

Rhythm-Sense-Subject, or:
The Dynamic Un/Enfolding of Sense

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ABSTRACT

This article traces Henri Meschonnic's concerted attempts to grasp the interaction rhythm-sense-subject, and situates this with the broader concerns of his work: the critique of 'sign-thinking', the elaboration of rhythm as *le continu*, his reflection on historical subjectivity. Meschonnic's thinking of rhythm is of an exigency from which he himself often shrinks back, notably through a series of equivocations (between language and sense, between rhythm as such and an individual rhythmic figure, between discourse as activity and an individual's discourse/idiom). The article focuses on these equivocations, and argues that within them we come to see the complexity, and mutability, of the rhythm-sense-subject interaction. It ends by proposing that we think the place of rhythm in this interaction in terms not of continuity/discontinuity, as per Meschonnic, but rather as a 'dynamic unfolding/enfolding of sense'.

Where, then, to start with rhythm? Can one ever 'start'? For with rhythm, everything is surely always already underway; it is only when underway that rhythm can be said to *be*, only when underway that can emerge the repetitions, the recursions, of rhythmized time. When rhythm is sensed, it is sensed retroactively—we sense that there *has already been rhythm*. Only

retroactively does rhythm indicate its work of configuration. Where, then, to start? For if rhythm is underway, it is always a case of a ‘then’—not in the sense of a demonstrative that would indicate a particular moment when we start, or when rhythm starts, a degree zero of rhythm as it were, but in the sense of a conjunction of inference: ‘then’ implies an anteriority, at once temporal and logical, which discloses itself as ‘rhythmic’, indeed upon which rhythm itself depends; when we encounter rhythm, what we encounter is in part its anteriority, its already having unfolded, within which we are already enfolded. But such conjunction also reiterates rhythm’s constitutive relationality, a relationality which unfolds, enfolds, in time. ‘Rhythmic becoming’, Maurice Blanchot was moved to write, is ‘le mouvement pur des relations’ (‘the pure movement of relations’);¹ or, on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s terms, rhythm is fundamentally *medial*, an ‘entre-deux’ (‘in-between’) which facilitates a ‘passage transcodé d’un milieu à un autre, communication de milieux, coordination d’espace-temps hétérogènes’ (‘a transcoded passage from one milieu to another, communication of milieus, coordination of heterogeneous space-times’)² This is rhythm as ‘syntagmatics’, as Meschonnic will call it,³ setting in relation different orders of sense, of movement. And yet, the temporality of rhythm is not of forward propulsion only: ‘then’ syncopates back also, prosodically, syntactically, rhythmic continuities scored by discontinuity. If we are already underway in rhythm, then the time of rhythm is multidirectional, heterogeneous, internally plural, subject to intensions, extensions, distensions; it is a time that is not only sensed but is cognised, and indeed, given its recursions, its enfoldings, is cognised only through being re-cognised. But *where*, then? For it would appear that we are always ‘in’ rhythm, as we orient ourselves, are configured, in sense. When we start with rhythm, we are—in part, at least—trying to get to where we already are.

The question of rhythm is thus, from the start, also a question of sense: rhythm is something sensed, something that appears in sense, but is also sense-giving, sense-making. And rhythm is also a question of subject—of the ‘we’ who are oriented in sense, who have been configured in and by rhythm, who are subjects of, and subject to, rhythm, sense. And this is before we start

to differentiate between two meanings of rhythm, between a generalised rhythmicity and individual rhythmic figures, let alone differentiate between alternative modes of rhythmicity, alternative domains for rhythmic figures: prosodic, musical, choreographic, but also circadian, physiological, societal; and all this before we start disaggregating the different senses of ‘sense’: corporeal, linguistic, directional.⁴

No thinker has followed the ramifications of the various reciprocal interrelations of rhythm, sense, subject, in as concerted a manner as Meschonnic. He recognises, in particular, that their interrelation deprives one of an easy starting point:

Ni la théorie du rythme, ni la théorie du sens, ni celle du sujet ne sont constituées. Mais jamais aucune théorie n’est constituée. L’erreur initiale serait d’attendre, pour l’une, que l’autre soit plus assurée. Aucune des trois n’est un préalable à l’autre. Sauf à attendre indéfiniment. Si le sens, le sujet, le rythme sont liés, travailler à l’un c’est les travailler ensemble. (*Critique* 78)

(Neither the theory of rhythm, nor the theory of sense, nor that of the subject are constituted. But no theory is ever constituted. The initial mistake would be to wait for one to be more defined before the other can be further determined. None of the three is a prerequisite for the others. Or there would be an indefinite wait. If sense, subject, rhythm are linked, working on one means working them together.)

In this predicament lies, one might say, the *economy* of Meschonnic’s thinking, continually holding in suspense rhythm, sense, subject, restlessly working and re-working them in different permutations, according to different shapes of interaction (equivalence, identity, subordination, synecdoche...). An economy characterised by disequilibrium and nonmeasure, attending to rhythms irreducible to, and in excess of, any ‘metric’. But not an economy merely: what emerges is something like a *method*: if each term or category (rhythm, sense, subject) is bound

to the others in dynamic reciprocity, if none can be invoked in isolation, then this demands a thinking of the ‘continuous’ (*le continu*) where habitually thinking has in Western metaphysics operated through discontinuity, through prising apart, isolating, breaking down into constituent parts its objects of thought (as befitting a history built on *ana-lysis*, whose original connotations of loosening, releasing, dissolving, would furnish an epistemological principle). To attempt to think rhythm is to find oneself in a hermeneutic circle, in which rhythm, sense, and subject, are already *there*, even if not theoretically ‘constituted’, mutually dependent, coterminous, even consubstantial. A hermeneutic circle also shaped by the history of the conceptualisation of rhythm, sense, subject, which, in being bound to ‘la paradigmatique du signe’ (‘the paradigmatics of the sign’)—which, ‘pas seulement un modèle du langage, c’est également, et indissociablement, un modèle anthropologique, philosophique, théologique, social et politique’ (‘not only a model of language, but also, and indissociably, an anthropological, philosophical, theological, social and political model’), would obstruct any attempt to orient oneself in this circle (*Pour Sortir*, 15).

