The Recovery of Rhetoric as "Methododeutic": A Renaissance of Discourse in a Postmodern Age

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In *From Humanism to the Humanities*, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine argue that humanism underwent a profound change from its origins in quattrocento Italy to sixteenth-century England. Instead of inculcating virtue and passing on the repository of cultural wisdom envisioned by the first humanists, the humanities became a curriculum in which the goal was to produce participants and functionaries who knew enough to look out for themselves and their own interests, to control social forces, and to apply the methodical knowledge afforded them to nature (196-200).

In effect, this argument details the beginning of what may be called the provenance of individual subjectivity that would take center stage in the thought of Descartes. The sovereign subject, as it came to be thought, the classical, rational subject as reflected throughout the Enlightenment project, was the foundation for questions of epistemology. Knowledge was a matter of self-knowledge, and all else was reduced to object status as perceived by the subject. The subject was also the foundation of being for whom existence was a matter of reflection and self-consciousness—the *cogito*. This is the subject of modernity in both senses of the genitive, both modernity's interest and focal point as well as the central characteristic of modernity, that which designated modernity. All questions in the modern period were referred to the subject as the ground for an adequate account of existence and knowledge.

Yet this concept of the modern subject is precisely what has been under scrutiny and attack from Nietzsche and Heidegger to contemporary thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Irigaray. And the notion of the classical, rational subject as ground for being and as adequate explanation for questions of epistemology has been rejected.¹

Since the modern subject was universalized as quintessentially human, the humanities inevitably became implicated in the modern notion of the subject, and, with the demise of the subject, the humanities have lost their direction and their intellectual justification at the beginning of what is being called postmodernism. This is the crisis of the humanities when the very ground of what was considered the essence of humanity, the subject, can no longer account for existence, knowledge, and human experience.
Nihilism and Tradition in Western Thought

The demise of the subject is part of what has been called by Gianni Vattimo “nihilism and the postmodern in philosophy.” Borrowing the term “nihilism” from Nietzsche and extending it through the Heideggerian concept of *verwindung*, Vattimo finds in nihilism a new opportunity for thought, an opportunity capable of transforming the humanities. By nihilism, Vattimo means the characteristic of modern thought that Nietzsche identifies as being central to Western culture; it is the continuous attempt of a succession of thinkers to found being on sure footings, only to have each thinker undercut and annihilate the previous one. The result of this history of Western thought is not an approximation to being, each thinker steadily approaching being until its full presence is manifest, but is instead a series of errors in which each systematic foundation laid as an explanation of being is successively destroyed by subsequent thinkers. Thus the series of errors is characterized by annihilation. Hence nihilism is the identifying characteristic of Western thought.

According to Vattimo, Heidegger modified Nietzschean nihilism with his concept of *verwindung*. *Verwindung* has a range of meanings from overcoming and recovery and convalescence to distortion (*Modernity* 39). For Heidegger *verwindung* is not an overcoming as in leaving something behind. It is merely a getting over, knowing that relapse is possible at any time. It is a kind of “living with” as one learns to do with arthritis or any other such disease. Complete recovery is not possible but coping strategies are all important. For Heidegger we must learn to cope with the modernist drive for certainty and foundations, not by acquiescence but by resistance.

Resisting the pull of modernism is also part of what Vattimo argues that Heidegger means by *verwindung*. Along side and compatible with the modernist notion of the subject is the modern notion of progress. Vattimo argues that the notion of progress is a derivative of the Judeo-Christian notion of salvation that placed its hope not in God but in the eventual enlightenment of the subject. This was, of course, the project of the Enlightenment—to seek out and emancipate Reason so as to allow it to proceed unimpaired toward its eventual destiny of certainty and explanatory adequacy. All things would be founded and explained in the universal rationality of the subject. Vattimo further argues that, for late modernism, progress became an end in itself. The goal of the modern, therefore, was not so much the complete realization of universal Reason as novelty itself. The essence of modernity for Vattimo is the quest for novelty (*Modernity* 100-01). The quest for novelty is precisely what Heidegger was trying to get over, cope with, in his notion of *verwindung*.

