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Rhythm as Aesthetic Category (Part 2)

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
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-



Publication date: Sunday 16 December 2018

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From Poetic to Aesthetic Rhythm (Schnaase - 1844)

Since the explanation of this "historical fact" covers the very last pages of the volume 3, and probably reflects Schnaase's deepest thought concerning the role of poetic rhythm in aesthetics, we must go here into details.

According to Schnaase, the Ancient prosody, which was based on syllable quantity, resulted just like Vitruvian architecture in "perfectly unitary" wholes "structured according to a fixed rule, in which nothing indifferent, nothing unnoticed, may be contained." As we noticed above, he was probably right about this concept translation from poetry to architecture by Vitruvius. But this phenomenon was not to be reduced to an isolated author and characterized as a rule consciously chosen. On the contrary, it was to be derived directly from the unconscious popular "feeling" by means of the natural speech. As a matter of fact, we already encountered in vol. 2 similar statements by anti-Hegelian thinkers as Humboldt and Nietzsche, to whom, at least in this instance, Schnaase may certainly be compared.

In Ancient prosody, every syllable has a meaning [only] in relation to the rhythm; it is not merely counted; it is not merely a syllable, but a syllable characterized as long or short. Now, since these syllables are joined together according to a certain rule [*nach einer bestimmten Regel*], forming a whole in the prescribed course, this whole seems to be structured [*gegliedert*] according to a fixed rule, in which nothing indifferent, nothing unnoticed, may be contained. There is nothing artificial and conventional in that. On the contrary, in prosaic speech [*prosaischen Rede*], a rhythm already arises everywhere involuntarily through the combination of words. The feeling [*das Gefühl*] likes to arrange the speech so that its tone corresponds to the intended expression. The poet only recognizes this natural rule and develops it. [...] The whole constitutes a perfect unity. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 544, my trans.)

The shift from the Ancient quantitative prosody to newer rhythmic forms, i.e. the increased importance given to the sound quality of speech instead of its mere quantity, which derived from obscure movements of the popular spirit, resulted in the weakening of what we could call the quantitative-Vitruvian prosodic rules and the development of a new poetic freedom and fantasy, which was actually quite close to the concept of *rhuthmos* or *way of flowing* (see vol. 1, chap. 1).

Rhyme, by contrast, is ruled by the principle of antithesis and difference. Between the few significant syllables, there are many which have no other formal importance than to measure the distance between the others. These, therefore, have no connection with each other; they only get one through the rhyme. The consonance occurs sporadically between unequal syllables; it then produces a sudden, unmediated consensus. The rule of rhymed poetry is [thus] to let oneself go free and through mere symmetry, and return to regularity [*Regelmässigkeit*] by a bold jump. One sees how playing fantasy has much greater freedom in it. Among the indifferent, freely flowing words [*unter den gleichgültigen, frei hinflussenden Worten*], those which makes up the rhyme seem surprising, like kinds of miracle. In the regular chaining of the measured syllables, on the other hand, there is always a firm rule, a necessity, as in the plastic design of the natural body. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 545, my trans.)

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Schnaase found the same rhythmic opposition in the fine arts. The Greco-Roman art often used repetitive decoration but the latter always "followed a certain rule" and formed an uninterrupted "series" with no midpoint between the successive elements.

We need to make, here, some remarks on the relation between the formal principle of the Frankish arabesque, and that of the rhyme, and [in turn] on the relation of the latter to that of Greco-Roman art. In the Greco-Roman art, the ornamentation either assumed the form of a natural object or, where this was not the case, of meander, egg motif, or other patterns. It nevertheless followed a certain rule. According to this rule, it formed and ran in a horizontal direction, simply repeating itself, without letting form any section, any midpoint between two corresponding sides mirroring each other. It predominantly had the meaning of the *series*. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 547-548, my trans.)

In Germanic art, by contrast Schnaase took the example of the arabesque included in the initial miniature in some manuscripts the dominant rhythmic element was not linearity nor the principle of continuous series but free move of curved lines completing their course in "a constant renewal of symmetrical recurrence."

By contrast, in the Frankish arabesque, the rectilinear decoration (e.g., that within the initials) is only a repetition, a reflection of the outer outlines, while the curved line moves freely, and without following a necessary rule [*sich frei und ohne ein nöthigendes Gesetz*], up to a high point, then turns and, repeating the same course in the opposite direction, finally breaks off as it began, and thus completes its course in a constant renewal of symmetrical recurrence [*in steter Erneuerung symmetrischer Wiederkehr*]. Each side of such an intertwining is only the imprint of the other; it is governed by the rule of free agreement [*das Gesetz freier Uebereinstimmung*]. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 548, my trans.)

Schnaase concluded that there were in art history at least "two different, opposing formal principles" which, as far as we are concerned, we might rightly call "rhythmic principles." Both were unitary and integrating principles, but the Ancient art worked through exterior and quantitative rules, and aimed at closed and perfectly arranged wholes (as the Vitruvian model), whereas the Christian-Germanic art developed from an interior spiritual and qualitative drive, and let the forms proliferate and occupy the space within a certain frame (according to the dualistic model that Schnaase found in rhymed poetry).

We, therefore, see two different, opposing formal principles [*Formprincipien*]: in Ancient art that of continuous unity [*das der fortlaufenden Einheit*]; in Christian art that of recurrence or duality [*das der Wiederkehr oder der Zweiheit*]. In the Ancient unity [*antike Einheit*], while each member is firmly connected to the whole and locked, it distinctly separates itself from the others. In the latter, the external duality is based on an inner spiritual unity. For their two initially separate sides are related to each other by their position and relative, if not complete, equality. They point to an inner center and are connected by it to an unbreakable whole, which carries its rule in itself, not just in an external limitation. But this inner unity of every single part gives, precisely because it is not external, the rule of the whole, in that also the details are united by free agreement into a greater whole. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 548-549, my trans.)

Schnaase is often remembered for having introduced into the history of art formal concerns which had been unduly

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disregarded by Hegel, while basing them on the perfectly orthodox Hegelian claim that these forms were actually determined by "*ein Kunsttrieb* - an art drive," or "*eine Kunstrichtung* - an art direction" (vol. 3, p. 530) expanding from the innermost spirit of each people. As a matter of fact, this concept will be, as we shall see, borrowed and re-elaborated by Alois Riegl as "*Kunstwollen* - artistic will" in order to assist in the elaboration of his own kind of formalism which will have much in common with Schnaase's.

However, I would like to emphasize another aspect of Schnaase's endeavor which does not go in the direction of a sheer formalism, entirely devoid of temporality, while distancing itself from the Hegelian philosophy of history. In the final analysis, this opposition between Ancient and Modern formal or rhythmic principles I said Modern, for the Middle Ages marked in Schnaase's opinion the beginning of a certain spiritual Modernity was grounded, according to Schnaase, in a transformation of the language itself which allowed its *conventional* part to recess and its original *motivated* part to reemerge. Schnaase differentiated between the common use of words the Speech which was "the result of habituation," and their essence the Word which, by contrast, was based on what he called its "*musical*" quality, i.e. the immediate association between sound and meaning in a more modern vocabulary: a close motivation between signifier and signified.

This leads us to a second deeper inner affinity between the rhyme and the pictorial sense [*dem bildnerischen Sinne*], which already asserts itself in this Frankish art. The rule of the Ancient verse is, as we have seen, grounded in nature; it arises directly from the inflexion of *Speech* [*aus dem Tonfall der Rede*], from the expression. But it has little or nothing in common with the essence of the *Word* [*mit dem Wesen des Wortes*], to which it remains something completely exterior. It measures everything according to the monotonous measure of length and brevity, it does not care about the multiplicity of meaning. In rhyme, by contrast, the meaning of the words is taken into consideration, and also in this lies a natural element. Anyone who realizes that must recognize that the *sounds* of the word are by no means wholly arbitrary and unrelated to meaning. At least this is true of the first development of language. In the case of the root-words, a relation of the sound to the meaning cannot be denied, certain sounds consent with one idea, they recur in words of similar meaning, [and] are used [only] with modifications and slight deviations of meaning. The combination of certain sounds with certain concepts is partly grounded in human nature and [...] partly the result of a habituation whose origin cannot be demonstrated. With the further development of language, the need for the distinction between more numerous and freer concepts prevails so much that the origin of the words is forgotten, yet not without them retaining some of the power of the early impressions. The sound of the word, therefore, has a meaning that we must call *musical*, because it is the expression of a spiritual and individual being in the realm of time and sound. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 550-551, my trans.)

