

Conclusion - An Essay on *Rhuthmology* - The Naturalistic Cluster – Part 5

Monday 11 October 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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Insights and Difficulties Concerning Literature and Art

Both Serres and Morin and Deleuze & Guattari encountered profound difficulties in the treatment of literature and art. The hyperpragmatist framework they all shared had unfortunate consequences that, unsurprisingly, were similar to those encountered with language.

5.1 Just like in Serres' paradoxical essay on Lucretius, literature and art were almost totally absent from Morin's point of view, who nevertheless intended to cover the whole range of modern scientific knowledge. Naturally, one could judge that *Method* was already, in itself, an extraordinary achievement which covered nothing less than physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology, ecodynamics, mathematics, cybernetics and the social sciences. And there is no doubt about it. But we cannot stop at the quantity of knowledge processed and articulated into a systematic whole and we must also take into account the presuppositions and the consequences of this systematization. In fact, a great number of disciplines comprising the humanities, the cultural studies, linguistics, poetics and art theory were lacking in Morin's naturalistic perspective or were treated rather superficially. And this could not but have embarrassing effects on the general "en-cyclo-pedic theory" he intended to propose. Like his predecessor, Morin not only ignored the innovative practices and theories introduced from the mid-19th century by writers, artists and theoreticians such as Baudelaire, Hopkins, or Mallarmé (see Vol. 2, Chap. 8), but he also paid no attention to the more recent linguistics and poetics developed by Benveniste and Meschonnic.

5.2 As for Deleuze and Guattari we saw that, by contrast, they were fully aware of the importance of literary and artistic issues, and were even capable of developing remarkable arguments which sometimes led them very close to the Aristotelian poetic side of the rhythmic constellation.

5.2.1 Chapter 4, for example, provided a series of noticeable insights concerning the concept of "poetic rhythm."

5.2.1.1 We remember that while discussing the "postulate" of structural linguistics which affirmed that "languages" are "homogeneous systems" composed of "constants or universals," Deleuze and Guattari opportunely cited Kafka, Beckett, Gherasim Luca, Jean-Luc Godard. Each of them, they noted, gave the German or the French language a whole new look—or better yet, a whole new sound. Each had "his own procedure of variation, his own widened chromaticism, his own mad production of speeds and intervals," in other words, his own manner of making his own language flow. Each author invented his "own language - *sa propre langue*," and made it "a pure continuum of values and intensities." "All elements of language" were placed "in a state of continuous variation,

for example, the impact of tone on phonemes, accent on morphemes, or intonation on syntax.”

5.2.1.2 Language thus seemed to become “secret” or private but it actually remained open to ever new uses, performances and interpretations. Deleuze and Guattari did not emphasize this aspect but it was implied by their next argument. In the following section devoted to a discussion of the fourth “postulate,” according to which “language can be scientifically studied only under the conditions of a standard or major language,” they added that literature was basically about making one’s language become “minor,” precisely by placing it “in a state of continuous variation” and by “stretching tensors through it.” It was like becoming a “foreigner” in one’s own tongue. But, this becoming secret and foreign was obviously shareable or, better still, literature drew its very strength of propagation from its power of estrangement.

5.2.1.3 Consequently, there was no such thing as a set of linguistic constants which one varied, as in structuralism, or a set of linguistic norms from which each figure of style would be a deviation, as in rhetoric. On the contrary, each discourse set up a networks of tensions which occurred through “tensors” like “atypical” or “agrammatical” expressions, or more simply a repetitive use of a conjunction. Deleuze and Guattari emphasized that this tensive and creative power was not limited to “poets, children, and lunatics.” It was actually the normal form of language activity, even in the most ordinary speech. Therefore, performing a discourse—what Deleuze and Guattari called an “assemblage of enunciations”—was not simply using the tongue (*la langue*) in a more or less distorted way. It was not a violation or even a deformation of the language norm. It entailed “a come-and-go between different types of variables,” which “effectuate[d] the machine in unison, in the sum of their relations.” In short, it involved a series of tensions, speeds, specific values rendering a discourse entirely specific to one author while remaining entirely shareable by an open-ended series of readers in the future and in other social groups.

