

Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead

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This essay works toward an integration of psychoanalysis and rhetorical theory in response to the poststructural critique of mediation. I argue that the concept of communication, usually understood as the mediation or reconciliation of Self and Other, is based on what Lacan termed the “fundamental fantasy.” Distinct from the conscious fantasies usually analyzed by rhetorical critics, the fundamental fantasy is an underlying psychical structure that channels desire, usually a subject’s desire for the Other’s desire. I argue that conscious fantasies yield a sense of agency, but only as iterations of this more fundamental fantasy thriving in the unconscious. To illustrate this psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy and subjectivity, I examine the rhetoric of John Edward, a popular television psychic and medium who persuades people that he can talk to the dead.

Keywords: Fantasy; Subjectivity; Psychoanalysis; Desire; John Edward

On June 14, 2000, John Edward walked into a television studio and explained to a hundred people that he would “connect some of them with their departed relatives.”¹ This moment marked the first taping of the highly successful television show, *Crossing Over with John Edward*, as well as the beginning of a lucrative spiritualist enterprise of book deals, private consultations, and high-priced hotel seminars.² After only twelve weeks on the air, the Sci Fi Channel’s leading late-night show “fattened its audience (761,000) by 50%,” which piqued the interest of Steve Rosenberg, president of Studio USA Domestic Television.³ Rosenberg claims that, combined with the cable show’s prosperity, his chance encounter with a fan led him to push *Crossing Over* into syndication:

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While vacationing with his family, Rosenberg ran into a buddy, “this big macho guy, who’s a football coach for a Long Island high school,” he recalls. “He asks me, ‘Have you seen this thing, John Edward?’ I look at him and say ‘Yeah.’ Then he just starts crying, his eyes start welling up.... The story is that their son always wanted to get a malamute breed of dog, but they never wanted to get him one because they thought they’d end up having to take care of it,” says Rosenberg. “But after their son died, they bought the dog for their other two kids. Well, the first thing John says to them is ‘Thanks for buying the dog.’ There’s no way John would have known that.”⁴

What was previously and almost exclusively the dramatic formula of ABC journalist Barbara Walters, prompting interviewees to cry, is the central dramatic highlight of *Crossing Over*. Edward parades in front of a “gallery” of audience members arranged in a semi-circle. Randomly, he begins “connecting” with someone’s dead uncle until, at last, the bereaved cries or nods affirmations. The success of this tearful, generic mutation of the talk show genre has spawned two other high profile productions, *Beyond with James Van Praagh* (also in syndication) and Animal Planet’s proven paranormal pets program, *The Pet Psychic*.

After a century of careful (and not-so-careful) research on psychic or “psi” phenomena,⁵ the fiction of spiritualism is widely known, and skeptical readings of talking to the dead are not difficult to locate.⁶ Although skeptical and descriptive critiques explain how Edward deceives audiences, they cannot explain why his rhetoric is so compelling. That Edward’s short, unembellished phrases, such as “Thanks for the dog,” can induce weeping betokens a highly enthymematic, emotional, and bodily mode of persuasion at work that is not reducible to simple deception.⁷ Shifting one’s focus from the truth of communicating with spirits to how spiritualist discourse works, however, reveals the powerful magic of fantasy. In this essay I suggest that the idea of communication derives from a fundamental fantasy structuring the phenomenon of talking to the dead. Specifically, in this essay I work toward an integration of psychoanalysis and rhetorical theory by arguing that the idea of communication is a coping fantasy that shields us from the terrifying ambivalence of subjectivity.⁸ Talking to the dead is simply a more conspicuous and exaggerated elaboration of the underlying fantasy that is central to the ways we think about rhetoric: the mediation or reconciliation of Self and Other across a terrible, yawning gap.⁹

Theorizing the idea of communication as a psychical fantasy is important because, first, it responds to an increasingly popular, poststructural critique of mediation that jettisons the Self-Other relation central to rhetorical studies. Second, a psychoanalytic understanding of communication explains the reality and persistence of agency while admitting that subjectivity is discursively produced. Finally, I argue that understanding communication from a psychoanalytic perspective recovers an alternate concept of fantasy that better explains the interpersonal dynamics of persuasive encounters, particularly in terms of desire. Because spiritualist discourse represents the most extreme and exaggerated form of the fantasy of communication, an analysis of *Crossing Over with John Edward* highlights the way it works and demonstrates the utility of psychoanalytic concepts for rhetorical studies.

