

# EL CÓMPUTO SILÁBICO

## COUNTING SYLLABLES

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**Resumen:** En un libro reciente, *Meter in Poetry. A New Theory*, los autores Nigel Fabb y Morris Halle, han propuesto, basándose en la métrica generativa, un sistema de análisis del verso que se puede aplicar, con las oportunas adaptaciones, a todo ámbito lingüístico y a la poesía de todos los tiempos. La mayor parte de las páginas se dedica en efecto al análisis de textos que van del griego antiguo al inglés moderno y a todos los otros “meters of the world”, mientras que en el primer capítulo se enfocan la teoría y las modalidades de análisis. Es aquí donde justamente se patentiza la fragilidad del planteamiento (cada regla admite un sinnúmero de excepciones y también su contrario) y sobre todo la inconsistencia de un sistema que pretende estudiar el metro prescindiendo del ritmo y de la semántica, como si un verso fuera tan sólo un conjunto de signos gráficos.

**Palabras clave:** metro, ritmo, poesía, teoría de la literatura, teoría generativa, sistemas métricos del mundo.

**Abstract:** In their *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory*, a recent book on generative metrics, Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle propose a method of parsing verses that applies to every linguistic area and to the poetry of every time. Its main part is dedicated to parsing texts that go from ancient Greek to modern English and to

all the other “meters of the world”, while the related theory and rules are set in the first chapter. Here lies, however, the weakness of the system, as every rule presents lots of exceptions and even comes to admit of its contrary. Most of all, the method seems fallacious in that it pretends to study meter as detached from rhythm and semantics, as if the line were only a sum of graphic signs.

**Key words:** meter, rhythm, poetry, literary theory, generative theory, meters of the world.

**I**N an article that appeared recently in this review<sup>1</sup>, reference was made to the study *Meter in Poetry. A New Theory*<sup>2</sup>. Beyond featuring two authors as renowned as Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle, the book originates in the “generative” context, which is nowadays one of the few to contribute to the field of literary theory after its decline in the last decades of the twentieth century. One could argue whether this is actually theory or whether Fabb and Halle have, in fact, developed a formulary, a series of methodological indications aimed at identifying what they call a «well-formed line». The authors, however, do not linger on philosophical questions; and while it is true of any theory of poetic form that it implies a theory of poetry, let the readers be reassured: they will be spared both.

Furthermore, only the first chapter of the book “A theory of poetic meter” raises basic issues in this regard, such as the relationship between meter and rhythm, or a possible definition of “verse”. The remaining ten chapters that make up the book are dedicated to the analysis of different verse forms –or, rather, to the application of the analytical rules presented in the first chapter. These verse forms belong to different traditions and ages, from Sanskrit, through ancient Greek, Arabic, old and modern English, Spanish, French to any other “Meter[s] of the world” (ch. 10), although these last are only touched on. The ambition of this book is to define universally valid principles for the assessment of «metrical verse, which is the most widely used kind of poetry and is also the subject of this book» (p. 3).

<sup>1</sup> See DUFFELL, Martin J.: “The principles of free verse in English”, *Rhythmica. Revista española de métrica comparada*, 2010, 8, pp. 7-35. Thanks to Sara Sullam for this translation.

<sup>2</sup> FABB, Nigel & HALLE, Morris: *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Carlos Piera, a highly regarded member of the scientific committee of «*Rhythmica*», has contributed to the research with the chapter “Southern Romance”. Since *Meter in Poetry* is a remarkable undertaking, with which future studies in the field will necessarily deal, I think it is worthwhile considering once more its guiding assumptions before they become the basis for future reflections. I will not dwell, however, on specific textual analysis, which have already been carefully looked into by other reviewers<sup>3</sup>; I will limit myself to recalling that on this very point many objections have been made, since the applicability of the principles elaborated by Fabb and Halle for English poetry actually requires a radical revision to be made every time a different language and cultural tradition is considered. This strongly impairs the theoretical value of their proposal, which, in fact, is puzzling from its very distinction between «strict» and «loose meters» in English poetry.

