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The Critique of the Thing

The study of rhythm (of rhythms) can proceed in two ways, the convergence of which we shall demonstrate. One can study and compare cases: the rhythms of the body, living or not (respirations, pulses, circulations, assimilations – durations and phases of these durations, etc.). This remains close to practice; in confronting the results, the scientific and/or philosophical spirit should arrive at general conclusions.¹ Not without risks: the leap from particular to general is not without the danger of errors, of illusions, in a word, of ideology. The other procedure consists in starting with concepts, definite categories. Instead of going from concrete to abstract, one starts with full consciousness of the abstract in order to arrive at the concrete.

The second method does not exclude the first; they complete one another. *Specialists*, doctors, physiologists, geologists and historians tend to follow the first, without always arriving at ideas and conclusions that are valid for all rhythms. Here, we follow the second, more philosophical method, with its attendant risks: speculation in the place of analysis, the arbitrarily *subjective* in the place of facts. With careful attention and precaution, we advance by clearing the way.

Is there a general **concept** of rhythm? Answers: yes, and everyone possesses it; but nearly all those who use this word believe themselves to master and possess its content, its meaning. Yet the meanings of the term remain obscure. We easily confuse *rhythm* with *movement* [*mouvement*], speed, a sequence of movements [*gestes*] or objects (machines, for example).² Following this

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we tend to attribute to rhythms a **mechanical** overtone, brushing aside the **organic** aspect of rhythmmed movements. Musicians, who deal directly with rhythms, because they produce them, often reduce them to the counting of beats [*des mesures*]: ‘One-two-three-one-two-three’. Historians and economists speak of rhythms: of the rapidity or slowness of periods, of eras, of cycles; they tend only to see the effects of impersonal *laws*, without coherent relations with *actors*, ideas, realities. Those who teach gymnastics see in rhythms only successions of movements [*gestes*] setting in motion certain muscles, certain physiological energies, etc.

Is the origin of the procedure that starts with *generalities* found in abstractions? No! In the field of rhythm, certain very broad concepts nonetheless have specificity: let us immediately cite **repetition**. No rhythm without repetition in time and in space, without *reprises*, without returns, in short without **measure** [*mesure*].³ But there is no identical absolute repetition, indefinitely. Whence the relation between repetition and difference. When it concerns the everyday, rites, ceremonies, fêtes, rules and laws, there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference.

To take a highly remarkable case: the repetition of unity (1 + 1 + 1 . . .); not only does it generate the infinity of whole numbers, but also the infinity of **prime numbers** (without divisors) which, we have known since the Greeks, have specific properties. It is necessary to discover the (without doubt diverse) bases of the repetitive and the differential; and to realise that these relations, being contained within the concept, have then to be found and recognised in real rhythms . . .

A glance at the *modern* era (by which we understand the nineteenth century, since the French Revolution) reveals often omitted truths–realities. After the Revolution, against the values of the revolutionaries (and despite the protestations of *reactionaries* wanting a return to the past), a new society was installed: that socio-economic organisation of **our** urban–State–market society. The commodity prevails over everything. (Social) space and (social) time, dominated by exchanges, become the time and space of markets; although not being *things* but including **rhythms**, they enter into **products**.

The everyday establishes itself, creating hourly demands, systems of transport, in short, its repetitive organisation. *Things* matter little; the *thing* is only a metaphor, divulged by discourse, divulging representations that conceal the production of repetitive time and space. The *thing* has no more existence than *pure* identity (which the *thing* symbolises materially). There are only *things* and *people*.

With the reign of the commodity, philosophy changes. In order to expose the social process, we call out to the sum total of activities and products: nature – labour. A double philosophy results from this, the one *reactionary*, the other *revolutionary*. More or less simultaneously: Schopenhauer and Marx. The former fetishises nature, *life*, though not without seeing in it an abyss, a pit from which the ephemeral surges forth. Music evokes the chasm; however this philosophy speaks little of rhythms. By its side, Marx insists on the transformation of brute nature through human work, through technology⁴ and inventions, through labour and consciousness. Yet he doesn't discover rhythms . . .

There was, in the heart of the centuries preceding the Revolution, a critique from the *right* and a critique from the *left* of human (social) reality. The present writing engages deliberately in a critique from the **left**.

