

## THE MAN, THE CITY AND THE BOOK

(text for the interpreter)

April 2012



I've slept half the day, and still I'm tired. I can hardly stay on my feet. Yesterday I worked all day, from eight in the morning till eleven at night. By the time I got home I was shattered. I went to bed without eating or getting undressed, and fell fast asleep.

The living-room had to be finished. The master was away, so the mistress had nothing to do but look me up and down the whole time – this strange deaf man. She thinks I'm some peculiar animal from the jungle. As soon as I reached the top of the ladder she started asking me questions, one after the other, but I can't read lips at that distance, so I had to come back down. I tried to answer, but she didn't understand me, so I simply wrote it down. She was astonished that I could write without making any mistakes. She thinks that we deaf people can't read or write, that we're retarded. The mistress may be rich, but her mind isn't. She doesn't know everything about the deaf. That doesn't bother me, although I do think she should be more modest. But she certainly has good taste; above the fireplace there's a tree of life full of flowers and birds. In the foreground there's a peacock. The walls are salmon-coloured, with a delicate flower pattern.



This is a magnificent book, written by Abbé de l'Épée – God bless him. No wonder he's famous throughout Europe. Kings and emperors come on visits to watch him teach the deaf in public. He's hearing, but he signs extremely well, and the audience are deeply moved. He's put my thoughts and feelings down on paper. No-one else has ever done that as well as he can. I'm so delighted with this book, I can hardly tell you. It's made such an impression on

me, for it's written so clearly. Just listen: "People think it's hard to teach the deaf, but that simply isn't true. So what should hearing people do? They should take the information that reaches them through their ears and pass it on to deaf people in sign. The deaf can pick up such visual information quickly. It's just like a house: what can't get in through the door can get in through the window."

(...)



And then there's this other priest. His name is Abbé Deschamps. He's also written a book and teaches the deaf. But he doesn't use sign – he's against it. He writes utter nonsense. What he says about sign language is all wrong. I've just read his book, and I felt I had to defend my language – and to give Abbé de l'Épée my support. So that's why I've written this book. It's a thin book compared with the fat books the learned gentlemen write, but I have to work for my living. At night I've got time to write, but during the day I've got the wallpaper brush in my hand. I'd like to give all my attention to writing, but my body demands sleep. A constant conflict. I fall asleep so often while I'm writing.



As a child I heard every sound.

(...)

I could hear all the sounds in the far distance. But now the sound has gone.



The mistress rules her house like a queen. Her house has many rooms.

(...)

And I have to wallpaper them all.



My father had a small piece of land, a skinny horse, a few goats and some chickens. I went to school and there I learned to write, and a bit of arithmetic, and when I came home I looked after the goats. My father didn't have a well-balanced character. He couldn't read or write, and he complained all the time, especially about taxes. The masters took everything from us, so we had nothing left but bread, water and carrots. If we ever had expensive bread and some wine, the tax collector came. The masters enjoyed legs of wild rabbit and washed them down with expensive wine. And we just kept paying taxes – even for fishing in the river or crossing the rotten wooden bridge. If the tax collector came, accompanied by four soldiers, my father got angry. He grabbed his scythe and pursued them as though he were Death himself. My father wasn't afraid of anyone, not even the devil.



Recently a friend of mine asked me how to sign the word 'envoy', but I didn't know. So I asked around, but no-one could tell me. And I couldn't think of a single sign either. An envoy – what is that exactly? A king summons a lord. And the lord goes to see another king.



So cold, such a fever, such pain everywhere. Nightmares. The fever receded. I opened my eyes. It was all so quiet. I looked at the beams on the ceiling, at the sun shining through the window onto the breeches hanging over the chair. I tried to stand up, but I was too weak. My jaw paralysed, my arms so thin, my ribcage like a washboard.

The door opened and there was mother, but I couldn't hear the hinges creak. She spoke to me, but I couldn't understand her. She laid her cool hand on my forehead.



I can write whole pages about just one sign. I've got complete chapters in my head. I'd like to put my thoughts on paper, but I don't have the time or money. I observe, I remember and I think. And I'd like to express myself – but hearing people don't understand my signs, and if I speak to them, they can't understand me either. My thoughts grow and grow until my head feels like it's bursting.



