Edward Nye

Jean-Gaspard Deburau: Romantic Pierrot

Jean-Gaspard Deburau was the nineteenth-century mime artist who created a new model for subsequent performers to either imitate or reject, but hardly to ignore. Silent cinema benefited from the nineteenth-century vogue for the mime in general – and the Pierrot character that he did so much to popularize in particular.[1] The most famous mime of the twentieth century, Marcel Marceau, derived his character 'Bip' in part from Deburau's Pierrot.[2] And while two of the most influential French mime artists of the twentieth century, Jean-Louis Barrault and Étienne Decroux, sought a radical departure from his Pierrot tradition, they ironically found themselves in the now legendary French film *Les Enfants du paradis* acting the parts respectively of Deburau and Deburau's father.[3] In this article Edward Nye explores the reasons for Deburau's success from two perspectives: first, by considering Deburau's reputation for clarity of expression, and the absence of critical or public debate over any obscurity; and second, the context of the Romantic movement which primed spectators to appreciate his style of performance. Edward Nye is Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, and University Lecturer in French. He has published on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subjects in French literature and the arts, notably *Mime, Music, and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: the Ballet d'Action* (CUP 2011), *Literary and Linguistic Theories in Eighteenth-Century France* (OUP, 2000), and on the literary aesthetics of sports writing, in *À Bicyclette* (Les Belles Lettres, 2000).

Key terms: mime, French theatre, Romanticism, Funambules, commedia dell'arte.

1: CLARITY OF EXPRESSION

THE NOVELIST George Sand's response to Deburau is typical of her contemporaries. Such was the semantic clarity of his body language that spectators 'listened' to him and could translate his mime into words and phrases:

> You listen to him, you think he could be speaking, you could write down all his witticisms, his cutting repartee, all his eloquent, persuasive, and conciliatory turns of phrase. When the spectators hear the hustle and bustle of the stagehands behind the scenes, they fear missing a word of Pierrot's role and cry out indignantly: 'Quiet back stage!' And Pierrot, who maintains a continuous and intimate rapport with his spectators, thanks them with one of those affectionate and dignified looks that speaks volumes.[4]

The spectators' silence is a sign of how well Deburau kept their rapt attention, and Sand's final comment in this quotation is a clue to his success: he seemed to express a great deal with minimal effort and with only the slightest movement or facial expression. There was still room in Deburau's performance for expansive physical gesture, such as his trademark kick in the seat of the pants, or acrobatic somersaults and 'sauts de carpe'. He was, in fact, well-known for his physical agility.[5] His talent, however, seems to have been to know when he needed to act with subtlety in order to advance the plot, the dialogue, or else develop the character of his role, and when he needed to be more physical.

The consensus on Deburau's mime contrasts markedly with contemporary responses to Romantic ballet. About half the duration of a Romantic ballet would commonly be devoted to mime scenes, so the ability to mime as well as to dance was essential to a ballet dancer's success. Hence, the most famous dancers were often the most renowned mimes: Émilie Bigottini, Fanny Elssler, Jules Perrot, or August Bournonville. Unlike Deburau, however, their mime scenes often provoked criticism. This contrasting reception is captured in the different approaches taken by the satirical journal *Musée ou*

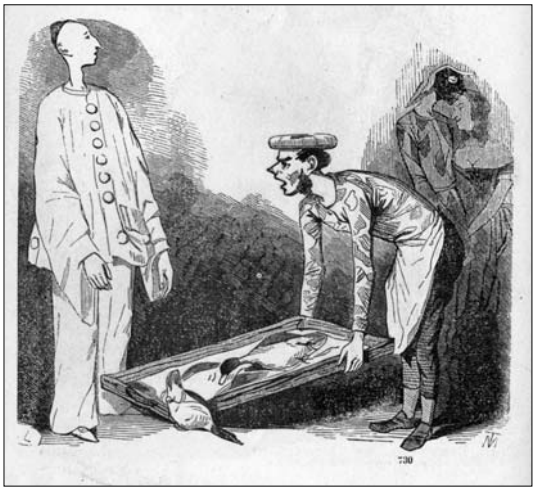
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magasin comique de Philipon to Deburau's *Satan, ou Le Pacte infernal* (*c.* 1842) and to a production of perhaps the most famous Romantic ballet, *Giselle*, in 1843.[6] In a series of words and caricatured illustrations (see alongside), the journal mocks many aspects of *Satan, ou Le Pacte infernal* (the insalubrious theatre, the meagre props, the predictable musical accompaniment, the coarseness of the lower-class performers), but not the mime.

In its treatment of *Giselle*, however, the satire on mime is insistent. Essentially, the targets of criticism are the discrepancies between the detailed plot synopsis included in the programme and the ambiguous meaning of the mime sequences: either the programme notes overstated the mime, or the performers were not miming what they were supposed to. Either way, there was a problem with the mime component of the ballet.







Deburau in *Satan, ou Le Pacte infernal*, from *Musée ou magasin comique de Philipon*, XXXIII, p. 182 (*c.* 1842). Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Character Acting

Character is an important factor contributing to Deburau's clarity. Here, he had the best of both worlds. From the waning world of the commedia dell'arte he took the concept of playing a role, Pierrot, with recurrent characteristics and types of behaviour that emerged in whatever part he played. From the wider world of theatre he took the principle of character acting, of seeking to imitate the physical and psychological manner of social types as realistically as possible.

Both these skills would have contributed to the clarity of his mime. Firstly, the Pierrot tradition primed the spectator to understand Deburau's mime in certain ways. Secondly, Deburau's character acting provided a social and psychological context in which to understand his mime. The combination of his Pierrot *role* and his ability to act the *part* is surprising and challenging, because Deburau seems to have bridged the gap between the commedia dell'arte tradition in which the spectator is never allowed to lose sight of the role, and a Molièresque tradition in which the spectator is encouraged to believe in the

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social and psychological nature of the part. There were illustrious precedents for this, notably Marivaux in the 1720s and 1730s, and Goldoni in the following two decades.

