

Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 5

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Rhuthmology as Philosophy of Rhythm (1870-1872)

Strikingly, in his *Rhythmic Researches* (1870-1872), the young Nietzsche refers many times to the project of a “philosophy of rhythm.” In one of his notes, he contemplates the idea of writing a larger book than the one he will finally publish. He explicitly places this new philosophy in line with what he will examine in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Importance of Art, Dionysus and Apollo, Socrates, The position of the artist.” Exposed in the first section of the second part of this book, this philosophy would constitute the culmination of the essay before exposing the various poetic rhythmic “Accentuating and quantitative poetry” and entering into “details.”

Introduction: the coming philologist (or philology)

I.

1. Importance of Art.
2. Dionysus and Apollo.
3. Socrates.
4. Position of the artist.

II.

1. Philosophy of rhythm.
2. Accentuating and quantitative poetry.
3. ss. from here on the details

(*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGW II 3, p. 331, my trans.)

Thanks to others notes of the same period, we are able to specify a little what such “philosophy of rhythm” could mean to Nietzsche. First of all, this project entails to link together through detailed philological studies, “theory of rhythmic” and “philosophy of language.” Rhythm is to be understood through language.

New theory of rhythmic.

New aesthetic.

Homer and the tragedy.

New culture evaluation.

New philosophy of language.

New form to be found. the “novel”

(eKGWB/NF-1870,8[52] — Winter 1870-71 — Autumn 1872, my trans.)

Furthermore, this “philosophy of rhythm” is to be based on a kind of historical-anthropological study of “rhythmic sensations.” In a short note from the same period entitled “Decline of Latin Vocalism,” Nietzsche reflects on the relations between the “symbolism of language,” “time-proportions and “pitch-proportions.” He explicitly considers introducing his study by a presentation of “the whole metric problem of time.” Then the core of the study would be dedicated to a “history of rhythmic sensations” that could be extended into a “philosophy of rhythm,” whose objective would be to trace—we will see not unlike Humboldt in his book on *Kavi Sprache*— the impact of the “rhythmic feeling in the formation of language,” as well as the reverse effects of linguistic and poetic rhythms on the development of thought and expression of emotions, what Nietzsche calls in still Schopenhauerian terms the “symbolism of the will in the bonds of beauty.”

What do the time-proportions mean for the symbolism of language in respect to the pitch-proportions? i.e. what is time-rhythm [*Zeitrhythmus*] in respect to melody? Important is that, in the introduction, the whole metric problem of time [*die ganze metrische Aufgabe der Zeit*] is presented: careful attention to the still existing rhythmic sensations in any people and a history of rhythmic sensations. From this follows a philosophy of rhythm. The rhythmic feeling in the formation of the language: i.e. [*dh*] symbolism of the will in the bonds of beauty. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGW II 3, p. 308-309, my trans.)

Notwithstanding their frailty, these fragments delineate a subtle frame that will gain consistency when we read more texts written during the same period. For the time being, we can at least retain that they are suggesting the development of a “philosophy of rhythm,” that this philosophy would be related to a philosophy of language and based on an anthropology and a poetics of rhythm.

Rhythmic vs Metric (1870-1874)

As one may know, before writing *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche received a complete humanist

education and was appointed youngest Professor of classical philology at the University of Basel when he was only 24 years old. His numerous texts dedicated to the issue of rhythm and language have been for a long time poorly known—except by philologists who finally recognized in the 1920s their revolutionary aspect (Corbier, 2009, p. 2, n. 2). Heidegger does not take them into account despite his willingness to embrace the whole Nietzschean corpus. But recent scholarship brought new evidence of their importance (Bornmann, 1989; Kremer-Marietti, 1996; Porter, 2000; Porter, 2000b; Sauvanet 2001; Dufour, 2005; Corbier, 2009; Günther, 2010; Müller-Sievers, 2015) [1].

