

1988

This Silence Which Is Not One: Towards a Microphysics of Rhetoric

Renate Holub

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Holub, Renate (1988) "This Silence Which Is Not One: Towards a Microphysics of Rhetoric," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 2 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol2/iss1/21>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

This Silence Which Is Not One: Towards a Microphysics of Rhetoric

Renate Holub

Review-essay on Paolo Valesio, *Ascoltare il Silenzio. La Retorica come teoria*. Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 1986.

One thing needs to be said from the start: This is surely not an easy book. It takes courage to develop a theory of discourse aiming towards organicity, systematicity, continuity, and some form of determinacy based on the multisensory materiality of everyday life. It takes courage to develop such a foundational theory in an era which—under the apparently inescapable impact of major paradigm changes in modern physics and philosophy (as well as of advances in chip high-tech)—opts for discontinuity, decentralization, and indeterminacy, a belief in the imperialism of the eye at the expense of other senses, and the gradual disappearance of the subject in the fluidity of infinite structurations. It takes an unusual kind of wisdom and immense knowledge to attempt such a grounding philosophy under the aegis of rhetoric and to assemble forms and concerns of knowledge of the master-texts of modernity—Hegelianism as well as Marxism, psycho-

analysis as well as neo-positivism and pragmatism—with the advances made in the areas of semiotics and linguistics, discourse analysis and narratology. And it also takes a good dose of integrity to present such a program—where linguistics merges with psychology and social studies, and where ontology, dialectic, and ideology are never separate but always intertwined—as a post-philosophical discourse on silence. For the notion of silence has been massively colonized by the logic of the discourses on power and powerlessness, by political discourses on liberation and emancipation—and the present rhetoric of silence no doubt presents a challenge to some of these discourses.

Certainly, if one were pressed to seat this author at the roundtable of philosophical discourse, he might have to be placed with the believers rather than with the radical skeptics, not with the propagators but with the detractors of the end of philosophy, with those who envision an ethical transformation rather than a dead end. Here he might sit no doubt with the hermeneutic crowd, with those tending towards contemplative rather than active hermeneutics, that is, with Levinas rather than Apel, with Picard and Bachelard rather than Habermas. Yet there are forms of knowledge, epistemological and ontological practices which are being carried out in multiple forms and places by women and feminists without always being structured into a full-fledged theory, or without being taken into account by the predominant master discourses in philosophy. It is with these practices, which have found articulation in a—most of the time—silent philosophy, that Valesio has something in common as well. I will get to this in a moment.

Valesio understands his discourse on silence as a contribution to post-philosophical philosophy. Yet his account is far from following a traditional philosophical program. He is perhaps an inimitable artist in telling the interdisciplinary story of his travels through the immense cultural landscapes of the past, freely crossing borders from linguistics to poetics, from anthropology to art history, from ethnography to philosophy, from rhetoric to ideology, from theology to literature and psychoanalysis. He is an astute diagnostician of the minimal in the maximum, a swift surgeon when electing and selecting the disciplinary, critical, and methodological tools for the dissection of the Western cultural body. In his ontological and epistemological search for a rhetoricized *anima mundi*, his attention focuses on the minimal which is expressed and not expressed, a minimal *vis veri*, a grounding principle and a metaphysical rhetorical strategy nonetheless, informing the micrological stratifications of much of the Western

representational tradition: Heraclitus, Shakespeare, Calderón, Lessing, Pirandello, Camus and so forth. As he states in the preface to *Ascoltare il silenzio*, his radicalization of philology has led him to the insight that matter has its limits, that the materialist basis and drive of language finds a demarcation in another drive or force, namely, in the transitional, perhaps transmaterial, and multifaceted presence and action of silence. The earlier development of his philosophy, as it emerges from his *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1980), is based on the belief that a systematic and inexhaustible textological and semiotic analysis would yield a knowledge of the ideologically informed atomistic particles of the text, that it would get to the ontology of the linguistic matter. Here philosophy amalgamates with philology. In the later development, or in the second movement of Valesio's dialectic, as it is presented in *Ascoltare il silenzio*, the author refutes such a possibility. The fullness of rhetoric or discourse, its imperial, phallic, omnipotent, and inexhaustible drive of a universe of expanding matter finds itself challenged by the presence of an element which is in all forms of being, yet not reducible to them, an energy which informs yet transcends expansion and amplification, which sets limits yet is productive in a thermodynamic universe of order and entropy. With the Senecan axiom *Quae philosophia fuit, facta philologia est*, the author reestablishes the priority of philosophy over philology, of the "idea" over the "fact." It limits the power of language to transcend the limits of the world.

