

***Elements of Rhythmology* vol. 2 – Conclusion**

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

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The period spanning between 1750 and 1900 has been marked, first of all, by a tremendous expansion of the *Platonic metric paradigm*. Poetry, dance and music continued their ancient numerical tradition, into which they tended to introduce, at least until the 1840s, strict regularity and pulsation. Life science witnessed the generalization by Wolff and his followers of the division of phenomena duration into time-sequences which had been initiated in Antiquity by the Aristotelian school. The same happened in metrics and aesthetics with Hermann, Schelling and Hegel. Meanwhile, the term rhythm, used as synonymous with *meter*, *period* or *cycle*, became a common idiom in an ever growing number of disciplines: first, in art theory, philosophy, life science, medicine; then from the 1860s onwards, in economy, history, sociology, anthropology, urbanism and many other fields.

The significance of this expansion cannot be overrated. We should certainly pay more attention to the Platonic origin of most rhythmological concepts that are currently in use in human, social as well as natural science, because this origin entails significant biases. As we will see in the next volume, when we study its second wave, the Platonic preconception not only affects the description of phenomena, which most often misses the target or limits itself to marginal metrical aspects, but also their artistic, ethical and political implications. The authoritarian and somehow reactionary Platonic doctrine of *eurhythmia*, which already pervaded Schelling's and Hegel's perspectives, will be once again endorsed and developed at the end of the 19th century by many thinkers and practitioners such as Steiner, Jaques-Dalcroze or Laban and passed on to authoritarian regimes in the 20th century.

A second decisive change that occurred between 1750 and 1900 must, however, be taken into account. The period witnessed an unexpected renaissance of the two ancient *rhuthmic* paradigms that had disappeared since the beginning of the Roman Empire and that began to challenge the domination of the Platonic conception of rhythm.

First, in the wake of Spinoza's and Leibniz's works, the *Democritean physical paradigm* spectacularly re-emerged after centuries of oblivion. Embarrassed at first by the appropriation of the term rhythm for sheer technical uses—as Lucretius with the term *numerus*—then using it more freely, Diderot, Goethe, and Nietzsche tried, each in his own way, to figure out how to account for the organized flows—i.e. for the *rhuthmoi*—of the world. Each one of them developed a full-fledged *rhuthmic* ontology and radically changed the sense of the term rhythm.

A quasi simultaneous and similar change involved the *Aristotelian poetic paradigm*. In the previous volume, we saw that this particular perspective on rhythm was certainly the least developed in Antiquity—even if Aristotle had already provided it with very strong bases and if a few noticeable hints could be found too in Quintilian and even Augustine. From 1750 onwards, based on their own

practice, some writers, some musicians, and a few philosophers who happened to be also artists, began to challenge the age-old Idealist conception of rhythm, its modern guises and the deeper presuppositions which supported them. To meet with their practical needs, they forged new concepts that partly retrieved their ancient empiricist and poetic forms. Thus, from Diderot to Nietzsche, from the German Romantics and Humboldt to Hopkins and Mallarmé, theory of language and poetics, which had been abandoned for centuries, developed into remarkable *rhuthmic* empirical and theoretical bodies, and helped, in turn, to de-Platonize the concept of rhythm.

In tune with the collapse of the French Revolution in 1799 and the return to absolute monarchy all over Europe, both of these anti-Platonic movements met with fierce opposition due to the spread of the metric paradigm in poetry, music, dance, life science and the momentary suppression in aesthetics of the previous development based on poetics. But when in the 1840s this reactionary wave retreated, they came back on the artistic, scientific and philosophical agenda and became powerful forces whose effects lasted well beyond 1900.

One of the first benefits from this extraordinary renaissance was what we could term a *metaphysical deflation* of the original concept of *rhuthmos* or “way of flowing.”

