

Slave to the Rhythm?

The Many Different Definitions of Rhythm

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I was prompted to write this text after reading Igor Pilshchikov's article devoted to rhythm in this issue of *Forum of Poetics*. I was all the more inspired because Pilshchikov brilliantly discusses the history of "meter" and "rhythm" in Russian literary studies, which, in turn, inspired Henri Meschonnic and Julia Kristeva (especially as regards the works of Russian formalists), and I will refer to both scholars many times (I created my own "project of somatic criticism" years ago inspired by their works). The title of my essay refers to one of Grace Jones's brilliant songs,¹ which was accompanied by a brilliant music video. In this text, I return to my

¹ "Slave to the rhythm" on: Grace Jones *Slave to the rhythm*, Island Records 1985. The lyrics: <https://genius.com/Grace-jones-jones-the-rhythm-lyrics> (date of access: 28 Nov. 2021). The entire song (apart from the ending, i.e., the dialogue): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCqW2ubP7-c> (date of access: 28 Nov. 2021). The lyrics (but not the music) unequivocally refers to the work songs of black people from the South of the United States (in the mid-nineteenth century), i.e., to the roots of blues. The rhythm in the song is associated with rhythmic work, galleys, hard work, being forced to follow a repetitive cycle of actions associated with physical labor.

previous reflections; I often come back to them, because I have written about rhythm and the subject leave me alone. It keeps reminding me of rhythm. Thus, it works in the same way as Edward Pasewicz's beautiful poem *Sonata o rytmie* [Sonata about rhythm] which is essentially a treatise on rhythm.

To begin with, let us go back to the lyrics of Jones's song:

[Intro (Spoken): Ian McShane & *Grace Jones*]

Rhythm is both the song's manacle and its demonic charge. It is the original breath, it is the whisper of unremitting demand. "What do you still want from me?" says the singer. "What do you think you can still draw from my lips?" Exact presence that no fantasy can represent. Purveyor of the oldest secret, alive with the blood that boils again, and is pulsing where the rhythm is torn apart. How your singer's blood is incensed at the depth of sound. Lacerations echo in the mouth's open erotic sky where dance together the lost frenzies of rhythm and an imploring immobility. Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Grace Jones. Jones the Rhythm *Slave!*

[Chorus 1: Grace Jones]

Slave to the rhythm
Dance to the rhythm

[Verse 1: Grace Jones]

Axe to wood in ancient times
Man machine, production line
The fire burns, with heartbeats strong
Sing out loud, the chain gang song

[Pre-Chorus: Grace Jones]

Never stop the action
Keep it up, keep it up
Never stop the action
Keep it up, keep it up

[Chorus 1: Grace Jones]

Slave to the rhythm
Dance to the rhythm

[Post-Chorus: Grace Jones]

The master... never stop

[Bridge: Grace Jones]

Never stop the action, keep it up
Never stop the action
Keep it up, keep it up

[Chorus 2: Grace Jones]

Slave to the rhythm, work to the rhythm

Dance to the rhythm, live to the rhythm
 Slave to the rhythm
 Dance to the rhythm, live to the rhythm
 Slave to the rhythm, work...to the rhythm
 To the rhythm, work to the rhythm, to the rhythm

[Outro: Grace Jones]
 Slave, slave
 To the rhythm, to the rhythm, to the rhythm

[Outro (Spoken): Paul Cooke & Grace Jones]
Oh that's weird...
 Grace Jones, welcome
Thank you Paul. And if you're wondering what's wrong with my voice, I just choked on my saliva. So...
 Now obviously you're in the Bond movie-

This song describes rhythm – defines it in a unique way – it is actually a quasi-definition of rhythm. An image accompanies the lyrics: the video clip is in sync with the rhythm of the lyrics, music, and voice. Image, sound, and text enter into a unique kind of oscillation, vibration, which penetrate the viewing and listening subject. When it comes to the dominant theme, both the word and the image focus on the body, the body which vibrates to the rhythm, the body filled with rhythm, the image of the body, the body that is represented beautifully, reminding one of ancient sculptures. Rhythm is not only connected with art, but also with economy, because the lyrics mention work (production line, the monotonous rhythm of factory work, as presented by Chaplin in his famous film *Modern Times* from 1936). In order to enter the lyrics, one has to first allow the listening body to immerse itself in the rhythm. It all starts with the rhythm – even before it was named, before it is perceived, and before it enters the word.

