

# Henri Meschonnic: Rhythm As Pure Historicity\*

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## Philosophical Position

**H**ENRI MESCHONNIC is one of the key figures of French New Poetics but is still wholly unknown here. Outside the United States he is best known for contributing to an understanding of rhythm. *Critique du rythme, anthropologie historique du langage* (The Critique of Rhythm: A Historical Anthropology of Language), his central text, is neither a metrical study nor the usual sort of rhythmic analysis, but something quite other. As a poet and as a translator of the Hebrew verse of the Bible, Meschonnic contends that rhythm governs meaning.<sup>1</sup> He defines rhythm in language as the continuous movement of *signifiance*<sup>2</sup> constructed by the historical activity of a subject. His book considers all theories of rhythm ever put forward and shows how each is limited by its time and place—indeed that there is no such thing as an absolute statement about rhythm but that it is always historicized. For rhythm is heard only when the subject prevails.

Rhythm in discourse exposes the subject (*sujet d'énonciation*) in that activity of language we call poetry. Human beings think with their whole body,<sup>3</sup> but such body language is easier to grasp in speech and posture than in written discourse. Yet even in discourse, the larger the role of rhythm, the greater the fullness of body. Because its language has best retained rhythm from the body and imposes a perception not yet conceptualized by culture, poetry is the mode of signifying that says the most, and most transforms the modes of signifying. Meschonnic shares with Derrida and Foucault the notion that discourse shapes and circumscribes the subject, but he goes further, as a poet, to suggest that this form of power flows in the other direction, from the bottom up: the subject also determines

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the language (or discourse) one uses in the very act of borrowing that language from the social cistern of language. This opens the possibility in Meschonnic's thought for the subject to transform culture's language which is itself transforming the subject.

Historicity, then, gives equal weight to the subject's ability to transform language and to language's ability to shape the subject. Unlike traditional literary history, the critique of rhythm is the source of a historicity of works, not only of their circumstances or social effects. Rhythm exposes the subject through its body language, and that subject is the locus of *historicity*, a term which, in contrast to *historicism*, is contained in the advanced position which Meschonnic holds and maintains in a polemic engaged on almost all important fronts. One of these fronts is the analysis of rhythm in prose and prosody, which has been largely neglected by modern literary theory even though it is fundamental to the perceptions underlying "textualism" and pragmatics. Meschonnic's work is the one major attempt to address that absent dimension. In foregrounding rhythm, he has theorized and exhibited ways of discussing empirically the constraints that inscribe the orality of language in writing.

Three stages mark the evolution of Meschonnic's work on rhythm: the redefinition of poetics in 1970, the reevaluation of theories of language in 1975, and the critique of rhythm in 1982. A critical survey of everything on poetic language published by linguists, structuralists, and formalists in the 1950s and 1960s, *Pour la poétique* (For Poetics) lays the groundwork for connecting language, the unconscious, and ideology in the work. The experience of translating the Bible provides the basis for *Pour la poétique II, épistémologie de l'écriture, poétique de la traduction* (For Poetics II: An Epistemology of Writing, A Poetics of Translation),<sup>4</sup> which extends the first volume by examining what Meschonnic considers three important theoretical moments: the epistemology of writing, the poetics of the sacred, and the poetics of translation.<sup>5</sup> Constructing a theory of the subject which constitutes a dialectic of the I or Ego and of language in history, he situates poetics in anthropology, and the poetics of the sacred in the Bible. This theoretical book is accompanied by *Pour la poétique III, une parole écriture* (For Poetics III: A Word Writing),<sup>6</sup> a study of the practice of French poetic languages from Nerval to Eluard.

An aggressive exponent of time and change, Meschonnic everywhere attacks stasis. He broadens his scope from poetics to theories of language in *Le Signe et le poème* (The Sign and the Poem),<sup>7</sup> which contends with two "impasses" reached by language: pervasive phenomenological violence and Marx.<sup>8</sup> The philosophical tradition lead-

ing to and continuing with Hegel has supported these differing but mutually reinforcing impasses, which, he holds, have dominated literature, opinion, and the university. The importance of a non-instrumentalist theory of language—for all conceptions of society, from politics to poetics—becomes apparent as Meschonnic demonstrates how all impasses of language reinforce a metaphysics and a dictatorial power. To touch on language, therefore, one must necessarily deal with the passions, whether in connection with an individual or with a society, as he shows in his study of Hugo. First presented in the Massin edition of Hugo, the essays collected in *Ecrire Hugo, pour la poétique IV* (Writing Hugo: For Poetics IV) comprise Meschonnic's most extensive study of a practice of poetic language, and constitute the most persuasive evidence for his theory. Two related studies, *Poésie sans réponse, pour la poétique V* (Poetry without an Answer: For Poetics V) and *Jona et le signifiant errant* (Jonah and the Wandering Signifier)<sup>9</sup> complete the sequence on poetics and theories of language.