*Meter in Poetry* has generated attention and discussion, which is inevitable for a work in which –as already pointed out by other reviewers– «Ambitions for cognitive relevance and universality are set high»<sup>4</sup>. However, reviewers have not focussed on its premises, partly due to the fact that debate has taken place mainly within a generative context –in this case, a generativism not excessively concerned with defining itself and its specificities. Hayes, in fact, warns that «scholars new to generative metrics would be well advised to do some background reading before taking on the challenging proposals presented in this work» (p. 2520), while Riad observes that Fabb and Halle «do not seriously challenge any other brand of generative metrics» (p. 542).

A first, in fact preliminary, reason for dissent –a methodological rather than critical dissent– is the fact that in the title of their book Fabb and Halle do not present their theoretical proposal as

<sup>3</sup> See the reviews by Paul KIPARSKY in *Language*, December, 2009, 85, 4, pp. 923-930; Tomas RIAD in *Phonology*, 2010, 27, 3 pp. 542-551; Bruce HAYES in *Lingua*, 2010, 120, pp. 2515-2521.

<sup>4</sup> RIAD, p. 242; KIPARSKY has defined the book a «major event» (p. 923) and has observed that «the strengths of this book are the clear exposition, and the application of a carefully worked out, phonologically grounded theory to interesting material representing the whole typological spectrum». His conclusion, though, reads: «The results are disappointing» (p. 929).

“generative”. Had they done it, readers unaware –if not of the perspective of that critical context, of its language and critical tools– would have been better equipped to read the book, they would have more eagerly accepted the substitution of concrete syllables and words through abstract symbols (“asterisks”) and could have more easily understood the mechanisms of “projection” and “grouping” transforming a line of verse into a not less abstract “grid”; and perhaps they would not have been startled at reading statements such as: «John Donne uses non-projection very extensively» (p. 60). Moreover, it seems to me that speaking so generically of a “new theory” –instead of a “new generative theory”– implies a substantial disregard for what is not “generative”, especially if no mention is made (and this is the case) of different critical traditions, or if no effort is made (and this is the case) to present one’s positions and assumptions and to justify them, to compare them with the achievements of other theoretical proposals and, more generally, to discuss them. This inevitably causes unpleasant lapses; so, for example, does Riad feel obliged to notice that one is faced with a «fairly novel approach to Greek metrics» that turns out to be «clearly at odds with traditional analysis and also with phonological fact». Kiparsky, on the other hand, comments: «This intricate theory is developed with precision, but with little justification», and adds that: «The daunting task of assessing the theory is left to the reader» (p. 925).

I’d like to start, though, from the statement according to which «What distinguishes all poetry from prose is that poetry is made up of lines (verses)», immediately following the definition of poetry as «a form of verbal art» (p. 1). One is not shocked by the fact that, in order to define poetry and to distinguish it from prose, the authors resort to a purely formal criterion; rather, what I find puzzling is the fact that they invoke writing (which is already pretty rough, since it has already been objected that even gravestones can be written “in lines”) without considering that writing simply gives visibility to and transmits something originating as a *verbal* message, with all the features this implies: first of all, it takes place *in time* (it has a “duration”: the end of a line of verse is simply the end of the melodic-rhythmic line which is

consubstantial to it; and it signals a new beginning, delimited in tone by a pause and marked, in writing, by a fresh line). Secondly, it is characterized by precise sonorities, by precise intensive or iterative phenomena. These phenomena are perceived and appreciated by readers even when they read the text silently, in their interiority; for a word is, in our understanding, first and foremost a sound, and each grapheme is perceptibly and inevitably associated to a sound and to a duration (and we will not be dealing with semantics and syntax here, not because it is impossible, but rather because Fabb and Halle do not, and doing it would mean entering an even more polemical discussion).

