

Aristotelian Rhythm in Rome (1st century BC - 1st century AD) - part 5

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

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Rhythm as Arrangement of Feet - Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (1st century AD)

Concerning rhythm properly, Quintilian borrows again most of his presentation from Cicero. He first defines rhythm, along with order and connection, as one of the three qualities necessary to the success of a *compositio* - artistic structure.

Further, in all artistic structure there are three necessary qualities [*in omni porro compositione tria sunt genera necessaria*], order, connexion and rhythm [*ordo, iunctura, numerus*]. Of these we will first discuss order, which must be considered in connexion with words taken both singly and in conjunction. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.22, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

Order means the succession of words, connection the phonetic junctions between words, rhythm their overall organization in sections (Gr. *kómma* - Lat. *incisum*), stances (Gr. *kôla* - Lat. *membrum*), and full sentences, periods (Gr. *Períodos* - Lat. *ambitus, circumductum, continuatio, conclusio*).

But the more closely welded style is composed of three elements [*at illa connexa series tres habet formas*]: the comma [*κόμματα*], or as we call it *incisum*, the colon [*κῶλα*], or in Latin *membrum*, and the period [*περίοδον*], which Roman writers call *ambitus, circumductum, continuatio* or *conclusio*. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.22, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

Then, like Cicero, Quintilian distinguishes oratory rhythm from poetic meter, that is, implicitly, rhetoric from poetics. Both are arrangement and connection of words but meter entails “a certain measure” while rhythm does not.

However, let us pass to the consideration of rhythm [*transeamus ad numeros*]. All combination, arrangement and connexion of words [*omnis structura ac dimensio et copulatio vocum*] involves either rhythms (ῥυθμούς which we call *numeri*) [*aut numeris (numeros ῥυθμούς accipi volo)*], or meters [*aut μέτροις - métrois*], that is, a certain measure [*id est dimensione quadam*]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.44-46, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

Yet Quintilian rapidly introduces two innovations. First, whereas Cicero constantly has *numerus*

instead of *rhythmos*, which he writes only as Greek (Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, Or. 20, 67; 51, 170), Quintilian most often uses a Latin transliteration and alternates between *numerus* and *rhythmos* or *rhythmus*. He is one of the first writers, along apparently with Varro (Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary*), providing the first recorded Latin occurrences of this word, which will spread in all European language, at least those exposed to the influence of Latin.

Second, he brings in a new idea that was not in Cicero. Both rhythm and meter can be broken down into feet which are natural in language. Here Quintilian is closer to Aristotle and Aristoxenus than to his mentor. Probably eager to provide a strict scientific description, he considers the feet as their common primary elements.

Now though both rhythm and meter consist of feet [*pedibus*], they differ in more than one respect. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.45, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

At the end of the section dedicated to rhythm, Quintilian goes so far as to consider the syllables as the most basic units of speech.

Rhythm pervades the whole body of prose through all its extent. For we cannot speak without employing the long and short syllables of which feet are composed. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.61, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

Because of their common composition out of feet and syllables, the difference between oratory rhythm and poetic meter may seem at first a bit slim. As a matter of fact, Quintilian sometimes designates as rhythm what we would name today meters and lists them according to the number of primary time-lengths they contain. He writes of a balanced “dactylic [rhythm]” composed of one long syllable and two shorts (2/1+1 or 1+1/2), “paeanic [rhythm]” composed in turn of one long and three shorts (2/1+1+1 or 1+1+1/2), and “iambic and choreic [rhythm]” composed of one long and one short (2/1 or 1/2).

For in the first place rhythm consists of certain lengths of time [*numeri spatio temporum constant*], while metre is determined by the order in which these lengths are arranged [*metra etiam ordine*]. Consequently the one seems to be concerned with quantity and the other with quality. Rhythm may depend on equal balance [*ῥυθμὸς ἐστὶ αὐτὰρ παρ*], as in the case of *dactylic* rhythm [*ut dactylicus*], where one long syllable balances two short, (there are it is true other feet of which this statement is equally true, but the title of *dactylic* has been currently applied to all, while even boys are well aware that a long syllable is equivalent to two beats [*longam esse duorum temporum*] and a short to one [*brevem unius*]) or it may consist of feet in which one portion is half as long again as the other, as is the case with *paeanic* rhythm [*ut paeanicus*] (a *paeon* being composed of one long followed by three shorts, three shorts followed by one long or with any other arrangement preserving the proportion of three beats to two) or finally one part of the foot may be twice the length of the other, as in the case of the *iambus* [*ut iambus*], which is composed of a short followed by a long, or of the *choreus* consisting of a long followed by a short. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.46-48, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

But if both rhythm and meter are based on feet, the arrangement of the former is actually a little bit looser than that of the latter. Rhythm “merely takes into account the measurement of the time,” i.e. it is a quantitative and global arrangement between beginning and end, that is to be invented each time afresh, whereas meter provides a qualitative and traditional disposition which has to be respected and in which no unit can be substituted with any other one.

These feet are also employed by metre [*sunt hi et metrici pedes*], but with this difference, that in rhythm [*rhythmo*] it does not matter whether the two shorts of the *dactyl* precede or follow the long; for rhythm merely takes into account the measurement of the time [*tempus enim solum metitur*], that is to say, it insists on the time taken from its rise to its fall being the same. The measure of verse on the other hand is quite different; the *anapaest* (u u -) or *spondee* (- -) cannot be substituted at will for the *dactyl*, nor is it a matter of indifference whether the *paean* begins or ends with short syllables. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.48, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

Another difference results from the fact that rhythm concerns the whole speech and the sections it is made of, while meter is encompassed by the line. As Aristotle already noticed, oratory rhythm has a holistic dimension.

There are also the following differences, that [rhythms have unlimited space over which they may range] [*rhythmis libera spatia*], whereas the spaces of metre are confined [*metris finita sunt*], and that, whereas metre has certain definite [ends] [*certae clausulae*], rhythm may run on as it commenced until it reaches the point of *μεταβολή* - *metabolê*, or transition to another type of rhythm [*id est transitum ad aliud rhythmici genus*]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.50, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

Speech rhythm is also endowed with a greater freedom concerning the alternation of movement and rest than meter, even if Quintilian notes that such variations are also possible in poetry i.e. when, paradoxically, “the time is measured by the beat of the feet or fingers.” This seems to suggest, incidentally, that what we call the beat or the pulsation existed already in music and poetry but that the execution was probably not as regular in Antiquity as it has become today. This maybe sheds a light on Cicero’s impromptu comparison of rhythm with the falling of drops of water we encountered above, and supports Nietzsche’s allegation who will insist many times on the irregularity of the performance in his research on ancient rhythmic.

[Again rhythms more readily admit of rests – lit. empty times] [*inania quoque tempora rhythmici facilius accipient*] although they are found in metre [*ut metris*] as well. Greater license is, however, admitted [*Maiores tamen illic licentia est*] when the time is measured by the beat of the feet or fingers [*ubi tempora metiuntur et pedum et digitorum ictu*], and the intervals are distinguished by certain symbols indicating the number of shorts contained within a given space: hence we speak of four or five time (τετράσημοι, or πεντάσημοι) and others longer still, the Greek σημεῖον indicating a single beat. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.51, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

This detailed comparison between oratory rhythm and poetic meter culminates with two illuminating remarks. On the one hand, Quintilian underlines the extension of speech rhythm to the body. Rhythm is not limited to words as the meter is, but is translated into delivery, gesture and features, a phenomenon that, strangely if we think of the age old use of rhythm in dance theory, was not taken into account by Cicero.

