

Aristotelian Rhythm in Rome (1st century BC - 1st century AD) - part 3

Saturday 10 September 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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Rhythm as Prolongation of Breath - Cicero's *De oratore* (1st c. BC)

Then Cicero comes back to Aristotle's naturalistic definition of the period as "that which can be rounded forth in one breath" and Plato's view which he abruptly re-introduces by praising the order of the universe (3.44.179) and tying the functioning of language with that of nature. In oratory, rhythm must follow the compass of the breath, "for the stoppage of the breath, and the confined play of the lungs, introduced periods and the pointing of words," which constitute replicas in human beings of the cosmic order, the periodic return of seasons and planets.

It happens likewise in all parts of language, that a certain agreeableness and grace are attendant on utility, and, I may say, on necessity; for the stoppage of the breath, and the confined play of the lungs, introduced periods and the pointing of words. This invention gives such gratification, that, if unlimited powers of breath were granted to a person, yet we could not wish him to speak without stopping; for the invention of stops is pleasing to the ears of mankind, and not only tolerable, but easy, to the lungs. The largest compass of a period, then, is that which can be rounded forth in one breath. This is the bound set by nature. (*De oratore*, 3.46-47.181-182, trans. J.S. Watson)

In speech, rhythm has, according to him, a natural basis. Oratory rhythm is natural "modulation" of the voice; it is "inherent in the human voice."

Since if perpetual and ever-flowing loquacity [*illa sine intervallis loquacitas perennis et profluens*], without any pauses, is to be thought rude and unpolished, what other reason is there why it should be disliked, except that Nature herself modulates [*modulatur*] the voice for the human ear? and this could not be the case unless [rhythm was inherent] in the human voice [*nisi inest numerus in voce*]. (*De oratore*, 3.48.185, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

If some metric feet happen to be heard in a speech, it does not matter as long as “the compass of [the] sentence [is] not shorter than the ear expects, nor longer than [the] strength and breath will allow.”

And if [these feet] [*illi pedes*] are observed at the beginning and at the conclusion of sentences, the intermediate [feet] may be disregarded; only let the compass of your sentence not be shorter than the ear expects, nor longer than your strength and breath will allow. (*De oratore*, 3.49.191, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

Should this rule of the measuring by the breath be followed, then the speech will be efficient because it will meet the natural expectations of the hearers, since “there is nothing which so naturally affects our minds as rhythms and notes.”

All people are accordingly moved, not only by words artfully arranged [*verbis arte positis*], but also by [rhythms] [*numerus*] and the sounds of the voice [*vocibus*]. How few are those that understand the science of [rhythms] and measures [*qui teneat artem numerorum ac modorum*]! [...] there is nothing which so naturally affects our minds as [rhythms and notes] [*quam numeri atque voces*], by which we are excited, and inflamed, and soothed, and thrown into a state of languor, and often moved to cheerfulness or sorrow; the most exquisite power of which is best suited to poetry and music. (*De oratore*, 3.50-51.196-197, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

A comment made in *Brutus*, another late dialogue (46 BC), sheds some more light on the role of nature in the definition of oratory rhythm. Cicero cites Isocrates (436 – 338 BC) as being the first to have differentiated between musical/poetic and oratory rhythm. The latter was, he says, characterized by “a certain measure and rhythm” but these were not produced by art, there were not so to speak, artificial, as in music and poetry, but natural “for mere nature itself measures and limits our sentences by a convenient compass of words.”

When the professors therefore, abovementioned were in the decline of life, Isocrates made his appearance, whose house stood open to all Greece as the *School of Eloquence*. [...] He composed many valuable specimens of his art, and taught the principles of it to others; and not only excelled his predecessors in every part of it, but first discovered that [a certain measure and rhythm] should be observed in prose, though totally different [from verse] [*tum primus intellexit etiam in soluta oratione, dum versum effugeres, modum tamen et numerum quendam oportere servari*]. Before him, the structure [*structura*] and [rhythm] [*numerus*] of words was unknown;—or if there are any traces of it to be discovered, they appear to have been made without design; which, perhaps, will be thought a beauty:—but whatever it may be deemed, it was, in the present case, the effect rather of native genius, or of accident, than of art and observation. For mere nature itself will measure and limit [*comprehendit concluditque*] our sentences by a convenient compass of words; and when they are thus confined to a moderate flow of expression, they will frequently have a [rhythmical cadence] [*cadit etiam plerumque numero*]. (*Brutus*, 32-34, trans. E. Jones, my mod.)

