life, mind, and soul; and, third, the “organic being” that appears in feeling, thought, and love. Although not a Catholic, Mackaye throughout his career was remarkably consistent in adhering to Delsarte’s theology. In sensation, for example, we see the action of feeling; in perception, the action of thought; and in affection, the action of love.

Expression was a category with its own triads. In “Trichotomic” Peirce wrote:

Mr. Mackaye divides dramatic expression into pantomime, voice, and language. A person would at first glance make the division into speech and gesture, and this would doubtless answer some purposes better. But with reference to the value of the different instruments at our command it is important to make a division which shall correspond as nearly as may be with the different kinds of representation. (W6:213)

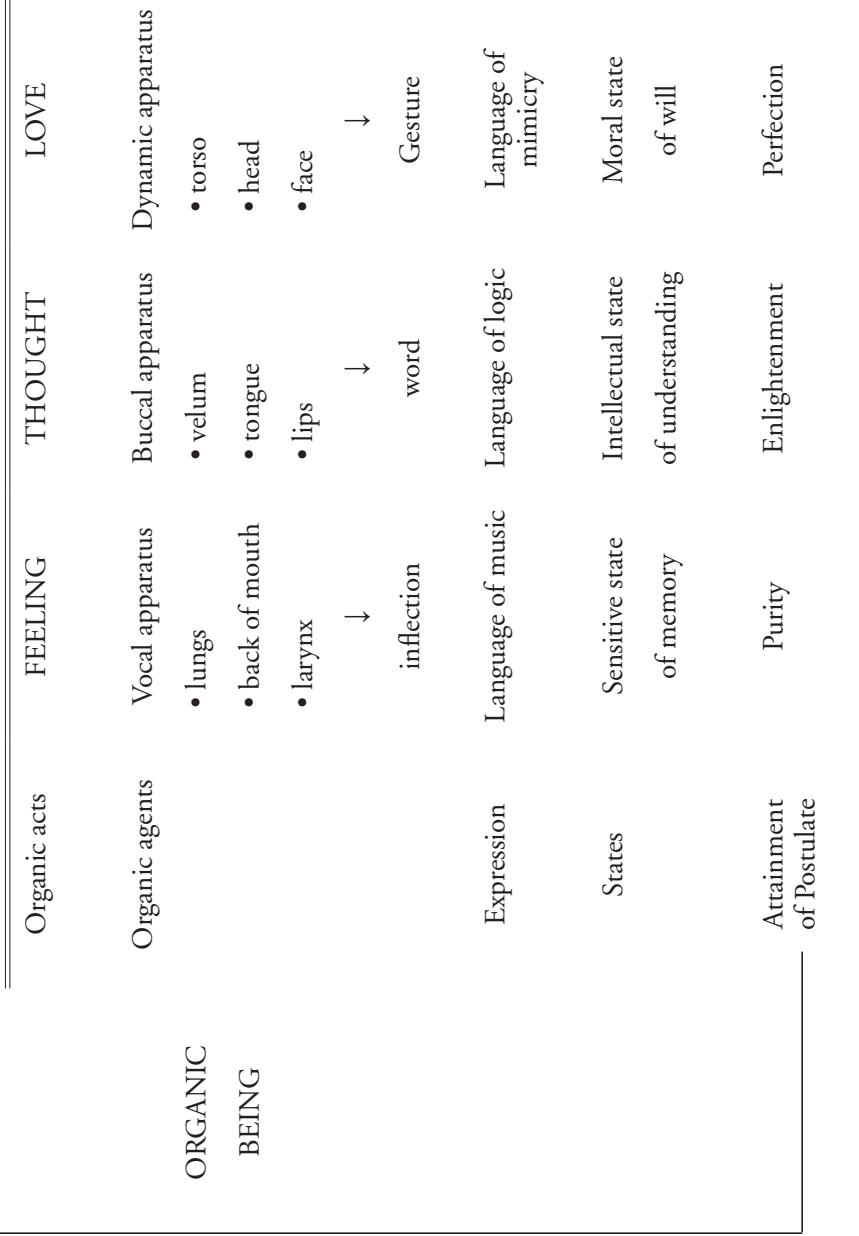
While language “involves the analysis of whatever is to be conveyed,” voice “awakes attention, . . . calls up feelings[,] and modifies consciousness . . . in a physiological way.” Pantomime is distinct from these two in being “contemplated without analysis and without discrimination of the sign from the thing signified” (213). Peirce seems to draw a correspondence between these kinds of representation and his own divisions of the sign/object relation into symbolic, indexical, and iconic. In the actor’s creation and the audience’s reception of a figure such as Kauvar, the iconic might appear as a gesture that elicits a feeling; the indexical as that gesture’s impact on the audience’s senses; and the symbolic as the

Figure 2. The Delsarte System of Expression (adapted from Shaver 53)





**MAN**



**ORGANIC  
BEING**

audience's recognition of its meaning. For Mackaye, in much the same way, pantomime, voice, and language involved elements of the others. What makes these distinctions flexible rather than rigid is that the actor performs all of them simultaneously and continuously.

In his actor training Mackaye implemented Delsarte's "principle of intertwining," or his understanding of the trinity in both its immanent and worldly forms. According to Shaver, "[The principle of intertwining] attempts to explain the relationships of the three essences of any trinity. A trinity is not composed of any three casual objects, but must consist of three things definitely related in such a way that each of the three affects the other two" (Shaver 46). For example, in Delsarte's discussion of gesture, which embodies feeling, reveals thought, and justifies speech, he writes that "gesture is founded on three bases which give rise to three orders of studies": the "sciences" of the static, the dynamic, and the semeiotic. "The semeiotic presents to our scrutiny a triple object for study. It sets forth the cause of the acts produced by the dynamic and static harmonies. Moreover, it reveals the meaning of the types which form the object of the system. It offers us a knowledge of the formal or constitutional types, of the fugitive or accidental types, and, finally, of the habitual types" (*Delsarte System of Oratory* 467). Thus, the semeiotic translates the aesthetic work of the actor into signs offering the audience three intertwined types of knowledge.

No evidence suggests that Peirce was aware of Delsarte's theological framework or how it informed Mackaye's principles of experience. In order to demonstrate the similarities between these principles and his own, though, Peirce reordered Mackaye's categories. (Figure 3.) Whereas Mackaye ends with affection or the motive principle, Peirce interprets Mackaye's motive principle as a type of secondness. Peirce puts in the third position perception or, as he phrases it, "esthetic understanding" or a reflective "comparison of feelings." After this brief aligning of principles of being, the essay ends with two paragraphs, the first on the functions of the nervous system "corresponding to the three kinds of consciousness," the second on the general properties of protoplasm. This seemingly sudden shift away from his discussion of Mackaye may actually represent an intent to connect the Delsartian principles of being with Peirce's developing metaphysics. His table of contents for *Guess* suggests that Chapter III, on the triad in metaphysics, was intended to "treat of the theory of cognition" (166). The fragment we have of Chapter III announces a plan to review pre-Socratic philosophy in terms of Peirce's three basic categories, beginning with the primal matter from which the world was made (181), i.e., the riddle at which he is guessing. Peirce's discussion of cognition, which appears in Chapter IV, does resemble the line of thinking that he was pursuing when he broke off his draft of "Trichotomic." In Chapter IV, he writes, "But that element of cognition which is neither feeling nor polar sense,

Figure 3.  
How did Peirce read Mackaye?

<p>Peirce on Mackaye, 1888</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vital or passionate principle</li> <li>• Affectional or impulsive principle (Peirce's "dual consciousness plus Desire and minus Sense")</li> <li>• Reflection ("esthetic understanding" or "comparison of feelings")</li> </ul>	<p>Mackaye, 1885 (reorganized)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vital principle (sensation)</li> <li>• Motive principle (affection)</li> <li>• Mental principle (perception)</li> </ul>
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is the consciousness of a process, and this in the form of the sense of learning, of acquiring, of mental growth is eminently characteristic of cognition" (186). Similarly, in "Trichotomic," the third function of the nervous system involves "the power of acquiring habits, which is the ground of our faculty of learning" (215). In the mid-1880s Peirce had witnessed such habit formation in Juliette's efforts to pursue actor training. His essay's abrupt turn from Mackaye's principles of being to the neurological operations of consciousness, and thence to the properties of basic organic matter, suggests that he may have intended to compare and contrast his own principles of being with those of Mackaye. Perhaps Peirce lacked an adequate knowledge of Delsarte's system. Or perhaps he sensed that these theology-based categories were ultimately of limited use for his own logic-based account of what the world is made of.