From theories of language Meschonnic turns again to the critique of rhythm with the publication of *Critique du rythme*. Henceforth his project involves finding a single theory for language and history. This theory synthesizes the literary, linguistic, historical, and anthropological discourses under the aegis of a concept of discourse. Rhythm, for Meschonnic, calls on us to distinguish three terms rather than two: the oral (which can be heard when the subject prevails, whether in written or in spoken language), the spoken, and the written. In his attempt to abolish the traditional opposition between the oral and the written, he analyzes how value functions as the difference in a system, transposing it from *langue* to *discours* and transforming society. Meschonnic defines value as “an element of the sign as well as of the text, inasmuch as the sign and the text are inseparable in the work. . . . [O]n the level of literariness . . . value plays the role of an element of the system of the work, to the extent that the work constitutes itself through certain differences. These differences may relate to phonemes, words, characters, objects, places, scenes, etc. There is no value in the pure state but only in the interior of a system.”<sup>10</sup> In this way value indicates a particular force or emphasis in meaning, a departure from ordinary meaning, though not a complete separation; for example, “I’m going to my home (house)” versus “I’m going *home*.”

Meschonnic's historical anthropology of language thus finds its philosophical antecedents in Saussure and Benveniste. Benveniste, upon whose work Meschonnic bases his theory, initiated the study of “enunciation”<sup>11</sup> and discourse while refusing the formalists' sep-



aration of philology and linguistics.<sup>12</sup> And Saussure paved the way for the hypothesis of the primacy of discourse. Against Saussure's structuralist followers who attempted to reduce his work to the metaphysics of the sign, Meschonnic defends the use of Saussure's four terms: *value* (rather than meaning), *system* (rather than structure), *functioning* (rather than origin), and, particularly, *the radically arbitrary element* (rather than convention). He does not attack what has been taken to be Saussure's concept of the sign but recovers Saussure from his structuralist interpreters. Yet, as Meschonnic sees it, the sign still pervades anthropology and ethnology with the traditional opposition between the oral and the written, and in that opposition, the sign privileges written over oral cultures, modern industrial over traditional societies, semiotics over syntax.

The increasing absence of rhythm in meaning and of meaning in rhythm in our linguistic inheritance is so crucial a development that *Critique du rythme* attempts to address that absence by establishing a new theory of rhythm to carry us along *le bon chemin*. This large volume of more than 700 pages establishes a new theory of rhythm; it engages all of language, and in that subject, all subjects. That is why—across all the problems he confronts, such as the tie between language and music, voice and diction or typography, and across the strategies he analyzes, from metrics to psychoanalysis, from linguistics to philosophy, including even rhythm's technical aspects—the theory of rhythm is, in the word's wider sense, political. For it involves the person in the choices one makes in community.

### Practical Critical Methods

Wherever there is poetry, Meschonnic says, there is “war,” and everywhere he is frankly polemical. His dissent from opposing theories brings into focus the methods of his rhythmic analysis. In opposition to the traditional view of rhythm as the metrical variation which characterizes “the historical dimension” of prosody as the philologic or linguistic reflection of the state of the language in various periods of history,<sup>13</sup> Meschonnic defines rhythm in language as “the organization of marks by which the linguistic signifieds (especially in the case of oral communication) produce a special semantic meaning.” That meaning he calls *signifiance*, which is to say “the values proper to a discourse and only to one” (C 216). The regularity of Saint-John Perse's “rhythm” dehistoricizes his verse and dissociates the poet from the political in language. Resolution and regularity lead to ideas of sedimented value, to a historicism

that forgets that “nothing in language and in history is described without an observer, and that the observation is always a tie which modifies what one observes” (C 30). But, on the other hand, to politicize language directly is obsolete and dangerous. In order to show that rhythm is “historicity,” it is important to keep the conflict alive and unresolved between what shapes us culturally and what we do to escape being mere cultural products, twice victims—to cultural forces in general, and, in particular today, to the industrial production of commodities.

Traditional meters convey a dogmatism rather than an ideology. Meschonnic devises a system of notation subtle enough to gauge the transformations effected by rhythm. To capture what Gerard Manley Hopkins called “the movement of the [spoken] word in writing,” sound notation needs to record more than the number of syllables in a line and whether the line rhymes. In brief, to a metrical notation, Meschonnic adds a rhythmic one, a move more revolutionary than may be apparent to the English-speaking reader, for traditional French scansion differs from English in that it is quantitative or based on syllable count. Whereas English scansion has always distinguished stressed and unstressed syllables, it is only a recent advance in French poetics that recognizes the intermingling of the quantitative with the accentual. Thus Meschonnic no longer considers French verse exclusively in terms of a fixed or unfixed number of syllables followed by a rhyme, as Banville stated in the nineteenth century, but also in terms of a hierarchy of accents and contrasts. There would be no point in doing a rhythmic analysis of a poet or poems if the distribution of accents in French obeyed no more than a metrical code. Because of the need to measure intensity and duration of lines characterized by both a complex accentual rhythm and a consonant counterrhythm, Meschonnic has recourse to a specific scansion notation. Thus  $\sphericalangle$  denotes the consonant attack and all alliterative play on a short syllable; to analyze the varied degrees of counteraccents,  $\sphericalangle$  denotes a long, counteraccented syllable,  $\underline{\sphericalangle}$  a subsequent, long, counteraccented syllable, and so forth. These two kinds of rhythmic “flashings,” which Meschonnic compares to Hopkins’s sprung rhythm, help him discuss the constraints that inscribe orality in writing.

