Introduction: This seminar will trace the emergence and transformation of the concept of ‘rhythm’ from the period 1840–1960, and the attendant consequences for poetry (among other artistic media), in addition to philosophical thought more broadly. Rhythm might at first seem so pervasive a phenomenon as to be an unchanging, ahistorical entity; yet prior to the nineteenth century it is in fact conspicuous by its absence (Samuel Johnson does not include it in his Dictionary of 1755–56). As the concept became increasingly prominent across the nineteenth century, so did its potential applications multiply: it became, among other things, a means of understanding the specific laws of English poetry, in distinction to classical precedents; an indispensable resource for the developing sciences exploring motion, force and thermodynamics; and part of a broader philosophical effort to grasp the phenomenology of experience. Along the way, a number of specific points of contact opened up between literary form (and especially poetry), on the one hand, and a range of discourses, on the other. This seminar will explore these cross-discursive points of contact by reading a separate literary text or texts each week, alongside a range of other writings on science, technology, medicine and philosophy. The point of this itinerary, which carries us deep into the twentieth century, is to put critical pressure on what the concept of rhythm can mean for us, today.

Course Structure: 6 x 1.5 seminars in weeks 2–7 of Lent Term. All primary materials will be uploaded onto Moodle in good time before the first session. Students should aim to read all of the core texts, and as much secondary material as is feasible.

Essays: Essays need not be confined to the material covered across the six seminars, but can range widely across both period and discursive context. I will be happy to discuss prospective questions; all students planning to write a coursework essay for this seminar are encouraged to meet with me for a 30-minute supervision.

Week One: Speech Rhythms

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable flourishing of the sciences of elocution and speech therapy. Individuals such as Joshua Steele, John Thelwall and James Wright devoted increasing attention to the varied rhythmical patterns of the spoken voice: in many such attempts, poetry was employed both as a potential remedy for stuttering, but also as an indication of the rich expressive resources of the voice. We will examine this dialogue between the rhythms of poetry and verbal dyspraxia, which persists in the recent work of Susan Howe, among several other contemporary poets; and consider the broader context of the nineteenth century’s attempt to grasp the rhythms of speech.

Core Reading:

Robert Browning, Sordello (1843), Book I.


**Secondary Reading:**


Joshua Steele, *Prosodia rationalis: or, An essay towards establishing the melody and measure of speech, to be expressed and perpetuated by peculiar symbols* (London: 1779).


**Week Two: Philosophical Rhythms**

Over the first three decades of the nineteenth century, several German philosophers and writers, ranging from Novalis, to Schelling, to Hegel, laid increasing emphasis upon the term rhythm, as a means of understanding not only poetry in its historical development, but also the nature of experience and thinking more fully. We will consider this movement both for its historical significance and impact upon contemporary philosophy; in the process, we will trace the way in which such thought percolated into Anglophone culture, in the unlikely form of the poet and aphorist Coventry Patmore, most widely (if somewhat unfairly) known for his *The Angel in the House*.

**Core Reading:**


Coventry Patmore, *The Unknown Eros* (1877).


**Secondary Reading:**


Week Three: ‘Primitive’ Rhythms

The discourse on rhythm was both nourished and troubled by increasing anthropological research into so-called ‘primitive’ music. We will chart the passage of such ideas through the late nineteenth century drive to chronicle indigenous folk traditions (as seen in Frances James Child’s monumental collection of oral ballads); and the subsequent modernist tendency to tie rhythm to conceptions of ethnicity, metrical ‘liberation’, and technological advancement.

Core Reading:


Frances James Child, extracts from the *Child Ballads* (1882–1898).

Secondary Reading:


Week Four: Urban Rhythms

Anglophone verse over the nineteenth century is notable for its exclusion of the city, which is all the more striking in comparison to the French tradition of Baudelaire and the symbolists. Yet this position changes radically on the cusp of the twentieth century, as a series of works explore the changing rhythms of urban modernity. We will consider Hope Mirrlees’s still-neglected *Paris: A Poem*, in this regard, in addition to the cues that such work may have taken from developments in the visual arts. Such work interrogates the feasibility of Henri Lefebvre’s intended science of “rhythm analysis”: the study of society according to rhythmic continuity and change.

Core Texts:


Virginia Woolf, ‘Street Music’ (1905).


Hans Richter, *Rhythm 21* (film, 3 mins.).

Secondary Reading:


Week Five: Psychoanalytic Rhythms

As is well known, Freud developed his earliest theories of the psyche through extended dialogue with Wilhelm Fliess. Less discussed, however, is the extent to which Fliess’s obsessive concern with the concept of ‘biorhythms’ might have influenced psychoanalysis: not only in the form of frequent discussion within the pair’s Correspondence, but also in a residual notion of periodicity that emerges in Freud’s mature writing. This seminar will trace some of the various ways in which psychoanalysis has tried (or failed) to grasp psychic and embodied rhythms, most recently obviously in the work of Nicolas Abraham. We will put Abraham’s own reading of verse by Goethe and Poe into tension with H. D.’s early collection, Sea Garden.

Primary Reading:


H. D., Sea Garden (1916).


Secondary Reading:

Amitai F. Aviram, Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry (Ann Arbor, 1994).


Week Six: Technological Rhythms

Primary Reading:

This concluding seminar will trace the ways in which developing technologies (typewriters, tape loops, samplers) change our understanding of rhythmic embodiment. Among several such instances, we will consider Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’, which argues for a ‘breath-poetics’ that is nonetheless in part predicated upon the typographical possibilities afforded by the typewriter (margins, spacing, etc.); A. R. Ammons’s A Tape for the Turn of the Year, itself typewritten upon a roll of adding machine tape; and the experiments with repetition and resonance of the contemporary American composer Alvin Lucier.

A. R. Ammons, A Tape for the Turn of the Year (1965).


Alvin Lucier, ‘I am Sitting in a Room’ (1969; audio, 15 mins. 23 seconds).

Secondary Reading: