

1 | The voice and the body in the Enlightenment

The ballet d'action was one of those artistic phenomena which was as popular as it was controversial. It is easy to attribute its popularity to a heightened contemporary interest in the expressive body, but less easy to explain the controversy it provoked. There are analogous trends towards the expressive body in related arts, such as Garrick's physical acting, or in different arts, such as the libertine novel, or in different domains, such as Diderot's philosophical materialism.¹ Such is the momentum of interest in the body and its expressive potential in the eighteenth century that the popularity of a new somatic art, the ballet d'action, seems trivial. It would seem to be part of an obvious tendency.

The ballet d'action may indeed be part of a conventional contemporary interest in the body, but it was also acutely controversial because it did something which no other somatic art form did: substitute the body entirely for the voice. No matter how expressive body language seemed to some, others thought that eliminating the words from classics of contemporary theatre fundamentally undermined them. It turned great theatre into a dumb show. The ballet d'action presented an audience with the almost unique spectacle in theatre and literature of mute heroes and heroines. Unlike literary blindness, there are few examples in art or literature of heroic muteness. The ballet d'action was unusual in that it muted the greatest heroes and challenged the spectator to watch them with undiminished appreciation. For some spectators, voiceless heroes and heroines seemed deprived of their fundamental characteristics. Don Juan was less of an atheist freethinker without his calculated eloquence. Medea was not quite the witch that she could have been if she could not verbally curse her unfaithful lover and his mistress. The Elder Horace did not have the same uncompromising sense of honour if he could not verbally wish his son had died in defence of Rome. Mute heroes seemed dispossessed of their heroic qualities.

¹ For a survey of the subject, see Angelica Gooden (ed.), *The Eighteenth-century Body: Art, History, Literature, Medicine* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002).

The underlying reason why mute heroes challenged the aesthetic pre-conceptions of the eighteenth century was because they also challenged ideological principles. There was, perhaps always had been, and arguably still is a considerable tendency to associate the spoken word with the rational mind, as if one were a necessary and unique sign of the other. The folk metaphysics of the voice as an 'expression' of a rational mind is persistent and powerful, partly because it often goes unnoticed, disguised as the more abstract-sounding 'language' when in fact the examples we tend to give of 'language' are almost always *articulated* language. What other grip could we get on language if not its external manifestation in articulation? The problem with this is that it leaves those without articulated language also without reason. They are 'dumb', in more senses than one.

In order to understand that the resistance in the eighteenth century to mute drama was ideological as well as aesthetic, we will draw a parallel in this chapter between the ballet d'action and the contemporary development of sign language for the deaf by the Abbé de L'Épée. He was by no means the first in his field, but his pedagogical approach was unparalleled for its open-mindedness and freedom from ideological distortion. He recognised that the improvised system of manual signs used by untutored deaf mutes (what modern deaf signers call 'home sign') was a genuine language. He learnt it in order to converse with deaf mutes in their own terms; subsequently used it as the basis of his more elaborate, 'artificial' system of signs which he taught to his deaf pupils; and, in the process, dispensed almost entirely with the need to teach lip-reading or articulation. He thus challenged his contemporaries to consider the humanity of a dumb signer, just as the ballet d'action challenged audiences to consider the virtues of a dumb hero.

L'Épée's challenge was refuted by some of his most eminent contemporaries. Kant, whose succinct essay 'Was ist Aufklärung?';² is doubtless one of the most forceful eighteenth-century statements of the 'intellectual maturity' which modern philosophical man had reached, also claims elsewhere that the deaf mute can never reach intellectual, enlightened maturity; he or she can only attain an 'analogue' of reason, not reason itself. Without speech, he or she is not entirely human.³ Herder concurs, relating an unsubstantiated anecdote about a deaf mute, incapable of the most basic rational

² Immanuel Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784). Translated in James Schmidt (ed.), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, ed. Reinhard Brandt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2000), p. 45. Translated by Robert B. Loudon, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

reflection, who sees a butcher killing a pig, and later, in imitation, dispassionately disembowels his own brother.⁴ Like many others in the eighteenth century, Kant and Herder did not accept that a language of manual signs, such as that taught by L'Épée, was a true language, and they therefore refused to believe that it could be the expression of a rational mind. In the process, they dispossessed deaf mutes of their humanity.

The ballet d'action, sign language, and also contemporary theories of the origin of language have often been interpreted by modern scholars as symptomatic of eighteenth-century intellectual support for somatic expression. They are, in fact, double-edged, revealing as much about the ideological primacy of the voice as they do contemporary interest in the body. Sign language and the ballet d'action are two powerful ways of challenging what Derrida calls 'phonocentrism'.⁵ They do so implicitly by affirming that spoken words are no different from written words and somatic language: all are representational gesturing. They also do so explicitly by claiming for themselves some of the authenticity and naturalness which is so often associated with oral language. In effect, they have their cake and eat it: they would deprive the dogma of the spoken word of its defining characteristic, and at the same time claim that the principle of naturalness defines their somatic languages.

Sign language and the dogma of the voice

The analogy between mime and sign language in the eighteenth century tended to be used to criticise rather than endorse them. L'Épée's system of manual signs was mocked by his major contemporary rival in France, Jacob Rodrigues Pereira (often known by the French spelling of his name, 'Péire'), who called it 'comic pantomime', with the clear implication that his own emphasis on articulation was a more serious method.⁶ Ange Goudar, who wrote more extensively on the ballet d'action than almost any of his contemporaries did, compared it unflatteringly with sign language,

⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. Martin Bollacher, in *Werke*, 10 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1985), Vol. VI, p. 139. Translated by T. Churchill, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (London: J. Johnson, 1800).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

⁶ See Charles-Michel de l'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets par la Voie des Signes Méthodiques: Ouvrage qui Contient le Projet d'une Langue Universelle, par l'Entremise des Signes Naturels Assujettis à une Méthode* (Paris: Nyon l'Ainé, 1776), p. 119.

contending that mime dancers are more mute than deaf mutes who have developed a sign language.⁷ The unfavourable analogy continued into the nineteenth century. The 1824 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* contends that the crude, imprecise native language of the deaf is the 'language of pantomime', and that it cannot be relied upon to express abstract ideas or to cultivate the intellect of the deaf.⁸

In contrast, practitioners of sign language and of the ballet d'action refused to see any analogy between the two. L'Épée rejected Péreire's comparison and substituted for it one with more noble contemporary implications: the proficient signer uses gesture with as much subtlety and dignity as a pulpit orator.⁹ Noverre pointed out that L'Épée's sign language is a system of conventional symbols which needs to be taught, and therefore has no theatrical application unless one were to provide classes for spectators to learn the meaning of the signs.¹⁰ It is no surprise that L'Épée and Noverre did not seek mutual support, since they were equally under siege from those who believed in the fundamental primacy of the voice. It is as if the deaf signer and the mime dancer shared the stigma of muteness, and each feared association with the other's stigma. They, along with Péreire, Goudar, and the author of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article are in effect agreed that sign language and the ballet d'action ought to be different. When we explore the relation between these two somatic arts more objectively, however, we find that there are significant parallels.

There are potential similarities in technique. It is impossible to make a detailed comparison, since there is so little extant evidence, but even a cursory reading of L'Épée's seminal eighteenth-century book on teaching the deaf brings to light suggestively theatrical aspects of sign language. The sign for 'love', for example, would work on stage: 'the right hand is placed strongly on the mouth, while the left is on the heart, and the right hand

⁷ [Ange Goudar], *Supplément au Supplément sur les Remarques de la Musique et de la Danse, ou Lettres de Mr G... à Milord Pembroke* (n.p.: n.p., 1774), pp. 82–83. Goudar often wrote anonymously, semi-anonymously (as he does here), or under the name of his wife, Sara.

