

Extrait du Rhuthmos

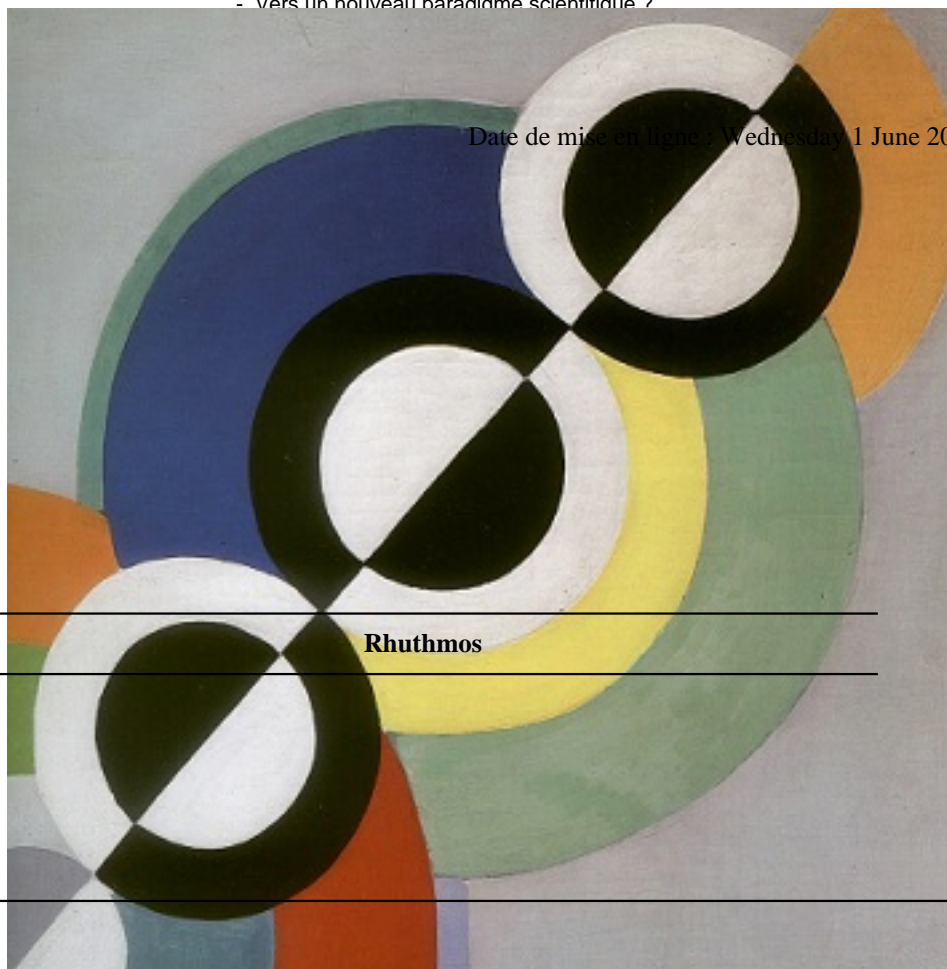
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Rhuthmology as Poetics and Historical Anthropology (1870-1874)

- Recherches

- Vers un nouveau paradigme scientifique ?

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Rhuthmos

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Rhuthmology as Poetics and Historical Anthropology (1870-1874)

One of the unpublished sketches of *The Birth of the Tragedy* entitled *The Dionysian Conception of the World* (1870) ends up with a quite interesting theory of language, which anticipates some important features of discourse and poem theory developed in the second half of the 20th century (Benveniste, 1966, 1974; Meschonnic, 1982). In order to accurately describe the Dionysian forms of expression, Nietzsche feels the imperative need to get beyond the traditional semiotic definition of language, which dates back to Locke and before to the Greeks.

Nietzsche starts with an appetizing remark: language includes many "images of the representations which have become clear through the symbolism of gesture" and that seem to express "the rhythmic" of the will itself. The quite common rhythmic images which we find in our languages are like symptoms of deeper rhythmic "dynamics." They help us to "recognize the degree of the intensifications of the Will, the varying quantity of pleasure and displeasure."

Everything we can say to characterize the various feelings of displeasure are images of the representations which have become clear through the symbolism of gesture, as when we speak, for example, about pain as something which "beats, aches, twitches, stabs, cuts, bites, or tickles." These seem to express certain "frequencies" of the Will in short, to use the language of musical sound, they express [*the rhythmic*] [*kurz in der Symbolik der Tonsprache die Rhythmik*]. In the *dynamics* of musical sound we recognize the degree of the intensifications of the Will, the varying quantity of pleasure and displeasure. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speirs, my mod.)

But because Nietzsche still shares the Schopenhauerian metaphysical viewpoint, the Will "conceals itself, without allowing itself to be expressed symbolically." Therefore "rhythmic and dynamics" are still external aspects of the Will "as it reveals itself in symbols," whereas "harmony is the symbol of the pure essence of the Will." Rhythm is taken into account not *per se* but only as symbolic images of rhythmic gestures. Its importance in language is here both recognized and minimized in favor of a supremacy of sheer harmony from which it is entirely disconnected. Language is still defined as a series of semiotic means to communicate separate from any musical means able to suggest the deepest emotions.

Whereas [rhythmic] and dynamics [*die Rhythmik und die Dynamik*] are still to a certain extent the external aspect of the Will as it reveals itself in symbols, whereas they still almost have something of the type "phenomenon" about them, harmony is the symbol of the pure essence of the Will. It also includes "gestural language," mimics done with the hands, the arms, the face, actually the whole body. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speirs, my mod.)

The same disconnection characterizes the "gestures" which are performed in the "Dionysiac work of art." Gesture symbolism, especially the gestures of dance, certainly allow the performer to express himself "not as an individual

but as the *human species*," but only the simultaneous musical performance does finally express "the genius of existence itself, the Will." Gesture and sound are clearly separate semiotic means of communication.

When he uses gesture man remains within the limits of the species, which is to say, within the limits of the phenomenal world; when he produces musical sound, however, he dissolves the phenomenal world, as it were, into its original unity; the world of Maya disappears before the magic of music. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speir)

But Nietzsche does not stop here. He singles out first the "shout" as an exceptional semiotic token in which experience of the will, viz. feeling, and sound tightly coincide.

When does natural man attain to the symbolism of musical sound? [...] Above all, in the supreme states of pleasure and displeasure experienced by the will, as a will which rejoices or a will which is frightened to death, in short *in the intoxication of feeling*: in the *shout*. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speir)

Then he extends this apparently exceptional match to the whole language. As a matter of fact, every expression of the will, "every gesture," finds a sound capable to convey it.

But the gentler stirrings of the will, too, have their symbols in sound; in general, there is a sound to parallel every gesture. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speir)

The conclusion is extraordinary: language is not only made out of pieces of information supported by sounds, signified by signifier, doubly separated from rhythms of gestures and harmonies of musical sounds. It is *in itself* both *gestures and sounds, rhythm and harmony*. It signifies through a much more complex apparatus than most philosophers have been claiming after Locke. On the one hand, language is "the most intimate and frequent fusion of a kind of gestural language with sound." On the other hand, it symbolizes the essence of things "in the tone and cadence of a word, by the strength and rhythm of its sound, by the gesture of the mouth." Nietzsche retrieves by his own means ideas that were already fully elaborated by Diderot, some German romantics and finally Humboldt.

The most intimate and frequent fusion of a kind of gestural language [*Geberdensymbolik*] with sound [*Ton*] is called *language* [*Sprache*]. In the tone and cadence of a word [*durch den Ton und seinen Fall*], by the strength and rhythm of its sound [*die Stärke und den Rhythmus seines Erklingens*], the essence of a thing is symbolized, by the gesture of the mouth the accompanying representation is shown, the image, the appearance of its essence. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speirs)

Nietzsche then claims, quite debatably one can think for instance of contrary evidence gathered by psychoanalysis ,

that in memory the "sounds fade away entirely" and only the "concepts" remain. He comes back to a more traditional conception which considers language as a defective means to reach reality, which must be rejuvenated by the poetic expression of emotions and feelings, "as it were, a return to nature."

Symbols can and must be many things; but they grow instinctively and with great and wise conformity to a law. A symbol that is remembered is a *concept*; since the sound fades away entirely when preserved in memory, only the symbol of the accompanying representation is present in the concept. One "understands" things which one can designate and differentiate.

