

***Elements of Rhythmology* vol. 3 - Preface**

The Spread of Metron from the 1840s to the 1910s

Tuesday 26 March 2019, by [Pascal Michon](#)

It is often said that the term rhythm has as many meanings as the number of people who use it. This essay tries to argue to the contrary. Nowadays, the most common definition relies on a metric basis that spread and became dominant in our culture during the 19th century.

A previous essay has dealt with the history of rhythm in Antiquity. It has uncovered the intricate and conflictive development of three theoretical prototypes: the *Democritean physical*, the *Platonic metric*, and the *Aristotelian poetic paradigms*. It has also thrown light on the progressive erasure, in the last centuries of the previous era, of the first and third of these paradigms to the benefit of the second one that gained complete supremacy in the last centuries of Antiquity before dominating the whole period of the Middle Ages.

The second installment of this series was principally meant to bring to light the reemergence between 1750 and 1900, thanks to a series of poets, artists and philosophers, of the two paradigms that had vanished in Antiquity and to evaluate the consequences of their reintroduction into modern Western culture, particularly their potential, still largely unexploited, for renewal. The investigation into the spread of the Platonic paradigm was therefore limited to two particular fields and periods of great significance for Western history: first, medicine and life science from the middle of the 16th century to the end of the 19th century; second, poetic metric and idealist philosophy during the first three decades of the 19th century. The first series of evidence that I was able to gather showed that these fields have been instrumental in the transmission of the ancient and medieval Platonic model to the Moderns and its perpetuation till the 19th century. However, I could not go any further.

The research presented in this new volume has been mostly motivated by this regret. It will follow the main channels that have been instrumental in the spread of *metron* - meter, between the 1840s and the 1910s. After 1840, the metric model of rhythm experienced a dramatic development first through a line of disciplines pertaining to *natural science*. From medicine, it penetrated during the 1840s and 1850s into physiology, and between the 1870s and the 1890s, in two distinct waves, into psychology. Concurrently, it spread into a second line pertaining to *aesthetics*. From architecture, sculpture and painting, where it had been variously used since the Renaissance, but also from physiology and psychology, it entered in the 1840s into art history, where it steadily grew in popularity, before becoming a subject of fierce debate in the 1890s and 1900s, and finally a commonplace in most disciplines dealing with the fine arts between 1900 and 1914. Lastly, from the 1890s—thus quite late compared to the two previous cases—it penetrated into the emerging *social science* where it was translated, either from physiology, music, or sometimes poetry, into economics, sociology, and anthropology. By 1914, the Platonic metric paradigm had clearly gotten the upper hand over a large section of the scientific life.

Although there is a kind of strong Platonic family resemblance between all scientific discourses

collected in this essay, I have been vigilant, though, not to reduce them to already known features and to meticulously retrace each of their particular ways to address the issue of rhythm. I have also been careful to identify the numerous crisscrossing influences between these disciplines, as well as between them and the artistic practices that had traditionally maintained the use of the notion of rhythm. As in previous volumes, to avoid the all-too-common flimsiness of lot of contemporary essays based on vague comments of scarce empirical evidence, I have willingly provided the reader with long citations that I have often translated or re-translated myself for better accuracy and conceptual homogeneity. [1]

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Footnotes

[1] To make it more comfortable for the reader, I translated the titles of the works I surveyed into English but, for the sake of greater clarity, I provided the dates and the page numbers *in the original version* even when I used other scholars' translations.