Our authors quote Tomaševskij, who said that, in language, «the phenomenon of verse itself does not exist»; Fabb and Halle seem to forget the radically different positions that emerged in the critical context to which Tomaševskij belonged. Of course, *the phenomenon of verse itself does not exist*. In fact, a verse “exists” only if it is accompanied by other verses and it becomes part of a series: only in this case does its entity pass from potentiality to act and becomes *recognizable as such*. This, however, does not imply denying that even ordinary language can be “interwoven” with verses, nor does it lead to stating that «there is a well-founded distinction between texts divided into lines and texts not divided into lines» (*ibidem*): that distinction does not exist, it is a mere convention –as anyone who is acquainted with ancient codes, in which verses were written consecutively, already knows; while it is undoubtedly true that if the *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost* were written consecutively, this would not prevent the reader from correctly deciphering its rhythmic nature. Hopkins was right when he said that the underlying principle of verse is parallelism, while the contrary cannot be said: a verse simply provides *evidence* for the rhythmical construct realized by the poet.

I’d like to make it clear, once again, before moving on: before being *written*, a verse is a sequence of sounds, or rather, a series of linguistically organized phonemes, and, as in any other written text, it records a *word* which has been –or still has to be– communicated. As we’ve been taught, therefore, it is a *representation* of something with an oral nature, the features or

functionality of which cannot be assessed regardless of *sonorities* making it up and of the *time* necessary for them to be expressed. If we do not keep this into account, we run the risk of mistaking what is in movement with its inert traces:

Les spécialistes du rythme poétique se noyaient dans les vers, les divisant en syllabes, en mesures et essayaient de trouver les lois du rythme dans cette analyse. En fait, toutes ces mesures et syllabes existent non pas en elles-mêmes, mais comme résultat d'un certain mouvement rythmique. Elles ne peuvent donner que des indications sur ce mouvement rythmique dont elles résultent. Le mouvement rythmique est antérieur au vers. On ne peut pas comprendre le rythme à partir de la ligne des vers; au contraire, on comprendra le vers à partir du mouvement rythmique<sup>5</sup>.

Fabb and Halle, though, seem to be content to work with “traces”, on a form that they consider as *static*, fixed on paper and defined not in temporal terms, but in spatial ones. Which, after all, Halle had already done when he founded the so-called generative metrics with Samuel Jay Keyser, substituting the traditional term *syllable* with *position* –that is, with a spatial term<sup>6</sup>. Fabb and Halle go back to *syllables* and verse length, precisely measured by the number of syllables (p. 3)<sup>7</sup>. It should not be forgotten, however, that neither syllable nor verse “length” are actually unambiguously defined. What I find even more serious, though, is that, in the analytical hypothesis that we are considering, this kind of reality is immediately put aside in favour of an even more abstract representation of such reality (the asterisks we have already mentioned), in which any link with the *language* making up the verse and with the *rythm* shaped by the verse is broken once and for all.

This could still make sense if, as in algebraic representations, there was a precise correspondence between that which represents and that which is represented, and if, therefore, any “trace”

<sup>5</sup> BRIK, Osip: “Ritm i sintaksis”, *Novyy Lef*, 1927, 3-6; in *Théorie de la littérature*, textes des Formalistes russes réunis, présentés et traduits par Tzvetan Todorov, préface de Roman Jakobson. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965, pp. 143-153; 144.

<sup>6</sup> See HALLE, Morris & KEYSER, Samuel J.: “Chaucer and the Study of Prosody”. *College English*, 1966, XXVIII, pp. 187-219.

<sup>7</sup> «The core of the theory (...) is about the measuring of line length and the grouping of units projected from syllables» (RIAD).

objectively referred to an element of a given verse. However, as always happens in these cases, the question concerns what can be defined as “objective”, that is, the way in which we can eliminate our *interpretation* from the act of deciding what has to be represented and how it is to be done. Here one is faced with an issue which is crucial and even more so, in my opinion<sup>8</sup>, since it is left unsolved the relationship with the phonological reality of verse (of language), which, under certain aspects, is not made explicit enough, and otherwise seems to take for granted that the graphic transcription of language is absolutely “objective” (see above) and is totally consistent with its verbal features.

