

## CONTENTION AND CONTINUITY: THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN METRICAL STUDIES AND POETICS

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Metrical theories agree upon the fundamental function of time as the basis along which the organizing principles in the perception of poetic rhythm are articulated. The fact that it plays an inescapable role in music —and indeed all human activities, from the circadian rhythms of biology to its presence in metaphysics— raises complex and wide-ranging questions about its role in the arts, questions that deal with concepts beyond the insights and epistemological principles of the linguistic theories that are the basis of most current metrical studies. There is a gap between the linguistic approach and that of literary criticism, and although it is a matter of contention, there is a certain tendency in some scholars from either field to make brief incursions into the opposing side. The aims of this paper are to briefly explore and survey the limits of some of the approaches in relation to the temporal element and to provide some examples from either field which could lead to an outline of a few shared perspectives.

The origin of this paper lies in an attempt to provide a survey of different views on the role of time in poetry, in particular of the relation between its presence at a basic constituent level —such as syllable duration or the principle of stress-timing— which requires for its study the perspective of applied linguistics, and the speculations about time which pertain to the domain of literary criticism. These two views imply different epistemological principles in their extreme versions. Applied linguistics seeks to provide a rigorous method of research, description and analysis within the boundaries of the current disciplines of language, with the assistance of concepts and methods based on empirical proof, logical discourse and detached, objective and scholarly prose. On the other hand, most of the trends in literary criticism dealing with the issue of time tend to produce a different kind of discourse, less *objective*, based on concepts that are sanctioned by an old and well-established tradition of philosophical speculation. Occasionally, the kind of language used in these treatises gravitates towards a sort of poetic prose of elevated overtones.

When working in the area of linguistics applied to poetry, the researcher usually finds himself/herself divided between these two extremes: on the one hand

the need to limit oneself to the use of proof provided by linguistic analysis, and on the other the temptation to delve into assessments based on intuitions that belong to the realm of literary criticism or aesthetics. The fact is that there is a hazy area, an undefined zone, in which rational analysis becomes fused with some cultural constructs and general intuitive evaluations about poetry and language. This area constitutes the borderline between what many would call *science* and *speculation*. The intention of this paper is to draw attention to some interesting coincidences between these different disciplines.

The subject of time in poetry in its many different aspects turns up continuously, even within the realm of linguistic studies, where the less objective and verifiable affirmations about it also timidly appear. In my opinion, this is the result of the tendency to take applied linguistics beyond mere descriptive analysis and the need to relate form and meaning: linguistic structure, subject to systematic organization, on the one hand, and individual and social aesthetic response, on the other. In this respect, the issue of time has lately become prominent in relation to emotion. The part of rhetoric dealing with *affectus* has for some time been neglected, mainly due to the emphasis laid on the objectively quantifiable part of human experience, to all those areas which can be subjected to empirical observation and analysis. Time has been related to the arousal of subjective emotions within critical views that precisely seek to transcend the dualities between linguistic form and subjective response. Thus, Hyde and Smith (1993) try to recover the notion of *movere*, one of the functions of rhetoric, as that part of the discipline that linked theory and practice, truth and emotion, dialectic with rhetoric.

Among less formalistic perspectives, there predominates a vague neoplatonic notion in relation to language and time: both are similar in terms of their linearity, but they can also be construed as simultaneous if they are contemplated as, respectively, the result of an abstract paradigm and the product of human subjective perception. Language and time also share linearity with music. It is revealing to see how some of the ideas on music and language reflect basic notions of time which have their roots in Plato and Plotinus: hence the ideas of time as a moving image of eternity, or of time as a manifestation of a static *presence*. This is one of the basic notions that will appear in different guises and within different methodological perspectives in relation to time in poetry. Victor Zuckerkandl echoes this view when he affirms that, in the realm of music, a tone is “the *promise of a whole* that it bears within itself” (in Katz 1996: 167-68). This notion has undergone many re-elaborations and has known many different avatars, from the idea that every creature or object in the sublunary world is a reflection, a microcosm, of the divine static whole, to its latest faint echo in the notion of the relation between constituents and whole as a structurally defining one: in this case, the paradigm would be the static element, largely unchangeable, or at least not as fluid as the spoken chain.