The other sense of *verwindung* that Heidegger invokes is distortion. If we are to cope with the modern propensity for novelty, we have to learn
not to look to the future as progress but to the past. Vervindung then is a retrograde movement that revisits the past so as to avoid novelty, but it is not simply a repetition of the past, for it is a distortion. Vervindung looks backward and revisits the past only to reinterpret and distort it. In its purpose vervindung is very much a deconstruction—a review that engages in both de-struction and con-struction.

For Vattimo, then, nihilism is not something that we overcome so much as cope with by vervindung, deconstruction, or destructuration (Modernity xxii-xxiii, 32-39). And the distorted reinterpretation of the past is something that cannot be legitimated on the principles of reason because reason is implicated in the very modernism that we are coping with. Instead, Vattimo posits what he calls a weak thought, a dissolution, that legitimates itself not by reason but by conviction rhetorically induced. Contrasting this rhetorical form of legitimation to a metaphysical one as it develops in scientific discourse, Vattimo sees a new course for philosophy in postmodernity.

What philosophy, in its present form, can do is perhaps only to propose a “rhetorically persuasive,” unified view of the world, which includes in itself traces, residues, or isolated elements of scientific knowledge. As a matter of fact, our everyday language regularly incorporates and uses terms originally belonging to specific sciences like psychoanalysis, physics, etc. In such a philosophic, unifying discourse, not only metaphysics but also its final form, that is, science and technology, would be vervinden: recollected, distorted, accepted as a destiny. (Modernity 179)

In postmodernity, then, nihilism cannot be overcome in the sense of being put behind us. We will ever have to guard against the pressure to found our explanations with the expectation that we will eventually get it right if we just keep working on it into the future. We resist this modern impulse by resorting to the weak thought of vervindung, revisiting the past and reinterpreting it by distorting it. This view of things, then, is rhetorically legitimated for the sake of conviction with the full knowledge that this conviction is nothing more than an expediency and is not an account of things as they are. In nihilism, then, Vattimo sees the possibility of equality because the conviction and legitimation that he refers to are a matter of public discourse and not specialized knowledge.

Nihilism, the Media, and the Negative

Vattimo sees the media as significant places where this concept of communal nihilism operates. In fact, in Vattimo’s opinion postmodernism
is driven by the media. Commenting on the belief that postmodernism is just a fad, Vattimo states the following:

It is my belief, however, that the term "postmodernism" has a meaning, and that this meaning is linked to the fact that the society in which we live is a society of generalized communication. It is the society of the mass media. (Society 1)

The media, he believes, have produced several consequences. Quite apart from the anticipations of theorists such as McCluen and Adorno who both predicted a homogenization of society through the media, Vattimo observes that the result of media has been diversity and not homogeneity. The diversity is a direct result of the freedom that the media gives for expression of local difference. Instead of the media forcing global conformity, they allow the opportunity for all groups to voice their differences.

In addition to giving non-traditional groups increased opportunity to proclaim their differences, the media have had a direct effect on the modern notion of the rational subject. The modernist notion of subjectivity always included a concept of clarity, lucidity, and transparency. This is evident in Descartes' clear and distinct ideas. Richard Rorty has both elaborated and critiqued the claim that the ocular metaphors in Western thought become synonymous with knowledge and reason (Mirror 38-45). A society governed by the lucid subject of modernity would be transparent in the sense that it would be governed by the clear principle of rationality. What the media offer, Vattimo argues, is a picture of human society that is anything but transparent. Human society is irrational, diverse, chaotic, and the images that the media play continually undercut the notion of Enlightenment subjectivity. Vattimo states this thesis most boldly in his essay "The Postmodern: A Transparent Society?"

What I am proposing is: (a) that the mass media play a decisive role in the birth of a postmodern society; (b) that they do not make this postmodern society more "transparent," but more complex, even chaotic; and finally (c) that it is in precisely this relative "chaos" that our hopes for emancipation lie. (Society 4)

It will become clearer shortly what "hope" Vattimo finds in the chaos of postmodernism.

Furthermore, the media undermine the concept of being as presence of the real and stable because we receive various images of things. The images are not only highly diverse but often conflicting and alien to our experience. Whatever being was thought to be in modern society, in
postmodern society, thoroughly saturated with information media, being is confusing, variable, problematic. The vision of reality that the media portray is a soft, malleable reality, fluid and mobile.

