

Extrait du Rhuthmos

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A. From Rhuthmós to Rhythm - 7th-4th centuries BC

- Recherches

- Vers un nouveau paradigme scientifique ?
- Sur le concept de rythme - Nouvel article

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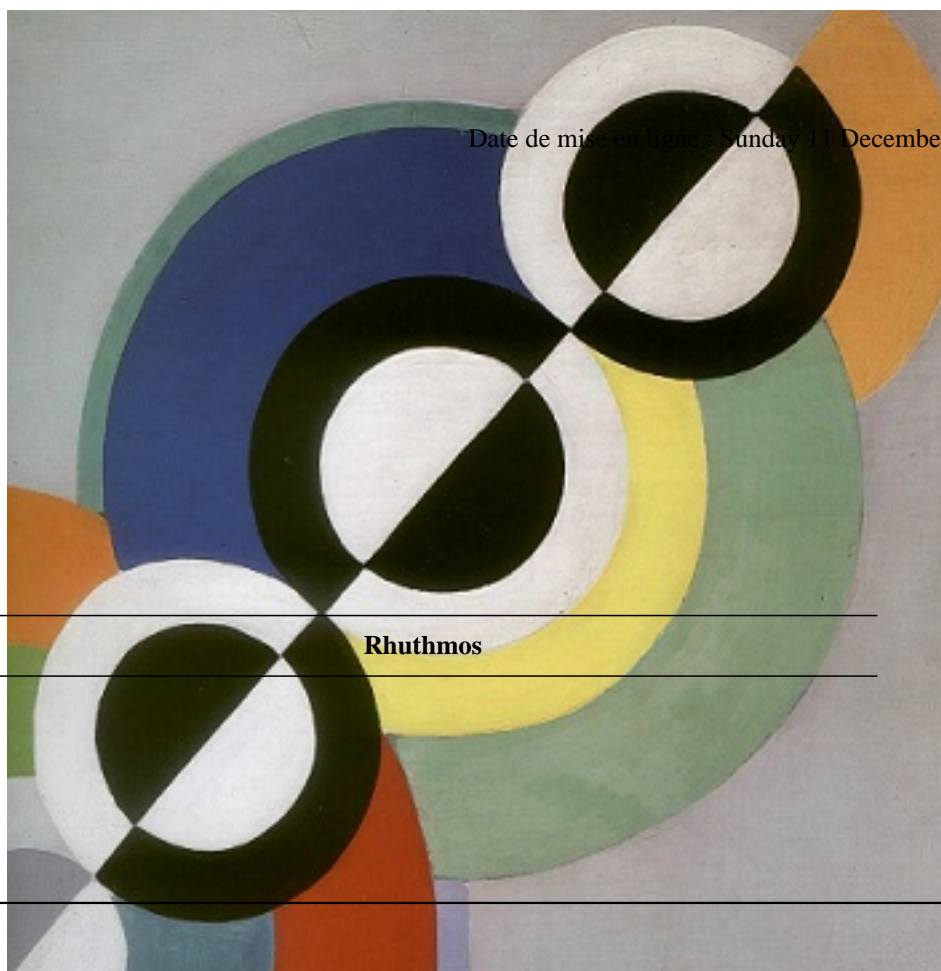


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Before entering in the obscure forest of the history of rhythm since the 18th century, we need to know a few things concerning its ancient past. Therefore I would like to start our journey by presenting the main conclusions concerning the origin of the term rhythm reached more than 60 years ago by Benveniste in an article that has not attracted enough attention in English speaking countries, but that still sheds a precious light on this matter (Benveniste, 1st ed. 1951, 1966; for a recent interesting if not fully convincing discussion, see Martin, 2006). Before Plato gave to the word *rhuthmós* the meaning it has had ever since, its meaning was quite different.

Rhuthmós vs Skhêma - Temporary Disposition vs Fixed Shape

Benveniste's analysis shows that the word ῥυθμός (*rhuthmós*) was commonly used from the 7th to the 4th century in Greek lyric and tragic poetry, as well as in prose, and that it became a technical term only with the ancient Ionian philosophers, especially the creators of atomism, Leucippus (5th cent. BC) and Democritus (c. 460-c. 370 BC).