If so, we should be reminded that in the introduction to the Harvard edition of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typography*, Jacques Derrida recalls the German musician and composer Hans Guido von Bülow's famous saying: "In the beginning there was rhythm."² It is not only an effective rhetorical trick or an aphorism which has made its way into the critical tradition, but a statement of fundamental importance to contemporary theories of rhythm. The concept of rhythm, seemingly simple, has been traditionally associated with a set of formal poetic features, but many theories argue that subjectivity is closely related to rhythm as well. It is said that rhythm and the subject are interconnected in text – that rhythm "creates" the subject. In the same text, Derrida further observes that: "There is no subject without the signature of this rhythm, in us and before us, before any image, any discourse, before music itself."³ Rhythm, similarly to the Derridean *shibboleth*, makes it possible to cross the boundaries

² Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction: Desistence', in *Typography. Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, by Phillipe Lacoue-Labrathe (Cambridge–Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 31.

³ Derrida, 31.

which divide these subjects. Rhythm also enables the move from body to body, a kind of *metempsychosis*, the transmutation of one body into another, body migration, physical reincarnation.⁴ The body that is immobilized in text comes alive thanks to rhythm. The body emits rhythms and signs; it is the source of life and immortality. Rhythm becomes an intermediary between the writing and reading body.⁵

The etymology of the term “rhythm” was researched and discussed years ago by Émile Benveniste.⁶ The term “rhythm” found its way into Western philosophical thought from Greek, through Latin. The Greek *rytmos* [ῥυθμός] was one of the key terms in the Ionian school of natural philosophy. *Rytmos* is a noun derived from the verb *rein* [rein], which meant “to flow.” Benveniste’s etymological analysis shows that *rytmos*, from the time it first appeared until the Attic period, did not mean “rhythm,” nor did it describe the regular movement of water; indeed, it referred to a distinctive form, a proportional figure, an arrangement. The concept of “rhythm” was specified by Plato, who still used rhythm in the sense of a distinctive form, arrangement, and proportion. What was innovative was that this concept was applied to the order of the human body in dance, in movement, and to the system of figures through which this movement was transformed. Plato made a connection between *rytmos* and *metron* and subjected this concept to the laws of numbers derived from music. The form was determined by measure and reduced to a sequence. It was Plato who ultimately defined the concept of rhythm (as related to repetition), which we still use today. The first philosopher to address the problem of the differences between rhythm and meter, albeit in music, was Aristotle’s student Aristoxenus. He wrote a treatise devoted to rhythm and meter. Only one part of it has survived – it is entitled *Elementa rhythmica*.

Benveniste’s analysis demonstrates how complex the etymology of the word “rhythm” is, the consequence of which was the emergence of a specific myth of “rhythm” as in the regular movement of the sea. However, the verb *rein*, which was the basis for the word *rytmos*, means “to flow,” and the sea does not flow. *Rein* was never used in reference to the sea, and *rytmos* was never used to describe the movement of waters. The etymology of the word “rhythm” had been misrepresented for so long that consequently all attempts to define this concept had been based on emphasizing regularity and repetition. Benveniste’s study, especially his take on meter and rhythm opposed, inspired Christopher F. Hasty to perform a thorough analysis in the field of music. The following statement was the starting point: “if we restrict musical rhythm to meter, pattern, and proportion, we feel that something essential has been left out of account.”⁷ Derek Attridge follows in Hasty’s footsteps in his textbook *Poetic Rhythm. An Introduction*, linking the concept of rhythm directly to the body, since the body produces rhythm and acts as its physical medium (“Rhythm is a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived; a series of alternations of build-up and

⁴ Jean Derrida has recently revived the concept of metempsychosis (*métempsychose*) in his essay. See: Jean Derrida, *La naissance du corps: Plotin, Proclus, Damascius* (Paris: Galilée, 2010).