Contrary to what critical sociology has long believed (with good reason, unfortunately), standardization, uniformity, the manipulation of consensus and the errors of totalitarianism are not the only possible outcome of the advent of generalized communication, the mass media and reproduction [of art]. Alongside these possibilities—which are objects of political choice—there opens an alternative possible outcome. The advent of the media enhances the inconstancy and superficiality of experience. In so doing, it runs counter to the generalization of domination, insofar as it allows a kind of "weakening" of the very notion of reality, and thus a weakening of its persuasive force. The society of the spectacle spoken of by the situationists is not simply a society of appearance manipulated by power: it is also the society in which reality presents itself as softer and more fluid, and in which experience can again acquire the characteristics of oscillation, disorientation and play. (Society 59)

Our reaction to the conflicting voices, images, and worldviews presented through the media is twofold. Because the media allow for greater diversity of voices from a greater number of different groups and persons, there is the increased likelihood that we can identify with our own local viewpoints. The result, therefore, is increased identification and belonging. Concomitant with this feeling of belonging, however, is the realization that our own views are merely local and are only some among many that vary widely, even incomprehensibly, from each other. The result of this realization is disorientation and confusion.

Vattimo argues that the postmodern condition is oscillation between identity and disorientation. The security that modernism sought in being as a full presence of things as they are has to be substituted in a culture of mass media and information for fleeting moments of identification, or belonging, among more widespread disorientation. In this sense, being has to be traded for the weaker form of "belonging." Being is precisely what always recedes, what does not appear, what is not present (Society 74). Being is something hoped for but always negated by experience. In fact, negativity is the fullest manifestation of being, and the only thing we can cling to is the weak form of belonging that happens only as an event in the oscillation between identity and disorientation.

The negativity of being and the experience of the event of belonging amidst disorientation produce what Vattimo calls disenchantment. Disenchantment is the refusal to found anything as guarantor of a stable
order: "Disenchantment is the recognition that there are no objective structures, values or laws and that everything is posited, created by man (at least in the realm of meaning)" (Society 97). This does not mean that without an objective order underwriting everything that we are reduced to radical relativism and the mere play of forces such as eros or power. The essentially negative movement of disenchantment, the weakening of being, provides an opportunity within which to discover "an explicit commitment to ethics as the capacity to transcend the logic of the struggle for life" (Society 103). The space within which to discover this opportunity for a commitment to ethics is provided by negativity itself. This commitment to ethics is the hope that Vattimo referred to earlier and that now needs explaining.

The Negative, Ethics, and the Human Condition

Vattimo reminds us that it was Nietzsche who identified negativity as the locus of the production of meaning: "the production of meaning—and we are still with Nietzsche here—is only possible because man is an animal capable of "taking sides against himself"" (Society 98). This is Vattimo's rendering of Nietzsche's analysis of the "bad conscience" in which the will to power is turned inward against humanity itself as a "No" (Genealogy 84-88). This bad conscience becomes the "womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena" (Genealogy 87). Kenneth Burke analyzes the negative in a similar way saying that the negative is the expression of symbolicity par excellence because there is no negative referent in nature. Hence the negative is purely symbolic.

In Language as Symbolic Action Kenneth Burke makes the case that the "negative is a peculiarly linguistic resource" (419). By that he means that the negative is the best example of the realm of action. Action for Burke is the realm of will and therefore of agency. Action is opposed to motion in which the laws of physics operate. If an apple falls from a tree, it is a result of the laws of motion. If I pick it and drop it, it is action because it was motivated. The negative for Burke represents the linguistic because, as his title suggests, language is a type of action. As in the apple example, most actions depend to some degree on the laws of motion too, but they cannot be reduced to the laws of motion. In the case of the negative, however, Burke finds the pure example of action because it is purely an idea without any real world referent. Nothing does not exist in nature. Nature always exhibits the positive. Therefore the negative is a purely linguistic resource that best exemplifies the realm of motivation and therefore of action. For Burke, without the negative, there would be no action, and, without action, there would be no agents and hence no agency.
Burke’s interest in human motives allows him to rethink the philosophical notion of the negative in motivational terms. Taking his cue from the philosopher Bergson, Burke makes the following remark:

