

INTERVIEW

H. Meschonnic

HENRI MESCHONNIC

Henri Meschonnic is one of the key figures of French “new poetics” but is still largely unknown in the United States. He is best known for contributing to an understanding of rhythm. *Critique du rythme: Anthropologie historique du langage*, his central text, is neither a metrical study nor the usual sort of rhythmic analysis, but something quite other. As a poet and as a translator of the Hebrew verse of the Bible, Meschonnic contends that rhythm rules over meaning. He defines rhythm in language as the continuous movement of *signifiante* constructed by the historical activity of a subject. He considers all theories of rhythm ever put forward and shows how each is limited by its time and place—indeed, that there is no such thing as an absolute statement about rhythm but that it is always historicized. For rhythm is heard only when the subject prevails.

Rhythm in discourse exposes the subject (*sujet d'énonciation*) through a body language, especially in that activity of language we call poetry. Human beings think with their whole body, and certainly such body language is easier to grasp in speech and posture than in written discourse. Yet even in discourse, the larger the role of rhythm, the greater the fullness of body. Because its language has best retained rhythm from the body and imposes a perception not yet conceptualized by culture, poetry is the mode of signifying that says the most, and most transforms the modes of signifying. Meschonnic shares with Derrida and Foucault the notion that discourse shapes and circumscribes the subject, but he goes further, as a poet, to suggest that this form of power flows in the other direction, from the bottom up: the subject also determines the language (or discourse) s/he uses in the very act of borrowing that language from the social cistern of language. This opens the possibility in Meschonnic's thought for the subject to transform culture's language, which is itself transforming the subject.

Historicity, then, gives equal weight to the subject's ability to transform language and to language's ability to shape the subject. Unlike traditional literary history, the critique of rhythm is the basis for a historicity of works, not only of their circumstances or social effects. Rhythm exposes the subject through its body language, and that subject is the place of “historicity,” a term which, in contrast to “historicism,” is contained in the advanced position Meschonnic holds and maintains in a polemic engaged on almost all impor-

tant fronts. One of these fronts is the practical field of prosaic and prosodic rhythmic analysis, which has been largely neglected by modern literary theory even though it is fundamental to the perceptions underlying “textualism” and to pragmatics. Meschonnic’s work is the one major attempt to address that absent dimension. In foregrounding the problematic of rhythm, he has theorized and exhibited ways of discussing empirically the constraints that inscribe the orality of language in writing.

As Meschonnic’s work on rhythm has evolved in the last two decades, so have the implications of rhythm, he believes, come to the fore for contemporary culture. The increasing absence of rhythm in meaning and of meaning in rhythm in our linguistic inheritance is so crucial a development that *Critique du rythme* attempts to address that absence by establishing a new theory of rhythm to carry us along *le bon chemin*. This large volume of more than 700 pages seems commensurate to our inertia, for in its effort to establish a new theory of rhythm, it engages all of language, and in that subject, all subjects. That is why—across all the problems he confronts, such as the tie between language and music, voice and diction or typography, and across the strategies he analyzes, from metrics to psychoanalysis, from linguistics to philosophy, including even rhythm’s technical aspects—the theory of rhythm is in the word’s wider sense, as Meschonnic claims, political. For it involves the person in the choices s/he makes in the community.

The critique of rhythm thus involves the intersection of several critical tools that might be brought to bear upon reading, or a reading, in order to wrestle with the various forms of critical tyranny that make reading an act circumscribed by one metaphysic or another. It is a progressive activity that combines a hyper-realism of poetic sound—his notation allows for a specificity of voice that traditional scansion cannot approach and in fact would not approach, simply because the traditional critic is more interested in establishing a reading rather than making readings possible in their multiplicity—with a pluralistic methodology and pedagogy which does not discount the anthropological, linguistic, semantic, or historical. It is an attempt to construct an all-embracing form of criticism that would not be the end of criticism, a paradoxical and certainly bracing position to take. It is all embracing in the way it welcomes both cross-disciplinary modes of critique and all forms of language under the rubric of discourse. It gives equal weight to the subject’s ability to transform language and to language’s ability to shape the subject through *signifiance* as “the specific production of elements that contribute to both meaning and signification without their knowing it.”

The interview will make apparent that for Meschonnic the revolution in the idea of poetry (and with poetry, the novel, indeed, all “discourse”) manifested in his presentation of rhythm is the basis of a change, a continuing change not only in literature but in philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, the idea of history, and social life itself. Everywhere this Heraclitean in modern armor seeks out the enemy in “fixity” and “stasis”: in Plato and, of course, Hegel, but also in Freud, in structuralism, in Marxism. If one asked him what form of life, of government, of society, he favored, his answer might well be: no “form” as such except the kind of “form,” if you will, evolving in rhythm.

—Gabriella Bedetti

On Meschonnic

Gabriella Bedetti: For the American Reader unacquainted with Henri Meschonnic, tell us about yourself.

Henri Meschonnic: About myself means about my work. I am first of all a poet. That experience leads to my work on the relationship between the theory of language and literature, the theory of translation, and their mutual implication with the theory of history

and society. I am a professor of linguistics at the University of Paris VIII, Vincennes.

My first two books came out in 1970, *Pour la poétique* and *Les cinq rouleaux* [*The Five Scrolls*], the latter initiating a new way of translating the Hebrew verse of the Bible according to its cantillation accents. Then, intermingled with essays, came five books of poetry. The work on poetics, seven volumes, developed into the critique of the theory of language in *Le signe et le poème* in 1975, which in turn developed into the critique of rhythm [*Critique du rythme*] in 1982 and an essay in 1984 on the problem of onomatopoeia as the origin of language in "La nature dans la voix," which introduces my edition and reissue of Charles Nodier's 1928 *Dictionnaire des onomatopées*.

I have also directed several collective works, such as a translation from the Russian of Lotman's *The Structure of an Artistic Text*, some special issues of journals, including *Langue française* and *Europe* [on Hugo], and a seminar volume on the Frankfurt School, *Critique de la théorie critique: Langage et histoire*, in 1985.

Bedetti: Tell us something about the history of the career that has led to your fascinating work on rhythm.

Meschonnic: The starting point is certainly translating the rhythm in the Bible, realizing that it ruled over the meaning, probably also my own poetic experience, and then the article of Benveniste on the etymology of rhythm. The whole developed into an integrated theory of language, voice, and body, including all that the usual pattern of the sign leaves out.

On Rhythm

Bedetti: What is the basic principle of the book on rhythm?

Meschonnic: The basic principle is that a theory of discourse is no longer effective without a theory of rhythm, which transforms the prevailing discontinuity of the units of sign into the primacy of continuity, with rhythm defined as the continuous movement of *significance*, such a movement being the historical activity of a subject, the very possibility of the passing on of significance from subject to subject—the *energeia* spoken about by Humboldt.