⁵ See, for example: Amittai F. Aviram, *Telling Rhythm. Body and Meaning in Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁶ Émile Benveniste, ‘La notion de rythme dans son expression linguistique’, in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, by Émile Benveniste (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 327–35.

⁷ Christopher Francis Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

release, movement and counter-movement, tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections”).⁸

It is impossible to reduce rhythm to a pattern or proportion, because something essential is always lost as a result of such a simplification. If there is meter in the text, there is of course repetition and regularity, but alongside them there also appear various modulations and deviations. They are the most interesting object of analysis of rhythmic systems. This can be seen very clearly when one looks at various Polish and foreign works on rhythm. I refer to, for example, Józef Elsner's *Rozprawa o metryczności i rytmiczności języka polskiego, szczególnie o wierszach polskich we względzie muzycznym* [The treaty on meter and rhythm in the Polish language, in particularly in Polish poems in terms of music],⁹ in which subsequent analyses of “rhythmic metric” in poetry (Elsner's original concept) are closely related to music (rhythm as the basis for distinguishing poetry from prose, rhythm as “an array of tones and [...] their form in time,” rhythm is the duration of pronouncing sounds, meter in poetry is a measure in music).¹⁰ Elsner's treaty is supplemented by a commentary and Kazimierz Brodziński's “octameter” poems, as well as detailed metrical analyses of every poem (“the pleasant bondage of meter,” Brodziński writes, “awakens almost like Music, sustains and lifts the feeling”). In Ludwik Jenike's *O znaczeniu rytmu w poezji* [On the role of rhythm in poetry], rhythm is subordinated to nature and its regularities. It is openly connected with regularity: “We need a certain commensurability of movements and sounds of all kinds; we tend to arrange them in some permanent system. Such an approach seems to be innate to man.”¹¹ The same applies to Antoni Małecki's definition, which emphasizes “harmony” in poetry: “Rhythm is a sequence of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, which, if repeated in a certain constant and consistent pattern, pleases the ear and creates poetical rhythm.”¹² Respectively, the definition of the word “rhythm” in Karłowicz's dictionary reads: “a harmonious succession of long and short syllables, or stressed and unstressed syllables, which endows the poem with musicality.”¹³ In his treaty *Wiersze polskie w ich dziejowym rozwoju* [Polish poetry and its historical development], Jan Nepomucen Łoś analyzes the rhythmical structure of Polish poems, beginning with the Middle Ages and ending with the early works of the poets associated with the Skamander group, and distinguishes between rhythm based on three principles: meter, stress and syllable. This notwithstanding, he constantly refers to regularity and repeatability, and also connects rhythm with music and dance, stating that: “Rhythm and rhyme – these are the two most

⁸ Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

⁹ Józef Elsner, *Rozprawa o metryczności i rytmiczności języka polskiego, szczególnie o wierszach polskich we względzie muzycznym* [The treaty on meter and rhythm in the Polish language, in particularly in Polish poems in terms of music] (Warsaw, 1818).

¹⁰ See: the beginning of Elsner's treaty.

¹¹ Ludwik Jenike, *O znaczeniu rytmu w poezji, a mianowicie o rytmiczności języka polskiego* [On the role of rhythm in poetry, i.e. on the rhythmicity of the Polish language] (Warsaw: Drukarnie Gazety Polskiej, 1865).