5.2.2 In the same vein, Chapter 11, which was devoted to the “refrain” and the constitution of “territory,” compared literature with architecture and introduced the remarkable notion of “complex rhythmic personage or character” bringing “consistency” to heterogeneous fluid entities. This was a brief but remarkable insight into one of the most important rhythmological issues.

5.2.3 Although sometimes in a somewhat obscure way, these analyses rightly pointed to phenomena that had been observed by many writers and a few theoreticians. In literature, but it is also partly true in ordinary situation of speech, the language is used, or better still, made flowing, each time in a new way. Each writer, each speaker, invents his or her “own language” by giving it new *rhuthmoi*, new “values and intensities.” His or her language may thus seem to become private but in fact remains open to re-actualization, allowing intercommunication and interaction.

5.2.3.1 Benveniste, in an interview dated 1968 in which he commented on Chomsky’s generative linguistics, had indeed underlined the fact that, contrarily to Chomsky’s claim, “all men invent their own tongue [*leur propre langue*] at the moment and each one in a distinctive way, and each time in a new way.” This fundamentally regenerative process concerns sentences, as well as words, down to the most banal locution as “hello!” Against all structuralist views, Benveniste insisted that, in real pragmatic situation of communication, it is “no longer the constituent elements that count” but “the complete organization of the whole, the original arrangement.”

5.2.3.2 Meschonnic, for his part, documented similar phenomena, this time at the text level, in *Écrire Hugo, Pour la poétique IV* and in *Critique Of Rhythm: Historical Anthropology of Language* published respectively in 1977 and in 1982. To oppose any temptation to separate between linguistics and poetics, Meschonnic first argued against Austin, who considered poetry as “a parasitic use” of ordinary language, insisting for his part on the continuity between ordinary and poetic language. Having secured this relation, Meschonnic described how each author “re-produces” the language – *la langue* in which he or she writes in a way that is entirely specific to him or her, while still being fully sharable. Just as Deleuze and Guattari, who explained this rather surprising effect by the use of “tensors,” which escape linguistic categories, establish “pragmatic values essential to assemblages of enunciation,” and “effectuate the machine [of the language] in unison, in the sum of their relations [*toutes à la fois [...] d’après l’ensemble de leurs rapports*],” Meschonnic described it as a particular form of “enunciation” which produces “values specific to one discourse and only one” through the global organization of its “prosodic and rhythmic system.” (see Vol. 6)

5.2.4 At the end of Chapter 11, Deleuze and Guattari presented an enlightening theory regarding the history of modern art which draw attention to both the growing interest of artists and writers in rhythm and their shift over the course of the 19th century from *metrics* to *rhuthmics*. Although most of the examples provided on this occasion were drawn from the visual arts and music, this reconstruction provided a historical framework that accounted fairly well for the many attempts since the end of the 18th century to develop a non-metric conception of rhythm (for a detailed analysis of this shift, see Vol. 2, Part. 2 and 4).

5.2.4.1 By contrast with the Classical period, “Romanticism” had been, they claimed, the period of “territorialization” of art. Instead of seeking “de jure universality” and of building “metric milieus,” artists “territorialized themselves” and built “territorial assemblages” based on “rhythmic characters” and “melodic landscapes.” Artists no longer attempted to tame Chaos by enveloping it in solid and well-measured forms, but, on the contrary, to gather what Deleuze and Guattari called “the forces of the Earth”—that is to say, although this remained unclear, both the most fundamental forces of the Naturing Nature and those of the Globe as now deeply “territorialized”—and to find in them a deeper “ground or foundation.” This new perspective explained why art now simultaneously involved the production of what they called a “melodic territorial refrain” and an unquenchable nostalgia for the “primal refrain,” the “rhythmic refrain of the Earth.” The unreachable virtuality of the “eternal breathing of the Earth,” here more clearly the *Natura Naturans*, explained why artists “experience[d] the territory” as “necessarily lost” and themselves as “an exile, a voyager.”

