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Towards a non-Platonic Ethics of Rhythm (1882-1888)

- Recherches

- Vers un nouveau paradigme scientifique ?
- Sur le concept de rythme - Nouvel article

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[Previous chapter](#)

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This conclusion gives already a hint on the ethical implications of Nietzsche's new conception of eurhythmmy. Eurhythmmy means successful symbolization of affects through the creation of infinitely open signifying systems that is to say of *poetic subjects* which are also *transsubjects*. But we must get here into specifics because the ethical power remained the subject of a quite numerous series of later texts among which, it is worth noticing, some were published by Nietzsche himself which have often been misinterpreted

In a previous section we have noticed that Nietzsche claims that there is, on the one hand, a deep and unknown rhythmic drive that supports the production of language and therefore of emotion and thought, but also that, on the other hand, already formed languages and cultures have by their particular rhythms significant feedback effects on sensibility and behavior. In both cases, "rhythm" and "melody" determine the ways the *creative ordering of emotions and thoughts*, or, in the other direction, the *compelling organizing of perceptions and behavior* are performed. It is therefore possible to study man by observing 1. the rhythms that he imposes upon language; 2. those that his languages and cultures imposes back upon him.

But because Nietzsche often regards language as a defective means of communication that should be bypassed, he tries in some fragments to uncover a direct physiological relation between rhythm and body. In a short note entitled "Power of Rhythm" written between 1870 and 1872, he contemplates the impact of music on corporal dynamics. He claims that the existing body "rhythms," pulse, walk, heart beat which actually are only periodic phenomena clearly different from what he describes as rhythm in the arts are "*bestimmt*" i.e. simultaneously "defined and tuned," by "musical rhythms."

The rhythmic movements of the pulse etc. (of the walk) are likely restructured by a march music, as the heart beat accommodates to the step [...] Since the entire body contains a myriad of rhythms, each new rhythm attacks the body directly. Suddenly, everything moves according to a new law: not that the old ones do not apply anymore, but that they are being [defined/tuned] [*bestimmt*]. The physiological reason and explanation of rhythm. (and its power) (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGA II3, p. 322, my trans.)

Due to its conceptual imprecision and the lack of link between this one-dimensional physiological claim and Nietzsche's much more sophisticated analyses dedicated to language, this argument is actually quite weak. It appears as the projection on the rhythmic issue of the philosophical distrust towards language, common in Nietzsche's work, and witnesses a certain return to the metric paradigm.

Worse still, this quote is sometimes used, in a rather surprising way, to allege a sheer physiological basis of Nietzsche's doctrine of rhythm. Nietzsche would consider *the body*, i.e. ultimately Nature, as *the origin of rhythm*. His view would then simply fall under naturalism. But this is a rather curious and inverted interpretation of the previous statement where he undoubtedly considers "a myriad" of corporal "rhythms," talks of "physiological reason and explanation of rhythm" but aims primarily at *the effect of musical rhythm on body dynamics*. It is true that Nietzsche confusingly designates very different phenomena by the same vague term and omits to explain the relation between

music and language rhythmic effects, but he clearly does not propose here any kind of naturalistic doctrine of rhythm.

Besides, to my knowledge except once in a very short statement that I will address below, Nietzsche did not elaborate further the physiological dimension of the rhythm power. All ulterior texts available to us show that he mainly specified his original historical, anthropological and philological approach developed in his notebooks on Greek rhythmic.

In the very famous aphorism of the *The Gay Science* on the "Origin of Poetry" (1882), Nietzsche tackles again the question of the power of rhythm. He starts by recalling that Apollo was the god of rhythm and poetry. However by stressing this historical fact he is far from claiming, although many commentators have argued to the contrary, any superiority of Apollo upon Dionysus. In other words, the mature Nietzsche does not come back to Classicism any more than the young Nietzsche indulged in Romanticism. By looking closer, one will easily realize that he does not consider Apollo anymore as the god presiding over architecture, periodicity and measure. Abandoning his former aesthetic and metaphysical viewpoint for a mere anthropological and historical one, Nietzsche only points out that Apollo was considered by the Greek as supervisor of the prophetic and magical use of *formula*, and that prayers in order to be efficient should be "pronounced with literal and rhythmical correctness."