Further, metre [*metrum*] is concerned with words alone, while rhythm [*rhythmos*] extends also to the motion of the body [*in corporis motu*]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.50, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

On the other hand, this comparison changes somehow the balance between rhetoric and poetics. Unlike Cicero and much like in the passage mentioned above on rhythm in letter and ordinary speech, Quintilian insists on the existence of feet in prose and, some eighteen centuries before Mallarmé, considers that “prose consists of short lines of verse of certain kinds or sections of the same.”

In [the arrangement of oratory speech] [*in compositione orationis*] the [measure] [*dimensio*] should be more definite and obvious to all. Consequently, it depends on feet [*ut pedibus*], by which I mean metrical feet [*et metricis quidem pedibus*], which occur in oratory [*ut oratione*] to such an extent that we often let slip verses [*versus*] of every kind without being conscious of the fact, while everything written in prose [*quod est prosa scriptum*] can be shown by analysis to consist of short lines of verse of certain kinds or sections of the same [*ut quaedam versiculorum genera vel ut membra*]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.52, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

As we will see in the next volume, in *Music and Letters* (1894), Mallarmé will argue that “the line of poetry is all in all, as soon as one writes.” For him, any poetic prose is always “equivalent to a broken line of poetry,” that is, it contains parts of lines. Lines should then be considered as prime elements of any kind of speech, although being of different lengths and belonging to a strictly organized whole. There is no fundamental difference between prose and poetry.

Specialists will probably object that such a suggestion is sheer anachronism. I think on the contrary that Mallarmé’s intuition sheds a new light not only on language but also on an author who has always been considered in the sole perspective of the history of Western rhetoric. His role in this development is unquestionable but, compared to Cicero, there is something new in Quintilian which, in my opinion, has not been sufficiently noticed. While being mostly interested in public speech, he is certainly more conscious than his predecessor of the poetic dimension of language, naturally not because of his interest in the use of metaphors and figures, which is equally shared with Cicero, but because of his extended and profound interest in rhythm.

Interestingly, to prove his point, Quintilian discusses the response Cicero gives, in the *Orator* (70.234) to the criticisms directed at his style by some of his fellow senators, including Brutus, but also probably by people from a younger generation. I am using here Wilfried Stroh’s study which seems to me closer to the truth than those of other specialists (Stroh, 2010, p. 323 sq.). Cicero’s critics were fond of the more austere and formal Attic style and opposed to the so-called Asiatic

oratio, which was more emotional and colored with wordplay. This style was also distinguished by the episodic use of various combinations of feet, especially at the end of clauses (*clausulae*). Specialists now think that both styles did not develop in Greek and was not imported from Greece as it has been believed for a long time, but directly in Latin in Rome.

Anyway, these critics accused Cicero of being bombastic (*inflatus, tumidus*), exaggerated, redundant and superfluous (*redundans, superfluens*). He was, according to them, prone to repeat himself (*in repetitionibus nimius*). Moreover, the structure of his speech lacked vigor (*in compositione fractus*), it was unfettered, sluggish, enervated (*solutus, enervis, elumbis*), it was too sweet and almost devoid of virility (*paene viro mollior*) (Stroh, 2010, p. 323). In short Cicero was an “Asiatic” (*asianus*). One recognizes the two dimensions of ornamentation: first, richness of figures and metaphors; second, arrangement of periods, clauses and words.

In his last works on rhetoric, Cicero defended his case by arguing that his critics, who pretended to imitate Demosthenes’ Attic style, could not prevent their own clients from running away (*Brutus*, 289), that he himself was actually not fond of Asiatic style (*Brutus*, 153), that each orator must produce his own style, that real eloquence needs a perfect balance between rigor and charm, and that the “ideal orator” (*orator perfectus*), in a Platonic sense, actually must master three different kinds of speech, which naturally entailed three kinds of rhythm (*Orator*, 75 *et sq.*). The simple style (*genus tenue, summissum, subtile*) had no rhythm, fewer ornamentation, but it was full of wit and impertinence. The middle style (*genus medium, modicum, temperatum*) entailed more ornaments, especially metaphors, and charming and sweet rhythms (*suavitas*). The grand style (*genus vehemens, grave, amplum*) needed full ornamentation and figures (*ornatus*), richness in expression (*copia*) and ample rhythms. (Stroh, 2010, p. 328)