According to this theory, whereas the Ancient quantitative prosody implied a reduction of the language to its acoustic part, a certain indifference towards its meaning, and a poetic composition based on the mere horizontal joining of "building blocks" in "a regular measure," the New rhymed poetry which emerged in other European languages as well, but for which, according to Schnaase, the German language was particularly suited was based, on the contrary, on a close association of sound and meaning, what he strikingly termed the "*Klangbedeutung* - sound-meaning," and the development of "the musical element of speech" through the rhyme system. This "musical element" must be understood as a new dimension of the production of meaning based on what we may call "verticality," a dimension deploying itself across or perpendicularly to the usual flow of speech.

The length and brevity of the syllables too are related to sound and meaning, at least in root syllables, but in grammatical flexion and in the composition of several words this relationship is completely lost. For the meter, therefore, this sound-meaning of the word [*jene Klangbedeutung des Wortes*] is completely indifferent. The words are joined together like building blocks in a regular measure [*wie Bausteine im Ebenmaasse aneinandergefügt*]. In rhyming, on the contrary, the individuality of the sound appears more clearly; it is emphasized by the repetition. Even if in a developed language the number of meaningful-sounding words [*bedeutsam klingenden Worte*] is not so great that this relation could be recognized in every rhyme, the musical element of speech is chiefly preserved in rhymed poetry, and the rhyme becomes the poet's means, through the nature and the variation of sounds [*durch die Art und den Wechsel der Klänge*], the word-areas in which his thoughts move, and thereby expresses the mood [*die Stimmung*] from which the poem flows. It is remarkable that in the German language this meaning of the sound is often apparent; even now, after the influence of so many alien elements, our language is rich in words whose tone is significant. It was therefore particularly suitable for the application of the rhyme. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 551, my trans.)

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, this analysis must be set in Schnaase's Hegelian perspective. According to this view, the Arabic or Germanic rhythms, be they visual, linguistic, or poetic, were still "underdeveloped" but they already had "surpassed" those pertaining to Indian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman art. This "progress" could be measured against a dualistic criterion opposing, on the one hand, stiffness, proportionate arrangement, linearity, and regularity of meter, and on the other hand, elegance, free design of the arabesque and the rhyme, and variable recurrence.

However, if we set aside this simplistic historical perspective and the nationalistic prejudice which accompanies it, we still may give some credit to Schnaase's attention which goes against any hard formalism as well as, indirectly, any Hegelian historicism towards a phenomenon that had already been noticed by Diderot, some German Romantics, and Humboldt, and that will be a central concern for the poets in the second half of the 19th century: the rhythm in language should not be reduced to the succession of metric building blocks (be they quantitative or accentual) but should be enlarged to the vertical interweaving of these blocks in and by the flow of sound-meaning (see vol. 2, chap. 3, 4, 7, and 8). In his own way, Schnaase rediscovered the *rhuthmic* nature of poetry and language.

I won't discuss the ultimate pages of vol. 3 in which Schnaase compared the change in the poetic-linguistic rhythm illustrated by the development of the rhyme, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the contemporary transformation in the use of color, what he called the emergence of the "*malerisch* - painterly" principle. It is largely beyond the scope of our survey but it would certainly be worth paying some heed to it since it will be later, yet in a very different way, reelaborated by Wölfflin into one of the categories of modern formal analysis, and since it suggests the outlines of a theory of the visual arts based, for once, on poetics instead of philosophy or psychology.

Rhythm as Alternation and Repetition (Schnaase - 1854-1864)

According to the previous occurrence table, the third and most recent kind of use of the term rhythm as "*rhythmischer Wechsel* - rhythmic alternation," or "*rhythmische Wiederkehr* - rhythmic repetition," was rare in the 1840s in the volumes dedicated to Antiquity and early Middle Ages. It forcefully emerged in the early 1850s in the volumes devoted to the "Real Middle Ages" and became prevalent after 1854 in those concerning the late Middle Ages. This emergence occurs at the expense of the Vitruvian-Albertian acceptance but, also, of the poetic one, which seemed to evaporate during this period.

One can find already, in the volume 2 on Greek and Roman art published in 1843, a few occurrences of this new acceptance. Frieze ornaments like the triglyphs, as well as the columns and the intervals between them, formed a "rhythm" by their mere regular alternation.

On the frieze, therefore, a full, vertical, effective element [a triglyph] always alternates with an empty, ineffective one, of greater width; here we see the same rhythm as the one which occurred in the alternation of the columns and intervals of the portico, recur on a smaller scale and in a doubled number. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 2, 1843, p. 46, my trans.)

