

# Rhythm as Form

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**ABSTRACT:** In the present essay, I explore the historical roots of “rhythm” in biblical Hebrew and classical Greek. In both cases, the concept of rhythm arises from an account of material form. In Hebrew, rhythm (*ketsev*) speaks in the first instance to the limits, cut, or shape of a given object, while in Greek the idea of *ruthmós* as form also intersects with deeper philosophical considerations. I conclude by connecting these complementary ideas of rhythm to Emmanuel Levinas’s fragmentary aesthetics, pointing to an understanding of rhythm as both form and dispossession.

**I**N THE SECOND CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF JONAH, the eponymous prophet famously finds himself trapped within the belly of a large fish. Inside the fish, Jonah overcomes his mortal fear long enough to offer up a song to God. Toward its end, he sings: “The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the deep was round about me; the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars closed upon me forever; yet hast Thou brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God” (Jonah 2:6–7). Setting aside the broader discursive and cultural weight of Jonah’s song, it is worth turning to a deceptively straightforward phrase near the end of the passage just cited: “I went down to the bottoms of the mountains” (*l-kitsvi harim yaradti*). The verse in Hebrew begins with a prepositional phrase (*l-kitsvi*) that includes a plural form of the Hebrew noun *ketsev*. What does the word *ketsev* mean? In modern Hebrew, it most commonly signifies “rhythm,” “rate,” or “tempo”; however, its meaning in biblical Hebrew would seem to suggest something quite different.

Derived from the verbal root *k-ts-v* (“to cut,” “chop,” or “shear”), the noun *ketsev* originally meant “cut” (as in a *cut* of meat), “shape,” or “extremity.”<sup>1</sup> In 1 Kings 6:24–25, for example, we find a description of the two cherub statues located in the sanctuary of Solomon’s Temple: “And

<sup>1</sup> In Galilean Aramaic, *ktsv* also meant “to cut”; while in Arabic, the same meaning was associated with the verb *qadhaba*. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 891.

five cubits was the one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the other wing of the cherub; from the uttermost part of the one wing unto the uttermost part of the other were ten cubits. And the other cherub was ten cubits; both the cherubim were of one measure and one form.” In Hebrew, the phrase translated into English as “one measure and one form” is “middah achat v’ketsev echad.” In a literal sense, then, both statues were of the same size and shape, and it is the noun *ketsev* that is used to express “shape” or “form.” Again, in 1 Kings 7:37, we find a description of the bases for the ten metal lavers located in Solomon’s palace: “After this manner he made the ten bases; all of them had one casting, one measure, and one form” (kazot asah et eser ha-mkonot; mutsak echad, middah achat, ketsev echad l-kullahnah). In this passage, we once again find *ketsev* signifying the physical form, shape, or limits of an object.

In these passages, the nominal form of *k-ts-v* strongly suggests the result of an act of cutting or the place at which a particular cut is made. In the case of Jonah’s mountains, he is describing, we might say, his fall to the very lowest point on earth, to that bottommost edge at which high mountains have their dark, aqueous beginning. This is, of course, also a geological trope for Jonah’s own ignominious descent and subsequent rise to behold once again the holy temple of God; however, what matters most here is the broader sense that we might excavate from the noun *ketsev*. Turning back to the use of *ketsev* in relation to the cherubim of Solomon’s Temple, we find a subtle, metaphoric shift from the quotidian notion of *ketsev* as “limit” or “cut” to its application within the aesthetic sphere. In this sense, *ketsev* could signify both the bounded limits of matter and the shape or *form* of an object such as a work of art.

In the Talmud, *ketsev* likewise consistently signifies “shape,” “form,” or “extremity”; however, it also takes on the further metaphoric meaning of “law” or “decision,” giving the sense of a “question” or “matter” that has been decided, or “given shape.”<sup>2</sup> In the Jerusalem Talmud, for example, we find the phrase *halachot ktsuvot*, signifying “decided questions of law.” The shift here, at least within the domain of late antique Jewish scholarship, seems to have been from using *ketsev* to describe material objects (things that can be cut or delimited) to having it refer to immaterial matters (decisions, questions, and ideas). What remains constant in this shift, however, is that *ketsev* continues to refer to the *form* of some other thing, whether by this “thing” we mean a stone sculpture, food, or a question of law.

