Towards a Theory of Aesthetic Rhythm
Eva Lilja

In versification studies, rhythm has been a wide and loose concept. Meter is thoroughly investigated, but modern free verse requires other tools. All kinds of poetry have rhythm of course. In a way, everything shows some kind of rhythm – seasons, moon light, brain waves etc. - the word ‘rhythm’ has been used very broadly. What, then, is really relevant and possible to investigate? In 2006, I took part in the arrangement of a symposium in Göteborg, collecting the most distinguished Scandinavian scholars in the field of aesthetic rhythm. The symposium resulted in a report where we listed nine areas for future research.

Firstly, we established some theoretical standpoints:
1. Rhythm is regarded as a psychological feature rather than as a property of the work of art – which on the other hand of course has properties that trigger the experience of rhythm.
2. Several investigations of rhythm presuppose an understanding of musical meter. However, this idea is too narrow. The dancing body should be the starting point for the study of rhythm. It is both spatial and temporal which may explain why we use the word ‘rhythm’ about e.g. cathedrals, sculptures, music and poetry. The dancing body forms a stable gestalt. The meeting between body and world is both natural as well as culturally/conventionally produced.
3. Rhythm should be seen as preconditioned by sensuous experience. Vision and hearing give us the incitements of rhythm, but the experience of rhythm should be situated in the sensory-motor capacities, and in ideated sensations, that is, internalized memories of sensuous experience that affect present perceptions.

We made a list of problems possible to investigate:
4. Repetition. Rhythm emerges when form elements are related to each other. They relate through being repeated or, in other words, they have a certain likeness to each other. The term ‘equivalence’ means sameness or similarity (Roman Jakobson). The person who experiences a rhythm compares a form element to another. The beat, or pulse, holds a special position in its extreme conformity.
5. Cognition. Rhythmic experience exists in the tension between universal, cognitive experience and culturally determined aesthetic conventions. The cognitive factors are specifically the experience of movement, direction, force-dynamics and balance. The conventional factors consist of adequate, historically determined gestalt patterns, e.g. versification patterns. How does one distinguish what is cultural and what is universal in the rhythm of a poem?
6. Balance. Balance was discussed as a key concept in relation to sensuous capacities. We noticed that the symmetry of form elements is influenced by an endeavor for asymmetry (dynamic repetition). How does this play between balance and divergence work in a poem, and how does it relate to the equivalences of point 4?
7. Levels. Rhythmic segments are related both with each other, and with other rhythmic levels in the work of art. Every part relates to a hierarchically larger part which in turn relates to the whole. The interplay between different gestalt levels creates a polyrhythms. How does one describe this interplay and its effects?
8. Time. Rhythm affects the experience of time, which can be automatized or de-automatized. Rhythm can be a means to synchronization. Is it possible to systematize this observation?

Finally we made a statement about meaning production:
9. Rhythms produce meaning, probably by activating internalized bodily experiences as well as conventional meaning patterns developed from social practices and cultural traditions. The segments of rhythm in a work of art are diffuse signs; they lack the evident semantic meaning of words but they still have meaning or signification. This should be seen as a particular kind of meaning production. Delayed categorization produces time for such extra meaning to come into play (Tsur 2008:577f.). Such diffuse signs first and foremost produce meaning of attitude and feeling, but they can also influence factual content by applying displacements and perspectives.

Here I will leave point 5 and 8 to future research and focus especially on point 4 and 6, discussing some rhythmical problems in four poems, two Swedish ones and two in English. I will also propose that rhythm might be constructed according to three basic principles: serial, segmental and dynamic rhythm (Hopsch & Lilja 2007:364).

Movement and Direction in a Poem by Tranströmer


På natten klockan två: månsken. Tåget har stannat
mitt ute på slätten. Långt borta ljuspunkter i en stad,
flimrande kallt vid synranden.

Som när en människa gått in i en dröm så djupt
att hon aldrig ska minnas att hon var där
när hon återvänder till sitt rum.

Och som när någon gått in i en sjukdom så djupt
att allt som var hans dagar blir några flimrande punkter, en svärm,
kall och ringa vid synranden.

Tåget står fullkomligt stilla.
Klockan två: starkt månsken, få stjärnor.