⁸ 'Deaf and Dumb', *Supplement to the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: A. Constable & Co, 1824), Vol. III, pp. 467–479. John Rée suggests that the author, whose initial is given in the article as 'W.', may be Thomas Watson, the founder of the first charitable school for the deaf in England, and an opponent of manual signs. See Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 224n.

⁹ L'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets*, p. 123.

¹⁰ Jean-Georges Noverre, *Lettres sur la Danse et les Arts Imitateurs* (Paris: Lieutier, 1952), p. 16. This letter appears in the St Petersburg edition (1803–04, Vol. II, letter 7), and the last Paris edition (1807, Vol. I, letter 9), but not in the first edition of 1760. Translated by Cyril Beaumont, *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* (Alton: Dance Books, 2004).

is then strongly placed on the heart, over the left hand'.¹¹ L'Épée based his systematic sign language on the readily understandable manual expression which deaf mutes developed for themselves, their 'home sign', so one might expect it to share some features with the somatic language of the ballet d'action which, according to choreographers, also derived to some extent from customary or 'natural' gesture. The biggest difference would have been that mime dancers used the whole body, while deaf mutes, according to L'Épée's descriptions, used hands and face.

Most significantly of all, the ballet d'action and sign language shared an important, fundamental principle: somatic expression is autonomous; body language can be rendered fully meaningful without the support of articulated words. The *raison d'être* of the ballet d'action, according to its major practitioners and many contemporary critics, was to transform the 'meaningless' movements of contemporary stage dance into a meaningful dramatic art by incorporating mime and narrative principles into it. The contention was that a complete narrative action could be recounted without the use of words. In effect, mime dancers forcefully asserted the creation of a new theatrical language, or at least its recreation, since they were aware of precedents. The critical opposition they encountered was almost always based, fundamentally, on the belief that somatic expression was an inadequate substitute for the articulated language of theatre, including opera. It could not convey anything like the same complexity of meaning, and it hardly deserved the name 'language' at all. The dogma of the voice was not usually made explicit, but it is implicit in the comments of many critics cited in this book that a story cannot properly be recounted without words. For such critics, the success of the ballet d'action must be measured in terms of its ability to achieve whatever is possible in spoken theatre; no more, no less. If it could not match the effects achievable by speech, it was considered weak. If it created effects which speech could not, they were considered redundant. Not surprisingly, the ballet d'action suffered by the comparison. Much of the criticism directed at L'Épée derives from the same implicit assumption.

The prejudice in favour of the voice has a long history. It has philosophical roots which one can appreciate most succinctly in the meaning and use of a key term in ancient Greek philosophy, 'logos'. The basic, non-technical meaning relates to speaking, but ancient philosophers attached a variety of more abstract meanings to it. For Heraclitus in the sixth century BC, it was the divine order of the cosmos; for Aristotle, it meant an argument

¹¹ L'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets*, p. 73.

from reason (rather than from emotion or 'pathos', or on moral grounds, 'ethos'); for the Stoics in the two centuries before Christ, it meant the active reason pervading the universe and present in all matter.¹² In these and many other cases of modern as well as ancient philosophy, it is speech which has a privileged relation to mind, spirit, or whatever we like to think of as those abstract, non-material faculties with which humans and gods are usually thought to be uniquely endowed. The assumption is often made unquestioningly by even the most thoughtful of philosophers. In the early modern period which concerns us here, Thomas Hobbes devotes a chapter to speech in his *Leviathan*, in which he proposes a unique relationship between speech and the mind, 'understanding being nothing else, but conception caused by Speech'. Implicitly, he excludes deaf humans as well as explicitly animals from understanding: 'If Speech be peculiar to man (as for ought I know it is), then is Understanding peculiar to him also.'¹³

The dogma of the voice is also religious. If speech is considered a divine gift, all human beings may be thought to need it in order to fulfil the creator's plan, and indeed the Catholic Church's will that its members should confess their sins, orally, to a priest. If speech is considered one way in which man is made in God's image, God who, according to the Hebrew and to most translations of the Old Testament Bible, 'said "Let there be light"', and 'said "Let there be a firmament"', creating the world in a series of oral commands, then human beings must speak, also. Those who are speechless are defective divine images, less than human, closer to the 'dumb animals' than to God's elect.

It is the shared fate of sign language and the ballet d'action at the hands of this dogma which makes a comparison of the two mutually revealing. Until the eighteenth century, the ultimate aim of teachers of the deaf was almost invariably to teach them to speak. When, in the 1760s, L'Épée made sign language the primary aim of his teaching, he unwittingly defied two centuries of oral methodology. In the process, he undermined the dogmatic idea held, implicitly or explicitly, by his predecessors that mental understanding and speech are intimately, uniquely related. L'Épée himself never put it in these terms, perhaps because he did not seem to be aware, as far as we can tell from his published pronouncements, of the dominant oral methodology in the history of deaf teaching. Others did put it in these terms

¹² 'Logos', in F.E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York University Press, 1967); K.F. Johansen, 'Logos', in *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy*, ed. Donald Zeyl (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997).

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 109.

for him. De Gérando, the French philosopher and prototypical anthropologist who wrote a report on the national school for the deaf founded by L'Épée, comments on the history of deaf teaching that:

It has been supposed that speech and the sounds of the human voice are endowed with a mysterious virtue which makes them the living and natural expression of thought and feeling. Vague concepts from Plato on the relation between language and ideas have been deployed. The old metaphor, or rather equivocation, which gives the word 'logos' the dual sense of speech and reason, has been treated by some as if it were deeply meaningful.¹⁴

He goes on to point out that misconceptions about the voice are evident, not only in the word 'logos', but in modern words in French such as 'langue', meaning both 'tongue' and 'language', as if language were a product solely of the tongue. This polysemic fusion of what are arguably two distinct meanings is at least as old as the Latin 'lingua' from which French 'langue' (and English 'language') is derived, but the confusion is more widespread than the Romance languages: English 'tongue', Russian 'iazyk', and Hebrew 'lashón' also carry both meanings.

Such misconceptions have a long pedigree in the history of deaf teaching. The first innovator in the modern era in teaching language to the deaf and dumb was the sixteenth-century Spanish Benedictine monk, Pedro Ponce Leon, who encouraged his pupils to use senses other than hearing to develop a preliminary awareness of language (they could watch speakers and touch their throats to feel the vibrations of speech), but the final objective was that they should learn to articulate words.¹⁵ In the seventeenth century, his compatriot Juan Pablo Bonet published the first ever book on the education of the deaf in which he made a crucial contribution to the field by defining a 'finger alphabet' or dactylology, allowing the deaf to spell out words. Bonet's intention, however, was not to teach manual signs as the primary language of the deaf. His dactylology was intended only as a secondary system of language for pupils who could not write, in order, in the end, to teach them to vocalise. Even teachers who had less confidence than Leon and Bonet did in the oral method did not, as a result, prioritise sign language. The Scottish linguist George Dalgarno had a healthy suspicion of vocalisation as a primary objective, but as a result he limited his teaching of the deaf to

¹⁴ Joseph-Marie de Gérando, *De l'Éducation des Sourds-Muets de Naissance*, 2 vols (Paris: Méquignon l'Ainé Père, 1827), Vol. I, p. 16.

¹⁵ For a general history of the teaching of the deaf and dumb which discusses de Leon and others we mention below, see Réé, *I See a Voice* (1999), particularly pp. 97–206 for the history up to the end of the eighteenth century.

reading the written word from the page and spelling using his own form of dactylology.

The fundamental linguistic flaw in the oral method was inadvertently pointed out by Dalgarno's contemporary John Wallis, Oxford Professor of Geometry. His pupil Daniel Whaley could articulate, read the written word, and, most revealingly, imitate the speech of a Polish speaker. Wallis never claimed that his pupil could understand the sense of the Polish he repeated, which begs the question of how much Whaley understood of the English he articulated. He was never able to speak or argue on his own account. The question did not seem uppermost in many people's minds, however. An English doctor visiting the school of the seventeenth-century Dutch speech therapist Johann Conrad Amman was very impressed with the ability of one of his congenitally deaf pupils to speak and read out from Dutch and Latin texts, but did not stop to consider whether the pupil understood all that she said or read.

