Rhetorical Agency: Mind, Meshwork, Materiality, Mobility
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If the upcoming chapters ever imply any camouflaging of the authorial persona, that impression may simply derive from the humility at stake in arranging for collisions among the perspectives of others. But I’m in the neighborhood anyway, so I’ll introduce the work as a whole by previewing the places where the main topics and lines of reasoning are located. (Let me add from the outset, though, that I’m breaking with tradition by previewing the places slightly out of order.) In the process, I’ll contribute a few autobiographical anecdotes, each connected with an insight about rhetorical agency. These little stories, just the four of them, might serve as bridges between my sense of the situation and yours. They might also model some of the applications that I hope will come to mind in the rest of the discussion, where rhetorical agency as it works for the theorist meets rhetorical agency as it works for the practitioner.

When theory does refer to “rhetorical agency,” the focus generally falls upon the respect in which communication might involve agents who act — instead of patients, as it were, that are passively moved upon. And then a question arises as to what rhetoric might contain (or unleash) that empowers its users to cooperate in action. It’s an important question, though it most often gets a quarter-hearted, not even full-throated reply. For rhetoric is credited, and that’s about the size of it, with enigmatically managing, or activating, or supervening upon the most crucial of the forces, or capacities, or proclivities which travel along with writing and reading, with speaking and listening, with teaching and learning — with communicative production and reception. So Chapter 1 frames the important question itself as a problem of productivity.

As for the answer to the question, at least the answer uncovered during the present investigation, it’s translucent enough to state in a sentence but four-folded enough to explain at length: Rhetorical agency is an assemblage made out of subjectivity, conventionality, materiality, and transcendence, each of which is still under construction. Chapter 2 therefore lays out the
essentials of the answer, all of them in the same spot. That’s not to say there’s nary an air-bubble in the answer. To the contrary, there’s a glitch meandering all the way through it, and this is that almost everybody studying rhetorical functionality is currently positioned to discern only one of the components, only one of the constituents of rhetorical agency at a time.

But that reminds me of when I went to see the dentist, the one who asked how Barack Obama’s speaking style could ever have gotten the guy elected president. Temporarily supine, familiar with enough of those horror movies to know the drill, I plumped for diplomacy. Why, said I, the explanation had surprisingly little to do with speaking style. It was just that Obama, by invoking certain recurrent ideals, virtues, and aspirations (and this is where I remembered to emphasize not only hope but also change) had managed to create the requisite identification between himself and the public.

Later on, speeding from the scene, I congratulated myself for producing, and under such unnerving conditions, the irrefragable response. For mine had been the sort of reply, give or take, that ought to meet the approval, or so I decided, of contemporary rhetorical theorists such as anybody. Yes, Barack Obama had proven himself to be an agent, and he had done so by invoking certain recurrent ideals, virtues, and aspirations, and my dentist had not demurred.

Surely, as many a recent textbook on argumentation or public speaking would confirm (in a section, say, on the place of “warrants” in the Toulmin model), rhetoric operates not so much, if at all, through eloquence as through leveraging those hoary, durable values which the recipients of a message share with the sender. For what else, if not guidelines held (or, better yet, guidelines valorized) in common could explain why, periodically tabling our atomistic selfishness, we accede to the collective, if still worthy-of-us endeavor? From this perspective, rhetorical agents do not possess any rhetorical agency, certainly not as their private property. They share it with those others in the community who happen to share the same values.

So I’ve continued researching that entire way of thinking, a line of reasoning which remains every bit as true, as ready-to-
hand, and—frankly—as mobile as an Arctic icescape. The results are featured not exactly where you'd expect, but somewhat further along, in Chapter 4. They are (re)visited wherever the text mentions the rhetorical-humanistic perspective, according to which rhetorical agency inheres in conventionality.

Yet there was that other occasion when, eavesdropping upon the conversation between a couple of graduate students, I grasped with some finality that the irrefragable response was not what it used to be. The discussion was about the Mexican-born Selma Hayek, topical for having so recently received U.S. citizenship. And what difference would switching passports make for a celebrity of that stature? Would it alter her talent as a performer, her ability as a director—would it modify her financial wherewithal, her engagement as a political activist? No, but it would still increase her “agency.”