When emotion is intensified the essence of the word reveals itself more clearly and more sensuously in the symbol of sound; which is why it resounds more. The *Sprechgesang* is, as it were, a return to nature; the symbol which gets blunted in use regains its original strength once more. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speirs)

Nevertheless, although he sticks to this banal semiotic and badly Romantic view, Nietzsche simultaneously develops powerful insights on language and poetry which partly extract them from *semiotics* and assign them to *poetics*. Symbols, viz. signs, *sēmata*, are to be overwhelmed by "something new and greater," a "higher sphere" in which each word is "constantly being re-defined by the higher unity of the sentence" and the "spoken melody [*Sprechgesang*] of [the latter] is not just the sequence of the sounds of the words." At least in poetry, words are not to be considered any more as elementary units of sound and meaning: the whole text is signifying. But, as mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, this holistic semantic effect is produced by the global organization of the flow of speech utterance and gesture performance. "Rhythmic, dynamics and harmony" are not separate any more and "again become necessary on this level of expression."

In a sequence of words, i.e. by a chain of symbols, something new and greater is to be represented; [rhythmic], dynamics and harmony [*Rhythmik Dynamik und Harmonie*] again become necessary on this level of expression. This higher sphere now governs the more limited sphere of the individual word; it becomes necessary to select words, to put them in a new order; poetry begins. The spoken melody [*Sprechgesang*] of a sentence is not just the sequence of the sounds of the words; for a word has only a quite relative sound, because its character, the content presented by the symbol, varies according to its position. In other words: the individual symbol of the word is constantly being re-defined by the higher unity of the sentence and the character this symbolizes. (*The Dionysian Conception of the World*, § 4, trans. Ronald Speirs)

The unnoticed relation with the previous century anti-idealist *rhuthmological* trend of thinking and also with more recent artistic conceptions and practices we have seen above comes again clearly into view when Nietzsche tries to figure out the anthropological meaning either as cause or consequence of the rhythmic and non-metric patterning of ancient language, dance, poetry, music and theater.

Let us come back to the quote from the *Rhythmic Researches* entitled "Decline of Latin Vocalism" (1870-1872) already cited above, where Nietzsche contemplates developing, against the cliché of the primacy of harmony, a "history of rhythmic sensations" tracing their role "in the formation of language" and "from this" "a philosophy of rhythm."

What do the time-proportions mean for the symbolism of language in respect to the pitch-proportions? i.e. what is time-rhythm [*Zeitrhythmus*] in respect to melody? Important is that, in the introduction, the whole metric problem of time is presented: careful attention to the still existing rhythmic sensations in any people and a history of rhythmic sensations. From this follows a philosophy of rhythm. The rhythmic feeling in the formation of the language: i.e. [*dh*] symbolism of the will in the bonds of beauty. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 308-309, my trans.)

The objective of this "philosophy of rhythm" would be to trace the impact of the "rhythmic feeling in the formation of language," as well as the subsequent effects of linguistic and poetic rhythms on the development of thought and expression of emotions.

Here language is not defined any longer as in most philosophical views, even those who pretend to fight the last traces of idealism left in Heidegger as a socially determined means of reference to things and as a tool used to communicate ideas or information, but as a specific rhythmic activity lead by a rhythmic collective drive and which gives shape to the fluid stream of emotions and representations.

Hence it is quite understandable that this "philosophy of rhythm" would largely benefit from a *poetics* able to get beyond the limits of pure philology and investigate, thanks seemingly to concepts borrowed from the speculation on forces, the change in poetic rhythm as evidence of deeper transformation. Indeed, Nietzsche goes on.

It is poetry that looks at the existing language according to rhythmic time proportions [*Zeitproportionen*] and consolidates a feeling for it. The time differences are indeed available [as] an infinitely subtle symbolism: they are now classified under large categories, and so is given the possibility of a new symbolism (of the sentence). An entirely different rhythmic is that of the force relations [*Kraftverhältnisse*]. Here too the infinite variety of nature must be subdued by certain basic shapes (regular alternation of "strong" and "weak"). Within these basic formula, mentally hold, the most dynamic diversity is now allowed again. It is exactly the same with time proportions. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 309, my trans.)

Starting too from the problem raised by the central but quite mysterious role played by the power of imagination in the *Critique of Judgment*, Humboldt claimed that this role was actually played by sexual power and its most delicate offspring: the language (Trabant, 1992). Language was not, as most philosophers were lamenting it was, a deceitful means of knowledge; on the contrary, as Leibniz was first to recognize, it was the wonderful expression of the infinite power of the body and the mind to illuminate reality.

