7. Agency in the Rhetorical-Theoretical World

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Agency in the Rhetorical-Theoretical World

The preceding study has taken us into four distinct landscapes of rhetorical agency. These discrete paradigms are theoretical-and-practical workspaces for the production of subjectivity, of conventionality, of transcendence, and of materiality. While each locale does offer an indispensible contribution to our thinking about rhetorical agency (highlighting structural constraints, or shared values, or authentic claims, or variegated networks), each models the rhetorical agent in its own, proprietary way. So, although there are several options for theorizing the connection between rhetorical transaction and genuine social change, the choices aren’t, all of them, available in the same place.

In the social-structural landscape, rhetorical subjectivity is being assembled out of terms that always dissolve into their relations. The rhetorical agent is a structural subject perpetually reproducing its own “unavoidable” condition (Campbell 3). It’s an agent quite incapable, other than by theoretical fiat, of speaking in such a way as to make any difference, an agent attached as closely to the state as is a barnacle to a ship. But, then again, the interiority of speakers and listeners cannot be other than collectively contextualized. For that reason, it’s perfectly appropriate for there to be a social-structural paradigm, where the local theorists and practitioners can continue manufacturing all manner of constraints upon the structural subject.

In the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, rhetorical conventionality is being assembled out of at least some terms that don’t merge with their relations. True, the rhetorical agent is a whole person, routinely finessing certain traditionally-held values that come from who knows where. Nevertheless, in deploying such guidelines, the whole person can promote some genuine social change, if only by helping the group recover its
longed-for coherence. Thus we should applaud the existence of the rhetorical-humanistic world, whose inhabitants do keep producing a form of rhetorical conventionality serviceable enough for any whole person to keep redirecting.

Meanwhile, in the existential-transversal landscape, rhetorical transcendence is being assembled primarily out of terms that don’t reduce to their relations. For better or worse, the rhetorical agent is the existential self, reducing half to lack, loss, or absence, and half to quite the occasionalist corporeality. To be sure, the occasionalist half might yet give up the ghost, now that there is no longer any “self-sufficient agency that can qualify as intentional,” and now that “choice” is “objectively co-caused at the crossroads of chance and determinacy (Massumi, qtd. in Hall 120). Even so, the existential self does give itself “reasons” for being, regardless that it doesn’t initially “have” any (Beauvoir 12). That’s justification enough for us not merely to cherish but actually to rehabilitate the existential-transversal landscape, the only world in which an existential self could thrive to begin with.

In the material-semiotic landscape, rhetorical materiality is being assembled entirely out of terms that remain separable from their relations. The rhetorical agent is an ineffable participant, forever making things otherwise than they are, and yet forever morphing into all sorts of other ineffable participants. Nobody here can say exactly why any of this activity should be going on, or under what circumstances (or to what extent) it should ever be stopped. So it does appear that the ineffable participant of this landscape ought to stay in close communication with the existential self from the other, existential-transversal world. This would be so that the former sort of agent can sometimes borrow, from the latter, the “reasons” that neither could possibly have in the first place (Beauvoir 12). However, its ethical slightness notwithstanding, the material-semiotic perspective does warrant our protection, since it’s a preserve for all the resources empowering the ineffable participant to materialize everything, even transcendence.

So it’s not only that each of the four landscapes persists, each in its own way, as a factory for producing a four-folded rhetorical agency. It’s also that each persists despite the per-
sistence of its others. Meanwhile, there’s no theoretical justifica-
tion for stapling such paradigms together. To the contrary,
it’s incumbent upon us to inculcate the incommensurability
among the four perspectives, so that rhetorical agency can stay
irreducibly four-folded.

Now, one might think, given the sophistication with which
rhetorical functionality is being studied, that we’re cognizant
enough of the complexity, the reputed perversity of rhetori-
cal agency. Yet rhetorical agency is becoming less multiple all
the time. For theory seems bent on suturing the landscapes, on
assembling a certain rhetorical world, on manufacturing a sin-
gular — Thomas Rickert (2013) would prefer “ambient” — home
for all four types of rhetorical agent simultaneously. That’s the
blueprint for a concentration camp, its blended atmosphere too
toxic for any meeting among the ineffable participant, the exis-
tential self, the whole person, and the structural subject, all of
whom do need to be left in their own ontologies.