If that were the case, or so I began to suspect, then one could probably factor out the appeal of any shared values expressed in Salma Hayek's performances, projects, or platforms, since the shared values themselves would remain equally appealing regardless of Salma Hayek's nationality. But then the numerator, or what accounted for this upgrade in Salma Hayek's agency, would be the hegemonic power with which Salma Hayek had just now become identified.

In other words, these graduate students, here reduced to anonymity but still shepherded along by their up-to-date reading assignments, had every reason to conclude that agency accrued not so much, if at all, to shared values as to the control mechanisms locking down the group. Remembering the dentist's office, remembering Barack Obama (remembering, that is, a rhetorical situation lined with X-ray images, with testimonials to expertise), I realized that what the graduate students were saying—that agency belongs to the state—was, regrettably, correct. From this perspective, rhetorical agents neither possess nor share any rhetorical agency: they lease as much of it as allowed to by law.
So I’ve continued researching that entire way of thinking, a line of reasoning which remains every bit as true and conflictual as a traffic ticket. The results are featured back there in Chapter 3 and (re)visited wherever the text mentions the social-structural perspective, according to which rhetorical agency inheres in subjectivity.

Then a certain communication instructor briefly contracted the flu, which briefly became associated with pneumonia, which briefly resulted in hospitalization. There were doctors, nurses, visitors, medical assistants, some of whom, dropping by to maintain the IV drip stuck into a left arm, might have observed the tapping out, with a right hand, of e-mail messages to persons.

But where oh where was my rhetorical agency then? It wasn’t located so much, if at all, in a set of shared values or ideological pronouncements as in a relational-yet-tangible mesh. That alliance, so far as I could tell, included not only all of the preceding but also quite a few buildings, pillows, forms of medical knowledge, students, healthcare systems, sensations, pieces of specialized equipment, affiliations and livelihoods, sheets, perceptions, viruses and germs, interests and agendas, ideas for thesis statements.

In short, what must be accurate to say of agency (and, while we’re at it, of patiency too) is that it’s distributed irreducibly among all sorts of actors pulling together, regardless that most of them aren’t even human. From this perspective, rhetorical agents neither possess, nor share, nor yet lease any rhetorical agency. They emerge, together with rhetorical agency, as network effects.

So I’ve continued researching that entire way of thinking, a line of reasoning which remains every bit as true and internally heterogeneous as an alloy. The results are featured all the way over in Chapter 6. They are (re)visited wherever the text mentions the material-semiotic perspective, according to which rhetorical agency inheres in materiality, albeit the kind of materiality that’s relational as well as tangible.

Nevertheless, lying as I was in my hospital bed (though that’s an allusion both to Bo Diddley and to the New York
Dolls), I kept registering that the typing hand, the one tapping out those e-mail messages to persons, wasn’t somebody else’s. No doubt the abstract-and-concrete totality did seem more real than it ought to be. But to the extent that it existed, then it existed, if at all, not so much for better or worse as for me. There’s undeniably something for each of us, isn’t there, in Sarah McLachlan’s “Fumbling Towards Ecstasy”: “It’s my heart that pounds beneath my flesh / It’s my mouth that pushes out this breath.” From this perspective, rhetorical agents neither possess, nor share, nor lease, nor yet sit around waiting for the emergence of any rhetorical agency. They stake a claim to rhetorical agency despite their enmeshment in the network.

So I’ve continued researching that entire way of thinking, a line of reasoning which remains every bit as true and (shucks) improbable as your presence. The results are featured in the place that’s been missing so far — namely, Chapter 5 — and they are (re)visited wherever the text mentions the existential-transversal perspective, according to which agency inheres in transcendence.

Those little anecdotes, all four of them, might yet become bridges and models, entrances into the study of a four-folded rhetorical agency. Chapter 7, the conclusion, even offers a suggestion for bridging the models, but without effacing the boundaries among them. As to whether theory takes the hint, that’s hardly for me to say.