

Meyer's Rapier – Summary of Examples

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14 November 2011

Version 0.1

Introduction

This document started life as me trolling through the Jeffery Forgeng translation of Joachim Meyer's Art of Combat (1571) with a single aim in mind: to collect all the examples of techniques he gives in the text, collate and order them to fully understand core techniques of his single-handed sword style. Two obvious factors emerge:

1. the rapier chapter could have been less than half its current size and better communicate the techniques within it; and
2. there's a lot of really good notes on fight strategy here.

Given that part of my aim was to consolidate all the examples, some nuance and minor differences between otherwise similar techniques has been lost. At this stage, I believe this is acceptable when balanced against the benefit of gaining a fuller idea of the techniques that Meyer taught.

This document assumes a basic understanding of Meyer's text and some exposure to historical fencing in the German tradition. A right-handed swordsman is also assumed.

Fundamental Concepts

This section covers the most basic actions and includes some tactical advice which doesn't fit elsewhere in the document.

The Postures

There is only one guard position in Meyer's teaching, although there are four basic postures which are used as the start and end points of the various techniques he demonstrates in the text. The lone guard position varies depending on exactly how it is held and the names applied to the different variations can be thought of more as points along a continuum than specific postures.

Unless otherwise stated in the text, you should always approach the fight in the Iron Gate or Straight Parrying posture (2.54R, 2.74R, 2.99R). This position, whether held slightly to the left, right or directly in front of you, is Meyer's key guard. For the right-handed swordsman, stand with your right foot forward and (I believe) weight evenly

balanced over your feet. The stance is quiet deep according to the illustrations. Hold your point directly at your opponent's face with your quillions in the vertical plane. This is the Straight Parrying - also called Long Point. Begin to drop your hilt towards your right knee and, as you do so, angle your blade closer towards the vertical. At the other end of this continuum, this is the Iron Gate. A variant of the Iron Gate sees you hold your quillions horizontal and is called The Plow. Then there is Long Point. This is both the end position of a standard thrust at shoulder height and the Straight Parrying posture extended to its logical extreme.

The four basic postures - Left and Right Ox, Low Left and Side Guard - may be thought of as moving your hilt out of the Straight Parrying position into one of the four quarters (upper/lower, inside/outside) while keeping your point on-line.

Stepping and Foot Work

For the most part, Meyer does not say much about footwork in the Rapier chapter other than to state that the subject is fully covered in the chapters on Longsword and the Dusack. Read those chapters for a fuller understanding.

The new footwork introduced in the rapier chapter I've dubbed the Meyer Pivot. This action consists of pivoting on your front foot and stepping with your rear foot. Generally the motion is away from an incoming attack but occasionally the pivot is towards the attack. For example, if the opponent attacks your left side, pivot on your right foot while stepping with your left foot towards your right. This action should not result in crossing your legs but in re-orienting your whole body to face off-line towards your left.

Types of Attack

There are three strategies for each of your attacks. Attacks can be provokers, takers or hitters (2.67R). Combinations of these strategies, says Meyer, ensure success.

- Provokers force the opponent to react. Their purpose is to prompt the opponent into action whether to take advantage of a perceived opening you have allowed or to change posture to one more favourable to your plans. While they do not aim to cause injury as such, if the opponent does nothing he or she will be hit. In terms of the Italian tradition, these are actions which force obedience.
- Takers are essentially parries. They take away the opponent's attack.
- Hitters are the strikes, whether cuts or thrusts which injure your opponent.

There are three mechanics of striking: thrust and cut are self-explanatory. A thrust drives the point of your weapon into your opponent. A thrust may come from above or below. The standard thrust is called the Flying Thrust in the text (2.64r5, 2.64v1). Almost all thrusts described in the examples are to the face of the opponent although there are also described thrusts under the armpit and to the belly and thighs.

(Note: train to thrust into Long Point while turning the long edge against his blade. Thrust into long point then continue in as a slice into the opposite quarter and return – ie: thrust from Right Ox, slice into Left Low and back into Right Ox. This is described using the postures of the Plow and Left Ox at 2.96v1.)