Quintilian is well aware of the controversy and the theory of the “ideal orator” Cicero finally built in his own defense. He knows that Cicero supported rhythm against meter in oratory, while recognizing that the former was a sort of analogue in prose of the latter in poetry. He also knows that he liked periods that had first growing parts then ended with a small number of meters, especially ditrochee (- u - u) and cretic (- u -), and that his critics reproached him for both these pompous and precious habits. But his reasoning starts from the seeming confusion made by Cicero between rhythm and meter.

Cicero, indeed, frequently asserts that the whole art of prose-structure consists in [rhythms] [*frequentissime dicit totum hoc constare numeris*] and is consequently censured by some critics on the ground that he would fetter our style by the laws of rhythm [*tanquam orationem ad rhythmos adliget*]. For these *numeri*, as he himself expressly asserts, are identical with rhythms [*nam sunt numeri rhythmici, ut et ipse constituit*], and he is followed in this by Virgil, who writes, “Numeros memini, si verba tenerem – [I remember the rhythms, if I recollect the words (my trans.).]” (*Ecl. ix.45*) (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.53-54, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

Thus, Quintilian seems first to dismiss Cicero for presenting rhythm as a strict rule implicating rigid patterning. If Cicero, in this instance, he argues, really means *rhythmus* when he says *numerus*, he is wrong. Rhythm is a much looser kind of arrangement than meter. “Rhythms have no fixed limit or variety of structure” and “oratory will not stoop to be measured by the beat of the foot or the fingers” as music does.

Among others they attack Cicero's statement that the *thunderbolts of Demosthenes would not have such force but for the rhythm[s] [by] which they are whirled and sped upon their way*. [cuius non tam vibrarent fulmina illa, nisi numeris contorta ferrentu] [If by this, i.e. *numeris contorta*, he means *rhythmis contorta*, I do not agree] [*in quo si hoc sentit: "rhythmis contorta," dissentio*]. For rhythms [*nam rhythmī*] have, as I have said, no fixed limit or variety of structure, but run on with the same rise and fall till they reach their end, and the style of oratory will not stoop to be measured by the beat of the foot or the fingers [*oratio non descendet ad crepitum digitorum et pedum*]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.55, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

But the following passage suggests that he does not believe that that was Cicero's opinion—and actually, according to our previous discussion, it is clear that it was not. It looks more like a projection of his critics who attributed to him a false stand and did not understand his real view, with which Quintilian entirely agrees and which is much more balanced than it seems.

On the one hand, by contrast to Cicero's opinion, public speech is indeed made of feet—if only because language consists of long and short syllables. As a matter of fact, as we noticed, Cicero was not unaware of sporadic use of meter in prose or even against it. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it should be reduced to sheer meters either. Quintilian calls those supporting this view "tiresome grammarians."

For example, I have come across tiresome grammarians who attempted to force prose into definite meters, as though it were a species of lyric poetry. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.53, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

On the other hand, public speech is arranged with rhythms which, as Cicero rightly pointed out, are composed of larger units which are different from regular meters but have their own formal requirements.

This fact [that rhythms have no fixed limit and cannot stoop to be measured by the beat of the foot or the fingers] is clearly understood by Cicero, who frequently shows that the sense in which he desires that prose should be rhythmical [*numerosum*] is rather that it should not lack rhythm [*non arrhythmum*; other ver. ἀπάλαιοι - not to be thrown in wrestling], a deficiency which would stamp the author as a man of no taste or refinement [*inscitum atque agreste*], than that it should be tied by definite rhythmical laws, like poetry [*quam enrhythmum*; other ver. *quam ἔνρhythμον, quod poeticum est*]; just as, although we may not wish certain persons to be professional gymnasts, we still do not wish them to be absolutely ignorant of the art of gymnastics [*ἀπάλαιοι* - not to be thrown in wrestling]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.56, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, my mod.)