One of the underlying patterns in this dichotomy consists of an attempt to overcome the linear nature of language, poetry, or music: even to contemplate these linear sequences as either cosmic or structural (i.e. paradigmatic) wholes; in other words, to project simultaneity over linearity, stasis over change. In this respect, it is

very revealing to find Derek Attridge turning to Saint Augustine for a description of the relation between the linear sequence of meter in a poem and its contemplation as a whole:

So it is that a metrical line is beautiful in its own kind although two syllables of that line cannot be pronounced simultaneously. The second is pronounced only after the first has passed, and such is the order of procedure to the end of the line, so that when the last syllable sounds, alone, unaccompanied by the sound of the previous syllables, it yet, as being part of the whole metrical fabric, perfects the form and metrical beauty of the whole. (Attridge 1982: 308)

It is not surprising to find these references to St. Augustine, since he was not just the author of a treatise on music, but was also concerned with language as one of the links with the transcendental world. He also established an analogy between fallen language and time: time is the result of creation and thus a manifestation of the less-than-perfect state of creation as compared with God's immobility; and, as with time, so with language: also fallen from perfection. But what concerns us here is the fact that he uses linguistic categories to refer to time, as Freccero (1983) has pointed out. He also uses a term that will constantly appear in relation to simultaneity and linearity: *memory*. Significantly enough, language and theology are closely related in Augustine's texts: he establishes a close parallel between the literary interpretation of a poetic text and a Christian world-vision. In other words, his perspective constitutes an important step towards establishing an analogy between the linguistic materiality of poetry, the tangibility of its constituents, and the transcendence that is very frequently projected onto it. According to Freccero:

Poetry was for him the emblem of intelligibility in the cosmos. Just as meter gave a pattern and a regularity to the otherwise open-ended flow of our words, so God's providential intent gave meaning to the flow of time. History itself might be said to be God's poem. (1983: 14-15)<sup>1</sup>

Augustine goes as far as turning to *song*, to music and poetry, as a metaphor for his definition of time, in which two fundamental concepts structure its subjective perception, embodied in the language and the music of the song: they are

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<sup>1</sup> I offer the reader the full quotation to give an adequate idea of the context in which these words appear: "Of all of the Fathers of the Church, Augustine, orator and Bishop, was most aware of the analogy between the realm of words and the Theology of the Word. His discussion of the rule of recapitulation in the *De doctrina christiana* moves from an understanding of the term as a literary device to its application to Biblical exegesis. There is no conflict in his mind between literary interpretation and salvation history; on the contrary, poetry was for him the emblem of intelligibility in the cosmos. Just as meter gave a pattern and a regularity to the otherwise open-ended flow of our words, so God's providential intent gave meaning to the flow of time. History itself might be said to be God's poem, saved from both the timeless eternity of the Platonists and the death of the fall by the Word, through whom the time was redeemed. In such a plan, human lives are the syllables, ordered to one another according to the meter of Providence, and death is no more than the syntactic silence necessary for meaning to emerge" (Freccero 1983:14-15).

*memory* and *expectation*. These two terms provide a link between Augustine's transcendental notion of poetry as an emblem of time and God's creation, as proofs of divine presence, and modern theories of meter and cognitive poetics such as those by Tsur, Cureton or Attridge. These terms play a central role in the concept of time as part of phenomenological reality. But they are equally important within theories of meter. They are present there as *tensions*, as the tension between memory and expectation within an individual's perceptual experience. This would be the cognitive, non-transcendental counterpart to the notion of poetry and music not just as images of time, but also as reflections of eternity (where eternity is understood as simultaneity, as a constant presence that never flows or changes). The underlying concepts are in both cases linearity versus simultaneity: what varies is their status and the authority that sanctions their validity within their respective systems. In the case of neoplatonism it is the authority of that transcendent presence, whereas in metrical studies they would be validated by scientific method, research and logical argumentation, inevitably assisted by empirical evidence.