The notions of "idea" and "fact" (perhaps more the notion of "idea" than of "fact") need to be put in quotation marks. While the author adopts a materialist notion of the linguistic fact as it has been commonly accepted by the Marxist tangent of structuralism, he uses the notion of "idea" in a highly original way. For in Valesio's program this field of the "idea" (or philosophy) of silence emerges as an energy which has an impact on the materiality of the fact—it being capable of putting a limit to the fact—while simultaneously functioning as a productive and generative force. In contradistinction to Heidegger, who understands this field of silence as fullness, matter, or *hyle*, thereby allowing it to stand as an oppositional territory to non-silence, Valesio stresses the interruptive nature and function of silence. Surrounded by the atoms of language, it pierces, similar to the rays of light, through the materiality of language in a process of micro-energization, thereby changing the materiality of the very substance it penetrates. The microphysical images in Valesio's

otherwise Heideggerianized account are overwhelming. Similar to the matter-energy problematic in modern physics, the molecules of language change with the absorption of a quantum of radiant energy. These quanta are invisible yet ubiquitous, inexpressible yet present in all and the most minute forms of life, and their silence can be made out, so goes Valesio's argument, by the one who does not need to speak but cares to listen. What this meditative disposition promises is a glimpse of hope, expressed in the archetypal image of the *filo d'erba*, a cosmic *viriditas* which speaks of the perennial germination of things within the limits of a temporal beginning and an end. The dialectic of language, of rhetoric, thus moves not towards a teleology of the *copia verborum*. The dialectic of rhetoric moves towards a parable of language and silence, towards the Heraclitean axiom so inimitably analyzed by Valesio: *Tôi oûn tóksōi ónoma bíos, érgon dè thánatos*.

I cannot comment at length on Valesio's intriguing microphysical program and on the ways in which he departs from Heidegger. Yet two things should surely be pointed out. For one, there seems to be a shift in his understanding of materialism from earlier versions of his theory to later ones. And second, that shift is highly suggestive of materialist epistemologies as they have emerged in feminist theories such as the ones authored by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. The shift I am referring to deals with Valesio's presentation of the materiality of language. In his earlier *Novantiqua*, the primacy of the materiality of language over nature in his understanding of dialectic appears as follows:

In the traditional, ontological view of dialectic, we are implicitly told that there are certain processes at work in nature which also operate in society, are then reflected in language, and may be polished and embellished by rhetoric. What is proposed here is the opposite: these processes exist essentially as rhetorical structures, which are extended to all linguistic manifestations, and through them imposed on society and nature as the only ways of perceiving and describing phenomena in these domains. (121)

Yet in the last hundred pages or so of *Ascoltare il silenzio*, Valesio gives up this Kantian phenomenological position, which he shares with Heidegger in his skeptical description of the program language imposes on the fullness of the real ground. What he puts in its place is not an understanding of the ground as full, as corporeal, as *hyle*, as "Sein als Seinendes," as Heidegger would have it, but as radiant energy, as light, ether, vibration, and prop-

agation, an amalgamation of Newton and Huygens at once. This imagery of light captures Valesio's program of silence. Luce Irigaray has pointed out in her *L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger* (1983) how Heidegger's repression of the element of air in his philosophical discourse is hardly an innocent affair. For it is this element which, in the footsteps of Bachelard, Irigaray bestows with the attributes of femaleness, allowing for a demystification of traditional divisions in male representation based on an imagistic oppositional genealogy of lightness/darkness. And the introduction of a female principle is surely appropriate here. For Valesio's highly interesting and massive phenomenology of the parable of the dialectic of rhetoric, which he assembles to develop his theory, leads him to discover and come to terms with precisely such a principle. In the innumerable cultural documents and depositories of collective reveries he studies, he finds that the phallic, the ideological, the corporeal manifestations of the *homo fans*, culturally and libidinally expressing themselves as an amalgamation of the heroic, erotic, and rhetorical, are also accompanied by the presence and the freedom of a *homo infans*, one who is not forced into the structurations of language. The author also unearths visions of love such as Agape, and psycholinguistic vestiges of visions of an energy of a presence which transcends the phallic sexuality of rhetoric. Perhaps the most compelling and telling account is one of Valesio's most brilliant analyses of a cultural text, the analysis of an Etruscan statue of an orator, the so-called *Arringatore*. Here the presence of a female principle is an essential part of that paradigm of rhetoric, philosophy, and silence. In *reductio*: due to the particular constellations drawn by the arms and hands of that statue of the orator, of eminent emblematic value for Valesio's theoretical map, attention can also be paid to an important detail, meticulously described: the right hip of this male orator, roundish or making rounds under the pleats of the tunic and the toga, emanates an effect which might be best described as feminine-like or sensual. Valesio is quick to point out that this detail does not belie the phallic valence of the orator, expressed via the vertical axis and the frontal versant. Rather, that feminine-like and sensual detail integrates with that phallic valence. And Valesio concludes: This representation can be the emblem of the union of the male and the female principle in rhetoric, an emblem of the androgynous nature of discourse. Elsewhere, in his *L'ospedale di Manhattan* (Editori Riuniti, 1978), Valesio evokes an androgynous principle when he stresses the fluidity of sexual identification, as when the character is male lover, mother

to the woman, the woman herself, and himself at once. This is a process which Kristeva detected in her study of Artaud in the context of avant-garde literature, in *La révolution du langage poétique*, namely, the precariousness of sexual identification, which she sees when Artaud is father, mother, himself, and author at the same time. Yet what is interesting here in the context of his analysis of the *Arringatore* is Valesio's insistence on the androgynous nature of discourse, although his description clearly speaks of an integralism and essentialism of a female principle: The female-like element does not combine or symbiotize with the phallic valence of the statue, but actively "integrates" it. There is some ambiguity then, or some uncertainty, when it comes to a genderized description of that element of air, vibration, energy, or force which lives in all and every materiality. For what emerges is both a female essentialism—as we know it from the work of Irigaray—and an androgynous principle—as we know it from the work of Lacan on the unconscious. Yet one thing is beyond any doubt: the principle or element Valesio evokes keeps its distance from a representational tradition which emanates a female principle of darkness, inertia, and unproductive silence. In fact, it almost seems as if Valesio would like to keep it that way. For in one of his phenomenological excursions in search of the traces of silence (which, the author interestingly believes, have been collectively repressed out of fear of the sacred), Valesio does not only encounter a microphysics of positive energy informing all forms of life, a *viriditas*, which renews itself in space and time. He also comes across a law of inertia, of non-movement, of void, of passivity, of stasis, which he quickly considers as only one out of many dimensions of silence. Certainly, he acknowledges that his phenomenological account of silence, which he sets out to do in the spirit of Bachelard, is far from being complete. One wonders though whether in a four-dimensional universe, one dimension has not more weight than Valesio would grant it, and that in a more developed genealogy of silence more of the darkness, stasis, void, and non-ethereal and non-luminous qualities of the other side of the parable of rhetoric would appear. I think that such discoveries would problematize his notion of androgyny.

The rather abrupt move with which Valesio effaces the "dark," the material, the non-ethereal, the static side of the dialectic of rhetoric is very much a leitmotif in all of his work. For instance, in a poem entitled "Florescence" published in the first issue of this journal, he evokes the mysteries of life and the silence inscribed in it by witnessing the natural order and meaning of things.

And in his *L'ospedale di Manhattan*, he accredits women with first detecting and organizing the secrets inscribed in even the most minute material fact. He writes:

La donna ha inventato e disciplinato in sistema—lungo il corso dei secoli—la teologia dei dettagli quotidiani, la teologia degli oggetti e gesti minuti; ed essa può essere disprezzata sola dagli uomini di quantità, che in effetto disprezzano ogni forma di teologia, del mastio così come della femmina. (74)

So woman stands here as a principle of origin of a philosophy of silence. It should be pointed out that, in a somewhat different language, a feminist genealogy of silence has come to similar conclusions—or to put it otherwise, that Valesio has arrived at conclusions not indifferent to or different from feminist practices. In fact, if we were to reductively sweep through a microhistory of the notion of silence in the liberational discourses in general, and in feminist discourses in particular, the following oversimplified trajectory would emerge, which parallels the various phases of Valesio's theoretical program. As a master category, "silence," conceived of as presence and absence, permeates and informs the architectural designs of feminist discourse at first as a synonym of powerlessness, of the places, rights, symbolic orders and privileges which had been denied to many women, and with the inflexibility of some of the symbolic systems to express that which had hitherto remained inexpressible. In a subsequent move, feminist discourses recognize that silence was not always to be seen in a negative key, that the cultural silences which appear to have been imposed on women perhaps reveal, as much as they conceal, presences which fueled the various historical phallographic ascents to power. And so the issue is not only, from then on, to document the cultural silence of women, to speak of powerlessness, oppression, and exploitation, or of the conditions which contributed to such a state of affairs, but the issue is also to archaeologize the silent sites of power present in those silences, to find out, to put it simply, where and how woman has been and where she can be. Susan Adrian's forthcoming *First Wave Feminism: The Invention of Technologies of Power*, straightens this issue out, no doubt, for some time to come. So before and next to Foucault's, or in any event quite independently from his, feminist theory and other emancipatory discourses have come to understand that, as Foucault put it in *The History of Sexuality*, "there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses." This is