According to the French poet and writer Théodore de Banville, Deburau was good at playing his part. As a fishmonger, he would balance a basket of fish on his head with great swagger. As a cook, he prepared cabbage soup in such a way as to make the spectators salivate. In *Le Diable à quatre*, 'no one better assumed the gestures, the manners, the glasses, and the face of a cobbler better than he did', and in *Les Jolis soldats* 'he really was the dazed, astonished and naive conscript, wearing his clogs, performing his menial tasks, sweeping the straw from the parade, going about his job with studied incompetence.'[7]

These are the kinds of 'mundane occupations' that the critic and novelist Champfleury, who wrote scenarios for the Théâtre des Funambules after Deburau's death, thought were characteristic of Deburau's performances.[8] This character acting was part of the 'natural' and 'truthful' style that inspired the novelist Charles Nodier to write the first well-known review of Deburau in 1828.[9] It probably also led critics like Jules Janin to assume socio-political significance to Deburau's pantomimes (he was 'the people's Pierrot'),[10] and caused Banville to see Deburau as a 'painter of manners, a caricaturist', performing something akin to a Balzacian 'comédie humaine' of social types and behaviour.[11] Most fundamentally, however, it must have helped the spectators understand the specific meanings of Deburau's mime. His looks and gestures were not made in a socio-psychological vacuum, but were framed by the part that he played apparently so convincingly.

A Commedia dell'Arte Role

What could Deburau's spectators expect of his fixed Pierrot role? His forebears in the commedia dell'arte would seem to be the Pulcinella or Pedrolino family of roles (a combination of which probably spawned the French 'Gilles' and 'Pierrot' of the eighteenth century), not only because he shared their white costume, but because he had the cunning of a *zani* who instigated so much of the action.[12] The only other common ground, however, is a principle which ironically led to quite a gulf between Deburau's Pierrot and its forerunners: they each came up with their own distinctive permutation of existing character types. This is how commedia dell' arte characters developed over three centuries, and Deburau can be considered to have done the same.

Yet his new stage character cut Pierrot further adrift from the commedia dell'arte than usual. This was conspicuous in a number of ways. Commonly remarked on by contemporary commentators is the calm and understated manner that Deburau gave Pierrot: 'The calmness that Deburau brought the Pierrot role contrasted greatly with the exuberance, the excessive gesturing and the leaps employed by his predecessors.'[13] It was doubtless this sense of restraint which raised the tone of the traditional Pierrot and produced, according to Sand, a very different role:

> He is not gluttonous, but fond of food. Instead of being debauched, he is gracious. . . . He is not devious, he is irreverent and funny, neither is he angry, because he is reasonable, and when he administers his impressive kick in the seat of the pants, he has the impartiality of an enlightened judge and the grace of a Marquis. He is, in essence, a gentleman in every way, and he does not so much as flick a finger without the politeness and manners of an aristocrat.[14]

Sand describes the new Pierrot as if he were a more reflective version of the old, as if Pierrot had somehow intellectually matured and learnt to moderate his worst excesses, or even to turn them into relative virtues. The old vices of gluttony, debauchery, deceitfulness, and anger would have been easily recognized by earlier spectators as those (in different measures) of the commedia dell'arte *zani* Pulcinella and Harlequin, or of their eighteenth-century French counterparts, Pierrot and Gilles. Sand proposes that the new virtues are just as recognizably Deburau's.

What most struck contemporary spectators, however, was not necessarily the characteristics of Deburau's Pierrot role as such, their virtues or otherwise, but their contrasting, almost paradoxical combina-

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tion: 'credulous scepticism, servile disdain, a carefree diligence, lazy liveliness, and all these surprising contrasts'.[15] Deburau's Pierrot was one example of the 'sparkling paradoxes' which were typical of the Théâtre des Funambules in so many ways.[16] His placid manner was probably remarked upon so often in part because it contrasted so markedly with the active manner expected of a Pierrot.

Although Deburau had the capacity for cunning, he did not necessarily use it. Far from actively prompting and stirring events, he often appeared somewhat detached from the action: 'The Gilles character imagined by Déburau [*sic*] inhabits a dramatic action, passes through it all the time, but without ever seriously becoming mixed up in it.'[17] It is almost as if he 'kills time' on stage while his fellow performers get on with the action.

All in all, Deburau developed the Pierrot role into something quite unlike the Pierrot first created on the late seventeenth-century Parisian stage when the commedia dell'arte was arguably at its height of popularity in France.[18] Deburau's role also seems quite unlike the popular 'Gilles' who gradually supplanted the Pierrot role during the eighteenth century, particularly in the 'parades' of the boulevard theatres. There were superficial similarities, such as their costume, but the 'Gilles' role is set apart by its coarse vulgarity.[19] The novelty of Deburau's creation was not lost on spectators, and there was widespread agreement that his role had clear-cut and instantly recognizable characteristics.

Deburau created it at least as early as the review by Nodier in 1828 which first brought him to the attention of a wider public, and spectators still remarked upon it in the year of his death in 1846.[20] The constancy of Deburau's role will have gone some way to resolving a substantial problem with the 'language' of mime: to some degree, at least, it is not a matter of custom or convention, and does not have the relative permanence of articulated language.

The second factor contributing to his success relates to the physical nature of the theatre in which he performed throughout his career, the Théâtre des Funambules (see opposite page). This was small, so that even spectators sitting far up in the gods were close enough to the stage to discern relatively subtle gestures or changes in facial expression. In this Deburau had a great advantage over ballet dancers performing on the grandiose but remote stage of the Opéra. So, too, did he over closer rival theatres (where various forms of mime were also employed), such as the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin or the Théâtre des Variétés, which were significantly larger. As Sand remarks in the first quotation in this article, the Théâtre des Funambules was such an intimate venue that spectators and performers could watch each other closely; they were in a shared visual dialogue.