5.2.4.2 Art now addressed a world that was not any longer *chaotic* but fundamentally *rhuthmic*. Consequently, the question of form shifted from *metrics* to *rhuthmics*. Artistic material and artistic form were both conceived as “in development” or “moving.” Since there were no longer “milieus” and “substances” to be ordered or metrified, nor definite “codes” or “forms” usable for this purpose, artistic matter transformed into a “*moving matter in a continuous variation*,” while artistic form became a “*form in continuous development*.” The recognition and promotion of the *rhuthmic* nature of the world and of art led artists to seek to compensate for the loss of their ordering power by developing “great forms,” such as the literary cycles or pictorial series by Balzac, Monet or Proust, which would provide large frames to the magmatic materials they had now to deal with.

5.2.4.3 The “modern age”—starting from the end of the 19th century—was the third stage in Deleuze and Guattari’s grand history of art. Instead of aiming at dominating and metrifying “Chaos,” instead of riding “the forces of the Earth” and gathering “territories” through forms in continuous

development, artistic modernity aimed at capturing and harnessing “the forces of the Cosmos.” The latter was the whole universe as it was now diversified by physics but also the whole world as it was unified by industrial development, capitalism and imperialism as well as by the nuclear danger of total destruction—they did not know yet about globalization but they certainly would have recognized it as a new and powerful element in what they called the “age of the cosmic.”

5.2.4.4 While Romanticism had introduced the idea of a fundamentally *rhuthmic* world but had tried nonetheless to encompass it through large flowing forms, Modernity—as Foucault and Meschonnic, Deleuze and Guattari explicitly rejected Lyotard’s idea of a postmodernity—took over the postulate of a *rhuthmic* world but dramatically changed its response to its challenge. Since this world was now entirely molecularized and flowing, modern art proposed to build only local and limited apparatuses capable of “harnessing Cosmic forces.” The artistic problem was no longer a question of finding how to begin organizing or “re-creating” the world as in Classicism, or how to find its deepest base in the Earth and “re-founding it” in order to produce local or larger “territorialized assemblages” as in Romanticism. It now became “how to consolidate the material, make it consistent, so that it [could] harness unthinkable, invisible, nonsonorous forces.” Art consisted both in dealing with “deterritorialized” and “molecularized” matter and in installing pockets of “consistency or consolidation” capable of harnessing “cosmic forces.”

5.2.4.5 These historical conditions explained a novel interest in the ways of giving a specific “consistency” to the “fuzzy aggregates” of molecularized matter they had to work with. The idea emerged that it necessitated both an internal “densification” but also, paradoxically, a greater “discernability” of the elements composing them. In other words, each work had to convert fuzziness into consistency by setting up a network of inner tensions which would make its elements solidary but discernible. Densification necessitated internal intensification.

5.2.4.6 This new type of art naturally had ethical and political correlates. The artists discarded the solitary romantic figures and relinquished both the forces of the Earth and those of the Peoples based on territory. Indeed, the Earth had been entirely deterritorialized by physics as much as by imperialism, while the Peoples had been deeply massified or molecularized by capitalism, mass media and mass organizations. The artistic challenge was therefore to stir up or help create “a people yet to come” by transforming the existing Peoples, deeply massified and controlled by “mass media, monitoring procedures, computers, space weapons,” into other kinds of “molecular populations.” In the future, Earth and People would no longer be massified and organized in a hierarchical cosmos, but would become, on the contrary, “the vectors of a cosmos that carries them off.” As a sort of subconscious homage to Barthes’s idiorrhythmy and Morin’s “homeorrhesis,” Deleuze and Guattari then imagined that Earth and People would flow freely at their own rhythm and that the cosmos itself, so to speak, would become art. The idiorrhythmy would be extended from the small group of friends considered by Barthes to the whole humankind.