The problem is that our authors seem to be totally uninterested in rhythm, and they know it: «In this respect our approach departs radically from most other approaches to meter, as these have been focused almost exclusively on rhythm». In their perspective “the rhythm is a by-product of the way line length is restricted»<sup>9</sup> (p. 3) and one should rather conform to meter, since it is to meter that the reality of verse aims. But what is “meter”? In a previous study<sup>10</sup>, Nigel Fabb hypothesized «some specialised kind of ‘metrical cognition’ as one of the types of linguistic cognition» (p. 13). While this kind of metrical cognition still lacks a precise definition, the rules and conditions controlling it have by now been made clear: «A meter is a set of rules and conditions» (p. 93). In fact, a major part of the book is dedicated to the development of such rules<sup>11</sup>, to the identification

<sup>8</sup> But see also RIAD, who, after stating that «It is everybody’s intuition that there is a connection between phonology and metre» and after underlining the relevance of phonological factors in FABB and HALLE’s observations, notices that, having to deal with issues raised by specific metrical traditions, «the connection is less clear. Phonological notions employed in metrical conditions are simply stated, or taken as self-evidently given from the language» (p. 547). HAYES, on other hand, wonders: «does metrics includes instances where the data pattern is orderly in underlying form but not at the surface?» (p. 2517) and he points out, for instance, that «a tension can be seen between FH’s use of the “strongest position” concept –namely, as defining the site of special rule application– and more traditional concepts that relate more intuitively to metrical strength» (p. 2518).

<sup>9</sup> KIPARSKY, p. 924. The author underlines this aspect of the text, proposing an analytical discussion of it.

<sup>10</sup> FABB, Nigel: *Language and Literary Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Already partly elaborated in FABB, *cit.*

of the mechanisms best suited to make verse analysis (of any verse) reliable and objective, not depending on interpretation and aimed at highlighting the “metrical grid” underlying a certain verse measure, the *pattern*, which «though non pronounced, determines the perception of a sequence of syllables as a line of metrical verse, rather than as an ordinary bit of prose» (p. 11). In fact, in such a perspective «a verse line is well formed metrically if and only if its grid is well formed» (*Ibidem*. Therefore, if reality does not match the criteria with which we have decided to analyse it, well, then so much the worse for reality...)<sup>12</sup>.

Let us follow, however, the process allowing us to construct the *grid* and which, as we said, reduces the linguistic entity of the verse to a series of abstract elements which take the place of syllables and which are grouped according to the «iterative rule»,<sup>13</sup> from left to right or from right to left, following a binary or ternary principle; the last group of syllables can be left incomplete.

Here is a verse by Keats; let's follow its “transformation”:

Ever let the Fancy roam,  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \*  
 (\* \* (\* \* (\* \* (\*

And here is Byron:

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*  
 ) \* \* \*) \* \* \*) \* \* \*)

Those who are acquainted with generative metrics already know that this process, explained in the Fabb's *Language and Literary Structure*, implies several further steps, which cannot be analysed in detail here. It is there that we have to look for the explanations that the author makes no effort to provide in *Meter in Poetry*; we thus find a series of «projection and non-projection rules» (*LLS*, p. 8) which applied, for instance to a sonnet by

<sup>12</sup> KIPARSKY similarly observes that FABB and HALLE «blame Hopkins for violating their own wrong rules» (p. 928).

<sup>13</sup> On this point see IDSARDI, William: *The Computation of Prosody*. PhD Dissertation, MIT, 1992.

Browning with its syllabic variability, allow for it transformation «into a metrical representation in which there are exactly ten syllables in every line» (*Ibidem*).

Traditional metrics yielded similar results assessing the length or shortness of vowels and resorting to “metrical figures” such as synalepha; those results, however, often relied on interpretation, while, indeed, getting them by means of objectively applicable rules or, at least diminishing the number of factors usually taken into account, would be a relevant fact from a scientific point of view. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case with Fabb, for, while certain lines of the sonnet “project” exactly 10 asterisks:

Remember, never to the hill or plain,  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

some of them, inevitably, project 11 or 12; one has therefore to establish, for example, that the last syllable of the verse «which is unstressed or weak in stress and which comes after a strongly stressed syllable» (p. 9) must not be projected.