No More Homogenization Now!

Let’s underline the exigency by examining some of the recent
work on rhetorical materiality, reading the results in the man-
ner of a cautionary tale. After all, as we’ve seen in our trav-
els, rhetorical materiality is already folded into rhetorical
agency, for which reason the ongoing effacement of rhetor-
cal materiality — or, alternatively, the suturing of the materi-
al-semiotic landscape to its others — can serve as an allegory
for what’s happening to the rest of rhetorical agency as well.
So we’ll reflect on two equally sophisticated contributions. One
affirms that rhetorical practices should certainly be concep-
tualized as materially irreducible. The other affirms that our
thinking about rhetorical functionality has certainly moved
beyond the naive view in which any tangible signifier can only
ever be the figure (the notionally material trace), while ideol-
ogy must always be the constitutive ground. Nevertheless the
very authors advancing these claims are among those currently
assembling a single rhetorical world, a concentration camp for
all sorts of theorists and practitioners at once.
Here’s the contribution of Ronald Walter Greene, a scholar who “perhaps more than any other” is “committed to thinking the problem of rhetoric’s materiality” (Trapani 344). In an essay of 1998, Greene chastises Michael Calvin McGee for having developed a “fragmentation thesis” that effectively “keeps a materialist rhetoric locked into a logic of representation” (34). McGee’s claim is that the rhetorical utterances around us must surely mirror the fragmentation that characterizes our multiply distributed sociality more generally. In that case, as Greene explains, McGee’s error is to have inculcated a view in which

Rhetorical practices do not exhibit their own positiv-
ity, their own unique place in the structure of every-
day life, their materiality does not resist but simply
reflects what we already know: that we live in a frag-
mented culture. (34)

We may discern the prescience of Ronald Walter Greene when we grasp that the complaint still applies today, and to no less than the approach promoted by Ronald Walter Greene.

To be sure, Greene (1998; 2009) has become adamant as to the sheer pointlessness, in theorizing rhetorical materiality, of invoking concepts like representation, influence, coercion, suspicion, and so on. He maintains that power operates autonomously, silently, through constitutive-and-productive articulations, in short, materially, rather than at the level of ideation. But let’s note a rejoinder from William Trapani, which is that Greene himself, in one of his works, “inadvertently smuggles in an unreconstructed notion of communication as mediation and thus risks losing the very prospect of a new ‘materialist rhetoric’” (Trapani 345). Whether inadvertently or otherwise, Greene does persist in reinstating the very notion of representation (communication, mediation, and so on) that he has so vociferously contested.

For example, Greene (2009) is the one who can continue to write, and always about rhetorical materialism, passages like this, wherein rhetoric’s materiality is framed as that of some delivery system, dutifully channeling the interests of the status quo: “The need to govern the rhetorical subject is due to how
a generalized rhetoricality infuses capitalism with its dynamic energy to produce and appropriate the social wealth of communicative labor” (61). So, in Greene, rhetorical materiality isn’t irreducible, after all. It’s reducible to capitalism’s needy automatism. Although capitalism is nowadays governing the subject by other-than-symbolistic means, it’s still expressing itself perfectly, if not through signification, then through the rhetorical materiality that it’s so definitively appropriated.

Here, the point is that even if Greene is correct (about theory’s need to acknowledge rhetoric’s irreducible positivity), it wouldn’t yet help for him to be correct, since not even Greene is clear as to how rhetorical materiality could resist, rather than simply reflect, what we already know. In this instance, we can be sure we’re living in a capitalist society. And that, according to Greene, is what rhetorical materiality tells us, too! But where, in that case, is rhetoric’s material difference, its irreducible heterogeneity?

Maybe it’s in the contribution of Christian Lundberg, also representative of the scholars committed to thinking the problem of rhetoric’s materiality. In his “On Missed Encounters: Lacan and the Materiality of Rhetoric” (2009), Lundberg characterizes the two most salient versions of “the materiality of rhetoric thesis” as inadequate (162). Theorizing about rhetorical materiality, he says, has led to certain “advances,” but these don’t quite register the “irreducible plurality and specificity of rhetorical events, texts, and practices” (161, 163). One of the advances has been “beyond an object-centered view of rhetoric as durable effect against an ideational bias” and “toward an ever more expansive view of discourse constituting the subject” (163). Another has been “beyond the critical categories of representation and interpretation” and “toward attention to logics of power and articulation that produce reality.” But that’s not all there is to the advances.