We remember that in the Democritean tradition, at least as we know it through Lucretius, the cycle of generation, duration, corruption and disappearance of things was entirely determined by the change from *turbae*, or unorganized populations of atoms, into *turbines*, or vortices of atoms, and vice versa. Natural science resorted then to what Serres called “a general theory of turbulence.” In this worldview, there was no need for eternal essences. But, we also recall that this doctrine was strongly opposed and finally swept out by the triumph of the Aristotelian then, at the end of Antiquity, of the Platonic worldviews. While broadly supporting Idealism, the former still retained some elements of the ancient empiricism. If some ideas, as numbers, were considered as heavenly, most of them resided within the things. Individual beings were produced through processes shaping a matter according to a specific form which was also its final cause. Naturally, this was not the case with the latter. Instead, it proposed a purely Idealist perspective. Any individuation process, i.e. any coming-into-being was to be understood as led by otherworldly Forms that were more or less perfectly reflected in it.

In the 17th century, two large-scale attempts were made to oppose those two brands of Idealism which had, alternatively, dominated the whole period of Middle Ages and to get back to the lost ancient *rhuthmic* tradition. However, in order to give an account of the recent progress in physics without falling into the symmetrical traps of sheer Mechanism and sheer Idealism, Spinoza and Leibniz substituted the Democritean passive and immutable atoms with dynamic *modes* or *monads* and the Platonic Forms with *actual* or *active essences*. As Aristotle’s forms, they were not any longer separate from the things they were supporting and were still considered as eternal, but at least for Spinoza—Leibniz remaining faithful on this matter to Aristotle—they were rid of any teleological implication (see Michon, 2015a).

In the 18th century, similarly to Spinoza and Leibniz, Diderot and Goethe developed a pluralistic ontology while rebuffing both concepts of atom and Form. But chemistry and life science were now thriving, therefore they presupposed either sensible matter corpuscles or a broad Spinozist pantheism equating matter and spirit. Beings, whether living or not, were organized, supported and led by *drives*, which were partly equivalent to the Spinozist actual essences (devoid of any

teleological power) but which had no eternal counterpart anymore.

In the 19th century, Nietzsche carried on with this metaphysical deflation. On the one hand, he reduced the concept of atom, which he considered sheer anthropomorphic projection of our own subjectivity, to a mere point endowed with no extension and being in time before being in space. On the other hand, he tried to figure out their gathering-into-clusters by resorting to a will to power that was concurrently infinitesimal and all-encompassing.

This transformation of rhythmology partook in a larger critique of metaphysics which has often been noticed and rightly commented as a significant achievement of Modern Times. Yet, I think we would miss something important in this movement, should we limit it to a mere deconstruction of metaphysical presuppositions. It is indeed quite noticeable that in all cases—even in Nietzsche's as a matter of fact—this radical ontological deflation has been accompanied by the simultaneous development of a completely *new anthropology*.

This is, in my opinion, the second benefit of the *rhuthmic renaissance* which occurred between 1750 and 1900: while it deconstructed the most invasive by-products of metaphysical speculation, it foregrounded *empirical observation of human beings*, especially through three main lenses: linguistics, poetics, and history.

Although they paved the way for those disciplines, Spinoza and Leibniz were not able to really get them off the ground. This probably was their main limitation (for a detailed analysis, see Michon, 2015a).

Instead, the 18th century, particularly after 1750, witnessed an explosion of research in those fields that developed remarkably during the 19th and 20th centuries. Even if our current anthropology had to overcome the Eurocentric and historicist prejudices that were introduced during those years (Duchet, 1971; Said, 1978), it still owes a lot to this period in terms both of empirical observation and theoretical innovation.

Strikingly, all our analyses do converge upon what I propose to call a *radically historical anthropology*, even if some of them do unveil only a facet of it. Whether for Diderot or Humboldt, and later even, as we saw, for Nietzsche, language appears firstly as the basis of *human beings' radical historicity*. Indeed, language as *speech (le discours)* is an activity through which the human beings think about the world and themselves, interact, form social groups, produce poetry and art, develop science, knowledge and religion. But as *texts (les discours)*, language allows memorization, history, culture which all have huge feedback effects on the human beings who originally produced them.