Fantasy and the Poststructural Critique of Communication

In his masterful history of the idea of communication, John Durham Peters argues that “at best, ‘communication’ is the name for those practices that compensate for the fact that we can never be each other.”¹⁰ The imaginary structure implied by the concept of communication is the “traditional communication model”: two individuals, an individual and a group, or two groups, are separated by some airy span or “gap” through or over which messages are sent, received, and processed. As Lawrence Grossberg explains:

the model of communication assumes a relationship between two discrete and independently existing entities: whether between individuals, or between audiences and texts, or between signified and signifiers. The result is that any cultural relation takes on the form of an unspecified and unspecifiable exchange—a mediation—between encoding and decoding... Whether the text or the audience... has the power to determine the meaning of a specific communicative event, communication is the process by which this gap is overcome.¹¹

Communication is a mediation of subject and object expressed in the terms of Self and Other.

Although the poststructural critique of overcoming this gap is widely known in the humanities,¹² it has entered rhetorical studies most recognizably in two ways. First, through the appropriation of Derrida and the idiom deconstructionism¹³ and the subsequent theory of the “fragmented text.”¹⁴ Second, through the appropriation of Foucault and immanent modes of criticism and critique, as well as the attendant “posthumanist” understanding of subjectivity as the *production* of discourse.¹⁵ These twin poststructural appropriations suggest that if the unity of text and the autonomy of the subject are illusions, then so is communication as the successful reconciliation of Self and Other. Because of the produced or split subjects on either end of this “gap,” and because of the desired but nevertheless impossible “merging” with the Other, Peters suggests that communication is better conceptualized, in practice, as “the manipulation of effects.”¹⁶ Like Burke, Peters maintains that the “success” of communication is cooperation, a remarkable “coordination of behaviors” via the fiction or misrecognition of identification.

This critique of the communication model means that the ends, be they speaker and audience, text and reader, or episode and viewer, are unstable, divided, and messy; so conceived, the gap between the poles is now seen as firing off relations and producing texts and subjects in a sticky swirl. Given this conceptual mess, should we abandon the telos of communication as mediation, the idea that the gap can be bridged if we find the right way to do it? A number of rhetorical scholars, especially those who advocate newer materialist modes of criticism, find the current messiness of the binary model of communication and the notion of the text or message as a “mediation” terribly problematic.¹⁷ From a pragmatic, critical vantage, for example, Grossberg begs to understand how the critic or analyst “[stabilizes] the mobile and shifting alliances of audiences and subjectivities, of relations to and investments in various sites [and] events.”¹⁸ After all, such a model presumes that the critic will

never succeed, but “can only join into the endless and seemingly random movement of fragments, deconstructing any and every claim for stability, unity and necessity.”¹⁹ Consequently, Grossberg and others have urged an abandonment of the communication model (and by extension, of dialectical thinking and criticism) in favor of a new critical vocabulary, largely drawn from French poststructuralism (for example, Foucault, Deleuze), that dispenses with the categories of text and meaning and, by extension, the self-conscious subject or agent, in favor of spatial materialism and an analysis of “practices” or “events.”²⁰ To wit: Grossberg advocates the vaporization of rhetoric.²¹

An alternative, characteristically rhetorical response to the problem of the gap is to embrace its diffuseness as the reality of suasive encounter, to agree that the symbolic world, as much as the natural world, is maddening, a “great blooming, buzzing confusion” that the subject fashions into one coherent scheme or another for coping; persuasion is the call to coherence.²² Rather than avoiding the dizzying array of shifting texts and morphing subjectivities by retreating into sociological idioms and abandoning the modernist conceit of agency, one could conceive of the task of the rhetorical critic as that of an arbitrary *stabilization of the poles in the act of criticism*. In other words, one wilfully fixes an instance of rhetorical movement or mediation (suasion) in a particular context.

The question arises: if this gap in the communication model bespeaks a maddening, ever-moving reality of becoming, then what are we fixing? Texts? Relations? Rituals? Practices? The answer I offer in the remainder of this essay is “fantasies.” To retain communication as a central concept for rhetorical studies after the poststructural turn, one must identify immanent structures without an “outside” or extra-discursive reality. The best example of such a structure is that of fantasy. Indeed, as Ernest Bormann originally observed in 1972, it is a group’s “convergence” through the medium of fantasy that makes *agency* possible by creating a kind of discursive map of Self and Other. Because Bormann’s understanding of fantasy preceded the poststructural turn, however, it assumes a stable communication model and cannot accommodate the idea that subjectivity is produced or split. An alternate, psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy and its relationship to desire demonstrates the continued utility, power, and function of the ideas of communication and agent while accommodating the poststructural critique.

Whose Fantasy? Which Motive?

According to lexicographers, the contemporary understanding of “fantasy” as “caprice, whim, [and] fanciful invention” (sometimes simply shortened to “fancy”) came to prominence in the fifteenth century and has stuck ever since.²³ Unfortunately, the common understanding of fantasy as “fancy” has eclipsed the complex and useful elaborations of the concept in the humanities. The rhetorical scholars most identified with fantasy are Ernest Bormann and his supporters, whose general theory of group invention, symbolic convergence theory (SCT), and related critical protocol, fantasy theme analysis (FTA), are keyed specifically to the “importance of

imaginative language (and the imagination) in nonverbal and verbal transactions.”²⁴ Fantasy is conceived as a performative dynamic, the content of which consists of various subjects, “characters, real or fictitious, playing out a dramatic situation in a setting removed in time and space from the here-and-now transactions of the group.”²⁵ This content coheres as a “theme,” and if elaborated, can “chain-out” among group members. This chain, argue Bormann and his supporters, can be interpreted as an index of a “group’s hidden agenda.”²⁶ In repeated elaborations of the theory and method, Bormann and his supporters have characterized fantasy as “a technical term” for the “creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need.”

Although Bormann and his supporters are not interested in exploring the psychological need that fantasies seem to fulfill, SCT and FTA have produced hundreds of studies that identify and evaluate fantasies in diverse contexts, from popular culture to organizational cultures.²⁷ If we return to the theoretical inspiration of Bormann’s work with fantasy, the scholarship of Robert Freed Bales, however, we discover a different, psychoanalytic understanding of the concept that can be recovered for doing a different kind of rhetorical criticism.

Unlike Bormann, Bales’s concept of fantasy is unquestionably Freudian, a consequence of Freud’s failed “theory of seduction.” Before he turned to theorizing the reality function of fantasy, Freud had originally supposed that the cause of many of his patients’ neuroses was a shocking, presexual sexual encounter, often of the abusive variety. Because he eventually realized that maintaining such a theory meant that there had to be an epidemic of sexual child abuse, Freud abandoned seduction theory in favor of what he termed the “psychical reality” of fantasy: The stories patients related about past sexual experiences were real, but not necessarily *really* Real.²⁸ Freud thus returned the concept of fantasy to its etymological roots as a mental phenomenon. Fantasy is parasitic on the older Latin *phantasia*, which referred, variously, to a spectral apparition or phantom, the process of sensuous perception, or the faculty of the imagination. It is in its imaginative and spectral aspects, sometimes spelled “phantasy” to distinguish the concept from fancy, that fantasy has been used by students of psychoanalysis. For Freud and later Lacan and Žižek, *fantasies* refer to psychical-rhetorical narratives about Self (the “I”) and Other (a symbolic “not-me”) and the way desire generates and traverses these narratives.²⁹

It is tempting to suppose that Freud’s understanding of fantasy as real (but not *really* Real) is an illusion opposed to some brute reality, but in psychoanalysis, reality “itself is discursively constructed”; it is, in effect, fantasmic.³⁰ Such a move sharply distinguishes a psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy from that of Bormann and his followers: whereas fantasy in symbolic convergence theory is confined to fanciful invention about events not in the here and now, fantasy for Freudians is a reality structure that is always, in a sense, in the here and now insofar as it is part of the construction of reality, the meaning of our social existence.

A second distinction between Bormann’s descriptive notion of fantasy and Bales’s psychoanalytic understanding concerns the role of motive. In *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior*, Bales unmistakably characterizes fantasies as the index of

unconscious desires, psychological needs rooted in an individual's "earlier family relationships."³¹ Motive in this sense refers to a *cause* that is often unknown to the individual or group fantasizing. Further, in his touchstone text, Bales repeatedly insisted that "fantasy is connected with overt behavior as the unconscious aspects of the mind are with the conscious aspects, that is, through many distorting and concealing defenses."³² Fantasies bespeak the unconscious desires of groups and individuals, but they do not predict behavior or *motive*, understood as hidden intent or desired action, precisely because fantasies are defenses.³³ In other words, Bales argued that neither those caught within the magical pull of a fantasy, nor the seemingly free or objective outside observer (for example, Bales), can directly discern motive because the fantasy is a concealing distortion of wishes and desires.³⁴

Those who continue to employ fantasy theme analysis often conflate psychological and rhetorical need with the ambiguous term "motive."³⁵ Because motive has yet to be discussed directly, however, the many attacks and defenses of symbolic convergence theory over the past thirty years are often confusing.³⁶ One can make sense of the debate if motive is understood as an important equivocation of two significations: of a rhetorical script and of unconscious desire. Once these two senses of motive are understood, it becomes easier to distinguish between fantasy theme analysis as the description of *conscious* fantasies and their deployment, and psychoanalytic criticism as the interpretation of fantasies as symptoms or traces of unconscious desires.

