

Elements of Rhythmology vol. 1 – Conclusion

Thursday 1 September 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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The first objective of this book was to examine the most ancient roots of Western rhythmology and clarify the various *concepts* on which it rests. Our investigation has shown that three different theoretical paradigms surfaced between the 5th and the 4th centuries BC. We then followed, over a period of more than thousand years, their complex relations, their respective fates, and the final global shift that occurred between the 3rd and the 6th centuries BC. The overall picture that results from this analysis is quite intricate but instructive.

1. To begin with, it is worth noting that the first rhythmic paradigm emerged in the 5th century BC among materialist thinkers such as Leucippus and Democritus. It developed during the 4th and the 3rd centuries with Epicurus and Archimedes and reached its final splendor in the 1st century BC with Lucretius. After that date, it sank into oblivion and remained entirely forgotten until its recovery at the end of the 16th century and during the 17th century with Bruno, Gassendi and Spinoza.

This paradigm was very different from the present common notion of rhythm. It was based on the concept of *rhuthmós*, i.e. a materialist and proto-empiricist concept of form. A *rhuthmós* was not a “Form,” an “Idea,” an εἶδος (*eîdos*), but a shape “as it presents itself to the eyes” of the observer. It commonly meant a “temporary disposition of something flowing.” Far from being outer-worldly, it belonged to phenomenal world. Furthermore, as Benveniste noticed, etymologically this form did not “designate the fulfillment of [a] notion but the particular modality of its fulfillment.” Hence it was not fixed, immobile, and eternal, but it had, so to speak, a life of its own. This original *rhuthmós* reappeared a few centuries later in the form of Lucretius’ *turbo* which meant too an impermanent form appearing and lasting for a certain period of time in a flow, and observable by human beings.

2. The second paradigm was initiated by Plato in the first half of the 4th century BC, probably against the previous one. It developed during the second part of the 4th century BC through Aristotle and his followers in the Peripatetic school, especially Aristoxenus. Eventually, it was appropriated by the 3rd century Alexandrian physician Herophilus and his numerous followers, then transformed during the first two centuries of the Roman Empire by the physicians of the Pneumatic school and especially Galen into a canonical medical theory which was to be used at least until the Renaissance. Simultaneously, the Platonic paradigm was adopted on Italian soil and developed further, between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, by Cicero, Vitruvius and Quintilian. It finally experienced a remarkable dissemination through Plotinus and Aristides Quintilianus in the 3rd century AD, Ambrose and Augustine in the 4th century AD, and finally Boethius in the early 6th century AD. It remained the dominant rhythmological paradigm throughout the Middle Ages and started to be efficiently opposed only in the 17th and 18th centuries (Michon, 2015a).

Plato deeply transformed the concept of *rhuthmós* and determined the main features of the concept

of *rhythm* for centuries. By subjugating the *rhuthmós* to an arithmetical *métron*, he enforced his doctrine of Forms against the previous one which was based on improvised, temporary forms or variable ways of flowing. The apparently chaotic becoming, the multiple and changeable duration, could be therefore regularly divided into series of alternate times and related to a common measure determined by a simplistic mathematic and a naive astronomy, respectively based on the series of rational numbers and the divine, circular and perfect revolutions of the heavenly bodies.

3. The third paradigm popped up in various parts of Aristotle's work during the second half of the 4th century BC. As one may know, the latter was during his youth a faithful follower of Plato, but when he reached a certain level of maturity he took some distance from his master. In the *Politics*, the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, Aristotle opened entirely new spaces for rhythmology by analyzing the rhythms of discourse in oratory and poetry, which could not be reduced without great loss to the Platonic paradigm. In the Roman world, between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, this new rhythmic paradigm was strangely ignored by Lucretius but it was still illustrated by Cicero and Quintilian, while being though subjected to a larger metric and rhetoric framework. After that, it almost entirely disappeared, except in a very few marginal instances, because of the radical rejection of empirical art by neo-Platonic philosophers in the 3rd century AD as well as by Christian thinkers between the 4th and the 6th centuries.