From the beginning, this theme imposes itself: What is repetition? What is its meaning? How, when and why are there micro and macro restarts, returns to the past, in works and in time? . . .

a) Absolute repetition is only a fiction of logical and mathematical thought, in the symbol of identity: $A = A$ (the sign reading 'identical' and not 'equal'). It serves as a point of departure for logical thought, with an immediate correction. The second A differs from the first by the fact that it is second. The repetition of unity, one (1), gives birth to the sequence of numbers.

b) Differences appear immediately in this sequence: odd and even (2, 3, 4, 5, etc.), divisible (4, etc.), indivisible or prime numbers (5, 7, 11, etc.). Not only does repetition not exclude differences, it also gives birth to them; it **produces** them. Sooner or later it encounters the **event** that arrives or rather arises in relation to the sequence or series produced repetitively. In other words: difference.

c) As it currently stands, would not this production of the

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different by the identical (repeated) produce a theoretical shortcoming? Does it not permit the following, highly significant formulation (affirmation): ‘Differences induced or produced by repetitions constitute the thread of time’?

Cyclical repetition and the linear repetitive separate out under analysis, but in *reality* interfere with one another constantly. The cyclical originates in the cosmic, in nature: days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycles, etc. The linear would come rather from social practice, therefore from human activity: the monotony of actions and of movements, imposed structures. Great cyclical rhythms last for a period and restart: dawn, always new, often superb, inaugurates the return of the everyday. The antagonistic unity of relations between the cyclical and the linear sometimes gives rise to compromises, sometimes to disturbances. The circular course of the hands on (traditional) clock-faces and watches is accompanied by a linear tick-tock. And it is their relation that enables or rather constitutes the measure of time (which is to say, of rhythms).

Time and space, the cyclical and the linear, exert a reciprocal action: they measure themselves against one another; each one makes itself and is made a measuring-measure; everything is cyclical repetition through linear repetitions. A dialectical relation (unity in opposition) thus acquires meaning and import, which is to say generality. One reaches, by this road as by others, the depths of the dialectic.

In this way concepts that are indispensable for defining rhythm come together. One essential is still absent from the definition: **measure**. A further paradox: rhythm seems natural, spontaneous, with no law other than its unfurling.⁵ Yet rhythm, always particular, (music, poetry, dance, gymnastics, work, etc.) always implies a measure. Everywhere where there is rhythm, there is *measure*, which is to say law, calculated and expected obligation, a project.

Far from resisting quantity, time (duration) is quantified by *measure*, by melody in music, but also in deed and language. Harmony, which results from a spontaneous ensemble, or from a *work of art*, is simultaneously quantitative and qualitative (in music and elsewhere: language, movements, architecture, works of art and diverse arts, etc.). **Rhythm** reunites **quantitative** aspects

and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it – and **qualitative** aspects and elements, which link them together, found the unities and result from them. Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body. **Rational**, numerical, quantitative and qualitative rhythms superimpose themselves on the multiple **natural** rhythms of the body (respiration, the heart, hunger and thirst, etc.), though not without changing them. The bundle of natural rhythms wraps itself in rhythms of social or mental function. Whence the efficiency of the **analytic** operation that consists in opening and unwrapping the bundle. Disorder and illness, at the worst death, take over the operation. However, the natural and the rational play only a limited role in the analysis of rhythms, which are simultaneously natural **and** rational, and neither one nor the other. Is the rhythm of a Chopin waltz natural or artificial? Are the rhythms of the aphorisms of Nietzsche – of Zarathustra – natural or artificial? They sometimes have the rhythm of a march: that of the body, that of the tempo [*allure*] of the thinker-poet.

Philosophers (including Nietzsche, the philosopher-poet) only presaged the importance of *rhythm*. It is from a Portuguese, dos Santos, that Bachelard, in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, borrows the word ‘rhythmanalysis’, though without developing the meaning any more than did dos Santos.⁶ However, the concept of rhythm, hence the rhythmanalytical project, emerges bit by bit from the shadows.

Now for its unfolding, a panoply of methodologically utilised categories (concepts) and oppositions would appear indispensable:

repetition and difference;
mechanical and organic;
discovery and creation;
cyclical and linear;
continuous and discontinuous;
quantitative and qualitative . . .

Several of these concepts and oppositions are known: employed, picked out, utilised; some are less so: repetition and difference, for example, or even the cyclical and linear. It will be necessary to employ them with care, in such a way as to fine-tune them through use. They converge in the central concept of **measure**. An apparently enlightened, but in fact obscure, notion. What makes the measurable and the non-measurable? Isn't time, which seems to escape measure on account of its fluidity, that which measures itself: the millionths of seconds in the cycles of galaxies, the hours in the seasons and the month? Why and how? Would the spatialisation of time be a preconditional operation for its measurement? If yes, does this operation generate errors, or does it, on the contrary, stimulate knowledge at the same time as practice?

Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is **rhythm**. Therefore:

- a) repetition (of movements, gestures, action, situations, differences);
- b) interferences of linear processes and cyclical processes;
- c) birth, growth, peak, then decline and end.

This supplies the framework for analyses of the *particular*, therefore *real* and *concrete* cases that feature in music, history and the lives of individuals or groups. In each case the analysis should

ride with the movements in whichever work or whichever sequence of actions until their end.

The notion of **rhythm** brings with it or requires some complementary considerations: the implied but different notions of polyrhythmia, eurhythmia and arrhythmia. It elevates them to a theoretical level, starting from the lived. Polyrhythmia? It suffices to consult one's body; thus the everyday reveals itself to be a polyrhythmia from the first listening. Eurhythmia? Rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal (which is to say normed!) everydayness; when they are discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state (of which arrhythmia is generally, at the same time, symptom, cause and effect). The discordance of rhythms brings previously eurhythmic organisations towards fatal disorder. **Polyrhythmia analyses itself.** A fundamental forecast: sooner or later the analysis succeeds in isolating from within the organised whole a particular movement and its rhythm. Often coupled empirically with speculations (see, for example, doctors in the field of auscultation, etc.), the analytic operation simultaneously discovers the multiplicity of rhythms and the uniqueness of particular rhythms (the heart, the kidneys, etc.). The rhythm-analysis here defined as a method and a theory pursues this time-honoured labour in a systematic and theoretical manner, by bringing together very diverse practices and very different types of knowledge: medicine, history, climatology, cosmology, poetry (*the poetic*), etc. Not forgetting, of course, sociology and psychology, which occupy the front line and supply the essentials.

We have hovered around a fundamental, therefore perpetual, question. Will it elude us? No, but to find a (the) answer, it is not enough to pose it explicitly. **What is it to think?** And more precisely, what do you think when you speak of **rhythms**? Do reflections, discourses pertain to *thinking*, or simply to the verbal commentary of concrete rhythms?

The Cartesian tradition has long reigned in philosophy.

It is exhausted, but remains present. The 'Cogito . . .' signifies: to think is to think thought; it is to reflect on *oneself* by accentuating (putting the accent on) the consciousness inherent to the act of thinking. Yet what *we* have thought over the course of the preceding pages implies another conception of *thinking*. It is to think that

which is not thought: the game and the risk, love, art, violence, in a word, the *world*, or more precisely the diverse relations between human being and the universe. Thinking is a part, but does not claim to *be* the totality, as many philosophers thought it. Thought explores, expresses. The exploration can hold in store surprises. Likewise, perhaps, rhythms and their analysis (rhythmanalysis).

Since this introduction announces what follows, let us say from now on that rhythmanalysis could change our **perspective** on surroundings, because it changes our **conception** in relation to the classical philosophy that is still dominant in this field. The **sensible**, this scandal of philosophers from Plato to Hegel, (re)takes primacy, transformed without magic (without metaphysics). Nothing inert in the *world*, **no things**: very diverse rhythms, slow or lively (in relation to *us*).

(This garden that I have before my eyes appears differently to me now from a moment ago. I have understood the **rhythms**: trees, flowers, birds and insects. They form a polyrhythmia with the surroundings: the simultaneity of the **present** (therefore of presence), the apparent immobility that contains one thousand and one movements, etc. . . .)

Perhaps a problematic, or at least an outline, of rhythms would find its place here, beside a primary analysis of the **present** and of **presence**?

Might there be hidden, **secret**, rhythms, hence inaccessible movements and temporalities?

No, because there are **no secrets**. Everything knows itself, but not everything says itself, publicises itself. Do not confuse silence with secrets! That which is forbidden from being said, be it external or intimate, produces an obscure, but not a secret, zone. On the contrary. Not only does everything know itself, but the whole world knows it, and knows that of which one can speak and that which can or should rest in silence. To show evidence for this – that secrets do not exist – it suffices to think of sex, of sexuality. Those who never speak thereof (modesty, prohibition, morality, etc.) let nothing on the subject slip by. Rather, those who speak of it less might know more about it than others.