Although Bormann admits that his concept of fantasy is based on Bales's psychoanalytic elaboration, he bracketed the existence of the unconscious and, therefore, "the Freudian principle of hidden forces pushing people to act in ways they do not understand."³⁷ Because he was only interested in *conscious* desire, he argued that fantasies betokened motive by reframing motive as a narrative structure. No longer wed to unconscious desire, motive is "in the message ... co-created with the audience."³⁸ Unfortunately, discussing motive without ample qualification is difficult because of its many connotations. In commonplace discourse, for example, motive frequently connotes an internal impulse or desire that may be hidden from both self (unconscious motive) and others (ulterior motive).³⁹ Bormann and his supporters attempted to eclipse such an understanding by stressing that motives were conscious, external scripts through or over which members converge.⁴⁰ The lack of explicit discussion of this restricted sense of motive meant that motive is nothing more than conscious fantasy, a socially shared script, and it becomes difficult to distinguish motive *from* fantasy.⁴¹ Absent the motor of unconscious desire discussed by Bales, fantasy and motive are the same twisting side of a Möbius strip, and one is left wondering, with G.P. Mohrmann, "how the fantasies abstracted from the content of messages constitute social realities and further [how] these realities compel action."⁴² In other words, although fantasy theme analysis identifies fantasies at work, without taking desire into account, one cannot explicate their suasive power.

To explain how fantasies compel action and, hence, constitute agency, it may be helpful to abandon the confusing term "motive" altogether. One can envision a

psychoanalytic complement to the analysis of conscious fantasies by replacing motive with desire as the causal motor or source of suasive action. This replacement begs a return to Bales's characteristically Freudian description of fantasy. By briefly returning to the work of Bales on fantasy and extending it through the elaboration of the subject's "fundamental fantasy" in Lacan, a more robust concept of fantasy emerges that better explains its emotional complexity and magical pull.

A Return To Bales: Beyond Motive, Toward Desire

Bales's theory of group fantasy in *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior* is startling because of its clarity and similarity to Lacanian notions of fantasy, which were not widely discussed among cultural critics until their translation in the 1980s and their subsequent popularization in works such as Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Bales's work elegantly anticipates the three "orders" or "registers" of Lacanian psychoanalysis that have since become useful concepts in cultural criticism: the Real, the symbolic, and the imaginary.⁴³ Below I address each concept in turn, showing that Bales's understanding of fantasy helps us to grasp better these registers in relation to desire.

Freud's assertion that reality is fantasmic eventually led his self-professed student Lacan to posit the order of the Real, something akin to an external absolute that cannot be imagined or symbolized, yet something that is only understood in distinction from the symbolic and imaginary.⁴⁴ Although reality is discursively produced, there is nevertheless something that resides beyond that construction; conceptually, there has to be an "outside" of sorts, and this outside is designated by the concept of the Real. Although the Real refers to a mind-independent reality, its psychical function is much more than "the world in-itself": it is a surplus, an impossible excess that cannot be symbolized or imagined.⁴⁵ Unlike the more familiar perspectivism of social constructivist theories that posits multiple, symbolic routes to a mind-dependent reality, psychoanalytic theory holds that the subject confronts the Real as a sublimely horrible "kernel resisting symbolic integration-dissolution," something that, if experienced directly, would court sheer madness.⁴⁶ Interestingly, like the later work of Lacan and Žižek, Bales's theory features the Real as the cause of fantasy. The register appears as "naked nature":

The man of normal human sensibility, when suddenly confronted with some aspect of naked nature that breaks through his little world of meaning, immediately interposes a flood of integrating fantasy, a current of feeling that is normalizing, reassuring, often inspiring and memorable, and sometimes deeply religious.⁴⁷

Fantasy is inspired by the Real as a fundamental defense mechanism of subjectivity, a screen from the horrors of "naked nature," understood as a meaningless void that we recognize most consciously in moments of trauma. When one confronts the Real through trauma, it stimulates a "flood" or "plague of fantasies," a litany of "pseudo-concrete" images and narratives that structure reality and continuously integrate the Self into networks of meaning.⁴⁸ Understood in this sense, fantasy is not

only motive as traditionally conceived, but also the staging of agency as an active misrecognition of what is beyond symbolization. Similar to Burke's understanding of motive as a metadiscursive attribution after the act, fantasy *retroactively* gives one's doing, one's action, purpose and meaning. This is not to say that fantasies, especially those widely shared fantasies like communication, do not become preemptive and prophylactic. We are, in fact, socialized into a fantasmic world. What understanding fantasies as retroactive attributions means is that they are reflections; one can succumb to a ready-made, cultural fantasy like talking to the dead, for instance, but only after the trauma of experience (otherwise known as castration, discussed below).

It is important to note that one can also understand the Real as the original cause of a symptom, such as a nervous tic. The undiscovered cause is always in the Real. Because psychoanalytic therapy aims toward the discovery of the causes of symptoms, a cause ceases to be Real when it is identified as a cause. The therapeutic effect of psychotherapy depends on the discovery and the naming of the source of a symptom, thereby bringing it out of the order of the Real and into the symbolic.