¹² Antoni Małecki, *Gramatyka języka polskiego szkolna* [Textbook of Polish grammar] (Lviv, 1906), 264. In his *Gramatyka języka polskiego większa* [Advanced textbook of Polish grammar] from 1863 Małecki writes: “[rhythm] is like walking to a beat; in Polish louder and softer steps are arranged in the following way: soft-soft-loud or soft-loud.”

¹³ Jan Karłowicz, Adam Antoni Kryński, and Władysław Niedźwiedzki, *Słownik języka polskiego* [Polish dictionary], vol. 5 (Warsaw, 1909), 798.

important features of the modern poem; the third feature is musicality and melodicy. Unfortunately, however, it is impossible to say what it really consists of: whether it is stylistic, or, as some say, whether it is a certain way of arranging sounds in a poem, some consonants but mainly vowels, as if they were musical elements.”¹⁴ Any deviations from rhythmic regularity are defined by Łoś as “rhythmic errors,” “broken rhythms,” “rhythmic defects,” “unmaintained rhythm,” “disturbed rhythm,” “arrhythmicity,” “a-rhythmicity,” “the most unruly rhythm.” All such instances, in his opinion, destroy rhythmic order and disturb the pleasure of reading. Respectively, according to Henryk Źyczyński: “poetic rhythm, whether it manifests itself in beautiful prose or in poetry, is for the poet above all not a form of experiencing, but of shaping. What is before is a mood, a ferment, an indefinite impulse, and only *rhythm* is the creative *fiat* that brings beauty out of it. As such, it is compulsion, discipline, but at the same time the only condition that can endow an experience with an aesthetic value.”¹⁵ Źyczyński repeatedly emphasizes regularity, but also mentions “shaded variety” (this term is somewhat unclear in his essay). Źyczyński recognizes Julian Przyboś and Jan Brzękowski as poets which tried to revolutionize Polish poetry and points out that innovations in their poetry are mainly limited to poetic style and representation, while rhythm is, in his opinion, neglected and not properly defined. He could not have been more wrong, but this became clear many years later.

The difference between rhythm and meter is particularly important in the theories proposed many years ago by Henri Meschonnic or Julia Kristeva.¹⁶ Meter was often equated with rhythm, the two overlapped, guided by the principles of regularity, equivalence, and symmetry. In traditional terms, meter points to poetry; it is a means of “de-automatizing” language (as pointed out by Russian formalists or the Prague school). If rhythm is seen as a subcategory of the phonological level of language, meter is subordinated to it. Meschonnic argues that rhythm itself is not metrical. Depending on historical and writerly circumstances, it

¹⁴Jan Łoś, *Wiersze polskie w ich dziejowym rozwoju [Polish poetry and its historical development]* (Warszawa: Gebethner & Wolff, 1920).

¹⁵Henryk Źyczyński, *Problemy wersyfikacji polskiej [Problems of Polish versification]*, part I: *Rytm poetycki [Rhythm in poetry]* (Lublin: Dom Książki Polskiej, 1934), 32.

¹⁶See: Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme Anthropologie historique du langage* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982); Henri Meschonnic, *La Rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989); Henri Meschonnic, *Politique du rythme. Politique du sujet* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1995); I summarize the views of Kristeva and Meschonnic presented in these works. More extensive discussions of Meschonnic’s theory can be found in the following studies: Gérard Dessons, *La Théorie du rythme d’Henri Meschonnic. Introduction à la poétique. Approche des théories de la littérature* (Paris: Dunod, 1995); Sergio Capello, *Le réseau phonique et le sens. L’interaction phono-sémantique en poésie* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1990), 111–15; Lucie Bourassa, *Rythme et sens. Des processus rythmiques en poésie contemporaine* (Montréal: Balzac, 1993); Parick Suter, ‘Rythme et corporéité chez Claude Simon’, *Poétique*, no. 77 (1994) The last two works prove that Meschonnic’s theory is effective in the analysis of poetry (Bourassa) and prose (Suter); Gabriella Bedetti, ‘Henri Meschonnic: Rythm as Pure Historicity’, *New Literary History* 23, no. 2 (1992): 431–50; The practical application of Meschonnic’s theory and method of textual analysis were discussed at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries in: T.V.F. Brogan, ‘Rhythm’, in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. T.V.F. Brogan and Alex Preminger (Princeton, 1993), 1066–70; Aviram, *Telling Rhythm. Body and Meaning in Poetry*; Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) – a collective study in which Charles Bernstein in his introduction places particular emphasis on the distinctiveness of meter and rhythm, and also emphasizes that prosody shapes rhythmic processes. The following authors also refer to Meschonnic’s works: Marjorie Perloff, ‘After Free Verse’, in *Close Listening*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89–90; David Evans, *Rhythm, Illusion and the Poetic Idea – Baudelaire – Rimbaud, Mallarmé* (Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2004).