Mother was always so happy, but then she became gloomy. Her face shrank like a forgotten apple in the orchard. Father preferred not to look at me. Father and mother were constantly quarrelling. And at school they didn't want me any more, for I was deaf-mute. At home my father sent me away to look after the goats.

The priest at the church gave me a book, and I found somewhere shady at the foot of a tree. I sat reading the book while the goats grazed.



I never had any friends. Books were my friends. I never liked people, but I did like books. At home we never had books, except my father's bible – and no-one was allowed to touch it, not even my mother.

The priest at the church had shelves full of books – about history, nature, shipping, astronomy, the Ancient Romans and Greeks. And a whole row of books about the lives of the saints, who suffered so much and died so cruelly. And I read all those books over and over again.



I'm sitting reading a book, when suddenly a stone hits my forehead. The goats are grazing. I can't see anyone. The corn waves in the distance.



All the objects in the world have a sign inside them. They're pregnant with signs.

Look at the sky and see the bird.

(...)



I can see the priest. He doesn't look at me, but at something behind me. The line of children stops and fans out into a semicircle, a round mirror. The priest comes and stands next to me, his face white and his jaws clenched.

And the children run off like a pack of frightened dogs.



Sign language is graphic and visual. Feelings are painted in the air, in gentle pastel hues or in bright colours. No other language is so suitable for planting feelings in the soul. Love. Hatred. Look at my body – it sculpts feelings.

(...)



As a child I couldn't sign. Who was there to teach me? There were no other deaf people in the village or the valley. I had no mirror image, except the distorting mirrors of the children in my village. When father wasn't looking, my mother made signs she had invented by herself. My father knew just one sign, that was all. If I thought no-one was looking, I made signs of my own –

not sign language, but disconnected signs.



Deaf children really can learn a language: sign language. It's easy and self-evident. Nature has given us deaf people language. We can't hear, but we can see better than anyone. We don't get distracted by sound. We look at the world, and ourselves. If deaf children are forbidden to use signs, they turn into wild animals.



And then one summer's day in May – I was sixteen – I met that deaf man.  
(...)

For years I'd been waiting for a man like him, and finally I met him.

He got down from the coachman's seat, with his travelling bag in his hand. He invited me to sit down by the riverside. He produced a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread. He cut a slice of bread and gave it to me. 'Bread', he signed. (...) And this is the sign for wine. That afternoon we signed for hours. I couldn't get enough of it. The man produced a piece of paper and wrote something down. 'If you ever come to Paris, show someone this paper. Then they'll take you to a gentleman's house, where I work.'

We said goodbye. Then, to my great regret, he vanished into the distance. I took the piece of paper home with me. I hid it under the mattress, and dreamed of his signing.



It's so busy outdoors. It's crawling with people, like on a Sunday. There are old people sitting in the gardens round the palace, in the shade of the

trees. The ladies are chatting and showing off their new hats and dresses. Children are playing with paper boats by the pond. I'd been sitting there so quietly, drinking a glass of lemonade. But over there, by the coffee houses, people are crowding round the doors and windows to catch a glimpse of a man who's standing on a table and holding a speech. And the people are cheering! The bill-posters are busy. And the people are reading the broadsheets on the walls – Paris is full of them. And there are more and more Swiss soldiers keeping an eye on things.



The priest wanted to give me his support. And there we sat: father, mother and I. I want to go to Paris, I said. Father laughed. Paris? What do you expect to do there? Work, I said. And what kind of work do you think you're capable of? Cabinet-making, I said. What did he say? father asked. He doesn't understand, I said, I'll write it down: cabinet-making, picture-framing, wallpapering, bookbinding. I gave the piece of paper to the priest so that he could read it aloud, but my father grabbed it from him and tore it to pieces. Tell him that if he goes to Paris he can look for work till the cows come home. The workhouse – that's where he'll end up! Tell him that. Don't bother, I said, I know what he meant.

Mother seemed to be praying. She was staring at her hands. There was no expression on her face. No mockery, no sadness, no surprise, no hatred, no love. Nothing at all.