The oral method dominated the eighteenth century as much as it did the seventeenth. Thomas Braidwood established a successful academy for the teaching of the deaf in Edinburgh in 1760. Like L'Épée, his direct contemporary, he made considerable efforts to learn the untutored sign language, or 'home sign', of his pupils, but his subsequent objectives were to teach written and articulated language. In 1792, his nephew, Thomas Watson, established the first charitable school for the deaf in England, basing his pedagogy on his uncle's principles. L'Épée's rival in Paris, the Portuguese Jew Péreire, was a confirmed oralist. We know this from the autobiographical essay published by his star pupil, Saboureux de Fontenay (the first ever publication by a deaf mute) in 1764, in which he explains that his master's method depended on a strict rule forbidding the use of gestures and obliging pupils to express themselves in French.¹⁶

The obsession with articulation meant that some teachers of the deaf in the eighteenth century would go to extraordinary lengths to avoid a manual system of signs and to focus all their attention on the mouth. L'Épée engaged in a long and intense correspondence with Samuel Heinicke in Leipzig, who never explained his methods in great detail, but who seems to have taught 'sounds' by relating them to taste, using a feather to put different tastes on the tongue: sharp vinegar for the letter 'i', extract of

¹⁶ Saboureux de Fontenay, 'Lettre de M. Saboureux de Fontenay, sourd et muet de naissance, à Mademoiselle ***', Versailles, le 26 décembre 1764', in *Suite de la Clef ou Journal Historique sur les Matières du Tems [Journal de Verdun]* (1765), pp. 284–298, 361–372. Translated and reproduced by Harlan Lane and Franklin Philip in *The Deaf Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 14–27.

wormwood for ‘e’, pure water for ‘a’, sugar water for ‘o’, olive oil for ‘u’, and mixtures for diphthongs.¹⁷ Curiously, Heinicke claimed that this allowed him to teach speech ‘directly’, without reference to signs or writing. He must have thought that stimulating the tongue would stimulate language at the same time. For all their apparent eccentricity, Heinicke’s methods are indicative of the widespread oral prejudice in the teaching of the deaf and dumb.

The least one can say of the oral principles of teaching of the deaf and dumb is that they were persistent, despite the manifest flaw that producing the physical, articulated word does not in itself constitute more linguistic ability than a parrot has. Even though one has to recognise that Ponce de Leon’s first steps in the sixteenth century were a phenomenal recognition for the first time that it was possible to educate the deaf and dumb at all, there are indications that the oral method was a dogma rather than solely a practical pedagogy. It is in this oral linguistic culture that the ballet d’action developed in the eighteenth century. It is perhaps not surprising that the ballet d’action provoked a strong critical reaction.

L’Épée’s innovations

The dogma of the voice inspired the first ‘querelle’ or public debate about the relative merits of articulation and signing, and the first ever published writings by the deaf. The star pupil, Saboureux de Fontenay, of L’Épée’s most high-profile contemporary rival, Péreire, published an autobiographical essay in 1765 in which he expressed a great deal of scepticism about the exclusive use of sign language. He recounts how, before being taught by Péreire, he was taken under the pedagogical wing of a certain Father Vatin who used signs and drawings to teach him the rudiments of the Christian religion. It was only later, under Péreire’s tuition, that de Fontenay realised how ineffective Vatin’s use of visual and manual signs had been:

I thought that God the Father was a venerable old man residing in the sky, that the Holy Ghost was a dove surrounded by light, that the Devil was a hideous monster who lived beneath the earth, and so on. My ideas about religion were concrete, physical, and mechanistic.¹⁸

¹⁷ Heinrich Stötzner, *Samuel Heinicke. Sein Leben und Wirken* (Leipzig: n.p., 1870), pp. 53–54.

¹⁸ Saboureux de Fontenay, ‘Lettre de M. Saboureux de Fontenay, sourd et muet de naissance’, in Lane, *The Deaf Experience*, p. 25.

Pictures and visual signs in general are apparently ineffective because they convey physical rather than abstract ideas. De Fontenay argues at some length that abstract meaning is the hardest aspect of language learning for the deaf, and his experience convinces him that it is not best served by a system of manual signs. It is Péréire's emphasis on articulation which led de Fontenay to be able to understand, in retrospect, what such abstract notions as 'God' or 'Holy Spirit' meant. Although de Fontenay does not mention L'Épée explicitly, his scepticism with regard to visual signs is likely to be a veiled criticism of him.

L'Épée responds in his seminal *Institution des Sourds et Muets par la Voie des Signes Méthodiques*, published a decade later. In his view, de Fontenay and Péréire significantly underestimate the linguistic nature of the sign language which deaf mutes invent for themselves, and which L'Épée sought to systematise. He devotes a chapter, 'Article IV', to the issue raised by de Fontenay of abstract ideas in sign language: 'How metaphysical ideas are expressed in methodical signs.' His method was to teach signs for abstract ideas by reference to their simpler component ideas. He analysed abstract ideas into their constituent meanings. In order to teach the word 'belief', for example, he divides it into four components: the mind says 'yes', the heart says 'yes', the mouth says 'yes', the eyes have not seen.¹⁹ The proficient, dexterous signer could express this four-part sign in 'the blink of an eye'.²⁰ If the pupil did not understand one of the constituent signs, then L'Épée would analyse it, too, into its component parts. In theory, he could continue this process of semantic analysis until he reached those basic sensory signs which deaf mutes had already invented for themselves, although he states he never had to go this far.²¹

L'Épée's analytical approach is partly what he meant in the title of his work by 'methodical' signs. He sought a systematic semantic approach which would not only teach deaf mutes to use signs, but teach them their meaning clearly. Philosophically and linguistically, he is certainly ambitious, perhaps even naïve, to assume that he would accomplish one of the most difficult and enduring tasks in the philosophy of language, clarifying language usage; more specifically, clarifying the meaning of words for abstract ideas. Relative to his critics, however, who never seemed to question whether they had adequate understanding of language use in their own, articulated languages, L'Épée was anything but naïve. If his critics had taken more account of

¹⁹ L'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets*, p. 79.

²⁰ L'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets*, p. 81.

²¹ L'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets*, p. 78.

contemporary philosophers such as Condillac, or indeed seminal ones such as Locke, or Ancient ones such as Plato and Aristotle, they would not have taken for granted that speakers understand abstract language. L'Épée, in contrast, had all the suspicion of language and the intellectual humility that Locke recommended in his two chapters on the clarity of language in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. L'Épée's principles of breaking down complex ideas into their component simple ideas is exactly the solution proposed by Locke in most of the instances he cites of the obscurity of language: 'the precise collection of simple ideas [must be] settled in the mind, with that sound annexed to it, as the sign of that precise determined collection, and no other'.²² L'Épée resolved to break down complex ideas as far as they would go if this was what was needed to make their meaning clear. This is also Locke's objective, but because he was a Sensationist philosopher, he proposed to go one step further, as far as the sensation which is the origin of each simple idea: 'the only sure way of making known the signification of the name of any simple ideas, is by presenting to his Senses that subject, which may produce it in his mind and make him actually have the idea, that word stands for'.²³

Locke is also aware of the common prejudice in favour of articulated language. He is just as suspicious as L'Épée is of articulated language, since complex ideas often seem to us to have been mastered by the mere fact that abstract words appearing to stand for them can be confidently pronounced:

Wisdom, glory, grace etc. are words frequent enough in every Man's Mouth; but if a great many of those who use them, should be asked, what they mean by them? they would be at a stand, and not know what to answer: A plain proof that though they have learned those Sounds, and have them ready at their Tongues end, yet there are no determined ideas laid up in their minds.²⁴

There is no confusion in either Locke's mind or L'Épée's between the 'tongue' in our mouths and 'tongue' in the sense of 'language'; the physical mastery of the first is no guarantee that the second is intellectually mastered. The first often disguises the fact that abstract ideas are not understood, or indeed difficult to express, and produces what Locke calls 'noise without any Sense or Signification', 'nothing but bare sounds'.²⁵ One imagines that he would

²² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book 3, Chapter 11, §14 (p. 515).

