

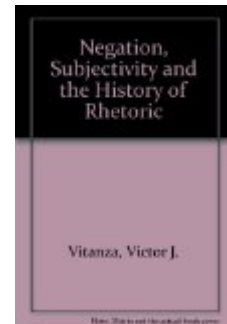
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Victor Vitanza. *Negation, Subjectivity and The History of Rhetoric*. N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997. xii + 428 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3124-5; \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-3123-8.

Reviewed by J. D. H. Amador (Santa Rosa Junior College)  
Published on H-Rhetor (September, 1997)



It is, perhaps, a banal truism that a summary or review of a book or article does violence to the subtlety of the original, but it is especially so in the case of this work: This book should be read. Any review simply cannot do justice to the complexity, depth, care and insight which Vitanza brings to the nature and relation of negation to subjectivity in “The” History of Rhetoric. Only a direct encounter with the text will do justice to the obvious care and effort brought to this powerful work.

Vitanza’s book is a sustained, subtle, irreverent and aggressive assault upon the discursive traditions and philosophical foundations giving shape to The History of Rhetoric. Spring-boarding from critiques of the recent works of Edward Shiappa, John Poulakos and Susan Jarratt on the question of the Sophists and their relationship to rhetorical history and tradition, Vitanza takes us on a labyrinthine journey of modern, postmodern and classical theorists in order to clear a space for alternative readings.

Among the numerous issues he raises, the most pressing he confronts is the function of *dieresis*, or species-genus analytics which inform not only these approaches to The History of Rhetoric, but is the foundation of western educational tradition and epistemology as a whole. Vitanza begins his work by confronting and rejecting Schiappa’s conclusion that the Sophists did not exist, but were a fiction created by Plato for his own ends (p. 46). As Vitanza correctly points out, this conclusion was reached through a divisive, definitional caveat, a bifurcation predetermining the answer (Sophists—oasis or mirage? ). Schiappa’s answer is predicated by the question he asks, a question informed by an ideology of ontology. As Vitanza points out, “the structure of the onto-

logical question is violent ... because it is preconditioned to have us believe that it must be answered (that it is irrepressible) and that it has a ‘correct’ (Platonic absolute or Aristotelian actual) answer” (p. 49).

Schiappa’s divisionary tactics are related to species-genus analytics, to the determination of the existence and “place” (species) of a subject according to preconceived system (genus). It is this tactic and its effect and impact upon subjectivity and historiography that Vitanza explores. For Vitanza, the issue is: Who is excluded and silenced through disciplinary practices which seek to control and limit, through ‘proper’ identification, those who are constituted as subjects? What happens to those who, by definitional caveat, are simply *not*, because they cannot be identified, because they do not fit within the paradigm?

To answer these questions, he weaves an elaborate tapestry of critical theoretics and analytics which simultaneously expose the power systems at work within the foundations of his discipline, while offering alternative means by which to envision a radically different Third Sophistic. To this end, he develops a complex trajectory of multiple linkages from Kant (the mathematical sublime), to Lyotard (heterogeneity of discourses), Bataille (sovereignty and excesses of a general economy), Nietzsche (Dionysian multiple subject positions), Foucault (nonpositive affirmation, transgression), Deleuze/Guattari (desiring machines), Cixous (depays; wild, savage writing). He works through to a position of “Dionysian” excess, affirmation and desire, as compared to a foundational philosophical tradition which sees negation and lack as fundamental to human expression, experience and thought. He confronts the pervasive

philosophical trope “out of the impossible comes the possible” or “out of the negative (lack) comes the positive (excess/desire).” It is from within his network of linkages that he begins to imagine and fashion an alternative space, a pagan space, where the exiled, silenced and rejected dwell and are given a place from which to speak.

Through and from out of these linkages he turns to explore the relationship of negation to fascism in education (historiography, political education, even everyday political life) in a trajectory extending from Isocrates to Heidegger: Isocrates’ concept of the hegemonic and unifying force of the civilizing (Greek) logos provides the eventual foundation for an imperialist Panhellenism. Isocrates emphasizes the hegemonic capacity of reasoning (logos) to unify and lead. Through a series of dextrous readings, re-readings and stretchings, Vitanza traces a Greek-German connection as evidenced through Jaeger’s concept of *paideia*, culture, *Geschlecht*. Jaeger argues for a similarity of spirit and culture between Germany on the one hand and the great Greece-Roman cultural empire on the other, and it is Isocrates and his concept of *paideia*/logos as civilizing force that provides the inspiration.

Interestingly, Heidegger himself turns to the concept of logos and its relation to Being, but rather than seeing in it a unifying force, he looks to the sophistic notion of *doxa* as in a perpetual act of appearance/glory. “In other words, *logos* speaks *doxa* which is an unconcealment and simultaneously a concealment of *some aspect* of *episteme*/truth, which can never be completely gathered, or unconcealed” (p. 178). It is necessary, therefore, to keep the question of Being from ever finding a definitive answer. Nevertheless, it is this Abyss of Being which is, like Isocrates’ logos, to be our guide. And it is this Abyss, as a negative essentializing moment, which becomes the object of nostalgia for Heidegger, a nostalgia that leads him to stop questioning and embrace a Fuehrer principle of logos/Being which ultimately leads him to National Socialism.