A cut is a strike with the edge of the blade designed to carve into your opponent. Cuts are named after the line they follow and may be begun from either the left or the right:

- A High Cut is a downwards vertical motion. A High Cut used defensively is called a Suppressing Cut.
- A Wrath Cut is a downwards diagonal motion. A Wrath cut used defensively is called a Defense Cut. Two Wrath Cuts combined, say a left Wrath Cut followed immediately by a right Wrath Cut is called the Cross Cut.
- A Middle Cut is a cut in the horizontal plane.
- A Low Cut is an upwards diagonal motion.

The concept of the slice is not clearly articulated in the text. It is a type of defensive downwards cut in which you lead with the hilt rather than trying to hit with the weapon's point-of-percussion. Note that the slice is not a draw cut (2.68r2). One interpretation is that it is similar to the *atajo* of Spanish *Destreza* in that it is used to funnel the opponent's blade into the strong of yours in order to control it. This appears to work in practice, and is the interpretation used here, but I make no claim to truth or accuracy.

Tactical Considerations

These three points to my mind show a degree of tactical thinking lacking from most period manuals that I've read which concentrate on individual techniques rather than their use.

- Always attack the quarter that the opponent's blade has just come from as it's difficult for him or her to change direction mid-flight to get back to where he or she started (2.71r2, 2.99R, 2.80r1).
- Take out all attacks with Defense Cuts (2.93R). Always use the cross cut in order to withdraw to safe distance (2.100V).
- The counter against "changing through" (a disengagement under your blade) is to thrust directly at your opponent's face. Then block his or her response with a raised hilt and counter-thrust to hit (2.94r2).

The Four Kinds of Opponent

Joachim Meyer is perhaps alone of all the renaissance fencing texts by dividing potential opponents into four basic classes and giving advice on how to handle each. To me, this shows the practical nature of his method. The lack of a one-size-fits-all approach to personal combat lifts him above those who teach a single style for all occasions.

Overly Aggressive

Against a "violent and stupid" opponent who is "overly aggressive with strokes," the strategy is to remain in Straight Parrying and bear off the opponent's attacks until an opportunity presents itself to counter-attack (2.80r1, 2.99v1). Meyer is more specific on how to deal with this class of opponent than the others. When that opportunity occurs, "turn your hilt up against the stroke," drag your blade around your head and cut through the same line as the opponent's attack. Then change your posture into Ox and thrust. For example: the opponent thrusts at your upper left quarter. Parry

into Long Point in the upper left quadrant. Follow with a Wrath Cut from the left into Side Guard. Change into Right Ox and thrust (2.75v1).

Against the Moderate

The moderate opponent is “artful and sharp” and only attacks when an opportunity presents itself. The strategy to adopt when facing this class of opponent is to change from posture to posture, ensuring that you always keep your point on-line, until the opponent attacks. That provides you with an opportunity to parry and counter-attack (2.99v1). This is referred to by Meyer as Changing Off and is described in the **If Your Opponent Will Not Attack** section below.

Crafty and Skilful

Meyer calls this class of opponent “judicious and deceitful.” This is an opponent you cannot allow to take control of the fight. Meyer’s advice is to provoke him or her with cuts and concentrate on parrying or bearing off his or her responses to your attacks. An opportunity will present itself for you to attack with a thrust (2.99v2). This class of opponent brings into sharp relief the conceptual framework of the German tradition found in the provoker-taker-hitter schema.

Too Defensive

Meyer states that they are fools who simply sit in guard and await an attack as this posture does nothing for them and hands the initiative of the fight to you on a silver platter (2.100R). He spends a great many words explaining how to safely engage an opponent who will not fight. These techniques are described in the **If Your Opponent Will Not Attack** section below.

Defensive Techniques

All techniques assume that you are responding to a threat rather than initiating an attack. In terms of the German tradition, these techniques assume you are fighting in the *nach*. They are presented at ‘taker - hitter’ combinations. These techniques can be used offensively. This assumes that some form of provocation has been used to draw a response from the opponent that these techniques can be applied to.