What follows is an example of a line scanned in the usual French way, which Meschonnic then scans in his way. The difference between Matila Ghyka’s quantitative analysis of an alexandrine by Racine<sup>14</sup> and Meschonnic’s qualitative analysis suggests the advantages of rhythmic notation. Ghyka counts the line in terms of the syllable groupings 2, 4, 2, 4:

L'éclat de mon nom même augmente mon supplice

[An honored name itself intensifies my torment]

The metrical abstraction records what are, for Meschonnic, non-existent measures while erasing the conflict between syntax and meter and ignoring the construction of a consonant rhythm. Although considering the line in isolation greatly limits Meschonnic's analysis, he provides this rhythmic scansion:

$\overset{\frown}{\underset{\frown}{\text{L'éc}}}$   $\overset{\frown}{\text{cl}} \underset{\frown}{\text{at}}$   $\underset{\frown}{\text{de}}$   $\underset{\frown}{\text{mon}}$   $\overset{\frown}{\text{nom}}$   $\overset{\frown}{\text{mê}} \overset{\frown}{\text{me}}$   $\underset{\frown}{\text{aug}} \overset{\frown}{\text{men}} \overset{\frown}{\text{te}}$   $\underset{\frown}{\text{mon}}$   $\overset{\frown}{\text{sup}} \overset{\frown}{\text{pli}} \overset{\frown}{\text{ce}}$   
 L'éclat de mon nom même augmente mon supplice

No “number” will account for the vowel coupling of *mon* and *nom* and the consonant coupling with *même*. Nor are these mere assonances or alliterations but rather elements of a paradigmatic series, with *augmente* and *mon* comprising elements of a linearity but also of a circulation of nonlinear signifiers through the space constructed by Racine's “organization-saturation.” Ghyka stresses *même* metrically but places no accent on *nom*, thereby simplifying a double and ambiguous linking—the group *l'éclat-de-mon-nom* qualified by the addition of *même*, and the group *l'éclat* followed by its complement *de mon nom même*. As with the linking of consonants, the monosyllabic quality of the terms *nom* and *même* contributes to the weight placed on each term and helps build on to the semantic intensity that the situation and context establish. Meanwhile, the five syllable syntagm *l'éclat de mon nom* enters into conflict with the six-syllable metrical unit. This convergence of effects creates a tension between the fifth and sixth position. Meschonnic scans this tension with the double notation  $\underset{\frown}{\text{L'éc}}$   $\overset{\frown}{\text{cl}}$ . He further records the relationship of counteraccent, consonant accent on *mon* (marked  $\underset{\frown}{\text{L'éc}}$  to remind one that it does not lengthen the syllable) and on *nom*, and group accent on *même*; this progressive sequence calls for the gradation / // ///, a cumulative effect which does not indicate that *même* is “three” times more intense than *mon*, but which denotes the linear addition of prosodic and rhythmic effects without confusing them. The mark on *l'éclat* denotes the consonant coupling. The same occurs on *supplice*, preceded by *mon* which is already marked by the repetition and by the fourth position in the *m*-series—hence the triple marking. Nine out of twelve positions are marked, the only ones not marked being the third, seventh, and ninth. Yet the third and the ninth are linked phonetically by the dentals, and the seventh is likewise half-marked



by the liaison, whether it is spoken or not. The liaison places *augmente's* initial syllable between an *m* at the end of a syllable and a *g* which responds through an echo from the *k* in *éclat* as, inversely, the *t* responds to the *d* in the third position. Selected by chance and considered in isolation, Meschonnic offers his analysis of this line only as an example of how rhythmic-prosodic notation works (C 252–53).

Insofar as there is a sedimentation of certain values at any given time, Meschonnic believes that they call for deconstruction. The critique of rhythm aids that process by transforming Paul Fussell's supposed historical discontinuities into synchronic debates, as illustrated in Meschonnic's reading of the laughter in Hugo's *Châtiments*.<sup>15</sup> Since the writer deconstructs sedimented values by attending to the I-here-now rather than to the prosodic norms, Meschonnic begins by showing how Hugo allows spoken language to enter into verse, a process of individuation that must be understood in the French context which does not, as in the English-American tradition, mingle poetry with conversational style. He notes something popular in the poetic language of *Châtiments*—the intrusion of speaking, the undoing of the rhythm of the alexandrine. Meschonnic does not consider it accidental that, regardless of the fact that Hugo is a *grand bourgeois*, he is constantly “of the people”—not as a purely political option, but as the lived tie of language between poetics and politics. The distinction separates Meschonnic from the kind of historian who substitutes literary units of power where earlier historians substituted units of idea. Where the historical concept of class forcefully excludes what it does not embrace, in Meschonnic's rhythmic analysis Hugo's text mixes the popular and the middle class—a combination that can be finessed in a concept of power. Refining concepts of genre and literary history, the critique of rhythm thus serves to de-aesthetize the lyric without maneuvering the individual into being a direct function of its social ties—and permits the reader to see not only how individual value represents itself in the critique of rhythm but also how cultural values are themselves shaped by it.