We find the word ῥυθμός especially in the Ionian authors and the lyric and tragic poetry and in the Attica prose, especially among philosophers. We best understand the specific meaning [*valeur*] of ῥυθμός in the vocabulary of ancient Ionian philosophers, especially in the creators of atomism, Leucippus and Democritus. These philosophers have made ῥυθμός, (ῥυθμῶδες), a technical term, one of the keywords of their doctrine. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 328, my trans.)

From all identified uses of the word *rhuthmós* among lyric poets, tragedians and philosophers, Benveniste concludes that it meant, at least since the 7th century (p. 330), "form" or "shape," ἄσκημα (*skhêma*). Related verbs as ῥυθμίζω, ῥυθμῶδες (*rhusmô, metarrusmô, metarrusmizô*) meant identically "to shape" or "to transform, physically or morally sth/sb."

There is no variation, no ambiguity in the meaning that Democritus gives to ῥυθμός which is always "form," seen either as the distinctive shape or the characteristic arrangement of the parts in a whole. Once this point established, one has no difficulty to confirm it with all ancient examples. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 328, my trans.)

But Benveniste notes that there were in ancient Greek several other terms meaning "form" and that *rhuthmós* should in some way differ from them. To show that, he switches from his survey of lexical uses to morphology and etymology, a move that allows him to introduce a revolutionary idea: The term-ending -(,)ῥυθμός "does not designate the

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fulfillment of the notion but the particular modality of its fulfillment."

Once this meaning established, we can and must be more specific. In Greek, there are other expressions meaning "form." $\epsilon\zeta\alpha\epsilon\iota$, $\mu\epsilon\lambda\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$, etc. from which $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ must in some way differ, more clearly anyway than what our [first] translation indicates. The structure of the word $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ must be interrogated. We can now usefully return to the etymology [...] The term-ending $-\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ merits attention for the special sense that it gives to "abstract" words. It does not designate the fulfillment of the notion but the particular modality of its fulfillment, as it presents itself to the eyes. For example, $\delta\acute{\alpha}\zeta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ is the fact of dancing, $\alpha\delta\acute{\alpha}\zeta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ is the one particular dance observed in its full development. [...] $\sigma\tau\acute{\alpha}\zeta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ is the fact of standing/setting [*de se tenir*], $\sigma\tau\acute{\alpha}\zeta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ the way of standing/setting. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 332, my trans.)

In other words Benveniste does not elaborate this point but he makes it quite obvious *rhuthmós* is a concept of form that is completely opposite to Plato's. A *rhuthmós* is not a "Form," an "Idea," an $\mu\epsilon\lambda\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ (*eîdos*), but a shape "as it presents itself to the eyes" of the observer. Far from being outer-worldly, it belongs to the phenomenal world. Moreover, it is not fixed, immobile, and eternal, it has a life of its own. It does not "designate the fulfillment of [a] notion but the particular modality of its fulfillment." That is the reason why it is "appropriate for the *pattern* of a fluid element" and commonly denotes an "improvised, temporary, changeable form."

When the Greek authors explain $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ by $\epsilon\zeta\alpha\epsilon\iota$, when we ourselves translate it by "form," it is in both cases an approximation. Between $\epsilon\zeta\alpha\epsilon\iota$ and $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$, there is a difference: $\epsilon\zeta\alpha\epsilon\iota$ [...] is defined as a fixed, achieved "form," set somewhat like an object. Instead $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$, according to its various contexts, refers to the shape in the moment it is assumed by something moving, mobile, fluid, the shape of something that has no organic consistency: it is appropriate for the *pattern* [in English] of a fluid element, an arbitrarily shaped letter, a peplos that one arranges at its discretion, a special disposition of the character or mood. It is the improvised, temporary, changeable form. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 333, my trans.)

Benveniste, still without referring directly to Platonic Forms, emphasizes the philosophical significance of the term *rhuthmós*. It actually designated the most common concept of form in the Ionian school, i.e. before Plato imposed his own. In this sense, it still remains a very powerful tool against Idealism.

But $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ is the essential predicate of nature and things in the Ionian philosophy since Heraclitus, and Democritus thought that, while being produced by atoms, only their different arrangements produce the differences between shapes and between objects. One can then understand that $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$, literally meaning "to flow in a particular way," was the most appropriate term to describe "dispositions" or "configurations" without fixity nor natural necessity and resulting from an arrangement always subject to change. The choice of a word derived from $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\theta\mu\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ to express this specific modality of the "form" of things is characteristic of the philosophy which inspires it; it is a representation of the universe in which the particular configurations of the moving [*du mouvant*] are defined as "flowings." [*fluements*] (Benveniste, 1966, p. 333, my trans.)