They comprise four large sets of notes dated by the editors between the winter 1870 and the beginning of 1872: *Griechische Rhythmik; Aufzeichnungen zur Rhythmik und Metrik; Zur Theorie der quantifizierenden Rhythmik; Rhythmische Untersuchungen* (KGW II 3, p. 99-338). To these notes must be added a few sections of *Encyclopädie der klassischen Philologie* (1873-74) (KGW II 3, p. 339-437), the section 84 in *The Gay Science* (1882-1887), which is also dedicated to rhythm in poetry, and a letter Nietzsche wrote in August 1888 to the musicologist Carl Fuchs: *Zur Auseinanderhaltung der antiken Rhythmik ('Zeit-Rhythmik') von der barbarischen ('Affekt-Rhythmik')*. (eKGWB/BVN-1888,1097 — prob. August 1888)

In what way are these notes important to us? James Porter has reconstituted the evolution of Nietzsche's first book project. He claims, quite convincingly, that "*The Birth of Tragedy* [...]" originally was to have included a section on Greek metrics" but that those two themes were eventually separated in Nietzsche's mind, somewhere between summer 1871 and spring 1872 (Porter, 2000, p. 130, see especially n. 8). Yet by reading the multiple plans and lists of current cultural-critical projects Nietzsche wrote during this period, one cannot help but recognize a still confused but not inconsistent threefold intellectual project, which would have articulated under the cloak of rhythm a large reflection on Greek tragic art, Greek science and Greek language. Even if this project was obviously too ambitious to be carried out by such a young philologist and was rapidly reduced to two then to one only of its elements, it is worth noting, particularly in respect to the questions raised by Heidegger's critique—but also subsequent critics of Heidegger as Rorty or even Apel—which completely ignores its third vector.

As one can see in a letter written in 1870 to a friend, Erwin Rhode, concerning philology, Nietzsche's first objective is to get rid of the *metric theory* developed by his predecessors from Gottfried Hermann to Rudolf Westphal.

I have discovered a new metric [*Metrik*]; compared with it, the entire recent development of metric [*Metrik*] from G. Hermann to Westphal or Schmidt is an aberration. Laugh and malign me as much as you want—the whole thing is astonishing to me too. (eKGWB/BVN-1870,110 - Nietzsche to Erwin Rhode, 23. November 1870, my trans.)

We must emphasize this theoretical shift because it has not attracted enough attention in the specialized literature. Nietzsche most often designates his research by the term "*Rhythmik*" and explicitly rejects that of "*Metrik*" to which he refers only once as opposite to "*Rhythmik*" (*Aufzeichnungen zur Rhythmik und Metrik*). This move makes him quite close to the poetics developed by Diderot, Moritz, Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel and Hölderlin.

Nietzsche's criticisms are analogous too to Jean Paul's and Humboldt's (see above chap. 3 and 4). By subjecting rhythm to meter and to "Kantian categories," Hermann completely missed it. Blinded by abstraction, he dismembered and destroyed the artworks he studied.

G. Hermann as successor of Bentley [set up] at the end of the last cent.[ury] the first system of metric. Kantian categories. He assumed the identity of meter and rhythm and was unconcerned about the rhythmic conditions of metric. He completely ignored the rhythmicians [*die Rhythmiker*], indeed [he] knew nothing of them: for example, he denied the pauses [*die Pausen*]. On the whole, his work was only an improved output of Hephaestion's, with all the defects of the ancient system. The artworks are destroyed; the torn limbs are externally organized. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 126, my trans.)

Westphal, who just wrote *Metrik der Griechen im Vereine mit den übrigen musischen Künsten* in 1867-68, does not fare any better. While he pretends to discover eternally valid rhythmic laws and practices, he actually projects on ancient Greek poetry schemes borrowed from German music of the 18th and 19th centuries, from Bach to Beethoven. Among other errors, he considers wrongly the quadratic rule, which generalized only at the end of the 18th century, as already existing in Ancient Times.

Among us is a much greater uniformity: mostly four-bar periods (tetrapodic series). Many three-part series, including some with dipods. But also five-part series. Westphal cites the first phrase of the C sharp minor sonata by Beethoven as an example. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 115, my trans.)