Cicero then explains what he means by these natural measures and limits that give a “rhythmical cadence” to speech: like in the previous passage of *De oratore*, the oratory rhythm is doubly determined by nature since it is based on respiration when it is produced and on hearing when it is perceived.

For the ear alone can decide what is full and complete, and what is deficient; and the course of our language will necessarily be regulated by our breath, in which it is excessively disagreeable, not only to fail, but even to labour. (*Brutus*, 34, trans. E. Jones)

The rhythmic regularity that ensues from this naturalistic rule must not be exaggerated but a last passage of *De oratore* may be yet quoted here because it prefigures how this question will be treated in Modern Times. The alternation of breath reflects the periodic return of celestial bodies but it does not entail yet a complete regularity. The link seems more metaphorical than substantial. However a detail in Cicero’s reasoning, which did not escape Nietzsche’s attention in his research on *Quantitirenden Rhythmik* (1870-1872) (see next volume), is quite intriguing. While presenting a quite loose conception of rhythm, Cicero introduces the comparison with falling drops of water (*cadentibus guttis*) in contrast with the continuous flowing of a river to explain what makes rhythm: the delimitation of intervals in a flow or movement. “Distinction, and strokes *at equal or often varied intervals*, constitute rhythm” (my emphasis). Ancient metrics is certainly not yet what it will become only in 17th century through normalization of music and poetry. What makes rhythm remains the loose and fluent succession of elements, clauses and periods. But the idea of an absolutely regular repetition of beats here pops up maybe for the first time in Western history.

But in an uninterrupted continuation of sound there is no [rhythm] [*numerus autem in continuatione nullus est*]; distinction [*distinctio*], and strokes [*percussio*] at equal or often varied intervals [*aequalium et saepe variorum intervallorum*], constitute [rhythm] [*numerus conficit*]; which we may remark in the falling of drops of water [*in cadentibus guttis*], because they are distinguished by intervals [*quod intervallis distiguuntur*], but which we cannot observe in the rolling stream of a river [*in amni praecepitante*]. But as this unrestrained composition of words [*continuatio verborum*] is more eligible and harmonious [*aptior et iucundior*], if it be distinguished into parts and members [*si est articulis membrisque distincta*], than if it be carried on without intermission [*continuata*], [those members ought to be measured in the same manner] [*membra illa modificata esse debebunt*]; for if those at the end are shorter, the compass as it were of the words is made irregular; the compass, I say, for so the Greeks denominate these [revolutions of speech] [*has orationis conversiones*]; the subsequent clauses in a sentence, therefore, ought to be equal to the antecedent, the last to the first; or, which has a better and more pleasing effect, of a greater length. (*De oratore*, 3.48.186, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

Rhythm as Political Device - Cicero’s *De oratore* (1st c. BC)

The question of the ethical and political value of oratory is not frontally addressed in *De oratore*. But Cicero provides sufficient hints on his view to make it clear. He comes back to the issue in the *Orator*.

At one point in the discussion in *De oratore*, Book 3, the character Crassus sketches a swift sociological description of the development and use of rhetoric in Athens in the 5th and the 4th centuries. Naturally, this description reflects more the current Roman than the earlier Greek situation but it serves to introduce Cicero's answer to Lucretius, Atticus and all those praising private retreat at the expense of public service and politics. This attitude, he says, is the result of the aristocracy "being excluded from public employments, as from business, by the state of the times." This statement shows a very clear awareness of the ongoing "domestication" of the Roman aristocracy at the end of the Republic by the new masters competing for absolute power—a social and political change Cicero is fighting against with all his strength.