On History

Bedetti: I would like to ask you about the word *historical* in the title, *Critique du rythme: Anthropologie historique du langage*. You state in the book that there is an irreducible conflict between historical and ahistorical thought, and that all ahistorical strategies, combined with the strategies of power, blur this conflict in order to make it disappear. What requires strategies of power to ignore history, and why is it important to keep the conflict between historical and ahistorical thought alive?

Meschonnic: It is to their advantage for strategies of power to ignore history. And therefore to be uncritical. The difference between polemics and critique is that polemics is a strategy of opinion and domination whereas critique is a strategy of research. Historical thought on language ("langage," according to Saussure) is a struggle for plurality, specificity, speech rather than *langue*. Those who think of language as no more than a system of signs expect by that strategy to get rid of historicity by confusing it with historicism. Keeping the conflict between historical and ahistorical thought alive is the only way to prevent historicity from becoming misrepresented and lost. That is what it means to fight for a new, empirical conception of language as rhythm.

On the Title The Critique of Rhythm

Bedetti: Given the marginalization of versification, and given the traditional conception of rhythm as regularity rather than discourse, would you explain your choice of title for the book?

Meschonnic: Plato's conception of rhythm as a universal provides the context to any discussion—and the need to break it—for it is the context established by the sign, from which most of language (*langage*) escapes. So the word *rhythm*—because by it I understand something radically different—is necessary, for the whole conception of language and the subject (*sujet d'énonciation*) is at stake in rhythm. Verse is only one of the fields, a significant one, for concepts and techniques. The title is *Critique du rythme* and not *Critique of the Theories on Rhythm*, because through the examination of these theories, the question would then become no more than one of the foundation of rhythm. The theory of such a foundation evolves from Kant to the Frankfurt philosophers and beyond.

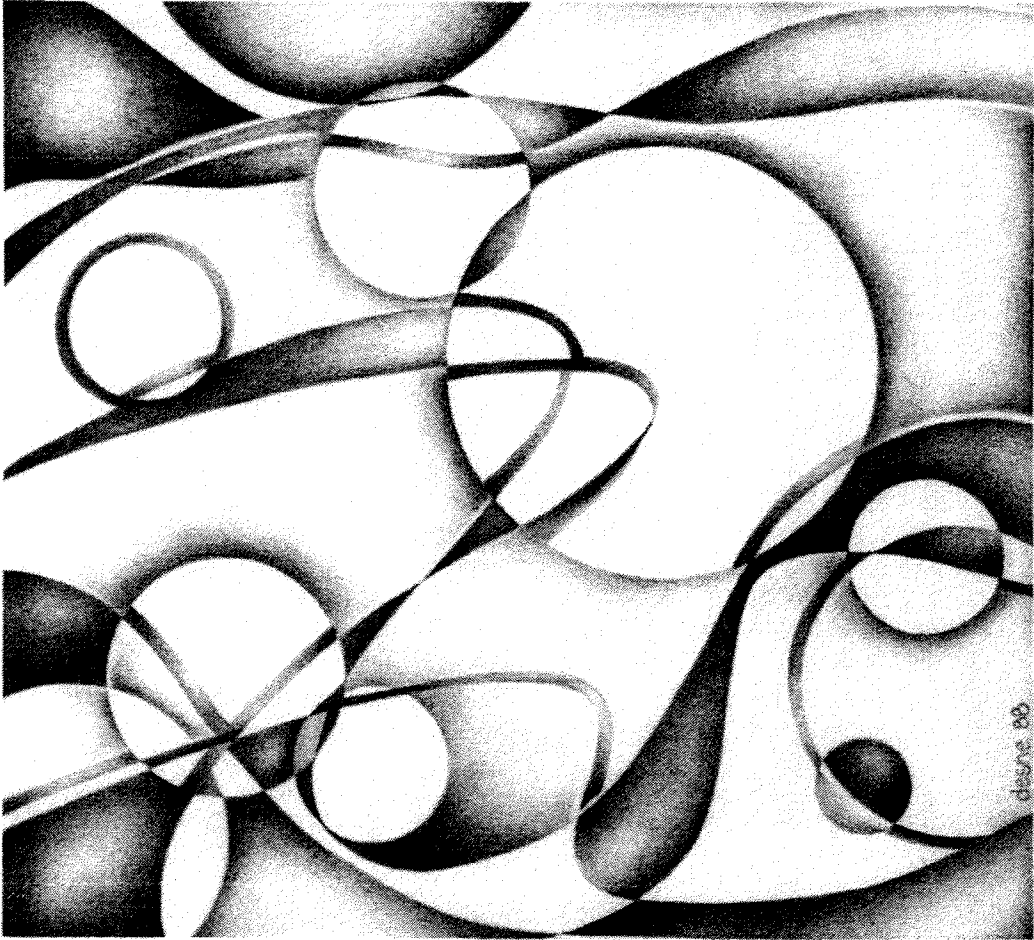
On the Materiality of a Text

Bedetti: You state in *Critique du rythme* [73] that there is no unity of rhythm, that the only unity would be a discourse as inscription of the subject. Is Paul de Man's critique on Riffaterre, with its emphasis on the materiality of an inscription, pertinent to rhythm's critique?

Meschonnic: The materiality of a text is a concept held over from the dualism of the sign, which is tied to the *langage/langue* distinction. In that context it seems a mere critique of structuralist stylistics, for the structuralist and phenomenological ways of treating language and literature both share the same basic conception. Rhythm, as the organization of the subject in and by its language, has no further tie, except historically, with structuralism, or with its home, polemics.

Bedetti: You have asked me to explain to you what "feminist theory" is, but it seems to me that your work has something in common with it—perhaps that is why you do not recognize it as other: your interest in the practical, in the body's survival, in the irreducible non-fit between theory and practice, in the pluralized apocalypse (like working without fully knowing the boundaries of the question). Am I blurring the issues?

Meschonnic: Husserl places in the same category the poet, the child, the woman, and the mad by contrast to the normal rational (Western) adult male. Such is the caricature and portrait of nineteenth-century rationalism. So the problem shared by women and poets is to change the relation, not just to reverse the terms. But in France, at least a few years ago, feminist theory figured theory as male, and the relation to the body as feminine. Thus Kristeva tied rhythm to the impulse. That is precisely nineteenth-century dualist anthropology: reason versus emotion, male versus female, mathematics versus embroidery. The more that "feminist theory" rebelled against the male, the more it reinforced the model. Just as blasphemy does religion. Others, working out an ideological problem, asserted that there was a "feminine writing" and used feminine metaphors such as "the week was pregnant." In a similar way, some African French poets asserted they wrote African poetry because they inserted local terms into a Saint-John Perse-like diction. Others claim to write Jewish poetry in the process of naming "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." Those are naive and hasty responses that do blur the questions. For such questions are much too important to be solved that way. That is all I wanted to say.