To make a prophecy that means originally (according to what seems to me the probable derivation of the Greek word) to determine something ; people thought they could determine the future by winning Apollo over to their side: he who, according to the most ancient idea, is far more than a foreseeing deity. According as the formula is pronounced with literal and rhythmical correctness, it determines the future: the formula, however, is the invention of Apollo, who as the God of rhythm, can also determine the goddesses of fate. (*The Gay Science*, § 84 - Origin of Poetry, trans. Thomas Common)

Moreover this anthropological-historical reminder serves only to criticize the present: we Moderns are as superstitious as the Ancients, Nietzsche says. We still believe in the efficiency of rhythm here explicitly designated as *metric* upon nature, gods and human beings, and "serious philosophers" are especially prone to this kind of illusion.

Even now, after millenniums of long labor in combating such superstition, the very wisest of us occasionally becomes the fool of rhythm, be it only that one *perceives* a thought to be *true* when it has a metrical form and approaches with a divine hopping. Is it not a very funny thing that the most serious philosophers, however anxious they are in other respects for strict certainty, still appeal to *poetical sayings* in order to give their thoughts force and credibility? (*The Gay Science*, § 84 - Origin of Poetry, trans. Thomas Common)

Hence we see here: 1. that Nietzsche in the 1880s remains faithful to his earlier anthropological historical approach; 2. that poetic rhythms, according to him, have been given throughout Western history up to the latest "most serious" philosophers, "force and credibility"; and 3. that without questioning the efficiency of poetic rhythms, he implicitly claims that the power they possess is, at least partly, the one *we* grant them *by our belief*.

Thus this aphorism does not refer any more to Apollo as member of the dyad *Apollo-and-Dionysus* Nietzsche has definitely parted from the metaphysical world set by *The Birth of Tragedy*. It does not include either any physiological explanation. Rather it complements former philological analyses with a psychological explanation: the power of poetic rhythm depends on its objective qualities which sometimes make it frame the mind, sometimes influence sensibility

and behavior, but also on subjective qualities of that very mind or that very body where physiology could possibly find its place.

In an unpublished text dated from the winter 1883-1884, Nietzsche further elaborates on the issue of rhythmic power. He suggests that, as any other living beings, man is composed of a bunch of "forces, connected by a common nutritional process," which *opposes, reformulates and evaluates* all other forces he has to deal with. The core of this trilogy taking place between emotion/action and thinking/evaluation, is devoted to imagination. Man feels sensations and immediately acts accordingly as by a kind of involuntary reflex, but before reflecting upon what happens, that is according to Nietzsche evaluating what is good or bad for himself, he first "reshapes" the forces he is facing by projecting "forms and rhythm" on them. Man is therefore "a form- and rhythm-fashioning creature."

What we call "life" is a multitude of forces, connected by a common nutritional process. All so-called feeling, imagining, and thinking belong to this nutritional process, as means of its accomplishment, that is, (1) an opposition against all other forces; (2) a reformulation [*Zurechtmachen*] of them according to forms and rhythms [*nach Gestalten und Rhythmen*]; (3) an evaluation of incorporation versus separation.

1. Man [*der Mensch*] is a *form-fashioning* creature [*ein formenbildendes Geschöpf*]. Man believes in "being" and things because he is a form- and rhythm-fashioning creature [*ein formen- und rhythmusbildendes Geschöpf*].

The shapes and forms which we see, and in which we believe to have the things, are not all at hand [*vorhanden*]. We make it easier for us and connect whatever "impressions" through figures that we create.

He who closes his eyes discovers that a form-fashioning drive [*formenbildender Trieb*] is continually exercising itself, and that innumerable things are tried without corresponding to any reality.

2. Man is a *rhythm-fashioning* creature [*ein rhythmusbildendes Geschöpf*]. He introduces all becoming [*alles Geschehen*] into these rhythms, it is a way to possess the "impressions."

3. Man is an *opposing* force [*eine widerstrebende Kraft*]: regarding all other forces.

His means of *feeding* himself and assimilating things is to bring them into "forms" and rhythms: *comprehension* [is] first of all only *creation* [Schaffen] of the "things." *Knowledge* [is] a means of nutrition.

(eKGWB/NF-1883,24[14] Winter 1883-1884, my trans.)