Meschonnic's perception of an ongoing discursive exchange between the I-here-now and sedimented values places him against the identification made by Western modernity during the last 150 years of the poem with what may be called lyricism or identifying the explicitly subjective poem with the short poem. For Meschonnic every poem is fundamentally epic in its historicity. Consequently the critique of rhythm presupposes an anthropology of voice, a history of voice, and a certain cultural status for diction. Turning to Homer, Meschonnic points out that *voice* and *epic* have a shared

etymology. The main source of Meschonnic's concept of rhythm as historicity is the experience of translating five books of the Old Testament according to the cantillation accents of collective reading.<sup>16</sup> As in the Hebrew *Mikra*, in which the notions of orality and collectivity in reading are conjoined, and contrary to the romantic commonplace of pure linguistic expressivity as lyric's *raison d'être*, rhythm does not exist except in discourse. Since the notion of an isolated individual consciousness is an obstacle to a historical theory of the subject, just as the individual is more of an ideological maneuver than the fruit of a truly historical analysis, Meschonnic empties the individual of its intolerable oneness. In and through the work the subject is not the individual but the transformatory processes of individuation: the work enables the social to become individual, and the individual, fragmentarily, indefinitely, to accede to the level of the social.

Voice cannot, for Meschonnic, be linked to the individual, nor, if it is to attain the level of the social, can voice be reduced to language. Voice, as a category of interest that often appears alien to the new textual strategists, becomes the focal point of Meschonnic's rhythmic analysis and of his experience not only as translator but also as poet. His first book of poetry *Dédicaces proverbes* (Dedications Proverbs) deliberately breaks away from the rhetorical and formal moment in French symbolism and reestablishes the connection with the homogeneity of oral forms (proverbs, maxims, fairy tales, and fables) by reestablishing the continuity between the oral and the visual that had been thwarted by an almost exclusive concern for metaphor, with its emphasis on image. Meschonnic affirms that the poem is not a break but merely an opening:

je ne m'en couvre pas comme  
ceux qui vivent sous leur épitaphe  
tant ils s'identifient à leur mots

[I do not cover myself like  
the ones who live beneath their epitaph,  
so much do they identify with their own words]

(V 25)

Providing an alternative to the philosophy of rupture, his poetic rhythm calls for attentiveness because one writes of what one is not:

tellement je suis à venir  
que j'ai à peine le présent



tellement je manque de lieu  
qu'on ne me trouve pas

[I am so much in the state of arriving  
that I barely have the present  
I am so lacking in place  
that I cannot be found]

(V 56)

Voice in his poems undermines the symbolist voyager and undercuts the romantic self. If Meschonnic's poems remain in the quest tradition, it is not a quest for self-identity but an arrival at commonality. Allusions to ancient epic voyagers, in *Voyageurs de la voix* (Travelers of the Voice) in particular, triggers a shift from *I* to *we*, from the desire for invention to a recognition of a shared past:

nos souvenirs dorment ensemble  
et nous  
écoutant ce qui vient nous  
respirons le vent

[our memories sleep together  
and we  
hearing what comes we  
breathe the wind]

(V 60)

Because of the focus on sound rather than figure, Meschonnic's untitled poems exhibit the reciprocity of the spoken rather than the relative autonomy of the printed word.

The continuity that a poetics of rhythm establishes with oral cultures counters the prevailing commodification of the poem that Jameson, for example, identifies in Baudelaire's attempt to reduce reference to an absolute minimum<sup>17</sup> and that results, to Meschonnic's mind, in excluding the very possibility of the new and of transforming the dominating modes of thought. For it is in the context of the artwork turned product in a consumer society that poetic listening takes on its critical importance. As the worst betrayal for Meschonnic-the-philosopher would be a passivity toward being, so would a passivity toward language be the worst betrayal for Meschonnic-the-poet. In an age when the "word product" has become a throwaway commodity, language—the ultimate achievement that we as a species have evolved so far—is being revived by an infusion of the sensibility to and the candor of rhythm possessed by oral cultures. From

Homer to Rabelais, Hugo to Gogol, Milton to Joyce, Kafka to Beckett, Hopkins to Meschonnic, writers in the West have mixed oral literature with the written text. Suppleness of sound characterizes their work. In the way that multiple caesuras have come to figure displacement as a means of rebirth in Meschonnic's poems, so the Jew, because of a history of displacement, is taken as figure of the poet in his poetics. For Meschonnic, only by specifying difference through the "enunciation" of the subject can the transformatory processes of individuation occur.