That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* Δ

Perplexity does not arise from the necessity of a new symbol (one of “non-projection”: Δ) or from the need to take into account an exception beside the rule, but rather from the fact that identifying *unstressed, weak in stress, strongly stressed syllable* will not always be as easy as in the abovementioned example. Of course, it can be in most cases: still, wouldn’t we end up relying on the very phonological reality that the new theory claims not to consider? And what, then, is the novelty with respect to the traditional notion of meter? There, too, one relies on accents to decide whether to “count” a syllable or not. In Italian, for instance, one counts only one syllable after the last accent of the line, even though there might be two or three of them; and there is also the possibility to have a “virtual projection”, since after the last accent one usually counts a further syllable even if the line is concluded. And the abovementioned «non-projection rule»

(a) is not the only one; for it is followed by a «non-projection rule» (b) and a «non-projection rule » (c). The former reads:

Optionally: do not project a syllable which ends on a vowel, when that syllable precedes a syllable which begins on a vowel. (p. 9)

And the latter:

Optionally: do not project a syllable which has as its nucleus one of the following sonorant consonants: [l], [r], [m] or [n], or which has as its nucleus the weak vowel [ə] followed by one of these sounds. (p. 10)

These rules are to be reconsidered keeping into account the phonological system of every different language; in the Italian system, which I have just mentioned, rule *b* is provided for by synalepha while rule *c* has no evidence. The problem is that, in such cases, we should not speak of rules but rather of possibilities, which can apply or not: for they are *optional* and it is up to the interpreter to decide whether they apply or not. Where, then, has “objectivity” gone? If we want to change a system, we have to come up with tools which turn out to be more efficient than older ones, less subject to the evaluation of the single person. In the sonnet by Browning quoted by Fabb, all accents fall on an “even position”, but, given the optional character of “non-projection rules”, in other cases it will always be possible to conform reality to *quod demonstrandum erat*. Fabb himself implicitly admits it when he states (p. 13) that «it is true of *almost* iambic pentameter lines that they have ten projected syllables. That is, we can do to *almost* every line of iambic pentameter what we did to the Browning poem, with the same results». The fact that this does not always happen, but rather *almost* always (emphasis mine) does not seem to worry Mr. Fabb; after all, any work made of pentameters is, of course, made of pentameters.

Let’s get back to Fabb’s new book, though. It should contain clear indication as to the reasons for the adoption of certain processes –it does not, though. One wonders, for instance, why syllables are “projected”, and not single phonemes; why mention is made only of binary and ternary principles; why the grouping of

syllables can start from left or right likewise and why each projected “gridline” can change what held of the previous gridline level<sup>14</sup>. Since all of this is lacking, what we read on p. 5 «the meter controls primarily the number of groups in the line, and only secondarily the number of syllables» sounds definitely overassertive, inasmuch as it subreptitiously mistakes «the meter» with what is simply Fabb and Halle’s notion of it. This is precisely the methodological stance of the two authors: while they do not provide any reasoning or reflection generating curiosity in their readers, let alone trust, they force them to mechanically follow the process. One often gets the impression that rules presented as new –and which are each time subject to variations– are inspired by linguistic facts and traditional principles (which are not defined as such, of course: see, for example, the importance attached to accents). «As you like it», we might say, borrowing the words of someone who knew metric problems very well.