In Lundberg’s view, the latest advance looks to be that of folding the other two advances together, as by recruiting “articulation theory” to serve as a “principle” of order—a principle “mediating the divide between the order of discourse and the order of reality by reading them as simultaneous” (Lundberg 163). And what bothers Lundberg is the seamlessness presup-
posed in this convergence, hence his lamentation that the two advances, especially when blended, can only conduce to the effacement of rhetoric’s “irreducible plurality and specificity” (161).

By reading Lundberg a little against the grain, we begin to see that he’s protesting too much. In celebrating the advance “beyond an object-centered view of rhetoric as durable effect” he himself is dismissing the possibility that objects, things, corporealities might yet have some materiality of their own (Lundberg 163). For him, it’s not even the object, only talk about the object that matters. Meanwhile, in celebrating the advance “beyond the critical categories of representation and interpretation,” he himself is dismissing the possibility that signification can matter, either (161). For he’s the one agreeing that the “logics of power and articulation” can “produce reality” all by themselves, i.e., that it’s no longer meaningful to differentiate between the map and the territory (163). So of course to fold together the two advances is to leave out any irreducible plurality and specificity. It’s to render everything (events, texts, practices, objects, durable effects, and so on) epiphenomenal to an all-encompassing social totality.

But what is Lundberg’s own suggestion for re-admitting rhetoric’s irreducible plurality, specificity, and heterogeneity? Well, it’s to refer rhetorical materiality to a linguistic loop. Technically, the argument is that rhetoric remains material because, on the one side, rhetoric is animated by a material drive that operates out of awareness, and because, on the other side, rhetoric is the material trace left in signification — insinuated into “practice” — by the material drive itself (Lundberg 162).

To begin with, there would appear to be two sorts of material available for reworking by the material drive. But the one sort is linguistic, comprising such symbolizations as are continually reconfigured during the ordinary, trope-deploying processes of communicative interchange. And the other sort is unconscious, too, comprising the extraordinary content of the unconscious, which is only the “reservoir of all the possible metonymic associations potentially inhering in a signifier by way of past usage” (171). So far, Lundberg’s rhetorical material-
ity is divided neatly between tropes which are familiar because they’re new, and tropes which are uncanny because they’re old. Of course, there’s still the question of the material drive that’s animating these processes of signification. Oddly, not even the material drive can matter. Its functionality is limited to that of reshuffling all those representations, some of them brand-new, the remainder second-hand.

Thus the approaches of Greene and of Lundberg are comparably flawed, though in opposite directions. Greene theorizes rhetorical materiality too reductively (as whatever might be left after the vacuuming-out of all linguisticality), and Lundberg theorizes rhetorical materiality too expansively (as whatever might turn out, once again, to be linguisticality in disguise). Either way, rhetorical materiality, like all the rest of rhetorical agency, is theorized in a manner that effaces its internal heterogeneity.

**On Keeping Difference Different**

In reflecting on what both Greene and Lundberg have to say, we can still arrive at a couple of clues as to where to find rhetoric’s disappearing heterogeneity. The clue from Lundberg is that rhetoric should be theorized as speaking with the aid of such objects, things, corporealities as are “durable” enough to stick in the gears of any social machine bent on generating everything in its image (163). Indeed, to trivialize the durable and the object-oriented, as by moving beyond them, would be a step in the wrong direction. We should therefore, as even Lundberg suggests, consider rolling back this notion that rhetorical materiality can somehow be captured in a reading of “the order of discourse and the order of reality...as simultaneous.” Similarly, the clue from Greene is that rhetoric should be theorized as speaking with its own, resistant positivity (always telling us something different from what we already know), even if Greene hasn’t actually theorized it that way.

Indeed, the problem uncovered above may be simply that the rhetorical theorists keep forgetting where they are. Perhaps, for example, Lundberg and Greene have come to think they’re wandering around the one rhetorical world, when they’re actu-
ally perambulating within the social-structural perspective (an environment-and-imperative where rhetorical subjectivity is the dominant term, and everything else a satellite). Perhaps these writers are trying to study rhetorical materiality with the aid of resources which are only good for studying rhetorical subjectivity. Perhaps this sort of misprision could be minimized were more of the local theorists to take seriously the commitments ordering their own, provincial paradigm.