²³ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 11, §14 (p. 515).

²⁴ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 10, §3 (p. 491).

²⁵ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 10, §26 (p. 505).

have found absurd Heinicke's obsession with stimulating the tongue to encourage speech – even dangerous, given the harm he thinks is done by the wilful and ideological distortion of language. According to Locke, speech gives the impression of rational discourse by a rational mind, but it is sometimes an 'abundance of empty unintelligible noise'.²⁶ He would not be taken in by the equivocal use of 'logos', meaning simultaneously 'speech', 'language', and 'reason'. Speech has no privileged relationship to ideas; Locke is not an 'oralist'.

The most Lockeian of L'Épée's contemporaries, the philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, attended L'Épée's public demonstrations incognito in order to question both teacher and deaf pupils.²⁷ He emerged from the experience convinced not only that sign language is the equal of articulated language, but that it is intellectually superior because it is a philosophical education in itself. Condillac felt vindicated, because he had speculated thirty years earlier that a purely gestural language was possible. In his essay inspired by Locke's Sensationist philosophy, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines*, he had proposed that the first language to develop in primitive human societies must have been an 'action language'. He had also pointed out, as Locke had done before him, the semantic failings and abuse of language, and the need, therefore, to analyse ideas closely.²⁸ Far from being incapable of expressing abstract ideas, therefore, Condillac thought that sign language was better at it than articulated language. Evidently, Condillac did not regard himself as an oralist.

The criticism that sign language was inherently physical and could not express complex, abstract ideas nevertheless continued, despite L'Épée's book, and despite the intervention of Condillac. It is in the nature of dogma to be immune to rational argument and practical demonstration. In 1779, the Abbé Claude-François Deschamps published his *Cours Élémentaire d'Éducation des Sourds et Muets* after a number of years' experience of teaching the deaf and dumb in Orléans. According to Deschamps, the only way to equip the human soul with the means to understand the abstract ideas in religion and morality was to teach reading, writing, and speech. There was no other way to eternal salvation. He strongly disapproved, therefore,

²⁶ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 10, §4 (p. 492).

²⁷ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Cours d'Études pour l'Instruction du Prince de Parme*, in *Œuvres Philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges Le Roy, 3 vols (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947–51), Vol. I, pp. 429n–430n.

²⁸ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines* (1746; Paris: Éditions Alive, 1998), seconde partie, section seconde, Chapter 2 (pp. 277–287). Translated by Hans Aarsleff, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

of L'Épée's emphasis on sign language on the grounds that it confined the deaf to a purely physical, sensory experience of the world.²⁹

Deschamps's criticism provoked a reply from one of L'Épée's pupils, Pierre Desloges, whose essay in 1779 was only the second publication by a deaf mute (after Saboureux de Fontenay's fifteen years earlier). He takes Deschamps to task for a number of inconsistencies, but is most incensed at his refusal to believe that the abstract concepts involved in religion are beyond sign language. Deschamps had claimed that the deaf mute will confuse the signs for 'firmament' and 'God', because the sign for both involves indicating the sky. Desloges is adamant, however, that the two would never be confused in sign language, since the sign for 'God' also involves a facial air of adoration and respect. In modern linguistic terminology, we would say that Deschamps mistakenly assumed that semantically non-essential or 'paralinguistic' devices in his own language (such as facial expression), are similarly paralinguistic in other languages. An uninformed European might make the same mistake with regard to Chinese intonation.

The manualist–oralist debate which began in the eighteenth century has never really abated. For much of the twentieth century, oralist teaching of the deaf and dumb dominated. There was a great revival in the fortunes of sign language after William C. Stokoe published his seminal article in 1960 in which he argued that deaf and dumb home sign is a genuine language, albeit with many different characteristics to articulated languages.³⁰ Since then, sign language has been taught widely as the primary means of communication for the deaf, but not without significant controversy.

The prejudice against somatic language and in favour of oral language manifested itself in its own way in the arts, or at least those in which using spoken words was an option. Arguably the main reason why stage dance had never been considered to be a 'high' art in the early modern period was because it did not fit into the dominant theory that art is an imitation of nature. No one was able to explain convincingly what the object of imitation was. The same difficulty frequently arose in the case of instrumental music, but music in general was saved from aesthetic oblivion by its alliance with words in forms such as opera. As long as the relationship between the music and libretto of an opera were sufficiently close, the words could be said to validate the expressive music. Music could thus be said to 'imitate' whatever

²⁹ Abbé Claude-François Deschamps, *Cours Élémentaire d'Éducation des Sourds et Muets* (Paris: Debure, 1779), pp. 59–67.

³⁰ William C. Stokoe, 'Sign language structure: an outline of the visual communication systems of the American Deaf', *Studies in Linguistics: Occasional Papers*, 8 (1960), Buffalo: Department of Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Buffalo.

the words expressed. This is particularly true of French operatic music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lully and Rameau are well known for their efforts to compose music which evoked the sense of the words sung. More than this, however, they endeavoured to imitate the prosody of spoken language. Instead of their own 'voice', instruments were sometimes made to imitate the intonation and rhythm of the human voice.³¹ Lully and Rameau were, in their own ways, oralists, like most contemporary teachers of the deaf and dumb.

The option of using supporting words was open to certain forms of stage dance, such as the seventeenth-century Court Masque in which dancers would be accompanied by singers. It was not open to the eighteenth-century ballet d'action, however, which was fundamentally based on the principle that the body did not need spoken words to express itself. In fact, the mimetic meaning of the ballet d'action was doubly problematic, because wordless movement was combined with wordless music; two of the most aesthetically indeterminate arts were combined so that if the spectator did not understand the sense of the music, he or she had recourse only to the equally mysterious language of the body. Almost with wilful abandon, choreographers of the ballet d'action claimed their wordless productions were as much 'high art' as any other stage art, and yet they made a principle out of refusing aesthetic support from the most obvious and effective source: the spoken word. If they had shown more regard for the contemporary prejudice in favour of the voice, if they had paid it a little lip service, as it were, by including some spoken words in the performance, the reception of the ballet d'action would have been less controversial.

There is, therefore, a telling parallel between the ballet d'action and sign language which we can best appreciate if we acknowledge the extent of oral prejudice in art and in our conception of language. The eighteenth-century culture in which the ballet d'action developed was a culture of the body, but the body subordinated to the voice. This helps to explain both the success of the genre and the controversy it provoked.

Theories of the origin of language

The same phenomenon is discernible in eighteenth-century theories of the origin of language. Since the nineteenth century, the subject has largely been

³¹ See Paul-Marie Masson, *L'Opéra de Rameau* (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1930), Chapter 3, 'Le Récitatif', and Chapter 4, 'Les Airs', who describes in detail the rhythmic and melodic ways in which Rameau and Lully imitated in music the conventions of declamation, both in recitative and in the aria.

excluded from philology and linguistics, but in the early modern period, and especially in the eighteenth century, it was part of the nascent study of anthropology, a field which arguably first became a scientific discipline in the Enlightenment.³² Eighteenth-century writers on the origin of language were interested in variations in language across time and space which might shed light on the history and processes of society and culture. Language was thought to provide particularly useful insights because its development must have been a long-term human process which could shed light on the pre-modern history of humans, and, by implication, on the nature of modern society, culture, and more specific domains such as politics, law, and religion. The methodology used to investigate the origin of languages was often admirable for its forensic attention to detail but surprising by its tendency towards speculation. Whether or not we find particular theories convincing in their primary object of uncovering the origins of language is less important, however, than their fundamental anthropological principle that civilisation is a natural, not a supernatural, phenomenon, and that it can be observed and understood; that we need a 'natural history' of humanity as much as we do a natural history of the fauna and flora around us.