All of which might explain, in Meschonnic, the apparent circularity in thinking, as it beats itself endlessly against the limits of this circle. Meschonnic has won few friends for his written style—not least his propensity to invective, long lamented by those sympathetic to his work⁵—but one can see how this writing embodies both the economy and method of his thought. One result of his insistence to think these categories in their ‘reciprocal interaction and implication’ is that no category ever gets treated in its particularity; following on from this comes the continual escalation of one problem into a chain of ever increasing vastness. Even the most apparently manageable category slips from our grasp, and we are left with a repeated injunction to think, but little indication of how such thinking might proceed. Whence an impression of deadlock, in which need is countermanded by impossibility. It is enough to make even the most resolute reader lose heart.

Meschonnic is hardly the first thinker to find themselves in such a predicament. As Hegel saw it, the idea that one might grasp the tools of cognition before embarking on cognition was tantamount to learning to swim without ever entering the water;⁶ and in *Being and Time* Heidegger argued that *Dasein* was always-already ‘thrown’ into its being-in-the-world, and so could not get purchase on being as an object of thought.⁷ Yet for each, it transpired that the task was not to extricate ourselves from this predicament, but rather to recalibrate our thinking in relation to it: as Heidegger put it, the exigency of the hermeneutic circle was not to ‘get out of the circle, but to come into it in the right way’.⁸ Hegel could thus observe that the attempt to grasp the tools of cognition simply *was* cognition, so that in learning to swim (to follow his analogy), we are, even perhaps without knowing it, already in fact swimming, or at least splashing about and staying somehow afloat; for Heidegger (whom Meschonnic never would cease to excoriate, and to whom he dedicated two book-length polemics, *Le Langage Heidegger* and *Heidegger ou le national-essentialisme*⁹), just to recognise the circle as ‘hermeneutic’ confronted one with the fact of the meaning of being, and more than this, the fact that being *is*. The situatedness of thinking becomes both the predicament of thinking, and what is to be thought.

At work here is a double anteriority: the historical constitution of this situatedness, and its ontological conditions. Meschonnic too provides a history of this situatedness, notably in his critique of the sign, and its ascendancy in Western thought which renders alternative conceptions of language ‘unthinkable’. But what of the second, ontological, anteriority? This is certainly intimated in his account of what is at stake in his ‘critique of rhythm’, where he writes: ‘la critique doit être théorie du sens, et de ce qui, dans le sens, déborde le sens, où agit le rythme’ (‘the critique (of rhythm) must be a theory of sense, and of that which, within sense, overflows sense, where rhythm is acting’) (*Critique*, 60).¹⁰ The critique of rhythm, that is, seeks to grasp excesses of, and over, sense: not just breakdowns but also surfeits of sense, points at which different modalities of sense are at work alongside and against one another. Rhythm thus

exposes us to an outside, and a before, of sense. And when he writes that ‘Rhythm is not sense, ... but sense material, even the material of sense’ (83), are we to conclude that rhythm provides a *substrate* for sense? Might rhythm provide an ontological first term?

There is ambiguity in Meschonnic’s syntax here: if the critique of rhythm requires both a theory of sense and a theory of ‘that which, within sense, overflows sense’, then *where* precisely is rhythm at work—in sense, or in its overflow? That the final clause should read almost like an afterthought does not help matters, though Meschonnic’s ambiguity is salutary—and not just because a theory of sense must surely also be a theory of what exceeds and withdraws from sense. If rhythm ‘is acting’ within sense, then is the implication that it works to overflow sense, or that it works within an overflow immanent to sense itself? Moreover, is this overflow rhythmic, or generated by rhythm? Or should we understand from this that rhythm does not simply inhabit sense, but stands at the threshold of sense, at once exceeding sense and configuring this excess? Or might we, finally, identify rhythm as the self-overflowing movement of sense itself, opening up a horizon that, sensual, sensible, semantic, answers to the diverse senses of ‘sense’? Where Meschonnic vacillates is precisely where the aporia of rhythm is most pronounced: both sensed and sense-making, and yet exceeding, preceding, sense.

For a thinker who so often proceeds through categorical assertion, such vacillations are surprisingly common. It is tempting to read these as symptoms of conceptual inconsistency; yet in the following I will read them back into what I have characterised as Meschonnic’s economy of thinking; such equivocations may be the point at which Meschonnic’s own claims collapse under their own weight, but they stem from the difficulty of the task he had set himself—and more than this, might trace those disequilibria released in the interaction of rhythm-sense-subject, upon which Meschonnic’s own project will founder. How might we make sense of such disequilibria?