This third meaning of the term *rhuthmós* is maybe the most difficult to reconstitute. In Antiquity, it is only in nascent state, yet some of its elements are already noticeable. In short—and this is of the utmost importance—the poetic *rhuthmós* can be compared to a translation of the physical concept of form to language and literature. From the poetics perspective, the famous Platonic definition as proportionate sequence of time-lengths is actually only a limited part of rhythm which constitutes by itself a much larger category. Poetic rhythm may be defined as the way a discourse is flowing, the modality of its performance and therefore of conveying meaning. That is why it is not limited to the linear arrangement of words, but embraces every aspects of discourse: lexicon, syntax, quantity of syllables, accentuation, sound echoes, voice, pronunciation, tone, tempo, even delivery, gestures and features (for a modern perspective on this phenomenon see Meschonnic, 1982, p. 216-217). Rhythm entails a temporal dynamic complexity. If taken in this sense, rhythm appears as a holistic organizer of the process of *significance* which, as Aristotle suggested, gives language its "taste"—maybe as much as its "music," as it is commonly claimed—i.e. its artistic, ethical and political value. It sheds some light back on the physical concept of form by contrasting it with a notion that is not reducible to a sheer *turbo*, although it shares with it some important features.

The second objective of this book was *methodological* and *epistemological*. It is the first installment of a series that hopefully should cover the whole history of rhythm in the West. Such a large project needs to be implemented according to a few simple rules.

1. We will have to address a profusion of information and therefore to discuss them, to sort them out, to classify them, yet without losing too much philological accuracy. This is the reason why we should take great care to reconstitute, as much as possible, the original texts and re-translate them if necessary. Most of the available translations are indeed affected by incoherence and debatable theoretical presuppositions.

2. We will have to balance the philosophical inquiry, which always bears the danger of excessive abstraction, with other kinds of knowledge: mathematics, physics and living science, but also

linguistics, poetics, theory of language, history, sociology, anthropology—in order to remain as close as possible to empirical facts. And vice versa, we will have to transcend sheer empiricism and sterile disciplinary specialization, which have most unfortunately invaded the academic world these last decades, with a larger theoretical view. There is no progress in knowledge without both observation and theory.

3. We will have to take into account a number of epistemological obstacles which could hamper further development of rhythmology. Our analysis has shown how the *Platonic paradigm of rhythm* has become progressively dominant in the West during Antiquity and why, although it has been partly replaced in Modern Times by other models, it has retained a great deal of power up to now. Consequently, one of the tasks of the next volumes will be to carry on with its historical deconstruction by precisely assessing its remaining power, which seems at first look to mainly consist in sustaining a vague but pervasive idealism, but which has also occasionally fueled noticeable reactionary attempts. This will demand great attention not to indulge in any of its modern forms.

4. But we will have to be extra-careful on the other side of the divide—the one that I suggest to call *rhuthmological*—too. As we happened to realize by studying Lucretius, the two other rhythmic paradigms share a common pre-Platonic definition of *rhuthmos*; they both are opposed to the Platonic doctrine of Forms, and therefore of science as well as art and society; they both share empiricist and partly materialist presuppositions; but they are not without some discrepancies of their own, which have had eventually significant artistic, ethical and political consequences.

On the one hand, the Democritean physical paradigm lacked a theory of language, a theory of poetry and more generally a theory of art, which would have been consistent with its own ontological presuppositions. This was probably the main reason for the suggestion by Lucretius—and after him Serres and maybe even Barthes—of an ethics and a politics limited to the well-being among a limited circle of friends. It is true that, on the other hand, the Aristotelian poetic paradigm lacked more elaborated physics and mathematics, which would allow it to overcome the limitations of the outdated doctrines of nature and number on which it has remained based for centuries. This second rhythmological divide between a more naturalistic and a more anthropological perspective will be certainly very difficult to overcome.

Therefore, we certainly must recuperate both physical and poetic models of rhythm, which have been repressed for centuries by an all-pervasive idealistic paradigm, but we should not disregard the very deep gaps between rhythm theories based on theory of language and poetics, on the one hand, and those based on mathematics, physics and living sciences, on the other.

5. In addition to that, the rhythm theories based on theory of language are not themselves without tricky split. We saw while studying Aristotle's contribution to rhetoric and poetics that quite conflicting interpretations were developed from it, concerning the activity of language, the production of meaning, and particularly the respective theoretical statuses of rhythm and metaphor, therefore of poetics and rhetoric. Some modern thinkers, as Derrida, Kofman and De Man, highlighted the consequences of what they saw as the "structure of language" and its "composition out of signs." This view prompted them to consider language as conveying meaning as a stream that not only could never be stopped but that had no organization at all. In this perspective, metaphor was all and rhythm nothing; rhetoric absorbed poetics. Instead, others thinkers as Benveniste and

Meschonnic, underlined the fact that language is certainly not a “structure,” that it is primarily an “activity,” which naturally endows it with temporality but which does not make it either devoid of any organization or arrangement. For them—rightly in my opinion—rhythm was more important than metaphor, and therefore rhetoric should be incorporated into poetics and not the other way around.