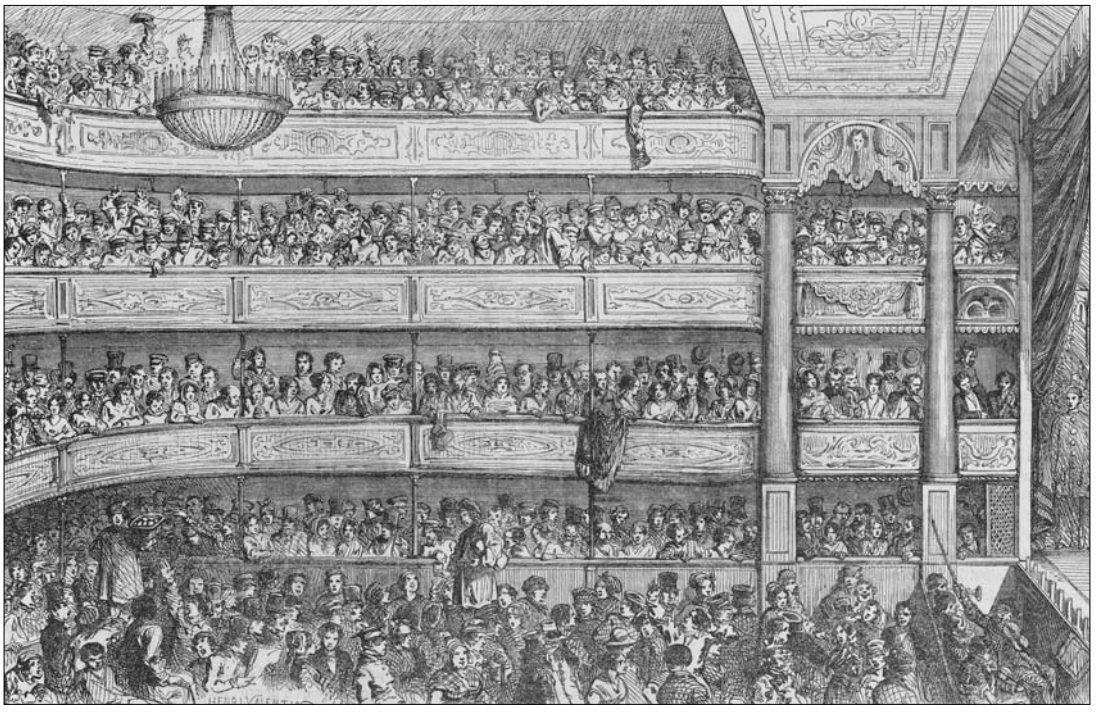
Stage and Make-up

Even though Deburau often changed out of his well-known white, voluminous Pierrot costume in order to play one part or another, he seems always to have kept his white face, black eyebrows, and (when visible) black skullcap. In the manner of commedia dell' arte performers over the centuries, no amount of dressing up quite hid from the



'Debureau' [*sic*], by Jules Poreau, 1846. Image courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

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Interior view by Henri Valentin of the Funambules Theatre, from Edmond Auguste Texier, *Tableau de Paris*, two vols (Paris: Paulin et le Chevalier, 1752–3), I, p. 121. Image courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

spectator the generic role underneath. His make-up had the effect of drawing attention to his facial features: 'This clown's [*paillasse*] precise facial expression [*physionomie*] which everyone admired so much derives solely from his apparently motionless white features [*traits enfarinés*], which contrast markedly and strangely with the slightest facial expression'.[21] The vacant, almost featureless white was a blank canvas on which even subtle expressions were more noticeable.

The prominence which Deburau sought to give to the face was probably why he wore a black skull cap rather than the white one of his immediate predecessor, Félix Chiarini ('Charigny'), or the white hat of Pierrots before him, because it served better to 'frame' his white face. It is probably also why he discarded the characteristic neck ruff, because it risked obscuring the face.[22]

Mime Technique

The third contributory factor is a form of realism which Champfleury describes without giving it a specific name. In the twentieth century, the seminal mime performer and teacher Decroux called it 'objective' or 'indicative' mime, as distinguished from 'subjective' mime'. It is a technique for creating the illusion of objects in space, 'showing' them to the spectator. If the object is an envelope, for example, then the mime will reproduce the movement of the hands necessary to give the illusion that an envelope really is being opened and that a letter is being taken out and read.[23] In contrast, subjective mime depends on indirect evocation.[24]

Decroux was critical of the limits of objective mime and thought that, after its extensive use in the nineteenth century, the art of mime needed to evolve away from it. He was probably right that it was a feature of nineteenth-century mime technique, but he does not recognize how innovative it was. There are no accounts of its use before Deburau, perhaps because it seemed pointless to go to the trouble of miming an object when one could simply use a prop.

Reflecting on the Théâtre des Funambules after Deburau's death in 1846, Champfleury at once describes Deburau's trademark tech-

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nique of objective mime and indicates that his successor, Paul Legrand, emulated him:

> What [Legrand] has preserved of his master's style is the care he takes to imitate material objects, such as the way he carries a full strongbox. There is not a moment when you forget he is carrying it, because the actor does not forget it, either; the strongbox is heavy, it makes him stumble, he can only put it down by leaning against a wall and sliding it towards the ground. Performers in other theatres overlook this truthfulness, and they are wrong to do so, because it is a necessary part of theatrical illusion.[25]

Presumably, Champfleury does not mean to suggest in this quotation that Deburau used a real strongbox, since the point he wishes to make concerns specifically the 'imitation' of material things, and he emphasizes that Deburau encouraged the spectator to 'remember' that he was carrying the strongbox. The latter point is one that every modern student of mime will recognize as crucial to the illusion of objective mime. It may be, then, that Deburau was the source, at least in France, of a nineteenth-century mime tradition of objective mime.[26]

What is especially interesting about Champfleury's example of the strongbox, however, is that it involves producing the illusion of a heavy object. Deburau managed to create the illusion of muscular effort in a manner which sounds similar to Decroux's influential 'contrepoids' or counterweight technique – 'a tangible muscular compensation for intangible imaginary forces' which produced the illusion that the performer was carrying, manipulating or otherwise interacting with a real object.[27]

There is nothing to suggest that this technique was part of a complete, codified language of movement, as it was for Decroux, nor that Deburau developed it to the levels of virtuosity that Marcel Marceau sought; it is nevertheless a sign of his technical prowess and of the importance of realism to him. It may have been the aim of cultivating the illusion of quotidian reality that spurred Deburau to devise techniques of objective mime. One can imagine that spectators found his mime all the clearer for the efforts he made at reproducing recognizable reality.

Dramatic Context

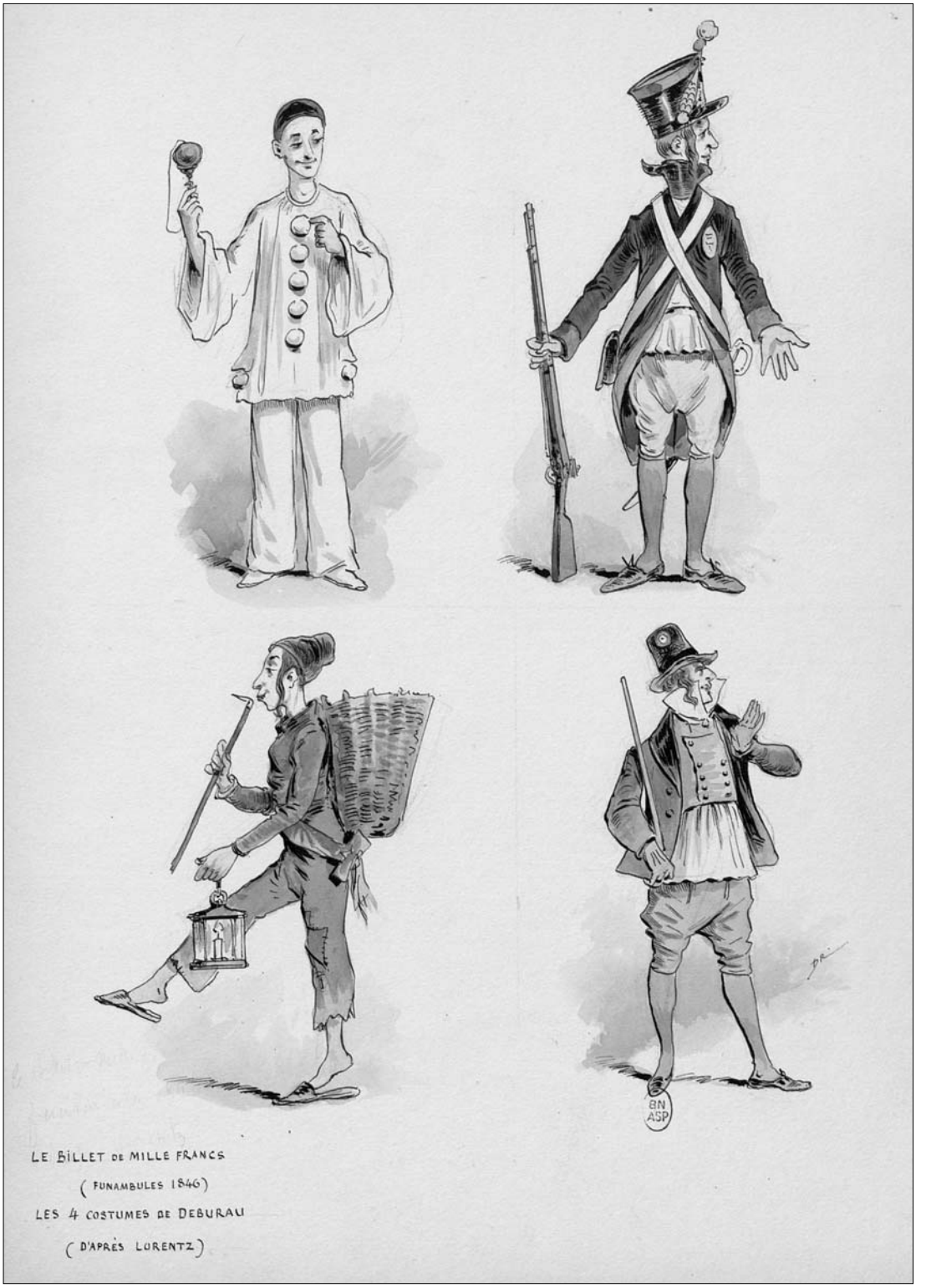
When one reads the plot synopses, as sent to the censor for approval, it becomes apparent that the mime was not alone in expressing complex meanings; part of the semantic load was carried by the dramatic context. A judicious approach to this matter seems also to have contributed to Deburau's clarity and success. Almost any of the dozens of extant synopses would demonstrate the point, but we shall take a famous example: *Le Billet de mille francs, ou Les Infortunes de Pierrot*.[28] This is the story of a poor rag seller, Pierrot, who finds the 1000-franc bank note of the title, loses it in a naive wager with two crooks, can hardly afford to settle his bill with the café owner, so joins the army. Eventually, a serjeant-at-arms ensures the money is returned to Pierrot, and the pantomime ends with Pierrot mocking the apprehended crooks.

It is a recurrent challenge for a mime artist to make visually clear what appear in a plot synopsis to be quite specific thoughts in the minds of protagonists, such as the reference here to a lovestruck protagonist: 'Edouard is alone and makes known his unhappy situation and his love for Adèle'. The spectator has somehow to understand, not only that Edouard is despondent, but the reason for his despondency: frustrated love.

The spectator is encouraged to take this meaning from the context. Pierrot the rag seller has just entered after an offstage voice (implicitly Pierrot's) has sung a popular love song. He then approaches a servant and they 'speak of their love'. Thus, the subject of love is established just before we find Edouard in despondent mood. Immediately following his dejection, the synopsis specifies that Adèle 'looks out of a window, gestures to Edouard, and throws him a letter'. If we suppose that Edouard's mimed reaction to a woman at the window throwing him a letter is delighted surprise, the spectator now has a pretty good idea why he looked dejected moments before.