Moreover it has to be said that even when some reasoning is present at all, it turns out to be hasty and hard to share. For instance, dealing with enjambment, separating not only syntactical phrases but occurring also –albeit rarely– «in the middle of the word», Fabb and Halle conclude “the fact that lines are sequences of syllables, rather than of words or phrases» (p. 10). They don’t seem to realize that: 1) they are founding their rule on exceptions, since enjambment is not a rule, but rather an exception in poetic discourse (and it is precisely why it has a name); 2) that an enjambment «in the middle of the word» is an exception to the exception, since evidence is very scarce in this

<sup>14</sup> I think that in the description provided by KIPARSKY for these operations, the randomness of the conditions controlling those very same operations becomes clear: «For each level in each meter, parameters determine the direction of scansion, the orientation of the parentheses, whether intervals are binary or ternary, and whether the parse begins at the edge, or one or two asterisks in. Additional “riders” specify whether the resulting groups can be, or must be, incomplete at one edge, and whether some syllables can or must remain ungrouped. Before grid construction begins, brackets may be inserted by rules sensitive to weight, linear context, or alliteration. At any point in the derivation, rules may delete asterisk and parentheses, apparently at any gridlevel, in contexts defined either hierarchically by asterisks and parentheses, or linearly by the weight or stress of neighboring syllables. These deletion processes allow groupings of any length to be formed». Kiparsky concludes later: «Hybrid system of rules and constraints have the major disadvantage that they lead to difficulties with managing their interaction, and to undesirable duplication» (pp. 924 -925).

case; 3) that verse is not a single unit, but it exists, as pointed out above, because it is part of a sequence; a sequence in which the fact that a verse ends with an enjambment is definitely not without prosodic, intonational and rhythmical consequences.

Unfortunately, the abstraction from the reality of the data to be examined easily inspires fallacious interpretations; and such an operation is a bad way of referring to the notions of generativism. Referring precisely to Chomsky (p.12) the authors claim that «the rules of meter (...) generate abstract elements that are not directly present in the acoustic speech signal»; what I find puzzling, however, is the fact that they resort to the term *elements* for an abstract model which is apparently not «directly present etc.»: if it is recognizable, it is because its rules operate –and are therefore present– in a «speech signal», even if, of course, it is not one of its “elements”. And I’d like to add that it has been acknowledged that it identifies with a musical and temporal principle, created by the linguistic string itself or to which the string adjusts (we will return on this point later).

Not less puzzling is the discovery that «words and syllables are not overtly present in the acoustic speech signal of the utterance; they are constructed by speakers and hearers alike by virtue of their knowledge of the language» (p. 11), for it is at least since Saussure’s time that it has been acknowledged that spoken language is a phonic chain in which pauses are motivated only by needs of breathing, intonation or emotional stressing. I’d like to add the need (often a strong one) for semantic disambiguation, but all this, while causing alterations in metrics, does not *obviously* imply that the model of reference should be questioned; moreover, one could argue over the fact that the capacity to recognize all this is «part of the human capacity for language» (p. 12) rather than something that is acquired culturally, and to this regard I refer to Franco Brioschi’s work, which is unfortunately written in Italian<sup>15</sup>.

The main problem, however, is that the conditions and restrictions proposed for the construction of the “grid”, intended to tell

<sup>15</sup> See BRIOSCHI, Franco: *La mappa dell’impero. Problemi di teoria della letteratura*. Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1983 (in particular: “Il lettore e il testo poetico”, pp. 57-114).

us whether a line of verse is “well-formed”, do not really generate a clear series of what it is possible –or not possible– to do, because the series can be changed and reset each time something turns out to be an exception. This, of course, is totally compatible with the elaboration of a new theory, which, in fact, should be able to account for the highest number of cases: problems arise when what the theory justifies actually applies only to a limited number of cases and, once a rule is established, one immediately has to establish the possibility of its contrary: «in strict meters the grouping of the syllables on Gridline 0 determines the placement of the maxima, whereas in loose meters it is the placement of the maxima that determines the grouping» (p. 33). The fact is that there is no rule to tell “strict” metres from “loose” ones; or, rather, to determine it one has to go back to reading the lines and the words that make them up, and the “grid” ends up being a schematization of what we already knew<sup>16</sup>.