The priest gave me a letter and some money so that I could travel to Paris with someone from the town. And so I left with just the clothes on my body and the shoes on my feet. I'd gone some way when my mother ran up, out of breath. We sat down. She had an apple, some carrots and bacon tied up in a cloth. She gave them to me. Then she kissed me farewell, and returned home without looking back. And I walked and I walked and I walked.



I can still remember it clearly – my first day in Paris! Such chaos! All those lines and rows of carriages. It was wonderful to watch the coachmen coping with it all. And they were so good at it. Being deaf, I needed eyes in the back of my head to make sure I wasn't run over. They say Paris is noisy, with all those wheels rumbling over the cobblestones the whole time, day and night. But it doesn't bother me. And Paris stinks. That's something I'm not used to. My village smells of blossom and flowers, but the stench in Paris is damp – it blocks your nose and fills your stomach. When it rains the water rises in the streets, so that the ladies want the gentlemen to carry them on their backs.

And the light's very different. The houses are close together. If I open my window I can easily touch the other side of the street. The houses are four or five storeys tall, and there's only a narrow strip of sky at the top, so the sun never shines into the alleyways. It's damp. The walls are black with smoke, and the streets are filthy. There are various cities in the world, including Paris. Here. This damp, dark cave I live in. It's beyond belief.

(...)



Hearing – what's that? I don't know, I've forgotten. Feeling – that I can understand! And seeing – I can understand that too!



And there's so much to see. There are so many people living in the streets, and off the streets. The police have banned the little wooden shops, but you're allowed to build up stalls in the morning, sell things, then take them down again in the evening. And there's so much on sale in the market.

(...)

And how are all those goods transported?

(...)

And then there are the performers.

(...)

At the corner of the street is the public scribe, who writes letters for people who can't read or write – in return for payment. And people are writing lots of letters nowadays – letters to the king, who hunts and stuffs himself with food and is completely out of touch with his people. The price of bread keeps rising. Why doesn't the king do anything about it? people write. The price of bread must come down! Mothers can no longer afford to buy bread, and so they are forced to abandon their children. And that's cruel.

(...)

This loaf of bread costs me a week's wages!



I soon found a room, and then I went out looking for work – day after day. One day I walked through a gateway and found myself in a courtyard with lots of beautifully dressed women. They looked at me and winked. I was so shy I didn't dare talk to them, and I soon left. I happened to meet a deaf friend, and I told him the story. He laughed. Those women seduce men, he said. Surely not, I said, they looked just like princesses. Look, he said, here in Paris the whores look just like queens, and the real queen looks like a whore. The whole world's upside down!

(...)



Aha, the word 'envoy', which I didn't know the sign for! Now I do know it: envoy! I only learned sign language when I came to Paris – from my friend. He's of Italian descent, and was born deaf. And he works for high-born families. He can't read or write, but he certainly knows how to sign. Every week I learn new signs from him: man, woman, nobility, gentry, merchant, employer.



I've got a really good employer. He takes me just as I am, and he gives me the respect I deserve. He's familiar with the work of Abbé de l'Épée, because he used to bind his books. He's seen how well the deaf work, and so he's helped some of them to find work – as bookbinders, wallpaper printers and wallpaperers. There's plenty of work. So I won't have to go to the workhouse – the workhouse full of lunatics, old people and people with the plague. The lunatics think of me as one of them. And the old, toothless people use their hands like forks. Conditions in the workhouse are fine, the food is good and the beds are soft – but even so it's no good. The lunatics don't respect each other, and don't respect me – I don't respect them either – and I've even lost my own self-respect. I've been there twice, but never again! Thank God for my good employer and my deaf friends, with whom I can enjoy signing and feel more at home than I ever did with my own family.



How did sign language first develop? People say Abbé de l'Épée invented it, but that isn't true. He saw the deaf signing in their natural language. He thinks of himself as a traveller in a strange land. He absorbed language, learnt it and then used it to teach people. So he didn't invent sign language. The proof is that there are deaf people who can't read or write and yet are fluent in sign language, like my friend.

We sign together, invent new signs and copy them from each other. We combine signs, so that the language expands. We sign about everything, about what's been happening in Paris, France and the whole world. We sign quickly, neatly and accurately, just as hearing people speak. Our facial expression is like their intonation. We sign as fast as the wind.