During the modern period, there occurred a more dramatic shift in the semantic range of *ketsev*. Put briefly, in using *ketsev* to signify “rhythm” or “pace,” the idea of form shifts from a concern with matter (and its limits) to an ordering of time and temporality. In other words, whereas *ketsev* had previously referred to the form of objects in the world, it has since come to refer primarily to the form or “cut” of time. Sliced into units, time itself thus becomes a kind of *halachah ktsuvah*, a “settled (measured) matter,” rather than an opening; and looked at diachronically, this metaphoric extension of material form or shape has apparently squeezed out the very aspect of materiality that had been at the center of the original term. Or, we might ask, has the older connection to materiality and form endured? Put another way, is there a meaningfully material, even morphological aspect to our understanding of rhythm in Hebrew? Does some piece of Jonah’s mountains—their undersea limits—rest within our modern talk of time, pace, and rate?

While the historical trajectory of *ketsev* is a complex one (it seems to have come to signify *rhythm* only in the nineteenth century, and largely through a conscious engagement by

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, with an Index of Scriptural Quotations* (New York: Choreb, 1926), 1404.

Hebrew-language poets with Western literature), its early use corresponds in significant ways to that of *ruthmós*, the ancient Greek noun from which is derived (though by no means directly) the English term “rhythm” (as well as the modern Hebrew *ritmus*, an alternative to *ketsev*). In the case of early Greece, we have more data from which to draw than with ancient Hebrew, and so we are able to track with a bit more specificity the evolution of *ruthmós* from about the sixth century BCE onward.

The earliest surviving account of the Greek concept of *ruthmós* belongs to the archaic poet Archilochus (ca. 712–648 BCE), who frames it as an ethical principle within a fragmentary self-exhortation to moderation. It appears in a poetic fragment in which the poet, presented as a soldier, exhorts himself to act moderately. He writes:

My Soul, my Soul, all disturbed by sorrows inconsolable,  
bear up, hold out, meet front-on the many foes that rush on you  
now from this side and now that, enduring all such strife up close,  
never wavering; and should you win, don't openly exult,  
nor, defeated, throw yourself lamenting in a heap at home,  
but delight in things that are delightful and, in hard times, grieve  
not too much—appreciate the rhythm that controls men's lives.<sup>3</sup>

The last line of this fragment, “ginôske d' oîos rusmòs anthrôpous éxei,” which Douglas E. Gerber translates as “appreciate the rhythm that controls men's lives,” is a command to know that is also, it bears mentioning, a command to accept dispossession and passivity. The Greek verb *gignôskô*, a relatively common verb that means “to come to know” or “to perceive” and is linked to the noun *gnosis* (a concept that would come to take on deeper spiritual significance in early Christianity), here stands as a command to act; however, the act is turned inward upon the speaker and his audience and stands as a paradoxical command to adopt a particular stance or attitude vis-à-vis a phenomenon (i.e., rhythm) that is at once outside and within them, holding them fast. Important in this phrase also is the particle–relative pronoun combination *d' oîos*, which subtly changes the command from one to “know” the rhythm that “holds humans” (*anthrôpous éxei*) to one to know “of what sort [is]” the rhythm that holds us. The temptation is to read this as a kind of proto-Machiavellian statement about *fortuna*; however, Archilochus is speaking of something much deeper and immediate than the ups and downs of political events. Put simply, he is not urging himself (and his audience) to come to know external forces that create the horizon of his political possibilities; rather, he is speaking of a force—at once external and internal to humans—that somehow holds us, forms us, and bends us toward ethical moderation. His command to himself is that he come to know the deeper essence of that principle or force that gives humans form and regiments our lives. It is for this reason, the presence of this force and its hold on us, that we should respond in a measured way to the various ups and downs of fortune. As Pierre Sauvanet argues, what is at stake here is not “a question of rhythm in the sense of humankind's ‘destiny’ but rather a sort of personal address focused on ethics.”<sup>4</sup> Archilochus's principal concern is thus with our response to rhythm's a priori hold on us; this is, in essence, at once a metaphysical assertion and an ethical prescription.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas E. Gerber, ed., *Greek Iambic Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Sauvanet, *Le rythme grec d'Héraclite à Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 13.