(Träspår, Hemligheter på vägen, 1958)

[At night at two o’clock: moonlight. The train has stopped / out at the plain. Far away lights of a city, / flickering coldly at the horizon. // Like when a man has gone into a dream so deeply / that she never will remember that she was there / when she returns to her room. // And like when someone has gone into an illness so deeply / that everything that was his days turns into some flickering points, a swarm / cold and small at the horizon. // The train stands totally still. / Two o’clock: strong moonlight, a few stars. // (Tracks, Secrets on the Road, 1958)]

What is going on in this poem? A train stops in the middle of the night. First this is compared to a dreaming man (“she”), and than to a sick person’s (“he”) weak memories of a normal life. The last stanza returns to the immobile train. Here the lights from a distant city are replaced with moonlight. The rhythm of the poem could be notated like this:
prominences syllable stress ratio

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<td>o O ooo O / OO // O oo O o</td>
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<td>O o O o / o OO o</td>
<td>2 2 4</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>O o O / O O o O o</td>
<td>2 3(2) 5</td>
<td>1.6 (1.5 1.7)</td>
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<td>oo O / OOO / O O o</td>
<td>1 3 2 6</td>
<td>1.5 (3 1 1.5)</td>
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[Explanations:
  O - prominence, strong syllable / - pause, phrase limit
  o - weak syllable // - a longer pause
  0 - weak prominence > - enjambment
  - phrasal focus]

Syllable stress ratio expresses the relationship between strong and weak positions of a line. 1 = all syllables are prominent, 2 = one half of the syllables are prominent, 3 = one third of the syllables are prominent etc.]

Of course it would be possible to realise the rhythm in other ways than the one which here is notated. I have tried to read the poem as normal as possible, considering grammar and prosody, but of course I have a pre-understanding or an interpretation of the poem, which has governed my choices.

Tranströmer has been interested in religious mysticism all his life, and he has tried to find modern expressions for it – like in this poem where he describes the slipping out of ordinary reality for a moment by help of a most modern train. The universal man of the poem changes between “he” and “she”. The rhythm analysis is aiming at an understanding of how rhythm and semantics are cooperating or not.

How does the rhythm work in the text? A train stands still in the first stanza, and the rhythm doesn’t move very much either. The core concept of moving rhythm is here to be specified in accordance to metrical tradition, where you are talking about falling and rising measures. The falling movement is defined by starting with a prominence, and rising means a movement towards the prominent syllable that occurs late. On the level of the sequence a forward movement implies that the significant goal is to be found in the end of the phrase. In this poem, forward movements are changing with lack of movement. ‘Stillness’ will here refer to phrases and lines in balance or equilibrium.

In l. 1, for example, the prominences are almost in perfect balance around the spondee in the middle. Rhythm and meaning are cooperating. The second stanza is situated in a sleeper’s dream. She is moving into her inner world, and the rhythm of l. 4-5 has an energetic forward direction, especially in the cadences – the enjambment of l. 4 and the closing spondee of l. 5. Line 6 changes to a vague falling movement, which closes the stanza. The same pattern is
repeated in the third stanza, which describes the distant inner world of a sick man. The forward rush from stanza 2 returns in l. 7-8 combined with a falling closing movement of l. 9.

The fourth stanza returns to the train, which still doesn’t move. Nor does the rhythm. L. 11 consists almost only of prominences, oo O / OOO / OO o, with a syllable stress ratio of only 1.5. In Swedish, you normally have a syllable stress ratio between 2 and 3.

To conclude this analysis – the strongest forward movements of rhythm take place where the semantic level tells us about inner life. In this poem, rhythm infers something like ‘inner movement goes further than trains’. Rhythmical meaning adds something to semantic meaning, shaping a narrative of its own which is commenting on the text. The rhythmical stillness (or balance or equilibrium) of stanza I gives room for the inward rush of stanza II-III. Lights from a distant city disappear in stanza IV in favour of the lights of heaven, the moon and stars. Arrived here, the rhythm returns at standing still.

An Audible Poem and a Visual One

The word ‘rhythm’ has been used for temporal events such as performances of music and poetry, and for describing visual artefacts like sculptures and paintings. Do you really mean the same thing by the word in those two cases? Are audible and visual rhythm basically the same phenomena?

Greek etymology of the very word ‘rhythm’ has something to do with ‘rheo’, floating. Plato expressed the meaning of ‘rhythm’ as ‘ordered movement’. The ‘mousikê’ of ancient Greece was an art form where dance, music and poetry were performed simultaneously. The ancient choir danced while performing (Benveniste 1995:131-139). A dancing body moves in time as well as in space. The dancing body may be regarded as the prototype of rhythm.

Painting and sculpture has been looked upon as spatial art forms and poetry and music as temporal forms. However, the immediate perception takes place in both dimensions. A printed poem uses time – the reading time – and space – the white paper where it is printed. Like a dancing body, the poem uses both temporal rhythms and visual rhythms, that is, rhythm has both temporal and spatial aspects. Sometimes temporality will dominate, sometimes spatiality.

The poem is multimodal. You may listen to it or read it by help of your eyes. Seeing prefers the whole gestalt and listening prefers the segments. A poem has at least four rhythmic levels. If you study the poem as a whole, the printed picture will dominate the impression, and the rhythm will be primarily visual. As to the stanza, rhythm is visual as well, but you might also hear its structure. The line is small enough to form an audible gestalt, but you may see it as well. The rhythm of a phrase, however, will not be able to be grasped by eyes – the rhythm is temporal.

- Printed picture visual rhythm
- Stanza visual, audible rhythm
- Line audible, visual rhythm
- Phrase audible rhythm

Principles of Rhythm in a Poem by Ferlinghetti
I am going to point at some qualities of rhythm by help of a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Sweet and various the wood lark”. A more thorough analysis of this poem is printed in Changing Borders (Hopsch & Lilja 2007: 361-76). This poem about the singing lark completes Ferlinghetti’s collection A Coney Island of the Mind 1958.

This poem is spread over the paper more loosely than you were used to in the year of 1958. Both margins are loosely waving in a way that differs both from metered stanzas and from early free versification with its typical picture - a straight left margin and a slightly wavering right margin. The picture differs also regarding broadness. It is rather slim in the beginning, but especially the tight part of line 11-19 gets obviously thicker.

sweet and various the wood lark
who sings at the unmought gate
and yet how many
wild beasts how many mad
in the civil thicket
Or控股股东 in his stone tower
at Tübingen
or then Rimbaud his ‘nightmare and logic’
a Sophism of madness
But we have our own more recent
who also fatally assumed
that some direct connection does exist between
language and reality word and word
which is a laugh if you ask me
I too have drunk and seen the spider
Studies of prosody have distinguished the separate versification systems of different cultures. Mikhail Gasparov has established the main systems, like French syllabic versification or Chinese syllabo-melodic versification (Gasparov 1996:3ff.). In the Germanic literatures, we have at least three versification systems (Lilja 2006:189):

- Accentual versification of the four beat line in Norse poetry and the Middle Ages.
- Meter or tactus of the accentual syllabic poetry circa 1600-1900.
- Free versification of the Modernistic free verse.

A versification system must rely on a certain rhythmical principle with the addition of some sets of rules. The rhythmical principle of accentual versification as well as of free verse relies on structured sequences in combination with a powerful segmentation. The rhythmical principle of measured forms of the Renaissance up to Romanticism is the tactus or beat.

Richard Cureton locates three so-called temporalities in poetry – tactus, grouping and prolongation (Cureton 1992:124ff.). Following Cureton and Gasparov, you may classify rhythm according to three principles: serial rhythm, sequential rhythm and dynamic rhythm, three basic sets of *gestalt* qualities (Hopsch & Lilja 2007:364):

- Serial rhythm: tactus or beat in measured music and poetry.
- Sequential or segmental rhythm: the sequence or the segment of the phrase, which is to be found in free verse and in the half line of the four beat medieval line, in music and in the surface of a painting, as well as in the parts of a sculpture or a piece of architecture.
- Dynamic rhythm: the forces and directions in two- and three-dimensional artefacts, and the temporal intensification towards a focus in music and poetry.