It needs to be noted that none of the defensive techniques described in the text are presented alone. They are always accompanied by a follow-on action which targets the opponent. It is not enough to prevent an attack hitting you but Meyer dictates that you must use this opportunity to attack your opponent. This is another example of the intertwined nature of the provoker-taker-hitter schema.

Suppressing Cuts

A suppressing cut is a vertical cut (High Cut) targeting either the opponent’s arm or weapon directly. Meyer calls out its trajectory as following a downward vertical line passing through the opponent’s shoulder. It is always accompanied by pivoting away from the attack, ie: if the attack is aimed at your right, step with your rear foot to the left, pivoting on your right foot. Vice versa if the attack is aimed at your left.

The suppressing cut can be followed up by:

- A counter-thrust (2.56r1, 2.56r2, 2.76r1, 2.68r3, 2.87v1, 2.89v3, 2.90r1, 2.91v2)
- A (middle) cut (2.79r1, 2.87v1).

Meyer often calls out an action to use in order to withdraw in safety. For instance, slicing away any counter attack or sweeping it away with a hanging blade.

Wrath/Defense Cuts

The Wrath Cut and the Defense Cut are the same thing: a downwards diagonal cut. As a taker, it is addressed to the opponent's blade although Meyer's text is unclear as to whether the cut should land on top of the opponent's blade or use the stroke's momentum to bar the attack. There are relatively few examples of the Defense Cut given in the text (2.57v1-2.58v1, 2.62v2, 2.70r2, 2.89r2). A Defense Cut is usually followed in the text by a Wrath Cut either to hit the opponent or as another Defense Cut in order to withdraw to safety.

Parry into Long Point

The key to the Parry into Long Point is to keep your point on-line and to rotate your hilt into the quarter from which your opponent is attacking. This interposes your blade between you and the opponent's weapon while maintaining a credible threat that the opponent must deal with. It is always accompanied with a pivot away from the incoming attack (2.68r1, 2.71r2, 2.73v1, 2.74r1, 2.75r1).

The ways in which you can use this parry may be summarised as follows:

- Against an attack parried in one of the upper quarters, use the force of your opponent's attack on your blade to snap it around your head to allow a Wrath Cut through the same quarter. For example, if the opponent cuts to your upper right quarter, parry into Long Point/Right Ox, snap around to cut a right wrath into low left guard (2.78r1 [right], 2.78r2 [left]).
- Against an attack to one of your lower quarters, as soon as the opponent's attack lies spent, finish your thrust from Long Point as your counter-attack. This may require stepping back in the direction of the original attack (2.62r1, 2.72r1, 2.91r2, 2.91r2, 2.91r3, 2.91v1).
- Change through (disengage, *cavazzione*, *cavare*, etc in other traditions) under your opponent's blade and thrust (2.95r2, 2.95v1, 2.95v2).

Meyer gives several methods of withdrawing to safety after making your counter-attack but they all involve slicing away or making a suppressing cut against any response.

Hanging Parry

A hanging parry sweeps aside the opponent's blade with an action of the sword - hilt up, point down - across your body. It may be performed in either direction although Meyer states that the right to left hanging parry is more commonly used. It may be accompanied by a pivot or double-step away from the opponent's attack.

It may be followed by these counter attacks:

- End the hanging parry in either Right Ox or transform it into Left Ox and thrust (2.76r2, 2.62r2, 2.62v3, 2.88r1, 2.88r2). Use a Defence Cut or Cross Cut to withdraw out of distance.
- A Wrath Cut from either the right or left (2.69r1, 2.88r2)
- A High Cut (2.87v2, 2.88r3)

Beating Away

This action consists of bashing the opponent's attack with the short edge of your sword. Almost all examples start from Low Left Guard and sees your blade moving from left to right across your body. The end point of this action is Right Ox Guard from which you can either thrust or cut (2.60v1, 2.89r3, 2.89v1, 2.89v2, 2.90v1, 2.91R). One example (2.90r3) starts in Low Left Guard, changes through under the opponent's weapon to beat it in the opposite direction from right to left while pivoting to the right. It is followed by a thrust. Meyer states that it can also be performed from Side Guard (2.79v2) but does not give examples.