One can classify rhythms according to these perspectives by crossing the notion of **rhythm** with those of the **secret** and **public**, the external and internal.

a) **Secret rhythms**: First, physiological rhythms, but also psychological ones (recollection and memory, the said and the non-said, etc.).

b) **Public** (therefore social) **rhythms**: Calendars, fêtes, ceremonies and celebrations; or those that one declares and those that one exhibits as *virtuality*, as expression (digestion, tiredness, etc.).

c) **Fictional rhythms**: Eloquence and verbal rhythms, but also elegance, gestures and learning processes. Those which are related to false secrets, or pseudo-dissimulations (short-, medium- and long-term calculations and estimations). The imaginary!

d) **Dominating–dominated rhythms**: Completely made up: everyday or long-lasting, in music or in speech, aiming for an effect that is beyond themselves.

Before giving details of the rhythms and even setting out the methods, let us return to the concrete: the **agent** (the analyst).

A philosopher could ask here: ‘Are you not simply embarking on a description of horizons, phenomenology from your window, from the standpoint of an all-too-conscious ego, a phenomenology stretching up to the ends of the road, as far as the Intelligibles: the Bank, the Forum, the *Hôtel de Ville*, the embankments, Paris, etc.?’

Yes, and yet no! This vaguely existential (a slightly heavy technical term) phenomenology (ditto) of which you speak, and of which you accuse these pages, passes over that which quite rightly connects space, time and the energies that unfold here and there, namely **rhythms**. It would be no more than a more or less well-used tool. In other words, a discourse that ordains these horizons as existence, as *being*.

Now the study of rhythms covers an immense area: from the most *natural* (physiological, biological) to the most sophisticated.

The analysis consists in understanding that which comes to it from *nature* and that which is acquired, conventional, even sophisticated, by trying to isolate particular rhythms. It is a difficult type of analysis, one for which there are possible *ethical*, which is to say practical, implications. In other words, knowledge of the lived would modify, metamorphose, the lived without knowing it. Here we find, approached in a different way, but the same, the thought of metamorphosis.

3

Seen from the Window

(No! this title belongs to Colette. – I write: ‘Seen from my windows, overlooking a junction in Paris, therefore overlooking the road.’)¹⁷

Noise. Noises. Murmurs. When lives are lived and hence mixed together, they distinguish themselves badly from one another. Noise, chaotic, has no rhythm. However, the attentive ear begins to separate out, to distinguish the sources, to bring them back together by perceiving interactions. If we cease to listen to sounds and noises and instead listen to our bodies (the importance of which cannot be stressed too greatly), we normally grasp (hear, understand) neither the rhythms nor their associations, which nonetheless constitute us. It is only in suffering that a particular rhythm breaks apart, modified by illness. The analysis comes closer to pathology than habitual arrhythmia.

In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely: be it through illness or a technique. A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function. However, to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it; one must *let oneself go*, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration. Like in music and the learning of a language (in which one only really understands the meanings and connections when one comes to *produce* them, which is to say, to produce spoken rhythms).

In order to *grasp* this fleeting object, which is not exactly an *object*, it is therefore necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside. A balcony does the job admirably, in relation

to the street, and it is to this putting into perspective (of the street) that we owe the marvellous invention of balconies, and that of the terrace from which one dominates the road and passers-by. In the absence of which you could content yourself with a window, on the condition that it does not overlook a sombre corner or a gloomy internal courtyard. Or a perennially deserted lawn.

From the window opening onto rue R. facing the famous P. Centre, there is no need to lean much to see into the distance.¹⁸ To the right, the palace-centre P., the Forum, up as far as the (central) Bank of France. To the left up as far as the Archives. Perpendicular to this direction, the *Hôtel de Ville* and, on the other side, the *Arts et Métiers*. The whole of Paris, ancient and modern, traditional and creative, active and lazy.

He who walks down the street, over there, is immersed in the multiplicity of noises, murmurs, rhythms (including those of the body, but does he pay attention, except at the moment of crossing the street, when he has to calculate roughly the number of his steps?). By contrast, from the window, the noises distinguish themselves, the flows separate out, rhythms respond to one another. Towards the right, below, a traffic light. On red, cars at a standstill, the pedestrians cross, feeble murmurings, footsteps, confused voices. One does not chatter while crossing a dangerous junction under the threat of wild cats and elephants ready to charge forward, taxis, buses, lorries, various cars. Hence the relative silence in this crowd. A kind of soft murmuring, sometimes a cry, a call.