It is worth pointing out that if the earliest known Greek theorization of rhythm resides at the intersection of poetry and ethics, the concept would find perhaps its most iconic expression within a scene of inhuman torture. The scene is mercifully a fictional one, occurring relatively early on in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. In terms of the question of rhythm, the scene revolves around the Titan Prometheus's short but evocative description of his unjust punishment at the hands of the newly crowned Zeus.

Prometheus's story more or less begins when he gives tacit support to the Olympian gods in their parricidal war against the Titans. After winning the violent conflict, Zeus claims the throne that had once been held by his father, Cronus, and the Olympian gods begin to take charge of things: Aphrodite, born of sea foam and Uranus's severed genitals (Cronus's ascent to the divine throne had been no less vicious than that of Zeus), begins her reign over love, beauty, and pleasure; her husband, Hephaestus, takes control of the forge and fire; Ares becomes the god of war; Poseidon takes over from Oceanus as the ruler of the seas; and so on. Through a clever trick at Zeus's expense, Prometheus shows his loyalty to mortal men, whom he himself, according to some versions of the myth, had created out of clay (the first mortal woman, Pandora, would emerge later from a different batch of earth molded by Hephaestus). Zeus retaliates by depriving men of the gift of fire, and Prometheus then counters by stealing it back for them. As the conflict escalates, Zeus orders Hephaestus to bind Prometheus in chains to a massive rock where a giant eagle will tear away at his ever-regenerating liver. Prometheus is eventually freed from his bondage by his own gift of prophecy, with a strong assist from a centaur's act of self-sacrifice and Heracles's brawny heroism, but the story most of us read, and the story in Aeschylus's play, nonetheless ends with Prometheus still suffering through his unjust bondage and contesting it loudly to anyone who will listen.

The play's unresolved ending aside, the scene that most interests me occurs relatively early, near line 240; in it, a chained Prometheus recounts to the assembled chorus the events that led to his imprisonment before ending with a short but dense description of his current state:

It is painful for me even to speak of these things, but it is also painful to keep silent: it is wretched either way. . . . As soon as [Zeus] took his seat on his father's throne, he immediately assigned to the various gods their various privileges, and organized his government; but of those wretched creatures, mortals, he took no account at all—on the contrary, he wanted to obliterate the race altogether and create another new one. And no one resisted that plan except me. I had the courage to do it, and rescued mortals from being shattered and going to Hades. And that, you see, is why I am being racked by these torments, agonizing to suffer and piteous to see. I took special pity on mortals, but was not held to merit it myself; instead I have been disciplined in this merciless way, a sight to bring disgrace on Zeus.<sup>5</sup>

This is a dense and moving passage, and particularly poignant is Prometheus's first phrase, a metadiscursive statement focused on the telling (or not) of his story itself: "algeinà mén moi kai légein estin táde, / álgos dè sigân, pantaxê dè dúspotma" (It is painful for me even to speak of these things, but it is also painful to keep silent: it is wretched either way). Following Michel Serres, we might read this phrase as a linguistically focused expression of *ruthmós*, of a stoppage

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<sup>5</sup> Aeschylus, *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 469–71.

of verbal (and rational) flow, of the momentary reversal of the irreversible,<sup>6</sup> of a form of fundamental constraint or interruption that renders the speaker (the Titan Prometheus, in this case) *patient* in the linguistic sense, hemmed in and silenced (temporarily) by what Archilochus had described as “the rhythm that holds us all.”

In general, Alan H. Sommerstein’s English prose translation of the original Greek manages to convey to his readers the striking piteousness of Prometheus’s situation and the bitterness of his accusations against Zeus. However, it likewise conceals, as translations from Greek invariably do, much of the conceptual and discursive complexity embedded within the original passage. The particular phrase that merits attention is quite short, and it occurs at the end of the section cited above. Sommerstein translates it into English as “instead I have been disciplined in this merciless way,” which, as the diagram below shows, is a more or less direct translation of the Greek phrase *allà nêleôs / hôd’ errúthmismai*:

<i>allà</i>	<i>nêleôs</i>	<i>hôde</i>	<i>errúthmismai</i>
but	mercilessly	thus	[I have been] disciplined