But as men accustomed to constant and daily employment, when they are hindered from their occupation by the weather, betake themselves to play at ball, or dice, or draughts, or even invent some new game of their own to amuse their leisure; so they, being either excluded from public employments, as from business, by the state of the times, or being idle from inclination, gave themselves up wholly, some to the poets, some to the geometers, some to music [...] But, because there were some, and those not a few, who either were eminent in public affairs, through their twofold excellence in acting and speaking, excellences which are indeed inseparable, as Themistocles, Pericles, Theramenes; or who, though they were not employed themselves in public affairs, were teachers of others in that science, as Gorgias, Thrasymachus, Isocrates; there appeared others who, being themselves men of abundant learning and ingenuity, but averse to political business and employments, derided and despised the exercise of oratory; at the head of which party was Socrates. (*De oratore*, 3.15.58, trans. J.S. Watson)

No wonder, then, if he rejects the hedonism of the old Cyrenaic school as much as the more recent Epicureanism which both begin to attract a lot of followers in Roman society. However, whatever the reasons are, either out of polite respect for his brother and close friends to whom the dialogue is dedicated or more profound philosophical motives, strikingly, this rejection is not based on moral grounds. Only the efficiency of oratory is at stake. A known-supporter of Epicureanism would have none of the qualities required to exercise influence "in public councils," lead "the administration of government," and convince any Roman audience. The ethics of rhetoric is based on plain empirical pragmatism.

Of those which remain, that philosophy which has undertaken the patronage of pleasure, however true it may appear to some, is very unsuitable for that personage of whom we are forming a conception, and whom we would have to be of authority in public councils, a leader in the administration of government, a consummate master of thought and eloquence, as well in the senate, as in popular assemblies, and in public causes. Yet no injury shall be done to that philosophy by us; for it shall not be repelled from the mark at which it wishes to aim, but shall repose quietly in its gardens, where it wishes, and where, reclining softly and delicately, it calls us away from the rostra, from the courts of justice, and from the senate, and perhaps wisely, especially in such times of the republic as these. But my present inquiry is not which philosophy is the nearest to truth, but which is the best suited to the orator. (*De oratore*, 3.17.64, trans. J.S. Watson)

Cicero rejects as well Stoicism, the other dominant philosophical trend in the Roman aristocracy of the time, for the same kind of practical reasons. Stoic philosophers have "alone, of all the

philosophers, declared eloquence to be virtue and wisdom” but they “do not admit that any person is wise” and therefore, paradoxically, prevent any possibility to convince people by addressing them with a speech. There is still too much of skepticism and Socratic irony in Stoic philosophy that makes it unfit for efficient oratory. Moreover, Stoics’ view on truth makes them adopt too sophisticated “manner of speaking” which is “dry, strange unsuited to the ear of the populace, obscure, barren, jejune, and altogether of that species which a speaker cannot use to a multitude.”

The Stoics, too, whom I by no means disapprove, I notwithstanding dismiss [...] I feel grateful to them on this account, that they alone, of all the philosophers, have declared eloquence to be virtue and wisdom. But there are two peculiarities in their doctrine, which are quite unsuitable to that orator whom we are forming; one, that they pronounce all who are not wise, to be slaves, robbers, enemies, and madmen, and yet do not admit that any person is wise; (but it would be very absurd to trust the interests of an assembly of the people, or of the senate, or any other body of men, to one to whom none of those present would appear to be in their senses, none to be citizens, none to be freemen;) the other, that they have a manner of speaking which is perhaps subtle, and certainly acute, but for an orator, dry, strange, unsuited to the ear of the populace, obscure, barren, jejune, and altogether of that species which a speaker cannot use to a multitude. (*De oratore*, 3.18.65-66, trans. J.S. Watson)

This purely pragmatic view of ethics seems, in a few instances, balanced by a stress on the morality of the orator himself. Right at the beginning of the dialogue, for example, Crassus states that the composition technique is not sufficient by itself. The orator must be educated in many disciplines, above all in law and philosophy, particularly the “division concerned with human life and manners” (1.13.69).

But he falls short of explicitly professing that the orator should be, so to speak, the moral guide of the state. Besides, this praise of philosophy does not entail any particular philosophical commitment. Cicero only emphasizes the pragmatic consequences of a lack of liberal education. When wide knowledge of law, philosophy, history and poetry is missing, the orator cannot properly arrange his speech. He literally lacks rhythm and sounds “ridiculous” and “childish.”