Mackaye concerned himself with Delsarte's principles as they revealed themselves in "motion allied to mind." Expression had two aspects for Delsarte, the aesthetic proper and the semeiotic. Claude Shaver describes the distinction:

The aesthetic proper . . . is the outward expression of the inner state; the semeiotic is the recognition of the inner state by its outward manifestations. The aesthetic proper is inventive; the semeiotic is translative. . . . [The actor's] study should be so well assimilated that [his or her] movements become a spontaneous expression of the inner state of mind, and thus purely aesthetic. (Shaver 55)

Delsarte sought to create knowledge by bringing human behavior, observed closely and systematically, onto the stage where the relations among man, nature, and God could be experienced and understood. The benefit to the actor lay in providing a "means of developing

his physical and vocal expressive range and as a transpersonal model against which the individual emotional range might be projected for comparison” (Kirby 66). Distrusting “inspiration”, Delsarte trained each performer to become a “self-possessed artist [who] ‘regain[s] the gesture’ in semiotic awareness that ‘molds the body to its will’” (Delau-mosne, quoted by Kirby 68). Delsarte’s self-possessed artist anticipated the modern turn to the “bourgeois restraint” in actor training that ap-pealed to Juliette Peirce’s generation of aspiring actors. Their model was not Mackaye but Edwin Booth, whose self-control and “class-based habits of bodily comportment” in his acting marked his characters as having reached the highest level of artistry (Walker 38–39). Mackaye was modern in his claim to a different sort of behavioral restraint, that of scientific method: his system’s “significations were discovered in na-ture rather than produced by convention, having been based upon Del-sarte’s own empirical observations” (Walker 43).

Yet Delsarte’s emphasis on the role of the actor’s will in creating expressive gesture from “character templates” looks less to science than to 18th-century neo-classical systems of rhetoric. Julia A. Walker de-scribes the Delsarte method as “a catalogue of gestures and expressions to which he had ascribed specific meanings[. It] instructed actors in us-ing their bodies to create various character types for the stage” (Walker 43) The actor’s limbs, head, and torso are governed each in turn by the faculties of life, mind, and soul: “The three faculties operating within the three bodily zones produce a range of nine basic gestures which are themselves variable by the nine types of movement for a total of eighty-one expressive possibilities” (46–47). Nor was Delsarte modern in his distinction between the natures of God and man. As Shaver puts it,

The basis of the Delsarte system is the trinity. Everything on earth is triune just as everything in heaven is triune, for both heaven and earth arise from the divine trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Man, however, is dual, with each of his natures composed of a trinity. His spiritual nature is composed of the three essences of life, arising from the Father of the Divine trinity, mind, arising from the Son, and soul, arising from the Holy Ghost. (Shaver 108)

Walker notes that Delsarte adhered to several pseudo-sciences—physi-ognomy, phrenology, mesmerism—“whose truth claims often appeared as common sense” (47). Even after Darwin’s theory of natural selec-tion, with its emphasis on instincts, began to supplant the neo-classical triad of reason, sentiment, and will, the earlier vision of the human self continued to dominate both the popular imagination and the training of actors (48). Mackaye adhered to this older, residual way of think-ing, which led to a curious disjunction between, on the one hand, his conception of the actor’s self-loss in creating a relationship between the

dramatic character and the audience and, on the other hand, his fascination with “scientific” actor training and emerging theatre technology, both of which tended to reduce the actor’s centrality and authority in performance.

Peirce’s interest in Mackaye’s system of actor training seems to focus on the reshaping of perceived binaries—*aesthetic/semiotic, inner/outer, spirit/matter*—into more valid triadic conceptions of embodied cognition. Mackaye had conceived a practical way of teaching these experiential binaries of the actor’s task through Delsarte’s triadic vision of life. The intersection with Peirce’s work on *A Guess at the Riddle* seems to lie in Delsarte’s principle of intertwining, which, like Peirce’s account of the categories, insists on absolute distinctions among First, Second, and Third, but also their interaction. In “Trichotomic” Peirce accounts for outward action and reaction (“External Sense and Volition”) and its inward corollaries (“Self-consciousness and Self-control”) in terms of “dual consciousness” (W6:215). I submit that the actor’s “genius of the mind” contributes to “genuine synthetic consciousness,” or Reason, *because* it also involves these degenerate forms. Crucially for the actor, “the dynamical variety is a consciousness of a coordination between acts of sense and will [while] the statical variety is the comparison of feelings, and may be called esthetic understanding” (215). In the actor’s accomplishment of his task we see the operations of performance in human consciousness more generally. Peirce attributes only “considerable resemblance” between his and Mackaye’s principles of being. Yet striking similarities exist between their respective ideas on what I call the performance nature of the sign—i.e., the mediating role of a third element in the relation of a gesture or vocal inflection to the corresponding behavior it performs. Without collapsing two distinctly different visions of a world permeated with signs, it is possible to see that theatre practices and performance cultures indebted to Delsarte emphasized the mediated character of meaning in embodied experience. In this rich environment Peirce continued to develop his ideas in the 1880s. If he had completed his essay “Trichotomic,” Peirce might have pointed out that Delsarte’s search for divine unity through performance was not a science. Nor was Peirce’s own science a search for unity, even when he extended it to the metaphysical. But he falls silent at this point.