Moreover, as I already mentioned in chapter 4, language production was oriented by "rhythmic" and "euphonic" demands specific to each linguistic group (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 88). Humboldt argued that the "linguistic sense" [*Sprachsinn*], which requires to depict "all different kinds of conceptual unity symbolically in speech" according to "its alertness and ordered regularity," does it by organizing sounds according to "relationship pleasing to utterance and ear" or "[going] further" by forming "rhythmical segments" and treating them "as auditory wholes." (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 110) He finally asserted that in speech concepts, thoughts, on the one hand, and sounds, words, sentences, on the other, are tightly linked together or better intertwined by "the sound-formation, artistically treated in its melody and rhythm" and that the latter "reciprocally arouses in the soul a closer union of the ordering power of understanding with pictorially creative fantasy." (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 110-111)

It is quite surprising and significant to see Nietzsche claiming likewise that there is a "musical drive" [*Trieb*] specific to each social group which participates in "the creation of language" and that explains the prevalence of proportion or stress in the various linguistic rhythmic.

Musical drive [*Trieb*] in the creation of language. The Germans in contrast between strong and weak, connected to high and low the Greeks with proportional times, linked with high and low. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 330, my trans.)

Due to the "laws" [*Gesetze*] of their specific languages, the Ancients could not create poetry using regularly distributed tonic accents but developed a purely quantitative rhythmic.

The laws of position [which regulate what syllable counts as long or short] are not subject to poetic license, but hidden in language. Language felt the longs and shorts even more sensitively than the poets could make use of them. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, my trans., p. 331, bracket by Müller-Sievers, 2015)

In another instance, although he remains very cautious and notices that it is something that "stays unexplained," he suggests that artistic rhythms are almost certainly related to an original "rhythmic feeling" [*rhythm. Gefühl*] already "active in the genesis of language" [*in der Genesis der Sprache tätig*].

Until now, one original phenomenon [*Urphänomen*] remains unexplained: important the viewpoint that the same rhythmic feeling [*rhythm. Gefühl*], which invented the rhythmic patterns, is already active in the genesis of language [*in der Genesis der Sprache tätig ist*] and dominates the alternation of long and short syllables. Thus the caesura is something noteworthy. (*Encyclopädie der klassischen Philologie*, KGA II3, p. 400, my trans.)

Strikingly, Nietzsche uses Humboldt's very words when he mentions the Greek linguistic "genius" [*Genius*], the original linguistic "sense" [*Sinn*] and the specific "artistic manifestation" of "language" [*künstlerische Manifestation*] in poetry, rhetoric and even dialectic.

We must consider as characteristic of the Greek genius [*Genius*] that original sense [*Ursinn*] for rhythmic time proportions [*Zeitverhältnisse*]. "The beating of the waves." [*Wellenschlag*] Each word is artistically [*künstlerisch*] perceived during both utterance and hearing as group of times. This sense [*Sinn*] expands in metric and dialectic (rhetoric). Thus the exigency of language is the first artistic manifestation [*künstlerische Manifestation*]. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 338, my trans.)

Furthermore, as Humboldt, Nietzsche claims that this linguistic rhythmic, resulting from each specific collective drive, entails feedback effects both on culture and interior life, be it emotional or intellectual. If this "original rhythmic drive" or "feeling" pervading one particular language is in itself most likely out of reach, it is nevertheless possible to describe its consequences in actual cultural and individual dynamics.

In the early *Notebooks on rhythm* Nietzsche is quite specific about the power of rhythm. According to him, the a-melodic proportional temporal law imposed on words proper to ancient Greek had first *aesthetic effects* i.e. *effects on sensibility*.

Unlike Wagner and most contemporary specialists and against some his own assumptions, Nietzsche remarks that research for "harmony" was actually not predominant in Greek music. Instead, the Ancients, as Pythagorean philosophy bears witness he says, were endowed with a "tremendous capacity to enjoy proportions, to view and to

hear everything in proportion," in other words to enjoy rhythm, at least a *quantitative rhythm* foreign to our *metric rhythm* composed of alternate strong and weak beats, as we will see.

Even in melody [the Ancients] did not experience the power of harmony, but the spatial difference from tone to tone as mimetic [*mimetisch*]. The differences in pitch between tones, i.e. ultimately arithmetic differences, were experienced in their imitative power [*in ihrer nachahmenden Kraft*]. In the philosophy of the Pythagoreans the essence of Antiquity became conscious. Its tremendous capacity to enjoy proportions, to view and to hear everything in proportion, is its most powerful characteristic. [...] (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II/3, p. 321-22, my trans.)

