

Rhythm as *Rhuthmos* - The German Romantics (1785-1804)

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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In German-speaking countries the rhythm became between 1785 and the very first years of 19th century, an explicit theme of philological, poetic and philosophical investigation. This is the second starting point in Modern Times of rhythm as *rhuthmos*, i.e. as “way of flowing”, the second time Platonic traditional definition was opposed by a re-actualized Heraclitean characterization.

From Numerus to Rhythm in Poetry (1765-85)

Clémence Couturier-Heinrich published in 2004 a wonderful study about poetry and theories of rhythm in Germany from Enlightenment to Romanticism. In her introduction, she suggests that the new interest by German writers and scientists for rhythm fits “in a wide cultural self-affirmation attempt already engaged in the first half of the 18th century to bring about a German literature able to compete with the contemporary European national literatures” (Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 11). But one wonders whether other non sociological reasons might have motivated the choice of this theme and might also explain its subsequent success in Germanic cultures in 19th and early 20th centuries. Why indeed this particular and early attention first to metric then more widely to rhythmic in addition, as in France or England, to logic or rhetoric?

Could we see in this trend an effect of a Lutheran-Calvinist culture, quite different from the Catholic and Anglican cultures? This religious influence surfaces already in the young Herder during the 1760s (Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 87 *sq.*) and it is most probable that this factor played an important role throughout the 18th century and beyond. In the Germanic culture, Greco-Roman philology seems to have been largely impregnated by that of the Hebrew Bible, theory of reading by simultaneous reflection on preaching techniques, finally theory of poetry by theory of music.

If confirmed the first of these assumptions would prove Meschonnic was right when he saw rhythm as a typically Jewish cultural and theoretical question (Meschonnic, 2001). The following two could, however, seem to contradict him since he considered Christianity, his interest in rhetoric and hermeneutics as obstacles to rhythm, and last but not least rejected any link between poetic rhythms

and musical rhythms (Meschonnic, 1982). Of course, Meschonnic was reasoning more in terms of theoretical legitimacy than in factual terms; his categories aimed less at historical research than at conceptual clarification. But he himself sufficiently stressed the need to historicize concepts. So we cannot dispense to compare his claims with historical and philological evidence. And the latter seem rather be going in the direction of a complex combination of influences ranging from a very old Jewish background, to an extremely dynamic Christian teaching and a spectacular development of music in courts and churches, influences that seem to be in constant interaction in the Germanic world at least since the first half of the 18th century.

Anyway, in 1760, the term *Rhythmus* is still quite rare in German. It is used only to translate the Greek *rhuthmos* or the French *rhythme* into German. In poetry, writers use instead “meter” (*Silbenmaß*), of “poetic number” (*poetischer Numerus*) or “number” for short (*Numerus*). Similarly the prose is characterized too by a “number”. But from the 1760s, the use of *Rhythmus* increases noticeably at the expense of the traditional terms drawn from Latin. In Klopstock and Herder, who trigger the movement in 1765, it is *Rhythmus* which now refers to the metric organization of Greek, Latin but also Hebrew texts (Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 16). Over the next two decades, this metric model is transposed to all diachronic arts and stands henceforth – as it still does most often today – for

the principle organizing the succession of elementary and complex units that compose poetry, music and dance. (Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 244).

The term *Rhythmus* becomes prevalent between 1765 and 1785, but its meaning does not really change and it still remains during this period entirely related to the old metric conceptions. The Germans have not reached yet the point where we left Diderot.

The anthropological model that sustains these conceptions resumes, while being slightly modernized, that of the ancient thinkers: among Sulzer (p. 44), Klopstock (p. 51), Lessing (p. 52) and even Goethe (p. 80) and Humboldt (p. 166), the rhythm acts physically and mentally through a kind of resonance between the “inner rhythm” of man and the “external rhythm” of poetry, music or dance.

This view was, in a slightly different form, already supported by Plato (428-348 BC.), Aristoxenus (354-300 BC.), and even much later, Aristides Quintilian (2nd-4th c.). Rhythm was considered by the Ancients as a fundamental educational tool because it had the power to inform or transform the *ethos* of human beings. However, respecting the common disinterest in Antiquity towards interiority that lasted at least until Augustine, the Ancients never spoke of “inner rhythms” nor considered rhythm as an “expression of the Self” but at most as an imitation of a desirable *ethos* (Otaola, 2011).