can be metrical or non-metrical. Therefore, it may accidentally appear to be regular, which is a cultural and traditional condition. Rhythm moves beyond meter. Meter is predictable and meets our expectations, while rhythm is unpredictable. Meter is discontinuous and numerical, while rhythm is continuous and non-numerical.

For Meschonnic, rhythm does not require a meter, but if it appears in the text then it functions as a rhythmic feature, a sort of “accompaniment.” Meter in a poem may be described, just like other rhythmic features. Meschonnic does not define rhythm in formal terms but sees it as an “organization of meaning” in a literary text. Rhythm may be analyzed on two planes: on the syntagmatic plane (analysis of “juxtaposed rhythmic sequences”) and on the

paradigmatic plane (regularity of rhythmic sequences, series – prosodic chains, prosodic figures – reflections, alliteration; recurrences, which are arranged transversely in the text). According to some theories of poetry, sounds can be motivated – they can shape meaning. Meschonnic believes that in literary works, sounds form a kind of network connected by association. The process of association itself is transversal, translinear, and does not take place in sequential order (anagrammatic reading of texts was postulated by de Saussure: in his view, poetic language creates secondary meaning which is added to the original word; de Saussure inspired a paragrammatic theory of reading which also found inspiration in psychoanalysis – Kristeva, in which rhythm is pre-symbolic and prior to meaning, as well as Meschonnic’s “series” and “prosodic figures”). In Jones’s song, such anagrammatic arrangements can be found: as a phonetic anagram, the words “Jones the rhythm” presuppose the phrase “Join the rhythm.”

According to this associative theory of reading, one cannot ascribe value only to meaning, because value is related to how discourse functions in its entirety. Only such a theory of reading, based on a transversal and dynamic process of association, allows us to accept the phonic organization of the text as something that co-creates to rhythm.

The entire phonic sphere is extremely important for the rhythmic and meaningful functioning of the text. Contrary to conventional theories which reject the motivated nature of the sign and recognize that all phonemic phenomena are connected to pragmatics, the logic of discourse, and linguistics, one should replace language with discourse and focus on how it functions. If we adopt such an approach, the text ceases to be a static structure; it becomes a dynamic process and is subject to constant transformations. The phonetic systems combined with other levels of language form the system of the text.

Analysis should therefore trace contrasts and sequences as well as transversal phenomena, translinear recurrences of certain phonetic elements – the rhythm of the text is created by phonetic similarities which appear in the text in different places, hidden phonetic anagrams. The entire phonic sphere of the poetic or prose text produces the so-called *signifiance*. *Signifiance* is a process of producing meaning as well as the result of this process; in the latter case, meaning is quasi-synonymous with signification; literary theory borrowed this term from Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Signifiance* only refers to actions connected with *signifiants*, which never refer to *signifié*. It is shaped, among other things, by a series of recurring sounds, which

produce an effect of *différance* or consonant echoes.¹⁷ In subsequent repetitions, one word is referenced by another. In such an analysis, the frequency of occurrence, sequence, and position of sounds are taken into account in order to determine how *significance* works in a given text, which further relates to memory, orality, as well as a set of perceptive, emotional and cognitive abilities of the subject.