Like the discovery of causes, fantasies are a kind of diagnosis, but one that necessarily is a misdiagnosis. As a retroactive naming of the cause, fantasy is always a misnaming of the Real, a nominalism of sorts. Although Bales does not explicitly describe fantasy as a misrecognition, his discussion of one's entry into the "realm of reality" or social fantasy of a group, and the possible recognition that this fantasy is autonomous, bespeaks the misrecognition of the symbolic as the Real:

As the individual person creates and maintains a system of symbols with other persons in a group, he enters a realm of reality, which he knows does or can surpass him, survive him; which may inspire or organize him, and which may threaten to dominate him as well. He "comes alive" in the specifically human sense as a person in communication with others, in the symbolic reality which they create together in the drama of their action.⁴⁹

Bales's description of an individual's entry into the social group is an entry into the symbolic, a thoroughly representational register that existed before her entry and that persists long after her death. This entry into the "realm [of symbolic] of reality," the fantasy of a given community, is the point at which a subject becomes *an agent in the world*, but not without paying a price.

Beyond Bales: Castration and the Other as the Cause of Clairvoyance

So far I have suggested that Bales's concept of fantasy differs from that of Bormann because, for Bormann, fantasy concerns fanciful scripts not in the here and now, and for Bales reality itself is a fantasmic construction. I have also suggested that Bales's concept of fantasy differs from Bormann's because it anticipates the orders of the Real and the symbolic theorized by Lacan in terms of "naked nature" and the "realm of reality," respectively. But what of the imaginary?

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Bales was familiar with the

psychoanalytic theory of Lacan at the time he wrote *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior*, his explication of the function of fantasy in groups anticipates Lacan's theory of the split subject because of the function of the specular. Put differently, Bales's description of the "flood of integrating fantasies" that follow an encounter with the terrible nothingness of "naked nature" betokens fantasies of self-sufficiency, unity, and completeness, hallmarks of what Lacan terms the imaginary order, which is concerned principally with images. According to Lacan, one can trace fantasies of autonomy and self-sufficiency back to a fundamental, specular misrecognition that occurs in what he terms the "mirror" or "looking glass" stage of subject formation.⁵⁰ As one emerges from the mirror stage, s/he develops a "fundamental fantasy" about his or her origin, a fantasy about the *cause of his or her desire*.

For Lacan, the mirror stage of development marks the emergence of the imago or spectral self, akin to a self-concept, which we internalize as children at the moment when language and image come together in the psyche. Lacan asks us to imagine a child who has realized an image of him or herself in a reflective surface. This reflection obviously is not the child but *other than the child*, yet unable to make that distinction, the child "jubilantly" assumes the specular image to be Self.⁵¹ This moment of misrecognition is "imaginary" in the sense that the *Gestalt* of Self is whole, complete, unfractured, and independent (hence, whenever Lacan speaks of the narcissistic aspects of Self, it always coincides with the imaginary order). Subjection is not complete, however, without the use of speech, which marks an audible submission to an exteriority: the Law, initially linguistic rules, but later social codes, morality, contracts, and the like. Submitting to the law of grammar and syntax enables the child pointing to her or his image to say, "That's me!" Thus, identification with the Self is both an imaginary and symbolic event of misrecognition, one that removes the individual's previous existence as a being incapable of distinguishing itself from its mother—an impossible, blissful state—to a subject of language. "That's me!" is a fiction, although one that enables *action*. Thus, agency is born precisely at the moment one gives up autonomy, a moment that is both traumatic and pleasurable. This pleasurable, traumatic moment of submitting to language in order to gain self-consciousness is "castration."⁵² Castration is the price of agency.

Castration or childhood self-identification marks the beginning of a life-long struggle to return to an impossible, paradisiacal state of completeness, which plays itself out in perpetual attempts to bridge a number of homologous gaps: the chasm between the ego and the unconscious, the abyss between the Self and the imago, the gulf between Self and Other. For example, in attempting to reconcile the imago or spectral self and the Self or "I," which, of course, is impossible, one is also attempting to reconcile the Self with the Other because the spectral self *is* an internalized Other or "not-me" from without (it begins as a mirror image and gradually accrues symbolic content from Others in the world, such as the expectations of one's parents). Thus, the subject is always pursuing the Other—for love, for unity, for completeness. The Other, either as the imago or as a love-object such as one's parent or partner, is assumed to hoard something that one desires to possess,

something that promises an impossible reconciliation. Whatever one elects this harbored thing to be is the *cause of his or her desire*, what Lacan algebraically designates as “*a*” (in later elaborations of Lacan’s theory of cause, when *a* is misrecognized as an object, such as a breast, it becomes the metonymic *objet [petit] a*).⁵³

Such quests to bridge psychical gaps in pursuit of *a* or a Real cause compose the substructure of our realities and generate fantasies that take a basic form: the split or “barred” subject ($\$$) is set in relationship (\diamond) to some cause of desire (*a*). Hence, Lacan’s algebraic expression of the fundamental fantasy of subjectivity is expressed as ($\$ \diamond a$). The fundamental fantasy is the narrative that a subject has internalized to explain to herself the cause of her desiring, what drives her: the longing for Prince Charming to arrive, the erotic pursuit of a personal savior, talking to a dead parent.⁵⁴ The fundamental fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) is something like a genre of subjectivity that each individual performs in his or her own way, depending on the context of one’s upbringing.