As soon as 1870, Nietzsche sees the flaws of such anachronistic method which unfortunately will become common practice until the first half of the 20th century. Following Hermann and Westphal, many specialists will continue to conflate ancient meters with modern measures in order to make Greek and Roman meter and verse fit beats and periods of modern metric.

Nietzsche opposes the metric tradition, essentially founded on late Roman "*Metriker*" (Varro - 116-27 BC, Horace - 65-27 BC, Caesius Bassus - †79 AD, Augustine - 354-430 AD) and modern music patterns, by revaluing the work of the first Western "*Rhythmiker*," Aristotle's student Aristoxenus of Tarentum (ca. 375 - ca. 335 BC) (see vol. 1).

The rhythmic doctrine of Augustine is that of Caesius Bassus and Varro. I mean, it was also that of Horace. It is the oldest metric theory we know. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 334, my trans.)

In Aristoxenus Nietzsche finds plenty of philological evidence that the ancient rhythmic was based on duration and proportion, with no importance given to the intensification of the voice or the stressing of a particular syllable—even if Nietzsche does not exclude the possible existence of "word accents."

So we have to give up entirely the rhythmic ictus and stick to Aristoxenus who only knows the time-rhythm [*Zeitrhythmus*]. The Greeks and Romans declaimed their verses with the word accents, but with the sharpest sense for equal times. That is why our imitation of the ancient metric is sheer confusion. [...] Solemnly measured [was] the antique verse, effeminate and floating [is] our modern. (*Encyclopädie der klassischen Philologie*, KGA II3, p. 401, my trans.)

From various arguments, Nietzsche concludes that it is impossible to identify the ancient meter with modern “measure” and “ictus,” or to look in Greek poetry for “periods” like in modern poetry. It is interesting to note that he agrees on this with Schlegel who already at the beginning of the 19th century saw “the particularity of ancient poetry in its strict observation of rhythmic quantities while in modern poetry ‘the number of syllables correlate to the domination of accent and rhyme.’” (quoted by Müller-Sievers, 2015)

Nietzsche concentrates his criticisms on the notions of *Takt* (bar/ measure/meter) and *Ictus* (stress/accents/beat) used by his predecessors. Even if *ictus* is a Latin word meaning beating/beat equivalent to the Greek βάσις originally meaning stepping/step, these notions, he keeps emphasizing, were actually unknown in Antiquity. They are modern creations and projections upon ancient rhythmic.

Everywhere where it is a matter of metric accuracy, the ictus has little to say. We know nothing of the ictus among the ancients. We only know of time differences. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA, II3, p. 135, my trans.)

The βάσις cannot be a rhythmic concept. Likewise the *percussio* [a measure section] has no rhythmic meaning. [...] In other words a metric percussion is no Ictus, but only a distinctive sign. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA, II3, p. 143, my trans.)

Takt and *Ictus* originated at the earliest during the last centuries of the Western Roman Empire. Nietzsche first recalls that modern historical linguistics has shown that ancient languages went through a radical mutation during this period. Whereas in classical Greek and Latin the linguistic rhythm was brought about by the alternation of long and short syllables, in late Latin and in the new emerging modern European languages, it was induced by the succession of tonic stresses.

Musical drive [*Trieb*] in the creation of language. The Germans in contrast between strong and weak, connected to sharp and low—the Greeks with proportional times, linked with sharp and low. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 330, my trans.)

According to Nietzsche, this new preponderance of melody and harmony in language furthered the breakdown of the sense of proportional timing in speaking. Whereas Greek verse consisted in a succession of more or less long time periods, organized through their respective proportions and in which no strengthening of the voice on one particular syllable was never to be heard, the Moderns, especially the Germans, spoke accentuated languages in which the sound intensity had a “pathetic”

function unknown to the Greeks.

The new syllable and its accents sucks all life into itself, while around it everything atrophies. Words now are uttered in explosions, the physical effort concentrated in one point is missing from other points. A new kind of rhythm emerges, not a wave of changing time, but of changing strength. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 308, my trans.)

