

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

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Between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, rhythm began to be understood exclusively under its Platonic-Aristotelian guise. Rhythm defined as order of movement or succession of time-lengths set up the general theoretical framework within which reflection was to remain in the West until the 18th century. The *Platonic metric paradigm* became dominant, at the expense of the *Democritean physical paradigm* but also of the *Aristotelian poetic paradigm*. The former disappeared abruptly but the latter, at least during a certain period of time, still produced a few noticeable offspring that I will try to bring to light as much as possible.

Rhuthmós as Numerus

A lawyer by profession, deeply involved in public affair—he was a prominent senator and was elected consul for 63 BC—Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 - 43 BC) was less interested than Lucretius, his contemporary, in physics, although we have proof that he read the *De rerum natura*. Since he was mainly concerned with rhetoric, law and political philosophy, he had a much better understanding of language, at least in public speech. Yet his reflection on poetics was quite limited.

His main dialogue on rhetoric, *De oratore*, was written in 55 BC after his return from exile. There are lesser works, the *Orator* and the *Brutus* also known as *De claris oratibus*, which were both composed in 46 BC, three years before his death, and the *Topics* which presents a treatment of common rhetorical topics. To these we should add also an earlier dialogue entitled *De inventione* written in 84 BC when he was still a young *homo novus* making his way up in the Republic. The latter met with great success in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but Cicero rejected it when he wrote *De oratore*, which he felt more refined and mature.

From a rhythmological viewpoint, the most striking features of these dialogues are the importance given by Cicero to rhythm but also the particular way he defines it.

Cicero, as his contemporary Lucretius, replicates the common language use that translates *ῥυθμός* as *numerus*, which implicitly makes rhythm a category depending on number. But he is a little bit more specific. For instance, in *De oratore*, Book 1, he clearly distinguishes in music between

“*numeri* – rhythms,” “*voces* – notes,” and “*modi* – measures/meters.”

Nearly all elements, now forming the content of arts, were once without order or correlation: in music, for example, rhythms, [notes] and measures [*ut in musicis numeri et voces et modi*]; [...] in literature, the study of poets, the learning of histories, the explanation of words and proper intonation in speaking them; and lastly in this very theory of oratory, invention, style, arrangement, memory and delivery, once seemed to all men things unknown and widely separate one from another. (*De oratore*, 1.42.187, trans. E.W. Sutton, my mod.)

When, in Book 3, he discusses Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* passage on the use of poetic meters in oratory, he also differentiates “*numeri*” from “*percussiones* – beats,” and “*pedes* – feet.”

There is a great variety of [rhythms] [*numeri*], your favourite Aristotle, Catulus, inclines to banish from oratorical language the frequent use of the iambus and the trochee; which, however, fall of themselves naturally into our common discourse and conversation [*in orationem sermonemque nostrum*]; but the strokes of time [*percussiones* – beating] in those [rhythms] [*eorum numerorum*] are remarkable, and the feet short [*et minuti pedes*]. He therefore principally invites us to the heroic measure, [spurious passage] in which we may proceed with impunity two feet [*pedes*] only, or a little more, lest we plainly fall into verse, or the resemblance of verse. (*De oratore*, 3.47.182, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

Almost ten years later, in the *Orator*, Cicero explicitly translates *rhuthmós* by *numerus*. A rhythm is then defined as any temporal arrangement that “falls under the measuring of the ear,” that is, that has a certain “number,” though this “number” is quite different from that in poetry, as we shall see.

For whatever falls under the measuring of the ear [*sub aurium mensuram aliquam cadit*], though it bears no resemblance to verse [*etiamsi abest a uersu*]¹—which in oratory would be a fault [*uitium*]²—is called rhythm [*numerus uocatur*], ῥυθμός in Greek [*qui Graece ῥυθμός dicitur*]. (*Orator*, 67, my trans.)

I think that these few pieces of evidence already show that the Ciceronian *numerus* is not to be confused with “measure,” “meter,” “feet,” nor “beat”; that it entails a larger meaning which encompasses these particular concepts; that, as Cicero himself notices, this makes it clearly the Latin equivalent for *rhuthmós*; and that it is therefore better translated as “rhythm” than “numerus” or as any other of its sub-concepts. I say *better translated* but the reader must keep in mind that, due to the use in Latin of a word that also means number, the idea of number and proportion must therefore always be included in that of rhythm. It is as if Cicero and Latin authors by using *numerus* made come into view the arithmetical aspect of the Platonic-Aristotelian concept of *rhuthmós* which was already present but still encapsulated in a term which, due to its theoretical history but also to its mere morphology, had first meant impermanent form of something flowing. In this respect, the classical translation in different European languages of *numerus* by number was not completely erroneous; its sole but crippling handicap was to erase the link with *rhuthmós* and to make the translation from Greek to Latin sound as a break when it was only a very progressive change of

balance in the Roman mind.