This text brings to light something that remained implicit in the notes on Greek rhythmic: the very peculiar anthropology that supported them. Indeed this anthropology is radically historical. There is not such thing as a universal being that would be called Man and that would remain the same throughout time and space. Man is primarily a living being among myriads of others, each composed of myriads of forces, and which has to deal with them in order to perpetuate itself.

But man does not dissolved either in the flow of the becoming. Thanks to his imagination, which is here equated with his rhythmic power, he projects forms, shapes, figures on the fluid world within which he is bound to live. Whereas Nietzsche considered the power of rhythm as partly interior (*Sprachsinn*), partly exterior to man (feedback rhythmic effects of languages and culture, included music), he now considers it as one of his most essential characters. Man is man because he is endowed with the power to "rhythmize" the world. A few decades later, in a course given around 1938 and published in 1947, Mauss, summing up a large theoretical trend which was developing since the 1900s, will similarly claim that "Socially and individually, man is a rhythmic animal." (see Michon, 2015b, 2016)

Nietzsche is no sociologist and remains on the philosophical level. He does not say whether this power makes man particular among the living probably not but he makes clear that if there is such thing as man it must rely on a capacity to cope with the becoming and humanize it. Consequently it is possible to study him by observing 1. the rhythms that he imposes upon the world; 2. those that the world, as it works, imposes back upon him. This fragment exposes probably the largest conception of rhythm power ever conceived by Nietzsche. And if rhythm has significant aesthetical effects, it is because rhythm has a more general ethical power: it produces man's humanity itself.

This claim raises a question though. It is clear that Nietzsche here generalizes a conclusion he already reached while studying poetry and language. But precisely what about them in this new conceit of the power of rhythm? Do they disappear altogether or are they included in it? In the first case, Nietzsche would develop a radical naturalism where language does not count. It is in this way that his late philosophy has often been interpreted, for instance by Deleuze and his followers. In the second case, which I think based on all evidence presented above is the best guess, the Nietzschean apparent late naturalism is actually supported by an implicit anthropology resting on his early findings concerning poetry, language and languages. Man (*Mensch*) as "*formen- und rhythmusbildendes Geschöpf*" is clearly reminiscent of the former "*sprachbildende Mensch* - the language building man."

Another important text written during the very last year of his intellectual career seems indeed to prove this guess right. In a letter to Carl Fuchs, written in 1888, entitled "To distinguish the ancient rhythmic ("time-rhythmic") from the barbaric ("affect-rhythmic)," he recapitulates his main philological findings. Why would he do that if he believed in a sheer naturalism where language would not induce any difference? This question should be answered by all those who read Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, without any regards to philological, poetic and linguistic issues. Indisputably Nietzsche comes back to his former historical-anthropological conclusions and even elaborates on them.

He explains to his friend what he calls the "main point": the distinction and opposition between the specific ethical powers of "two types of rhythm." The first one is "Barbaric" or "Germanic" but we have noticed that it is as much "Modern" and is characterized by the "expression of emotion." The second, particular to the ancient Greek, aims on the contrary at "control[ing] and eliminat[ing] up to a certain degree the affect." Germanic or Modern rhythmic expresses "pathos"; Greek rhythmic fosters "ethos."

6. Finally, the main point. The two types of rhythm are *contrary* in the most original intention and root. *Our* barbarian (or Germanic) rhythmic understands rhythm as the succession of equally powerful *emotion-rises*, separated by drops. This is our oldest form of poetry: three syllables, *each one* expressing a *main concept*, three significant blows, so to speak, to the affect sensorium that forms our oldest meter. (In our language, on average, the syllable which weights the most in the meaning process, the syllable which *affectively dominates*, supports the accent, which is fundamentally different from the ancient languages.) *Our* rhythm is a *means by which we express emotion*: the ancient rhythm, the time-rhythm [*Zeit-Rhythmus*], has on the contrary the task to control and eliminate up to a certain degree the affect. The presentation of ancient rhapsods was extremely passionate (one finds in Plato's *Ion* a strong description of gestures, tears, etc.): the *time-uniformity* was perceived as a kind of *oil* on the waves. *Rhythm* in the ancient sense is, *morally and aesthetically*, the *reins* which are imposed on passion. In summary: our kind of rhythmic belongs to pathology, the ancient to "*ethos*." (eKGWB/BVN-1888,1097 - Letter to Carl Fuchs, my trans., 1888)

Some commentators consider this final outcome of Nietzsche's rhythmic studies once again as a mere denunciation of the excess and disorder of Romanticism and a return, exemplified by his latest distaste for Wagner, to a certain Classical standpoint expressed through an Apollonian urge to master Dionysian exuberance and hubris.