It comes both on Greek and Latin soil a time when the Nordic song rhythms rules over the ancient rhythmic instincts. [...] Each time our kind of rhythmic accent penetrates into the ancient verse, the language is lost: immediately the word accent and the distinction between long and short syllables start to warble. It is a step in the formation of barbarizing idioms. (eKGWB/BVN-1888,1097 – Nietzsche to Carl Fuchs, August 1888, my trans.)

The first vector of modern beat and meter was, according to Nietzsche, the “folk song” which was based on tonic accentuation of words.

The development of modern meter [*modern Takt*] has two origins: 1. The folk song, in which the word accent dominated (which at all times had an *intensio vocis* even though at first it was just a higher pitch: but in the singing of songs its effect is *intensio, ictus*). [...] (*Zur Theorie der quantitirenden Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 269, my trans.)

Due to the demands of Christian cult and Church music, the tonic accent was then strengthened and the ancient sense of rhythm plummeted. Nietzsche points to Ambrosian (4th c., see vol. 1) and Gregorian chant (known from the 8th-13th c. but probably older). The early church rightly assumed “a community-building effect from the mnemotechnical advantages of strong rhythmic (ictical) poetry and songs.” (Müller-Sievers, 2015, see also vol. 1, chap. 7)

Finally, at the end of the Middle Ages, the meter appeared in order to help the singers to respect dissonance in an increasingly complicated counterpoint. It was a visual device used to read Ars Nova pieces which proved too complicated to be sung with older techniques.

[...] 2. Artificial counterpoint with its development of dissonance (in other words, harmonic reasons). (*Zur Theorie der quantitirenden Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 269, my trans.)

Thus, modern metric is based on a few principles—primacy of the ictus, i.e. tonic accent in words and verse, subsequently paired with temporal organization through measures (15th-17th c.)—which appeared in the language only in the late Roman Empire, and in music and poetry during Middle Ages. They became prevalent only late in the 17th century.

Once confronted with linguistic and historical evidence, the whole “modern rhythmic” theory

developed by Hermann, Apel, Westphal, Schmidt collapses.

The formation of this *equation* of measure [*Takt*] with *pous* [foot], especially the *ictus-theory*, is the *history of modern rhythmic*. [...] The general assertion is that a *time-measured* rhythmic must necessarily be *accentuated*. Historically this is wrong. Even the term *tactus* belongs to a period that knew nothing of rhythmic ictus and strong beat. (*Zur Theorie der quantitirenden Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 269, my trans.)

Modern philology is unduly based on modern music.

The mistake is to have taken our music for identical to the ancient one. (*Encyclopädie der klassischen Philologie*, KGA II3, p. 401, my trans.)

Whereas in Greece, Nietzsche argues a bit synthetically, “rhythm” was the most important part of music—“rhythm” having, as we begin to understand, a quite different sense from the one it has now—in modern times it was “harmony.”

In itself, the mimical power of the old music is essentially based on rhythm, with us on harmony. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 135, my trans.)

This very harsh critique of contemporary *metric* and its anachronistic presuppositions based on modern music, which has proved since then entirely correct, leads Nietzsche to consider finding the specific *rhythmic* of Greek poetry and music through historical, anthropological, philosophical and literary evidence.

Hence what did rhythm really mean for the Greeks? Ancient sources show that, contrary to modern metric’s assertion, music was originally not central in defining rhythm. One particularity of ancient Greek art was indeed to develop as *orchestics*, i.e. as an art making use concurrently of dancing, poetry and music. But among those three arts, the latter was the least important. It was actually subordinated to the former two and therefore had “no regular measure.”

Principles: intimate fusion of words and music, but in such a way that the duration of the spoken word generally prevails. Infinite mimicry [*Mimik*]: the music has no absolute character. Insofar as it is imitative, it has no regular measure [*Taktgleichheit*]. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 192, my trans.)

Since Poetry involved, when it was performed by a chorus, both singing and dancing, its rhythm was related to the movements of the dancer’s bodies. As Nietzsche puts it, rhythm was more “visible” than “audible.”

According to explicit testimonies it was not possible to hear the rhythm of spoken lyrical verses, if the largest time units were not brought by percussions [*Taktschläge*] [from] feeling to consciousness. As long as the dance accompanied [the verse] (—and the ancient rhythmic did not grow from music but from dance), you could see the rhythmic units with your eyes. (eKGWB/BVN-1888,1097 — Nietzsche to Carl Fuchs, Aug. 1888, my trans.)

Two words, as famous as poorly understood, show, according to Nietzsche, this primacy of dancing upon music and poetry. *Arsis* and *thesis*, which meant raising and lowering, were both directly inspired by the movements made by the dancers. They were not indicating a raising and lowering of the voice in pitch or volume but the raising and the lowering of the feet.

We find no trace of an *ictus of the voice*, only a *measuring of time* by *peditum et digitorum ictu* [feet and fingers stress]. This is important. What is then *θέσις* and *ἄρσις*? Nothing but entirely external: beat down and raise up. (*Aufzeichnungen zur Rhythmik und Metrik*, KGA II3, p. 229, my trans.)

But this succession of raisings and lowerings should not be understood in turn—as unfortunately it is still commonly done nowadays in countless naturalistic conceptions of rhythm—as moments of a *march*, i.e. as similar to the oscillation of a pendulum and therefore again as a regular beat. Is it necessary to recall that the Greeks did not know anything about the 18th and 19th century marching bands? If in these early epochs rhythm was recognized through gestures and not thanks to a succession of poetic or musical accents, this does not mean either that it was experienced as a mechanical succession of steps. The members of the chorus would only give through their irregular dance steps irregular measures to their songs. In more modern words, which are not Nietzsche's who uses meter in the ancient sense of foot, rhythm was completely alien to regular meter. Rhythm was clearly a *rhuthmós*, a complex porportionate way of flowing similar in space to that of the time-atoms in his *Zeitatomistik*.

The measure [*Takt*] of the Ancient allows no rhythmic periodic structure. By them the measure [*Takt*] originally emanates from the noticeable space relations of the chorus, i.e. the higher rhythm [*Rhythmus*] is only visible, not audible. Therefore, the laws of the visible rhythm [*Rhythmus*] prevail. (*Aufzeichnungen zur Rhythmik und Metrik*, KGA II3, p. 225, my trans.)

In other words, far from consisting in a more or less regular succession of weak and strong beats, of accents, the rhythm was composed of irregular and asymmetrical temporal elements of various durations, modeled on the gracious movements of the bodies. Neither marching nor even walking were the origin of rhythm in poetry and music but rather “a nice going.”

An important law [was] that the measure [*Takt*] originally was part of the orchestics: the singer would adjust to the dance (which was not a whirling dance, but a nice going) Naturally meeting with uneven measures [*Takte*] multiple *κινήσεις* of the dancers. (*Zur Theorie der quantifizierenden Rhythmik*, 1870-1872, KGA II3, p. 270, my trans.)

Classical rhythm, in dancing, poetry or music, was ordered according to duration and proportion rather than succession and pitch or volume. Not unlike in the *Zeitatomistik*, expression had therefore to materialize “through hesitations and accelerations” of the flow.

Important: lack of real ictus. A change of tempo is expressed only in the length of the notes. Because the ictus are missing, the rhythmic construction [in modern sense, PM] is largely missing. They expressed through hesitations and accelerations what we express with the ictus. (*Griechische Rhythmik*, KGA II 3, p. 136, my trans.)

Naturally some percussion, attested in Aristoxenus as “basis,” was accompanying Greek dance and music. But since the language was not naturally stressed, the accentuation was produced only by the musicians or dancers through gestures and strikes which played a fundamental role in the perception of the rhythm by the Greeks, although they had nothing to do with the modern regular beat.

Eventually, when theatrical performance was no longer the main medium of literature and when dance, poetry and music parted, time keeping began to differentiate itself.

Gradually a separation occurred between the pure time keeping [*rein Taktiren*] and the musical performance, especially in the pure instrumental music. (*Zur Theorie der quantitirenden Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 270, my trans.)

The conductor used then both visual and audible means to regulate the performance.