The most influential writing in the eighteenth century on the origin of language proposed that the first, most primitive human languages must have been gestural or in some sense physical. In some ways, therefore, this makes the eighteenth century a fertile period for the development of a body-based art form like the ballet d'action. Advocates of the ballet d'action often sought support for its techniques by relating them to a hypothetical original language of gesture lying dormant in modern language which can be uncovered and developed. The Viennese critic and playwright J.F. Schink was sometimes critical of the essential features of the ballet d'action, but he wrote fervently about its potential relation to the origins of language, which he thinks lie in a gestural expression of the richness of sense experience.³³ The Italo-Spanish opera critic and historian Stefano Artega was also critical at times of the obscure plots of some ballets d'action, but he

³² Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Finn Sivert Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 10. Among the supporting examples they give to argue that modern anthropology begins in the eighteenth century are Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des Loix*, a comparative, cross-cultural study of legislative systems from which Montesquieu derived general legal principles, and Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, which gives detailed descriptions of farming tools and craftsmen's techniques in such a way as to suggest for the first time the intellectual legitimacy of a study of everyday life.

³³ Johann Friedrich Schink, *Dramaturgische Fragmente. Erster Band* (Graz: mit von Widmannstättenschen Schriften, 1781), pp. 62–63.

too was intrigued by its relation to the primitive origins of language in body language.³⁴

Intentionally or not, however, they overlooked a less supportive aspect of almost all theories of the origin of language, which is that the first primitive, physical language developed by humans was superseded by other modes of communication, most obviously speech and writing. In this sense, these theories of the origin of language are typical of contemporary primitivist theories of culture: they all chart the advancement and progress of civilisation in which the primitive starting point has a value as only that, a starting point. In other words, primitive origins were regarded as significant in as far as humanity went beyond them. This is even true of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who gained a certain notoriety among his contemporaries because his second discourse appeared to be written in praise of the 'noble savage' and in condemnation of progress towards modern society.³⁵ With hindsight, one can argue that his later essay, *Du Contrat Social*, demonstrates that he believed that we should surpass not only our primitive origins, but our contemporary state, too.³⁶ In this sense, he had an even greater belief in progress than those who criticised him for having a naïve attachment to a primitive era. In this context, therefore, the eighteenth century is not such a fertile ground for the ballet d'action to spring from, because, to its critics, the priority it gave to the body, over and above anything else, seemed to be an example of art regressing rather than progressing.

Warburton and hieroglyphs

Bishop William Warburton is often credited with overturning the established view of Egyptian hieroglyphs as a symbolic system invented by a priestly caste for the purpose of concealing wisdom, and arguing instead that they were the original, abridged, and public form of communication. He powerfully challenged the theories of Porphyry, Clement of Alexandria, and the entire school of Christian exegesis. The chapter he wrote on this subject

³⁴ Stefano Arteaga, 'Ragionamento sopra il ballo pantomimico', in *Le Rivoluzioni del Teatro Musicale Italiano dalla sua Origine Fino al Presente*, 3 vols (Venice: Carlo Palese, 1785), Vol. III, pp. 153–157.

³⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'Origine et les Fondements de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes* (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1755). Translated by Franklin Philip, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1762). Translated by Christopher Betts, *The Social Contract* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

in *The Divine Legation of Moses*, subsequently translated into French and published as a separate, best-selling monograph, does, indeed, constitute an important advance, before Champolion deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs at the beginning of the nineteenth century and definitively disproved the cabalistic view.³⁷

A less explicit but equally innovative aspect of Warburton's theories, however, is the set of assumptions on which they were based. In essence, he accepted that pictural representations of physical actions could constitute a 'real character', a language. Concreteness was not incompatible with language; an image could simultaneously be a text. This is to go one step further than to make the relatively unproblematic claim that a material medium is capable of 'expression', since it would be hard to disagree that the arts such as sculpture or painting do not 'express' something merely because they work through a material medium. To argue that visual images carved into stone constitute a veritable *language*, however, was something that Warburton was the first systematically to propose. He argues that we should accept that a language can be based on the smallest possible gap between an object and its representation, that there be minimal abstraction away from the nature of the object. He is not so naïve as to suppose that hieroglyphs are only pictures, in the most straightforward sense, of real objects; he acknowledges that the gap between object and image widened as hieroglyphs developed. Nevertheless, he argues that this process of 'abbreviation' of images, by metonymy, synecdoche, and allegorical symbol,³⁸ was still based on the observation of natural forms. These forms were simply combined through the agency of 'wit'. When hieroglyphs were 'abbreviated' through figurative 'wit', their common foundation remained the quintessential picture conveying information directly to our eyes.

The principles underlying Warburton's study of hieroglyphs must have made thought-provoking reading for those of his contemporaries who were interested in the aesthetics of the arts. The early modern period is dominated by the doctrine of the mimesis according to which art is believed to imitate nature. Quite what 'imitation' and 'nature' meant was often unclear, but Warburton's theories impinge on both in challenging ways. There is no

³⁷ William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist*, 2 vols (London: Fletcher Gyles, 1737–41), Vol. II, Book 4, section iv, 'The high antiquity of Egypt proved from their hieroglyphics'. This section was translated by Léonard Des Malpeines and published separately in France as *Essai sur les Hiéroglyphes des Egyptiens* (Paris: Hippolyte-Louis Guérin, 1744). Champolion published his discovery in *Lettre à M. Dacier relative à l'alphabet des hiéroglyphes phonétiques* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1822).

³⁸ Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, Vol. II, p. 71.

evidence that Diderot read Warburton's works, or the *Traité des Hiéroglyphes* which was published under his name in France, but his most well-known elaboration on the theme of the poetic hieroglyph is close to Warburton's principles. They understand 'hieroglyph' in the same way: mysterious but decipherable, legible symbols. Diderot applies the principle of legible mystery to poetry in particular, and the arts in general, to conclude that, no matter how obscure it is, there must be a precise and identifiable explanation for the way a given artistic medium allows an artist to express himself. In poetry, the legible mystery may be the evocative use of sound and prosodic rhythm; in music, it may be the evocative use of rhythm and harmony.³⁹ Diderot acknowledges that artistic expression is, for most people, beyond understanding: 'there are a thousand times more people able to understand the most abstruse geometer than a poet';⁴⁰ there must nevertheless be a way of deciphering the 'hieroglyph' of art.

There are contingent reasons why Warburton's idea of legible mystery would have appealed to Diderot. He wrote *Lettres sur les Sourds et les Muets* partly in response to Charles Batteux's *Les Beaux-Arts Réduits à un Même Principe* (1746) which simplistically defines art as an 'imitation of nature' while complacently omitting to explain what 'nature' is and how it is 'imitated'. Diderot's hieroglyphic theory is intentionally more demanding; it supposes that we need to expend a great deal more intellectual energy on the most unsuspected aspects of art in order to understand artistic expression.

There is more than this contingent reason, however, to consider the aesthetic implications of Warburton's hieroglyph which Diderot draws out. For Diderot, poetry is like Egyptian hieroglyphs in its blend of the physical and the spiritual. It is almost as if Diderot gained confidence from Warburton's description of the meaning of physical hieroglyphs to propose in turn the meaning of the physical articulations of the voice reading poetry. In effect, Warburton and Diderot reassess the spiritual value of physical expression. Just as Egyptian hieroglyphs are a pictural language, so, too, according to Diderot, is poetry which uses physical articulation (prosody and evocative sound) to vocally inspire images in the mind of readers or listeners to poetry. Thus, Diderot shows how we underestimate the symbolic meaning of articulated sounds; Warburton shows how we underestimate the linguistic meaning of physical pictures.