To this anthropological cliché, modern German thinkers add a modern attention to interiority, absent among the Ancients, interiority whose rhythm is both a determination when it comes from outside, and an expression, when it springs out from the Self.

The historical model presupposed by these first theories of rhythm is newer but leans on the

historicist view, now totally obsolete, which begins to develop in the 18th century. For Herder, human history is divided into two parts, a primitive age and an age of culture (p. 88 sq.), or, an ancient and a modern World, at the very end of the century and the beginning of the next, for the Schlegel brothers (p. 105 sq. and 121 sq.), Schelling (p. 119) and Hegel (p. 130). The rhythm appears in both cases, like in the Christian tradition of the Fall, as a lost original principle whose invigorating energy modern Europeans should seek to recover. This theme will go through the entire 19th century and will be taken up and developed at will—without the critical force it had in the 18th century—in all pan-rhythmic speculations common in the late 19th and early 20th century as those of Steiner, Klages or Bode, to whom I will return later.

A change, almost imperceptible at first, seems to happen around 1785. New uses, re-actualizing Diderot's move, free from the metric model inherited from Plato and Aristotle, multiply within poetic theorizing by Moritz, Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel and Hölderlin. A revolutionary poetics delicately emerges whose effects on rhythmology will last until they will be forcefully repressed after 1805 by the rise of biological science, Kantian philology and purely philosophical models of art.

Rhythm as Autotelic Principle (Moritz - 1785-1788)

According to Clémence Couturier-Heinrich, the first occurrences of these new uses appear between 1785 and 1788 in two writings by Karl Philipp Moritz dedicated to the question of Beauty (*Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schöner Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten; Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*) and in another one on German prosody published in 1786 (*Versuch einer deutschen Prosodie*).

In a still traditional way, Moritz first defines poetic rhythm as “a measure accompanied by order and division” (quoted by Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 211). Poetry is to speech what dancing is to walking. Man has an “irresistible tendency to measure and divide what by nature has become equal” (quoted p. 211).

However, Moritz simultaneously introduces a new idea that will be of a great posterity, since, after being heralded by August Wilhelm Schlegel, it will once again be adopted by Jakobson in 20th century in the early 1960s: dance and poetry are “autotelic” arts that is to say, they are devoid of any exterior purpose and contain their “final cause” (*telos*) in themselves. But while Jakobson will associate, at least for poetry, this phenomenon to a signifying structure, Moritz sees it as an effect of rhythm. The interior aesthetic purpose of dancing and poetry entails the primacy of rhythm—still defined though as alternation of slow and fast movements in the communication process.

Moritz breaks, for the first time in Germany in a way reminiscent of Diderot, with the reduction of rhythm to a simple linear succession of contrasting accents or lengths and considers rhythm responsible for an overall effect of the work as a whole: its beauty or value.

Rhythm as Trans-subject (Schiller and Goethe - 1796-1797)

From Moritz, the idea of autonomy of poetic beauty based on rhythm is transferred to Goethe, who regularly visits him during his stay in Rome in 1786, then to Schiller with whom Goethe engages in an abundant literary correspondence.

Both Schiller and Goethe start from the traditional metric view. But reflecting on his poetic experience, Schiller comes to an idea that this time breaks clearly with the traditional binary model. In drama, he says, the rhythm appears as a unique law, which by dominating the entire form, gives a similar consistency to the content.

In drama production the rhythm performs [...] something great and significant: by treating all characters and situations according to a law, and by developing them, despite their internal differences, in one form, it forces the poet and his reader to require something general, purely human, from all that is characteristic and different even at the highest point. (*Letter to Goethe written between 1796 and 1798*, cited p. 217)

The rhythm becomes a unifying principle for poetics—pretty close to Diderot’s “hieroglyph”—which transcends the division between content and form and reaches what he calls in terms of the time the “spiritual,” and we would now call “poetic signifiante” (Meschonnic, 1982).

Everything must be unified in the generic concept of the poetic and the rhythm is used by this law both as representative and as tool, since it embraces all under its rule. It sets in this way the right atmosphere for poetic creation, anything coarse remains behind and only the spiritual can be carried by this tenuous element. (*Ibid.*)

In his response Goethe agrees with his interlocutor, but returning to his discussion with Moritz, he says that if rhythm guarantees its poeticity to dramatic work, it is actually because it guarantees aesthetic autonomy.