As already mentioned above, Quintilian finally proposes a middle way between Asiatic and Attic styles, "grammarians" and rhetoricians, primacy of meter and primacy of rhythm. Generally speaking, oratory rhythm is composed of feet but does not follow metric rules, while certain combinations of metric feet at the end of the sentence, as the ditrochee and the cretic used by Cicero,

may be named plain oratory rhythms. These rhythms, he says, are as typical in *elocutio* (expression or style) as the *enthymeme*, syllogism with an unstated premise, in *dispositio* (arrangement of arguments).

But the rounding of the period to an appropriate close which is produced by the combination of feet requires some name; and what name is there more suitable than rhythm [*numerus*], that is to say, the rhythm of oratory [*oratorius numerus*], just as the *enthymeme* is the syllogism of oratory? For my own part, to avoid incurring the calumny, from which even Cicero was not free, I ask my reader, whenever I speak of the rhythm of artistic structure [*de compositionis numero*] (as I have done on every occasion), to understand that I refer to the rhythm of oratory, not of verse [*oratorium dicere intelligar*]. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.57, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

Oratory rhythm is certainly freer than poetic meter, but it does make it easier to elaborate successfully. On the contrary, due to the countless possible combinations, an orator faces more difficulties to reach a satisfying equilibrium than a poet who is guided by strict formal constraints.

On the other hand the management of feet is far more difficult in prose than in verse, first because there are but few feet in a single line of verse which is far shorter than the lengthy periods of prose; secondly because each line of verse is always uniform and its movement is determined by a single definite scheme, whereas the structure of prose must be varied if it is to avoid giving offence by its monotony and standing convicted of affectation. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.60, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

Quintilian finishes his analysis of oratory rhythm by emphasizing the need to pay meticulous attention to the pauses which punctuate the speech and “where the mind takes breath and recovers its energy,” particularly to the beginning and the end of the periods. He entirely agrees, in that respect, with Cicero who cared particularly to avoid any “abruptness at this point” and disliked for that reason Demosthenes’ sudden endings.

Rhythm pervades the whole body of prose through all its extent. For we cannot speak without employing the long and short syllables of which feet are composed. Its presence is, however, most necessary and most apparent at the conclusion of the period, firstly because every group of connected thoughts has its natural limit and demands a reasonable interval to divide it from the commencement of what is to follow: secondly because the ear, after following the unbroken flow of the voice and being carried along down the stream of oratory, finds its best opportunity of forming a sound judgement on what it has heard, when the rush of words comes to a halt and gives it time for consideration. Consequently all harshness and abruptness must be avoided at this point, where the mind takes breath and recovers its energy. It is there that style has its citadel, it is this point that excites the eager expectation of the audience, it is from this that the declaimer wins all his glory. Next to the conclusion of the period, it is the beginning which claims the most care: for the audience have their attention fixed on this as well. (*Institutio oratoria*, 9.4.61-62, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

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In the 1st century AD, the theory of rhythm arrives at a watershed. The former concept of *rhuthmós* experiences its last bloom in the extraordinary work of Lucretius, who is one of the last Roman authors interested in atomist physics. After him, due mainly to the domination of Stoicism which generalizes to the whole universe ideas borrowed from Aristotle such as essential forms and teleological dynamism, this concept is entirely forgotten and disappears from scientific and philosophical sight, until its progressive revivification in the Renaissance, the 17th and 18th centuries (Michon, 2015).

Yet, simultaneously, a new trend of thought is on the rise. This trend, be it in rhetoric or architecture, is mainly Aristotelian. It incorporates basic Platonic features, as the definition of rhythm as time-based order of movement, but its overall framework is borrowed from Aristotle and members of the Peripatetic school such as Aristoxenus or the authors of the *Problems*. Division into time-lengths or sections and numbering of their relations and proportions, even in a loose sense as in rhetoric or a static one in architecture, are now common features.