³⁹ Diderot discusses these techniques at length in *Lettre sur les Sourds et les Muets*, ed. Paul Hugo Meyer, in *Diderot Studies* (Geneva: Droz, 1965), Vol. VII; see p. 72 for an example from Virgil's verse, and p. 84 for an anonymous musical extract portraying the death of Dido.

⁴⁰ Diderot, *Lettre sur les Sourds et les Muets*, p. 78.

Diderot is not original in discussing the evocative nature of certain prosodic or phonetic characteristics of poetic language. The subject is at least as old as Latin poetry, as is clear from the examples he gives from Virgil and others. What is original, however, is that Diderot should contend that it is more than an ancillary technique; it is instead the very essence of poetry. He thus radically re-evaluates the importance of the physicality of language and poetry.

The ballet d'action was in some senses 'hieroglyphic'. Its choreographers were the Warburtons and Diderots of the stage who contended that a physical medium such as the body could be the agent for a kind of language, what we idly refer to now as 'body language', but which would seem problematic to us if we were to take the expression simplistically to mean that anything which can be communicated using the voice can be communicated equally well through the body. We would still, today, find difficulties in the notion that concreteness is no barrier to abstraction. Much of the contemporary debate provoked by the ballet d'action sprang from the consequent question of whether it was a strength or a weakness for the ballet d'action to be 'hieroglyphic' in this sense, to use the most familiar physical medium, the body, to express what many thought were the most unfamiliar, obscure and mysterious meanings.

Condillac's action language

Condillac is in some ways the Locke of the French Enlightenment. His Sensationist theories owed a great deal to those that John Locke devised in his seminal *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, but in addition to borrowing wholesale some of Locke's ideas, he adapted Sensationism to suit French philosophical, cultural, and artistic expectations. Locke is largely uninterested in two matters which loom large in Condillac's writing: the origin of language, and the implications of Sensationism for contemporary art and literature. Thus, although the first half ('Première Partie') of Condillac's first and most well-known work, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines* (1746) is devoted to Sensationism, to understanding humans as primarily sensory beings who owe all aspects of their nature and mind to their sensory perception of the world, the second half ('Deuxième Partie') begins with the origin of language and extends far into contemporary debates about the arts. His *Essai* would seem, therefore, to endorse or promote those arts which cultivate a close relationship to the senses and to somatic expression. Many contemporary critics and practitioners of the ballet d'action deployed

Sensationist arguments, and many also cited in particular the hypothesis which Condillac pursues that the first language developed by human beings was a body language, a 'langage d'action'. What they overlooked or chose not to consider, however, is that Condillac charts an evolution in which early sensory modes of being and early language are superseded, or at least overshadowed, by subsequent developments.

The most interesting point in Condillac's theory of the origin of mind and language, as it relates to the arts and to the ballet d'action, is the moment at the beginning of his *Deuxième Partie* when human beings communicate for the first time.⁴¹ Communication begins with empathy, develops into a basic form of language which is part gesture and part unarticulated vocal 'cry' (both of which, together, constitute 'action language'), and then develops further in two separate directions. On the one hand, it develops into articulated language, and on the other into dance, by which Condillac means a symbolic body language. He gives an Old Testament example: Jeremiah who breaks an earthenware vessel before the gathered masses.⁴² This form of action language, argues Condillac, creates a greater and more lasting impression on the imagination; it speaks more profoundly to the heart. With time and the progress of civilisation, this symbolic dance is codified, rendered more graceful, expressive, and varied, and spawns what he calls 'the dance of steps'. Thus, there are now two varieties of somatic expression: the dance of gestures, which serves to communicate thoughts (like Jeremiah breaking the pot), and the dance of steps, whose purpose it is to communicate states of mind, for example joy. In the terms of his contemporaries, he would seem, here, to be distinguishing between an oratorical function, or 'actio', and dance. The way in which Condillac discusses the latter is grist to the mill of contemporary dance reformers such as Noverre and Angiolini. He acknowledges that there are many different kinds of dance in modern times and that they all have merit of one kind or another, on condition that they 'express' something in a varied and imaginative way, so that they form a kind of dialogue either with the spectator or with other participants. Grace and nobility are virtues, but in themselves they are insufficient. Technical virtuosity is also admirable, but lacks emotion, which was the primary reason why the 'dance of steps' developed in the first place.

⁴¹ Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines*, Part II, Chapter 1 for the following account of the development of language.

⁴² See Jeremiah 19 in which God inspires Jeremiah to use this visual symbol in order for his followers to understand God's wrath.

So goes Condillac's story of the origin of language. It culminates in the creation of dance, which derives from the earliest action language. 'Action' has a similar sense for Condillac as it did for mime dancers: meaningful movement. The crucial semiotic step which Condillac identifies, when human beings first attached a semantic value to an otherwise meaningless symbol, is analogous to the crucial principle of eighteenth-century dance reforms, which is that beautiful but meaningless dance steps must be endowed with meaning. For both Condillac and contemporary mime dancers, movement is a potential symbol waiting to be rendered meaningful. Given the widespread currency of Condillac's theories in particular and gestural theories of language in general, there is a linguistic and anthropological context to eighteenth-century dance reforms which lent them philosophical credibility. Like Warburton's, Condillac theories would seem to support the idea that physical expression can constitute a 'language'.

Condillac supposes, however, that there was a rapid and decisive evolution away from the primitive, gestural origins of language. He is not a primitivist who proposes that we should revive early, gestural language for modern use, artistic or otherwise. Quite the opposite, in fact; the importance he attributes to the development of articulated language suggests that he is as much of an 'oralist' as contemporary opponents of sign language, for the deaf, despite his professed admiration for L'Épée's sign language, which we mention above. He has an oralist's belief that speech superseded body language. At the outset of linguistic development, Condillac supposes that the first semiotic steps were taken by humans who vocalised at the same time as gesturing, and that the first linguistic signs were therefore a combination of the two.⁴³ The only reason that somatic language developed more quickly was that it was far easier for human beings to make use of the face, arms, and the rest of the body than it was to learn control of the vocal organs. He regards the ease with which somatic language was learnt, in fact, to have been 'a great obstacle' to subsequent linguistic development.⁴⁴ Once humans learnt to master their vocal organs, somatic movement was replaced by its oral equivalent, prosody. There is therefore a moment in Condillac's history of the development of language when 'movement' ceases to mean movement of the body, and means instead the rise and fall of intonation.⁴⁵ Early articulated language, he argues, must have been prosodically very varied, in imitation of the form of language which directly preceded it and

⁴³ Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines*, p. 164.

⁴⁴ Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines*, p. 166.

⁴⁵ Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines*, p. 209.

which depended on physically visible movement of the body. Even this kind of 'movement' diminishes as articulated language finds other, less primitive and more complex, ways to express meaning.⁴⁶ In Condillac's chronology, therefore, 'movement' of either a physical or a prosodic nature is gradually eliminated from language. This sheds a different light on what might appear in his schema to be the pre-eminent position of dance and the physical arts. Although they are part of a long process of development, they are not the culmination. Instead, they become a repository for linguistically redundant semiotic modes.

Rousseau's language of the passions

The priority of the voice over the body is even clearer in Rousseau's theory of the origin of language than it is in Condillac's. He boldly opens his *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues* with the statement that speech defines humanity and its local variants define nations: 'Speech distinguishes man among the animals; language distinguishes nations from each other.'⁴⁷ The only other viable semiotic system in his view is music, which uses quasi-linguistic 'signs' for our 'passions': 'the sounds of a melody do not affect us merely as sounds, but as signs of our affections, of our feelings.'⁴⁸ It is a moot point which belief produces the other: either his well-known predilection for music causes him to prioritise the oral dimension of language, or his prejudice in favour of oral language causes him to value music and its aural nature. What is nonetheless clear from this opening sentence is that Rousseau does not attribute primary linguistic value to the mute language of the body. As the *Essai* progresses, he acknowledges a gestural dimension to the first primitive developments of language, but insists on the pre-eminence of articulation and the musicality of linguistic prosody.