When looking for beauty, instead of looking for harmony, the Ancients were mainly interested in $\frac{1}{4}$ and considered it consequently as a "creative power." To produce artistic forms was then to project or better "recognize rhythm in everything." Reversely, the Germanic people created their songs according to the supremacy of harmony and melody upon rhythm which characterized their languages.

[...] To recognize $\frac{1}{4}$ in everything? In this sense, $\frac{1}{4}$ is the creative power [*In diesem Sinne ist der $\frac{1}{4}$ das Schöpferische*]; the concept of melody is missing (and if it exists, the affinity for it). Feeling for harmonic relations was diminished (which was creative in the folk melody of the Germans). Melody is a circumscription of harmony. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II/3, p. 321-22, my trans.)

The equation of $\frac{1}{4}$ with $\frac{1}{2}$ shows that rhythm is here that of poetry and language. It is because they have a specific rhythm in their language, that the Greek put such a strong focus on rhythm in their music and arts, and the Germanic people on melody and harmony. [1]

But the rhythmic specific to Greek language had also *ethical effects* i.e. *effects on behavior*. It prevented, Nietzsche claims, "passionate excitement," in other words, the direct and impetuous expression of emotions which is now "our" common lot. The attention to length and not to pitch or volume of syllables, which today involves a pattern of "excitement and relaxation," limited immediate expression of passion and sentiment and favored emotional distance.

On the whole we can see that our way of reciting is much more passionate, the accent dominates, i.e. passionate excitement. The Greeks enjoy the proportions of time, we enjoy excitement and relaxation. Here we have a tremendous chasm. Here strong and weak, there short and long. (*Encyclopädie der klassischen Philologie*, KGA II/3, p. 401, my trans.)

Helmut Müller-Sievers has recently proposed an interesting interpretation of the effect of Greek linguistic rhythm on the expression of emotions noticed by Nietzsche. It suggests that Nietzsche's conception of poetic rhythm, although it was based more on philological than poetic evidence, presupposed both a predominance of the signifier over the signified, and a primacy of crafting over inspiration, that strongly recall analogous considerations by Diderot and some German Romantics, especially Hölderlin.

Insofar as classical meter imposes on words and syllables the law of pure temporality, it prevents the direct and impetuous expression of emotions. [...] This emotional distance is inscribed in the distancing operations of ancient meter itself. The syntactic unity of the sentence and the semantic unity of the word lose their importance in favor of syllables and letters. Words are fragmented not only into their individual components, but also across their own boundaries (certain combinations of letters can make a syllable in a neighboring word long) and disaggregated into the externality of their phonetic or written elements. Poetic mastery for the ancients was technical mastery; it consisted in injecting additional meaning into words through metrical proportioning and thereby approximating meter to semantic meaning from which it is actually cut off.

(Müller-Sievers, 2015)

Let us recapitulate. Nietzsche considers melody and rhythm as "artistically" organizing the flow produced by the language sense (*Sprachsinn*) and simultaneously bringing, as Humboldt would say, a "closer union of the ordering power of understanding with pictorially creative fantasy," i.e. realizing the synthesis between understanding and imagination sought for by Kant in *Critique of Judgment*. But, unlike Humboldt who remained less precise on the subject, he also gives a look into the feedback effects of already existing languages and bodies of literature upon thought and behavior, and tries to measure the respective organizing and "creative" power of rhythm and melody in ancient Greek culture. This second angle is opposite to the first, but in both cases rhythm and melody designate the ways this *creative ordering of thoughts*, or, in the other direction, *perceptions and behavior*, is performed.

In this instances, as we see, Nietzsche is at odds with his other views on language. But because he is then more a philologist, a linguist and a poet than a philosopher and a rhetorician, these historical, anthropological and poetic views are much more accurate and inspiring to us. It is a real pity that most of Nietzsche's readers have concentrated on the former and ignored the latter.

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[1] The case of group accents in French introduces a difference with word accentuation that Nietzsche seems to consider in a letter to Carl Fuchs dated from mid-April 1886 where he claims that the French are closer, on this point, to the Greeks than the Germans: "The French understand that a purely time-quantifying metrics is conceivable in principle: they feel the number of syllables as time." (eKGWB/BVN-1886,688 Letter to Carl Fuchs - probably mid-April 1886, my trans.)