To begin with, a knowledge of very many matters must be grasped, without which oratory is but an empty and ridiculous swirl of verbiage : and the distinctive style has to be formed, not only by the choice of words, but also by the arrangement of the same [*non solum electione, sed etiam constructione verborum*]. [...] For it is from knowledge that oratory must derive its beauty and fullness, and unless there is such knowledge, well-grasped and comprehended by the speaker, there must be something empty and almost childish in the utterance. (*De oratore*, 1.5.17-20, trans. J.S. Watson)

Hence rhetorical technique must be accompanied by another one, applied this time to the orator. Before being able to shape the language as he wishes, to give it proper rhythms, and influence or manipulate his audience, he must develop his skills first and, so to speak, rhythmize himself by a series of exercises such as reading poetry and declaiming, translating Greek speeches into Latin, studying good actors’ elocution, training memory, studying common law/civil right, constitutions, treaties, and shedding a bit of fine humor on his speeches, “like a sprinkle of salt in the food.”

(1.34.154-159) We understand why Quintilian will soon be able to transform Cicero's rhetoric in a mere educational technique.

A little further down in the dialogue, another character, Antonius, disagrees with Crassus on the need to have such a thorough knowledge of common law and extended learning in liberal disciplines, which, in his opinion, are far too large to be mastered without not dragging the orator astray from his path (1.59.250). But he agrees with him on most practical aspects, especially on ornamentation (*elocutio*) (1.51.260 about Demosthenes pronunciation and 1.51.261 about his rhythm) and delivery (*actio*) i.e. the need of mastering the gesture and the elegance of good actors like Roscius, as well as one's voice, provided that the "young devotees of eloquence" do not start acting (1.59.251) and do not believe that voice is the only device of eloquence (1.61.259).

Can we then describe Cicero as a sheer empiricist and an ethical and political agnostic? Is the ideal orator only that one who succeeds in influencing or manipulating the audience he is addressing? Is, subsequently, rhythm only a practical tool?

Actually this would be quite untrue but Cicero's ultimate ethical and political perspective is difficult to grasp because, in the *De oratore*, it is most of the time hidden behind analyses and descriptions which are meant to be objective. It is more explicit in *Orator* where he opposes to his critics an "ideal orator" who would not be only a master in his art but would have also a deep moral commitment to the aristocratic values.

Although himself a *homo novus*, Cicero is imbued with the traditional ethical and political views of the Roman aristocracy. His thought rests on commitment of individuals to the service of the state, the *Res Publica*, and remains attached to debate and collective decision making—as long as it stays within the limits of the aristocratic group and respects the hierarchy of age and honorability. Therefore, Cicero simultaneously rejects any abusive and demagogic use of oratory, such as Clodius' or Milo's, and opposes the rising of military and financial power, such as Pompey's, Caesar's and Crassus', at the expense of the equitable power sharing among the great Roman families. But his response to the political challenges of the time is desperate, weak and soon to be obsolete. It consists in promoting, on the one hand, against the rising of vertical military and financial power, the oratory technique of debate and persuasion among peers, and manipulation of lower crowds, and, on the other hand, the figure of the ideal orator, against the abusive use of rhetorical manipulation by agitators without principles and scruples. As much as ornamentation, rhythm is therefore a plain political device.

The collapse of the *Res Publica* due to the struggle between *imperatores* will soon rid the aristocracy of the involvement of the Roman people in politics and therefore of demagogues, but it will also destroy its own political liberty for the sole benefit of the new monarch and, subsequently, empty the debate between peers as much as the address to the common citizens of their political meaning. The conditions for the fragile equilibrium between the pragmatic techniques of persuasion and the higher morality of the orator will vanish altogether. Rhetoric and its particular rhythms, naturally, will not disappear but its uses will never have the same meaning again. It will stay a part of classical education and will be practiced in court or local assemblies but never as a full-fledged political tool. Around 95 AD, Quintilian (c. 35 – c. 100 AD) will provide the classical textbook on rhetoric that will be used throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance in schools. But rather than intervening to defend the state or even pleading political causes, he will content himself with presenting the virtues

of rhetoric for a sound education. Rhetoric will be later revitalized by Christian orators but on very different grounds based—at least for a certain period of time—on purely religious objectives.

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