The final word of the phrase, *errúthmismai*, is a middle-voice form of the verb *ruthmízô*, and as Émile Benveniste has pointed out, the idea of *ruthmós* is firmly embedded within it. Benveniste himself translates this phrase as “a pitiless fate has made my *form* (= condition),” which admittedly takes some liberties with the Greek syntax, even if it makes a serious effort to give a fuller sense of *ruthmízô* as the action of “giving form.”<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, in his seminar on Heraclitus, refers to this passage, giving a more literal rendering of *ruthmízô*, or at least approving of the way in which Thrasybulos Georgiades renders it:

[Georgiades] cites a passage from Aeschylus’s *Prometheus*, to which Jaeger likewise has referred and in which the *ruthmós* or *ruthmízô* . . . has the same meaning as in the Archilochus fragment: *hôd’ errúthmismai* (*Prometheus* 241). Here Prometheus says of himself, “. . . in this rhythm I am bound.” He, who is held immobile in the iron chains of his confinement, is “rhythmed,” that is, joined.<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger opts to “let rhythm be” in his treatment of the line from Prometheus, insofar as he underscores the status of *ruthmízô* as the transitive verbal form of *ruthmós*: “to (en)rhythm” or “to be (en)rhythmed” (*rhythmisiert*) in its middle form.<sup>9</sup>

In conventional terms, of course, the verb *ruthmízô* can be rendered in English as “to bring into measure or proportion: generally, to order, to educate, train.”<sup>10</sup> Given the relatively broad semantic range of *ruthmízô* in English, Sommerstein’s translation of the verb as “to discipline” is perfectly justifiable, especially within the immediate context of Prometheus’s utterance. There is, however, a troubling lack of precision underlying this and nearly any conventional English translation of *ruthmízô* insofar as these translations consistently fail to take into account the underlying sense of *ruthmós*—as it was conceived during the fifth century BCE—that is encoded within

<sup>6</sup> Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, trans. Jack Hawkes (Manchester, UK: Clinamen, 2000), 154.

<sup>7</sup> Émile Benveniste, “La notion de ‘rythme’ dans son expression linguistique,” in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 1:331.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraklit* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1996), 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 720.

the verb and that serves as its semantic root. Bracketing off for the moment Sommerstein's rendering of *ruthmízô* as "to discipline," it seems worth taking seriously Heidegger's suggestion that we approach *ruthmízô* as "to (en)rhythm," understood as a "giving form" and "holding." There is great promise in such an approach, and the first step in exploring its possibilities is merely that we recalibrate what it is that we mean by "rhythm" when we speak of ancient Greek texts (and even later works not necessarily written in Greek). Returning to Archilochus, we see what this more contextualized approach might yield: a more fine-grained and productive treatment of *rusmôs anthrôpous éxei* that views this phrase as an early theorization of "enrhythment"—a form of at once metaphysical, discursive, and sensational bondage that interrupts and holds us at the most basic level and in the process gives us form. It has much in common, I should add, with Amerindian notions of perspectivism and with Xunzian philosophical approaches to rhythm (*jiezou*) from third-century BCE China.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, "rhythm" and especially "enrhythment" emerge as key terms within a philosophical framework with resonance far beyond the West.

As for Prometheus, in being chained to the rock and tortured (in theory for eternity, and thus in some sense outside time) we might say that he has been painfully reduced or bound to Zeus's new Olympian order, *enrhythmed* by the new machinery of Olympus: an archaic Charlie Chaplin caught by the gears of change. Also important is the fact that Prometheus has been made to serve as a perverse and naked spectacle (*théa*) of that order—a spectacle not incidentally also visible (and all too audible) to the play's audience.

The idea of Prometheus's enrhythment as a form of spectacle—as something to be pointed to and beheld rather than explained and referred to—suggests with even greater force that *ruthmôs* somehow lies at the boundaries of language and perception itself, as a momentary stoppage or reversal of referential "flow" if not an interruption of *lógos* in the broadest sense. How does this manifest itself in *Prometheus Bound*? In the line that I have analyzed above, for example, Prometheus employs the demonstrative adverb *hôte* ("thus" or "in this way") to index his punishment: "hôd' errúthmismai" (thus am I disciplined/enrhythmed). This deictic construction further underscores the important performative and pragmatic features of enrhythment for Aeschylus, both as a dramatist and as a poet: its power and its effects upon us are not to be described or represented but rather *to be pointed to* and witnessed as a "spectacle" that refers indexically (i.e., in a relation of contiguity with the spatiophysical surround, in a sense, *entailing* context itself) to the order for which it exerts its force. In this sense, Prometheus's enrhythment stands at the end of our world (embodied, on one level, by the peripheral Caucasus, which is the setting for Aeschylus's play) and at the boundaries of what language can say, the border between sensation and perception; along with Prometheus, we move to a place (or, more accurately, a stance) of dispossession—a letting-go of reason and power—at which it is both painful to speak and painful to remain silent. That is, insofar as enrhythment reveals itself, it is as a "stoppage of flow" within which one can say only "look," "thus," or "here I am." The swirling current, as Serres (and, just perhaps, Heraclitus with him) might put it, carries all the rest away.

Moving beyond *Prometheus Bound*, we see that Aeschylus in fact doubles down on his conception of rhythm-as-form in *Persians*. Himself a veteran of the Battle of Marathon, Aeschylus

<sup>11</sup> On the question of rhythm and Amerindian perspectivism, see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014). For rhythm and Xunzi's philosophy, see Haili You, "Rhythm in Chinese Thinking: A Short Question for a Long Tradition," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 18, no. 4 (1994): 463–81.

was deeply affected by the Greco-Persian Wars, and his dramatic account of what follows the defeat of Xerxes I at the Straits of Sálamis is a foundational work in just about every sense. As Benveniste points out in his survey of tragic Greek accounts of *ruthmós*, early in the play the ghost of Darius the Great reports that Xerxes had ordered his men to whip the Hellespont with chains to calm its waves and so facilitate their crossing:

And it is my son, by his youthful rashness, who has achieved this without knowing what he was doing. He thought he could stop the flow of the Hellespont, the divine stream of the Bosphorus, by putting chains on it, as if it were a slave; he altered the nature of its passage, put hammered fetters on it, and created a great pathway for a great army. He thought, ill-counselled as he was, that he, a mortal, could lord it over all the gods and over Poseidon. Surely this was a mental disease that had my son in its grip! I am afraid that the great wealth I gained by my labors may be overturned and become the booty of the first comer.<sup>12</sup>

Darius the Great characterizes Xerxes's actions as a mad attempt to restrain, transform, or "enrhythm" the sea as if it were his slave or servant (*doúlos*). The verb that Aeschylus uses to get across this sense of transformation is *meterrúthmize* (the third-person, singular, active, indicative, and imperfective form of *ruthmízô* with the *meta-* prefix added to it), which Sommerstein translates as "altered the nature of." Aaron Poochigian, for his part, somewhat creatively translates the phrase *póron meterrúthmize* into English as "[he] contrived a new bridge."<sup>13</sup> Poochigian's translation more or less follows Smyth's 1922 rendering of the phrase as "[he] set himself to fashion a roadway of a new order."<sup>14</sup> Benveniste offers a translation of *póron metarrúthmize* that is relatively close to that of Sommerstein: "(Xerxes, in his madness,) intended to *transform* a strait."<sup>15</sup> (331). Looking at the phrase in light of our broader discussion of *ruthmós*, we might likewise render it simply as

<i>póron</i> strait (acc. sing.)	<i>meterrúthmize</i> he transformed (imp.)
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That is, "he (i.e., Xerxes) transformed the strait" in the imperfective aspect, implying that the action was ultimately not realized, which Benveniste reproduces well through his rendering of the line: "[Xerxes] intended to transform a strait." The main difference between Benveniste's/Sommerstein's and Poochigian's translations of this phrase rests largely on the sense that each has of *metarruthmízô*; however, it also hinges on how they choose to render *póros*, which generally signifies a "place to cross a river or body of water" and can thus mean both "strait" and "bridge."<sup>16</sup> Given that Aeschylus presents it in the accusative singular (*póron*) and links it, as a direct object, to *metarruthmízô* (which can really only mean "to transform" in the sense that Benveniste explains it), it seems most likely that what is being transformed here—or at least that which Xerxes has hubristically sought to transform—is the strait itself.