Two methods for time keeping [*taktiren*]: for the eye and for the ear. The first (by raising and lowering the hand or the foot) described the whole time-spaces, the second [...] with an audible beat [*Aufschlag*] – indicated only the measure limits [*Takttheilgrenzen*] and the beginning of each measure [*aller Takttheile*]. (*Zur Theorie der quantitirenden Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 270, my trans.)

This autonomization of time keeping entailed more regularity or measure in music. Rhythm, which was often called *numerus* in latin, was then redefined “as the succession of the same, often manifold time spaces.” As we saw in volume 1, Nietzsche is entirely right.

Here [in quotes from Quintilian (ca. 35 – ca. 100 AD) and Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC) [\[2\]](#)] the essence of rhythm is defined as the succession of the same, often manifold time spaces [*Zeitraümen*]: as he says elsewhere, *in cadentibus guttis [in drops falling]* would be rhythm, not in the roar of a stream. The *ictus* and the *percussio* are therefore time measures that the conductor [*Taktirende*] indicates; we have no indication that they also specify rhythmic accents. (*Zur Theorie der quantitirenden Rhythmik*, KGA II3, p. 271, my trans.)

Nietzsche recognizes the same unfortunate predominance of regular measure in modern music

which “goes against its greatest effect.” Only Wagner, sometimes, manages to emancipate music from its tyranny. In nature there is nothing like this mechanical repetition that cuts “the impulses of the will in equal part of time.”

The importance of measure [*Takt*] as frame [*Schranke*] of music, [goes] against its greatest effect. Wagner sometimes makes us feel how music works without it: in this case too it is *idyllic*. The measure [*Takt*] [is] entirely without model [*vorbildlos*] in nature: what kind of force would be one that would cut the impulses of the will in equal parts of time? – i.e. originally it is the image of the pounding of waves [*Abbild des Wellenschlags*]. It is already a parable of the Will: something external, to be compared with the two actors of tragedy; that would be held tight. Harmony and melody are equally tamed by the measure [*Takt*]. (eKGWB/NF-1871, 9[116] – 1871, my trans.)

[Next chapter](#)

Footnotes

[1] Fritz Bornmann, Nietzsches metrische Studien, in: *Nietzsche-Studien*, 18 (1989), S. 472–489; Angèle Kremer-Marietti, “Rhétorique et Rythmique chez Nietzsche,” in: Pierre Sauvanet et Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (éd.), *Rythmes et philosophie*, Paris 1996, S. 181–195; James Porter, “Being on time,” in: *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, Stanford 2000, p. 127–166; Pierre Sauvanet, “Nietzsche, philosophe-musicien de l’éternel retour,” in: *Archives de Philosophie* 64 (2001), S. 343–360; Eric Dufour, “La physiologie de la musique chez Nietzsche,” in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 30 (2001), p. 222–245; Id., *L’esthétique musicale de Nietzsche*, Lille 2005, p. 81–83, 235–246; Friederike F. Günther, *Rhythmus beim frühen Nietzsche*, Berlin 2008.

[2] Quincti. *Instit.* 9, 4, 51: Pedum et digitorum ictu intervalla signant quibusdam notis, atque estimant quot breves illud spatium habeat; inde tetrasemioi, pentasemioi, deinceps longiores fiunt percussiones, nam semeion tempus unum est. / With steps and snapping of the fingers, they mark the time-intervals with signs and indicate how many *khrónoi prôtoi* [breves] are included in such a duration. Thus four-time, five-time, and even longer measures appear, for a *semeion* is a single time unit. (my trans.)

Cicero *De Oratore* 3 §. 186 : [Numerus in continuatione nullus est ; distinctio, et] aequalium, et saepe variorum intervallorum percussio, numerum conficit : quem in cadentibus guttis, [quod intervallis distinguuntur], notare possumus ; in amni praecipitante non possumus. / There is no rhythm in that which is continuous and uninterrupted. What constitutes rhythm is a succession of equal-interval beats, and often also varied. So we can perceive a certain rhythm in water droplets that fall according regular intervals; but we cannot in the uninterrupted flow of a river. (my trans.)