One passage from the *Critique du rythme* is particularly glaring for its equivocations. Given that the problem of grasping the rhythm-sense-subject relation is a problem of anteriority, it is appropriate that it should come in a reflection on the ‘anteriority of rhythm’. Meschonnic starts by terming rhythm ‘un représentant non sémiotique du sujet qui est antérieur du sens’ [‘a non-semiotic representing of the subject which is anterior to sense’] (99), where again the final conjunction (this time ‘qui’, rather than ‘où’) at first appears to specify, but in fact makes matters more confused. Does ‘qui’ refer to the subject, so that the subject is anterior to sense? Or to rhythm as ‘non-semiotic representing’? Earlier, Meschonnic had claimed that sense is ‘l’activité d’un sujet’ (‘the activity of a subject’) (71). ‘Activity’, stemming from Humboldt’s *energeia*, stands in opposition to ‘product’ (*ergon*), as though to suggest that sense is something we *do*, rather than something we *make*. But it also implies that sense is enacted by subjects, that it emerges from out of subjective activity. Earlier it seemed that rhythm offered an ontological first term, as material substrate for sense; now it appears to be the subject which stands as the first term.

He then continues:

L’antériorité du rythme sur le sens des mots est indissociable de ces mots, même si le rythme fait sens autrement, partiellement. Étant du discours, il n’est pas antérieur au discours particulier où il est un autre du sens. S’il y a une antériorité du rythme, elle précède le sens des mots, mais non les mots eux-mêmes. Antériorité seulement par rapport à la priorité habituelle du sens.

(The anteriority of rhythm over the sense of the words is indissociable from these words, even if rhythm makes sense otherwise, partially. Being of discourse, it is not anterior to the particular discourse where it is other of sense. If there is an anteriority of rhythm, it precedes the sense of words, but not the words themselves. Anteriority only in relation to the habitual priority of sense.) (99)

In the reduction of ‘sense’ to ‘the sense of the words’, Meschonnic contravenes his own insistence on the polysemy of *sens*; when he depicts rhythm as ‘other of sense’, his claim is that its modes of sense-making are irreducible to *signification*, but has his entire argument not been that sense itself is irreducible to signification? It seems that this expanded definition of *sens* as incorporating all sense-making phenomenal activity has become too vertiginously open to bear. Similarly, the question of rhythmic anteriority is no longer posed in terms of a sense-material anterior to sense, but in the more circumscribed context of its anteriority over ‘le sens des mots’ (‘the sense of the words’). So he shrinks back, construing ‘sense’ to mean ‘the sense of the words’, and thus linguistic reference along the model of the sign. And, shrinking back, he reverts to his well-worn critique of sign-thinking, whose ‘habitual priority of sense’ is grounded on a reduced, impoverished understanding of sense itself. But this was not the problem he had set himself. Turning to a straw man *sens* serves as a means of avoiding the problem of anteriority as such, that problem that so haunts the nexus rhythm-sense-subject.

This points to a more fundamental difficulty with Meschonnic’s understanding of *sens*. It seems axiomatic in Meschonnic that ‘sense’ belongs to language (*langage*): again, not as the *langue* of structural linguistics with its system of lexis-grammar-syntax, and for which rhythm would be akin to ‘form’ as opposed to ‘content’, ‘sound’ as opposed to ‘sense’, but as ‘discourse’, where rhythm permeates the entire ‘situation’ of utterance, binds together the total semantics of sense-making activity.

But here, a further slippage: Meschonnic situates the anteriority of rhythm within ‘the *particular* discourse’. One might take from this that, where rhythm is concerned, we must think in terms of ‘particulars’ rather than abstractions; and yet the discourse he presents here is one quite removed from his model of discourse in general. It employs sense as signification, for a start. This is discourse as idiolect, rather than as dialogical activity. The turn to the particular brings not concretion but equivocation. In one gesture, he posits rhythm as the production of a

sense that makes sense ‘otherwise’ within discourse—through prosody, inflection, intonation—and excludes such sense-making from what he now appears to be terming ‘sense’. How to square this use of ‘sense’ with his later statement that ‘comme tout est sens dans le langage, dans le discours, le sens est générateur de rythme, autant que le rythme est générateur de sens, tous deux inséparables--un groupe rythmique est un groupe de sens’ (‘as everything in language, in discourse, is sense, sense is generator of rhythm, as much as rhythm is generator of sense, both inseparable—a rhythmic group is a group of sense’) (215)? For here, there is a reversibility of sense and rhythm, where each is ‘generator’ of the other, which further unsettles the claim that rhythm necessarily takes place within the horizon of discourse. But in this later claim we find what is becoming a characteristic equivocation, between the term as such and its concrete instantiation, between rhythm as process of dynamic configuration, and the ‘rhythmic group’, an individual figure.

What is emerging in each case, is that Meschonnic conceives of all rhythm as *linguistic* rhythm, albeit with a markedly capacious model of language. This is what underpins his recurrent definition of rhythm as ‘l’organisation du sens dans le discours’ (‘the organisation of sense in discourse’) (71). It is a gesture at once liberating, and restricting. On the one hand, it allows rhythm to incorporate an array of linguistic rhythms that are not exclusively prosodic, let alone metrical, such as when in ‘The Rhythm Party Manifesto’ he will call rhythm ‘l’organisation-langage du continu dont nous sommes faits’ (‘the language-organisation of the continuum of which we are made’).¹¹ Rhythm, on this account, does not simply bind phonological units together into prosodic phrases, but binds humans together within discourse. In this, Meschonnic follows Benveniste in foregrounding the phrase over the phonological unit: phrasing is always discursive, and cannot be reduced to its grammatical or morphological status.¹² Metre as a conceptual model reduces rhythm to periodicity, isochrony, to the ordering of discontinuous syllables: discontinuous both in that they are isolated from each other, and as they are isolated from sense. They are subsequently measured into feet, or verse lines,

formalised according to patterns of alternating stress and unstress, and then reconstructed into higher level units. By contrast, ‘Le rythme est continu-discontinu. Il est un passage, le passage du sujet dans le langage, le passage du sens, et plutôt de la signifiante, du faire sens, dans chaque élément du discours, jusqu’à chaque consonne, chaque voyelle’ (‘Rhythm is continuous-discontinuous. It is a passage, the passage of the subject in language, the passage of meaning, and rather *signifiante*, sense-making, in every element of discourse, right up to each consonant, each vowel’) (225).

