It's All in the Timing
Concepts of Combative Timing in Historical Italian Swordsmanship

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Timing, it is said, is everything. Sun Tzu, writing his *Art of War* in the time of China's Zhou dynasty, spoke of when it is advantageous to strike at the enemy, and when it is advantageous to wait. On a smaller scale, seizing the opportune moment in which to strike the adversary, or, consequently, thwarting the adversary's attempts to strike oneself, is an integral part of any martial art. And, in keeping with the endless classification and analysis characteristic of Western thinking, European systems of fencing have a very sophisticated vocabulary with which to describe timing. These conceptions, which give names to practices found within the fighting systems of many nations, will no doubt found to be a useful training tool, as well as a spur to martial creativity. Indeed, in his *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Bruce Lee's concept of the "intercepting fist" was highly influenced by his study of fencing. A study of timing may also aid judges in martial arts competitions, who may begin to better recognize and give credit to various types of counters to attacks thereby.

This article therefore intends to explain conceptions of timing found in one tradition of Western swordsmanship, the Italian schools of rapier fencing that existed in the early modern era, in a way that will be useful and accessible to practitioners of all martial arts.

The reason why we have chosen the rapier to illustrate these concepts is that this particular weapon is a long, relatively slow thrust-and-cut sword that necessitates a sophisticated sense of timing for its effective use. Later in the history of fencing in Italy, the weapons grew lighter and quicker, and the definitions changed somewhat to reflect new realities.

The concepts of fencing time (*tempo schermistico*) found in Italian rapier are several: *stesso tempo*, or "single (literally, 'self') time"; *dui tempi*, or "double time"; *mezzo tempo*, or "in the middle of the time"; the action made *in tempo*, or "in time"; and *contratempo*, "counter-time," or "against the time." It is important to note that these concepts of *fencing time* (*tempo schermistico* in the singular or *tempi schermistici* in the plural) are not the same as the concept of *tempo*, which may be translated as *timing*. Timing, of course is an acquired sensibility as to the appropriate moment to execute any given technique.

These ideas of timing have a long history. For instance, Marcelli, in his treatise of 1686, says, "*In tre maniere puo considerasi il tempo; In primo Tempo, o Tempo di prima intentione: in Tempo assolutamente; & in Tempo di seconda intentione, o doppo Tempo.*" To translate: "Time may be considered in three ways: In the first time, or time of the first intention; in absolute time; and in time of second intention, or double time." That is, stesso tempo (literally, "self-time") mezzo tempo, and dui tempi. He later goes on to speak of "*un altra attiona delicatissima... ferita di contratempo,*" or "another, most delicate action... striking in countertime."

The reader may also note that we seem to be speaking of "fencing time" as if one fencing time was a concrete, quantifiable, and invariable period. This is not the case. One

fencing time is a relative, not absolute thing. It is defined simply as "the time it takes to perform one fencing action." Thus, a lunge with the rapier is one time, a direct cut with the edge is one time, a parry against the lunge or cut is one time, and a step forwards or backwards is one time. Of course, actions can be combined, so a step backwards taken together with a parry, or the extension of the arm which is an integral part of the lunge, is still one time. By extension of this principle, it also takes one time to jab with a fist, one time to throw a roundhouse kick, or one time to unbalance an opponent in judo. In terms of "clock time," it is of course not the case that everyone's roundhouse kick travels at the same speed, and, likewise, we know a jab, relatively speaking, is faster than a roundhouse kick. However, they are all alike in that they are single, simple actions, and so, for the purpose of our discussion, which concerns the tactical use of timing and not the measuring of time, we shall consider them the same.

Given the definition of what one fencing time is, it is easy to understand the concept of dui tempi, that is, "two times." This is, quite simply, one simple action followed by another. Thus, a parry followed by a riposte (that is, a counterattack) is considered *dui tempi*; a block followed by a punch is likewise two times; and a defense against a throw followed by an attempt to counter-throw can be seen as two times. Two jabs thrown in quick succession is two times; likewise, a jab followed by a reverse punch is also two times. Again, the relative speed of the actions is not important; what is important is that they are two discreet actions, whether offensive, defensive, or a combination of both. This is the most elementary mode of offense or defense: One attacks, and then one defends; or, conversely, one defends, and then one attacks.

Considered offensively, however, dui tempi uses time as a weapon. As Sun Tzu says, "All warfare is based on deception." Thus, in fencing, one may threaten the opponent with a feigned strike to the head (that is, a feint), and, as he raises his blade defend himself, you deceive the parry and cut him in the flank. In karate point-fighting, one deceives by threatening a backfist (*uraken*) to the head, and, as the opponent raises his hands to defend, launches a sidekick (*yoko geri*) to the stomach. In semi- or full- contact fighting, a jab can be the set-up for a devastating reverse punch. In judo, one unbalances an opponent in one direction, and, when, he compensates, unbalances him in the other direction as a set-up to the throw.

