

## **The Importance of Fundamentals in Italian Rapier**

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OK, so you are a student of the Italian rapier. Tell me honestly. How many lunges do you do every week? No, I don't mean as a part of drills with a partner (you do drill, don't you? Let's hope so!). I mean lunges. Solo. You and your sword, against the wall, trying to ingrain the right sequence of motions, to lengthen your reach without affecting balance, to gain speed, to add momentum and violence to your action. How many do you do? And how much attention do you pay to all the elements I have listed?

Be honest.

If the answer is "too many for me to count," congratulations. Now go and do more, and don't bother reading what follows.

If the answer ranges from zero to "a dozen or so whenever I remember," then fie, fie. The lunge is among the most important fundamentals of Italian rapier. It is also one that the masters themselves tell us to practice assiduously--and how, and why. I know, you understand the lunge theoretically and you can wax poetic about why it has to be performed a certain way, what muscle moves when and how you should breathe. But can you do it? I mean, can you do it the same way, all the time? Can you also say that your lunge today is measurably better than it was six months ago?

Which brings us to discussing the importance of fundamentals. But wait, you say... How do we know for sure which were the fundamentals... Funny you should ask.

### **Let's Do away with the Noise**

Those who know me know that one of the best ways to make me roll my eyes is to say that "we know too little about Italian rapier to tell what the fundamentals were." This statement can be the fruit of several things, ranging from fashionable false modesty to common laziness or to honest inability to read the treatises--all often sprinkled with a generous dose of postmodern relativism, that one-size-fits-all refuge of the less-than logical mind. Am I opinionated on the subject? You bet--in case you haven't noticed.

So let's do away with the noise right now: in truth, we absolutely know enough--indeed much more than enough--to tell what the fundamentals of 17th Century Italian rapier were.

How do we know? Simple. The extant period treatises are many, are self-corroborating, and although sometimes expressing individual preferences for this or that manner of performing an action, and share the greatest majority of the gross technical, tactical and stylistic elements. Starting with Fabris and Giganti (1606), Capoferro (1610), Alfieri (1640), Pallavicini (1670), Marcelli (1686) and ending with Di Mazo (1696)--just to name the major authors--the map is thick with data points and the style is consistent for the greatest majority of the actions and the fundamentals that compose them.

Moreover, these data-points are consistent with the main tenets of 19th Century classical Italian fencing, although by that time, many characteristics of rapier had faded into the background while new elements specific to the new weapon (the dueling sword) had emerged. Simply put, there is no

way to ignore the consistency of many of the fundamentals in Italian fencing--no way, that is, but being ignorant of them.

But what are "fundamentals"? And why is it important to know them, practice them and refine them? This is also simple. They are important because they are the necessary points through which the line of the art we call Italian rapier must pass in order to meet its goal or destination. To miss them equals one of two things: missing the destination entirely or practicing another art (or no art at all).

## **Art: a Line to a Destination; Fundamentals: the Points Along the Way**

While we often use different terms for what we do (Western martial arts, historical European swordsmanship, etc.), I define what interests me in fencing as historical European martial arts. This means understanding, practicing and internalizing a martial art as it was practiced within the specific historical tradition we choose to follow--according to our best-possible analysis of the tradition's extant literature.

Art has been defined in many ways. Let me offer you a fresh perspective.

An art is an established path to a goal, or a known line to a destination point. A line without a destination point is not an art but an empty ritual. A line that fails to meet its destination point is an ineffective art. A line that swerves too many times before it meets its destination point is an inefficient art. A line that should meet with its destination point, but doesn't because of inaccuracy on the part of the drawer's hand is an art practiced incorrectly; in this case, the failing is with the drawer, not with the art. A line that follows a totally different path to reach the same destination as another is a different art--but still measurable as to efficiency, effectiveness, accuracy, etc. And a no-line that plods its way randomly and each time differently to the destination is not art but accidental accomplishment of the goal.

The goal of our art, Italian rapier, should be the same today as it was in the time of Fabris: to learn how to protect oneself with the sword while inflicting injury on the opponent. The path is the specific tradition we choose to follow--in this case the 17th Century Italian tradition. The only important difference being that, back then, the tradition was current. Now, we have to reconstruct much of it from treatises. Hence *historical* martial arts.

Would I be performing Italian rapier if I took "defending myself with a sword while injuring the opponent" as the only part of the exercise and fulfilled it by means other than those detailed in Italian rapier treatises? No. Because, as we've said, an art is not the last step between just anywhere and the destination-point or goal; it is also the line you trace and the path you walk to get there. Photography is different from cinematography--yet both share a similar goal--as do handgunning and shotgunning, karate and kung-fu, watercolors and oils, hunting and fishing, hiking and climbing. Each of these arts has a set of rules and a style that makes it an unique route to a sometimes common destination.