However this view only reflects a banal prejudice that we know quite well by now. The late "time-rhythmic" and "affect-rhythmic" categories are only superficially philological equivalents of the early Apollonian and Dionysian metaphysical principles. They certainly share a few formal characteristics with them: measure, distinction, control of passion, on the one hand; immoderation, confusion, expression of passion, on the other. But they mean something radically different because their theoretical context has radically changed. Meanwhile Nietzsche has thoroughly studied the Pre-Socratic philosophers, especially Heraclitus and Democritus, who inspired him the elaboration of a full fledged rhythmic ontology. He has also substituted, through his philological research on Greek rhythmic, a historical anthropology of rhythm to his former metaphysics of art dominated by melody and harmony.

Hence the term rhythm retains here no metaphysical meaning. It does not point any more, through its eternal battle with harmony and melody, to the *Ur-Element*, the Will that animates the cosmos, or, for other historical periods, to the obstacles raised by Socratic or modern rationalism between us and the ground of reality. It now defines as Humboldt did by studying the variety of linguistic "articulation" human life in its various historical forms. In this sense, we have with this letter the confirmation that the rhythmic studies should be linked with the trend of researches that were initiated by Diderot and developed by some German Romantics up to Humboldt. What we could call a *historical anthropology of rhythm* is now firmly settled.

The change in method explains why in his letter to Carl Fuchs, Nietzsche is not setting, as it may seem, a simplistic moralistic view opposing "modern barbarian" and "ancient civilized" rhythms. His research on rhythm helped him to realize the poor chance we moderns actually have to get in touch with ancient rhythms. They show, against 19th century historicism's and metric's dream, but also against Nietzsche's own hope to reconnect with the spirit of the Greek drama, that we have lost contact with an important part of the linguistic and poetic life of the Ancients. For this simple reason too, Nietzsche is certainly not advocating a reactionary return to the past. He rather tries to describe the difference in the ethical outcome of two linguistic rhythmicity that have been crucial in the West. He is not splitting history into two periods respectively related to opposed metaphysical categories; he is historically examining two rhythms of speech and their specific human consequences. Indeed, he does not say that there are or even could be no other kinds.

In short, ethics is neither derived from a language-diffident Schopenhauerian metaphysics, nor from aesthetic analyses of very broad art forms. On the contrary, it is now based on one fundamental theoretical assumption: all that counts, ethically speaking, for rhythm theory actually occurs *within language*, without necessitating any reference to the "unreachable," "thing-in-itself" or "being." A new kind of anti-idealism based on the primacy of language has emerged.

However, this radical critique of metaphysics and dualism, this systematic use of history against abstraction and reactionary temptations, and the fundamental assumption of the primacy of language do not entail a sheer ethical and political relativism, as some post-modern thinkers, who set themselves in Heidegger's wake, have repeatedly claimed (De Man, 1979; Rorty, 1991). Usually, these interpreters do not bother with the countless statements in which Nietzsche judges, chooses, rejects and praises this or that. Or when they do, their own lack of consistent ethics makes them think that these statements are only arbitrary personal choices or judgments.

Because of his own limited rhetorical conception of language, De Man abusively reduces language to an "army of metaphors" and implicitly, if unwillingly, a traitor to the soul. As De man, Rorty claims that there are no stabilized meanings and values. But due to his pragmatic belief, he thinks that meanings and values are the result of both power relations and endless conversation run by human beings. This stand makes him pay more attention than De

Man to the positive building power of language, which he does not consider only being an "inefficient mirror of reality." However, because he regards language mainly as a set of tools for dealing with things, persons, ourselves and events in the world, he never considers the rhythmic linguistic and poetic aspects of what he calls the great "human conversation," which he reduces to community building or destroying.