His acknowledgement of the power of actions is confined to the first few pages. He appears to take a balanced view of gestural and articulated language, firstly by according equal importance to the two possible mediums of communication, vision and hearing, and secondly by enumerating the many examples from the ancient world which suggest that visual language has an impressive pedigree. Thus, the ancient Egyptians 'did not

⁴⁶ Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines*, p. 212.

⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), Vol. V, p. 375. Translated by John H. Moran and Alexander Gode, *On the Origin of Language: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder* (University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 417.

say it, but showed it' with hieroglyphs.⁴⁹ Or again: the King of Scythia sent a message to Darius consisting of a frog, a bird, a mouse, and five arrows, and the 'terrible harangue' was perfectly understood.⁵⁰ After a number of further examples of the effectiveness of action language, he ends his enumeration with the contention that 'one speaks more effectively to the eye than to the ear'.⁵¹ He is convinced that society could function at many levels without articulated language: 'we would be able to constitute laws, to choose leaders, to invent arts, to establish commerce, and to do, in a word, almost as many things as we do with the help of speech'.⁵² One of his examples of the communicative potential of visual action language is the efforts of eighteenth-century teachers such as Péréire to engage with the deaf and dumb by learning their native, self-taught 'home sign'.⁵³

Despite the tribute he pays to the history and practice of non-articulated language, he contends that it is fundamentally, intrinsically deficient in the most important respect, a point he makes explicitly in the resounding opening to his second chapter: 'It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words.'⁵⁴ In Rousseau's terminology, the expression of the 'passions' is the essential spiritual faculty of mankind, which is historically and logically prior to other faculties such as reason.⁵⁵ Thus, in an echo of critics of sign language for the deaf, Rousseau claims that non-articulated language is good only for the expression of physical needs. It is not up to the task of expressing the spiritual dimension of the human mind and experience. Given the importance that Rousseau attributes to the passions throughout this essay and all his other writings, this order of priorities undermines the value which he appeared to attribute to action language in the opening pages of the *Essai*. Even if action language is a potential medium for a range of social activities, it is inadequate if it cannot give full and proper expression to the passions. Later in his *Essai*, he makes clear the unique status of the voice as the only authentic medium

⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 376.

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 373.

⁵¹ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 377.

⁵² Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 378.

⁵³ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 378.

⁵⁴ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 380.

⁵⁵ See, for example, his second discourse in which he states that passion creates reason: 'Whatever moral thinkers say, human understanding owes a great deal to the passions [...] It is through their action that our reason perfects itself.' Rousseau, *Discours sur l'Origine et les Fondements de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), Vol. III, p. 143.

through which to express one's humanity: alone and wandering in the desert, 'as soon as vocal signs strike your ear, they announce to you a being like yourself. They are, so to speak, the voice of the soul.'⁵⁶

Like Condillac, Rousseau's interest in the origin of language in general and the voice in particular is not only linguistic or anthropological. He, too, is motivated by aesthetic, artistic concerns. His interest in this respect is evident even more quickly, in fact, than is Condillac's. Whereas Condillac devotes half his *Essai* to purely philosophical and linguistic matters before turning to their implications for modern artistic expression, Rousseau affirms them almost from the outset. Having acknowledged the role of action language, he contends that its major weakness is that it is made up of linguistic signs which are not sufficiently sequential. Action language uses visual, pictural signs which reveal their meaning in an instant; they have limited or no duration. In contrast, the inevitable sequential nature of articulated signs leads to a much more powerful expression of the passions, because they 'strike a redoubled blow'.⁵⁷ The first example he gives is theatre:

It is solely in this way that the scenes of a tragedy produce their effect. Pantomime without discourse will leave you nearly tranquil; discourse without gestures will wring tears from you. The passions have their gestures, but they also have their accents; and these accents, which thrill us, these tones of voice, which cannot fail to be heard, penetrate to the very depths of the heart, carrying there the emotions they wring from us, forcing us in spite of ourselves to feel what we hear.⁵⁸

Rousseau contrasts tragedy with 'pantomime', which suggests he means the latter term in its theatrical sense, as well as less specifically in the sense of the gestural expression first developed by primitive humans. He would appear, therefore, to be reacting against the contemporary trend towards mute theatre, or mute moments in theatre. Nothing here is remotely supportive of the ballet d'action. He discounts exactly that feature of visual language which most appealed to many contemporary critics: its promptness. From choreographers, to journalists, to philosophers like Diderot, the nature of a visual image, charged with many meanings and implications which made an immediate impact on the viewer or spectator, was a virtue. It was one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of the ballet d'action cited in support of its innovative nature. For Rousseau, it is a fatal weakness which means that visual language is inadequate. The passions are better expressed through 'accents' or prosody rather than 'gestures'. Like Condillac, the most

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 421.

⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 377.

⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 378.

expressive ‘movement’ in language is the rise and fall of the voice. He goes further than Condillac, however, to suggest what one might call an articulatory ‘character’ of the voice, a taxonomy of different expressions of the passions produced by different articulatory effects, almost an oral equivalent of the famous ‘character of the passions’ described by Charles Le Brun in his lectures in painting:⁵⁹

With the first voices came the first articulations or sounds formed according to the respective passions that dictated them. Anger produces menacing cries articulated by the tongue and the palate. But the voice of tenderness is softer: its medium is the glottis [. . .]. It may occur with ordinary or unusual tones, it may be more or less sharply accented, according to the feeling to which it is joined.⁶⁰

Rousseau thus imagines that the articulatory organs are a highly refined apparatus for the expression of that fundamental characteristic of humans, the passions. Visual, action language is, in comparison, unsophisticated.

Since Rousseau regards language as fundamentally oral and aural, it is closely related to music rather than to the visual arts. As such, he thinks it is wishful thinking, or worse still a flight of intellectual fantasy, to imagine that it can be somehow translated into another medium. Diderot’s hieroglyph would probably seem to him to border on such fantasy, because it is based on the principle that the sounds of poetry are interpreted into a visual image or painting in the mind of the reader or listener. Rousseau would doubtless object if we were to go too far towards the idea that outside the mind of the reader one could also create a direct correspondence between the oral–aural nature of one art and the visual nature of another. A painter could not paint the exact equivalent of a poem. Music cannot be translated directly into colours. Not surprisingly, Rousseau has no time for synaesthesia, as he demonstrates on a number of occasions when he criticises the well-known synaesthetic experiments of Louis Castel, the mathematician who apparently adapted a harpsichord so that it played coloured filters at the same time as music. Unlike Diderot, who is intensely interested in Castel in his *Lettres sur les Sourds et Muets*,⁶¹ Rousseau emphatically rejects the idea that his experiments reveal anything about the real nature of our experience of art: they give a false impression that it is possible to ‘put the eye in the place of the ear, and the ear in the place of the eye’; they ‘presume out of ignorance to paint for the ears and sing for the eyes’, when in fact ‘each

⁵⁹ See Picart’s 1698 edition of Charles Le Brun’s lectures republished in *L’Expression des Passions*, ed. Julien Philippe (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, Dédale, 1994).

⁶⁰ Rousseau, *Essai sur l’Origine des Langues*, p. 410.