What sets the fundamental fantasy into motion and inaugurates desire is the childhood frustration of not really knowing what the Other wants (usually one’s parents) in exchange for the *a*. Bruce Fink, for example, explains:

During infancy, our primary caretakers are immensely important to us.... We make demands on them; they, in turn, demand that we behave in certain ways.... The better we satisfy their demands, the more approval we are likely to obtain.... Yet they do not always tell us what they want. Often they confine themselves to telling us what they do *not* want, punishing us after the fact.... To garner favor and avoid such punishment and disapproval, we seek to decipher their likes, dislikes, and wishes: “What is it they want?” “What do they want from me?”⁵⁵

The fundamental fantasy thus concerns a cause (*a*) that is ultimately the desire of the Other; one desires the desire of the Other (for example, I want the Other to love me; I want readers to enjoy this essay). In this respect particular fantasies or iterations of the fundamental fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) can be understood as rhetorical *predictions*, clairvoyant narratives that anticipate what the Other wants in answer to this fundamental question or fixation on the cause of one’s desire. The spiritualist medium who divines fortunes and talks to the dead, for example, is always conjuring the fundamental fantasy. Edward knows that what audiences want is the desire of the Other and has learned how to place himself as the mediator of the *a* or Real cause. The reason that the absurdity of talking to the dead is compelling to people is precisely because of the way in which the impossibility of communication, of bridging the gap between Self and Other, is amplified; desire is even more magically unbearable because the desire of the Other is abjectly impossible to obtain when the Other is dead.

There is much more to say about fantasy, subjectivity, and desire, particularly in regard to ideology, than space allows, and I leave that discussion to a future essay. For the remainder of the discussion it is helpful, first, to summarize what I have argued, and then to illustrate briefly how a psychoanalytic criticism of fantasy differs from the more familiar analyses of fantasy themes. I have argued that fantasy has

been understood by rhetorical scholars as a *conscious, socially shared script*. Although much criticism has been devoted to the identification of these scripts, scholars have yet to explore their underlying suasive force or magical pull for audiences in terms of psychological need. Refitting fantasy with a theory of desire allows us to explain persuasion in terms of the ways in which individuals traverse the fundamental fantasy. In other words, psychoanalysis suggests a deeper psychical form structuring the many “integrating fantasies” or social scripts of our lives. This fundamental fantasy, expressed by Lacan algebraically as $(\$ \diamond a)$, concerns the subject’s desire for the desire of the Other, the *a*. As a retroactively posited narrative about the Self, the Other, and how to get the *a*, integrating or conscious fantasies protect the subject from the Real of her division, enabling a sense of agency. For rhetorical critics, the most obvious utility of the fundamental fantasy concerns persuasion in charismatic contexts: Whether the scene is a president addressing the country, a talk show host counseling others to be sexy, or a psychic reading a palm, the success or failure of a conscious fantasy depends on a rhetor’s ability to promise and hoard the *a*.

Glossing Over: Spiritual Communication as an Iteration of the Fundamental Fantasy

[A]t the psychic fairs, I started feeling a different kind of energy. It struck me that I was doing something other than what I thought I was doing. Not that I had any idea *what* I was doing. Shelley [a mentoring psychic] and others had news for me: I was connecting with the spirit world. —John Edward⁵⁶

When characterizing the prehistory of his psychic prowess, John Edward describes himself as an automaton, a machine animated by the forces of the spiritual realm. Not only did he realize something was working through him that he had misrecognized (he claims that he thought he was divining the future when, in fact, he was mingling among spirits of the dead),⁵⁷ but he also admits that he wrongly assumed he was in control. Understanding the subject as “split” explains, in part, Edward’s uncanny feelings as a preconscious realization of his own dividedness. The ambivalence of subjectivity also helps to explain the ways that Edward’s rhetoric persuades others by helping them similarly to bridge the gaps of subjectivity with spiritual fantasy. Just as Edward copes with the Real of his existence with the fantasy of his personal council of guardian spirits (he calls them “the Boys”), so audiences misrecognize their dead relatives, bridging a present suffering and a future, otherworldly place of harmony and wholeness. Of course, the Western concept for this fantasy, in its most basic form, is “communication.”