5.2.4.7 At the end of the chapter, because this three-stage narrative could be understood as a concession to Hegel or Comte, or as a declaration of allegiance to evolutionism, or even to a Foucault-style series of “structures separated by signifying breaks,” Deleuze and Guattari deconstructed their own narrative and turned it finally into a simple typology. All “ages,” they noted, actually contained all three types of “machines,” yet in different proportions. In other words, when they claimed that artists in the Classical age sought “de jure universality” and constructed “metric milieus” to tame Chaos, that those of the 19th century aimed to encompass the “fluid matter” both in “territorialized assemblages” and in “large cycles,” or that those of the 20th century looked for ways

to give a specific “consistency or consolidation” to the “fuzzy aggregates of molecularized matter,” we should understand that all three tasks have been actually at work in the three eras. Although Deleuze and Guattari did not elaborate further on this particular point, this remark opened onto a general theory of literary and artistic rhythms which could be used to reread ancient texts and not only the more modern ones. In all epochs, art and literature are liable of a metric and formal analysis, of an analysis of the organization in small or larger “territorialized” assemblages, and of an analysis of the means to establish both internal “densification” and greater “discernability” of the molecular elements composing each assemblage. As a matter of fact, if we are not mistaken, such a broad theory of rhythm was exactly what Meschonnic was trying, in the same years, to lay the groundwork for.

5.3 All these theoretical suggestions thus constituted significant contributions to the theory of rhythm in literature or more generally in art. However, we found that Deleuze and Guattari’s approach of literature was, otherwise, most often severely limited in a way that made it close to those of Serres and Morin.

5.3.1 As a matter of fact, except in the few pages we have just discussed, the treatment of literature in *A Thousand Plateaus* was generally quite disappointing. Chapter 8, the only chapter entirely devoted to literature, was symptomatically titled “1874: Three Novellas, or “What Happened?” It presented a series of analyses that remained mostly at the level of statements and narratives, without ever evoking enunciation, sound or rhythm. It entirely bypassed the “rhythmic personage” and the “network of tensions” which were supposed to transform the language into a “minor” or a “foreign” language. Whether in the “novella,” in the “tale,” or in the “novel,” literature was always about telling stories. Consequently, literary texts were only used as documents describing social and individual transformations which, unsurprisingly, were in perfect tune with Deleuze and Guattari’s own political and ethical theory. In these pages, literature was never considered for itself but as a sheer illustration of exterior dynamics.

5.3.2 Most of the time, they systematically rejected the testimony of writers about their own work on the ground of their supposed naiveté. Instead of taking into account the conclusions drawn from their practice of language, they accused them of believing in illusions such as substantial subject or instrumental language. Strikingly, Goethe’s, Balzac’s and Proust’s theoretical contributions were hastily put aside. Even Nietzsche was stripped of his philological training as well as his long-standing interest in the activity and rhythm of language, and his writings mistakenly presented as entirely foreign to those of Goethe. (for an alternative view, see Vol. 2, Chap. 9)

5.3.3 In addition to that, they totally ignored the ongoing research on poetics, which was nevertheless available in their time. Quite surprisingly since he taught at the same university as Deleuze, but also quite expectedly considering his direct link with Benveniste, they entirely missed Meschonnic’s theory of literature which provided both an elaborate theory of the rhythm of language and a ground-breaking theory of subjectivity.

5.3.4 By so doing, Deleuze and Guattari lost great opportunities to enrich their own *rhuthmic* theory. In fact, contrary to what they wrongly believed, a great number of writers interested in literary theory, such as Diderot, Goethe, Hölderlin, Balzac, Proust, Woolf, or Joyce, and many others, and a few number of theoreticians such as Benveniste, Barthes and Meschonnic, could have helped them to elaborate further their own theory of rhythm and, at the same time, to distinguish more clearly

between the substantial subject, i.e. the ego, which indeed dominated philosophy, and the non-substantial poetic subject, already identified in literary theory a long time ago without unfortunately the philosophers being aware of it.

[*Next chapter*](#)