Susanne Langer adequately describes the subjective perception of time in terms that parallel the perception of metrical rhythm as a series of tensions and resolutions based on the presence of memory: "The phenomena that fill time are *tensions*—physical, emotional, or intellectual. Time exists for us because we undergo tensions and their resolutions" (1953: 113). The perception of time as tension also echoes some definitions of poetic rhythm as a series of multilayered tensions at different linguistic and discursive levels. This is the case of Richard Cureton (1992, 1993), for whom the rhythm of language as embodied in poetry is a multilayered construct of diverse rhythmic structures superimposed on each other. Each level builds up its own rhythmic tension by means of the creation of expectation and its resolution—or lack of it—and the reader or hearer perceives all these different levels simultaneously. The complexity of this phenomenon can hardly be overemphasized, since in addition to the simultaneous perception of different structural levels we should add the role of memory—that goes back—and expectation—that points toward the future. This phenomenon is made up of phonic elements of a basically physical nature, with an acoustic dimension that includes the role of subjective perception. At this level, time plays a fundamental role in the perception of linguistic rhythmic phenomena: from syllable duration to the time spans between stressed syllables, whose varying regularity at those different levels creates the expectation that is either defeated or fulfilled and thus creates tension. The point here is that time (not just perceptual subjective time, but also physical time, like syllable duration) constitutes one of the building blocks of poetic rhythm, of metered language and discourse. Here time refers to phenomena of physical and acoustic perception: they are objective phenomena, but they also have a subjective aspect and therefore need to be studied from the perspective provided by the reader/hearer.

The way these more or less predictable features—i.e. those belonging to the domain of physical and acoustic features—interact with the larger and less predictable domain of discourse semantics, and in particular with individual subjective perception, is what really constitutes the gap between the linguistic

features of poetry and the experience of poetry as a whole: a gap we can hardly quantify and measure, at least with the same concepts and methods as we do syllable duration and rhythm. This gap is what constitutes a continuous subject of speculation. It lies in that borderline area where applied linguistics leaves off and speculative literary criticism takes over.

The domain of emotional tension, to a large extent individual and subjective, is also codified at a certain social level, i.e. part of this response would be determined by acquisition, by education; but at the utterly individual, subjective level this emotional response will be almost untransferable.

The tensions which constitute the perceptual experience of poetry are also part and the result of poetry as the outcome and simultaneous confluence of different perceptual domains: visual, acoustic, mental (the auditory imagination: rhythms interiorized by the individual). Thus, a poem represents perceived, subjective time, the time resulting on the one hand from its rhythmic structure in conjunction with semantic content. In this respect, the reader's perception and intervention is fundamental in rounding off poetry as a complete experience. The response of the reader thus must constitute a source of evidence and of validation of theoretical hypotheses in a theory of meter.

The mental representation of sound and rhythm in the reader during silent reading is part of the complexity of poetry as a perceptual phenomenon. But even in silent reading the presence of physical impulses has been detected in relation to the perception of rhythm. The original nature of rhythm as muscular impulses manifests itself in this type of reading by means of a subconscious movement of those muscles involved in speech. This phenomenon is mentioned by Attridge and other scholars within the area of applied linguistics, and it demonstrates that in the realm of rhythmic perception we need to go beyond the traditional dualism body/mind, which does not correspond to real experience. When opposing orality and literacy, Walter Ong also conceives of language in terms of the physical sensation of voice in the body and as an acoustic medium that bears a special relationship "to interiority when sound is compared with other senses" (Ong 1982: 71). Sound holds a special relation with consciousness in that it must be interiorized in order to be experienced and assimilated.

The close relation of voice to muscular impulses and the need to interiorize sound in order to assimilate it invites a reflection about the similarities between poetry and music, between the written text conceived as an unperformed score and its partial realization in a silent reading: the text as something secondary which has lost part of its essence in being translated into written words. If a poem is thus incomplete as such on the page, without its realization, that is, without its performance in and through *time*, this brings us back to the fundamental role of the reader for the final assessment of the literary text, its completion as a holistic experience. The presence of the reader also propitiates the rejection of a strict, definitive formalization of the rules of production of metered lines (see Attridge 1989: 195). From this perspective of the reader, the acquired nature of poetic

experience appears clearly for those disciplines which refuse to speculate beyond linguistics and related social disciplines. A combination of these two tenets —the social, historical origin of poetic conventions in terms of both production and perception, and the linguistic analysis of its structural and rhythmic components— makes up an intermediate view that would stand in that area between strictly formal linguistic studies and speculation.