If *langue* reduces rhythm to alternating stress and unstress, the rhythms of *discourse* bind speakers and elements of discourse into a relation. Continuous-discontinuous, it is both jointure and articulation, setting up linkages and commonalities, but in the same gesture individuating rhythmic elements. To set into relation necessarily entails such a double movement. In his later writings, Meschonnic will grasp rhythm solely as ‘the continuous’: indeed, even when the *Critique du rythme* treats rhythm as ‘continuous-discontinuous’, it is clear that the continuous already predominates, insofar as rhythm shapes the passage between continuous and discontinuous, thus indicating a higher order continuity. Rhythm here acts as the binding power of language: as it binds subjects in language, as it binds language together into a discursive whole—binding linguistic elements together, binding us to language, binding us through language, but also binding language to its outside, to that which exceeds language. ‘Le rythme du discours est une synthèse de tous les éléments du discours, y compris la situation, l’émetteur, le récepteur. Il est ce qui inclut l’extralinguistique et l’infrainguistique dans le linguistique’ (‘The rhythm of discourse is a synthesis of all the elements of discourse, including the situation, the speaker, the listener [*émetteur, récepteur*]. It is what includes the extralinguistic and the infrainguistic in the linguistic’) (225).

To this extent, the gesture is liberating; but it is restrictive, also, as it occludes that other array of rhythms which are not linguistic—even in this expanded understanding of language—but which nevertheless ‘make sense’. Meschonnic appears to dismiss these non-linguistic

rhythms wholesale as belonging to ‘metre’. This too might be traced back to Benveniste’s account of *rhythmos*, and its particular variation on the theme of Plato’s-original-sin: the Platonic *rhythmos*, unlike uses of the term which preceded it, is ‘associated with *metron* and bound by the law of numbers... which presupposes a continuous activity broken by metre into alternating intervals.’¹³ In the examples Benveniste gives, Plato uses *rhythmos* specifically in reference to music and dance; it would seem that Meschonnic takes this to mean that all musical rhythm accords with an interpretation of *rhythmos* as *metron*. This model of rhythm-as-metre is then, he argues, applied onto the stress patterns of a language from outside.¹⁴

In studies of versification, a qualitative distinction is often made between linguistic stress and unstress on the one hand, and musical beat and off-beat on the other;¹⁵ Meschonnic’s implication is that the notion of relative stress in phonology is itself a derivation of the beat/off-beat opposition (187). Whereas the rhythm of discourse binds the continuous and the discontinuous, in metre non-linguistic rhythms, projected onto phonology, break such rhythmic jointure up into discontinuous units, erasing the ‘passage’ between units which, for Meschonnic, subtends their rhythmic relationality. It is one thing to say that this is imported from musical *theory*; it is quite another to say that it is imported from musical *practice*. Meschonnic neglects to reflect on the complexity of the musical phrase, let alone ask whether the rhythms of music and dance might themselves possess a multidirectionality and heterogeneity that operates outside the confines of the ‘measure’.¹⁶

Perhaps Meschonnic would consider musicologists’ talk of ‘tonal’ or ‘harmonic’ language to be analogical at best, catachresis at worst; and yet such ‘languages’ would, just as much as any poem, work through discursive idiom and ‘serial semantics’, and would point to ‘sense’ as a meaningful-corporeal matrix—albeit with no recourse to signifiers. Meschonnic expands language outwards, from *langue* to discourse; other modes of artistic expressivity might suggest expanding discourse further outwards to non-verbal sense-making activity. But instead, Meschonnic ties sense back to verbal discourse: this not only returns the problematic of rhythm

to linguistic rhythm alone, but subordinates all other rhythms to the linguistic. This despite the fact that the earlier uses of *ruthmos* that Benveniste cites were largely unconnected to language, describing rather the ways that diverse phenomena provisionally take form, disclose themselves in movement.¹⁷

We have seen two equivocations, ostensibly shifts from abstract to concrete, even (though Meschonnic would resist the terms) ontological to ontic, but which introduce distortions as they shift from one to the other: of sense to ‘the sense of the words’, and of discourse to ‘a discourse’.¹⁸ Writes Meschonnic: ‘Si le sens est un activité du sujet, si le rythme est une organisation du sens dans le discours, le rythme est nécessairement une organisation ou configuration du sujet dans son discours’ (‘If sense is the activity of a subject, if rhythm is an organisation of sense in discourse, rhythm is necessarily the organisation or configuration of the subject in its discourse’) (71). When rhythm is described as the organisation/configuration of the subject in *its* discourse (that is, a particular discourse which is the possession of a particular subject, as opposed to discourse as such), this raises two problems. Where rhythm had previously been grasped as the configuration of sense, now it is the marker of a subject in language: sense is reduced to discourse, and discourse to personal idiom, ‘*its* discourse’.