⁶¹ Diderot, *Lettre sur les Sourds et les Muets*, pp. 50–51.

sense has its proper domain'.⁶² These are very similar arguments to those put forward by contemporary critics of sign language for the deaf. They are, in fact, quite characteristic of a widespread Enlightenment prejudice in favour of confining language proper to the oral–aural domain. They are an example of the intellectual and cultural obstacles faced by contemporary mime dancers. Although one of the prime virtues of the ballet d'action was said, by some critics and all choreographers who expressed an opinion, to be its ability to 'speak' to the eyes, the demotion of articulated language that this involved undoubtedly underlies a great deal of adverse reaction. Since ballets d'action were so often based on an existing text from spoken theatre, opera or a literary source, its prime objective had to be exactly what Rousseau and other like-minded contemporaries found most difficult to accept: that it was possible to translate from one sensory medium to another, from the oral–aural medium of articulated language to the visual medium of body language.

Herder, hearing, and the gateway to the soul

Herder opens his *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* with what appears to be a strong case for language as fundamentally a system of mental signs, not specifically articulated signs. For much of his essay, the reader is led to assume that any signs, visual or articulated, can constitute language proper, as long as they are genuine representations of a mental idea. As Herder charts the development of language, however, from its primitive origins, he accords the same exclusive status to articulation as we have seen in other contemporary writing.

The principle of language as first-and-foremost a mental phenomenon is one which Herder presents as a key innovation of his essay, and one which he claims many previous studies of language have overlooked. Language development begins, according to Herder, the moment a distinguishing mark of a given object in nature is identified, permanently associated in the mind with that object, and used to recall a memory of the object in its absence. Thus, the bleating of a sheep will become the sign for 'sheep' in the primitive human mind if it can be recalled at will. There is no need for the sign for 'sheep' to be physically articulated: 'The sound of bleating perceived by a human soul as the distinguishing mark of the sheep became [. . .] the

⁶² Rousseau, *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, p. 420.

name of the sheep, even if his tongue had never tried to stammer it.⁶³ By implication, even those, like deaf mutes, who cannot articulate can be regarded as linguistic human beings: 'It is not an organization of the mouth that made language, for even one who is mute for life, if he is human and if he reflects, has language lying in his soul. The point here is that [...] it is not a breathing machine but a reflective being who invented language.'⁶⁴ This affirmation of the essential linguistic capacity of deaf mutes stands in stark contrast to contemporary 'oralist' critics of sign language, whose fixation with physical articulation led them to conclude that deaf mutes cannot exercise the essential human faculty of reason, and, by implication, to exclude them from humanity. Their mistake, according to Herder, was to think that language makes mind, whereas Herder supposes that the mind makes language. He is in this sense more faithful to the Enlightenment belief in reason as the ultimate distinguishing characteristic of human beings, since he does not subordinate it to a single symptom, articulated language.

There is, then, potential in Herder's theories for a more balanced view of language than we sometimes find elsewhere. Once Herder begins to chart the progress of language beyond its origins in mental signs, however, articulation dominates because of the paramount importance he attributes to the sense of hearing, 'the gateway to the soul'. The perception of the world that it provides is, he thinks, a happy median between sight, which of all the senses is most likely to flood the mind with an excess of perceptual information, and touch, which is the poorest source of perceptions. Vision 'casts us by great distances outside ourselves'.⁶⁵ It is so 'over-brilliant' that 'the soul appears crushed under the multiplicity [of perceptions]'.⁶⁶ At the other perceptual extreme, touch gives a 'narrow' and 'vague' sense of the world easily overridden by the other senses. Sight leaves us over-stimulated, touch under-stimulated. Herder imagines a creature that is 'all eye', and exclaims 'how inexhaustible is the world of its beholdings! [...] In what infinite multiplicity is it dispersed! Its language – we cannot form an idea of it – would be a kind of infinitely refined pantomime; its script an algebra built on colours and strokes'. At the other perceptual extreme, a creature

⁶³ Herder, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, ed. Ulrich Gaier, in *Werke*, 10 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1985), Vol. I, p. 724. Translated by John H. Moran and Alexander Gode, *On the Origin of Language: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder* (University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶⁴ Herder, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, p. 725.

⁶⁵ Herder, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, p. 746.

⁶⁶ Herder, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, p. 747. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from the same page.

with only the sense of touch would 'build for itself a language as an insect builds a web': localised, limited, and inadequate. The richness of a visual language, therefore, would be its fatal flaw, as fatal as the poverty of a tactile language. Like Rousseau, Herder thinks the promptness of a visual language presenting us with more than the mind can properly process means that it cannot be properly, rationally analysed. In a reference no doubt to Castel's colour harpsichord, he exclaims that a visual language of colour would be unbearable: 'who could forever stare attentively at a colour harpsichord without soon going blind?'⁶⁷

The priority Herder gives to hearing over sight and touch (and indeed smell and taste, which he does not mention) is not original. In the long history of writing on the hierarchy of the senses, vision and hearing are most often regarded as superior.⁶⁸ Of these two, vision is usually considered to be the most important, but there are often specific circumstances in which it is outclassed by hearing. Thus, although Aristotle regards sight as the superior sense for 'the supply of the primary wants of life', he gives an intellectual priority to hearing: 'for developing thought, hearing incidentally takes precedence'.⁶⁹ Aristotle does not specify what exactly we need to hear in order to develop thought, but presumably he means speech, articulated language. Implicitly, then, he associates thought with articulated language, as if there were an exclusive relationship between the two.

If unoriginal, Herder's oral–aural definition of language does at least make clear what is never stated openly by proponents of oral teaching methods for the deaf: the 'oral' method is inevitably the 'hearing' method. By definition, therefore, it is entirely inappropriate for teaching the deaf (or at least, the congenitally deaf).⁷⁰ An oral–aural conception of language was exactly the principle which many critics applied to the ballet d'action, as if speech were the sole measure of the expressive value of mime. By this measure, they almost inevitably found it wanting. They held it to task for not being able to do what speech does, or, conversely, they criticised it for doing what speech cannot do. They tended to recognise the ballet d'action as theatrical, even highly theatrical in its effects, but did not accept that it had its own theatrical

⁶⁷ Herder, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, p. 748.

⁶⁸ On the history of discussion of the hierarchy of the senses, see Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*, trans. James Lynn (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), particularly Chapter 3, 'Classifications: The hierarchy of the senses', pp. 61–71.

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton University Press, 1995), Vol. I, pp. 693–713 (694).

⁷⁰ This is a point made by Susan Plann: 'the "oral method" might be more accurately called the "hearing method"', in *A Silent Minority: Deaf Education in Spain 1550–1835* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), p. 49.

'language' in the full sense in which they understood the word. Both sign language for the deaf and the ballet d'action challenged these deep-seated oral–aural preconceptions which are so evident in contemporary theories of the origin of language. They were substitutes for speech which demanded to be understood in their own terms rather than according to conventional criteria.

From the perspective of the modern scholar, it is important to bear in mind the dogma of the voice in order to avoid the pitfall of taking contemporary criticism of the ballet d'action at face value. The principles of the ballet d'action were often portrayed as extravagant; in fact, they were no more extravagant than *L'Épée's*, which proved their worth in practice. More extravagant, in fact, was the degree of prejudice in favour of the voice. When somatic expression was confined to the vulgar street theatres or to the *Commedia dell'arte*, or when it was dignified by the accompaniment of words, as Diderot contended it should be, it did not offend artistic sensibilities to the same extent as when it entirely replaced the words of the greatest classics of stage and literature in the ballet d'action. Equally, sign language for the deaf was acceptable to most teachers as long as it was confined to the early stages of teaching, as long as it was a means to an end: teaching the deaf to articulate. In the same manner, somatic language is an important part of many theories of the origin of languages, but a primitive part which is superseded by speech. The primacy of the voice goes to the heart of the contemporary criticism of the ballet d'action: what antagonised the critics was not somatic expression as such, but the contention that it could carry a heavy load of meaning, subtle or abstract meaning, and the idea that it could constitute a veritable 'language' which expressed as much, albeit through different means, as could the voice.