Dramatic plot is sequential, and adjacent incidents can support each other semantically. According to Charles Aubert's seminal (though later) book on mime technique, it is

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Deburau's costumes for *Le Billet de mille francs*. Watercolour by Jules Renard (known as Draner), after Pauquet's drawings in Edmond Auguste Texier, *Tableau de Paris*, two vols (Paris: Paulin et le Chevalier, 1752–3) I, p. 122. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

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'the whole situation on the stage' which allows complex meanings to be suggested in mime to the spectator.[29] Aubert's book goes into great detail about how dramatic situation does, in fact, make possible the kind of expression which, written out in words, might appear to be beyond the powers of mime; he thinks this is true even of verbal tense, which has otherwise been the subject of disagreement in the history of mime.[30]

If the dramatic construction of the performance is so important to mime, however, it cannot be left to chance, and requires artful writing of the scenario. It is perhaps for this reason that most scenarios were written by the performers themselves – a fact that has become obscured in retrospect by what is admittedly a significant phenomenon in itself: that famous poets and novelists such as Gautier, Nodier, and Champfleury were so interested in this small, apparently shabby theatre that they risked their professional reputations by writing a number of pantomime scenarios for it (only Nodier did not admit as much, though many contemporaries knew it to be true).[31]

Behind these star authors, however, were a large number of lesser known author-performers (and still more authors who were anonymous). *Le Billet de mille francs* was written by Sirot, who played the part of Edouard,[32] and it is possible that Deburau wrote his own parts into the scenarios.[33] Perhaps this is what one would expect of a popular theatre whose roots were, to some extent, in the commedia dell'arte tradition.

Given how many commedia practices had been lost by this time, however, it is significant that the Théâtre des Funambules hung on to this particular one, for it allowed performers to construct dramatic situations in ways that would help rather than hinder the clarity of the mute action. This is an advantage that Deburau had over contemporary ballet dancers. In Romantic ballet, the tightness of the dramatic action was likely to suffer from the great importance attached to technically brilliant dancing. Telling the story clearly in mime was not the overriding priority that it was at the Théâtre des Funambules.

2: ROMANTICISM

Important as the above factors were, Deburau's success must also have had something to do with a receptive public. There is a sense in which he arrived on the Parisian stage just at the right time, when Romanticism was a burgeoning artistic movement. In the social and artistic commotion that was the early Romantic movement, a phenomenon such as Deburau was bound to appeal, at least to certain quarters. His Bohemian origins, his humble background,[34] his portrayal of the common man, and his initial anonymity, combined with his creative abilities, made him the epitome of what Gautier and other contemporary writers considered a Romantic artist.[35]

Nodier's trail-blazing article in 1828 should be seen in the context of the radical movement for literary and theatrical reform that he promoted when he founded his influential salon for writers and artists at the Arsenal library four years earlier. After the July Revolution of 1830, putting up with the rudimentary, not to say dirty and smelly conditions for spectators at the Théâtre des Funambules became a very practical as well as a symbolic way for the likes of Nodier, Gautier, Janin, and Sand to demonstrate their rejection of the bourgeois materialism which they thought to dominate society, politics, and the arts. It is too much for the present study to consider all the relevant contextual factors, so for the moment we shall focus in general terms on the aesthetic dimension of Romanticism.

Evocative Mime

In their rejection of a neoclassical aesthetic, members of Nodier's artistic circle (and also members of subsequent literary circles such as Hugo's Le Cénacle, Borel's Le Petit Cénacle, and Gautier's Le Doyenné) placed significant emphasis on the principle of spurring the spectator's or the reader's imagination to take leaps into imaginative territory which the author, poet, or playwright would only hint at. They insisted on

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the writer's prerogative to be visionary, however obscure or paradoxical his language might seem to some, and on the reader or spectator's prerogative to give free rein to his imagination and follow the writer's visionary gaze in whatever direction it seemed to be pointing.[36]

Relatively speaking, Victor Hugo's extended metaphors, Nodier's fantastic tales, or the metaphysical beauty of Gautier's poetry are not in the least concerned with the kind of persuasive, rhetorical literary techniques so prized by the majority of French writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They sought to provoke rather than persuade, obliging the reader or spectator to work harder in order to understand. In this context, it is easy to see why Deburau's subtle techniques of expression were so well received by those who considered that it was not for the artist to say all there was to say, only to evoke meaning.

Deburau's blink was enough, according to Champfleury, to evoke volumes of philosophy in the mind of the spectator.[37] Subtle understated gestures hinted at great tragic feeling, according to Banville.[38] Gautier's well-known review of *Le Marrrchand d'Habit* {*sic*} is full of such 'philosophical' and 'tragic' interpretations and, as such, exemplifies what seems to have gone on in the minds of many spectators.[39]

His text is even more interesting than it at first appears, since it is probably not a review at all, but a flight of Gautier's creative imagination, a new scenario which had not, at the time he wrote it, been performed. The censor only gave permission to perform a pantomime with this title on 17 October 1742, more than a month after Gautier's article was published.[40] Gautier's 'review' must have inspired someone at the Funambules to stage this pantomime scenario. Of all the works Gautier wrote for other theatres, notably for the ballet and for vaudeville, none were written quite like *Le Marrrchand d'Habit* seems to have been. If it is a 'review' of anything, it is the action played out solely in his mind. This text suggests the inspirational effect that Deburau's mime had on the receptive mind of a Romantic author.

Physical Symbolism and Muteness

It was not only the subtle nature of Deburau's expression which the likes of Gautier found so evocative of great and mysterious things, but also its very physicality. Romantic writers and critics were fascinated with Deburau and dancers for the same reason: they used their bodies to make art. Janin, perhaps Deburau's most vociferous advocate, would have said the same of mime as he said of ballet, that 'one makes a ballet with dancers, not ideas'.[41] Romantic poets were fascinated with the physicality of art and with physical symbols, sometimes leaving behind the 'tenor' of the symbol in order to explore the 'vehicle' alone. One can imagine them watching Deburau as if they were reading Hugo's Romantic poetry, impressed by the subtle evocativeness of the physical symbols which follow each other too quickly to quite get the measure of them all, as if there were untold depths lying beyond.

It is a compliment indeed for Nodier, in the article that initiated Deburau's fame, to remark that in his performance, 'there is more poetry than I can possibly express'.[42] For Nodier and many Romantic writers 'poésie' is the very essence of art. They also thought that the symbolism of physical objects was the essence of poetry, which means that, for them, Deburau's facility with physical evocation was close to the kernel of the nature of art. In this sense, there was no better time for a talented mime like Deburau to have appeared on the Paris stage than in the full flush of Romanticism.