Enunciation makes clear the mutual implications of continuity and discontinuity in critique. By foregrounding this mutuality Meschonnic's historical concept of voice confronts a univocal notion of language as representation. He proposes instead a concept of voice that is at once representational and presentational. Discourse, for Meschonnic, is the unresolved conflict between what shapes us culturally and what we do to escape being mere cultural products, between representation as a communal activity, on the one hand, and, on the other, rhythm's individuation as a critical rather than dogmatic rendering of the historical circumstances in which it arises. For instance, he questions the psychoanalytic work of Kristeva because she reduces voice to language. Although psychoanalysis shares rhythm's critique of reason, it suffers from semiotics' dualism. In the case of Kristeva, who has twice attempted to construct a theory of rhythm, "a new avatar invents itself out of the dualism of the sign—the paradigm *feminine/masculine*, which places the feminine on the side of the signifier and of rhythm, the masculine on the side of the signified, and of theory" (C 685). Meschonnic takes Kristeva to task for the emblematic role she gives Céline: "Céline is the reversibility between the theory of writing-desire and realized writing" (C 685). And such pronouncements show her attempting to legitimize her fascination with Céline because, for Kristeva, in writing, everything comes from the mother and returns to the mother. In this way writing or rhythm-nature is the subversion of the society of man. But, for Meschonnic, instead of historicizing the written, she returns it to nature when she writes, "For abjection is in sum the other side of religious, moral, ideological codes—on which rest the sleep of individuals and whatever has a lulling effect upon societies."<sup>18</sup>

Because Céline aborts the internal contradiction of the subject and the social, his writing appears univocal to Meschonnic. With a few syntactic procedures Céline forms his own conventions. He builds a spoken of the written, or a written of the spoken. However,

Meschonnic doubts that this writing comprises, as Kristeva contends, an orality (C 518). And his threefold concept of discourse requires that third term.

Meschonnic hears the written and the spoken but not the oral because here the subject does not prevail. He empirically demonstrates that if this is writing as subversion, it is marked by an excess it cannot contain, an impotence established by rhythmic violence, and something lacking in itself which prevents this writing from interacting with and thereby modifying a history and an ideology. Céline's discontinuity without continuity presents an individual rather than the transformatory processes of individuation that attain the level of the social. Where Kristeva attends only to the desire for subversion, Meschonnic is aware of both desire *and* the failure to contain that desire. Where she reinvents the dualism of the individual versus convention in her reading of Céline, he hears an impotent solipsism cased in a spoken, aperiodic syntax—a violence that undermines Céline's originality.

Instead of a Crocian understanding of language in terms of individual aesthetic creativity—say, of Céline's abjection—with history composed of a series of creative voices, a history of voice traces a history of displacement, with each displacement looking toward a utopian horizon. Individuation is important not as self-expression but because it undermines the status quo while maintaining a continuity. Instead of inscribing stories of id-formation, as Céline does, the subject makes the prosodic-rhythmic organization of a text into a continuum of language that eliminates the opposition between the conscious and the unconscious, a dualism situated in the sign. Unlike continuists, however, Meschonnic is not trying to recover the mother lost since infancy or a Hebraism lost since the Canaanitic period but a latent and tacit discourse that is *always* there, so much so that *Critique du rythme* is dedicated “to the unknown” and the opening poem of *Voyageurs de la voix*, his fourth collection, ends “je commence là où je / m'interromps” (I begin at the place I / interrupt myself) (V 11). For Meschonnic, the future is an indispensable dimension of the writer's poetic dialogue with time and history. Thus the critique of rhythm as the socially critical construction of history eschews both Céline's and Kristeva's idea that art is above history (and community) and Fussell's idea that art is merely bound to time. Céline's writing cannot, for Meschonnic, comprise an actual critique because it fails to link subjectivity to historiography. My concluding section will illustrate how actual critique defines the subject in terms of both continuity and transformation. Using a







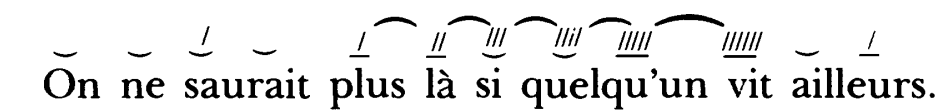
of sentences marked by the progressive construction of adverbial beginnings (*Puis, Depuis huit jours, Ce soir-là*) building the almost metrical equilibrium of descriptive discourse. In Zola's preface, the "picture" ("picture the fatal downfall of a family of workpeople, in the pestilential atmosphere of our faubourgs") passes through a "form." Naturalism is here inscribed in formalism. Zola correctly, and defensively, calls this novel "a purely philologic work" (OC 599). This is no disparagement of Zola but rather situates Zola's work and displays the historicity of the literary sentence after Flaubert. For that sentence, too, lives "sagely in its corner" and is written by a "worthy bourgeois" (C 516–17).

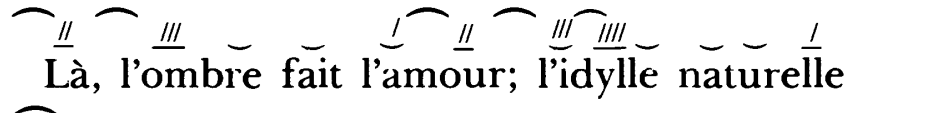
Rhythmic analysis, then, foregrounds Zola's historicity. Meschonnic's method of grounding repetition-displacement in the particulars of a discourse—here marked by the formalism of treatment and the realism of a working-class family—empirically exhibits the transformatory processes at work as a writer *alters* the modes of signification. For Meschonnic, the "folk" camp of historicity undermines the elitist camp of historicism or the "sacred." Rhythm as movement works in Zola's case against the reification of "the purely philologic work" because the continuous historical working of language struggles for plurality, specificity, speech, that is, *parole* and not *langue*. So even as Meschonnic rejects the notion of rupture, he takes *bricolage* to be the practice of all writers belonging to the folk camp of historicity. For in the link between the tongue/speech and history/action, only action and not history has meaning. By contrast with a transformatory theory of history, all theory of history as meaning is an idealist theory. There is no escaping the fact that posing the problems of language on the political plane requires the correlative maintenance of a theory of language and a theory of history. And for Meschonnic, like language, historicity is without transcendence.