Bergson approaches the problem of the negative in terms of the **negative proposition**; but we would approach it in terms of the **negative command**. Where he would build his analysis of the negative about a sentence in the indicative mood, such as “The thing is not here,” we would build ours about a sentence in the imperative, such as “Do not do that.” We would say that the negative must have begun as a rhetorical or hortatory function, as with the negatives of the Ten Commandments. (Language 421)

For Burke the very essence of the negative as the purest linguistic resource is to be found in the hortatory nature of something like the Decalogue. Motion can be tempered by action insofar as action draws on the hortatory and purely symbolic resources of the negative.

That is, the play of forces in a competitive effort to survive—Nietzsche’s will to power, eros, etc.—are overcome, frustrated, coped with, debunked precisely because human symbolicity can negate them and thus alter them, distort and reinterpret them in the spirit of Heideggerian **vervindung**. This sheer capacity of the negative for symbolicity allows humans the opportunity to think otherwise, negatively, taking sides against ourselves, thus becoming agents capable of action and being thus responsible for our actions. And in this opportunity and responsibility Vattimo sees the Possibility for “an explicit commitment to ethics as the capacity to transcend the logic of the struggle for life” (103) represented by Nietzsche’s will to power because disenchantment requires a certain fidelity to egalitarianism and thus to a sense of justice.

If it is a matter of recommending fidelity and not of demonstrating an inevitable logical consequence, it is immediately clear that only the second, egalitarian, alternative can be the object of recommendation. Suppose modernity had made the “egocratic” choice instead: would there be any sense in declaring that it must be followed not on account of logical reasons, but on faith? To speak of faith rather than logical necessity is a way of practicing disenchantment.... In a disenchanted logic, one cannot be “faithful” to the egocratic alternative of a violent and subjurgatory reading of the responsibility of man to create meaning.... It immediately outlaws any pretensions to authoritarianism and is directed towards consensus amongst equals in both its form and
its content, dispelling the "possible" reading inclined towards oppression. (Society 94)

The fidelity to disenchantment as the negative possibility for meaning becomes an imperative for rhetorical invention in the sense of *vervinding*, the moral obligation to see things otherwise, as well as an imperative for rhetorical legitimation in a public and egalitarian forum. This process of legitimation need not rule out the specialized discourses of theory and science. Rather, these specialized discourses can become a "supplement" to the larger process of public legitimation. Incorporating the sense of theory as a grounded system within disenchantment, Vattimo says,

From the perspective of disenchantment, [theory] could be seen as a "rhetorical accessory," a kind of "supplement of the soul," or an indispensable discursive apparatus aimed at preparing and sustaining both a politics and, above all, a living morality capable of keeping a strict faith with disenchantment. (Society 91)

That is, within the perspective of disenchantment we are always under the obligation to see things otherwise and to argue coherently, rhetorically, for a humanity that, as Nietzsche says, is "pregnant with a future." There are always more possibilities than at first appear, and disenchantment is the perspective from which to raise them. We are therefore not committed by any logical necessity to an idea or a course of action, but rather by the rhetorical serviceability that we are quite aware can always be otherwise.

**Negativity, Being, and the Possibility of Meaning**

But this characterization of disenchantment as negativity requires that we elaborate the relationship between negativity and signification and relate it more carefully to a definition of rhetoric. And to do that I will turn to the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce. In "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties" Peirce takes up the question "Whether a sign can have any meaning if by its definition it is the sign of something absolutely incognizable" (34). In reasoning through this question Peirce argues that all cognitions are based first on judgments of experience. Since we can think of our own cognition, the most abstract cognition is on the nature of cognition itself. Something that is incognizable can be experienced as something other than the cognizable, or the negative of it. "Not, then, or what is other than, if a concept, is a concept of the cognizable" (35). Having already argued that all cognitions are signs and all signs determine other signs (34), it follows that what is "other than" is a sign and can determine other signs. Peirce continues adding that both that which is knowable and
that which is knowable and negatable are cognizable, and he says "cognizability (in its widest sense) and being are not merely metaphysically the same, but are synonymous terms" (35). Therefore, in Peirce's thought, being, in both its knowable and negatable forms, is cognizable and therefore significant.