On a Poetics of Society

Bedetti: Could your conception of the nature and role of rhythm fit into the current emphasis on looking at institutions, looking for alternative cultural practices, and looking for a relation between cultural and political practices—in France and in the US?

Meschonnic: To understand rhythm as social and historical through and through, without continuing to confuse it with metrics, does imply an inner interaction between language and history. The conception does convey a movement towards a strategy of the subject, a poetics of society. The subject and society cannot try to identify themselves with any political practice that I know. They are as utopian as the place left to rhythm in the usual conception of language. The sign does not know about them. Nor do institutions. Politically, I belong to the party of rhythm.

Bedetti: Your work provides a variety of examples of rhythm's historicity, of its ability to impose a new perception, and at a level not yet conceptualized by our culture. Do you have a favorite or current example, perhaps a very simple one that you might use for pedagogical purposes?

Meschonnic: Mallarmé. For the last thirty years, at least in France, no one more than Mallarmé has been considered the hero of rarefied written language as opposed to the vulgarity of common words, to orality, the hero of negativity suppressing all subjectivity, all historicity. But on reading all of Mallarmé, including his correspondence, from the point of view of rhythm as the organization of language by the subject, I have shown in "Mallarmé au-delà du silence" that, taken historically, there is only a projection of strategies, which we call "Mallarmé." The way we say "Saussure." Thus, a new approach to Mallarmé sheds light on what was always there, but hidden by the way we saw it. That is, Mallarmé as the poet and theorist of the most common words, of orality, historicity, the most subjective state of language and of its theory. If the critique of rhythm can renew the reading of a work such as the work of Mallarmé, I take it as empirical proof (among others, such as my translation of the Bible) of the theory's strength.

Bedetti: Are you saying that if one studies Mallarmé's rhythm in general (not just in the lyric poems), a particular contour emerges that has a historical dimension?

Meschonnic: Mallarmé's writings in prose, and perhaps particularly his letters, are all parts of his rhythm, all necessary, I think, to the poetic understanding of his poems. Reading his whole correspondence made me, at least, perceive Mallarmé's historicity in quite a new way.

On Universality

Bedetti: Is the critique of rhythm related to the shift from binary rationalism to analogical modes of thought? Using Anthony Wilden's terms for the distinction between digital language, which depends on a binary system of representation, and analogical language, which remains in touch with the sensory, instinctual, largely prearticulate nature of human communication, is it appropriate to understand rhythm's critique in the context of communication and exchange?

Meschonnic: Rhythm is historicity. Not biology. I mean, of course, in language and society. It postulates the radical incompatibility of historicity and biology, against those unitary systems in fashion that combine the cosmic and the historical, necessarily reducing the latter to the former, constructing one and the same epistemology for the natural sciences and the social sciences, according to the nineteenth-century dream of universality. This search for unity is the latest form of (scientist) theology. The moral order of digitalization brings us a new Savior and his apocalypse. It benefits from Hegelian

logic. By oversimplifying the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, understood as an overcoming, Wilden makes himself the new transcendency. *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* shows the partnership formed between semiotics and phenomenology by way of their shared idea of "translation." The success of such syntheses is significant for the sociology of knowledge nowadays. They respond to some demand. But they respond too well. So Wilden makes a hodge-podge of a dozen natural and social sciences, plus Hegel and Marx, and Voloshinov. I doubt that the shared struggle for the rights of women, blacks, and Jews will benefit from the continuity established between animal and human language. This form of demagogical eclecticism curiously combines the bad conscience of a California professor with anti-French bias, which is apparently the latest fashion in the US. He is all the more correct since he is replete with Derrida and Lacan. Wilden has great ambition, like all semioticians. He claims a critical perspective. But he clings uncritically to the economical reduction of Marx, which he continues to consider a science. Epistemology is not his strong point. As he privileges communication rather than language, his dual model (the analogue and the digital) does indeed privilege the sign. He adheres to the weakest in Jakobson, the (dual) opposition between metaphor and metonymy. His competition with what is, according to him, the overdue importance given to language in France today does not turn out well for him, for the condition of language in his systemics belongs to the fifties in its reduction of language to information, and belongs to the structuralism of the sixties where everything else is concerned.

Systemics and semiotics are totalizing modes of thought. They want to rule. They overlook what Benveniste said [*Problèmes* 2: 43–63], that there cannot be a unified system of systems that don't have the same units in common. The first victim of semiotics is language and what is most vulnerable in it: the subject and poetry. The critique of rhythm takes a different approach from that of binary rationalism. It does not see itself as an apocalypse, nor does it pretend to be outside of Western culture. It criticizes the sign and the logic of identity by way of the system of rhythm in the Bible, because only there was such a system developed. Subsequent to the Bible, other works have contributed to the destruction of the supposed universal model of the sign. It is the effective and allegorical function of literature, and mainly of poetry, to show that the common idea of language has been overflowed.

On Value

Bedetti: How does value represent itself in the critique of rhythm, and how are cultural values themselves shaped by the critique of rhythm?

Meschonnic: I take value in Saussure's sense, as the difference in a system, transposing it from *langue* to *discourse*, from Benveniste onwards. Thus, literature and poetry have a symptomatic importance for the theory of language. For only there does one have "writing in the record of speech," as G. M. Hopkins wrote, and the permanent alteration of language by an individual subject. Value consolidates orality, subjectivity, historicity. Cultural values attached to works of language cannot help but be the social effects of values in Saussure's sense. The task of the critique of rhythm is to analyze how values function in the first sense and transform society in the second.

Bedetti: Can you clarify a bit more the "how" of the transformation?

Meschonnic: *How* implies that meaning, contrary to its usual privileged position, is one of the least important things in language—at least in the way meaning is generally understood. Intonation and situation, as everybody knows, can alter the meaning radically. Literature and poetry are the invention of constraints that inscribe the physics of language (its orality) into writing.

On Democracy

Bedetti: At the end of “Une crise sans critique dans les théories du langage et de la littérature” [*Les états de la poétique* 28], you label the Western crisis of the sign as Greco-Christian, whereas “critique” and “rhythm” are the Jews of sign. How do you explain aligning *democratic* thought to your politics of the subject, and are you not using the Jew as metaphor-concept for the other in us?