Yet there is another vacillation here, with even greater ramifications for Meschonnic’s broader economy, and method. The phrase ‘configuration of the subject’ can read as either subjective or objective genitive: either the subject is configured through rhythm, or the subject configures rhythm. This finds an echo in *Politique du rythme, politique du sujet*, where Meschonnic argues for a model of ‘le rythme dans le langage [...] comme l’organisation du mouvement dans la parole, l’organisation d’un discours par un sujet et d’un sujet par son discours’ (‘rhythm in language (...) as the organisation of movement in speech, the organisation of a discourse by a subject and of a subject by its discourse’).¹⁹ In both instances, rhythm appears in ‘*a* discourse’ that belongs to ‘*a* subject’.

Meschonnic's initial assertion that the three domains, sense, subject, and rhythm, were epistemologically coterminous, has now fragmented: sense into discourse and then *a* discourse; rhythm from configuration/organisation as such to the reciprocal organisation of a subject and its discourse. Here again, it would seem that the subject has become the ontological first term, such as in the claim that 'le langage est un élément du sujet, l'élément le plus subjectif, dont le plus subjectif à son tour est le rythme' ('language is an element of the subject, the most subjective element, whose most subjective element in turn is rhythm') (*Critique*, 71). Which leaves the question: what, or who, is this subject? And also—keeping with the rigorous reversibility between a subject and its discourse that Meschonnic observes—in what way are they a subject of rhythm, in what way subject to rhythm?

Both subject *of* and subject *to*. The subject is habitually taken to be the site of agency, interiority, consciousness, able to act upon objects, able to cognise objects of knowledge; and yet immanent in the word itself is a tension that pervades what it is to be subject. To be 'subject' implies the condition of being 'subjected' (*soumis, assujetti*), as much as it does the claim to subjecthood. So how is it that subject should come to signify something like the opposite of subjection, and what kinds of subjecthood issue from this? Or as Meschonnic puts it, how can the 'valeur passive' [passive value] of being 'subjected' become 'la base et la constante d'une stabilité' ['the basis and the constant of a stability']? In phrasing the question thus, Meschonnic is interested in the process of 'subjectivation' itself (*Politique*, 198); for Meschonnic grasps the subject as 'une activité, non un support (*hupokeimenon, sub-jectum*) de cette activité' ('an activity, not a support (*hupokeimenon, sub-jectum*) of this activity') (*Pour sortir*, 142). Sense is an 'activity of a subject', and the subject is itself 'activity'.

But on how this activity operates, Meschonnic is less certain. In *Politique du rythme, politique du sujet* (1995), he offers the following definition: 'Est sujet celui qui travaille la tension initiale, fondatrice du sujet, son ambiguïté, transformant la statique du sujet assujetti en sujet de lui-même' ('Subject is the one who works the initial, foundational tension of the

subject, its ambiguity, transforming the static of the subjected subject into a subject of itself”) (*Politique*, 200). This implies a teleology: subjectivation as the eventual attaining of subjecthood (the basis and constant of a stability). And yet in *Pour sortir du postmoderne enfin* (2009) he suggests an alternative relation: ‘Sujet au sens de celui qui supporte, qui est soumis à. Qui porte en lui. Puis à la réflexion, le sujet c’est la réversibilité entre les deux’ (‘Subject in the sense of that which sustains, which is subjected to something. Which carries in itself. Then reflected back, the subject is the reversibility between the two’) (125). In other words, less teleology than continual oscillation.

There is a certain irony in seeing Meschonnic, elaborating the different meanings of ‘subject’, engage in such etymological speculation. He is a thinker little credulous of ‘l’emploi réaliste-essentialiste du langage, ce mélange d’origine-essence-vérité pris pour le sens, et qui développe, chaque fois qu’il veut rendre compte d’un mot, son étymologie’ (‘the realist-essentialist employment of language, that mix of origin-essence-truth taken for meaning, and which develops, each time that it wants to take account of a word, its etymology’) (*Pour sortir*, 169). Etymological speculation constitutes, he argues, a reification of ‘nomenclature’; it confuses the history of a lexeme with its discursive historicity ‘comme tension et activité continuée’ (‘as tension and continual activity’) (15). Even Benveniste’s treatment of the notion of *ruthmos* as found in pre-Socratic thought, so crucial for Meschonnic’s project, is found wanting: Benveniste, having discovered a meaning of *ruthmos* as ‘la forme dans l’instant qu’elle est assumé par ce qui est mouvant, mobile, fluide’ (‘the form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid’),²⁰ ‘s’arrête à son travail philologique’ (‘restricts himself to his philological work’), rather than opening on to a philosophical-poetic elaboration of its consequences—namely of grasping its ramifications for thinking rhythm as continuum, as dynamic configuration (*Politique*, 142). Essentialist play on etymology mistakes historical antecedence for metaphysical origin; philological analyses of a set of cognates (*ruthmos*, *schema*, *metron*) tail off, just as critical-conceptual work begins.

Meschonnic never explains why his elaboration of the tension inherent in the word ‘subject’ does not fall under such essentialism; perhaps it is because this tension is not posited as a reified origin, but rather experienced continually in the double-binds of subjectivation each time that a ‘subject’ constitutes itself. It would thus be part of the lived history of the subject. This history of the subject is further marked by its epistemological and ideological confusions—of which the most prevalent is the conflation of subject and individual. The term ‘subject’ habitually elides the differences between several categories: ‘subject’ (as opposed to object); ‘individual’ (as opposed to collective); ‘self’ (as opposed to other); interiority (as opposed to exteriority). Following Manfred Frank, Meschonnic suggests that ‘subject’ signifies a universal, ‘person’ a particular, and ‘individual’ a singularity (*Politique*, 191).²¹ But if the subject is ‘universal’, it follows a peculiar universality: on the one hand, the subject is ‘un universel linguistique ahistorique: il y a toujours eu sujet, partout où il y a eu langage’ (‘an ahistorical linguistic universal: there has always been a subject, everywhere where there has been language’) (*Critique*, 72); on the other, the subject in discourse is the motor of history, and as such constitutes historicity itself, understood as ‘la faculté indéfinie de présence au présent, de transformation de tous les présents’ (‘the indefinite faculty for presence in the present, for transformation of all presents’) (*Pour sortir*, 18). As the subject pluralises itself in history, it attains this status as ‘ahistorical linguistic universal.’