Yet Nietzsche spent a lot of time and energy on philological research, gathering factual linguistic and poetic evidence. And his last letter to Carl Fuchs shows that he was very much attached to his findings which he presents systematically to his friend, the "main point" being the opposition between "time-rhythmic" and "affect-rhythmic" i.e. two *types of speech organization* and *their ethical consequences*.

If we set Nietzsche's late ethics in the historical anthropological frame that has been progressively reconstituted in previous sections, we see much better the stake of the last letter on Greek rhythmic. At the end of his intellectual life, capitalizing on his rhythmic research, Nietzsche does not see language any longer as deceiving the soul by its conceptual aspect or the infinite play of his metaphors; he is not either indulging in a kind of hermeneutics which would participate to a common conversation in this instance, he is not anticipating any kind of post-modernism. Rather, in a way that is not foreign to the 18th and 19th century thinkers and artists interested in rhythm, he sets the problem on the anthropological-historical level. He sees language simultaneously as production of the will, and as a frame that imprints back its patterns upon it. Turning against the twin *logical* and *rhetorical* definitions of language, but also against the *hermeneutical* one which was already common in 19th century, Nietzsche retrieves here *poetics* intuitions already glimpsed at by Diderot, Moritz, Goethe, Hölderlin, Humboldt and, that will be Hopkins' and Mallarmé's main concern: there is no separation between sound and meaning, the emotions and thoughts are intertwined and supported by the rhythmic organization of speech (including body movements), and these conditions set the immanent ethical frame we have to deal with.

Even when language is considered as radically historical, it can still be considered subsidiary to being, as for different but convergent reasons by Heidegger, Gadamer, or De Man. Or when it is not, it can be reduced to a tool devoid of any poetic dimension as in Rorty. But if its primacy is given full meaning, it should be taken as the main vector of human history. The *geschichtsbildende Mensch* is essentially *rhythmenbildend* and the *rhythmenbildende Mensch* essentially *sprachbildend*.

Now, what are the criteria that could be used to judge and choose if every value, every affirmation pertains to the historical sphere? Is there still a possibility to produce an ethics and a politics in and from a totally immanent world? My thesis is that Nietzsche was precisely working on this problem at the end of his life and that he was not far from the idea that *due to* our nature of *speaking living beings* our immanent world is not closed upon itself: since man is a language-and-rhythm fashioning creature, he is able to produce *subjects* which are also *transsubjects*. This goes against many interpretations, beginning with Heidegger's ontological reading up to Deleuze's naturalistic interpretation. But, obviously, the question motivating the letter to Carl Fuchs does not concern neither being nor nature; instead, it primarily concerns language, history and ethics.

This little piece of evidence offers us a precious insight on this very disputed question. It is well known that at the end of his intellectual career Nietzsche developed a new ethics based on life. In many texts, the criterion he uses to judge aesthetic, cultural, religious, philosophical or social matters seems very simple: is something favorable or opposed to the development of life? Wagner's drama, for instance, is condemned because it has depressive effects on its public, whereas Bizet's opera is praised because it expresses the joy and power of affirmation of life. But ever since the end of the 19th century, common readers as much as specialists have had difficulties to give a complete account of this criterion which involves both life as biological or physiological course, and life as existence or personal experience. When the former has been given precedence, Nietzsche's late philosophy has been reduced to a simplistic naturalism; when the latter was considered as the true core of Nietzsche's view, as in existentialist interpretations, one did not understand Nietzsche's insistence on natural dynamics and the role they play in his ethics.

The notes on rhythm and the radical primacy of language they presuppose seem to shed some light on this difficult question by better articulating this two *membra disjecta* of Nietzsche's late philosophy. By showing the rhythmic impact of the will to power on the development of language as well the rhythmic conditions of the development of thought and expression of emotions set in return by each specific language and culture, they suggest that there is no language nor speech devoid of any basis in biological-physiological life, but also and more surprisingly, no biological-physiological life, at least for humans, independent of any culture and any language. Human life develops as a constant interaction of linguistic-poetic and biological-physiological dynamics and their common ground, their possibility to interact is rhythm. Therefore, its value depends on that of the rhythms which organize it.