The mistress had a stick in her hand, and I asked her what it was

made of. She made a sign for 'very big'. A tree, I asked – a rock? Do you mean it's made of stone? Oh, ivory, I tried. A deaf friend happened to be present. He looked closely at the stick, then made the signs for 'very big' and 'fish', so that I understood the stick was made of whalebone.



I visited Abbé de l'Épée in the chapel where he teaches the deaf. He explains all kinds of things to them in sign language, including the structure of French, Spanish, Italian and Latin. And he also teaches them in sign how to write, read, speak and lip-read. There are princes, princesses, kings and emperors in the audience, but the deaf people don't feel uncomfortable. They're relaxed, proud and full of confidence. Abbé de l'Épée invites the audience to ask questions, which the deaf people answer without any difficulty, even questions that are meant to strike them dumb – for example, 'What is music?'

There's a big difference between Abbé de l'Épée and Abbé Deschamps. Abbé Deschamps wants to teach the deaf to speak, and he has his own ideas about that.

(...)

So that's what his deaf pupils have to do. They don't understand why, and they don't learn a thing. They lose confidence and patience. It's easier to teach dogs to dance than teach the deaf to speak by sticking fingers down their throats. I'm in favour of sign language. If deaf people can also learn to read and write, that's a good thing. But Deschamps wants to get rid of sign. Why? I'm sure deaf people can learn to read and write, as long as it's explained to them in sign. They can absorb such information quickly.



I can't speak. I hate speaking!  
I can't speak the way hearing people can. My mouth is paralysed. My teeth have gone. The air evaporates. I can't speak, and I don't want to. Just try speaking with a paralysed jaw. It's impossible! I want wine. I don't want to think, I want

to dream. I don't want to know, I want to forget. I don't want a past or a future, I want the present!



Abbé Deschamps says sign language is no good, because you can't sign in the dark. So he says sign language is useless. He wants to help us deaf people. Just look how.

(...)

And here's another idea of his.

(...)

Wonderful ideas, reverend. My compliments! How come it didn't occur to us deaf people before? Such a shame!

Deschamps wonders how we deaf people communicate in the dark. So why didn't he ask us? I could have told him. Just look – with signs.

(...)

Simply and logically.

Look at this sign. And now this one. Did you see any difference? No, it's the same sign. Now, once again.

Sky. God.

Did you see any difference? Yes, you did! Deschamps claims that we deaf people can't understand the difference between the sky and God, because he only looks at our hands and not at our faces. Our hands make the same sign, but the facial expression is different. For 'sky' our faces are neutral, but for 'God' it's as if we are worshipping. Sign language is precise and subtle, but Deschamps fails to see our facial expression. So it isn't our language that's poor – it's the abbé's sight!



Her name is Fleur. Her face is as lovely as a flower. Her eyes are like cornflowers, and the blushes on her cheeks are as red as poppies. I was walking across the Pont Neuf when I saw her, with a big basket of oranges on her hip. She saw me staring at her and she nudged a woman next to her. Oh madam, my apologies, I signed, I've seen many beautiful women, but none as beautiful

as you. Are you deaf? she asked.

Yes. She threw me an orange, which I caught in my hat. Oh, that was clever, she said. What's your name? Pierre. And yours? Fleur.



There are hordes of people coming past with torches. What on earth's going on?



And there amid the tumult is Abbé de l'Epée. He's tired and sick. But he won't use the firewood, for he wants to save money for the education of deaf children. He's confined to his bed, and they say it'll be his deathbed.



There's such turmoil outside. The atmosphere is oppressive. It feels to me as if people are about to explode. They're fighting and pushing and pulling. They've barricaded the street at both ends with whatever they could find, to stop the soldiers. The window of the bakery has been smashed, and people are grabbing loaves off the shelves. Mothers are seizing hold of the bags of flour like lionesses, and sticking their knives into them as if they're stabbing the king himself to death. I've a feeling the crowd will storm the Corn Exchange or the Bastille – or else they'll go to the palace and drag the king outside. He's lost his power. The way things are going, he'll lose his head.



If Abbé de l'Epée dies, his body will decay, but his ideas will survive. I'll personally make sure his ideas spread.



Down with oppression!



Down with the king!



Down with Abbé Deschamps!



*Liberté, égalité, fraternité!*