Yet the four alternative frameworks are already there, even if they do have to be understood in their own terms. Any attempt to blenderize them, or to staple them together, would be rhetorical-theoretical imperialism. Let’s, therefore, leave the landscapes alone, so that all those local theorists and practitioners can keep making their idiosyncratic contributions to a four-folded rhetorical agency. But, in that case, if the four paradigms ought indeed to be kept apart, we’re left with the question as to how resources from all four of them, crossing the abysses between, could ever become reconciled in rhetorical transaction.

A Fluctuating Rhetorical Agent

Perhaps we could assemble a theorist-and-practitioner of quite another stripe, a participant who’s capable of bringing some radical alterity into each and every landscape, even when the locals aren’t up to the task. We could add a fifth figure to the list of those belonging to the category of “rhetorical agent,” arriving at a metaphor, at a model for the interlocutor on call. Holding a quadruple passport, claiming citizenship in all quarters of the rhetorical-theoretical world, she could show up in any of the perspectives, always importing tidings from elsewhere.

A traveler like that could draw any local agent’s attention to connections (as between here and there), to linkages that, if not for her reminding presence, might seem impossible to detect. These would remain partial connections, as Marilyn Strathern (1991) or Annemarie Mol (2002) would say, and therefore partial separations, too. But they’d still be connections. Doubtless, such a traveling rhetorical agent would be a
messenger, an ontological drifter, maybe a sophist. And there is just such a model in the work of Michel Serres, the ally of so many a material-semiotic theorist. He has a book about it—*Angels: A Modern Myth* (1995). As for the angels populating the book, they’re of the kind that “fluctuates between the collective and the individual,” bearing “relationships” (293, 295).

Admittedly, the angels haven’t yet borne enough relationships. Often, they’ve settled for bearing only selective, elitist relationships, those echoed in “the cry in the desert,” in “the burning prophecy or the psalm,” in “the rustling of crossed wings,” in “the coded message, transported, delivered, received and deciphered,” in “emphatic words and speeches,” in “written law, sign, meaning,” in “the signified and the signifier,” in “speech, language, commentary and interpretation” (Serres 284). So the angel of the past—and here one might think of the steganographic angel posited, in the fifteenth century, by Johannes Trithemius (see Kolata), or of the mediological angel adduced so much more recently (see Debray)—wouldn’t have been such a good model for any traveling rhetorical agent.

Yes, but even the angels are undergoing remediation. They are becoming freed up to traverse all manner of “paths” and “interlacings,” and their work is now that of “unceasingly drawing up the maps of our new universe” (Serres 293). Indeed, they’re heralding the annunciation, when “word” becomes “flesh” (295). This is no idle auspication. For, as Serres implies elsewhere, communication needn’t continue reducing to some (let’s say, Kantian, Husserlian, Sartrean) tomb for a “petrified linguistic body,” its “tongue and nostrils parched with dialectic,” or even to some perseverative ritual whereby the referent keeps disappearing into the signified (Connor 162).

The way that Serres actually puts it, though, is that the angels, the fluctuating, relationship-bearing angels coming up today, are

individual and multiple; messengers that both appear and disappear; visible and invisible; constructive of messages and message-bearing systems…spiritual and physical; of two sexes and none; natural and manufactured; collective and social; both orderly and
disorderly...intermediaries and interchangers; intelligence that can be found in the world's objects and artefacts. (296)

Come to think of it, that's what we've been hearing all along. We've been hearing it from our exemplary rhetorical agent, the preacher who's accompanied us from beginning to end, bearing with her those difficult relationships that produce a fourfolded rhetorical agency.

So there's a model, a metaphor. With our help, the traveling rhetorical agent, that fluctuating angel, might come to collect all of the items on agency's checklist, filling her knapsack with unassimilable supplies, bundling these into the form of the communicative artifact. Her own speech would be a gift for carrying around, for unfolding within any collectivity susceptible to the rhetorical will to matter. After all, while humans can't be the only agents in town, they still need assistance in their own right. And what else, if not the intervention of their allies, could impel them to make things otherwise?