The first major author contributing to this new trend is Cicero. Compared to Lucretius, Cicero seems to stand in a mirror position at the other end of the philosophical spectrum. Whereas the former proposes a complete system of physics but devoid of a significant theory of language, the latter sketches a full-fledged theory of eloquence without yet paying much attention to physics. Moreover, while Lucretius suggests an ethics based on retreat from the turbulences of the world and development of private friendship, Cicero defends the traditional Roman republican aristocratic ethics, which is a mix between enhancement of personal-familial interests and public service.

But, as far as we are concerned, their respective stands are not equivalent.

1. While Lucretius still defends and promotes the concept of *rhuthmós* and the *Democritean physical paradigm*, Cicero generalizes that of *numerus*. He clearly belongs to the *Platonic metric paradigm* and is one of his most influential disseminator.

2. In a way, Cicero pays much more attention to rhythm in language than Lucretius. Thanks to his practice and theory of rhetoric, he addresses important aspects, which paradoxically were left aside by his contemporary, who was more interested in natural science than theory of language and even poetry. In his discussion of *elocutio*, he makes here and there some brilliant remarks. He recognizes that eloquence probably grew out of poetry and that it shares in any case with it some pragmatic features. He rejects the opposition between language and thought, language and behavior. He is at his best when he reflects on *continuatio* – arrangement of speech. The orator must find, he argues, a non-metrical way to give his *oratio* “rhythmic cadence, roundness, and finish, like verse.” And this specific effect is produced by “tying the thoughts with words in such a manner as to enclose them in a rhythm.” Like Aristotle who invented the metaphor of seasoning of speech to describe the overall effect of rhythm in language, he makes up that of complexion (*quasi color*) of the discourse. Since subject matter and words cannot be separated, rhythm appears then as basic organization of meaning. Rhythmic becomes a fundamental part of semantics.

3. Nevertheless, the role Cicero generally assigns to poetics is quite limited and since his politics is

quite foreign to us, his work has lost most of his former appeal. We saw how Aristotle managed to balance his scientific empiricism and his pragmatic study of public speech by a reflection on democracy and literature, which opened new ethical and political spaces. Contrastingly, for Cicero, rhetoric is not any more a part of the study of language, it is the whole of it, and is considered as main device for the reproduction of aristocracy. Cicero's combined obsession with science of speech and sheer defense of the Roman aristocratic republican system are at odds with the joint interest in literature, "poetry in itself," and democracy—even with the Aristotelian limitation of the term—which we could term "politics in itself," that were already at the center of Aristotle's meditation and that make him still immensely inspiring for us today.

Vitruvius' contribution is much more limited in size than Cicero's but it has had a very important impact on Western culture especially since its recovery during the Renaissance. In the next volume, we will see it reappear in 19th century theories of rhythm. For the time being, let us note that Vitruvius popularizes at the end of the 1st century BC a new use of the term rhythm designating the due proportions of a fixed structure. Although it departs from the common time-based concept of rhythm and introduces the human body as basic standard, its relation to arithmetic and proportions makes it clearly a new extension of the Platonic and Aristotelian paradigm.

Quintilian is the last thinker who plays a significant role in the rhythmological shift that occurs between the first century BC and the first century AD. Most of his contribution constitutes an extensive synthesis of Greek and Roman rhetorical tradition. Besides his own experience as a lawyer and long-time educator, Quintilian heavily borrows from Aristotle and Cicero. He belongs to the *Platonic metric paradigm*.

But because of the collapse of the republican system and the restoration of Monarchy under the guise of the Principate (27 BC – 287 AD), rhetoric has lost its political meaning. Quintilian now develops and teaches a kind of technique that is, so to speak, domesticated in the image of the Roman aristocracy itself. It has become principally an educational practice dedicated to the sons of the Roman upper class. Whereas its main objective was to prove (*probare*) and move (*flectere*) by pleasing, it is now to charm and delight (*delectare*) any audience that one wants to instruct or convince.