Therefore the people produce completely different noises when the cars stop: feet and words. From right to left and back again. And on the pavements along the perpendicular street. At the green light, steps and words stop. A second of silence and then it's the rush, the starting up of tens of cars, the rhythms of the old bangers speeding up as quickly as possible. At some risk: passers-by to the left, buses cutting across, other vehicles. Whereby a slowing down and restart (stage one: starting up – stage two: slowing down for the turn – stage three: brutal restart, foot down, top speed, excluding traffic jams . . .). The harmony between what one sees and what one hears (from the window) is remarkable.

Strict concordance. Perhaps because the other side of the road is taken up by the immense shopping centre, nicknamed Beaubourg after the name that immortalised a president. On this side, people walking back and forth, numerous and in silence, tourists and those from the outskirts, a mix of young and old, alone and in couples, but no cars alongside culture. After the red light, all of a sudden it's the bellowing charge of wild cats, big or small, monstrous lorries turning towards Bastille, the majority of small vehicles hurtling towards the *Hôtel de Ville*. The noise grows, grows in intensity and strength, at its peak becomes unbearable, though quite well borne by the stench of fumes. Then stop. Let's do it again, with more pedestrians. Two-minute intervals. Amidst the fury of the cars, the pedestrians cluster together, a clot here, a lump over there; grey dominates, with multicoloured flecks, and these heaps break apart for the race ahead. Sometimes, the old cars stall in the middle of the road and the pedestrians move around them like waves around a rock, though not without condemning the drivers of the badly placed vehicles with withering looks. Hard rhythms: alternations of silence and outburst, time both broken and accentuated, striking he who takes to listening from his window, which astonishes him more than the disparate movements of the crowds.

Disparate crowds, yes, tourists from faraway countries, Finland, Sweden, Portugal, whose cars but with difficulty find places to park, shoppers come from afar, wholesalers, lovers of art or novelties, people from the outskirts who stream in between the so-called peak hours, in such a way that *everybody*, the *world*, is always there around the huge metallic trinkets; boys and girls often go forth hand in hand, as if to support each other in this test of modernity, in the exploration of these meteorites fallen on old Paris, come from a planet several centuries ahead of our own, and on top of that a complete failure on the market! . . . Many among these young people walk, walk, without a break, do the tour of the sights, of Beaubourg, of the Forum: one sees them again and again, grouped or solitary; they walk indefatigably, chewing on gum or a sandwich. They only stop to stretch themselves out, no doubt exhausted, on the square itself, in the arcades of the Chiraqian Forum, or on the steps of the Fountain of the Innocent,

which now serves only this purpose. The noise that pierces the ear comes not from passers-by, but from the engines pushed to the limit when starting up. No ear, no piece of apparatus could grasp this whole, this flux of metallic and carnal bodies. In order to grasp the rhythms, a bit of time, a sort of meditation on time, the city, people, is required.

Other, less lively, slower rhythms superimpose themselves on this inexorable rhythm, which hardly dies down at night: children leaving for school, some very noisy, even piercing screams of morning recognition. Then towards half past nine it's the arrival of the shoppers, followed shortly by the tourists, in accordance, with exceptions (storms or advertising promotions), with a timetable that is almost always the same; the flows and conglomerations succeed one another: they get fatter or thinner but always agglomerate at the corners in order subsequently to clear a path, tangle and disentangle themselves amongst the cars.

These last rhythms (schoolchildren, shoppers, tourists) would be more **cyclical**, of large and simple intervals, at the heart of livelier, **alternating** rhythms, at brief intervals, cars, regulars, employees, bistro clients. The interaction of diverse, repetitive and different rhythms animates, as one says, the street and the neighbourhood. The linear, which is to say, in short, succession, consists of journeys to and fro: it combines with the cyclical, the movements of long intervals. The cyclical is social organisation manifesting itself. The linear is the daily grind, the routine, therefore the perpetual, made up of chance and encounters.

The night does not interrupt the diurnal rhythms but modifies them, and above all slows them down. However, even at three or four o'clock in the morning, there are always a few cars at the red light. Sometimes one of them, whose driver is coming back from a late night, goes straight through it. Other times, there is no-one at the lights, with their alternating flashes (red, amber, green), and the signal continues to function in the void, a despairing social mechanism marching inexorably through the desert, before the façades that dramatically proclaim their vocation as ruins.