A piece of art – in music, poetry, or sculpture – mostly exemplifies two or three principles of rhythm. A drawing may consist of segments in dynamic combinations of forces. A piece of music or a poem may consist of serial elements in a row of segments. In this poem, Ferlinghetti mixes all three principles of rhythm. The acoustic lines mix serial tactus and segmental, free rhythm. Let us take a closer look at the very last lines:

```
... 20  O oo O    segmental  choriamb  
21    oo OO     segmental  ionicus 
22   oO oO / oO >  serial  iamb 
23      oO o     serial  iamb 
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The notation follows the speech rhythm. L. 20-21 use two Greek figures, the choriamb and the ionicus. Especially an ionicus will not allow tactus. Those two lines exemplify sequential or segmental rhythm. The last two lines consist of four iambics. In the same way, sequential and serial rhythms vary down through the poem, which is to be seen in the left column. Dynamic forces are added with the unsteady printed picture, where the wood lark tops the lead line with the spider at the bottom. The arrows mark visual forces bursting in from the white paper (Kandinsky 1995:102 ff.).

The poem elaborates two or three ideas of poetic language. The mirror theory - that language shows reality - is rejected in the same clause where it is mentioned (l. 14-19). Secondly, that
language expresses the inner world of a person is said to be true, but it is not appreciated (l. 7-13) – a somewhat surprising opinion to come from a poet. A possible third idea has its symbol in the singing lark. Its fluttering wings up in the air might be said to win the theoretical discussion in terms of poetical metaphor.
Rhythm and Balance

The phenomenon of rhythm might be traced back to the experience of balance – first and foremost in the balance of a dancing body. A body in space creates directions and movements. The body moves around its axis, i.e. its point of balance. In dance rhythms, the bodily balance is constantly threatened in a play between symmetry and asymmetry. Balance also entails a moment of stillness, which plays against differing directions and movements. (Olssøn 2006:14f., Johnson 1987:85ff.)

The experience of rhythm alerts the body’s memories of earlier experienced movements, the muscle memory. Poets use to say that they walk a poem – s/he needs to take a walk to get started. Walking seems to be the most important bodily rhythm when it comes to poetry.

Mark Johnson describes the image schema of balance. An ‘image schema’ is defined as a preconceptual gestalt governing perceptions as well as bodily movements (Johnson 1987:75). The bodily experiences have settled most stable patterns of perception, creating unity, understanding and significance. A basic image schema of balance forms a point or an axis around which forces and proportions are distributed, which means that ‘balance’ is a balance between forces of perception (Johnson 1987:79ff.)

Forces in action are most obvious in the art of sculpture, of course. Take a look at the sculpture by Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), “Unique Forms of Continuity in Space” (1913). Boccioni was part of the Futurist movement, a friend of Marinetti, and his work centered on the portrayal of movement and speed. Boccioni became the main theorist of their artistic section.
Boccioni’s running figure – probably Hermes on duty – is simultaneously heavy and rushing, very fast indeed. Nevertheless he is a figure in balance – otherwise the sculpture would tumble and fall. Some form elements contrast with each other (e.g. the loins) and some are repeated, strengthening each other (e.g. his parallel wind-whipped clothing). Thus Hermes illustrates a moving object interacting with the surrounding space. Compare his forward movement with l. 4-5 in the Tranströmer poem (p. x). In both those pieces of art, you may find an interplay between force and balance.

Rhythm signifies movement, which includes a tendency to imbalance. ‘Rhythm’ might be described as a balanced form heading toward imbalance, or you might define ‘rhythm’ as threatened balance. No balance at all means chaos, or, in other words, a lack of rhythm.

Balance in a Poem by Fahlström

I would like to transfer this thinking into the realm of poetry via a poem by Öyvind Fahlström. It is titled ”Morning in the Town Hall”, was written 1953 and printed 1966 in Fahlström’s collection Bord [Tables]. This is a poem in the avant garde tradition, the Swedish concretism in the beginning of the 60s. Later on, Fahlström changed over to the visual arts joining the group of pop artists in New York, like Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg.

THE TEXT OF THE POEM IS SENT SEPARATELY IN PDF

I will not translate the whole text, partly because it is impracticable and also not necessary for my actual purpose. Fahlström is playing with language in a way not really possible to transfer. Below I will try to render line group IV and V, which are to be examined more in detail. But here follows a kind of description: there are too many clubs and too many farmers in the Town Hall. They keep joking, swimming and dining with their foxhounds. The ‘I’ of the poem has trouble with his composite feelings. A quick interpretation says that this might be a satire about local democracy and an old fashioned man’s role – both of them functioning badly. The language is unclean with much humour and wit.

The printed picture shows a balanced spiral consisting of six swings (Elleström 2008 p. 302-318). The first three lines of every line group grow longer and longer before the stopping short lines. This moving spiral is to be found also acoustically – six times the tempo increases and six times it is slowing down. Also semantically the same pattern is repeated – the long liners bring about more information, which is repeated over and over again in the short lines. The harmonious printed picture is undermined by a disharmonious sound picture and rather impolite meanings.

Let us take a look at line group IV. The notation goes like this (underlining means that the word is printed in spaced-out letters):

IV 14 O oo O o / o O o O o O o O o >
     O o O o / oooo O oo O o / O oo OO
 16 ooo O o / o O oo O0 o / ooo O ooo O oo O0
     ooo O o / oo O oo O0
 18 o O oo O0 o / ooo O0
     O ooo O oo O0 // O0
[Half of the bottom in all farmers is raised try to / hold on to me when I rush trough the club floating farmer-fast / of the whole world and half the junk sun I gladly sit with a foxhound in front / of the whole world and a foxhound in front / and half of the junk sun I sit in front / preferably with a foxhound in front // in front]

L. 14-16 are long liners. I will suggest that the phrases of l. 14-15 are not in rhythmical balance. Compare for example the long, bisyllabic phrase 14:2 with the short, heavy phrase 15:3. Their rhythmical expressions, respectively, are most different, aiming at varying ethos. Phrase 14:2 is telling a story while 15:3 just expresses strength.

L. 16 establishes two patterns which are then repeated until the end of the line group, an A-pattern and a B-pattern. Those two patterns elaborate each two expressions with some varieties in l. 18:

```
oooo O o eller o o O o (A)
"jag sitter gärna", "av hela världen"
["I gladly sit"] ["of the whole world"]

(o)o O oo O0 (o) (B)
"med en stövare framför", "och hälften av lumpsonen"
["with a foxhound in front"] ["and half of the junk sun"]
```

The A-pattern is to be found in l. 16, 16, 17 and the B-pattern in l. 16, 16, 17, 18, 19. A distorted version of the A-pattern reappears in l. 18 and merges with B in l. 19.

The same rhythmical idea is to be seen in the rest of the poem. Every line group repeats a pattern, where rhythmical imbalance dominates the long liners, but phrases balance each other in the short lines. In line group V, for example, the first three lines grow longer and longer, extrapolating an irregularity between phrases. For example, phrase 20:1 is just as short as phrase 21:3, three syllables, but where 20:1 is balanced and stable, the 21:3 floats away in a vague enjambment. The second phrase of l. 20 and 21 have about the same length (7-8 syllables) but the 20:2 is light and quick compared to the 21:2, which starts with a prominent monosyllable building up its heaviness.

```
V
20  O o O / oo O oo O oo
     ooo O0 o / O oo O o O o / O oo [>]
22  oo O o / oo00 O o O o / oo O0 o O oo O o
     oo O o / oo00 O o O o
24  O O o / oo // O O o
     O00 o O oo O o // o O o
```

[Farmers extend toward each other in the clubs / in their smoking-coats one before each heart sweating / after the bath they have run up out of the world and gotten stone-hard dogs for hearts / after the bath they have run up out of the world / out of the world and gotten // out of the world / stone-hard dogs for hearts // out of the world]

The short lined part of line group V is dominated by the spaced-out expression “ur världen” [out of the world] which forms a column of its own somewhere in the middle of the printed page.
The words are repeated and also the rhythmical figure is repeated, o O o. More than that, phrase 22:1 is repeated in 23:1, phrase 22:2 in 23:2 and the dactylic phrase 22:3 in 25:1.

How does the concept of balance work in this poem? The printed picture is beautifully balanced, aiming at visual symmetry. The line groups are imbalanced within themselves – three long lines are followed by three side-stepped short lines – but balancing each other.

The lines are divided in contrasting long liner and short ones. The rhythms of the long lines distinguish themselves by a vital untidiness when the short lines repeat a few patterns – however different from one line group to another. This means that half of the lines are characterized by mutual balance and the other half by mutual imbalance.

However, the balancing phrases of the short lines have no internal balance. In line group IV their directions are rising, and so is the case in line group V - except for l. 25 which should be falling. The stoniness of dogs and hearts will be the most important thing here.

Balance and Equivalence

Talking about repetition and balance in poetry, you will of course be reminded of Roman Jakobson’s principle of equivalence. Since his “Closing Statement” 1958, studies of poetry have acknowledged Roman Jakobson’s idea, that the specific lyrical quality originates from repetitions in a poem (Jakobson 1974:150f.). Among other things, Jakobson seems to speak about rhythm here – a simple definition of rhythm says that form elements are repeated. Reuven Tsur discusses Jakobson’s principle of equivalence within a frame of cognitive poetics concerning analogies (Tsur 2002:286f.).

Discussing rhythmical aspects of the poem, we have already seen many examples of repeated phrase rhythm. Instead of ‘equivalent phrases’ I have called them ‘balancing phrases’. By choosing the term ‘balance’, I intend to relate the rhythm of phrases to body rhythms. This bodily connection offers an explanation for the power of equivalent forms (Johnson 1987:85ff.). We feel the flow in our kinesthetic bodies, says Mark Johnson (Johnson 2007:239). The power of the flow forms a foundation for meaning.

More than that, using ‘balance’ instead of ‘equivalence’ provides a more nuanced tool. Jakobson’s equivalences never claimed to be exactly similar. They were said to be approximately equal, and the lyrical quality may depend on this approximation. A static repetition of form elements is lifeless and boring, but a dynamic repetition with small divergences evokes the reader’s attention (Danielsen 2006:8-12). Jakobson’s concept of equivalence harmonises divergences and overlooks the small differences.

The cognitive concept of aesthetic balance, however, points at the conflict between similarity and divergence. ‘Equivalence’ means in reality approximate sameness, while ‘balance’ hints first of perfect balance and then in the next moment pays attention to the salience of small differences and focuses upon the dynamics of differences within a repeated gestalt. Remember what is said above about delayed categorization in poetry, something which produces time enough for a deeper understanding (Tsur 2008:577f.). Line group IV in the Fahlström poem falls out happily just because of the small changes in l. 18-19, where ooo O o [jag sitter gärna, I gladly sit] goes ooo O0 [jag sitter framför, I sit in front], and O0 [framför, in front] is repeated in an absurd way in the very end of l. 19. In versification, there is no difference in substance between
‘equivalence’ and ‘balance’, but using ‘balance’ will underline the importance of dynamic tendencies to imbalance.

Balance includes the possibility of losing it, of falling. The divergence might take over. Dancing to a really good rock’n roll gives you the opportunity of losing your point of balance and tumbling. That particular moment when reaching for the helping hand, and feeling the force of your own spine, is a very special experience. This utmost edge seems to be a crucial rhythmical quality.

Balance in a Poem by Plath

In order to develop the tool of balance, I will comment on a final poem, this one by Sylvia Plath. It is one of her very last texts, from October 1962, written a couple of months before she took her life.

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.

2 Nor the woman in the ambulance
Whose red heart blooms through her coat astoundingly ----

4 A gift, a love gift
Utterly unasked for
6 By a sky

Palely and flamily

8 Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

10 O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
12 In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.

(Poppies in October, Collected Poems p. 240)

What happens in this poem? The title says that it is about flowers, poppies, which are never really mentioned in the text. But probably “such skirts” (l. 1) describe poppies, and the bleeding heart of “the woman in the ambulance” (l. 2) is compared to poppies just like the “sun-clouds” in l. 1 and the flaming “sky” of l. 6-8. Also the “gift” (l. 4) and the “mouths” (l. 11) may allude to poppies.

The narrative tells us about a woman who has committed suicide – or perhaps she has been shot – and now is transported to a hospital. It is an early morning in October, the weather could be better, and men are rushing to their jobs. In the last stanza, the ‘I’ of the poem listens to the screaming mouths of the poppies. The leading symbol of the poem, the poppies, seems to stand for fear of death. Here the notation of rhythm:

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<th>prominences</th>
<th>syllable stress ratio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O oo OO OO o / oo O o OO</td>
<td>5 + 3 = 8</td>
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<tr>
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Discussing the rhythm of this poem I would like to further develop the concept of balance regarding poetry. Following Mark Johnson, the bodily experience of balance includes weight and pressure (1987:85, 98). In other words, ‘balance’ might be understood as the combinations and relations of weight (or intensity, or simply more sound) and pressure (or force, or direction) in a poem. Intensity as well as direction works both in time and in space. Transferred to the language of versification, they entail a concentration on devices like syllable stress ratio, prominences (for weight or intensity) and phrase or line focus including enjambments (for pressure or direction). You will find the same parameters when using the rhythmic tool of prolongation (Cureton 1992:146ff.).

The stanza lengths of this poem balance each other, 3 - 3 - 3 - 3 lines. The printed picture of the poem is a common one in a historical perspective – a straight left margin and a wavering right margin just like the Tranströmer poem (p. x). The line lengths contrast between stanzas. Especially the long lines of stanza I (8 - 3 - 5 prominences) differ from the short lines of stanza II (3 – 3 – 1 prominences). The emptiness of the white paper is attacking the text especially in stanza II. Stanza I and IV are about balancing each other concerning line lengths (8 - 3 - 5, 4 - 5 - 5 prominences).