Rhythm From Poetics to Rhetoric - Cicero's *De oratore* (1st century BC)

It is worth noting that *De oratore* begins with a discussion on the relation between oratory and poetry, i.e. the two sides of Aristotle's works on language, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.

In some instances, Crassus, the main character who represents Cicero in the dialogue, considers rhetoric as dependent upon poetics. He recalls that music and poetry were bound together in the "former ages" and that the musician-poets aimed at pleasing the ear simultaneously by "rhythm of words and measure of notes." This pleasurable effect of rhythm and measure, i.e. "word period" and "regulation of voice," was then naturally transferred to oratory, "as far as the strictness of prose will admit." Historically speaking, oratory rhythm grew from poetic rhythm in which all of its main elements were already present.

For musicians, who were also the poets of former ages, contrived these two things as the ministers of pleasure, verse, and song; that they might banish satiety from the sense of hearing by gratification, arising from [the rhythm of words and the measure of notes] [*verborum numero et vocum modo*]. These two things, therefore, (I mean the [regulation] of the voice [*vocis moderationem*], and the [word period] [*verborum conclusionem*],) should be transferred, they thought, as far as the strictness of prose will admit, from poetry to oratory [*a poetica ad eloquentiam*]. (*De oratore*, 3.44.174, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

This explains why, in these instances, Crassus takes explicitly poetic rhythm as model for oratory rhythm. A successful orator "produces in his speech a sort of rhythm and poetry." In order to be efficient, the orator must rouse the audience's interest and pleasure by reaching the same kind of pragmatic quality as verse.

Whom then do men regard with awe? What speaker do they behold with astonishment? At whom do they utter exclamations? Whom do they consider as a deity, if I may use the expression, amongst mortals? Him who speaks distinctly, explicitly, copiously, and luminously, both as to matter and words; who produces in his [speech] a sort of rhythm and [poetry] [*in ipsa oratione quasi quendam numerum versumque conficiunt*]; who speaks, as I call it, gracefully [*ornate*]. (*De oratore*, 3.14.53, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

Crassus even takes into account the possible involuntary contamination of oratory rhythm by meters. The latter, he says, "will naturally come into your speech" but this is not important as long as the orator "let the rhythms be varied and diversified." In other words, meters are allowed when they are subordinated to the larger rhythmic organization of the speech, especially in the conclusion of the sentence.

Nor let the paeon or heroic foot [*paeon aut herous*] give you any alarm; they will naturally come

into your [speech] [*occurrent orationi*]; they will, I say, offer themselves, and will answer without being called; only let it be your care and practice, both in writing and speaking, that your sentences [*sententiae*] be concluded with verbs, and that the junction of those verbs with other words proceed with [rhythms] that are long and free [*ab proceris numeris ac liberis*], especially the heroic feet, the first paeon, or the cretic; but let the [rhythm] be varied and diversified [*sed varie distincteque considat*]; for it is in the conclusion that sameness is chiefly remarked. (*De oratore*, 3.49.191, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

Thus, at first, poetic rhythm and oratory rhythm do not seem to be opposed. The latter grew from the former, they both share some pragmatic qualities—producing pleasure—and they sometimes efficiently mix, at least up to a certain point. But Cicero's argumentation most of the time goes in another direction. When he turns his attention to practice, he clearly contrasts oratory with poetic rhythms.

The orator and the poet, he says, are very much alike in ornamentation. But while the poet is “richer in word choice,” he is more encumbered or “fettered by the rhythm” than the orator.

The truth is that the poet is a very near kinsman of the orator, rather more heavily fettered as regards rhythm [*numeris astrictior paulo* – lit. *somewhat contracted by the rhythm*], but with ampler freedom in his choice of words, while in the use of many sorts of ornament he is his ally and almost his counterpart ; in one respect at all events something like identity exists, since he sets no boundaries or limits to his claims, such as would prevent him from ranging whither he will with the same freedom and licence as the other. (*De oratore*, 1.16.70, trans. E.W. Sutton)

Crassus-Cicero specifies the difference between oratory and poetic rhythms by saying that the former are looser and freer than the latter which are fettered and confined. In oratory, the most striking thoughts and expressions come one after the other by mere virtue of style. The harmonic placing and disposing of words is acquired by writing “in a rhythm and measure proper to oratory as distinct from poetry.”