Hence, a third rhythmological divide must also be addressed. Opposing Platonic idealism is fine but if the alternative is sheer poststructuralism as for Derrida and most of his followers, or, as a matter of fact, sheer naturalism as for Serres and other modern philosophers, I think we will miss the point. It is true that unlike Serres’ naturalistic view, Deconstruction takes language into account but it proposes to substitute Platonic idealism with a kind of mere inversion of the idealistic presuppositions: no more substance and presence, but sheer flow and dissolution. Deconstruction ignores rhythm and overrates rhetoric at the expense of poetics. This perspective was acceptable when the world was systematized like in the second part of the 20th century but it has proved more and more limited in the fluid world that appeared in the last decades. One even wonders if sometimes Deconstruction and postmodernism have not become, unwillingly for sure, part of the official ideology of the neocapitalist world.

6. In short, we will have to deal with three nested divides: Platonic vs non-Platonic paradigms; among the non-Platonic paradigms, physical vs language-based paradigms; among the language-based paradigms, rhetoric vs poetics paradigms. My position is that rhythmology should rest on the right part of each one of these alternatives. Only by choosing this side will we be able to develop a well grounded historical and anthropological conception of rhythm, to really grasp the meaning of the rhythmic phenomena with which we will have to deal, to oppose efficiently the invasion of our lives by rhythmic demands coming from authoritarian and delirious religious or political powers, as well as their dissolution by the market flows.

Old theories based on *structure* and *system* cannot help us anymore today. They fairly fitted with the systemized world which was set up at the end of World War II and their suitability lasted as long as this world existed. In the 1980s and 1990s *individual* and *difference* became significant paradigms in human and social science because they were more adequate, each in its own opposite way, to the transformation that was occurring. But now, we are facing an entirely new world which formed at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. All former scientific paradigms have not disappeared yet; some are indeed still quite successful, at least in scholastic and cultural milieus; but we need badly new ones. My thesis is that *rhuthmos* should certainly be one of them.

The last objective of this book concerned the *ethical* and *political* dimensions of rhythmology. Indeed, theories are never devoid of practical causes nor of practical consequences. We will see again plenty of examples of that when we come to Modern Times.

1. To avoid burdening the reader with too many external considerations, I did not look very deeply into the historical context of the successive theoretical shifts we have witnessed. But there are good reasons to believe that the slow if sometimes hustled global drifting of ancient rhythmology towards idealistic views and finally the triumph of the Platonic metric paradigm upon his two competitors had something to do with the successive shifts from more or less democratic city-states to an aristocratic republic, then from a moderate monarchy to a militarized power, as well as with the parallel transformation of the social status of the dominant group in society, and the huge

changeover, during the last period, from an open polytheism to a dominating Christian monotheism. We saw that this progression was far from regular and took many turns, but it is indubitable that at the end of Antiquity, both Ambrose, Augustine and Boethius heralded a completely Platonized conception of rhythm which eventually dominated Western conceptual history until the 17th and 18th century and, as a matter of fact, is still quite common today.

2. As now for the consequences, we have plenty of evidence that each paradigm entailed particular ethical or political choices. It is not necessary to repeat here what has been thoroughly analyzed above, however one may notice a great divide forming in Antiquity. The artistic, ethical and political programs that were related with both physical and poetic paradigms were utterly opposed to the authoritarian agenda proposed by Plato. Whereas the Platonic metric paradigm implicated strong regulation by the State and his servants of social, language and body rhythms, both the Democritean physical and Aristotelian poetic paradigms entailed the construction of democracy, the pursuit of individual freedom, and the enhancement of one's life. We saw how this ethical and political purpose already varied substantially in the Greek world as soon as the late 4th century BC, how it was reshuffled at the end of the Roman republic and how it finally disappeared between the 1st and the 3rd centuries in a world that was increasingly subjected to military and Christian rule.

At the end of this thousand-year history, if a Christian should still care for rhythm, it was not anymore to become a full citizen in a more or less democratic city-state, nor to enjoy life among a limited circle of friends, nor to train himself to public service in an aristocratic republic, nor to engage in a bureaucratic career in an imperial state, nor even to try to live in harmony with the great living cosmos far from politics. The only proper goals were, on the one hand, to prepare to eternal life and, on the other hand, to integrate into Church community.

In other words, the concept of *rhuthmos* has never been only a technical concept that denoted some formal features of poetry, music and dance. It has always entailed ethical and political stances that sometimes supported, sometimes opposed the attempts by the state, the religious power and, now, the so-called "invisible hand" of the market—which has become pretty much visible lately—to rhythmize social groups, bodies and discourses according to their needs. One of the aims of this study will be to highlight the utopian content of his vis-à-vis: the concept of *rhuthmos*.

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