If you consider [your *Wallenstein*] as an autonomous work; it must necessarily become rhythmic. (*Letter to Schiller written between 1795 and 1797*, quoted p. 217)

Clémence Couturier-Heinrich sees this affirmation as simply resuming Moritz’s autotelic view (p. 218), but we could see in it, following another of her suggestions, quite a different proposal—much more fruitful for us today. Indeed, Goethe continues his remarks with these words.

In any case we have to forget our age if we want to work according to our conviction. (*Ibid.*)

Here autonomy is no longer, as in Moritz, defined as pure internalization of purpose and closure of the work in itself, but primarily as an independence from contemporary tastes. Goethe adopts the viewpoint of reception and thus appears to aim at something pretty close to what Baudelaire will later point at when defining in *The Painter of modern life* the artist’s task as drawing “the eternal from the transient” (*transitoire*). What makes the poetic value of a work is not related to its simple formal quality or to its autotelic closure, but rather, to the ability of a rhythmically organized work to transcend the tastes of its time and become a *trans-temporal* power—we have seen the same idea

appear in Diderot when we noted that the specific rhythm of a work of art constitutes a kind *trans-subject*. So we measure the originality and strength of Goethe's intuition when he reaffirms that

the rhythm is the condition of autonomy (quoted p. 218).

He has already entered a new theoretical world involving a poetics both dynamic and historical—a poetics of the subject.

Rhythm as Complex Organization (A. W. Schlegel - 1795-1803)

The issue of rhythm is now clearly on the agenda for the greatest artists of the time but it is still limited to private correspondence. August Wilhelm Schlegel seems to be the first to popularize these intuitions through academic lectures.

In his *Letters on poetry, meter and language*, published in 1795, and his *Lectures on the philosophical theory of art* pronounced in 1798-1799, Schlegel separates, in a still traditional way, poetry which would have its "end in itself", and prose which would serve, in turn, to "the fulfillment of the tasks of the understanding" and whose conduct would be "subjected to that of reasoning" (*Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, quoted p. 219).

But this initial poetic and anthropological dualism quickly gives way, when Schlegel focuses on poetry itself, to a clearly anti-dualistic view that is very close to Moritz's, Schiller's and Goethe's, and also, of course to Diderot's. Poetry, he says,

determines its own chronology by subjecting its flow to a law that it gives to itself. (*Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, quoted p. 219)

Of course, like all his predecessors, he identifies first this law to measure or meter, but he presents it too as the result of a "game" with the language. But the idea of "game", that he borrows from Schiller, implies

to abolish time in time, to reconcile the becoming with the absolute and the changing with the identity. (Schiller, *Letters on aesthetic education*, 1795, quoted p. 220)

The game is

all that is neither subjectively nor objectively contingent, and yet not forced, whether externally or internally. (*Ibid.*)

Clémence Couturier-Heinrich notes that this new conception of rhythm puts freedom and necessity under tension, and introduces internal cross motivation in a linear flow of signs usually characterized by their arbitrariness.

While being a kind of use where language enjoys the greatest freedom, poetry is also, according to Schlegel, one where it submits to a law, alienating the arbitrariness of the sign which characterizes it otherwise. (Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 220)

One might add that this new idea also involves changing the concept of rhythm from the traditional sense of linear succession of strong and weak beats, or long and short syllables, to that, close to Diderot's hieroglyph, of a dynamic organization of signifying marks. Schlegel says, in the words of his time and his intellectual culture, what Diderot was aiming at when he too stressed that poetry is an art of time, dependent of the spoken chain, but that, as far as it plays on echoes and prosodic harmonies, proceeds much like a painting, in which time and any dynamics are as trapped and internalized.

Developing his thought, Schlegel transposes, in subsequent texts on the epic written between 1797 and 1803 and in particular in his study *Sprache und Poetik*, the term *Rhythmus* from the study of the accentuation of verse to that of the entire work.

Inaugurating a new use of the word *rhythm* in which it does not refer to the metrical form, Schlegel applies the term to narratological features of the epic. [According occurrences,] he calls *rhythm* either various narrative traits, namely the detached attitude of the narrator, the completeness of the narrative and the equal distribution of its time, and finally the lack of causal dynamic – as when he evokes “the inner spiritual rhythm of the epic” – or the enunciation posture, or even the temporality and the narrative driving. (Clémence Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 227)

Whatever the angle taken, rhythm loses its metric nature and becomes a global organizing principle, related primarily to the objective organization of the narrative—one that will be underlined later by Vladimir Propp—but also to the enunciation and the temporality of discourse.