of course also what Valesio is about. And so beside the many master discourses of the second half of the twentieth century, which have recorded the gradual disappearance of the body's subject and the subject's body, feminist theory and practices have spoken of the multisensory materiality of the language of everyday life, and of the need to extend an understanding of the production and surveillance of knowledge beyond the eye and the ear to all of the body. Feminist theory has, on the basis of a discourse on the materiality of experiential being and knowledge, resisted and continues to resist the powerful move towards reducing the subject to one sense alone, or towards eliminating the subject altogether. And this is what emanates from Valesio's discourse as well. Yet while Valesio validates the silent agenda of power in silence in a direction of contemplation, which aligns him with the mystical tendencies in Irigaray's work, he also differs from another influential branch of feminist theory when it comes to an understanding of silence in terms of the power structures it conceals and reveals. A short excursion into Kristeva will suggest that much.

By adopting a principle of androgyny, Valesio did not assign himself to an insignificant strategy. That principle has good standing, and legitimizing credentials as well. Juliett Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, two profound theoreticians of feminist discourse, express similar views when they discuss, in their *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, the polemics on sexuality in the twenties and thirties, and in which Jung, one of the central characters in Valesio's narrative drama (and in his *L'ospedale di Manhattan* as well) has played a crucial role. They speak, as Valesio does, of the genderlessness of the sexual drive, of the impossibility of satisfying that drive, of the inseparability of "jouissance" (silence) and "signifiante" (the sphere of the fact) due to the inherent surplus contained in jouissance. In Valesio's account this surplus of silence seems to stand in relation to a generative principle which, although it fractures similar to light when piercing through the material fact, changes the fact but not itself. It is as if it were a constant, defying entropy which is otherwise part of order. In Kristeva's account, the place of silence, the surplus, or as she calls it, the *chora*, is, as in Valesio's account, the margin of language or the material fact, a pre-Oedipal sphere where sexual difference, a semiotic field of energies, plays a role in the signifying process. Yet whereas in Valesio these energies come to life unharmed, unrepressed in the materiality of symbolic orders and systems, in Kristeva's story the *chora* will be repressed once the subject

enters, as in Lacan, the order of language in the mirror phase. Thus the *chora* appears only as a pressure on the symbolic sphere, as a pulsional pressure which appears as disruption, contradiction, presence and absence in the symbolic language, and which, as such, eludes the symbolic order. It is not to the contemplation of this energy in the order that Kristeva aspires to because, she argues, this order is also the one that establishes sexual difference. Resistance to this order is possible for her when the *chora*, that energy which eludes order and the symbolic, is strengthened. In fact, strengthening the *chora*, and developing through it multiple and heterogenous positionalities with respect to the symbolic order, becomes for her the revolutionary road to change for women as well as for all those who desire change. Whether Valerio's philosophy of silence is moving in a similar direction remains to be seen. If we are to judge, however, from his dialectic transition from *Novantiqua* to *Ascoltare il silenzio*, he surely has no propensities for sitting still.

Ognuno sa che alla base della moderna teoria dell'architettura
c'è il fondamentale *Saggio* dell'abate Laugier
Questa è la prima edizione italiana

Marc-Antoine Laugier

Saggio sull'Architettura

a cura di Vittorio Ugo

Sono anche in libreria

Pseudo Longino, Il Sublime

Edmund Burke, Inchiesta sul Bello e il Sublime

Luigi Russo (a cura di), Da Longino a Longino: I luoghi del Sublime

Baltasar Gracián, L'Acutezza e l'Arte dell'Ingegno

Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue, Anatomia del Barocco

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Riflessioni sul testo poetico

Cesare Brandi, Segno e Immagine

centro internazionale studi di estetica

presso la facoltà di lettere e filosofia
viale delle scienze - 90128 palermo
tel. 091/422980 - telex 910235