

Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 8

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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Towards a non-Platonic Aesthetics of Rhythm (1870-1875)

Since he gave a significant role to rhythm in his philosophy, Nietzsche had naturally to assess its variable aesthetic, ethical and political value. This amounted to address the question of *eurhythm* or “good rhythm” [*Eurhythmie/eurhythmische Princip*]. Regularly evoked by philosophers and philologists in Antiquity and Modern Times until 19th century (see vol. 1, chap. 2, 5 and above chap. 3), it was once again introduced in the scientific debate in 1868 by Johann H.H. Schmidt who published a study on chorus in Aeschylus and Pindar entitled *Die Eurhythmie in den Chorgesängen der Griechen*.

Later on, this issue has been frequently addressed afresh by many artists and thinkers, whether writers like Steiner, teachers of music as Jaques-Dalcroze or dancers as the young Laban. As we will see in the next volume, it has pervaded the *Lebensreform* movement and its theory of rhythm at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

But Nietzsche’s answer has been treated ever since so confusingly and in so many divergent ways that it is today quite difficult to understand what his position exactly was.

The best example of this miscomprehension is given by the assessment of Nietzsche’s turn from an admirer into a harsh critique of Wagner’s music. As one may know, in Nietzsche’s early years, Wagner’s departings from tonality, cadence and regular rhythms, his introduction of indeterminate chords, changing tempos, irregular measures, were appreciated as rightful subversion of the mechanical, symmetrical and tonal ordering proper to classical music—which Wagner called disdainfully “eurhythmy”—and as ways to reconnect with the Dionysian element of Greek drama. Instead, in his maturity, Nietzsche considered that the Wagnerian music was utterly “modern” because, despite its seemingly freedom, it was subjected, precisely by its preference given to harmony and loose succession of stresses, to affects, passions and emotions. Previously praised as Apollonian frames that allowed “*the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit* in our contemporary world,” German music and Wagner’s drama were now accused to accentuate a modern trait: the hysterization of life due to their incapacity to organize speech, dance and music according to objective laws.

Consider the means of achieving effects which Wagner is fond of using (and which, for the most part, he had to invent):—the choice of the movements, the timbres of his orchestra, the abominable avoidance of the logic and quadrature of rhythm, the creeping, soothing, mysterious,

hysterical quality of his “infinite melody”:—they resemble in a strange way the means with which the hypnotizer performs his act. Is the state indeed into which, for example, the prelude to *Lohengrin* plunges the listener, especially the lady listener, essentially different from that of a somnambulant trance?—I heard an Italian woman who had just listened to that prelude, flashing those adorable mesmerized eyes that Wagneriennes know how to affect: “Come si dorme con questa musica!” (eKGWB/NF-1887,10[155] — Autumn 1887, my trans.)

Heidegger, who worked on Nietzsche mainly between 1936 and 1947, understood this aphorism—just like, before him, many German thinkers since the end of the 19th century—if not as a sheer rejection of the Dionysian at least as an affirmation of the necessity “to leash its force and give it form.”

Since Wagner sought sheer upsurge of the Dionysian and dissipation in its element, while Nietzsche sought to leash its force and give it form, the breach between the two was already determined. (*Nietzsche*, 1961, I, p. 88, trans. David Farrell Krell)

He accumulates metaphors illustrating the idea of becoming as pure flow (“dissolution,” “flexibility,” “plasticity,” “fluidity,” “swimming,” “submergence”) to show—just like Plato did—the necessity of “laws and borders” in order to avoid “sinking into nothingness.”

Here the essential character of the conception “collective artwork” comes to unequivocal expression: the dissolution of everything solid into a fluid, flexible, malleable state, into a swimming and floundering; the unmeasured, without laws or borders, clarity or definiteness; the boundless night of sheer submergence. In other words, art is once again to become an absolute need. But now the absolute is experienced as sheer indeterminacy, total dissolution into sheer feeling, a hovering that gradually sinks into nothingness. (*Nietzsche*, 1961, I, p. 87, trans. David Farrell Krell, my mod.)

Indeed some texts of the same period seem to prove him right. In 1888, in two fragments noted down while writing *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche criticizes the “tyranny” imposed on the listener’s mind by his “lack of tonality,” his “inability to build” a drama and his “lack of eurhythmy” in dance.

2. The corruption of music [...]

Lack of tonality

Lack of *eurhythmy* (“Dance”)

Inability to build [*des Baus*] (“drama”)

Means of *tyranny*

The “fixed idea” (or the leitmotif)

[...]

7. the *décadent* [in French]: extr irritability

Lack of tonality

Lack of eurhythmy

Inability to build [*zu bauen*]

Exaggeration of the details

(eKGWB/NF-1888,16[77] — Spring-Summer 1888, my trans.)