The figures are weighted or directed. There are some heavy figures, spondées and molossus, with a concentration on the first and the last stanza. Stanza II-III consist of one long sentence, which forms a falling unity – the gift of l. 4 offers the hot kernel of the passage. Stanza III (l. 7-9) has a vague tactus which is contrasting the heavy antique figures of the other stanzas (OO, OOO). L. 7 may be read in dipodic trochees: O o 0 o | O o 0. There is one strong enjambment in l. 8. Other figures of interest are the dactylus row in l. 9 and the anapests in l. 12 with their obvious directions, falling and rising respectively.

Let us take a closer look at the heavy figures of l. 1, 1, 1, 3 (I), l. 4, 5 (II), and l. 10, 11, 11, 12 (IV).

L. 1 “sun-clouds | this morning”, “such skirts”
   3 “red heart blooms”
   4 “love gift”,
   5 “unasked for”
   10 “am I”
   11 “these late mouths”, “cry open”
   12 “cornflowers”
Syllable stress ratio gives extra weight to l. 1, 4 and 10-11. In all those lines it is less than 2, which means that the line consists of more prominences than weak syllables. This is against normal prosody and something which occurs rarely, but which we already have noticed concerning the Tranströmer poem. Their weight emphasises those lines as the most significant passages of the poem. L. 1, 4, 5 and 10 are closed by spondees which gives a heavy forward movement. L. 11 seem to stand still with its heavy burden of prominences and lack of rising as well as falling directions.

Elsewhere, phrase and line directions are in my reading mostly rising. Stanza II-III is moving forward on the line level by help of enjambments – one of them even bypassing the pause between stanzas. This means that semantic meaning and phrase rhythm are in conflict here, since the semantic centre of those two stanzas must be the “love gift” of l. 4, that is extended in l. 5-9.

What does rhythmical weight and pressure mean for the interpretation? The spondaic enjambments of l. 1, 4, 5 and 10 combine weight and pressure, but the heaviness of phrase 1:1 and all of l. 11 make those passages just immovable. The reader is forced to linger. Stanza II combines weight with a strong forward movement that takes over in stanza III which closes the passage with the calm l. 9.

I will propose that the rising acoustic movement underlines some aspects of the narrative. A heavy forward dash could icon panic, an emotion that seems to underline the narrative of the poem. I would say, that the main theme here is fear of death. Does this heavy rush add something to this subject? What about death rushing forward to you? It sounds terrifying, and I will suggest that terror is the dominating ethos. Form strengthens the narrative in this poem.

I can find two resting points in this poem, l. 9 and l. 12. The falling dactylus row of l. 9, telling about the dulled clerks, looks away from catastrophe, and by then the reader will need some escape. More remarkable is the rising anapestic beauty of l. 12 which closes the poem. Red poppies change over to blue cornflowers, and the late cry silences in a forest of frost.

Weight, pressure and resting points relate and combine into a poem in balance. You may compare this poetical rhythm with the Hermes of Boccioni, at the same time heavy and rushing, yet nevertheless in balance.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have set forth three principles of rhythm: serial, sequential and dynamic rhythm. I have also investigated how the image schema of balance could be used for analysing rhythm. Thereby I have developed the concept focusing on dynamic repetition instead of static repetition. I have also transferred the qualities of pressure and weight into the language of versification.

This is a report from a work in progress. Probably it is too early to formulate a definition of aesthetic rhythm, but a few things could be said. Rhythm is a quality created in the perception of a piece of art. Form impulses are patterned into gestalts, audible and visual. Rhythm concerns the relationship within and between the form elements of an artwork. Of special interest is whether they balance or not. Tendencies to imbalance in the sequences cause movements and directions within the gestalts (dynamic repetition). ‘Rhythm’ signifies the (perception of) contrast between balance and movement, rest and conflict in a piece of art – such as in a poem.
Literature:


- Tranströmer, Tomas. 1958. Hemligheter på vägen [Secrets on the Road], Stockholm: Bonniers