Given the way in which teletechnologies like the telephone and television can erase great expanses of geographical space between people, it is no surprise that Peters’s study of the idea of communication focuses on the intersection of communication technologies and spiritualism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: nothing has spurred the idea of communing with spirits more than the erasure of geography.⁵⁸ Peters observes that “spiritualism, the art of communication with the dead, explicitly modeled itself on the telegraph’s ability to receive remote messages”

in terms of the “raps” and “knocks” of ghosts.⁵⁹ Spiritualism is a more conspicuous example of the communication fantasy, understood as a “registry of modern longings,” the desire to bridge gaps.⁶⁰ To illustrate the ways in which the longings or desire central to the fantasy of communication work in the televisual age, I turn to a two-part analysis of an episode of *Crossing Over*. First, I describe the *conscious* fantasy of talking to the dead, demonstrating how it is deployed in a context of suspicion, ironically in order to secure faith by means of misdirection. Second, I show how Edward sutures his audience to the spiritualist fantasy through transference, a powerful phenomenon whereby an authority figure taps the fundamental fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) to move subjects by means of their desire. Although an explanation of the techniques used to create the fantasy of talking to the dead is interesting in itself, only recourse to the ways in which Edward directs desire unconsciously can explain how the discourse compels and persuades.

The Conscious/Integrating Fantasy: “I Hear Dead People”

Crossing Over with John Edward is a remarkable performance of the communication fantasy because of its context and content. The show is part of a contemporary resurgence of spiritualism in the wake of a century of psychic debunking, and because of this contextual exigency, the content of the show always traverses the plot of overcoming doubt to gain faith. Unlike the original spiritualist craze, *Crossing Over* must contend with a century of media coverage that has led to the widespread suspicion that talking to the dead is really a parlor trick, and numerous commentators, especially James Randi, have dedicated their lives to exposing spiritual fraud.⁶¹ John Edward in particular has been the subject of much criticism, debate, and parody. A widely publicized *Time* article, for example, described how the show was tightly edited to make the readings seem more impressive.⁶² Similarly, parodies of Edward’s show, which disclose the tricks of the psychic trade in some detail, have been featured in *South Park* and *Saturday Night Live*. Because Edward is surrounded by criticism and controversy, it is almost impossible to watch his show without knowing, at some level, that it is perceived by many as a fantasy. In fact, the show’s success has everything to do with the centrality of suspicion: without the banishment of suspicion as a plot, there would be no suturing source of pleasure; there would be no desire to watch.

Aside from those shows featuring a “private reading” for a celebrity, each half-hour episode typically has three reading segments. Recent episodes tend to sandwich an edited retelling of a past reading between two readings in the “gallery.” For example, in the episode titled “Steven Can Finally Speak Clearly,” the story of a deceased, mute, and mentally disabled man is relayed in a series of interviews with his sister, who received a gallery reading on a prior show. This segment features shots of the sister talking about her brother interposed with haloed shots of Edward’s gallery reading with her. Because in the spiritual realm we are freed from bodily limitations, Edward says that Steven was able to “connect” with his sister to communicate his love for her. This more reflective segment is preceded by the

gallery reading of a woman (Veronica) wanting to connect with her son (Eddie), and is followed by a gallery reading of two women and their dead relatives.⁶³

The gallery is the focal point of the show. It consists of cascading rows of seats arranged in a semicircle around a white circular stage, which is lit from the bottom. At the beginning of a gallery reading, Edward walks along the front edge of the stage asking questions of the audience until he presumably feels compelled to focus on a particular section. The key technique Edward uses to elicit information about the deceased and to initiate the fantasy of spiritual communication is termed by insiders as “cold reading,” a process that depends on enthymematic logic and human forgetfulness.

In a cold reading the psychic performs “active listening,” a technique of interaction that has become the staple of most courses in interpersonal communication:

1. one listens both to cognitive and bodily information;
2. one paraphrases what s/he hears;
3. one listens for confirmation; and then
4. one asks follow-up questions.⁶⁴

Because the West is a low context culture (stressing the content of messages above other information), listening to bodily or relational messages is a hard skill to develop. Psychics, however, are experts at reading the body and paraphrasing *that* information verbally to the Other. Hence, cold reading is a kind of active listening that uses the content or verbal information of an individual to confirm bodily and relational information. Cold reading is a careful (if not sneaky) solicitation of information from a person, which is then fed back to her in a novel reformulation.