Such an approach to rhythm allows us to depart from the metaphorical descriptive approaches which focus on melody, musicality, etc. They are very close to the definitions of rhythm that appeared in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which rhythm was synonymous with meter. In this perspective, rhythm is also directly connected with the body that produces it. In written texts, rhythm is a trace of the body.

If we follow Julia Kristeva or Henri Meschonnic, we are able to see rhythm as an exceptionally beautiful form of bondage, which we cannot escape. Rhythm surrounds us, but at the same time allows us to trace our own, unique, and exceptional identity. This applies to all forms of art, every artist, poet, novelist, painter, musician, sculptor, photographer, every creator. Jones refers to it in her song. Indeed, in the lyrics (or, as I put it, a *quasi*-definition), there are many words that are directly related to the theoretical concepts of rhythm found in philosophy,¹⁸ linguistics, musicology, and literary studies.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

¹⁷See: David I. Masson, 'Sound-Repetition Terms', in *Poetics. Poetyka*, ed. Donald Davie and Kazimierz Wyka, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961), 189–99.

¹⁸See, for example: Pierre Sauvanet, *Le rythme grec, d'Héraclite à Aristote* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999); Pierre Sauvanet, *Le rythme et la raison*, vol. 1–2 (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2000).

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KEYWORDS

METRUM

Rhythm

b o d y

ABSTRACT:

This essay discusses different definitions of rhythm. The author thoroughly reviews the different definitions and approaches to rhythm in Polish and foreign-language (especially French and English) theoretical texts. He also refers to the texts of culture, including Grace Jones's famous song *Slave to the rhythm* or Edward Pasewicz's poem *Sonata o rytmie* [Sonata about rhythm].

DEFINITION

subject

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Adam Dziadek – professor at the University of Silesia in Katowice. His research interests include literary theory, comparative literature, men’s studies, genetic criticism, and translation. He is the author of: *Rytm i podmiot w liryce Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza i Aleksandra Wata* [Rhythm and subject in the poetry of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Aleksander Wat] (Katowice 1999), *Obrazy i wiersze. Z Zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej* [Pictures and poems. Relations between art and contemporary Polish poetry] (Katowice 2004 and 2011), *Na marginesach lektury. Szkice teoretyczne* [On the margins of reading. Theoretical essays] (Katowice 2006), *Obrazy i teksty. Interferencje i interpretacje* [Images and texts. Interferences and interpretations] (Katowice 2007). He also published *Wybór wierszy* by Aleksander Wat in the Polish National Library series (Wrocław 2008). He has published his critical essays in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, *Teksty Drugie* and *Przestrzenie Teorii*. He has translated the works of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Marc Augé, Clifford Geertz, Raewyn Connell, and Daniel Ferrer. He also published a translation of Gérard Raulet’s book *German Philosophy after 1945* (Warsaw 2013). In recent years, he has published *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* (Warsaw 2014) and *Somatic Criticism Project* (Frankfurt am Main 2018). Together with Jan Zieliński, he published Aleksander Wat’s *Notatniki* for the first time (Warsaw 2015). He was the head of the Maestro 4 research grant *Męskość w literaturze i kulturze polskiej od XIX wieku do współczesności* [Masculinity in Polish literature and culture from the nineteenth century to the present day]. He is the editor of the *Studia o męskości* [Men’s studies] series (IBL PAN). He was and is a supervisor in the NCN Fuga and Preludium projects. Since 2007, he has been on the editorial board of *Pamiętnik Literacki*. He is also a member of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Currently, he is the head of the NPRH project, module Universals 2.1, *Polish Men and Masculinities. Translation and publication in English of selected works from the Men’s Studies* publishing series.