In other words, the destination, or goal--e.g. self-defense, imaging, catching edible animals, summiting a mountain, etc.--may be shared by more than one art. But the specific line of each individual art to that destination is more or less unique. The essential points along these lines are what I call the fundamentals of the art. Taken together, fundamentals also make the style. The style

makes the inner and outer manifestation of how the art fulfills its purpose. That's how we can distinguish whether a thrust to the chest has just been delivered by a rapierist, a modern foilist, a longswordman, a classical saberist or a Japanese kendoka--even if the weapon used was just an umbrella.

And the fundamentals, like the points that allow you to trace a line, are what will make you hit or miss your destination-point. This is why they need to be identified and laid out efficiently, internalized and constantly refined.

## Need for Constant Practice and Refinement

I know many rapierists who understand the most important fundamentals theoretically, but can't incorporate them in their fencing--often even in their drilling. Why is this? Because they are as important as they are seen as unglamorous. One of the drawbacks of the adult mind is that as grownups we tend to dismiss what we grasp with our brain as "easy" and therefore we choose not to practice it, spending time instead with the sexier actions that also challenge our minds. Children, instead, relish repetition of the simple things, and use it spontaneously as a path to acquiring an ability. That's the main reason why, in many cases, kids make better learners.

Let's go back to the lunge, as the perfect example of this theory. We all know that the lunge has to be initiated with an extension of the arm, followed by an explosive action of the body and legs and ended with a swift recovery out of measure. Yes, all this is easy to understand. And yes, the action is *simple*. But it's not *easy* to perform well. And it can be refined ad infinitum. A circle is a simple shape, but it's darn-near impossible to draw one free-hand without an immense amount of practice. And there's always a better one you can draw--pending more practice. Similarly, a lunge is a simple action and its tenets are easy to understand, but performing it with the necessary accuracy, violence and speed requires constant practice. And there's always a faster, more violent and more accurate way to do it.

From the lunge comes the ability to take the tempo, perhaps the main theoretical pillar of Italian rapier. The slower the lunge, the more limited the range of tempi we can take as fencers. From the lunge also come many considerations about measure--another theoretical pillar of rapier. The shorter the lunge, the closer we have to be to the opponent as we set up our offensive actions, making us more liable to his attacks.

Ditto for the cut. As the secondary mode of attack in Italian rapier, it needs to be practiced for timing, momentum, reach, safety, economy of motion and effectiveness. As Di Grassi says, you should be able to eventually deliver just as effective a cut from the wrist as you would from the shoulder.

And ditto for other fundamentals, such as holding the guard(s), advancing and retreating at various speeds, gaining the opponent's blade, freeing your sword, parrying or counterattacking in opposition, performing beats, glides and a few transports, passing, voiding, using the left hand and executing disarmaments--just to name a few. Sure, some are more fundamental than others, but they are the raw bricks out of which rapier play is built.

Bottom line: you can't use a technique as an element of a more complex paired drill if you haven't isolated it and worked on it--alone, when you can (e.g. with the lunge), with a partner when you

can't (e.g. parries). Moreover, don't even think of using something with repeated effectiveness in free-fencing if you haven't refined it as part of more complex paired drills. Sure, it may keep succeeding, but it may more out of the opponent's failings than your own virtue. And when the technique in question is a rapier-and-dagger disarmament it's one thing--when it's a lunge, an advance or a cavazione, you better go back to the drawing board.

## In Conclusion

If I had to sell my soul to the devil (some say I already have) to attain perfection in one thing in Italian rapier, it would be to have a long, strong, lightning-quick, violent lunge-recovery with perfect opposition. This would allow me to safely and effectively take the majority of tempi offered by any opponent. Isn't that (really!) what Italian rapier is ultimately about? Isn't that the basis for:

- Thrusts in tempo
- Thrusts in contratempo
- Thrusts against a feint
- Thrusts against an invitation
- Thrusts against a cut
- Cavazioni di tempo and ubbidienza
- Controcavazioni and ricavazioni
- And Feints?

The bad news: in this type of skill, there's no perfection, only a higher level. The good news: higher levels are attainable. The even better news: it takes one thing and one thing only to attain them: practice of the fundamentals.

It doesn't matter which master you mainly follow--pick one, mostly for how they choose to perform the action, and stick to it, mostly for consistency's sake. Ultimately, though, remember that you are not "doing Fabris" because you stand in guard bent forward and keep your left arm near your head when you lunge--you are "doing Fabris" because you can comfortably and safely take the tempi that he tells you should be taking.

Let practicing the fundamentals take you there.

And then move the bar higher and start again reaching for it.