In other words, Wagner lamentably failed in the three areas that made up the ancient orchestics: harmony, poetry—considered here under the angle of construction—and dance. In these particular fragments, eurhythmy quite clearly means for body movements, what tonality does for melody and harmony, and structure/construction [*Bau/ bauen*] for poetry. Rhythm seems to be placed again on the Apollonian side of rational proportions and architecture, and therefore considered as a powerful means to master Dionysian exuberance and hubris.

Nevertheless, one should not jump to conclusions as Heidegger and many other readers before and after him did a bit hastily. Any naive inversion seems very doubtful. The balance and endless opposition between Apollo and Dionysius elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy* already raises strong doubts whether one of them could have been—in his youth as much as in his maturity—given the supremacy upon the other. Moreover, the most constant objective of posterior essays has been the deconstruction of the fundamental metaphysical oppositions between thing-in-itself and phenomenon, reason and sensitivity, *lógos* and intuition, which finally simply evaporated. Lastly, the interpretation that makes Nietzsche reject his own juvenile Romanticism to embrace a more mature Classicism runs on old metaphysical categories that Nietzsche himself explicitly declared obsolete in his “Attempt at Self-Criticism” written in 1886.

How much I now regret the fact that at the time I didn't have the courage (or the presumptuousness?) to consider allowing myself a personal language appropriate to such an odd point of view and such a daring exploit—that I sought laboriously to express strange and new evaluations with formulas from Schopenhauer and Kant—something which basically went quite against the spirit of Kant and Schopenhauer, as well as against their tastes! (*The Birth of Tragedy*, “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” 1886, trans. I. Johnston)

No simplistic dualism can be assigned to Nietzsche's late philosophy and it is misleading to associate it with some kind of reactionary aesthetics, ethics and politics choosing law and order—or “laws and borders” as Heidegger put it—against anarchy and chaos, or, in a milder wording, balance and harmony against imbalance and dissonance. Nietzsche is not advocating a return to the classical Western rhythms Wagner did help indeed, along with other artists, to overcome in the 1850s and 1860s—as the expression “logic and quadrature of rhythm” or “lack of eurhythmy” seems oddly to refer to. He is now opposing to Wagner—and modern German culture—the more valuable kind of rhythm that existed in ancient Greece.

The real question is: what might mean *eurhythm* if it is to be opposed to the dissolution of rhythm by Wagner but at the same time not to be reduced to its classical meaning? What could be an aesthetics, an ethics and a politics based on *eurhythmia* which would be independent from the simplistic oppositions between Romanticism and Classicism, freedom of thought and social order, Individual and State? How to describe this specific kind of rhythms? And what would make them so valuable?

First, we have to recall the context within and against which Nietzsche elaborates his aesthetics, ethics and politics of rhythm. As we saw in chapter 3, in Germany, the dominant aesthetic tradition in the first half of the 19th century drew mainly its inspiration from Vitruvius and, through him, from Aristotle and Plato. We have also to remember, when we read end-of-19th-century German thinkers or Heidegger's later comments on Nietzsche, that they were similarly deeply influenced by the same classical aesthetics, which prevented them to correctly understand Nietzsche's.

Another way to figure out the particular meaning of Nietzsche's concept of *eurhythm* is simply to look at his descriptions and evaluations of ancient Greek culture. It is common knowledge that his first concern was to contest the Apollonian Platonic aesthetics and that, in order to reach his goal, he reevaluated all Dionysian aspects. But this did not mean sheer inversion either. We need here to be particularly careful.

We remember that in *The Dionysiac World View* (1870) and *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche characterizes both Apollo and Dionysus as "stylistic opposites which exist side by side and in almost perpetual conflict with one another" and which "appeared fused together in the work of art that is Attic tragedy."

The Greeks, who simultaneously declare and conceal the mystery of their view of the world in their gods, established as the double source of their art two deities, Apollo and Dionysus. In the realm of art these names represent stylistic opposites which exist side by side and in almost perpetual conflict with one another, and which only once, at the moment when the Hellenic "Will" blossomed, appeared fused together in the work of art that is Attic tragedy. (eKGWB/DW-1 — ca. 11/08/1870, trans. Ronald Speirs)

Thus, in its simplest form, the Nietzschean *eurhythm* stems from the tense relation between the two main artistic drives, which for the first time perfectly blended, so Nietzsche claims, in Phidias' sculpture and classical tragedy.

The more vigorously the Apolline spirit of art now flourished, the more freely did his brother-god Dionysus develop; in the same period as the first of them was attaining to the full, one might say immobile, vision of beauty, at the time of Phidias, the other was interpreting the mysteries and terrors of the world in tragedy. (eKGWB/DW-1 — ca. 11/08/1870, trans. Ronald Speirs)

But can we be more specific? In what sense were Phidias' sculpture or classic Tragedy *eurhythmic*? How exactly did they perform the perfect mix of Dionysian dynamics with Apollonian forms? What

could be the main features of a work of art that would be both Apollonian and Dionysian? What, in a more general sense, could be an artistic eurhythmy that would be the result of the integration of two opposite tendencies without being their Hegelian synthesis, i.e. their suppression and transformation into something else?