The same kind of expression was used in volume 4.2 (1854) to describe the "alternating succession of pillars and columns" in pre-Romanesque Saxony churches as well as, a few pages below, in the 12th century basilica of the Holy Cross in Wechselburg - Saxony and St. Peter's church in Erfurt - Thuringia.

Since they are without vaulting, at least of the central nave, they all belong to the earliest form of Romanesque churches, but they differ from the early Christian basilicas by the rhythmic division of the ground plan through the alternating succession of pillars and columns, and by the formation of separate parts. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 4.2, 1854, p. 56, my trans.)

Here, therefore, [in the monastery church of Wechselburg founded in 1174] one sees the same rhythmic thought, which underlies the alternation of pillars and columns, in another, more delicate manner. [Similarly], the pillars of the monastery church in the Petersberg [Citadel] in Erfurt, which was consecrated in 1147 after a fire in 1142, have a much more complete structure [*eine sehr viel vollständigere Gliederung*]. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 4.2, 1854, p. 74-75, my trans.)

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The inner spatial rhythm resulting from an "alternation of simple and strengthened pillars" provided to the 12th century Romanesque churches of Rhineland a particular beauty.

The pillar construction, which was hitherto monotonous and tiring, had now obtained, thanks to the alternation of simple and strengthened pillars, a structure [*Gliederung*] and a rhythmic division [*rhythmische Abtheilung*], which was similar but much more energetic and animated than in Saxon edifices. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 4.2, 1854, p. 118, my trans.)

Schnaase used the same expression to describe the Cathedral of Pisa whose construction began in 1063. However, this time, the columns were not providing a *rhythmic structure* to the interior space of the church but a *rhythmic decoration* of its exterior outlines.

Three rows of engaged columns, corresponding to the aisles, the gallery, the upper part of the nave, surround the whole building, around nave, transept, and choir, and connect to the decor of the facade, on which, a fourth floor is added corresponding to the roof height of the aisles. The column row corresponding to the galleries carries, in an ancient manner, straight entablatures; the other [upper and lower] rows form arcades, a difference which provides animation to the uniformity of the former by their rhythmic alternation. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 4.2, 1854, p. 191, my trans.)

In vol. 5 (1856), Schnaase used again the term rhythm to describe the alternation of the upper semi-circular ornaments and the succession of columns on the sides of the portal of the 12th century St. Jacob's Church in Coesfeld - North Rhine-Westphalia.

The most beautiful of these portals is that of the St. Jacob's Church in Coesfeld, which has a special value, owing to the rhythmic alternation of smooth and ornamented parts, and to the fact that the polychromatic coloring with which the outline was covered is still very well preserved. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 5, 1856, p. 381, my trans.)

Finally, in the vol. 6 dedicated to the late Middle-Ages, in a section concerning the Cologne School of stained glass windows, Schnaase extended this use of the term rhythm from architecture to painting.

It was a design conformed to what was needed on the stained glass windows and, especially, to the principle of Gothic surface division [*Flächentheilung*]. At the same time our painter used it to produce a rhythmic alternation of forms and colors and a free play for his rich imagination. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 6, 1861, p. 416, my trans.)

Although Schnaase barely mentioned life science or medicine, his growing use of rhythm as alternation or repetition was most probably inspired by the new scientific concern for regularity that developed around the middle of the

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century (see vol. 2, chap. 2). As a matter of fact, he sometimes used to describe the particular aesthetic rhythm of Gothic churches expressions like *pulsirende Leben* - pulsating life (*id.* in vol. 7, 1864, p. 136) or *pulsirenden Lebendigkeit* - pulsating liveliness (in vol. 6, 1861, p. 127).

In this way, the individual divisions, both in the nave and in the aisles, did not form squares, but rectangles. I have already remarked above, how the narrower form of the vaulted fields increased and accelerated the pulsating life of the vaults, because the movement repeated itself more often and emanated from the walls at an acute angle, that is, with a greater force. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 4.1, 1850, p. 211, my trans.)

If we leave aside Schnaase's poetic reinterpretation of the concept of rhythm in art, which was actually the most innovative part of his work, but which he unfortunately abandoned in the 1850s, his most significant contribution was the transformation of the traditional Vitruvian-Albertian concept into a new concept based on alternation and regularity. Eventually, the latter deeply penetrated into art history and aesthetics, and finally entered into everyday language.

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