Slicing Away

This action can be thought of as a beat with the long edge of your weapon. When the slice is angled correctly, the opponent's attack slides down your blade to get trapped against your quillions as well as being pushed away from you (2.68r2). It always involves a pivot away or double step from the attack.

It can be performed from any of the four basic guard positions: Low Left, Side Guard, Left Ox and Right Ox. From the low guards, it is followed by either a cut or a thrust against your opponent (2.91v2, 2.92v1, 2.92v2). If beginning from an Ox posture, the slice ends in a low guard on the opposite side and is followed by a Wrath Cut or a Low Cut from that side (2.72r1). For example, from Right Ox, slice down into Low Left Guard the make a Wrath Cut from the left into Side Guard.

Slipping Back

This action relies on removing yourself from the danger zone by throwing your weight onto your rear foot. Meyer discusses two options for a counter attack: either waiting until the opponent's attack passes by before making a thrust at your opponent, or attacking during the tempo of your opponent's attack (2.70r1, 2.71v2, 2.76v1, 2.77v1, 2.82r1).

Low Cut (Counter-cut Upwards)

This action is used to defeat a Wrath or High Cut, possibly also a Middle Cut. It is performed by cutting upwards along the Wrath line with the long edge leading (2.63v1, 2.90r2, 2.93v2). One interesting aspect of this action is that the follow up is always a Wrath cut from the same side as the Low Cut. For instance, if you parry with a Low Cut from the left, you follow up with a Wrath cut from the left. In one instance only in the text is the Low Cut followed up by a thrust. Even then, the thrust is followed by a Wrath Cut as described.

High Parry and Run In

Meyer describes this action as parrying any high-line attack with a raised, horizontal blade, much like a modern parry in *quinte* or *St George's Guard*. The aim of this

action is solely to provide an avenue for you to charge your opponent and start wrestling (2.97r1-2.97v2).

If Your Opponent Will Not Attack

Craftiness is called for if the opponent won't attack since, by attacking, Meyer says you leave yourself open and vulnerable. Therefore, if you cut or thrust in the *Before*, you do so to draw the opponent out of guard, take away his response and attack the opening presented (2.99R). The manner Meyer advocates to prompt this response he calls Changing Off - rotating through the four basic postures in front of your opponent to either threaten or tempt him or her to action (2.73v2). For example, begin by changing from Straight Parrying into Right Ox. Slice downwards into Low Left guard. Raise your hilt into Left Ox. Slice downwards into Side Guard. Return to Right Ox and begin the sequence again.

Meyer spends a great many words on how to provoke an opponent to action, demonstrating clearly the importance of seizing and maintaining the initiative in the fight. Meyer calls out a number of specific actions from the four basic postures but these embellishments need not be examined in detail here.

- Provoke with a thrust to the quarter opposite to that in which the opponent holds his or her weapon (ie: if your opponent is standing in the low right posture, thrust to his or her upper left). When the opponent makes to parry it, either withdraw or take away the response before thrusting to the quarter he or she just moved out of (eg: lower right quarter). Make a Defence Cut as you withdraw to safety (2.82v1, 2.91r4, 2.94v3, 2.95r1).
- Provoke with a thrust and make a Defense Cut or Hanging Parry, if required, to take away your opponent's response. Finally, cut to hit (2.83v2, 2.83r3, 2.84r1).
- Provoke with a cut and make a Defense Cut or Hanging Parry, if required, to take away your opponent's response. Finally, thrust to hit (2.83r1, 2.83r2, 2.83v1, 2.94v1, 2.94v2).

The text lists a range of more complex actions to achieve the same end.