Vitanza’s point is not to blame Heidegger, whose concept of logos is after all, Greek and lies at the foundation of our western heritage. It is a logos which negatively essentializes *physis* (the Abyss of Being), which controls a perpetuates *nomos* (*paideia*-culture), which is at the heart of the will to truth (imperialism). It is this negative essentializing that Vitanza wants to critique, wants to avoid, in order to develop a nonpositive affirmative Third Sophistic based upon a general, libidinalized economy of excess.

To avoid the difficulties of the Isocrates-Heidegger

trajectory, Vitanza turns to Gorgias and casuistically stretches him through Nietzsche to (re)turn to a Third Sophistic. Rejecting Poulakos’ turn to Heidegger as problematic, Vitanza’s reconfiguration of The History of Rhetoric to (re)include the Sophists stretches Gorgias’ concept of the logos through a reading of excess: Where Plato unifies (one), and Isocrates divides (dissoi logoi—two), Gorgias explodes (many more, multiple subjectivities). Vitanza focuses in particular on Gorgias’ concept of logos as *kairotic*. This concept is explored in Gorgias’ defense of Helen, a figure which Vitanza eventually wants to turn to as an interpretive focal point for his Third Sophistic: Can he approach Helen through an anti-Humanist interpretive strategy which embraces a post-modern subjectivity-through-excess?

Setting aside Jarratt’s Feminist Sophistic, which he sees as founded upon a strategic negative essentializing approach (“only women can ...” as the obverse of patriarchy’s “only men can ...”), he stretches Judith Butler’s concept of gender identity as a performative activity. This allows him to approach subjectivity through a “middle voice”, a space between the active/passive dichotomy indicating a self undergoing movement, a multiplicity and excess of selves confronted by *kairotic* moments dispersing power. Here Vitanza finds the subjectivity he has been searching for: Helen, deliberating the dilemma of the decision whether or not to go with Paris, is confronted by the *kairos*, by the will to power through a *logos* uncanny, strange. Helen, read through Vitanza reading Gorgias, when confronted by the *logos*, is face-to-face with sovereignty and the sublime. She does not act, but is acted upon by a force that makes her subject to it, “not by virtue of a passive voice, but by ill-virtue—against ... what is fitting—of the middle voice (Hence, a denegated subject!) It is a force that prefers—just as the middle voice does—to place subjectivity into infinite dispersion, into a ‘Dionysian world’, into the middle voice ... of ‘endless desiring metamorphosis’” (p. 297). Vitanza rejects a Helen returned to agency as one most like to be reactionary. Instead, he finds (reading her through Nietzsche) a “sovereign, sublime subjectivity ... leaving behind active/passive voices, sadistic/masochistic voices by way of reaching for a middle voice” (p. 303)

What promises would such a project, founded upon a new sublime, sovereign subject, hold for histories of rhetoric? First, it would uncover the systems of consolidation and modalities of power at work throughout The History (and historiography) of Rhetoric as The History of Oppression. It would demand a fundamental reconstitution of the project(s) of histories of rhetoric by

(re)turning to the excluded (middle) voices, (re)turning us to the “dark side” of the pagus wherein dwell the antisocial, the criminal, the barbaric, the schizophrenic. It would denegate the negative, favoring pastiche over parody, overcoming the hegemony of onto-theological foundations. It would call for an end to philosophical rhetoric in favor of a return to poetic/schizophrenic speech. It would perpetually question the claim of rhetoric to “democratic values.” It would seek an excess of pessimistic joy, healing and celebration. It would, essentially, “explode *The* (speculative) genre of history” (p. 335).

There are so many questions that arise, and are addressed, when reading through this difficult, thought-provoking work. But I want to raise just one issue in light of the impassioned plea for/by/of the repressed (excluded, suppressed, oppressed): How do we measure the success(es) of an anti-humanist dispersion of power and subjectivities?

What do I mean? It has something to do about Helen, about Vitanza’s reading of Helen through a stretching of Gorgias. It has something to do with his accounting of Helen. She confronts and becomes, through his reading, the *kairotic*, schizophrenic moment. Yet, she is dispersed, neither powerless nor powerful, neither subject nor object, but left in liminality, in/as a way out.

There is something strange, almost dissatisfying about this. Perhaps it is simply something so new as to be unfamiliar. Admittedly, my reaction stems from an underdeveloped suspicion of mine that anti-humanist ana-

lytics of power, as important corrections as they may be to the ideology of human agency so prevalent in rhetorical theoretics, by advocating a theory of power as a network of discursive formations ultimately render the subject powerless in the face of overwhelming systems whose aims are precisely to eliminate individuality and agency. “We conceal, un/namely, that we, human beings, are not masters of this situation. Anthropos is not in charge here or elsewhere” (p. 292). The question I ponder, when reading Vitanza’s rereading of Helen, is: As an analytical critique, do we come to a better understanding of systems of power through it? Or does he have something else in mind, also? Perhaps, more importantly, he is looking for means and spaces of freedom that disperse power rather than engage with it, in it?

Vitanza’s book, difficult and brilliant, aggravating and enticing, elusive and invigorating, promises a future-anterior of wild, new (re)beginnings. It is a *tour-de-force* argument against the disciplinary rituals of power as played out in *The History of Rhetoric*. Ultimately, it leaves one desiring to see, if not also bring about, his and (Others’) envisioned future histories of rhetoric.

This book is a must-read for critical theorists, rhetorical theorists, historians (not only of rhetoric), and hermeneuts—modernists and postmodernists alike.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-rhetor>

**Citation:** J. D. H. Amador. Review of Vitanza, Victor, *Negation, Subjectivity and The History of Rhetoric*. H-Rhetor, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1260>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).