Secondly, for Diderot, the German Romantics and Humboldt, as later for Nietzsche and for Baudelaire, Hopkins and Mallarmé, language is not made of a succession of signs but consists in a global system of marks whose particular way of flowing, i.e. its *rhuthmos*, supports the *signifiante*. Rhythm, if we take this term in the sense of poetics, far from consisting in a linear succession of time-lengths or stresses limited to verse or periodic prose, appears as a *global organizer of speech*—any speech—always involving both signifier and signified, affect and thought, body and

mind, speaker and hearer. Through its rhythms, i.e. through the deployment of fluent holistic meaning systems, language activity overcomes dualism.

Thirdly, for Diderot and the German Romantics as for Baudelaire, Hopkins and Mallarmé, since language is a *rhuthmic* activity which produces *rhuthmic* texts, it is instrumental in the formation and deformation of *subjectivity*. As the concept of anthropology, that of subjectivity has borne an appalling reputation during the second half of the 20th century. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud were supposed to have definitively demonstrated its illusory nature. Similarly, Heidegger and his followers thought that it was ontologically dissolved by the mere passing of time or the *différance* imposed upon it by the structure of language and its endless shift from sign to sign. As anthropology, subjectivity was only to be criticized, deconstructed and reduced to its material, corporeal, linguistic or ontological basis.

Our rhythmological research shows how far remote these creeds were from the empirical experience of most writers and artists—even of the few philosophers really involved in art. Subjectivity as supernatural being, soul, or as natural and intimate self, ego, in each case mysteriously ingrained in the body, is certainly to be discarded. But this does not mean that we should throw out the baby with the bathwater. Both theory of language and poetics, that started to build between 1750 and 1900 out of empirical experience, show that human subjectivity does exist but materializes in very particular ways.

These artists did not refer to what Benveniste was to name, a few decades later, the “formal apparatus of enunciation” which provides the speaker with a few linguistic empty places—such as *I-here-now*, present time and a few modulation tools—that belongs to no one but that can be occupied by everyone (Benveniste, 1974; Michon, 2010a). But, as we repeatedly saw, they perfectly grasped the existence of a poetic subject. Contrary to the linguistic subject which depends on very few empty forms of enunciation, this particular subject is supported by the whole fluent organization of discourse. As such it suggests to the hearer or reader a certain number of specific values, emotions and memories, but it is also, paradoxically, open to endless re-actualizations. It transforms specific experiences into universally sharable discourses (Meschonnic, 1982; Michon 2010a).

The last benefit of the *rhuthmic* renaissance that needs to be mentioned concerns the fate of *materialism* in Modern Times. We saw, in the previous volume, that it remained divided throughout Antiquity. Due to his rejection of the Democritean atomism, Aristotle’s groundbreaking work on poetics stayed separate from the physical tradition. We do not know if and what Democritus wrote on language and literature, but Lucretius’ case shows quite clearly that the divide remained fully active until the 1st century BC, after which date both *rhuthmic* paradigms disappeared altogether.

This situation changed radically after 1750. I regret not having been able to provide a full study of Goethe’s rhythmological contribution, which would have certainly enriched our knowledge of the tensions and crossed influences between poetics and natural science during the Enlightenment. It is something that remains to do (yet for an introduction to Goethe’s particular materialism, see John, 2013). Nevertheless, we have now enough evidence that the two main branches of materialist thinking, that had been in opposition for centuries, began to merge.

For the first time in the West, a *materialist strategy* surfaced that built simultaneously on physical

and poetic grounds, i.e. on ontological as much as anthropological premises. In Diderot's, as in Goethe's and Nietzsche's *rhuthmic* worldviews, there was to be no opposition anymore between signified and signifier, thought and language, nature and culture, matter and spirit, poetics and physics. We saw that such an achievement was fragile and that some relapse and discrepancy jeopardized these endeavors. Nevertheless, this new understanding of rhythm made possible to think of materialism in an entirely new way—and vice versa. I hope to be able to show in the next volumes how deeply that materialist strategy transformed our view of scientific and artistic as well as ethical and political issues.