The category of ‘subject’ might thus be seen as working across different axes: grammatical, numerical, legal, spatial. Might these accord with the plural conceptualisations of the subject itself? There is the ‘conscient, unitaire, volontaire’ (‘conscious, unitary, intentional’) philosophical-psychological subject (16), which would inhabit a grammatical position (bearing predicates, acting upon objects); there is the subject which ‘manifeste pour ses droits’ (‘struggles for its legal rights’) (136); the moral subject would seem both individuated by its moral conscience and subject to a moral law; the aesthetic subject too would seem to be characterised by its individuality and its interior experience. To reduce these all to one single

subject would be to overlook the radical heterogeneity that lies in the interstices of these various subjects. ‘On ne saurait réduire ces divers sujets à des variantes du sujet philosophique. Ce ne sont pas des essences réelles. Ils correspondent à des activités distinctes’ (‘One could not reduce these diverse subjects to variants of the philosophical subject. These are not real essences. They correspond to distinct activities’) (136).

Elsewhere Meschonnic invokes ‘la treize à la douzaine des sujets que nous sommes’ (‘the baker’s dozen of subjects which we are’) (‘Manifeste’, 292); if this might be starting to resemble an Occam’s razor of subjects, one should recall the insistence that the subject is not a ‘real essence’ but rather discloses itself plurally, in and as these ‘distinct activities’. If the subject is a ‘universal’, its universality would not offer a model of selfhood, but rather resemble the personal pronoun *I*: as Benveniste puts it, *I* refers to ‘la personne qui énonce la présente instance de discours contenant *je*’ (‘the person who utters the present instance of discourse containing *I*’), and as such is radically impersonal, transferrable from one subject to another, but also situating them as subject in discourse.²² Or as Meschonnic puts it, ‘le *je* passe de *je* en *je* et reste *je*’ (‘the *I* passes from *I* to *I* and remains *I*’). Subjectivity is a position we inhabit rather than a property we possess. Moreover, this position is radically relational: ‘entre *je* et *tu*, intérieur et extérieur à la fois. Object, mais de lui-même, comme sujet de l’autre’ (‘between *I* and *you*, interior and exterior at the same time. Object, but of itself, as subject of the other’) (*Politique*, 209).

This is not to map a linguistic ‘subject’ on to the grammatical-logical place of the subject in a proposition (again: bearing predicates, acting upon an object); rather, for Meschonnic subjectivity emerges out of the act of *enunciation*. The question of how the first person pronoun works is not just a question of what is meant by ‘subject’, but also what is meant by ‘language’. For the model of language as *langue*, ‘le sujet parlant ne peut avoir qu’une définition grammaticale’ (‘the speaking subject can only have a grammatical definition’) (*Critique*, 70): the subject of *la langue* is a transcendent subject of knowledge and domination, the subject-

individual but also the individualist subject. By contrast, the subject of *le langage*, subject of/to discourse, distributed amongst so many different utterances of *I*, is constitutively plural, incomplete, an activity among others within discourse rather than the basis, or support, of a singular agency. ‘L’individu-sujet’ (‘subject-individual’) is ‘la créature des systèmes de signes’ (‘the creature of sign systems’) (71-72); the subject of discourse would exceed not only the notion of the sign but also individuality. But if the subject is to be thus distinguished from the ‘individual’, Meschonnic will also argue: ‘*Le sujet est l’individuation*: le travail qui fait que le social devient l’individuel, et que l’individu peut, fragmentairement, indéfiniment, accéder au statut du sujet, qui ne peut être que historique, et social’ (‘The *subject is individuation*: the work through which the social becomes individual, and the individual can, fragmentarily, indefinitely, reach the status of subject, which can only be historical, and social’) (95).

The subject is defined by its *rhythmics*: it binds together heterogeneities in dynamic configuration. This would anticipate his claim, years later, that ‘le rythme est un forme-sujet. Le forme-sujet’ (‘rhythm is a subject-form(er). The subject-form(er)’) (‘Manifeste’, 295). By *forme-sujet* Meschonnic brings together both the particular form that a subject takes with that which gives form to a subject, that through which a subject is formed. Again, subject and rhythm are conceived according to a certain reversibility, where each is always-already bound up with, even in, the other, where each reciprocally configures the other.

But with this *rhythmics* comes further entanglement. The subject, Meschonnic states, is individuation; and yet it is through individuation that the individual reaches the status of subject, here seen as necessarily social, and, inversely through individuation that the social becomes individual. The individual, it appears, both antecedes individuation and is its endpoint; the subject is both equated with the process of individuation itself, and posited as the ‘status’ to which individuation will lead the individual. Moreover, the subject is necessarily historical, and Meschonnic also claims that the individual is a particular historical manifestation of the subject, and more specifically, as we have seen, ‘the creature of sign systems.’ But most arresting is the

intimation that, becoming subject, the individual becomes constitutively *plural*. Every subject is, he says, ‘trans-subject’ (*Critique*, 72).

