

# Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 10

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

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

This conclusion gives already a hint on the ethical implications of Nietzsche's new conception of eurhythmy. Eurhythmy 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—some 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 impose 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.

In his last published text, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche contemplates again the power of rhythm upon physiology. But he replaces, this time, his reflection into a historical and poetic perspective. There is, he claims, a significant difference between Ancient and Modern man who "no longer immediately corporally imitates and represents all that he feels." The ancient poetic power of rhythm has declined and has been replaced by the modern 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." Hence, although Nietzsche still alludes to a mysterious "natural" rhythmic power, the stress is now on mechanization of modern art and, consequently, modern man.

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.)

As a matter of fact, unless I am mistaken, Nietzsche did not elaborate further on the physiological dimension of the power of rhythm. Rather, all late 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 "Origin of Poetry" (1882), Nietzsche 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 anymore than the young Nietzsche indulged in Romanticism. By looking closer, one easily realizes 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—as in the previous excerpt of *Twilight of the Idols*—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 *truer* 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)

In this aphorism of *The Gay Science*, we see: 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”; 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*; 4. that this aphorism does not refer anymore to Apollo as member of the dyad *Apollo-and-Dionysus*.

Nietzsche has definitely parted from the metaphysical world set by *The Birth of Tragedy*. But he does not allude either to any physiological explanation. Rather, he 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 a subjective quality of that very mind—her credulity.

In a letter to Carl Fuchs, written a few months before his collapse (1888), entitled “To distinguish the ancient rhythmic (“time-rhythmic”) from the barbaric (“affect-rhythmic”),” Nietzsche recapitulates his main philological findings. 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 promising *rhuthmic* 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 anymore, 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—exactly 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 research that was 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 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 rhythmicities 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 any longer 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 philology and history against abstraction and reactionary temptations, finally the fundamental assumption of the primacy of language, all these endeavors do not entail either a sheer ethical and political relativism, as some postmodern 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 much better grasp the issue at stake in 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 postmodernism.

Rather, in a way that is not foreign to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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. If language is given real primacy, it should be taken as the main vector of human history. The *geschichtbildende Mensch* is essentially *rhythmenbildend* and the *rhythmenbildende Mensch* essentially *sprachbildend*.

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