Naturally this change has significant theoretical consequences. There is in Quintilian's contribution an emphasis on scientific analysis and technical mastery that was less pronounced in Cicero, who was more oriented to action. The school master and scientist Quintilian is fond of taxonomies, discussion of concepts, systematic presentation. He gives his opinion but only after having clearly presented the conflicting views on the debated matter.

But, maybe because public action has become less important, Quintilian also develops, in limited parts of his work, new interests that will prove decisive in the future. The stress put on charm and delight gives not only rhythm a greater role. It also resumes Aristotle's best reflections on poetics and opens rhythm theory to entirely new directions. We remember that for Aristotle there would be no story, no character, no event, in short no *mímêsis* and no *kátharsis* without the *rhuthmoí* and *harmonías* of the language. Quintilian, in turn, addresses these issues in his own way.

1. If "rhythm and melody" are in oratory as essential as "selection of words and figures," one might

wonder then what “melody” could mean respectively to “rhythm” in language and therefore if the sounds, what we call the signifiers, should not be also taken into account in the production of meaning. Naturally, Quintilian thinks only about music and does not elaborate, but his intuition will prove very true when, from the 18th century, writers and theoreticians as well will pay attention to what Diderot will call the “poetic hieroglyph” (see next volume).

2. If Herodotus’ flow “seems to contain a certain rhythmical power hidden within itself” and if one can find rhythm in linguistic practices, which were not considered by Cicero as rhythmic, such as letters or dialogues, rhythm is not limited to metric poetry or organized oratory, it must be considered as a power, sometimes quite obvious sometimes hidden, pertaining to any kind of speech. Rhythm becomes a fundamental element of language, maybe more important than figures and tropes which contrastingly are not to be found in all kinds of speech.

3. If “both rhythm and meter consist of feet,” i.e. if oratory rhythm (and other kinds as well) can be broken down into feet like metric rhythm, it means that feet are natural in classical languages and not limited to poetry. Even if for practical reasons, one must distinguish between oratory and poetry, there is no fundamental difference between poetry and prose. This is a revolutionary finding that unfortunately will be soon forgotten but that will be revived, beyond the collapse at the end of Antiquity of the correlation between syllable weight and stress placement that existed in Classical Latin, in the 19th century by Baudelaire, Hopkins and Mallarmé (see next volume).

4. If “meter [*metrum*] is concerned with words alone, while rhythm [*rhythmos*] extends also to the motion of the body,” speech rhythm must not be severed from bodily rhythm. Delivery in general, gesture, features in particular, are integral part of the linguistic process.

These intuitions were the last of their kind to be developed in Antiquity. After Quintilian, the *Aristotelian poetic paradigm of rhythm* vanished for centuries until its fragile revival in the 18th and 19th centuries. During its translation into Roman imperial culture, Aristotle’s original joint interest in politics, rhetoric and poetics split. With Cicero, politics and rhetoric were given the primacy and poetics recessed into the background. This rapid demise, which actually was already quite advanced in the 1st century BC as Lucretius’ case shows, continued during the next century. While giving now the primacy to rhetoric and private life, Quintilian still made a few interesting remarks on the poetic dimension of rhythm, but his intuitions were lost in a large rhetorical body and were not sufficient to oppose the decline of poetics and its absorption by rhetoric.

Today, we still suffer from this split, this reduction and the domination that ensued. Twenty centuries after there are still people who consider style, figures and rhetoric as the most legitimate or—in the case of deconstructionists—the most beautifully illegitimate categories and who, whatever their respective perspective, disregard rhythm and poetics. One of the most important objectives of this book is to fight against this theoretical, but also political and ethical repression by getting back to the lost powers of Aristotle’s thought and the forgotten philosophy of the first materialist thinkers.

[*Next chapter*](#)