Generative metrics has been criticized on the grounds of its extreme, pointless formalization. What fruits, some say, can an elegant and precise theory bear if its only aim is the formulation of such economic, universal rules, without any regard for the practical purposes which they can serve, or for their explanatory and interpretive power, under which their validity outside the realm of pure theory can be put to the test? De Beaugrande (1997) and Attridge (1982, 1989), among others, have criticized this notion; a criticism which Youmans openly acknowledges: “Generative metrics has never claimed to provide an account of how poetry is actually heard by listeners or composed by poets. Rather, the theory seeks only to define verse in a formally explicit way” (1989: 9). Other scholars, such as Jackendoff (1989), propose an open, eclectic attitude to other disciplines and perspectives that might enrich the linguistic perspective without losing touch with methodologically sound criteria and the reality of the poem. In this respect, perceptual psychology has contributed with new insights and methods for analysis that have widened our understanding of the perception of music and poetry.

Within the realm of the study of perception, emotion has been conceived of as a form of temporal cognition, as codified in time. This is a suggestion that constantly appears in Katz (1996), who intends to construct emotion as the result of the confluence of memory and expectation. His is an attempt at establishing the temporal nature of this experience (see Katz 1996: 179-80). A return to memory and expectation is completed in relation to emotion and time not only in Katz (1996: 181), but also in Heidegger, one of the sources for Katz and the authors he mentions, from whose perspective emotion becomes an instrument of knowledge, a way of organizing the self’s contact with the world:

Emotion structures Dasein’s temporality by spatializing it. The primordial occurrence of this phenomenon takes place by way of Dasein’s emotionally disclosive ability to see the world as a matter of interest. Here, according to Heidegger, Dasein becomes involved in an ‘encounter’ with ‘what *has presence* environmentally,’ with what can *now* be made into an object of concern. (Hyde & Smith 1993: 77).

As to the issue of emotion and time as operators in our response to and knowledge of the world, we should also mention what some scholars denounce as the spatialization of phenomena that pertain to time. Thus, by means of what is called “the technologizing of the word”, language has been approached from spatial perspectives. Katz and Ong mention how this tendency is present in the kind of metaphors we use to refer to language and experience (i.e., *evidence*). From this perspective, the aural, temporal nature of speech, of language, has been traditionally

neglected in favor of its textualization, since putting the emphasis on this aspect (i.e. speech and language as space, as a text which functions as a mechanism) made possible its logical analysis and description: it was easier to fix, to de-historicize, as it were (De Beaugrande, and other linguists of the functionalist school have denounced, from another perspective, the neglect of the study of the oral aspect of language and the distortions it has produced in our general vision —another visual metaphor— of the way it works and its nature). To give just one example, Saussure has been held responsible for this with his emphasis on *langue* over *parole*, of paradigm over syntagm.

Under this perspective, the static aspect of language has prevailed over its dynamic one; again, probably because this facilitated the production of rules and its analysis. It also facilitated the construction of language as an object in space, that is, as something that could be contemplated from different angles that would eventually render a complete picture. By doing so, linguists avoided having to face the extremely elusive, dynamic aspect of language, the hard-to-grasp temporal, ever-flowing nature of speech. Katz and Halliday have from different perspectives elaborated on this view as well as some of its consequences.<sup>2</sup>

In the fields of style, poetry, and metrics there has been a similar development, whereby the temporality that is considered to constitute the essential nature of language affects its status as a source of emotion through its non-rational, temporal dimension, as opposed to its spatial dimension, which is related to referential and rational modes of thought (see Katz 1996: 234-35). Thus, the comparison with music has been used to favor that aspect of language which deals with its elusive elements, with that non-referential component which, according to some, appeals to emotions or the emotional mind, instead of the rational one.

Occasionally, some theories of poetry and meter that have a transcendental or speculative bent locate this unattainable essence in a sort of unspecified, quasi-mythical *origin*. Broadly speaking, there are many domains in human experience and institutions that find themselves haunted by the myth of the presence of origin. The purity of the primeval, complete and whole, not degenerated by the stigma of time and history *still* determines the nature of the object, experience or institution in question, and its echo or what remains of it constitutes its *real* nature. Language, music, poetry: they all fall under the spell of this myth. Instrumental music is generally thought of as simpler and purer than language because of its lack of a referential function, or at least a clearly defined one. From this perspective, those aspects of language which are likewise devoid of referential function, which are more *musical*, are deemed as responsible for its emotional appeal. Here emotion is of course the favored term in the opposition emotion/reason, as time is preferred over

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<sup>2</sup> See Katz (1996:77-78), and Halliday (1987:139). On the controversies brought about by the different perspectives in the linguistic approach to rhythm and meter, see the series of exchanges by Cureton (1994, 1995, 1996), Attridge (1996a and 1996b) and Barney (1995). Kramer (1988), one of the authors mentioned by Cureton (1995) also provides interesting insights about the relations between music, time and poetry from the field of musicology.