That a process of simplification should be intrinsic to generative analytical modes is widely acknowledged, and so is the tension to the future inspiring research of this kind: «at this time, next to nothing is known about the neurophysiology of syntax and semantics, and about how actual speakers compute the well-formedness of the sentences they produce. This problem may be solved in the future, as we get a better understanding of how the human brain and mind work» (p. 9). And yet, for the future to be correctly scanned, from a methodological point of view the instrument through which we observe it should be fit to the reality we want to analyse, the very same reality from which the canons for observation should be drawn. In the meantime, we could more modestly be satisfied with understanding in which sense the grid –which we are advised to build and which ends up being different for every “metrical tradition”– can grant access to the concrete complexity of a line of verse.

<sup>16</sup> HAYES resorts to similar arguments when he writes: «the theory allows languages to vary a great deal in their constraints. For instance, the theory allows constraints that require that strong positions be filled by a heavy syllable (p. 164), but also constraints that require that *weak* positions be filled by a heavy (p. 229)». While he recognizes that «This is not an objection in itself, since these constraints, after all, are doing real work in the analysis», he observes that «the sheer variety of possible constraints makes it hard to assess the restrictiveness of the overall theory», and hopes the authors will work on «a computation of the *output typology* of their theory» (p. 2517).

The authors are convinced that grids «allow us to distinguish metrically well-formed lines from other syllable sequences» (*ibidem*); I suppose that in this way a machine may generate a “well-formed line”, though I doubt that anyone who has a musical ear and a good literary education could have some gain considering the effort needed to understand the mechanism. I think it would be more relevant to understand why poetry can also include “bad-formed lines” without any major damage, and why an iambic pentameter is recognized as such in spite of its “irregularities” and the “bad manners” with which Shakespeare and other treated it. Any “grid” will end up discarding a substantial part of the verses that make up literary history, because poets are not really interested in being “in order”.

Meter is a «set of rules and conditions» only inasmuch as these rules tell us how to measure a line of verse, what makes it comparable with other lines, or what, potentially, makes it the “same” as other lines. Sameness is never a given fact; it is only through comparison that rhythm makes a pentameter the same as another and an *endecasillabo* the same as another.

Fabb and Halle’s book does not fail to make a reference to music, acknowledging its similarity with verse; however, the authors do not go beyond stating the mere fact (which, apparently, is considered discriminating) that music is measured by «time intervals» (p. 36) which can also include silence, while poetry is a matter of syllables which can never be reduced to silence. And yet poets have often said that their poetry is born out of the desire to «dress» with words a kind of interior music<sup>17</sup>. It would be enough to admit that the scheme the consistency of which Fabb and Halle look for –believing that they will ascertain its specificity– is simply the scheme of *time*. With the variations and, in certain cases, the irregularities of their concrete rhythm (which

<sup>17</sup> See for example Paul VALÉRY: «Si donc l’on m’interroge (...) je réponds que je n’ai pas voulu dire, mais voulu faire, et que ce fut l’intention de faire qui a voulu ce que j’ai dit. Quant au “Cimetière Marin”, cette intention ne fut d’abord qu’une figure rythmique vide, ou remplie de syllabes vaines, qui me vint obséder quelque temps. J’observai que cette figure était décasyllabique, et je me fis quelques réflexions sur ce type fort peu employé dans la poésie moderne; il me semblait pauvre et monotone» (in COHEN, Gustave: *Essai d’explication du Cimetière Marin, suivi d’une glose analogue sur La jeune Parque précédée d’un avant-propos de Paul Valéry au sujet du Cimetière Marin*. Paris: Gallimard, 1946, p. 22).

is not controlled by a chronometer but rather by our psycho-physical perception), verses simply scan segments of regularity of time. Being a fairly perceptible reality, close enough to the “time intervals” of music, the division into syllables has traditionally been used for line-measuring, and we might keep doing so; though, if we want to get closer to a scientific definition of a line of verse, of what it is and how it works, we do not need to build abstract grids referring back to the syllable. Rather, we should look at the way in which the syllable fills time intervals. With the notion of time we can account for both realities, without having to resort to a mysterious “cognition”: *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*.