Might this apply not just to the individual person, but to other forms of individuality? Where Meschonnic slips from rhythm-as-such to the individual rhythmic figure, from discourse-as-such to an individual discourse or idiom, from sense-as-such to the sense of words, what is lost is precisely this plurality. All of which stand in marked contrast to what he calls ‘the subject of the poem’—a subject which, Meschonnic is at pains to point out, is not to be confused with the subjectivity of the *poet*. Rather, this is the poem as subject, the subject as generated out of ‘the activity of the poem’ (*Politique*, 129), and which as such ‘déborde incommensurablement l’intention, la conscience’ (‘overflows incommensurably intention, consciousness’) (*Pour sortir*, 18):

En entendant par poème tout récitatif du continu dans le langage comme *inventio d’un système de discours par un sujet*—le sujet du poème—et *invention de ce sujet par son discours*, soit en vers soit en prose...

(Understanding by ‘poem’ any recitative of the continuous in language as *invention of a system of discourse by a subject*—the subject of the poem—and *invention of this subject by/through its discourse*, be it in verse or prose...) (*Pour sortir*, 137)

Meschonnic’s notion of *récitatif* brings together the *récit* of storytelling with the *réciter* of oral recitation, along with the operatic tradition of recitative, overlapping sung speech with spoken song. It is a song which belongs not to speaker, but to speech: ‘the *récit* du langage’, Meschonnic stipulates, language reciting itself (*Politique*, 190). Again, it pertains to the individual discourse of the individual poem; again, we find that characteristic equivocation, this time in the apparently innocuous preposition *par*. Meschonnic can be glossed as saying: through inventing this discourse, the poem invents itself as subject; but also as saying: the subject is

invented by its discourse (or perhaps, by the poem's discourse). On the former account, subjectivity is a form of self-invention through discourse, whereas the latter account would suggest a reversibility between subject and discourse, whereby each invents the other.

‘Dans le poème, c’est la subjectivation du langage qui est sujet. À lire allégoriquement’ (‘In the poem, it is the subjectivation of language that is subject. To be read allegorically’), Meschonnic writes (191). Again, that characteristic double-genitive: language makes subject and is made subject. But how to read this ‘allegorically’? If poetry is ‘une subjectivation maximale du langage’ (‘a maximal subjectivation of language’) (79), this implies that poetry is but a more concentrated instance of a process found in all language. In which case, the subjectivation that takes place in the poem becomes exemplary for all subjectivation in/of language. But more than this: that the poem renders manifest this subjectivation of language, and thereby becomes an allegory for this subjectivation. This is subsequently taken up in ‘The Rhythm Party Manifesto’, where he intones: ‘Pas de sujet sans sujet du poème’ (‘No subject without the subject of the poem’) (292). If the subject of the poem denotes the kind of subjectivity that arises through linguistic making, then it concerns not merely works we would habitually class as ‘poetry’, but all human sense-making activity in which language is transformed: a sense-making activity that shapes the future parameters of sense-making.

Might this subject of the poem cast further light on what Meschonnic means when he describes sense as ‘the activity of the subject’? The poem is not a product of an individual subject, but rather the activity of subjectivation through which a particular subject, distinct from the poet, emerges, along with the particularity of the poem’s discourse. It is through *sense-making* that the subject emerges; which is to say: *sense is subjectivation*. And if rhythm is ‘the *forme-sujet*’, then rhythm is not only the dynamic configuration that subjectivation takes, but also that which gives shape to such subjectivation. Rhythm becomes the dynamic shaping of sense, as it unfolds, enfolds, as it is sensed, but also as it exceeds sense. As Meschonnic puts it, ‘Le rythme, conçu dans une continuité avec le sens et le sujet, désunit le sens, le sujet’

(‘Rhythm, conceived in continuity with sense and the subject, disunites sense, subject’) (*Critique*, 82). The question of rhythm thus brings us to confront the internal plurality of sense and subject, along with rhythm’s own pluralisations. Again, jointure, but also differentiation.

Meschonnic’s major insight is that the rhythmic configuration of sense, subject, is both a binding of sense and subject—binding sense to itself, subject to itself, as well as sense to subject, subject to sense—and an unravelling of sense and subject as unities. But his thought continually shrinks back from this insight, either through his tirades against sign-thinking, where the exactitudes of thinking rhythm give way to reiterated statements of enmity, or where, faced with the protean, multiform phenomena of rhythm, sense, subject, eliding the wellworn categorical distinctions of universal/particular, abstract/concrete, ontological/ontic, Meschonnic *equivocates*. Whilst it is possible to reconstruct Meschonnic’s theory of rhythms as an interlinked set of attitudes, of stances, rallying cries, even dogmas, its equivocations mean it will never become a coherent system: for all the talk of ‘theory’ and ‘critique’, ultimately Meschonnic furnishes neither. But the equivocations within Meschonnic’s thinking allow us to see what is, as he puts it, ‘at stake in the critique of rhythm’, in the reciprocal interaction of rhythm, sense, subject. When Meschonnic thematises rhythm as ‘continuous-discontinuous’, as a setting-into-relation that is at once jointure and differentiation, he grasps the paradoxical interplay of incompatible movements, but the plane remains binary (just as for all his railing against the binaries of sign-thinking, he himself is not just binaristic but manichean). To think rhythm requires the interaction of plural planes, releasing multiple movements, and multiple topologies through which to trace these movements. When I have spoken of the dynamic unfolding, and enfolding, of sense, organised not around continuity but the ‘fold’, it is as an attempt to envision a spatiotemporal complex that allows for alternate kinds of orders of space and time, different modalities of spatial, and temporal, relation. In such unfoldings, in such infolds, one might situate the dynamics not just of sense-making but of subjectivation, the dynamics through and in which emerge subjects of rhythm who are—from the start, and

ceaselessly—subject to rhythm. To think rhythm with Meschonnic, but beyond Meschonnic, I propose we attempt grasp this unfolding/enfolding, that we subject our thinking to their modalities, their configurations, their dynamics.