All the thoughts and expressions, which are the most brilliant in their several kinds, must needs flow up in succession to the point of our pen; then too the actual marshalling and arrangement of words [*tum ipsa conlocatio conformatioque verborum*] is made perfect in the course of writing, in a rhythm and measure [*numero et modo*] proper to oratory as distinct from poetry. (*De oratore*, 1.33.151, trans. E.W. Sutton)

Poetic rhythms depend on meters which impose a rigid frame on expression. Public speech rhythms instead are looser and more natural. But this very difference presupposes that both of them do organize speech as succession of time-lengths. Both give order to the movement of language.

But these [rhythms] [*haec/numero*] [in oratory] do not require such sharp-sighted care and diligence as that which must be used by poets, whom necessity compels, as do the very [rhythms]

and measures] [*numeri ac modi*], so to include the words in versification, as that no part may be, even by the least breath, shorter or longer than the metre absolutely demands [*brevius aut longius quam necesse est*]. [Speech] [*oratio*] has a more free scope, and is plainly, as it is called, *soluta*, unconfined, yet not so that it may fly off or wander without control, but may regulate itself without being absolutely in fetters; for I agree in this particular with Theophrastus, who thinks that [speech] [*orationem*], at least such as is to a certain degree polished and well constructed, [ought not be confined by strict metrical rules but on the contrary be rhythmic] [*non astricta, sed remissius numerosam esse oporteret*]. (*De oratore*, 3.48.184, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

There are analog differences and similarities between oratory and music rhythms, which is not surprising since in Antiquity poetry is commonly included under music (Spitzer, 1963, p. 29, n. 38). Quintus Roscius, who was a famous Roman actor (126 – 62 BC), is said to be “fettered” (*astrictus*) by musical rhythm and poetic meter, exactly as the poet in the previous passage.

Roscius is fond of saying, that, the older he grows, the slower he will make [the flute-player’s measures] [*tardiores tibicinis modos*] and [the more moderate his chanted parts] [*et cantus remissiores*]. Now if he, fettered [*astrictus* – lit. tied] as he is by a definite system of [rhythm and feet] [*certa quadam numerorum moderatione et pedum*], is none the less thinking out some relief for his old age, how much more easily can we not merely slacken our methods, but change them altogether! (*De oratore*, 1.60.254, trans. E.W. Sutton, my mod.)

In one of his last dialogues, the *Orator* (46 BC), Cicero returns to the issue of the similarities and differences between oratory and poetry. He again starts with a historical remark, which is an allusion to the development of oratory in Rome since the end of the 2nd century and the innovations introduced by Caius Gracchus but which also shows its proximity to poetry: “Rhythm is now as familiar to the orator, as to the poet.” As we already pointed out above, the orator too uses his ear to measure his speech: “Whatever falls under the measuring of the ear, though it bears no resemblance to verse is called rhythm – *ῥυθμός* in Greek.” As Aristotle comparing in *Poetics* the style of some scientists writing in verse (Empedocles) and that of the Socratic dialogues, Cicero underlines the fact that philosophers as Plato and Democritus were considered to have “a nearer resemblance to poetry than the style of the Comedians who, excepting their little verse, have nothing different from the style of conversation.”

There is much the same difference between eloquence and poetry; for the poets likewise have started the question: What it is which distinguishes them from the Orators? It was formerly supposed to be their [rhythm] [*numero*] and [verse] [*versu*] : but [rhythm] [*ipse numerus*] is now as familiar to the orator, as to the poet; for whatever falls under the [measuring] of the ear [*sub aurium mensuram*], though it bears no resemblance to verse [*abest a versu*]*—*which in oratory would be a capital fault*—*is called [rhythm – *numerus* vocatur, *ῥυθμός* in Greek]. In the opinion of some, therefore, the [speech] [*locutionem*] of Plato and Democritus, on account of it’s majestic flow, and the splendor of it’s ornaments, [though it is not in verse] [*etsi absit a versu*], has a nearer resemblance to poetry [*poema*] than the style of the Comedians [*comicum poetarum*], who, excepting their [little verse] [*versiculi*], have nothing different from the style of conversation [*cotidiani sermonis*]. (*Orator*, 67, trans. E. Jones, my mod.)

However this first approach, which is directly borrowed from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, once again gives

way to a more practical view which resolutely opposes poetic and oratory rhythms. Because she is fettered by meter, he argues, poetry “takes greater liberties [than oratory] both in making and compounding word.” She is also more affected and “frequently administers to the pleasure of her hearers, more by the pomp and lustre of her expressions, than by the weight and dignity of her sentiments.”

[Verse], however, is far from being the principal merit of the poets; though it is certainly no small recommendation, that, while they pursue all the beauties of eloquence, the harmony of their [verse is far more regular and exact - *cum versu sit astrictior*]. But, though the language of poetry is equally grand and ornamental with that of an orator, she undoubtedly takes greater liberties both in making and compounding word; and frequently administers to the pleasure of her hearers, more by the pomp and lustre of her expressions, than by the weight and dignity of her sentiments. (*Orator*, 67-68, trans. E. Jones, my mod.)