In *The Dionysiac World View*, Nietzsche's answer to these questions, on the one hand, resumes Aristotle's reflection on catharsis and, on the other hand, largely anticipates the one that will be given a few decades later by Freud: a eurhythmic work allows "idealization," "redemption" and "transfiguration" by *symbolizing* the "truth," i.e. the most instinctive will.

This co-existence marks the high point of Hellenic culture; originally, only Apollo is a Hellenic god of art, and it was his power which so moderated Dionysus when he came storming in from Asia that the most beautiful brotherly bond could come about. Nowhere can the incredible idealism [*Idealismus*] of the Hellenic race be grasped more readily than here: a cult of nature which, amongst the peoples of Asia, had meant the crudest unleashing of the lower drives, a panhetaeric animality which sundered all social ties for a certain period of time, was transformed amongst the Hellenes into a festival of universal redemption [*ein Welterlösungsfest*], a day of transfiguration [*ein Verklärungstag*]. All the sublime drives of their character were revealed in this idealization of orgy. (eKGWB/DW-1 — ca. 11/08/1870, trans. Ronald Speirs)

In tragedy the singing and dancing is no longer the instinctive intoxication of nature; no longer is the Dionysiacally excited mass of the chorus the popular mass which has been seized unconsciously by the drive of spring. Truth is now *symbolized*. (eKGWB/DW-3 — ca. 11/08/1870, trans. Ronald Speirs)

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche elaborates further the idea. In the older Dionysian dithyramb and in the tragedy, which according to Aristotle developed from it, a new expressive chain formed. The symbolization was henceforth ensured by "the entire symbolism of the body, not just the symbolism of mouth, face, and words, but the full gestures of the dance—all the limbs moving to the rhythm." Speech was dubbed by body movements which formed with rhythm and harmony an expressive complex.

In the Dionysian dithyramb man is aroused to the highest intensity of all his symbolic capabilities. Something never felt before forces itself into expression—the destruction of the veil of Maja, the sense of oneness as the presiding genius of form, of nature itself. Now the essence of nature must express itself symbolically; a new world of symbols is necessary, the entire symbolism of the body, not just the symbolism of mouth, face, and words, but the full gestures of the dance—all the limbs moving to the rhythm. And then the other symbolic powers grow, those of music, rhythm, dynamics, and harmony—all with sudden spontaneity. (*The Birth of Tragedy*, § 2, trans. Ian C. Johnston)

Quite understandably Nietzsche proposes two versions of this eurhythmic chain: one Apollonian which was published; the other Dionysian which remained undisclosed. At the end of *The Birth of Tragedy*, indulging in the pompous style common in his time, he marvels over the beauty of a

Mediterranean landscape featuring “rows of high, Ionic columns” and “luminous marble,” where “human beings walk solemnly or move delicately, with harmonious sounds and a rhythmical language of gestures.” Eurhythmy seems here very close to its classical definition.

As he [“who would feel translated, even just in dream, back into the life of an ancient Hellene”] wandered beneath rows of high, Ionic columns, gazing upwards to a horizon cut off by pure and noble lines, seeing beside him reflections of his own, transfigured form in luminous marble, surrounded by human beings who walk solemnly or move delicately, with harmonious sounds and a rhythmical language of gestures [*mit harmonisch tönenden Lauten und rhythmischer Gebärdensprache*—would such a person, with all this beauty streaming in on him from all sides, not be bound to call out, as he raised a hand to Apollo: “Blessed people of Hellas! How great must Dionysus be amongst you, if the God of Delos considers such acts of magic are needed to heal your dithyrambic madness!” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, § 25, trans. Ronald Speirs)

One could think, considering the harsh criticisms Nietzsche received after the publication of *The Birth*, that this luminous conclusion was partly motivated by a necessary prudence. But if one looks at *The Dionysiac World View*, where one could expect to find a more critical conception of eurhythmy, one will be surprised to find an almost similar definition concerning the experience of Dionysian worshippers. The Dionysian dancer “is no longer an artist, he has become [himself] a work of art.” His ecstatic dance is not chaotic or completely disorderly. It partakes in the symbolization process and demands a supple control of the body movements, which should imitate the nice going, the measured walking, “the ecstasy and sublimity” of the gods whom the dancer saw “in his dreams.”

He feels himself to be a god; that which had previously lived only in his imagination he now feels in his own person. What does he now care for images and statues? Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art; man himself now moves with the same ecstasy and sublimity with which, in dream, he once saw the gods walk. (eKGWB/DW-1 — ca. 11/08/1870, trans. Ronald Speirs)

These two famous texts do not provide much more information on eurhythmy but they do show us the direction into which looking for: symbolization is transformation of affects into rhythm. Let us then turn to the notes on the orchestric rhythmic (1870-1872), where the specific features of the very tense symbolization process which produces eurhythmy become clearer.

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