No wonder then that Nietzsche pays particular attention to the rhythmic traces in particular languages of forces coming from the people, but also to the fashioning back of those forces, in individuals as much as collectives, by the dominant rhythms in one particular culture and language, in one particular period of time. Here we see again the typical Nietzschean scheme of two interacting dynamics but now the enhancement of human life has become the criterion of good and bad rhythms. As anyone can realize reading his last texts on the subject, Nietzsche is not supporting a relativist view according to which any rhythm would be as good as any other.

In the letter to Carl Fuchs, the different values given to each rhythmic type appear only in conclusion and in a slightly ironical way: whereas "our kind of rhythmic belongs to pathology," the "ancient [rhythmic]" supported "ethos", i.e. properly ethics. In other words, according to Nietzsche his rhythmic studies have shown that the modern rhythmic conditions of thought and expression of emotion due to modern languages and cultures deserve to be firmly criticized for their inefficient and autistic symbolization drives. Whereas ancient rhythmic conditions were ethically quite favorable because they fostered transsubjectivity and hampered the development of hysterical subjectivities, they make on the contrary the symbolization process of affects foster subjectivities closed in on themselves and hamper the emergence of shareable transsubjects. In this sense, contrary to *The Birth of Tragedy*, the notes on rhythm and their late final conclusion sketch a radically historical ethics *based on life*, which in this instance means as much *biological and physiological as linguistic and poetic* life.

In his last published text, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche claims one more time the existence of a significant difference between Ancient and Modern man who "no longer immediately corporally imitates and represents all that he feels." The original poetic power of rhythm has declined and has been replaced by the disciplinary power of meter. Even if "to a certain extent any rhythm still speaks to our muscles," music is now made possible only because "one has a sense of number [*eine Anzahl Sinne*], [and] asks the muscular sense [*Muskelsinn*] to stand still."

Music, as we understand it today, is as much a general excitation as a discharge of emotions, but [it is] still the leftover of a much fuller expressive world of emotion, a mere *residue* of Dionysian histrionism. What makes music possible as a special art is that one has a sense of number [*eine Anzahl Sinne*], [and] asks the muscular sense [*Muskelsinn*] to stand still (relatively at least: because to a certain extent any rhythm still speaks to our muscles): thus [modern] Man no longer immediately corporally imitates and represents all that he feels. (eKGWB/GD-Streifzuege-10 *Twilight of the Idols: Skirmishes of an Untimely Man*, § 10. First ed. 24/11/1888, my trans.)

To my knowledge, the only specialist who has been aware of this aspect of Nietzsche's late philosophy is Angèle Kremer-Marietti, to whom I would like to pay a tribute to end this section. In a text written in the mid 1990s, she rightly underlines the decisive role played by rhythm in Nietzsche's theory of language as much as in his own writing something I did not have time to study. The "meaning" occurs as "rhythmic and figural event"; "Nietzsche's style reflects his concern, manifested in his writings, for syncope, plural, diversity, musicality, movement, motif with development and deepening, assonance, and finally, as he would say, the whole *ticking* of poetry;" and last but not

least, "the effect of rhythm involves already by itself a slight modification of the rhythmic movements of life."

Nietzsche pleases us with his rhythmic writing, first developing in the body, then joining the thought, the decision and the will of the Self (the corporal *cogito*), a writing retaining from rhythm the difference between times, i.e. the purified, "abstracted-like" rhythm, changed into logical thinking, if not a "pre-reflexive cogito." As an essential trace, the rhythm is not foreign to the meaning of language and allows to disregard the disembodied aspect of the written sentence. Both poor reading and poor writing fail to recognize the intelligent and conscious sign, if they lack the right hearing. It is by thinking language as a rhythmic and figural event that Nietzsche builds his theory of meaning, since, as a sign of difference, rhythm in language lets show through the meaning.

Nietzsche's style reflects his concern, manifested in his writings, for syncope, plural, diversity, musicality, movement, motif with development and deepening, assonance, and finally, as he would say, the whole *ticking* of poetry. But the entire Nietzschean prose and poetry show the power of the free rhythms in writing. In this light, the effect of rhythm involves already by itself a slight modification of the rhythmic movements of life, which Nietzsche tried to precisely identify in his *Rhythmic studies*. (Kremer-Marietti, 1996, my trans.)

To be followed