This is the principle of the feint, which those considered "natural fighters" grasp instinctively. The rest of us, however, may benefit from some analytical study. The most important element is that the feint must be made with absolute conviction, forcing the opponent to react. As he reacts, the strike is made in the space uncovered. Likewise, the false attack must always be able to transform instantly into a real one, in case no reaction is provoked. One can instantly recognize the value of certain Zen concepts, such as the emphasis placed on the tranquil, immovable mind, in not overreacting to feints and making the adversary's job easier. The feint is indeed a difficult art to master, and one requiring years of practice, as well as great mental acuity.

Defensively, *mezzo tempo*, or "in the middle of the time," is more sophisticated than the simple parry/riposte or block/punch. It is an extremely useful concept, but it requires training, as it utilizes a more finely developed sense of timing and tactics than dui tempi. In rapier fencing, one may use a mezzo tempo action against a cut by stepping into distance and making a quick cut against the opponent's wrist as he raises his arm to

strike. Or, if the adversary makes a feint to the face followed by an attack to the abdomen, one may likewise act in the middle of his time, lunging at the instant he begins to lower his point, hitting him before the actual attack can develop.

In a Filipino martial art, a quick blow to the fingers of an opponent who is trying to strike one with a stick may be seen as a mezzo tempo action. In karate, one can defend against a roundhouse kick using a time action by stepping in as the kick is thrown and delivering a jab or side-thrust punch *(jun tsuki*) to knock the opponent back and rob the kick of its power. Two pugilistic defenses making use of time actions against a hook punch are throwing a quick counterpunch against the shoulder of the opponent, and stepping in with a rising elbow to the chin (*jodan hiji-ate*), taking the punch on the arm.

The astute reader will notice that all of the aforesaid mezzo tempo actions require either moving in, throwing a quicker counter-technique, or both. Unlike a dui tempi defense, one does not wait for the opponent to finish their attack before countering; rather, one makes a proactive defense by not allowing the opponent to finish his attack. The downside to this, of course, is that if the maneuver is performed incorrectly, one winds up stepping into the oncoming attack. Continually stepping into attacks, or, for that matter, fearfully striking out as an instinctive reaction at having an attack made at oneself, is neither skilful, nor particularly wise.

Perhaps the hardest of all these concepts of timing to explain and perform, but also perhaps the most elegant and effective, is the concept of *stesso tempo,* in which defense and offense become one. Because of its relative slowness, a dui tempi response to an attack with the rapier would take an impractically long time, allowing the opponent time to perform a counter. Therefore, historical masters such as Fabris advised fencers of early

modern era to defend themselves and wound the adversary "in stesso tempo" with an intercepting attack, an action both defensive and offensive. One way to do this with the single rapier is to catch the opponent's thrust in such a manner that the point is diverted with the portion of one's own rapier nearest the guard, while one's own point was directed against the adversary's target. One's own target, meanwhile, is further removed from danger with an evasive body movement. This is a technique that requires a sure sense of distance and timing, as well as a mastery of technique, great sensitivity, and a sure hand.

However, a stesso tempo action need not be made solely with the weapon. Another way of defending and offending in stesso tempo would be to deflect the oncoming attack with the left-hand dagger that was often the rapier's companion, while simultaneously executing a body displacement and counterthrust with one's own rapier. Needless to say, incorrectly performing a stesso tempo action can be disastrous.

An example of a stesso tempo action in unarmed fighting might be to deflect a hooking punch to the head with a jab delivered in such a manners as to both deflect the punch and strike the attacker. Another would be to partially deflect a punch to the body with one hand, while at the same time displacing one's body and driving home a counterpunch with a step forty-five degrees forward. However, the close distance and relative quickness involved in empty-handed fighting can make these sorts of maneuvers extremely challenging to perform.

Time actions, or actions made *in tempo* ("in time"), are another method of manipulating moments in time to defend oneself and offend the opponent. A counterattack made in tempo may perhaps best be understood by the example of the stop-

hit, or *colpo di arresto*. For example, as the opponent lunges with a thrust to the knee, one can merely draw one's leg back, lower the point of one's own sword, and transfix his wrist. The same with karate: As an opponent lunges forward with a backfist, draw back and launch a sidekick into the unprotected flank. The colpo di arresto, in short, is a counteroffensive movement made in the same time as the attack, together with a body evasion that removes the target from reach. Marcelli is correct in calling countertime "most delicate," for an improperly executed countertime tactic results in both combatants being struck—a Pyrrhic victory at best. One does not trade blow-for-blow with sharp swords.

Intimately linked with the colpo di arresto is *contratempo*, or "counter-time." Contratempo is an action against the adversary's stop. Contratempo may also be used against the fearful opponent who strikes out blindly in response to any attack. A counterattack may be provoked with a false attack, and then exploited in contratempo. With the aforesaid example of the stop-hit against the attack to the leg, the fencer attacking his opponent's knee may stop his attack short, bind his opponent's blade, and strike him in the face. Likewise, a savvy karate-ka, aware that the opponent tends to counter-kick, may avoid the kick by a block or sudden change of direction and continue the attack. At this point, the contest comes down to who has the greater skill, experience, subtlety of movement, and presence of mind.

To conclude, the concepts of timing found in the Italian school of fence provide a convenient and useful framework for considering and practicing offensive and defensive tactics in a variety of situations. We hope that readers have found this article useful, and that it aids them in their own development, no matter what art they study.