Schlegel goes as far as to make rhythm the basis of the differentiation between literary genres:

The spiritual rhythm of the epic poem is its essence. (*Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, quoted p. 229)

This does not mean, however, that Schlegel abandons any questioning about the metrical forms of the epic. Rather, he seeks to determine the relationship between these two types of rhythm, which will bring him very soon to regard them not as different realities but as mere aspects of a single broader rhythmic phenomenon.

The particular verse of the epic is the expression and audible image of this inner spiritual rhythm present in its enunciation. (*Sprache und Poetik*, quoted p. 229)

This is Schlegel's third contribution which enriches again the notion of rhythm by introducing a concept that will later become very significant: that of generalized interlocking and convenience from the smaller to the larger units. The hexameter has a similar rhythm, according to him, to this "advance that lingers" (*Ibid.*) which characterizes epic narration.

The Greek hexameter has neither a falling rhythm [...] nor an ascending rhythm [...]; it is floating, constant, balanced between expectation and progress. (*Sprache und Poetik*, quoted p. 229)

It is the same for the novel, the modern genre par excellence. Rhythm appears now as pointing to what is nowadays commonly called "complexity":

A rhythm of the story that would be with the epic rhythm roughly in the same relation as the oratory number with the meter, might be the only way to make a novel poetic throughout not only in its overall disposition but in its detailed execution, although the style must necessarily remain prosaic; and this seems to be actually executed in *Wilhelm Meister*. (*Sprache und Poetik*, quoted p. 233)

Rhythm as Subjective Power (Hölderlin - 1804)

The last significant contributor to the concept of rhythm during this period is Hölderlin. One finds witness to his thoughts in the *Notes* accompanying both *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* translations published in 1804. These notes convey slightly different ways of thoughts but they go broadly in the same direction. Again, the rhythm no longer appears as a simple succession of strong and weak beats, or of long or short syllables, arithmetically organized and limited to the level of verses. The rhythm takes a meaning free of any reference to metrics.

In his *Notes*, Hölderlin calls rhythm the "overall organization of the tragedy". But this organization is not just a formal organization, an ex post readable abstract structure. It appears as a genetic matrix during the act of creation itself. The completed organization of the work is thus an expression of this dynamic form. Indeed, in a way that is reminiscent of the praise of "craft" by Valéry a century later, Hölderlin highlights the fact that in ancient Greece, works of art, especially tragedies were produced in an artisanal fashion through a process likely to be "taught and, once learned, always reliably reproduced in practice" (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 236). The unfolding of the tragedy, its rhythm was therefore determined by "a way to proceed", a "calculation" whose "law" or "rule" was both the reference and the result (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 236).

The difference with the technical anti-subjectivism a bit perfunctory held by Valéry is that Hölderlin combines this conception of poetry as craft with an analysis of the dynamic combination of

representations, feelings and reasoning it produces in the soul. The organization of the tragedy is

the rule, the calculable law, the manner in which [...] representation, feeling and reasoning develop one after the other in varying successions but always according to a certain poetic logic. (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 236)

Hölderlin retrieves some aspects of Diderot's "hieroglyph" analysis: any poetic or dramatic-poetic discourse takes effect regardless of the Cartesian opposition of body and mind, i.e. by blending through an organization that is each time specific ("in different successions but still based on a certain rule"), the numberless echoes it produces within the different faculties of the soul: imagination, sensitivity and understanding.

Thus, by identifying the organization of the tragedy to a "rhythmic consecution of representations" [1], a "succession or alternation [*Wechsel*] of representations", a "consecution of calculation", a "rhythm of representations" or for short a "rhythm" (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 236), he indeed implements a theory of poetic subject, though at the same time he affirms the need to rethink the ancient tragedies in terms of craft, calculation, and technique. The conclusion of what may seem a paradox is on the contrary brilliant and revolutionary: there is a subject involved in the crafting and reception of poetry—of any art—but it has nothing to do with the Cartesian subject, this universal thinking substance constituting itself by reflection and instrumenting language. That subject instead is each time different. It is both carried and made sharable by the rhythm of speech, that is to say by the specific organization of the "representations" it triggers. By doing so Hölderlin, in the wake of Diderot's and Goethe's reflections, point to what Meschonnic will later name a "poetic subject" propelled by the rhythm of a specific discourse (Meschonnic, 1982).