Related to the physicality of mime is, of course, its muteness. And, as Peter Brooks remarks on the related subject of melodrama, Romanticism is about the inarticulate, or unarticulatable.[43] Hence, in melodrama, there are mute characters, or some matters which can only be expressed without words, or truths which are only revealed in non-verbal ways. Muteness is also an important dimension of the poetry of Gautier or Hugo. Gautier's outstanding collection of poems, *Emaux et Camées*, is full of mute but profoundly expressive objects. There is no greater

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silence than the 'Sphinx buried in an avalanche' in his poem 'Symphonie en blanc'.

Gautier was surely attracted by Deburau's baggy white costume, its voluminous blankness a visual counterpart to the performer's muteness. Gautier would have understood entirely why Deburau persisted in performing mute when, in the early years of the July monarchy, the theatrical laws were relaxed and he could, in fact, have played speaking parts. Silence is an aesthetic choice, because actions are sometimes more expressive than words.

Muteness and physical symbolism is probably why Gautier entitled his 'review' of *Le Marrrchand d'Habit* 'Shakspeare [*sic*] aux Funambules', because he felt that Deburau had Shakespeare's talent for evocative but mute action. He compares the scene in which Deburau steps on the head of the ghost who taunts him through the floorboards to the moment in Shakespeare's play when Hamlet retorts with an air of casual audacity to the ghost 'Well said, old mole!' (Act I, Scene v).[44] Shakespeare himself, he suggests, could not have found a better equivalent in action for Hamlet's words.

Silence and muteness is just as important to prose writers such as Balzac. For all the wordy, extended narration of his novels, the words sometimes describe very long periods of silence or muteness. His first major novel, *La Peau de chagrin*, opens with a dozen pages during which there is little speech but constant emphasis on visual experience generally and visual communication in particular. It reads, in fact, just like a long, detailed plot of a pantomime.

The previous two centuries of French neoclassicism never produced such an interest in muteness and silence as did the Romantic period. Deburau's public was waiting and willing to appreciate his mute expression, reading into it as much profundity as they might find in the poetry or prose of muteness. If we, in our modern era, still associate Pierrot with muteness, it has as much to do with Romanticism as with Deburau.[45] It was a combination of both which transformed a hitherto speaking role into the mute one we recognize today.

Romantic Tensions

Deburau was a purist in his approach to mute mime. He never spoke.[46] This appealed to Romantic critics who relished the mute expression of the unarticulatable, but it also attracted them because it was part of the kind of contrasts, contradictions, and tensions in art which they liked. Pure muteness and Deburau's vivid whiteness contrasted with the vulgarity of the other characters in what was often knockabout comedy, and contrasted more generally with the shabby nature of the theatre in which he performed.

Relative to French neoclassicism, Romanticism delighted in surprising, even shocking contrasts between the exalted and the ignoble, between dignity and familiarity, between beauty and ugliness, between ideal and reality – any contrasts, in fact, which conveyed the profound ambiguities which the Romantics thought inherent in humanity. Deburau's performances at the Théâtre des Funambules seemed to them to be bristling with such contrasts.

We have already cited Sand's remark that Deburau had the manners of a gentleman or marquis, and this in the midst of a notoriously insalubrious theatre. The same contrasts are evident in the narrower confines of Deburau's fictional world. No matter how mischievously or roguishly he behaves, he is always saved by his naive, childish virtues, and his whiteness of costume and face is an important attribute which serves to remind the spectator of this. In one plot synopsis, he is referred to as 'this whitewashed malevolence' ('*ce mal blanchi*').[47]

No matter how many tight spots he gets into, his costume always remains immaculately white, leading Banville to remark on its 'epic whiteness'.[48] The whiteness stands, therefore, for the resilience of his virtues in the face of life's woes. Thus, in *La Bouteille d'encre, ou le petit blanc*, Pierrot is imprisoned in an ink bottle by a sorcerer. When he later wants to use the ink, he finds it has gone white, so he smashes the bottle to let Pierrot out and recover his black ink.[49]

Pierrot's whiteness, its purity, bears comparison with the contemporary 'ballet

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blanc'. Deburau's role, however, is a better example of the symbolism that whiteness is said by some modern critics to have had in Romantic ballet, because it is a constant throughout his performances, whereas the whiteness of Romantic ballet has been much exaggerated, and is actually only instanced in a small number of works (most famously, *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*).[50]

The plots of Deburau's pantomimes are so full of peripeteia that contrasting situations arise frequently. Péricaud draws on one example in order to show how Romantic was the aesthetic of these pantomimes. In *Le Boeuf enragé*, the desperate lover attempts to end it all by throwing himself down a well, only for Cupid to pull him out and dress him regally. Péricaud quotes the plot synopsis: 'Cupid has changed the humble worm into a colourful butterfly', and comments: 'Eleven years later, Victor Hugo wrote that famous line: "I am but a humble worm, in love with a star." The Funambules theatre anticipated the greatest of poets.'[51]

The line of verse is from the letter which the eponymous valet of Hugo's play *Ruy Blas* writes to the Queen revealing his love for her. Péricaud contends that in its own comic way, a moment in *Le Boeuf enragé* contains within it a germ of the personal, social, and political tensions dramatized in Hugo's play, and that aesthetically they share common ground.

It is not only the peripeteia of Deburau's pantomimes which lend themselves to a Romantic interpretation of contrast and conflict, but also the staging. The plots are full of the use of what were called '*trucs*', or props which were so constructed as to change quickly from one object into a completely different object, usually without the protagonists knowing in advance. Pantomimes such as *Le Mandarin Chi-han-li, ou les Chinois de paravent* or *Pierrot errant* are full of such effects which are likely to give the spectator a constant sense of repeated contrasts.[52]

We can summarize the reasons for Deburau's success and his enduring legacy as partly his own theatrical accomplishment, partly the favourable Romantic context in which he performed. His own accomplishments are more varied than most modern critics admit. He was not only a performer of 'pantomime *sautante*', but was renowned for his subtle, psychological expression. Subtle use of the whole body was not prevented by the voluminous white costume which later became the distinctive trappings of the Pierrot. In fact, he performed without this costume about as often as he did with it. Silence was not forced on him, it was an aesthetic choice; Deburau remained silent even through the early 1830s when theatre regulations were temporarily relaxed.