- Provoke with cut or thrust from your right. As the opponent goes to parry, slip/pull back into Left Ox then attack with thrust or cut from your left (2.58v2, 2.59r1, 2.66v1). This can also be done from a counter cut against his initial attack (2.62v1). It may also be performed by dropping your point and snapping around into Left Ox with stepping to either the left or right (2.64r1, 2.64r2). If this provoker is parried, turn your short edge against the opponent's weapon and thrust (2.65r4).
- From Right Ox, thrust at your opponent but change it into a slice into Left Low Guard. Cut back up into Right Ox with the long edge. This can also be done from Left Ox (2.61r1). Another version of this is to cut (using false edge, true edge or flat) from Left Low Guard into Right Ox and thrust back into Left Low Guard (2.70v1). This can be done from either side.

Attacking a Competent Opponent

Meyer assumes that a competent opponent will likewise adopt a guard position similar to the Straight Parrying or the Iron Gate. Although these postures are

variations within the same continuum, Meyer describes attacking each very differently but all rely on some form of deception or provocation.

Deception

The key to deceiving an opponent under Meyer's system is the ability to change cuts to thrusts and vice versa (2.65r1, 2.65r2, 2.65r3). For example, you make as if to cut at your opponent's legs but mid-way through the action turn your point up to thrust from below (2.66v2).

To protect yourself against such deceit, keep in mind two principles:

- Always keep your hilt within a hand's breadth of the mid-point (2.81R)
- Always thrust at his face (2.81V).

Attacking into the Iron Gate

When you are standing in a low posture and your opponent is standing Iron Gate or Straight Parrying, while stepping out to the side, change through (*cavazzione*, disengage) under the opponent's blade and push his or her weapon to the opposite side. For example, if you are standing in Side Guard, step left, *cavare* under and push your opponent's blade to the right. You're now on the inside of the weapon and can thrust to his or her body (2.68v1, 2.94r1). Use this stepping to the side to force the opponent's blade away (2.77r2).

When the opponent is standing in Iron Gate or another a low posture:

- Provoke with a middle cut to the face followed by a left Wrath cut to the legs (hitter) then a defence cut from your right (taker) as you withdraw (2.67v2).
- Provoke with a thrust from Left Ox. When your opponent goes up to parry, *cavare* under his or her arm and thrust at the other side of the body (2.62r3).

Changing from a thrust from above (from 1st position in other traditions) into a thrust from below (from 3rd position) in mid-action and vice versa (2.63v2, 2.63r3, 2.63r4) is an alternative method for beating the Iron Gate.

Attacking into the Straight Parrying

When both you and your opponent are standing in straight parrying, change into Right Ox to give an invitation and, when the opponent thrusts, parry into Long Point and counter-attack. This can be done from any posture (2.86v1). Alternatively, ensure that you hold your Straight Parrying higher than your opponent. Envelope and sweep away your opponent's blade with an aggressive and pre-emptive Hanging Parry. Change into either Left or Right Ox, as appropriate, and thrust (2.85v2, 2.93v1).

When the opponent only stands in Straight Parrying and you stand in another posture:

- Provoke with a cut to his legs. Take away his response by either withdrawing or a Hanging Parry then thrust (2.84v1, 2.85r1).

- Provoke with a thrust then turn your hilt up into Left Ox to catch the opponent's point and drive it away. Then make a Cross Cut from left and, finally, thrust (2.85r2, 2.96v2).
- Provoke your opponent by cutting directly at his or her blade. The aim of this, Meyer says, is to make your opponent angry. When an opportunity presents itself, cut at your opponent then thrust and, finally, withdraw to safety (2.85v1, 2.86r2).
- Beat away the opponent's blade and thrust. Then cut quickly at his or her face or leg (2.86r1, 2.93r1).

In the Bind

Meyer's advice for handling the bind is very simple. If you are close enough to your opponent that your swords cross at the strong of the blade, you are too close to perform any complex action. Always stay strong on the opponent's sword to either:

- Thrust at your opponent directly from the bind by turning your short edge against your opponent's weapon (2.71v2, 2.79v1), or
- Give yourself an opportunity to step back out of the bind in order to free yourself to perform other techniques (2.71v1, 2.77v2).

Puzzles Remaining

The actions described at 2.77r1, 2.88v2 and 2.89r1 are a complete mystery to me. I have no idea what Meyer is talking about here. Does anyone have any ideas?