space. Space, vision and reason are associated restrictive parameters because they tend to order and rationalize, and hence result in impoverishment. Thus orality is favored over literacy as the most primitive feature of human communication: it is closer both to the mind and the body as an inseparable whole. The physicality of the voice also propitiates the activation of that missing piece in the constitutive nature of authenticity, of wholeness, from which results the reunification of these two aspects torn apart by rationalism, by spatialization, by the predominance of vision and its abstractions over hearing. In addition, orality is communal and transcends the self, hence eliminating the distance between subject and object. From a more integrated perspective, this oral, temporal and sensuous nature of knowledge should not be depicted explicitly as the only origin, but as a complementary term in a dialectic that aims at a holistic comprehension of the real nature of cognition and communication.

The importance given to the acoustic materiality of language as constitutive of the poeticity of the (oral) text appears in authors who work within the boundaries of linguistics, psychology and cognitive science. According to Tsur, for example, in the mechanisms of perception of rhyme there is a purely phonic element, previous to the perception of the sounds as constituents within a codified system. This is previous to the selection that is carried out by perceptual centers between those acoustic features that are linguistically relevant and those that are not, which are consequently blocked out. The delay in this process consisting in blocking out those phonic elements that are structurally non-significant is extended by means of the perception of rhyme, thus prolonging the perception of the pure phonic materiality of language, devoid of a primarily referential and systemic function. Here once more the primeval element is invested with an aesthetic function close to a hierarchical primacy, as the element that contributes, over and above the communicative function to the aesthetic value of the message, precisely by transcending its common use. Tsur also explicitly refers to the role of memory and expectation, which, together with the reference to simultaneity and rhyme as a partial victory over linear time, provides an echo of Saint Augustine:

Speech sounds are abstract categories, from which rich precategorical sensory information is typically stripped away. Nevertheless, some of this information does reach the cognitive system, reverberating briefly in short-term memory and facilitating, by way of certain cognitive tasks, the processing of verbal material. Rhyme exploits and enhances this sensory information. There is some experimental evidence that memory traces of two words that appear consecutively, that is, spread out in time, may be fused and perceived as if they were simultaneously present. Basing some of my findings on adaptations of gestalt psychology, I suggest that similar processes may occur in the interaction between phonetic categories and the underlying acoustic information, enhancing them or toning them down. (Tsur 1996: 55)



This cognitive victory over linear time (i.e. the simultaneous perception in the brain of two words) is a frontier. Going explicitly beyond it would take us out of the limits of linguistic and cognitive science. But Tsur's text seems to hide a certain longing for a method that could really lead beyond that line. Meschonnic goes beyond: his theory of rhythm is another instance of the myth of origin in metrical studies. In this case, rhythm, the basic element of poetry, is raised to constitutive, essential nature. Rhythm, in Meschonnic's opinion, pervades everything; it goes from the basic accentual and syllabic structures to discourse and far beyond. It predates discourse and anthropology, it is *the* origin, previous to signification and codification. As Richard Cureton states, the difference between a linguistic and rhythmic theory of poetry and Meschonnic's is that the former does not attempt to provide a holistic account of poetic experience (although that does not rid them of that particular yearning for interpretation: even some of the staunchest formalists will at some time or another be tempted to talk about iconicity and carry out evaluative judgments that go beyond formalization).

Meschonnic's is a self-consciously *poetic* and speculative theory, and it is so even in terms of style. There is in him a wish to overcome the differences and dichotomies that rationalism, spatialization and formalization have brought about in language and poetry, trying to include within his theoretical scope concepts and ideas from the realms of linguistics, and also others from a quasi-metaphysical discourse. From his particular perspective, time is also contemplated as basic but also as transcendental, much more so since it seems to embody the unattainable and constantly elusive element (Meschonnic 1988: 90). He also dwells on dualities, and on the melancholy of the *voice*. The irrational aspect of language and poetry is the authentic and original, is what expresses and embodies the real nature of life, time, poetry and experience.

