

***Elements of Rhythmology* vol. 2 – Preface**

Friday 1 July 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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This book is the second installment of a series that hopefully should cover the whole history of the concept of rhythm in the West. The previous one was dedicated to the most important doctrines which have been developed between the 5th century BC and the 6th century AD in Greece and Rome. This one aims at presenting and discussing those elaborated between 1540 and 1900.

From the end of Antiquity up to the first half of the 18th century, the term rhythm was used in poetry, rhetoric, music, dance, medicine and architecture, and most often considered from a Platonic perspective. This situation changed dramatically after 1750. On the one hand, the second half of the 18th century and the 19th century witnessed a tremendous extension of the concept of rhythm in two successive waves: first, in medicine, physiology, life science, art theory, and philosophy; then, from the 1860s onward, in economy, history, sociology, anthropology, urbanism and many other disciplines. On the other hand, it underwent remarkable transformations of meaning. By resorting to traditional notions such as *ratio*, *meter*, *period*, *cycle*, and *beat* most of these extensions continued the traditional *Platonic metric paradigm* [1]. Yet, in philosophy, natural science and poetics—three disciplines that most noteworthy were instrumental in the original development of rhythmology—two other paradigms began to reemerge after centuries of oblivion and to challenge the age-old Platonic dominance: the *Democritean physical* and *Aristotelian poetic paradigms*.

Concerning the dominant Platonic paradigm, its generalization was already prefigured in the mathematical and therefore universal aspect of the Platonic-Aristotelian definition of rhythm as sequence of time-lengths organized according to number. As we saw in previous volume, it was already fairly advanced in Antiquity and Middle Ages and it is no surprise that it gained momentum in Modern Times. However, because we still lack empirical data on the second part of the 19th century, I will limit myself in this volume to the first period of its expansion and to four disciplines: medicine, biology, metric and philosophy, that have been crucial in this process. I will address other late 19th century contributions to this trend of thinking in another volume.

I will be more thorough concerning the two other paradigms that are of the highest interest to us and far less well known. In the second half of the 17th century, a first breach occurred in the Platonic rhythmological framework. Spinoza and Leibniz, inspired by the new physics launched by Copernicus and Galileo, built new doctrines of God, nature, being and knowledge. In the case of Leibniz, this new trend relied also on a new mathematics which was retrieving and developing some of Archimedes' discoveries concerning infinitesimal calculus (see previous vol.). With these brand new dynamic worldviews based on movement, mutation, transformation and their laws, manners or arrangements (*modi* - *monads*), although they were not making use of the term rhythm itself, Spinoza and Leibniz clearly resumed with some basic features of the Democritean and Lucretian physical rhythmological paradigm, especially their concepts of form and individuation (*rhuthmoi* - *turbines*). These thinkers diverged on many subjects—above all God and his relation to nature—but

both proposed very powerful *rhuthmic* theories [2] that clearly paved the way for the extraordinary surge of innovations that occurred in the following century (for more details see Michon, 2015a).

In the 18th century, this Democritean trend developed further through the works of Diderot and Goethe who benefited from the progress of natural science. Whereas physics and astronomy were, during the previous century, the most important disciplines, chemistry and life science were now at the forefront and their findings were providing new data to rhythmological reflection. After an eclipse due mainly to a strong reaction by Idealist philosophy during the first half of the 19th century, the Democritean trend rebounded after 1870, with Nietzsche's survey of ancient Greek philosophy and his own philosophical elaborations to which I will devote a detailed study in the last chapter.

From 1750 onward, a second breach opened up in the Platonic rhythmological framework. First Diderot, then some of the German Romantics, reintroduced some basic features of the Aristotelian perspective with a renewed interest in poetics, theory of art and theory of language. This second *rhuthmological* trend, which surged directly from artistic experience, met in turn with fierce resistance from the dominant Platonic paradigm but it managed somehow to take roots and grow. After a difficult period during the first half of the 19th century, it experienced a strong revival and developed noticeably until the end of the century thanks to writers and artists such as Baudelaire, Wagner, Hopkins and Mallarmé, and one philosopher who happened to be also a writer, Nietzsche.

As the ancient one, modern rhythmology seems thus to have been propelled by three main theoretical forces among which the *Platonic metric paradigm* clearly got the upper hand and spilled over into a large number of new fields and disciplines. Nevertheless, both *Democritean physical* and *Aristotelian poetic paradigms* experienced an extraordinary resurgence and, moreover, they often developed side by side. Contrary to Aristotle who founded poetics but at the same time rejected atomism, and Lucretius who endorsed atomism but was unconcerned by poetics, both Diderot, Goethe and Nietzsche addressed rhythmic issues simultaneously from scientific, linguistic and poetic perspectives. The sharp divide which characterized *rhuthmological* strategies in Antiquity seemed, at least partly, to blur in Modern Times.

These very first observations set out for this volume objectives that are quite different from the previous ones. Naturally, I will try to assess the persistence of the Platonic paradigm in Modern Times, the channels it used to spread and the pressure it still puts on us. But I will seek, above all, to shed light on the extraordinary revival of its two competitors, the alternatives they suggest, the resources they provide us with to better understand and criticize the fluid world we are living in. This will involve assessing the novelty and the consistency of their unexpected combinations.

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Footnotes

[1] By the term “paradigm” I mean, as in vol. 1, a conceptual apparatus which entails a certain number of particular ontological, epistemological, and anthropological standpoints, and which has been used for variable periods of time. I am not referring to an encompassing structure of knowledge covering a whole period as the Foucaultian episteme, nor to a general framework within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the experiments performed in support of

them are formulated, as the Kuhnian paradigm, nor even to fixed epistemic tools that would be complete from the start and would not change in time. I am naming them according to their first known proponents but this does not imply any immutableness. As we will see, each one of the three original rhythmic paradigms have experienced many transformations.

[2] For Modern Times, since it is not the Greek terms themselves but the concepts that I am trying to define that matter, I will use the words *rhuthmos* and *metron* without accent.