¹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Le Livre à venir,’ in *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 302-332, p. 307. ‘The Book to Come,’ in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 226.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie: Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 384. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 313.

³ Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme* (Paris: Verdier, 1982), p. 532. Subsequent citations in main text.

⁴ Meschonnic’s *sens* is given the full scope of its semantic fullness, to encompass a word’s reference, and a more generalised ‘meaningfulness’ (*signifiance*), ‘sense-making’ (*faire sens*), the ‘senses’ themselves, and even direction, such as when his critique of ‘le maintien illusionniste d’un sens unique, déclaré insaisissable’ (‘the illusionist maintenance of a single meaning, declared to be ungraspable’) plays on the meaning of ‘sens unique’ as ‘one way street’. Meschonnic, *Pour Sortir du postmoderne* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2009), pp. 133-34. Subsequent citations in main text.

⁵ See for instance Gabriella Bedetti, ‘Henri Meschonnic: Rhythm as Pure Historicity,’ *New Literary History* 23:2 (1992), pp. 431-450, p. 434, and Gary D. Mole’s review of Marcella Leopizzi, *Parler poème: Henri Meschonnic dans sa voix* (Paris: Alain Baudry, 2009), in *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 64:4 (2010), p. 513. In this special issue, see especially Clive Scott (**add page ref at copy-editing stage**).

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), p. 34.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 174.

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 195.

⁹ *Le Langage Heidegger* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); *Heidegger ou le nationale-essentialisme* (Paris: Teper, 2007). That Meschonnic tries to distance himself from Heidegger, ironically indicates how

overlapped his thinking is with his antagonist's, especially in their respective critiques of the sign. I have discussed this in 'Stéphane Mallarmé and the Ontologisation of Poetry', in J. Acquisto (ed.) *Thinking Poetry: Philosophical Approaches to Nineteenth-Century French Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 149-166.

¹⁰ Meschonnic's French is *agit*, acts, but also with a nod to *agite*, to agitate; his cognates of 'activity' always refer back to Humboldt's understanding of language as *energeia* rather than *ergon*.

¹¹ Meschonnic, 'Manifeste pour un parti du rhyme', in *Célébration de la poésie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001), pp. 291-303, p. 294. Subsequent citations in main text.

¹² Benveniste writes: 'Les phonèmes, les morphèmes, les mots (lexèmes) peuvent être comptés; ils sont en nombre fini. Les phrases, non. Les phonèmes, les morphèmes, les mots (lexèmes) ont une distribution à leur niveau respectif, un emploi au niveau supérieur. Les phrases n'ont ni distribution ni emploi' ('Phonemes, morphemes, and words (lexemes) can be counted; there is a finite number of them. Not so with phrases. Phonemes, morphemes, and words (lexemes) have a distribution at their respective levels and a use at higher levels. Sentences have neither distribution nor use'). 'Les niveaux de l'analyse linguistique', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 119-131, p. 129. 'The Levels of Linguistic Analysis', in *Problems of General Linguistics* vol. I trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 101-111, p. 109-10. Translation modified.

¹³ Benveniste, 'The Notion of Rhythm in its Linguistic Expression', in *Problems in General Linguistics*, p. 287.

¹⁴ Ironically, this is the exact inverse of Bergson's account of rhythm, which saw the temporal *durée* of experience to be continuous, and language to impose discontinuity upon such experience, through acts of naming and through syntactic ordering of its experiential materials—an account with which Meschonnic takes issue in *Critique du rythme* (pp. 180ff.).

¹⁵ See for instance Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982).

¹⁶ Examples readily come to mind, perhaps less from the canon of Western concert music (at least before the introduction of polyrhythms in the early 20th century) than from music elsewhere in the world, be it West Africa or Indonesia.

¹⁷ Benveniste, 'La notion du rythme dans son expression linguistique', in *Problèmes* pp. 327-335. So in Democritus, one finds a rhythmic arrangement of atoms in a substance (such as air or water, p. 329), and in Herodotus the shape of alphabetic script, as it is reworked over time, is denoted by *ruthmos* (p. 330),

whereas for lyric poets *ruthmos* describes the fleeting forms of human moods, or the act of giving form to an emotion, or enacting a murder in a particular way (p. 331).

¹⁸ That the shift from ontological to ontic should entail such distortions is well documented in twentieth century European philosophy; yet in Meschonnic's case it seems to emerge less from the necessary slippages of ontological difference, and more from a terminological imprecision that leaves him talking at cross purposes.

¹⁹ *Politique du rythme, politique du sujet* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1995), p. 143. Subsequent citations in main text.

²⁰ Benveniste, 'La notion du "rythme" dans son expression linguistique', in *Problèmes*, p. 332.

²¹ See also Manfred Frank, *L'ultime raison du sujet* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1988).

²² Benveniste, 'La nature des pronoms', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (pp. 251-257, p. 252). Trans. modified from Meek trans., 'The Nature of Pronouns', *Problems in General Linguistics*, p. 218.