Meschonnic: As a crisis in the set of conceptions of a society identifies itself, the crisis is also a crisis in the meaning of meaning. And also in the sign’s strategy. Various powerful elements prevent a necessary critique and turn our age into an uncritical, unhistorical age: the importance of Marxism, the reign of structure and phenomenology, the dogmatism of semiotics, the eclecticism of systemics, not to mention religious revivals and extremisms. These are the powers of totalization, closed upon themselves and upon the sign as unity, identity, truth, and totality. Some have looked for a way out of the sign, in archaism or exoticism. They maintain what they want to transform. Thus, in language, the dualism of convention versus nature is maintained all the more when one throws oneself to one extreme or to the other.

Now democracy has been linked with the sign. Its basic scheme, the “social contract,” is of the same order as the signified versus the signifier: the first part (the majority) acts as the whole. The media increase the confusion between the general will and the majority. There is no ethics of the sign. The sign is the metrics of society. Hence the need for solidarity between rhythm and the subject. The logic of the system is at stake.

As for the Jew, being Jewish is a fact before being a metaphor. It is a metaphor not of “the other in us” but of the signifier, subdued but maintained. It is a metaphor of the fact that rhythm is hidden by the sign as the Jew has been treated by the political theology of the sign. Any minority could be a metaphor. Yet, to begin with, the Bible turned the Hebrews into the privileged metaphor of history and turned their history into a history of metaphors. Maimonides says the events of the Bible are events of the soul. They are still considered as such by many in our culture. Moreover, the Christian world has until recently, well, *aufgehoben* the Jew, raising him to the state of various metaphors. No one has had as lengthy an experience of the condition of metaphor. So, saying that rhythm is the Jew of sign is a shortcut for expressing all that and waking up the reader who is dozing in the sign. Marina Tsvetaïeva once said that *all poets are Jews*.

On Individuation

Bedetti: In *Critique du rythme* [95] you write of emptying the individual of his intolerable oneness. Can you explain how in and through the work the subject is not the individual but the individuation? What does it mean to say that the work makes it possible for the individual to accede to the level of subject? Conversely, are you also saying that the social can only become individual through the voice of an agent? Is this what Jonathan Arac wishes to emphasize in his illustration of Sappho’s lyric as less the expression of a unique soul than “a means of mass access to public transport” [355]?

Meschonnic: *Conscience* and the individualistic idea of the individual both act as obstacles to the historicity of language. They split language into the dual components of the sign: society is split into the individual and the social, literature into the writer and the work. But what one calls *a work* [*oeuvre*] is what can be passed on to others, indicating that the subject is that very property of transformation and continuity—not the individual as a person. The writer and the reader become subjects through the work. An “agent”

would imply that some previous entity passes through it. The subject is the realization of the social, though the social is not aware of it, for the realization of the social only takes place in the individual. That makes their opposition meaningless and dangerous. That is why I quoted Mandelstam, who in 1920 wrote that without an organized individual one would have collectivism without collectivity. And I do agree with Arac. All the more so, since "public transport" is what has become of *metaphor* in modern Greek.

Bedetti: What do you think of Arac's comment about the self-enclosure of North American criticism and the lack of understanding of how poetry relates to socio-cultural codes? If you agree with him, to what do you attribute such self-enclosure?

Meschonnic: Self-enclosure is not the exclusive domain of North American criticism. New Criticism has become its own tradition. Only fragments of the Russian formalists have been translated, and ignorance regarding what has not been translated partly explains the absence of ties to socio-cultural codes. Linguistics demonstrates that provincialism, continent by continent and nation by nation. On editing his *Readings in Linguistics* in 1957, Martin Joos quoted Rulon Wells, who said about American linguists that "half of these authors had read the *Cours [de linguistique]* by Saussure]. The others got it second-hand." By which he meant to excuse them. Monolingual illiteracy is still a common disease among linguists and literati. The same is true in France. Boas and the American anthropological linguists are barely known. Only what is inscribed in the prevailing fashion is translated immediately. And as fashion tends to its own establishment, it produces the lingering effect of intellectual colonizations: structuralism, phenomenology, pragmatics. The new new becomes the old old. But self-enclosure is not a property of ideas in themselves. The peculiar deafness it leads to (an illusion created by internal polemics) is the strategical effect of territorial powers which often makes university life more akin to the behavior of rats than to that needed for the critical study of problems. Such is the sociological condition of intellectual life.

On the Unconscious

Bedetti: Could you clarify the role of the unconscious and of the deliberate in the critique of rhythm? You write [*Critique du rythme* 293] that voice participates in the unconscious, as does language, yet you also disagree with Kristeva's placing metrical schemes on the same prearticulate plane as the "system of language" [*La révolution du langage poétique* 217].

Meschonnic: The unconscious comes in various kinds. The linguistic one, the cultural-ideological one, and that belonging to psychoanalysis. Kristeva defines rhythm in terms of the irrational versus the rational: that is traditional theory in Horkheimer's sense. Once again, we have the sign. Then she ascribes metrical schemes to the system of language, which is historically unfounded. From Homer's, which was borrowed and non-Greek, to the various systems adopted by Russian poetry throughout its history, not to mention English poetry in the eighteenth century, many examples show that a metrical scheme is not a linguistic emanation, but rather a relation between culture and language. If metrical schemes are pre-conscious, as she says, they belong to the linguistic unconscious. Alliteration, according to her, belongs to the Freudian unconscious: the impulse. For the critique of rhythm, the subject and historicity make the prosodic-rhythmic organization of a text into a continuum of language that neutralizes the opposition between the conscious and the unconscious, these notions being situated in the sign. The source of the critique of rhythm is the empirical functioning of rhythm, as it is observed outside of the dual model. This, for instance, the *te 'amim* in the Bible help to show, just as parallelism shows the strategy of substitution Greek rhetoric has been using for centuries.

Bedetti: I would like to ask a broader question about the place of this aspect of discourse that has little to do with overt signaling. Is there a connection between the drop in sales of digital watches and the return to popularity of analogue watches and the contextualizing power of the critique of rhythm? Is this emphasis on the reciprocal human dimension of language simply a new romanticism?

Meschonnic: Personally, I have a good old watch. Its hands go normally from left to right. Digital watches, it is well known, brought havoc to the imagination of time. But this does not convince me that time is circular. Space is circular, not time. I am quite pleased with what you tell me. But you interpret the drop of their sales as a return to an analogue representation of time. Yet the hands of a watch move discontinuously, and time is continuous. And even the illusion of circularity has nothing to do with the "contextualizing power of the critique of rhythm." Because rhythm is not circular. Not linear either. That would be metrics. It cannot be reduced to discrete units of measure since it works out meaning as a continuous matter of intersubjectivity. Romanticism confused the subject with the individual. So, it is indeed the usual conception of the social and of the individual opposed to one another which is dragging out bits of romanticism.