Not all of his success, however, can be attributed to his personal talents. Romanticism also nourished and sustained his image. The acute interest shown by the literary elite of Paris in a wordless performer is unparalleled in the period of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French Classicism. The pre-eminent position of mime in their pantheon of the arts is incomparable to the approach taken by early modern forebears, and is an indication of the radical aesthetic changes being wrought in the Romantic period.

The affinity felt by an elite band of contemporary critics for Deburau's humble Pierrot and his working-class theatre is testimony to the political dimension of Romanticism which was never very far from its aesthetic ambitions. Part of understanding Deburau, then, is to acknowledge that, behind the cliché that his silent Pierrot mime became, lies his impressive theatrical innovation and artistry. The other part of understanding him, however, is to acknowledge that he does not deserve all the credit; it is the power of the Romantic movement which helped to launch him, and doubtless the enduring nature of Romanticism which made his form of 'pantomime blanche' a paradigm of mime well into the twentieth century.

Notes and References

1. For example, the first feature-length film in Europe was Michel Carré's *L'Enfant prodigue* in 1907, adapted from his theatrical work of the same name, which was first performed by the Cercle Funambulesque in 1890. The film starred the French mime Georges Wague, who played the role of Le Père Pierrot.

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2. Marcel Marceau acknowledges the influence of the nineteenth-century Pierrot in general and of Deburau in particular in Marcel Marceau, 'Pierrot de Montmartre', *Arts*, 19 June 1952. For these and other influences on Marceau, see Annette Lust, *From the Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond: Mimes, Actors, Pierrots, and Clowns. A Chronicle of the Many Visages of Mime in the Theatre* (Lanham, Maryland; Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2000), Ch. 10.

3. *Les Enfants du paradis*, 1945, dir. Marcel Carné.

4. George Sand, 'Deburau', in the newspaper *Le Constitutionnel*, 8 February 1846, p. 2–3. Others also remark on the silence while Deburau performed. See Louis Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules, ses mimes, ses acteurs* (Paris: Sapin, 1897), p. 309. Although the author, a noted actor and theatre director, was scarcely a contemporary of Deburau's (he was eleven when Deburau died in 1846), he cites verifiable published sources and persuasive oral informants, such as Funambules actors Vautier and Heuzy, and is usually a reliable source on Deburau.

5. Deburau's '*coup de pied*' is mentioned countless times in plot synopses, reviews. and other writing. See, for example, the newspaper *L'Indépendent*, 28 August 1834, p. 1, or the plot synopsis for *Les Trois Godiches* approved by the censor on 17 August 1842, Paris, Archives Nationales, F^{18} 1087. His '*saut de carpe*' was apparently remarkable; see the newspaper *Le Mercure des théâtres* 29 August 1844, p. 2.

6. *Musée ou Magasin comique de Philipon: contenant près de 800 dessins*, illustrated by Cham, Daumier, Dollet, Eustache. *et al*., written by Bourget, P. Borel, Cham, L. Huart *et al*., 48 issues (Paris: Chez Aubert et Cie., 1842–3). *Satan, ou le pacte infernal* is parodied in No. 23, p. 182–4, *Giselle* in No. 9, p. 65–70.

7. Banville, 'Les Petits Théâtres de Paris', in *Musée des familles; lectures du soir*, 84 vols (Paris, 1833–1900), Vol. 13 (1845–6), p. 237–47 (at p. 240–1).

8. Champfleury, *Souvenirs et portraits de jeunesse* (Paris: Dentu, 1872), p. 64–5.

9. Nodier, in the newspaper *La Pandore*, 19 July 1828; reproduced in Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 77–8.

10. Jules Janin, 'Gilles, c'est le peuple', in the newspaper *Journal des Débats*, 1 November 1830, p. 3.

11. Banville, 'Les Petits Théâtres de Paris' (1845–6), p. 39. See also similar comments on all the commedia dell'arte characters performed at the Théâtre des Funambules in the collaborative work *Deburau*, by Janin, Nerval, Gautier, and others (Paris: Aubusson et Kugelmann, 1856), p. 4–6.

12. The connections between the French roles Pierrot and Gilles and the Italian roles Pulcinella and Pedrolino are complex and uncertain. For a detailed study of Pierrot's origins, see Robert Storey, *Pierrot: a Critical History of a Mask* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), Chapter 1, 'Origins and Birth'.

13. Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 28.

14. Sand, 'Deburau', in the newspaper *Le Constitutionnel*, 8 February 1846, p. 2–3.

15. Théophile Gautier, in the newspaper *La Presse*, 31 August 1841, p. 1. See also Auguste Jal, *Salon de 1831: Ebauches critiques* (Paris: Dénain, 1831), p. 178–9.

16. See the newspaper *L'Indépendant*, 22 July 1847, p. 2.

17. Banville, 'Les Petits Théâtres de Paris' (1845–6), p. 238.

18. Compare the Pierrot in Gherardi's *Supplément du Théâtre italien, ou Nouveau Recueil des comédies et scènes françoises qui ont été joüées sur le Théâtre italien par les comédiens du Roi de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne à Paris*, 4 vols (Amsterdam: Adrian Braakman, 1697). Robert Storey is surely wrong to claim that the Pierrot in these plays is 'isolated' from his fellow masks, and that he is 'standing on the periphery of the action'. See Robert Storey, *Pierrot: a Critical History of a Mask* (1978), p. 27–8.

19. That Gilles becomes more popular relative to Pierrot in the first half of the eighteenth century is suggested by the frequency of these roles found in two anthologies of contemporary theatre. Pierrot appears only once in *Le Nouveau Théâtre italien. Ou Recueil général des comédies représentées par les Comédiens italiens ordinaires du roi*, 10 vols (Paris: Briasson, 1753), a collection of plays performed at the Théâtre italien from 1720 to 1743. By contrast, Gilles appears frequently in T. S. Guellette, ed., *Théâtre des boulevards, ou Recueil de parades*, 3 vols (Mahon [*sic*]: Gilles Langlois [*sic*], 1756). None of the Gilles roles in this collection bear much comparison with what we know of Deburau's style.

20. Nodier, *La Pandore*, 19 July 1828.

21. *Le Mercure de France*, 1836, p. 78. See also Champfleury, *Souvenirs des Funambules* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1859), p. 96: of Paul (stage name of Charles Legrand), 'His face does not have Deburau's curiously placid quality which gave every crease a meaningful sense.'

22. Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 43. Maurice Sand (George's son) makes the same observation, adding that Pierrot is a variation on the white-faced commedia dell'arte 'Pagliaccio' role. See Maurice Sand, *Masques et bouffons* (*Comédie italienne*): *Texte et dessins*, 2 vols (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1860), Vol. I, p. 284.

23. Decroux gives this example in Patrick Pezin, ed., *Étienne Decroux, Mime corporel: Textes, études et témoignages* (Saint-Jean-de-Védas: L'Entretemps Editions, 2003), p. 117.

24. Jean-Louis Barrault gives distinctive examples of each in 'Le Corps magnétique', in *Cahiers Renaud Barrault*, 99 (1979), p. 71–135 (at p. 110–11).

25. Champfleury, *Souvenirs des Funambules* (1859), p. 96.

26. Champfleury may have been referring again to objective mime when, in a later volume, he comments that Deburau 'convinced himself that he was going about daily tasks'. See Champfleury, *Souvenirs et portraits* (1872), p. 64–5.

27. Mira Felner, *Apostles of Silence: the Modern French Mimes* (London; Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), p. 57.

28. *Le Billet de mille francs*, approved by the censor on 2 March 1826 and performed shortly thereafter. The manuscript is kept in Paris in the library of the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques. Banville cites this as one of Deburau's best performances; see Banville, 'Les Petits Théâtres de Paris' (1845–6), p. 238.

29. Charles Aubert, *L'Art mimique; suivi d'un traité de la pantomime et du ballet* (Paris: E. Meuriot, 1901), p. 181.

30. Compare the disagreement in the previous century between Noverre and Angiolini. See Edward Nye, *Mime, Music, and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: the Ballet d'Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 209.

31. There is no record of Charles Nodier accepting authorship of any scenarios for the Théâtre des Funambules, but he was said to have written some of the most successful pantomimes: *Le Bœuf enragé*, *Le Songe d'or*, *Le Lutin femelle*, and *Le Philosophe sans le savoir*. These were

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attributed to Nodier by the following contemporaries: Nerval in *La Presse*, 26 October 1846; Plouvier in *La Sylphide: journal de modes, de littérature, de théâtres et de musique* (1840–85), Vol. IV (1846), p. 7; and Banville, 'Les Petits Théâtres de Paris' (1845–6), p. 238.

32. Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 468. The *Almanach des Spectacles* (Paris: Chez J.-N. Barba, 1822) lists Sirot as one of the actors at the Théâtre des Funambules.

33. Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 30.

34. See the opening chapters of the biography written by Tristan Rémy, *Jean-Gaspard Deburau* (Paris: L'Arche, 1954).

35. See, for example, Gautier's portrait of the ordinariness of the writer in his preface to *Les Jeunes-France, Romans goguenards* (Paris: E. Renduel, 1833).

36. See Paul Bénichou, *Le Sacre de l'Ecrivain: essai sur l'avènement d'un pouvoir spirituel dans la France moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), Chapters VII and IX.

37. Champfleury, *Souvenirs et portraits de jeunesse* (1872), p. 64.

38. Banville, 'Les Petits Théâtres de Paris' (1845–6), p. 14.

39. Gautier, 'Shakspeare [*sic*] aux Funambules', in *Revue de Paris*, Series 4, Vol. 9 (4 September 1842) p. 60–6.

40. *Le Marrrchand d'Habit*, Paris, Archives nationales de France, F^{18} 1087. Péricaud must be wrong to give the date of first performance as 1 September 1842. Champfleury does not date the first performance, but assumes that Gautier wrote the scenario; see Champfleury, *Souvenirs des Funambules* (1859), p. 9. For further discussion, see Robert Storey, *Pierrots on the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985): p. 40.

41. Janin in the newspaper *Le Journal des debats*, 6 December 1833, p. 1. Janin's comment anticipates the well known reply to Dégas attributed to Mallarmé: 'Ce n'est point avec des idées que l'on fait des vers. . . . C'est avec des mots.' See Paul Valéry, 'Poésie et pensée abstraite', in *Variété V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 141.

42. Nodier, *La Pandore*, 19 July 1828.

43. Peter Brooks, 'The Text of Muteness', in *New Literary History*, V, No. 3, History and Criticism: I (Spring 1974), p. 549–64 (at p. 563). See also the same author's *The Melodramatic Imagination; Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Yale University Press, 1976), Chapter 3.

44. Gautier, 'Shakspeare aux Funambules' (4 September 1842), p. 63.

45. It has less to do with silent mime in early eighteenth-century French theatre than is sometimes thought. See Thomas Leabhart, *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 3–5, who does not recognize that silent mime in these years was short-lived and did not give rise to anything one could call a practice or standard of mime.

46. According to Péricaud, there was a single exception to Deburau's silence: in *Le Marchand de salade*, he says 'Achetez salade!' in a hoarse whisper, a squeaky voice like that of a modern-day Punch character which is usually produced using a small reed-like device, or 'swazzle', in the throat. See Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 92. Janin also cites a single, but different exception, which may mean there were two occasions when Deburau broke his characteristic silence. See Janin in the newspaper *Journal des Débats*, 19 September 1868, p. 2.

47. *Souffre-douleur, Pantomime-arlequinade dans le genre anglais à grand spectacle et en douze tableaux*, approved by the censor 21 February 1840, Paris, Archives Nationales de France, F^{18} 1085.

48. Théodore de Banville, 'Deburau et les Funambules', in *L'Ame de Paris: nouveaux souvenirs* (Paris: Charpentier, 1890), p. 11–45 (at p. 38).

49. *La Bouteille d'encre, ou le petit blanc, pantomime en 3 tableaux*, in Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 49, who dates it to the 1823–4 season.

50. See Marian Smith, 'Levinson's *Sylphide* and the Danseur's Bad Reputation', in Marian Smith, ed., *La Sylphide; Paris 1832 and Beyond* (Binsted, Hampshire: Dance Books, 2012), p. 258–90 (at p. 270).

51. Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules* (1897), p. 70.

52. Paris, Archives Nationales F^{18} 1087 and F^{18}1084, approved by the censor on 12 December 1842 and 24 November 1838 respectively.

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