As the inscription of a subject in the political field of formalism, the fragment from Zola suggests that there is no such thing as a "poem" or the "poetical" as such, for the subject prevails wherever rhythm may be heard. Is rhythm in a poem continuous or dependent on pauses? For Meschonnic the pauses, rather than being dictated by convention, are invented by the poet. The continuity is not determined by traditional order but by the poet who stops a moment to see what shapes one culturally and decides what to do to escape being a mere cultural product. According to Meschonnic, the poet can do this without requiring consciousness or intentionality. Thus the socially mediated constraints, invented by the poet, that inscribe the words in a particular way, are the working out of value. For example, in Victor Hugo's poem "Pasteurs et troupeaux," pauses



determine the turning points and reversals in the convergences of Hugo's sound series;<sup>22</sup> without pauses there would be no construction of a movement in this poem from opposition to interdependence—no subject. The prosodic counteraccents, for example, in *quelqu'un*, *Là-l'ombre*


  
On ne saurait plus là si quelqu'un vit ailleurs.



  
Là, l'ombre fait l'amour; l'idylle naturelle



  
Rit

[There it would be hard to know if anyone lives anywhere.  
There the shadow makes love; the natural idyll  
Laughs]

(ll. 6–8)

invert the familiar into the terrible, as Hugo tries to give mystery to the colloquial, and form the reciprocal familiarization of the terrible. The rhythmic-syntactic effects in


  
Un doux être quinze ans, yeux bleus, pieds nus, gardeuse


  
De chèvres,

[A sweet being fifteen years old, blue eyes, bare feet, keeper  
Of sheep,]

(ll. 20–21)

escalate the tension between the young feminine world and the poet, as does the linking of the rhythmic-accentual and the prosodic in


  
Chèvres, brebis, béliers, paissent; quand, sombre esprit

[Sheep, ewes, rams, are grazing, when, somber spirit]

(l. 25)

The sweet, accessible, familiar, reassuring world of the pastoral is—in the disjointedness between syntax and meter—beginning to give way to a more menacing, strange, and frightening order. *Signifiance*, then, as distinguished from meaning, introduces the new into the established: meaning is sedimented value, *signifiance* creative value.

Only the prosodic and rhythmic paradigms belonging to this poem turn it into the implicit criticism exercised by rhythm. The cumulative effect of all the series of *signifiante* works through all the positions of the poem's last line

La laine | des moutons | sinistres | de la mer

[The wool of the sinister sheep of the sea]

(l. 46)

to achieve a new order. What began as an opposition has been transformed into an interdependence. This final line also exhibits (within a broader context than that afforded by Racine's isolated alexandrine) Meschonnic's sense of the difference between metrics and rhythmics. For metrics the alexandrine has only two marked positions, the sixth and the twelfth. For rhythmics the alexandrine has twelve positions. Only the position at the end of an unaccented group accounts for the fact that Meschonnic does not mark positions three and nine, for they are otherwise marked—by the consonant coupling (*laine, sinistre*), by the similarity of suggestion in the series (*ombre, tremble, âpre, sinistre*), and by the end-of-group position. In both Racine and Hugo rhythmics offers a striking departure from the equilibrium of classical prosody as the subject overcomes traditional boundaries for poetic duration in the process of inscribing what Meschonnic calls “the physics of language (its orality)” in writing.

Rhythmics, prosody, metaphors comprise a single semantics—a semantics of the particular, of value. In contrast to the phenomenality of the sign, a critique by rhythm here involves the materiality of discourse as inscription of the subject in the arena of romantic idealism. To hear the critique of rhythm means to determine the character or quality, and in this sense the value, of a work through rhythm. In this instance, critique transforms the conventionalized pastoral into a new order in which an idyllic nature and the poet come to be on the same side as God and the terrible; an oppositional ideology is thus displaced and the cosmic and human fused. Value operates from what happens with the contrast between the *gardeuse de chèvres* and the *vieux gardien pensif*, between the young feminine world and the poet, who, being on the side of age and the disquieting, leaves the sexual difference behind him in the displaced pastoral vision.

Yet, if “nothing . . . is described without an observer . . . [who]

modifies what one observes,” one could object, How does a person know that what Meschonnic observes is the kind of thing that others might observe—and that there is any common element between our observations that makes communication possible? The reader may quibble with a particular scansion although the prosodic and rhythmic paradigms Meschonnic records appear “concrete” precisely because of their oral specificity. One may resist the technicalities of his rhythmic notation but be amazed at what that notation registers. After reading several pages disclosing the critique of rhythm in “Pasteurs et troupeaux” (C 267–72), one will discover, moreover, that Meschonnic is not cutting off the possibility even of description and criticism in the ordinary sense. But no such activity is simple and separate. For orality and collectivity are conjoined in reading. Other readings of Hugo or Zola are possible, indefinitely. But what escapes each reading will not be the same, depending on whether it be the residue of a dualist analysis in which metrics is inscribed, or whether it be the *signifiance* which, once produced, never ends, if not by the catastrophe of the text’s disappearance. Like languages, for Meschonnic, texts are not mortal in themselves but rather die through the extinction of people who can speak them. *Signifiance* is infinite, like theory. One would not be able, strictly speaking, to talk of “escaping.” For one escapes from a limit, whereas the primacy of rhythm contributes to situating meaning in nontotality, in non-truth, in nonunity. That is its critical effect.

Do the semantics of rhythm and prosody contribute anything else? One may acknowledge that these elements help to intensify, vivify, and by strengthening the play on one’s feelings and thought give the text a quality of livingness, which is always a major value. While acknowledging that rhythm and intonation do make a difference, one may yet object that such difference is inevitable. After all, the universal is indispensable because it helps one to sort out experience—this is like that, or more like that than it is like something else. *Signifiance* and *signification* have common elements in spelling, but though the *-iance* is different from the *-cation*, they both tie on to the *signi-*. Thus, “meaning is the least important thing in language” appears an unbridled overstatement to the Western reader concerned with closure. There is something fanatic about *signifiance* going on and on—a Heraclitean drunkenness in picturing oneself as “laughing”—to one for whom sobriety means adding increment by increment, knowing one will have to work with uniformities at some stage if only to detect a “relevant” difference. But to Meschonnic the need for closure and the coerciveness of measuring relevance according to a norm are aspects of reading that do not bode well



for the evolution of a democratic society. Perhaps the degree of receptiveness to rhythm as pure historicity is commensurate, as he suggests, with the freedom to hear of "those who are less engaged in, or feel a more intense urge to transform, the dominating modes of thought."<sup>23</sup> Meschonnic acknowledges being circumscribed and shaped by the universal just as Zola admits being shaped by formalism and Hugo by idealism, but he goes further, as a poet, to say that the subject also determines the language in borrowing that language from the "body social."<sup>24</sup> His notion of historicity requires the maintaining of that internal contradiction between the universal and the new, between the social and the subject. In its prevailing concern for the universal, he believes that Western metaphysics excludes the very possibility of the new. And because rhythm, unlike the universal, does contain everything, every play of light and shade, every shudder, it embodies the new even before culture's language is able to conceptualize the new. This internal contradiction is what Meschonnic claims has been occulted by the sign in our culture.

It is apparent that for Meschonnic the revolution in the idea of poetry (and with poetry, the novel, indeed all "discourse") is manifested in rhythm as the basis of change, a continuing change not only in literature but in philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, the idea of history, and social life itself. Everywhere this Heraclitean in modern armor seeks out the enemy in "fixity" and "stasis": in Plato and, of course, in Hegel, but also in Freud, in structuralism, in Marxism. If one asked him what form of life, of government, of society, he favored, his answer might well be: No "form" as such except the kind of "form," if you will, evolving in rhythm. This position may be indeed his "center" which "holds" everywhere, and I shall end with a quotation that sets it forth:

Maybe the poem consists in making that "other place" gradually what takes up the whole place. Providing the creation of structural relations which suggest that individuals are the opening possibility of becoming subjects. . . . That is why poetry has such a symptomatic importance for society, if one calls poetry that which invents within language new ways of being with oneself, others, and the world—a continuous invention of the social and of poetry, and therefore a form of utopia. The paradox then is that ordinary language, ordinary people are a part of the utopia of poetry. That anybody can share.<sup>25</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 See Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme, anthropologie historique du langage* (Lagrasse, 1982), hereafter cited in text as *C*; *Dédicaces proverbes* (Paris, 1972); *Dans nos recommencements* (Paris, 1976); *Légendaire chaque jour* (Paris, 1979); *Voyageurs de la voix* (Lagrasse, 1985), hereafter cited in text as *V*; *Jamais et un jour* (Paris, 1986); and *Les Cinq Rouleaux (Le Chant des chants, Ruth, Comme ou les Lamentations, Paroles du Sage, Esther)* (Paris, 1970).
- 2 *Signifiance* is not the "significance" of Charles Morris, who equates significance with universal value, in *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (The Hague, 1971), p. 55, whereas Meschonnic equates *signifiance* with the construction of a subject in and through a text (*C* 267). Morris's semiotic definition leaves out subjectivity. Meschonnic suggests coining the English equivalent of the French *signifiance* partly to separate himself from the semiotic ogre identified as "the combined product of a linguistics borrowed from Hjelmslev [rather than Saussure], a pseudoscientific formalization, and the history of American semiotics, particularly since Charles Morris" (*C* 78). For a critique of Charles Morris, see *Le Signe et le poème* (Paris, 1975), pp. 173–81. Anthony Wilden's *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London, 1980) is, for Meschonnic, symptomatic of semiotics's continued limitations.
- 3 See Marcel Jousse, *L'Anthropologie du geste et du rythme* (Paris, 1974), p. 30.
- 4 Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la poétique* (Paris, 1970); *Pour la poétique II, épistémologie de l'écriture, poétique de la traduction* (Paris, 1973).
- 5 Included in a more recent collective work on translation, *Les tours de Babel, essais sur la traduction* (The Tower/Tricks of Babel: Essays On Translation), ed. Gérard Granel (Paris, 1985) is Meschonnic's translation of and commentary on the Bible passage on Babel, and an essay on the poetics of Wilhelm von Humboldt's essay "On the Historian's Task" as seen through a study of its French translations. It shows that even a philosophical text has a poetics, and that when that poetics is ignored, both Humboldt's concepts and the translations of his essay suffer.
- 6 Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la poétique III, une parole écriture* (Paris, 1973).
- 7 See n. 2 above.
- 8 For what Meschonnic considers "the most beautiful example" in Marx of social instrumentalism tied to the theory and the practice of language, see "Poétique et politique," in *Les états de la poétique* (Paris, 1985), p. 61; also translated in "Poetics and Politics: A Round Table," *New Literary History*, 19 (1988), 461.
- 9 See Henri Meschonnic, *Ecrire Hugo, pour la poétique IV*. 2 vols. (Paris, 1977); *Poésie sans réponse, pour la poétique V* (Paris, 1978); *Jona et le signifiant errant* (Paris, 1981).
- 10 Meschonnic, *Pour la poétique*, pp. 175–76. (Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise noted, English translations of French material are my own.)
- 11 The problem is that in English *enunciation* has a narrower meaning and applies only to the capacity for being heard.
- 12 See Emile Benveniste, "Sémiologie de la langue," in his *Problèmes de linguistique générale II* (Paris, 1974), pp. 43–63.
- 13 See Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* rev. ed. (New York, 1979), p. 63.
- 14 Matila Ghyka, *Le Nombre d'or, rites et rythmes pythagoriciens dans le développement de la civilisation occidentale* (1931; rpt. Paris, 1976), I, 114.
- 15 Meschonnic, *Ecrire Hugo*, I, 207–302.
- 16 A historical anthropology is thus set against a sacred anthropology: "*Mikra* assumes the gathering during which one reads or has read the texts in question, and since this reading is done out loud, the notion conjoins, indissolubly to my understanding, orality and collectivity in reading. Thus the text, by its rhythm, by its rhythmic organization, its way of making meaning and being carried, is above all in effect oral literature, and oral literature signifies collectivity. There is thus nothing in the notion itself which designates the cut in the text which there is for

us between the author and the reader. . . . What is put in play by this opposition *Mikra*/writing, by this lever, is an anthropology of the historicity of language in an indissociable holding on to the contradiction of the subject and the social. The Western metaphysics of the sign has lost this hold" (Meschonnic, "Poétique et politique," in *Les états de la poétique*, pp. 51–53).

17 See Fredric Jameson, "Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist: The Dissolution of the Referent and the Artificial 'Sublime,'" in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 247–63.

18 Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur, essai sur l'abjection* (Paris, 1980), p. 246 (my translation); in English as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982).

19 Requiring further study is the affinity between Dominick LaCapra's "historiography as transference" and Meschonnic's idea of "rhythm as transformation," including LaCapra's notion of "carnavalesque uncrowning" and Meschonnic's notion of "critique's laughter." See Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 72.

20 Emile Zola, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris, 1967), III, 601; hereafter cited in text as *OC*. For Meschonnic's discussion of this paragraph, see *C* 516.

21 My translation is based on *The Dram-Shop*, ed. Ernest A. Vizetelly (London, 1932), p. 1.

22 See Victor Hugo, "Pasteurs et troupeaux," in *Les Contemplations*, ed. Jacques Seebacher (Paris, 1964), II, 111–12 (Bk. V, Sec. xxiii); hereafter cited in text by line.

23 Henri Meschonnic, "Interview," *Diacritics*, 18 (1988), 107.

24 In the title essay of a book in progress, Meschonnic uses the term as part of a parable on the body's reception of everything, including that rejected by the sign: "If everything in language is the play of meaning, which is necessarily so, since nothing that is in language can fail to have an effect on meaning, then not only do rhymes have meaning, and meters, but also each consonant, each vowel, all the seen and heard materiality of words contributes to meaning. Which organizes it. The effect being in this organization, not in any of the terms separately. Rhythm is this organization which creates meaning. Passing through prosody. And, in the spoken, through the body. The body social as much as individual, historical as much as biological. Where everything passes that the formalism of the sign rejected outside of meaning as a residue. Stripped of meaning because it denied meaning. This organization does not cease for an instant in all of language. That is why poetry is ordinary. The only discourses that exempt themselves to the maximum: those of technique, science, the dictionary." See Henri Meschonnic, "Rhyme and Life," *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (1988), 93.

25 Meschonnic, "Interview," 108.