In Peirce's theory, signs are tripartite: sign, referent, and interpretant. The fact that signs can be determined by other signs depends on their quality of thirdness or their translatability into thought, or other signs. It is this translatability that allows us to interpret signs. For example, the fact that we see a footprint (a first) of someone that has passed by (a second) allows us to take this semiotic combination into the thought and interpret it as signifying that someone passed by (Interpretation 26-27). This translatability of all signs into other signs is what Peirce calls methodic or pure rhetoric, and its primary goal is to understand how one thought can bring forth another (Interpretation 22). Since what is other than, the negative, is cognizable and therefore a sign, and since all signs are translatable into other signs, and since the cognizable, or the significant, and being are synonymous, being can be translated negatively as an "other than" into different signs and the negativity of disenchantment can become the basis of a Peircean methodic or pure rhetoric. This is, I believe, the point that Vattimo was getting at earlier in his notion of fidelity: disenchantment is faithful to being insofar as it interprets and renders it otherwise as arguments, and the rendering otherwise is precisely what Peirce called methodic or pure rhetoric—how signs are translated into other signs. Thus, Vattimo's disenchantment as the possibility of the production of meaning requires fidelity in the same sense as Peirce's signs require translatability into other signs. This exchange value into otherness is what both Vattimo and Peirce mean by rhetoric.

Rhetoric, in this sense, is not so much an art of persuasion as an investigation into how one sign, say a text, can be rendered as another text—that is, how, say, a work of literature can be rendered as a critical statement about that literature, or how one critical statement can be rendered in terms of another, or how one literary theory can be rendered as another text or another theory. If it is true, as Grafton and Jardine argued, that rhetoric formed the basis of the humanism that they lament exists no longer, the concept of rhetoric as methodic provides a way of resuscitating humanism in a postmodern age. Rhetoric is now the means of understanding how texts become translated as other texts—not how to apply any one theory of interpretation to a text but how interpretive systems work and articulate by the principle of disenchantment. A text must always be read otherwise than it is; one cannot take a text, or any other sign, to thought without translating it into another sign or text. A text must always be understood otherwise than it is. Rhetoric in the sense
of methodeutic would oversee the interpretive systems and assumptions at work in such a process.

This would bring about a radical transformation in the humanities. It would make the humanities a rhetorical enterprise based not on texts but on translation of signs, or rhetoric in Peirce’s sense, as the inevitable way of being in the world (Interpretation 219). What could be more essential to the humanities than to teach a “cheerful faith (not certainty)” (Interpretation 228) that the human past is infinitely rich and worth revisiting time and time again into the indefinite future? As William Rogers states in Interpreting Interpretation,

I am arguing that it might be a good idea to stop talking about “teaching texts.” It is too easy to take that phrase as implying that in the humanities one gets knowledge of poems, for example, the way an astronomer gets knowledge of celestial objects, and that accumulating this knowledge is the goal and justification of the humanities. That view, I think, is mistaken. “Teaching the humanities” does not mean “teaching texts.” It means, instead, methodeutic. (218)

In the Renaissance, exploration and scholarship yielded knowledge of other lands and peoples who did not belong to the Western tradition yet who had achieved remarkable accomplishments in civilization. This new knowledge shook Eurocentrism and precipitated a self-questioning that opened the opportunity for vernacular literatures and languages to become part of the tradition. Similarly, the encounter with new lands and peoples urged the advance of scientific knowledge. In this climate, the place of rhetoric in the curriculum shifted its classical focus from producing speeches and orations to reading texts, classical, scriptural, and vernacular (Humanism 140, 146). In a sense, rhetoric became the strategy for coping with the otherness of the new within a reinterpretation and reintegration of the old. Now in the age of the postmodern where, as Vattimo demonstrates, the encounter with difference and otherness is the very condition of life in an age of information and mass media, it appears that the conditions are right for rhetoric as methodeutic to become not the foundation, but the provenance of the humanities.

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Notes

1For an excellent introduction to the rise and demise of the transcendental ego and the modern subject see Robert C. Solomon's *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*.

Works Cited