This repetition of the same line of reasoning reveals Cicero’s fundamental perspective. Between rhetoric and poetics, Cicero clearly decides for the former at the expense of the latter even if he is not unaware of some of their common features. Whereas Aristotle wanted to address the question of “poetry in itself” and opened a new field of reflection on language which was independent from rhetoric, Cicero looks into it from a rhetorical viewpoint. As oratory, he says, poetry supposes “judgment and a proper choice of words,” while the only important difference between them is in their respective use. Unlike “the philosopher, the sophist, the historian, and the poet,” the orator is him “who in the Forum, and in public debates, can so speak, as to prove (*probare* – lit. to make good, approve, commend), delight (*delectare* – lit. to allure, attract, delight, charm), and force (*flectere* – lit. to bend, turn round) the passions.” To put it in a nutshell, language is a matter of choice and use; it has mainly pragmatic effects. Nothing could be farther from Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Though judgment, therefore, and a proper choice of words, is alike common to both, yet their difference in other respects is sufficiently discernible: but if it affords any matter of doubt (as to some, perhaps, it may) the discussion of it is no way necessary to our present purpose. We are, therefore, to delineate the orator who differs equally from the eloquence of the philosopher, the sophist, the historian, and the poet. He, then, is truly eloquent, (for after *him* we must search, by the direction of Antonius) who in the Forum, and in public debates, can so speak, as to prove, delight, and force the passions [*is qui in foro causisque civilibus ita dicet, ut probet, ut delectet, ut flectat*]. (*Orator*, 68, trans. E. Jones)

Let us recapitulate. Contrary to far too rapid assertions by some specialists (e.g. Formarier, 2014, p. 36 *sq.*), Cicero—and therefore all his followers—does not *radically* oppose oratory rhythm, on the one hand, and verse and meter, on the other. 1. Oratory grew from music/poetry; 2. they both display ornamentation; 3. they both aim at pleasing the audience; 4. moreover, they both fall under the Platonic paradigm: as musical rhythms, poetic and oratory rhythms are considered as organizing sequences of time by numbers and proportions.

Their opposition is only *practical*. Rhythm is opposed to meter *in oratory*. Therefore, the sole difference between them concerns the kind of succession they imply. Music and poetry follow traditional rules concerning the succession and association of various time-lengths, or long and short

syllables, “the rigid measures of the rhythmicians and musicians,” while eloquence rests on a succession of larger units, as *periodi* (complete sentences, periods), which here are called *absolutas conversiones* or in other instances *conclusiones* (complete revolutions), and *membris* (parts, members of a sentence, clauses), which are the shortest sections of speech but still have “to be fettered by rhythms.” As the terms which denote them show, all these elements must be finally organized according to number and proportions in order to reflect the periodic return of the seasons and the perfect circular movements of the celestial bodies.

To this standard, then, proceeded Crassus, is your [speech] [*oratio*] to be formed, as well by the practice of speaking, as by writing, which contributes a grace and refinement to other excellences, but to this in a more peculiar manner. Nor is this a matter of so much labour as it appears to be; nor are our phrases [to be governed by the rigid measures of the rhythmicians and musicians] [*nec sunt haec rhythmicorum aut musicorum acerrima norma dirigenda*]; and the only object for our endeavours is, that [our speech may not be loose or rambling] [*ne fluat oratio, ne vagetur*], that it neither stops within too narrow a compass, nor run out too far; that they be distinguished into clauses [*ut membris distinguatur*], and have complete [revolutions] [*ut conversiones habeat absolutas*]. Nor are you to use perpetually this fullness and as it were [these revolutions] of language [*quasi conversione verborum*], but [a speech] is often to be interrupted by minuter clauses [*saepe carpenda membris minitioribus oratio est*], which very clauses [*quae ipsa membra*] are still [to be fettered by rhythms] [*sunt numeris vincienda*]. (*De oratore*, 3.49.190, trans. J.S. Watson, my mod.)

This shift from a general to a more practical perspective would not be a problem if the primacy was not finally given to the latter upon the former, and therefore to rhetoric upon poetics. Cicero knows of Aristotle’s tense contribution, which quite brilliantly managed to balance the sheer pragmatic view of rhetoric by the resolutely ethical view of poetics. But, as a professional orator and a typical Roman aristocrat less interested, to say the least, in democratic ethics than his predecessor, he tends to lean towards rhetoric and disregard poetics. This, in my opinion, explains why his analyses regularly fall into the traditional dualistic traps concerning language that Aristotle in his *Poetics* yet started to debunk.

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