<sup>12</sup> Aeschylus, *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*, trans. Sommerstein, 97–99.

<sup>13</sup> Aeschylus, *Persians, Seven against Thebes, and Suppliants*, trans. Aaron Poochigian (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Aeschylus, *Suppliant Maidens, Persians, Prometheus, Seven against Thebes*, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 173.

<sup>15</sup> Benveniste, "La notion de 'rythme' dans son expression linguistique," 331.

<sup>16</sup> Liddell and Scott, *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 662.

Beyond Aeschylus's reference to the intended transformation of the Hellespont through a transitive verbal form of *ruthmós*, he also speaks of its restraint in a similar way and in the process offers a striking theorization of rhythm. In line 746, just before his use of *metarruthmízô*, Aeschylus speaks of Xerxes's intention to "restrain the flow" of the Hellespont. The phrase in question is *êlpise sxêsein réonta*, which quite literally means: "he intended to restrain the flow." Significantly, both *sxêsein* and *réonta* come from terms we have seen before in our discussion of *ruthmós*. The first of these, *sxêsein*, is the future infinitive of *éxô* ("to hold" or "hold in check"), and the second, *réonta*, is the present accusative participle of *réô* ("to flow"). That is, while Archilochus speaks of humans being held in check by rhythm (*rusmôs anthrôpous exeî*), Aeschylus speaks here of an individual human (foolishly) attempting to hold a flowing strait in check (*êlpise sxêsein réonta*). And both poets, it is worth pointing out, use the same verbs—*éxô* and *réô*—to express these ideas, a fact that further joins the concept of *ruthmós* to flow and restraint, while strongly suggesting that these two ideas were hardly antinomies in classical Greek, at least insofar as they relate to the idea of *ruthmós*.

The considerable power of Pre-Socratic ideas on rhythm, while largely ignored by philosophical traditions built on Plato and Aristotle and by later poetic traditions principally concerned with matters of metrics and prosody, nonetheless managed to find its way into the written work of a small but influential group of intellectuals operating in France during the second half of the twentieth century. While these thinkers were not part of a single philosophical school or movement, their work does share many connections and similarities. The first of these is Émile Benveniste (1902–76), a French linguist most famous for his work on early Indo-European languages as well as more general theories of verbal practice. His philological reconstruction of the Pre-Socratic notion of *ruthmós* is in many ways the first explicit attempt to engage in a renewed exploration of the broader possibilities of rhythm after the Second World War. Benveniste's former student Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) would then take his ideas on rhythm and enunciation and develop them into a sprawling "critique of rhythm" with implications for poetry and politics alike.

Working along different, more explicitly phenomenological lines, Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) would speak about rhythm throughout his long and productive career. When he wasn't expressing serious mistrust with regard to rhythm's "magical" effects, he spoke of rhythm in ways that place him in direct dialogue with earlier theorists of rhythm such as Archilochus and Aeschylus, not to mention the broader tradition of Jewish thought. In a 1951 essay, for example, Levinas begins his closing with a provocative question related to ethics, ontology, and rhythm: "Can things have a face? Is not art the activity that lends faces to things? Does not the façade of a house regard us? The analysis thus far does not suffice for an answer. We wonder all the same if the impersonal march of rhythm does not substitute itself in art, always fascinating and magical, for sociality, for the face, for speech."<sup>17</sup> "Sociality," "face," and "speech" are highly charged terms at the center of Levinas's philosophy, and any understanding of rhythm as a potential "substitute" for them is a philosophical project that Levinas himself left unfinished, even if he placed rhythm, sensation, and participation at the center of his aesthetic meditations.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as the

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," *Philosophy Today* 33, no. 2 (1989): 129.

<sup>18</sup> Recent work by Jill Robbins and Tom Sparrow has begun to approach this question, albeit from different perspectives and with no specific focus on the question of rhythm. See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Alresford,

idea of rhythm has historically emerged from conceptions of form—and here we return to Jonah and to the cherubim of Solomon’s Temple—as well as very real forms of constraint, evidenced in Archilochus and Aeschylus, we might wonder if the concept itself might link us to the aesthetic (as *aisthêtikós*, related to both perception and sensation) not within a relation of subjective judgment but rather as a primordial dispossession, a constitutive act of cutting. A