Clémence Couturier-Heinrich wonders if "the whole man" in whom Hölderlin situates the rhythmic succession of representations is the main character of the tragedy, the poet or the viewer (p. 238) and she concludes that the last hypothesis is probably the best. While recalling the opposition of Hölderlin to effect aesthetic, she cites the opinions of Dilthey, Corssen and Kurz (p. 239, n. 72). It seems to me that these two hypotheses appear contradictory only from a dualistic viewpoint that Hölderlin explicitly rejects and that confuses the "character", the "poet" but also the "spectator" with individuals endowed with interiority. In fact, Hölderlin thinks "from the middle" and, for him, the poetic subject produced in the rhythm is neither in the "character", nor in the "poet" nor in the "spectator". It is a pure effect of discourse to which the first accessed thanks to his craftsmanship and to which the spectator or the reader will possibly reach if he sufficiently open himself to the unknown.

The analyses of tragedy rhythms that Hölderlin presents show his willingness to understand rhythm as both a genetic matrix of representations and the effect of their dynamic aggregation. A tragic drama consists, according to him, in two parts which are balanced around a "caesura"—analog in the larger unit to the caesura in the smallest unit, the verse—which he calls "counter-rhythmic interruption" and defines as follows:

Thanks to it, the consecution of the calculation and the rhythm are split, and their two halves relate to each other so that they appear as of the same weight. (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 239)

This macro-caesura thus ensures the balance and unity of the play. Performed in both cases by Tiresias' speech, it is never placed right in the middle: it either comes early enough in the development of the plot, as in *Oedipus Rex*, or, on the contrary, quite late, as in *Antigone*. Indeed, as each of these two parts is characterized by a certain speed of the flow of representations, it is necessary for an equilibrium to be reached, that the length difference counteracts this difference in speed. In *Oedipus Rex*, for example, representations evoked by the second part flow faster than those raised by the first:

The rhythm of representations is of such a nature that in an eccentric speed, *the former* are more driven by *the following*. (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 239)

Under these conditions, says Hölderlin,

caesura or counter-rhythmic interruption should be *at the beginning*, so that the first half is virtually protected against the second and the balance, precisely because the second half is originally faster and seems to weigh heavier, will lean, because of the caesura which acts in the opposite direction, more from the back to the beginning. (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 240)

In the *Antigone* type of structure, on the contrary,

the rhythm of representations is of such a nature that *the following* are repressed by those *at the beginning*. (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 240)

The caesura should be located

closer to the end, because it is the end that has to be protected, so to say, against the beginning, and the balance will therefore lean further towards the end because the first half is longer and as a result the balance appears later. (*Übersetzungen, Sämtliche Werke*, quoted p. 240 – Italics are Hölderlin's)

Hölderlin sets up a kind of calculus of the representation flow and of its subjectivation effects. He tries to account for these two aspects of rhythm, not by a simple sum of semiotic representation quanta, that would be more or less equal and scattered throughout the drama, but by subtracting the calculus of two different moving flows endowed with different speeds. In the case of the

tragedy—but it is likely that this is to Hölderlin’s eyes of a broader meaning—poetics is not a simple product of metrics, or succession of signs, but it manifests itself through an interweaving of dynamic representations, that can be translated into terms of opposing forces or powers. The balance of a tragic system is achieved by inverse variation of speed and length (when the representations through the length of the part increases, and vice versa) and by the induced movement of the caesura (when the caesura is placed at the beginning, it causes a kind of intensification of the upstream part that gives it the weight that its brevity and relative slowness threatened to remove from him; when it is placed at the end, it is the last part that benefits from this rebalancing effect). From this point of view, a successful dramatic work, one that has rhythm, is characterized as a system of antagonistic forces.

What Schlegel still saw as a complex game organizing the various levels of the text, from narration to verse and vice versa, Hölderlin now defines as a set of balances of power pertaining to the organization of the entire text. As Clémence Couturier-Heinrich rightly notes:

From the mid-1770s to the years immediately around 1800, the force, that was only an exterior attribute of rhythm, has become its inner source. (Clémence Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 247)

A major qualitative change has happened around 1800. What Hölderlin discovered alongside Diderot, Goethe and Schlegel, is the systemic logic of interaction that dominates the rhythm of literary works—and more generally of works of art—and that gives them the power to subjectivize the individuals who actualize or re-actualize them.

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Footnotes

[1] Clémence Couturier-Heinrich emphasizes that Hölderlin uses “the word representation no longer in the narrow sense of mental image, but in a broad sense encompassing the mental images, feelings and reasoning, that is to say, as produced by the three faculties attributed to humans in the 18th century, imagination, sensitivity and reason or understanding” (p. 236).