

Preface - *Elements of Rhythmology* - Vol. 4

Friday 2 April 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Different groups spread around an uninhabited
centre = the very principles of idiorrhymic organizations

(I'd like a less voluntarist term: constellations?).

(R. Barthes, *How to live together*, 1977, p. 51)

The disciplines have closed down upon mutilated objects.

Thus, closed knowledge has everywhere destroyed or hidden

the solidarities, the articulations, the ecology of beings and

of acts, existence! (E. Morin, *Method*, 1977, p. 205)

During the past fifteen years, rhythmanalysis has been thriving in many disciplines, especially in the English-speaking scientific world. As a result, the figure of Henri Lefebvre has reemerged after a long period of oblivion and has become a kind of totem in rhythmanalytical studies. Giving honor where honor is due, this book begins with a study on Lefebvre's contribution. But, in the 1970s and 1980s, he was by far not the only one important thinker interested in rhythm. In fact, he belonged to a sort of "constellation" of linguists, sociologists, philosophers, specialists in literature and art, all of whom took rhythm as a key subject.

Everyone interested in humanities and cultural studies knows the series of structuralist works published during the 1960s, especially by Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan during the pivotal year 1966, but it is less often noticed that a series of works, having this time rhythm as central concern, has been carried out in France during the following decade, by Michel Foucault, Émile Benveniste, Roland Barthes, Michel Serres, Edgar Morin, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Henri Meschonnic, both in reaction against the declining structuralist and systemist hegemony and in opposition against the fast-rising individualist, differentialist and postmodern paradigms.

This volume is the fourth installment in a series that aims to cover the entire history of the concept of rhythm in Western culture from the earliest Greek reflections on the subject. After having followed the emergence, struggles, successes and sometimes decline of the three major rhythmic models in Antiquity—the Democritean physical, the Platonic metric and the Aristotelian poetic

paradigms (Vol. 1)—I attempted to reconstruct the discontinuous reemergence since the Renaissance of the Democritean and Aristotelian paradigms, which had been ignored during most of the Middle Ages (Vol. 2), and the spectacular diffusion of the Platonic metric model during the 19th century (Vol. 3). For lack of time and because I have already documented a small part of it in a previous book (Michon, 2005/2016), I decided to jump over the first half of the 20th century, which, however, has been a flourishing period for rhythm both as a subject and as a tool, and to resume my research from the 1970s. I hope to one day be able to return to this fascinating period.

In Volume 4, I will try to show the richness and the complexity of the contributions made in the 1970s. These involved a powerful critique of the Platonic metric paradigm and a remarkable promotion of both the Democritean physical and Aristotelian poetic paradigms. Rhythmanalysis passed, over a very few years, from the first essays of Lefebvre and Foucault, mainly interested in the rhythms of society, individual and time, to those of Benveniste and Barthes, highlighting the entirely new question of the *rhuthmoi* of language, subject and self, and finally to those of Serres and Morin, who introduced in turn, on a comparable basis, that of the *rhuthmoi* of nature, machines and information. While Lefebvre's illuminating critique of what he called the "linear rhythms" which had invaded modern societies still remained partly tinged with a Platonic undertone, those of Foucault developed a remarkable social and political critique which showed the full power of metrics when it began to be applied in the West to bodies and souls of prisoners, students, soldiers and workers. Benveniste, for his part, had already revealed at the beginning of the 1950s the full significance of the concept of *rhuthmos*. From the end of the 1950s until the middle of the 1970s, he sketched an entirely new theory of language highlighting its flowing nature, which contrasted drastically with the main philosophical and theoretical perspectives of the time, and an articulate theory of subjectivity plainly consistent with it. Using Benveniste's study of the notion of rhythm, Barthes then suggested the outlines of a new idiorrhhythmic ethics. Finally, Serres and Morin worked, on comparable bases although neglecting or ignoring Benveniste, to marry the old Democritean and Lucretian views with the latest discoveries in physics and biology.

This overview would not be complete, though, without going through two extraordinary contributions, published at the very beginning of the next decade but which had been written during the last part of the 1970s: Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2* (1980) and Meschonnic's *Critique of Rhythm: For an Anthropology of Language* (1982). Since these books are both enormous (respectively 645- and 729-page long), both trying to discuss thoroughly nothing less than the whole scientific knowledge accumulated during the previous decades, and more, on the subjects that motivated them, both epitomizing the misunderstandings and conflicts which have marred rhythmanalysis and rhythmology since the 1970s, I will devote Volume 5 and 6 to their thorough analysis and confrontation. We will then be able to better understand the critical and theoretical resources the rhythmic constellation made available to us, but also its limitations.

Indeed, had this series of innovative works interacted and ultimately united, it could have triggered what one might call a "paradigm shift"—although in a different sense from Kuhn who belonged to the structuralist and systemic era. However, the rhythmic constellation did not bring about the changes one would have expected and, for a long time, remained almost invisible in the heavens. Its slightly noticeable conjunction was entirely obfuscated in the 1990s by the rise of shiny new stars, in particular individualism, differentialism and postmodernism.

Therefore, if we want to reconnect with this period and with its extraordinary contribution to

rhythmanalysis and rhythmology, we must first explore these works in depth for themselves, but we must also understand the reasons for their inability to significantly modify the intellectual landscape of the time. As we will see, many factors can certainly explain this failure and temporary disappearance. Let us mention, for the moment, only two of them.

One is certainly the lack of confrontation or debate between the members of the rhythmic constellation. Quite surprisingly, considering that they belonged to the same Parisian intellectual milieu, that they worked sometimes in the same academic institutions, rhythm has never been among these thinkers an issue thematized and discussed for itself. All of them approached it without however ever transforming it into a scientific paradigm comparable to those which prevailed before or to those which would do so soon in the decades to come.

Another factor, less visible but which involved deeper divisions in the constellation, was the difficulty that most of the stars situated on the Democritean physical edge of the rhythmic constellation had to relate to other edge, the Aristotelian, linguistic and poetic one. As we will see, what was at stake was in fact the place of language and anthropology respectively to physics, biology and natural science. We will have to come back to these vexing problems and maybe a few more.

To be honest, I must say that I deliberately left aside one contribution that concerns our subject, that of Henri Maldiney (1912-2013). In 1973, Maldiney, who taught psychology, philosophy and aesthetics at the University of Lyon, republished in a collection of essays a short paper entitled "*L'esthétique des rythmes - Aesthetics of Rhythms*" (1st ed. 1967). Aside from the fact that he would not fully develop the ideas contained in this article until the 1980s and 1990s, the main reason for not including him in this survey concerns his intellectual distance from most members of the constellation. If he used Benveniste's reassessment of the notion of rhythm and joined his contemporaries in rejecting the metric model to the benefit of the concept of *rhuthmos*, he nevertheless applied the latter to a phenomenological analysis of human existence and feeling (*le sentir*) which was at odds with the main concerns of his peers who, for their part, came either from Marxism, from the history of science, or from structuralism. While all members of the constellation, except maybe Lefebvre, rejected Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, he, for his part, perpetuated this tradition, while resuming with older research, based on psychology, on the role of rhythm in aesthetics, architecture and urban planning that we encountered in Volume 3 of this series (Part 2: "The Spread into Aesthetics").

Although my approach presents itself as a history of the uses of the concept of rhythm, it is in no way only a historical reconstruction, whether in the style of the history of science or in that of the history of ideas. It constitutes a plain philosophical enterprise and aims, through a careful reading of our predecessors, at making possible the emergence of a new scientific paradigm for the 21st century.

As in previous volumes, I have been very careful not to claim anything without relying on tangible evidence taken directly from the texts. This is why I have provided the reader with long quotes which may give him or her the possibility to check what I assert and even to come to conclusions differing from mine [1]. I know that the volume of this study has increased consequently but I think it was worth it, not only because it now constitutes one of the largest databases on the subject, but also because this method has allowed a careful construction of my interpretations. Needless to say, by this I also intended to strongly oppose today's favor for short, hastily written and hastily read

essays and articles, and to resist the pernicious intellectual rhythm which has permeated academic life at least for the past two decades.

However, if one does not have time for a full read, he or she can easily jump over the quotes and browse the book faster. As a matter of fact, by choosing his or her own reading rhythm the reader will tackle directly and very practically one of the most important issues addressed in this book: in Barthes' own words, the possibility of developing an "idiorrhymy," or in an approximately Woolfian wording, *a rhythm of one's own*.

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Footnotes

[1] When the translation is mine, the page number is that of the original edition. When I indicate the name of the translator, the page number refers to the English edition.