Meschonnic also carries out another shift within the basic dichotomies of the authentic and the secondary, orality and literacy. For him, language occupies the place of the "dead": he calls it "the sarcophagus of voice". Now it is not just the technologized word, it is language itself as a system that has degraded *voice*, the primeval authentic element that holds a direct connection to *life*. Reason and technology are equated with the signified. The underlying assumption here is the supremacy of the signifier (as the irrational, the material, the untranslatable) as the essential, what pertains to life, to the voice, as opposed to the "dead" system of language (Meschonnic 1988: 91-92). Once more the materiality of language is raised to the rank of the primitive and original, unstained by signification. The final stage in Meschonnic means a complete and definitive transcendentalisation of poetry and the poetic voice, coming very close to St. Augustine's discourse. This is definitely the other pole, opposed to the rational discourse of linguistics and its application to the analysis of poetic language. It is also in a way the closing of one of the possible circles: from St. Augustine to Meschonnic, comprehending and refining, assimilating and transforming 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguistic discourse and philosophical speculation about language and time:

One does not have to draw from far off to bring poetry and life nearer together, because poetry is one of the languages of life as it is one of the languages of language. But it is a well-ordered organization. In this respect rhyme —whose etymology as well as functioning condenses and symbolizes all metrics— leads one no doubt to hear in language a very ancient cosmology. Rhyme is not only an echo from word to word, but in addition the echo of an echo that is its model. Arrangement for arrangement, the order of language, being an order in language, evokes and mimes a cosmic order. In realizing itself, rhyme achieves it, corresponds with it, is tuned to it. Perhaps, from afar, it acted on it. But in any case, rhyme and meter were praise. An indirect theology. A making as much as a meaning. This meaning not coming across except through such a making. Even if, precisely, it was not more than its echo. The response. Medieval poetics stated it clearly. Shelley knew it and said it again. Then the rhymes know it for all those who have forgotten it (Meschonnic 1988: 93)

From this perspective, it is not surprising to see that Meschonnic situates the origin of that false dichotomy precisely in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the dichotomy between form and meaning, which can be attributed to those he calls “abstractors of life”.

What all the different perspectives collected here amount to is a brief testimony to the complexity of time as a phenomenon within the realm of poetry and its perception. What led me in the first place to carry out a survey of some of the critical texts dealing with time in poetry was the need to connect analysis and interpretation. Surveying the different perspectives on time in poetry is not an easy task, let alone one conveniently summarized in a few pages. Assessing them is even harder, and I would like to think of this paper as a first step for future research in that direction. The reader will agree with me that as scholars we periodically need to check the ground on which we stand: hence the preceding pages. When faced with the current diversity of views, one is at the same time fascinated and at a loss to provide a coherent conclusion, let alone a comprehensive theory. But if we wish to fill the gap between linguistic analysis and the values and notions that are projected onto poems as artistic objects, we must always take an eclectic approach. In this combination of diverse fields we will be able to find something close to a holistic approach, or at least we will be able to put together a set of perspectives, a perpetually moving constellation of views on poetry that can contribute to a sounder understanding. On the one hand, we cannot but sympathize with Meschonnic when he talks about the “abstractors of life”: we would be doing a poor service to our students and to the aims of higher education if we limited our approach to poetry to a strictly mechanistic and formalized perspective. We all know that poetry is much more than that.

The quantifications and measurements of certain linguistic theories of meter are useful as analytical tools for interpretation, but we should never forget the obvious fact that they are useless *per se*. In that respect, and in view of the complex and highly elaborate systems of analysis that some theories build, nobody should be

surprised to find literary criticism turning its back on long series of statistical tables and quasi-mathematical formulae, as a poor attempt to turn a poem into an object for scientific analysis and analytical dissection (and as an equally poor attempt by the humanities to overcome a certain inferiority complex in a century which has witnessed the awesome triumph of science and technology). This gap should be bridged by an absolutely necessary integration of this analysis into interpretation.

The analysis, quantification and determination of the material nature of linguistic components must go hand in hand with the evaluation and the establishment of its cognitive value: the effect that phonic impulses, for instance, have on human perception through physiological and psychological mechanisms. From that step we should move into how this material and its perceptual nature has been integrated within the symbolic structures of a human group, i.e. how human societies choose to build up or interpret such constructs in relation to their individual and communal activities as well as their identities. Then, we could move into more speculative realms. But if there is something basic we need to hold on to, I believe this is the historicity of the concept of time in poetry, indeed the historicity of poetry itself. In order to do so we should turn to the contributions of disciplines that can give us an account of the complex historicity of poetry as a set of verbal artifacts, both the producers and the products of discursive practices with inherent social, ideological and cultural dimensions. Poetry is indeed one of the languages of language, and language itself; as Halliday has pointed out, is a "theory of experience" (1987: 146).