Bedetti: Despite a certain sympathy philosophically for your point of view, some readers may draw the line at your radical Heracliteanism. Is it not true that even rhythm has to have regularity enough to be discernible as rhythm, and if historicity is just an occurrence at a given point in time with no relation to what comes before and after, then is the discontinuity not so radical as to destroy the "history" in historicity?

Meschonnic: Saussure speaks of "the river of language" (*le fleuve de la langue*), which means that the system and history are in constant relationship, synchronic and diachronic at the same time, whereas structuralism placed the synchronic in opposition to the diachronic, the static in opposition to the dynamic. My Saussureanism balances what you would call my Heracliteanism—not as a compromise, but in the same direction. The continuous and the discontinuous are both at work and inseparable. But I would not speak of "regularity" versus discontinuity, for regularity is still too formal (I mean semiotic) a term. What one recognizes is a meaning, a subject, a cultural pattern that is an organization. Pure discontinuity would not be rhythm, but rather the destruction of rhythm.

On Orality

Bedetti: Let's discuss the politics of a concept of discourse that presupposes an anthropology and a history of voice. Why is the concept of orality such a sore spot, the place where your work encounters the greatest resistance? Does the answer relate to Jacques Ancet's remark that in denouncing the opposition between written and oral cultures, the critique of rhythm unveils the more profound antagonism between modern industrial societies and traditional illiterate societies?

Meschonnic: Resistance is a token. One sees it in discussing translations. Rhythm, to my mind, calls on us to distinguish three terms, rather than two: the oral (as the primacy of rhythm), the spoken, and the written. But the sign still pervades anthropology and ethnology with the traditional opposition between the oral and the written. It does not help them get rid of the identification of the oral with the archaic. There indeed can one see the political effects of the sign. That is why I opened and closed my book on rhythm by proposing that the theory of rhythm is political. Its politics is that of the subject, the weakest link in the chain of society, the one which breaks.

Bedetti: Would you clarify your central category, rhythm, and its corollaries—the oral, speech, writing? Is rhythm the possibility, the very orality of the oral? On the other hand, since you have very little good to say about the neo-Heideggerians, and nothing

good to say about Husserl, it is not likely that you would indulge in that sort of metaphysics. You do repeat the term *empirical*, which suggests that the oral is vocable sound itself. But how can you then go on to distinguish the oral from the spoken? How do you keep these terms from collapsing into one term or one concept?

Meschonnic: No, the oral is not primarily sound. When you hear the oral, you don't hear sound, you hear the subject, from the physiological to the historical and cultural elements that compose the continuity of rhythm that constitutes that specific mode of signifying. When the subject prevails, whether it be in written or in spoken language, there is the oral. Thus the oral is quite a different concept from that of the spoken.

Bedetti: In discussing Heidegger's analyses of Trakl's poems [*Les états de la poétique* 56–57], you state that Heidegger ignores the subject by studying language as if it was not connected to a subject. You go on to say that the subject disappears from view since there is no longer a speech. Analyzing on the level of the tongue leads Heidegger to completely eliminate the subject of speech. His negation of speech results in a negation of the subject in the social—all because of an idolatry of language. Later in the discussion [65], in the context of relating language and history, you reiterate that speech has a subject and a meaning, whereas the tongue has no subject and no meaning. As actions have meaning and history does not, so speech has meaning and the tongue does not. You conclude by saying that to a materialist practice, all theory of history as meaning is idealist. Will you explain what is at stake in your choice of the terms *tongue* and *speech* rather than the commonly used terms *language* and *discourse*? Will you distinguish your choice of the term *subject* and two other terms you do not use, *subject matter* and *speaker*?

Meschonnic: For decency's sake, I don't put Husserl and Heidegger together. For I greatly admire Husserl, although I criticized his logical conception of language as being too tied to the impoverished model of reason and the sign. I would say his strategy, like that of Saussure, is a strategy of the search for truth—betrayed as much by Heidegger, who passes for his disciple, as Saussure was by the structuralists. In both the case of Heidegger and of the structuralists, betrayal serves a strategy of domination.

But domination has far graver effects in the case of Heidegger. The major theoretical problem here is how the maximum degree of abstraction ennobles and conditions thought—but above and out of history—thus making the thought of being into the greatest treachery to the historical subject. In the same language game lies the condition for his meta-Nazi politics and for his treatment of poetry. I started analyzing that condition in *Le signe et le poème* and am actually engaged in a re-examination of it, following the recent publication in France of *Heidegger et le nazisme* by Victor Farias and in response to the effect of denegation, observable once more, on French Heideggerians.

As for the word *tongue*, I used it only to avoid the ambiguity of *language* in English. Maybe *discourse* is better than *speech*. I wanted to emphasize the empirical and to avoid the theory of argumentation. As for *subject*, I mean by that the subjective-historical function of language. I avoid speaking about *subject matter* because my concern is not *what* is said but the mode of signifying. I avoid the term *speaker* because it maintains the dual category of the spoken versus the written and, innocent as it seems, maintains the traditional theory (according to Horkheimer) of the sign.

Bedetti: How does foregrounding narrative (or the epic) reduce antagonism between written and oral cultures? How does narrative/voice/enunciation help situate writing or text in discourse rather than language? In the US there seems to be a growing division between the lyrical poet and the narrative poet, with the latter being in current fashion. Would you see this trend as a corrective for the identification, as you write [*Critique du rythme* 88], by Western modernity of the last 150 years of the poem with lyricism? Is the penchant for the long poem an effort to return to poetry's epic origins, with its closeness to fable and legend and its connection to the sacred? How do you situate your poems?

Meschonnic: English and American poetic traditions have their own inner relation to prose and to the epic. In France poetry has been radically opposed to prose and the

narrative through Mallarmé, Valéry, and most followers. What is now known in the US of modern French poetry is mainly the social effect of a few small but influential groups who write according to that academism of modernity. That is why foreign poetry, wherever it comes from—Greece, Spain, Italy, the US—is important for French poetry now. The sacred is also a ready-made reserve of poetry, therefore a danger for poetry. A new relation with prose cannot help but affect ideas on verse, lyricism, and the epic, change the old relation to the epic. I think my poems take place in this changing moment of French poetry. Poetry is not behind them. I am working in the most common language. I am trying to utter a language that works out its own poetry.

On Polemics

Bedetti: What can you tell us of the reception of your work in the last two decades? What effect has it had in France and outside? And what of the polemical aspect of your work, the attempt to build the foundations for a true comparatism? In your recent essay on the sociology of poetics, I sense a failure of others, including the French, to engage with your polemics. Why is that?