Before Plato, *rhuthmós* meant either "a temporary disposition of something flowing," or more deeply, according to Benveniste's morphological analysis, "a particular way of flowing" or "a particular modality of the fulfillment of an

action."

Rhuthmós as *Métron* - From Temporary Disposition and Way of Flowing to Ordered Sequence

The last pages of the article are dedicated to the question of how these particular concepts of form have been forgotten. And the answer is quite simple: it is Plato who is responsible for the semantic shift of the term *rhuthmós* towards its actual meaning as a collateral development of that of Form which somehow *replaced it*.

The problem is to understand the conditions that made the word ῥυθμός able to express what we mean by "rhythm." [...] The modern meaning of "rhythm," which does exist in Greek, results **a priori** from a secondary specialization, since the meaning of "form" is the only one attested until the middle of the 5th century. This development is in fact a creation to which we can assign a date if not, at least, one particular occasion. It was Plato who specified the concept of "rhythm" and gave to it its new meaning by delimiting the traditional semantic value of ῥυθμός. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 334, my trans.)

In the *Symposium* (c. 385-370 BC), Plato notes, without being very specific about the nature of those elements, that "rhythm is produced by fast and slow, which in the beginning were at variance but later came to agree," just like harmony is "consonance" or "kind of agreement" between sounds that ceased to vary.

Music also, as is plain to any the least curious observer, is in the same sort of case: perhaps Heracleitus intends as much by those perplexing words, "The One at variance with itself is drawn together, like harmony of bow or lyre." Now it is perfectly absurd to speak of a harmony at variance, or as formed from things still varying. Perhaps he meant, however, that from the grave and acute which were varying before, but which afterwards came to agreement, the harmony was by musical art created. For surely there can be no harmony of acute and grave while still at variance: harmony is consonance, and consonance is a kind of agreement; and agreement of things varying, so long as they are at variance, is impossible. On the other hand, when a thing varies with no disability of agreement, then it may be harmonized; just as rhythm is produced by fast and slow, which in the beginning were at variance but later came to agree. In all these cases the agreement is brought about by music which, like medicine in the former instance, introduces a mutual love and unanimity. (*Symposium*, 187a-c, transl. Harold N. Fowler)

Then Benveniste points out that in the *Philebus* (360-347 BC), Socrates emphasizes the significance of intervals (ἰσότητες - *diastémata*) whose characters, differences and combinations one must know if he wants to seriously study music. These combinations have been called "harmonies" (ἁρμονίαι - *harmonías*) by "our fathers." But there are other similar qualities, inherent this time in the *movements of the body*, which are "measured by numbers" and "must be called rhythms and measures."

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Socrates But when you have learned what sounds are high and what low, and the number and nature of the intervals and their limits or proportions, and the systems compounded out of them, which our fathers discovered, and have handed down to us who are their descendants under the name of harmonies; and the corresponding effects in the movements of the body, which they say are measured by numbers and must be called rhythms and measures (ῥυθμὸς καὶ μέτρα); [...] when you have thus grasped the facts, you have become a musician. (*Philebus*, 17c-e, transl. Benjamin Jowett and Harold N. Fowler)

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Finally in the *Laws* (360-347 BC), Plato explains that young men are fiery but that they "attain a sense of order" ($\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ - *táxis*), which is a human privilege. The "order of motion" is called "rhythm," while the "order of voice" is termed "harmony."

Athenian At the commencement of our discourse we said, if we recollect, that since all young creatures are by nature fiery, they are unable to keep still either body or voice, but are always crying and leaping in disorderly fashion; we said also that none of the other creatures attains a sense of order, bodily and vocal, and that this is possessed by man alone; and that the order of motion is called "rhythm," ($\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ - *táxis*) (while the order of voice (in which acute and grave are blended together) is termed "harmony," and to the combination of these two the name "choristry" is given. We stated also that the gods, in pity for us, have granted to us as fellow-choristers and choir-leaders Apollo and the Muses, besides whom we mentioned, if we recollect, a third, Dionysus. (*Laws*, 664a-665a, trans. R.G. Bury)

Thus the new meaning of rhythm emerged in the Platonic dialogues around the middle of the 4th century. The *rhuthmós* which was previously considered as an ephemeral disposition of something varying, an "improvised, temporary, changeable form," or a "way of flowing," became "an ordered sequence of movements" subject to "numbering" and "divided into alternate times." It was entirely subjugated by the *métron*, i.e. "that by which anything is measured," be it a rule, a measure of content, of size, a due measure or a limit (Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*). Moreover, these natural forms which were knowable through the senses, i.e. scientific observation, would now consist of more or less perfect reflections of transcendent Forms and were to be judged accordingly through the intellect. Democritean forms would be erased for the centuries to come by Platonic Forms.