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## NOTES

1. My investigation was supported by the University of Kansas General Research Fund allocation #2301530–003 and a sabbatical leave in Fall 2009. This article is based on a lecture given at the Peirce Edition Project, housed at the

Institute of American Thought (Indianapolis). My sincere thanks to André de Tienne, PEP director, for his invitation to speak; David Pfeifer, Director of the Institute, and Cornelis de Waal, PEP Associate Editor, who helped to organize the event. I am also grateful for assistance received at the Houghton Library (Harvard University), the Rauner Special Collections Library (Dartmouth College), where my work was supported with a Leslie Visiting Fellowship, Mary Paterson of Milford, Pennsylvania, and the Grey Towers National Historic Site, overseen by the U.S. Forest Service in Milford.

2. The following timeline is compiled from several sources, among them Brent, Percy Mackaye, Sokalski, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, and *The Essential Peirce*.

3. Claude Shaver follows Mackaye's translation in rendering Delsarte's use of *semeiotique* or *la semeiotique* as "semeiotic" and "semeiotics" (55).

4. Steele Mackaye's given name was James Morrison Steele McKay. He later restored his surname's original Scottish spelling and convinced his siblings and father to do the same (Sokalski 267–268). In his correspondence he does not capitalize the k.

5. "Steele Mackaye and François Delsarte," Papers of The Mackaye Family, James Steele Mackaye, Box 8, Folder 1, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

6. My thanks to Professor deTienne for this suggested wording.

7. Juliette apparently enlisted her husband and friends in an effort to keep her origins and identity concealed. Her name (rendered usually as Juliette Annette Froissy or Juliette Froissy Pourtalai), birthdate, ethnic origins, and upbringing have been the source of much research and speculation.

8. Professor David Pfeifer has pointed out that, at this early point of their marriage, Charles and Juliette would have been well able to afford the Lyceum School's tuition of \$200 per three-month term ("Mackaye's School of Acting and Expression in Art" [brochure], Mackaye Papers, Box 8, Folder 6, p. 16). Up to 1890 Juliette received \$4,000 per year from her private income, and in 1884 Charles was still earning \$6,000 per year from his positions at Johns Hopkins and the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey.

9. These documents constitute part of Mackaye's papers at Dartmouth College.

10. Juliette was living in Fall 1884 in Baltimore while Charles commuted to Washington. She could have been in New York only infrequently, certainly not four days a week for an extended period. But, given the concentration of references to "Mrs. Pierce" in the Dartmouth records, she may have begun a course of study she could not maintain. In fragile health that winter, she and Charles spent part of the spring of 1885 in Key West, and they did not return to New York until late May.

11. Papers of Charles S. Peirce, Juliette Peirce Correspondence. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Subsequent citations (indicated as R + item number) are keyed to the standard index compiled by Richard S. Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1967).

12. Here I am exploring Joseph Brent's suggestion that the Peirces may have staged *Medea* (R1562a). Alternately, the play may have been Tom Taylor's *Still Waters Run Deep* (1855), a small fragment of which we have in Peirce's hand (R1562b). While to date I have found no convincing evidence to favor one over the other, Taylor's domestic comedy, with its discreet appeal to upwardly mobile American audiences, was certainly known to and probably enjoyed by the Peirces and Pinchots.

13. The first chapter of *A Guess at the Riddle* is called “Trichotomy” (W6:168–80). Although Peirce apparently began formulating *Guess* in late 1885, shortly before he may have met Mackaye at Cornell, Chapter I was written last of the extant chapters, in late 1887 and early 1888, roughly at the time Peirce attempted “Trichotomic” (594–95). According to the editors, *Guess* was designed to answer the riddle “What is the world made of?” Peirce had been studying pre-Socratic philosophers on the nature of “primal matter” (438–39). His answer lies in his last chapter, on physics: “three elements are active in the world, first, chance; second, law; and, third, habit-taking. . . . Such is our guess at the secret of the sphynx” (208).