Time, the temporal component in poetry and its metrical structure, is from this perspective one of the truly basic cornerstones of our symbolic articulation of experience. It is central to all the analyses and speculations (empirical, cognitive, metaphysical, etc.) of human experience in our civilization. The fact that Augustine turns to song and poetry to articulate and thus make his notion of time appear before our eyes confirms time as one of the basic concepts in the western theory of experience. Moreover, it sanctions music and poetry as both articulators and emblems of this essential temporality of human experience, and how this experience at both the individual and the social level is in its turn articulated on complex, simultaneous processes of memory and expectation, repetition and forward movement. The *mechanics* of meter, the rhythmical structure of poetry, through its effect on human cognitive processes, produces the underlying cultural construct as a result of which we look at poetry as an emblem, an epitome, condensed and complex, of identity and vital experience. This perspective turns poems into sophisticated instruments that construe symbolic patterns of both individual and communal experience: hence the view of poetry as a privileged form of cognition, derived from its status as an equally privileged type of language.

We should not, however, read into poetry and its rhythmical structure any sort of transcendental entity or principle. What exists is a continuous dialectic process between the articulation of this meaning in the poems and the interpretation of the same. This dialectic is both conscious and unconscious. Part of it is evident to the common practitioners and readers of poetry and at the same time some of the formal

meaning-producing patterns and processes are so deeply ingrained in the culture and the individual minds as to be largely unconscious. This is due to the fact that poetry has a non-referential pattern—which nevertheless codifies and constructs experience—and a referential one, the two of which work much in the way Halliday describes the functioning of natural language: “Just as language construes the social order without referring to the system it is constructing, so likewise language construes the natural order—through the unconscious, cryptotypic patterns in the grammar, which create their own order of reality independently of whatever it is they may be being used to describe” (1987: 142). Repetition and linearity are features of natural language, but poetry, with its inherent rhythmic structure of highlighted repetition and forward movement, turns itself into a privileged emblem of these underlying patterns of experience. Repetitive patterns (*e.g.* rituals) are needed for the construction of social and individual identity; at the same time, the western mind finds in a linear thrust forward the embodiment of its need for a progressive impulse, its vision of itself as moving towards a closing *telos*. In the underlying syllables and the repetitive rhythmic patterns that we in part unconsciously perceive we contemplate the unity of the poem and its identity articulated through the process of memory. In the linear sequence of the rhythm, we perceive the movement forward that both satisfies and produces expectation.

The gap between linguistic analysis and interpretation can only be bridged by avoiding the de-historicization of poetry and its associated disciplines, poetics and metrical studies. As De Beaugrande (1997) has argued, de-historicizing is what generative metrics does through excessive formalization, reducing poetry to a mechanism. At the other extreme, critics with a transcendentalist bent like Meschonnic also bring about, through a quasi-religious process of metaphysical abstraction of the basic principles of poetry, a form of reduction or annulment by putting what they deem the essence of poetry out of human reach, or rather, so essentially inside us as to be virtually ungraspable. Poetry, meter and music are indeed related to religion, but only insofar as they are the totems which human communities (whether consciously or unconsciously) have through centuries of experience chosen to represent the deepest reaches of experience (what others would call Being, or the immortal soul). As such totems, poems have either been toppled (for instance, through deconstruction) or they have been the object of textual commentary, very much in the way of Biblical exegesis (see Delbanco 1999: 84).

In any case, a theory of poetry should integrate the analysis of the phonic and perceptual (*i.e.* cognitive) aspects of time, with the varying role that the concept of time plays in each different civilization. This latter aspect also requires careful and detailed sets of analyses (cultural, socio-historical, anthropological, etc.) of what time means for specific societies, communities and individual authors. After all, if what we pursue is a reasonable grasp of the poetic phenomenon within human activities, we should attend to its historicity. Doing so does not mean a narrow cultural materialist view, but a comprehensive perspective of socio-contextual aspects, inevitably complemented by contributions from the field of cognitive science as it is now understood (perceptual psychology, linguistics, discourse analysis, etc.). A successful combination of these perspectives should provide us

with a reasonably stable set of hypotheses from which to contemplate poetry and meter, their relation to time and the role it plays within their structure and meaning. The rest is poetry.

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