We see how this definition still respect the traditional meaning, but also how it transforms it. Plato still uses $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ in the sense of "distinctive shape, arrangement, proportion." He innovates by applying it to the form of the movement that the human body performs in dance, and to the figures executed by this movement. The decisive factor is there: in the notion of a corporal $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ associated with the $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ and subject to the law of numbers: the "form" is now determined by a "measure" and subject to an order. This is the new meaning of $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$: the "disposition" (literal sense) is made by Plato an ordered sequence of slow and fast movements, like "harmony" results from the alternation of acute and grave. And the order in movement, the whole process of the harmonious arrangement of body attitudes combined with a meter, is now called $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 334-335, my trans.)

The Platonic innovation radically changes the meaning of the term *rhuthmós* and endows it with the universalizing power of numbers and mathematics. Since everything that has a certain duration can be regularly organized in a succession of alternate times, the rhythmic model which is fundamentally a metric model becomes applicable to any phenomenon developing in time.

One can now talk about the "rhythm" of a dance, a walk, a song, a diction, a work, anything that requires a continuous activity divided by the meter into alternate times. The notion of rhythm is now fixed. From $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ as spatial configuration defined by the arrangement and proportion of distinctive elements, one reaches the "rhythm" as configuration of movements ordered in time [*la durée*] [...], "any rhythm is measured by a defined movement." (Aristotle, *Probl.* 882b 2) (Benveniste, 1966, p. 335, my trans.)

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With Plato begins "this vast unification of man and nature under a consideration of 'times,' intervals and identical returns" by which Benveniste started his article. A cosmic and mathematical rhythmic paradigm, one of the most solid support of Idealism, is now under way and will develop with architects as Vitruvius (c. 80-70 BC-c. 15 BC), neo-Platonic philosophers as Plotinus (206-270 AD) or Boethius (480-524 AD) or more modern thinkers as Novalis, Schelling, Steiner, and many others.

This vast unification of man and nature under a consideration for "times," intervals and identical returns, was allowed by the use of the very word, the generalization in the vocabulary of modern Western thought of the term *rhythm* which, through Latin, derives from the Greek. (Benveniste, 1966, p. 325, my trans.)

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We have reached our first significant conclusion. Benveniste's philological analysis suggests: 1. that the term *rhuthmós* designated in the 5th century the various temporary forms taken by the ever running Heraclitean world flow whether conceived as flow of atoms or not as they present themselves to the eyes of the observer; 2. that the atomist philosophers made it, for the first time, one of the most important concepts to explain nature on a materialistic and pre-empiricist ground; 3. that *rhuthmós* commonly meant "temporary disposition of something flowing," but also, implicitly, due to its morphology, "particular way of flowing or fulfilling an action"; 4. that it never denoted the order of a sequence of time but either an ephemeral form of something due to change, an instantaneous time-stop, or, when it involved a duration, a form that was itself changing during its *per-formance*; 5. that the sub-concepts measure, number, periodicity, and the idea that a *rhuthmós* should be known by looking for its essence, its Form, were introduced in the definition of rhythm only by Plato during the first half of the 4th century; 6. that the Platonic conception of rhythm obfuscated the previous one and made it very difficult to recover; 7. that it largely ruled over Western cultural history up to present and was responsible for the tremendous success of idealist and sometimes irrational views equating man with nature.

What I want to do in this book is to use these ancient semantic values as critical tools to deconstruct the Platonic domination upon the history of rhythm, but above all to identify the resurgences and new developments of the pre-Platonic *idea of rhuthmos* which I will transliterate without its original accentuation to suggest that, in these instances, I will not talk about the ancient Greek *term* but about the *question* that Ionian philosophers were pointing at while using it. By doing so, I hope to be able to show that the history of rhythm, although dominated by the idealist Platonic conceit, offers also a bunch of original propositions which still are of the greatest interest to us.

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