Meschonnic: Reception depends on the degree of agreement or disagreement with the dominant trends: on how one is contemporary, whether with or against. At any rate, time is a factor in thinking and writing and reading. A book may take ten years to make its way. Or more. A whole work, even more. Decades are a vivid portrayal of social effect. But my first two books came out in 1970. Let four more years go by. I perceive the absence of discussion in terms of the difference between the critical and the polemical. If I were polemical, I would be on the same ground, one term out of the two in opposition. But the critique I began implies a position too distant for dialogue. In 1971 when I criticized the translation of Celan published by Du Bouchet and his friends, I analyzed minutely how they replaced poetry with rhetorical devices. That critique conveyed a certain idea of poetry and of translation. There was no discussion. And since then only a kind of silence in the literary media. I may appear difficult and isolated by my idea of poetry and language. Yet this has not prevented a growing underground effect, meeting the expectations of young research workers from various places. Another feature, if not due to polemics, stems from our compartmentalized culture. To some, I am a translator of the Bible. And at first I was considered more as a theorist or critic than as a poet. Recently, more as a poet than as a linguist. It is true that the two prizes I received, in 1972 (*prix Max Jacob*) and in 1986 (*prix Mallarmé*), were for poetry. But it is philosophy rather than linguistics departments that have been inviting me to lecture.

Bedetti: Is there a problem with polemics as a mode of investigation in our historical moment? Do we tend to think of pure theory and, furthermore, of theory focused not on the moment of production but on the moment of consumption? Do you think that given today's tendency in the US and England to politicize texts, that your care in defining terms, in being systematic, in situating yourself is perceived as a residual academism? It is because of the very quantity and therefore novelty of your research that interest centers on the most polemical.

Meschonnic: Polemics, in my definition, is a means of dominating over opinion, whether or not it be from lack of information, and it cannot be a mode of investigation. Only of self-indulgence. The critique of rhythm—as research into social and linguistic strategies, into what historicity is made of, and into the various kinds of social mediation—is a mode of investigation. Politicizing language directly is obsolete and dangerous. That is what I would call academism. It is one of the tricks of reason insofar as it remains in the sign.

On Audience

Bedetti: To what extent have the requirements of a technical rigor relegated the critique of rhythm to the theoretical margin?

Meschonnic: Perhaps I don't understand your question. How can "technical rigor" relegate the research for what happens in rhythm, for what is at stake in it, to a "theoretical margin"? Technicalities are indispensable in establishing the central place of rhythm in the theory of language. Conversely, only theoretical and historical investigation can show what is presupposed in every technical detail. I was asked to reduce the book to a 200-page essay. I refused. I still think I was right in keeping *Critique du rythme* to its inner necessity and development. One does not write to please. One does not write for anybody. But for what has to be written. Here technical rigor is central in order to demonstrate what has been done throughout history with some of the technical notions of language. I do not believe the argument that it reduces the audience. For, in any case, few people really care about the history and functioning of rhythm. So the work had to be done with the point of view I have displayed in at least this one book. And as far as I know, there has never before been a book like it. For me, that is enough. Other small books I shall write.

Bedetti: I detect a shift in your prose style since 1970. Daniel Delas characterized your earlier style as demanding ("Containing a difficult vocabulary, handled with dexterity and virulence, long parentheses, sinuous and abrupt-looking sentences, and surprising processes of lexical composition or derivation"). I agree with Jean-Jacques Thomas's recent remark [in conversation] that your latest publications are remarkably clear and direct, though, I would add, not without the original intensity, fervor, conviction. Even the length of the essays and interviews in *Les états de la poétique*, for example, seems more manageable. Is this the result of a deliberate effort to bridge the gap with your audience?

Meschonnic: Not the gap with the audience, but the gap with my thinking. The most difficult problems—those one is not used to thinking about, or those one tries to think about in a new way—can be put in the simplest words. But the simple words are the most difficult ones. Compare the language painters use when they speak or write about their painting with the language of art critics. So the concrete experience of thought and poetry works its way towards a simpler expression. You are right. Only, I would add that what is personal in one's experience consists precisely in making simple words different from what they were before.

On Being "of the People"

Bedetti: The round table interview ["Poétique et politique"] published in the H. M. issue of *Esprit* and reprinted in *Les états de la poétique* is very helpful because some questions are raised which I had not seen addressed before, including Olivier Mongin's final question on how to be "of the people" when one is not Jewish. Your answer—and this was a decade ago—was to maintain the tension and link between poetics and politics. Can you elaborate?

Meschonnic: At the time I used the example of spoken language appearing in verse, specifically in *Châtiments*, by Hugo. The English-American tradition (from Wordsworth to Eliot and Olson) mixes ordinary speech with conversational style, which is different from the French tradition. There are examples in Hugo's *Contemplations*. As an instance of the opposite, it will suffice for me to mention Saint-John Perse, who is noble and metrical through and through: a statue of poetry. I begin with poets because my problem was, and is, a poetical problem. If you reread the interview you quoted, you will notice

that the term “of the people” entered the discussion with “Jewish people” versus “Christian people” and was brought in only by the other participants. I didn’t utter it once. I would not have spoken it of my own volition. The term I used was that of everyday language, placing poetry within common language, ordinary speech, as a paradigm of the ordinary person. Like you and me. Countering the clichés of the sacred versus the profane, the feast versus the everyday, the archaic and the country versus the modern city, etc.—that moralization (good and evil) which belongs to the ideological paradigm of dualism. The Hebrew *Mikra* (“Reading,” and not Scripture) is interesting because, by contrast, it implies the solidarity between orality and the social. That is why poetry has such a symptomatic importance for society, if one calls poetry that which invents within language new ways of being with oneself, others, and the world—a continuous invention of the social and of poetry, and therefore a form of utopia. The paradox then is that ordinary language, ordinary people are a part of the utopia of poetry. That anybody can share.

Bedetti: To say that “poetry invents within language new ways of being with oneself, others, and the world,” sounds nice, but can you really be conscious of a “way to be with,” without the appreciation illuminated by reflection? What can you say to the “idealist” who does not separate the “heart of the matter” from interpretation? In particular, I would like to know what you mean by *signifiance*—and if you refuse to tell me about it, using the concept at least as far as possible, then I could accuse you of the “mysticism” for which you seem to have no use. Can you point me to some of your work on Hugo, for example, for a closer look at *signifiance*?

Meschonnic: By *signifiance* I mean neither *meaning* (the denotation of words) nor *signification* (what words mean to you or me), for which I think the English *significance* is just a more common synonym. I have shown in *Critique du rythme* [esp. 259–72] that by *signifiance* (I would suggest coining its double in English, “signifiance”) I mean the specific production of elements that contribute to both meaning and signification without their knowing it, for the sign does not and cannot take them into account. These elements are the semantics of rhythm and of prosody, their paradigms. They include pausal or positional effects, or conflicts between syntax and meter. I include here what Hopkins called *sprung rhythm*. So there is nothing mystical about it. Nor could anything be more concrete and ordinary.

