

## Poetry and the Art of Speech, GA 281, Rudolf Steiner

March 29, 1923, “**The Uttering of Syllables and the Speaking of Words – The Syllable: Quantity, Meter and Weight,**” italics/underline added:

The Greek poet, Homer, “... begins his poem with the words: ‘Sing, O Muse, of the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles.’ Homer himself does not sing: Homer is conscious that he must raise his soul to the super-human, the supersensible. The modern poet, Klopstock also “appealed to the invisible – as Goethe constantly did, even if he did not overtly say so. ... // *The supersensible, however, does not speak in words. Words are in every instance prose.* Words are in every instance components of a discourse, components of psychic act which submits to the conditions of logic. Logic exists in order that we may become aware of external beings and occurrences in their external sense-reality; logic must not, therefore, intrude upon spiritual reality. The moment we arrive by means of logic at a prose sentence we must feel the solid earth under our feet. For the spiritual does not speak in human words. *The spiritual world goes only as far as the syllable, not as far as the word.* Thus we can say that the poet is in a curious position. The poet has to make use of words, since these are after all the instruments of human speech: but in making use of words he necessarily deserts his proper artistic domain. He can only achieve his aim if *he leads the word back to syllable-formation. In the quantities, meters and weight of syllable-formation – this is the region where the word has not yet become word, but still submits to the musical, imaginative and plastic, to a speech-transcendent spirituality – there the poet holds sway.* And when the poet has to make use of words, he feels inwardly how he has to lead word-formations back to the region that he left under the necessity of passing from syllable to word. *He feels that through rhyme, through the entire configuration of the verse, he must again make good what is lost when the word abandons the concrete quantities and weight that belong to the syllable, and round it out artistically, imparting form and harmony. ...*”

“*The declaimer or reciter, as the interpreter of the poet’s art must give special attention to what I have just described. He has to conduct what comes before him as a poetical composition, which obviously communicates through words, back to quantity, meter and the weight of the syllables. What then flows out into the words has to be consciously rounded out so as to accord with the verse-structure and rhyme.* In our own age, with its lack of artistic feeling, there has arisen a curious kind of declamatory-recitative art – a prosaic emphasis on the prose-sense, something quite unartistic. The real poet always goes back from the prosaic or literal to the musical or plastic. *Before he*

*committed the words of a poem to paper, Schiller always experienced a wordless, indeterminate melody, a soul-experience of melody.* As yet without words, it flowed along melodically like a musical theme, onto which he then threaded the words. One might conjecture that Schiller could have conjured the most varied poems, as regards verbal content, out of the same musical theme. And to rehearse his iambic verse-dramas, *Goethe stood in front of his actors with a baton, like a conductor, considering the formation of sound, the balance of the syllables, the musical rhythm and time-signature to be the essential, rather than the literal meaning.* For this reason it has become necessary for our own spiritual stream to return to a true art of recitation and declamation, where what has been debased through the means of expression imposed upon the poet to the level of mere prose can once again be raised, so as to regain the level of a supersensible formative and musical experience.”

March 29, 1923, “**The Interaction of Breathing and Blood-Circulation**”:

“Every poetic act, every forming act of poetry ultimately rests on this ratio between breathing, as inwardly experienced, and the inner experience of the circulation of the blood. *Subconsciously our breath counts the pulse-beats; and subconsciously the pulse-beats count the breaths dividing and combining, combining and dividing to mark out the meter and the syllable-quantities.* It is not that the manifestations of poetry in speech adapt themselves so as to conform either to respiration or to the circulation of the blood: but rather the ratio between the two. *The configuration of syllables may be quite irregular, but in poetry they stand in a certain ratio to one another, essentially similar to that between breathing and circulation.*

“We can see this in the case where poetry first comes before us, in what is perhaps the most congenial and readily comprehensible form – the hexameter. Here we can see how the first three verse-feet and the caesura stand in a mutual ratio of four to one. The hexameter repeats this ratio of blood-circulation to breathing a second time. Man receives the spiritual into his own inner processes and inner activities when he creates poetry out of what he is at every moment of his earthly life: a product of breathing and blood-circulation. *He articulates this artistically through the syllables in quantity and meter. And we approach intensification and relaxation, tension and release, in a properly artistic way when we allow fewer or more syllables to the unit of breath.\* And these will then balance each other out in accordance with their inherent natural proportions. In other words, we must adjust the timing of the verse in the right way.*”

\* (My experience suggests that what is meant is that – for example – tetrameter calls upon four syllables per unit of breath; trimeter three; pentameter, five; etc.)

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