As an example, I would mention the analysis I made in *Écrire Hugo: Pour la poétique IV* of the system of prosodic endings in the short narrative *Le dernier jour d’un condamné*, where conclusive, vocal group endings happen to make the paradigm of *moi, condamné* [me, condemned] and the suspensive, consonantal group endings the paradigm of *la mort, les autres* [death, the others], a system of prosodic organization which I have not found elsewhere in Hugo, and which cannot but contribute to the efficiency of that text, though the usual semiotic-semantic criteria don’t even notice it. Yet there is no event in language that does not have an effect on meaning or on the “suburbs” of meaning.

That example could be a parable of the fact that *signifiance* works without one knowing it, perhaps sometimes more according to the way texts have of signifying than through what the sign makes us conscious of. Thus it is rhythm that leads us, the subject as distinct from the individual, and in that sense meaning is the least important thing in language.

Bedetti: Your poems have been translated and published in English, German, Hebrew, Arabic, and Japanese—but not in the US. *Pour la poétique I*, part of *Pour la poétique II*, a section of *Critique du rythme*, and a theoretical essay have been published in Japanese—but not, at this time, in English. Why is that? Could it be because you are positing a politics of the subject that contradicts our logic of identity, unity, colonialism, and dualism? Is that why you have promoted your work in Canada, Mexico, and in China, but not much in the US? Is it a deliberate decision to give voice to the other?

Meschonnic: The logic of identity, unity, colonialism, and dualism is not the exclusive property of the US. Nor have I "promoted" my work in the parts of the world you mention. Nothing is "deliberate" in that situation. But it is logical. It shows the degree of receptiveness to my poetry and theoretical work. They are more free to hear, those who are less engaged in, or feel a more intense urge to transform, the dominating modes of thought which indeed do not give voice to the other. What you are describing is the cartography of intellectual and university life. But it undergoes a continual change. You know that, since you are one of those who are changing it.

On Theoretical Activity

Bedetti: Let us speak of the relation of theory and practice and of your caution in *Critique du rythme* [140] not to confuse theory with power. What is theory's place in relation to cultural change?

Meschonnic: To confuse theory with power is to replace discussion with techniques for ruling over opinion. That is, to replace what one would have formerly called the search for truth with the keeping of order. Perhaps "theory" (I mean theoretical activity as distinct from knowledge and science) is the activity which disturbs order, the order of ideas a society has about itself: its language, its ideas about language and literature, particularly in philosophy and the social sciences, and what those ideas show about it. So theory is bound to be endless, critical and criticized, but not to be identified with any one "theory" or doctrine.

Bedetti: Are you opposed to the metaphorical use of terms only because they are misused to circumvent analysis? Can a metaphor-concept ever serve as a useful tool of analysis? If, as you write [*Critique du rythme* 701], the critique of rhythm is a critique of the dualism of the sign and of its primacy in a binary rationalism, can one not permit the internal plurality of a theoretical style?

Meschonnic: There are many situations of discourse for metaphors. Some metaphors say a lot—for instance, the metaphor *ta 'am* ('taste') to designate the "reason" that joins or separates words in the Bible, as the physical condition of meaning. It says that meaning is first of all, in speech, a mouthful of language, a group, a cut, a rhythm—before the sense of words. Saussure says as long as we don't know everything about language, we cannot avoid metaphors. And if a metaphor says what nothing else can say, is it still a metaphor? As analysis is an endless recognition of relations, I don't think one can oppose metaphors and concepts, as is usually done—as if there were definite and definitive concepts. They are rather moments of thought, with aspects in the grammatical sense. But metaphors are harmful when they close rather than open, when they totalize with a fascination that prevents analysis and hides a reductive effect. Analogy may act that way. It is intended as an immediate synthesis, which explains its appeal, but it is mere syncretism. As is the language metaphor which has had such a success (*genetic code*, and so on) in linking biology and linguistics, for it reduces language to communication. The problem is that of the logic of relations, such as between language and history. Their internal plurality (plurality of attitudes, of logics, of strategies) does not at all imply that "theoretical style" should imitate that plurality. For it would be analogous without being aware of that fact, beginning with a confusion between plurality and eclecticism, and ending (like Barthes and others) in a mimetic paraphrase.

Bedetti: Is it true that your readers are generally more aware of the theoretical in your work than of the instances of practical criticism, translation, and poetry writing? Why is that? Donald Wesling ends his review by saying that in the over-700-page *Critique du rythme* you establish the need, if not fully the method, of the critique of rhythm. In one sense this seems a strange remark because elsewhere, including your editions of Hugo,

you offer a good deal of practical criticism, not to mention the kind of practice your poetry evidences. With so much theory in your work, how is the critique of rhythm not simply theoreticist? Or is it necessary, as Eagleton claims, to begin with a kind of putting the house in order before developing a cultural practice? In 1970 you criticized Jean-Pierre Richard for not taking on the challenge of developing the tools for a more subtle investigation than the one immediately possible.

Meschonnic: Unfortunately, reading is often compartmentalized. Most translators are afraid of "theory." Culturally, the very word *theory* acts as a scarecrow. Conversely, those of, say, my colleagues who read perhaps my critical work will not read my poems, if they do read today's poetry at all. Of course, there are exceptions. So, specialization creates "specific" intellectuals, as Arac restated after Foucault, instead of "general" intellectuals. But you know that the method of the critique of rhythm was tested in the two volumes on Hugo, after having been initiated in *Pour la poétique* and before being expanded into a general theory. My books assume one another and grow one out of the other. This may be demanding on the reader. But that's the way it is. Donald Wesling had probably not read *Écrire Hugo* when he made that statement. In any case, no book will ever establish anything fully. It accomplishes enough if it initiates something new, to be continued by someone else. What prevents critique from being theoreticist and dogmatic is that it can only develop from practice. I started translating the Bible before writing on the theory of translation. In my work poetry precedes theory, not the other way around. So one cannot put the house in order "before developing a cultural practice," since only a new order in the making can change the old order. One does not wait for a theory to be completed, and then apply it, because no theory will ever be completed, and practice does not follow, but comes first, empirically.

On Writing Poems

Bedetti: Your characterizations of the poem and the university are identical. What intrigues you about both is the transformational relationship of representational and narrative modes of argument. Yet you want to place your poems in a category apart: "As for the poems themselves," you write, "that is my story. They are elsewhere. But just as there is no contradiction between reading and writing, there is none between this other place and the university" [*Les états de la poétique* 278]. Will you say something about this "other place"? Are you referring to the inner voice that is the voice of the other in us? Do you locate it "elsewhere" in order to protect it from the representational and institutional, in order to be "of the people," to keep the conflict alive and unresolved between what shapes us culturally and what we do to escape being mere cultural products?

Meschonnic: The absence of contradiction does not mean identity. I mean mutual implication. For me. Matisse writes somewhere that the painter should, when he takes his brush, know everything and forget everything, at the same time. The same goes for writing. But some forget to know. Others forget to forget. The poem is the place where one forgets, which is another way of remembering. I don't see what I can say about it that the poems don't say. So I will not paraphrase them. And I am unable to tell anecdotes about their circumstances, as some poets do, thereby creating a sort of feigned familiarity perhaps to put themselves within reach of the public. That would be regressing from poetry to private life. Doing the exact reverse of what the poem does. Maybe the poem consists in making that "other place" gradually what takes up the whole place. Providing the creation of structural relations which suggest that individuals are the opening possibility of becoming subjects.

On Critique's Laughter

Bedetti: I would like you to explain the closing paragraph of "Critique, condition du rythme": "Hegel took joy in the 'good' infinite. I do not know this joy. I even know that I would not want it. For me, rhythm is in what he called the 'bad' infinite. I would only wish to share critique's laughter—for theory's jubilation shares in the same adventure with poetry" [*Les états de la poétique* 79]. How does this relate to de Man's remark that he intends to take the divine out of reading, and that the act of faith is not for him compatible with reading [Moynihan 586–87]?

Meschonnic: The "bad" infinite is also what Hegel called the "prose of the world." It is the other side of order (which is the cosmos), of the sacred. Because order and the sacred are on the side of metrics, Hugo was led to write that God had created the world in verse. However, the bad infinite is the realm of history. Of rhythm. The work of poetry (as distinguished from verse) and of theory and also of ethics is to tackle the prose of the world without cheating. Being history in the making, it is the movement of the unknown. It possesses its own joy. Not the one belonging to Plato and Hegel, but the joy on the side of Heraclitus. The world once resounded, we are told by Homer, with the laughter of gods. Among the many laughs that followed, I claimed there was the specific jubilation, yes, of rhythm as pure historicity, and I hope the critique of rhythm communicates. It is not quite the same as what Paul de Man says, as you can see, but is not opposed to it.

On Teaching

Bedetti: How does your professed pedagogical practice of "talmudic seminar" by contrast to "authoritarian seminar" [*Les états de la poétique* 270] work itself out in reality? Can you tell us something of the history of your seminar from the days it included other instructors to your recent collaborative publication with your students? Is there no contradiction between the democratic pluralistic reciprocal confrontation of the seminar and the leader whose massive project, whose scathing contentiousness has led him to be characterized as a Torquemada? Would such a conflict not be yet another instance of a healthy pluralism within the self?

Meschonnic: I wanted to react against the making of disciples, the dogmatic effect of masters of truth, typical of some groups of semioticians or Heideggerian phenomenologists. I spoke of "talmudic seminar" by analogy with the specific circulation of discourse that is displayed by any page of the Talmud. I would not have been able to use that metaphor, had I not had the luck of experiencing something similar, I think, in my own seminar. It was made possible by the sustained presence (partially renewed) over several years of a few students who have become research workers and teachers and have formed a precious discussion circle. There was a first collective article published in 1979 in *Littérature* No. 34, and last year a volume on language and history in the Frankfurt School, from Horkheimer to Habermas, *Critique de la théorie critique: Langage et histoire*. Our work in progress now is a critique of Foucault. "Torquemada"? That is just the ideological product one can expect from those who replace discussion or critique with the devices of polemics. So critique is labeled Inquisition. Interesting metaphor. It smells of the stake. And since I know that I am not Torquemada (although that is no proof), I cannot but wonder if those showing a complacency for that metaphor don't feel they ought to be burnt, unless they present a case of classical Freudian displacement, and *they* would like to be Torquemada, while playing the part of the victim. I leave it for you to decide.

On Terrorism

Bedetti: The journal *Style* has just come out with a special issue on orality and rhythm; it includes a short piece by Paul Zumthor but mostly essays and book reviews and some practical criticism by American literary historians of studies on rhythm. What, for you, are the implications of such nationalism—in relation to Etiemble's call for a comparative metrics and prosody in 1966, on the one hand, and, on the other, in relation to terrorism in 1986?

Meschonnic: That is why I wrote "What Do You Hear When One Speaks of Orality?" ["Qu'entendez-vous par oralité?"], which was collected last year in *Les états de la poétique*. The program claimed by Etiemble twenty years ago has mostly remained a cry in the wilderness. And not hearing the other is a sly form of terrorism. It does not shed blood. It is exerted by any establishment. Moreover, it seems definitely increased by some insularity that has struck the US. But any work is a bottle thrown into the sea. What Celan called *Flaschenpost*. It takes its chance.

On Open Systems

Bedetti: I am curious about the development of your work. Most people seem to go through phases or transformations. They do not always use the same terminology. They are brought up in one mode and then may become exposed to different writers who give them other points of entry. Of course, they may always have an attraction for and be interested in certain categories. Your work, by contrast, seems monolithic. The terms you defined in the glossary of *Pour la poétique I* remain fundamental to your project, even as you have developed the idea of orality. Recently you have published on Mallarmé. In the different context of "Critique, condition du rythme," you remarked: "But in front of the unknown of the problems of rhythm, of the anthropology of voice, for example, which implicates rhythm, this book is but an incomplete and unrealizable beginning sketch" [*Les états de la poétique* 79]. Does this comment about your masterwork suggest that you are haunted by the ghost of Mallarmé's "Grand Oeuvre"?

Meschonnic: I am not a monolith. I grow. My books of poems have a continuity, but they don't repeat one another. Nor do the others. Your observation, which is upon the whole true, comes from the fact that it has taken me a long time to reach my language. It required something like a second birth to write my poems. So, since 1970, my books are a continuous development—although *Critique du rythme* gives me the impression of a second beginning. The optical illusion makes people see a big book in it. Yet I know it is just a sketch of what remains to be done. But that has nothing to do with the ghost of the ideal Book never to be written. I tried to show, about Mallarmé, that in one way he did write it, even if he thought he had not, for it is precisely everything that he wrote. A work is always both finished and unfinished. It is never a totality, even when it is closed, but a piece of the infinite. That makes writing a continuous listening to the unknown.

Bedetti: Of the varied if complementary facets of your work to date, which seem now to have the most urgency?

Meschonnic: They are all urgent. I have a dozen books in progress, many quite well along. Often an unforeseen urge leaves older plans behind. The most urgent one is a book begun about nine years ago, and almost finished, *Langage histoire une même théorie*. In it I try to analyze the logic of relations between theories of language and theories of history. But I have begun a short essay on modernity that I want to finish soon. Other essays and poems and translations. You see, it is a question of rhythm.

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