Cold reading is termed “fishing.” Cold readers typically speak very fast while fishing until the participant affirms something (in recounting his first show, Edward remembers a woman in the gallery who raised her hand: “‘Can you start over?’ she asked. ‘You talk way too fast’”).⁶⁵ When there is affirmation, it is called a “hit.” Gradually, by carefully phrasing interrogatives as statements of fact, the psychic can get very specific information from a person or “mark.” Further, like reading a horoscope, the person being “read” tends to embellish enthymematically the partial and vague statements of the psychic, sometimes making even the most ludicrous observation fit past life events. Consider the following exchange between Edward and two audience members in the opening segment of “Steven Can Finally Speak Clearly”:

Welcome to *Crossing Over*. Umm, I wanna preface by saying that I’m coming to a father figure who I don’t think was very nice in life and he’s letting me, [growls], like very gruff. I feel like that back section over here.

[Points and begins moving to upper left section of the audience.] I’m over here somewhere [points]. I’m right here [motions with hands to isolate a section of about ten people]. So somebody’s got the older male in life who has passed. No offense, I’m sure he was a great father, but, the way he’s coming across to me is harsh, and very gruff, and very like ... judgmental almost. That’s the feeling. If I had to pick who I thought it was, it would have to be you guys, this area, right here [points to last row of people]. Um, and there’s got to be an Ed, or an “E” name, that’s connected

somewhere [a woman and a man to her left nod affirmatively in unison]. Where is that? [A woman in the back row nods and a boom microphone appears below her face. An audience member off camera and behind Edward gets his attention.] No, it's them. [Edward points to the now teary-eyed woman and a younger man to her left.] I'm over here. Explain that [the "E" name reference].

Man: Ummm.

Woman: It's my son [she has difficulty speaking because she is in obvious grief].

Man: [not upset like the woman] Son, and my father passed.

Edward: So, are you guys together?

Man and woman: [in unison] Yes.

At this point in the reading, Edward has focused on a couple in the back row of the gallery. He has fished and learned that a man's father has passed as well as a woman's son. Because of the woman's tearing eyes, Edward knows that she is grieving a sudden loss. He continues fishing to get a sense of the situation for both the man and the woman and to validate his hunches:

Edward: OK, is your son passed?

Woman: [nodding] Yes.

Edward: [to man] OK. And your dad's passed?

Man: Yes.

Edward: And where's Ed?

Woman: Ed's my son.

Edward: [to man] OK, and your dad is not connected to him in any way?

Man: No.

Edward decides to focus on the man and his passed father first, perhaps because reading this man will be less tearful and more television friendly. At this point the speed with which Edward speaks makes it very difficult for the man or woman to affirm or deny his reading. An exceptionally active listener, Edward paraphrases the content (verbal) and relational (bodily) information the man conveyed to him:

Edward: OK, I wanna be clear though. Your dad was a difficult man in life? [This seems like a statement but it is actually a question.]

Man: Ah, not to the kids but to other people.

Edward: [very fast] So he's carrying this tradition forward to the medium because he's making me feel like, I, I, I feel like, you know, there's a great rose, you know, like people get, a beautiful rose, but if you go to grab it, the thorns are very, very pronounced on this rose for me. So he might have been the rose at home, but if anyone else like me were to grab this rose, he's got massive thorns on him. OK, that to me is clear [pulls on pinkie finger as if counting].

The man affirms with his body that his father was "gruff," but also volunteers extra information: "Ah, [my father] was not [difficult] to the kids but to other people." Edward simply paraphrases this information, feeding it back to the man via the rose and thorn analogy.

As mentioned, the central dramatic device of the show is the moment when a bereaved audience member succumbs to the fantasy that Edward is speaking to a deceased loved one. I call this the "breaking point." Having addressed the man's father, Edward focuses most of his attention on the tearful woman and her dead son.

Edward confirms a hunch by fishing to see if the son passed in an accident (phrased in reference to an ambiguous “passes in impact”). Once the woman affirms by nodding—and eventually crying—Edward unleashes his retroactive prophecy, placing himself as the Other and pretending to give the woman the object of her desire (a): love/knowledge.

Edward: I wanna let you know that there, I don't know whose family this is for, but somebody passes in impact [his fist hits his open hand], which to me means there's gotta be some type of event that causes their passing. Do you understand that? [woman is holding back tears, nods, points to herself.] OK. And I want you to know that your father [speaking to the man], I guess and your son, wanna share the spotlight in doing this. [unintelligible] Jeff? Or Jeffrey? Who's Jeffrey?

Woman: Jeffrey is my son's godfather.

Edward: Is he still here?

Woman: Yes.

Edward: OK, I need you to let Jeffrey know that your son came through. I don't know if he did not handle your son's passing the way that you would have liked, or if maybe he didn't hear from him, or you really didn't talk to him [the woman appears puzzled but nods]. But I feel like his passing greatly affected Jeff. OK. Now, I dunno if somebody passed in a vehicle accident, um, but I feel like there is a lot of speed going on here, there's like a fast feeling that's happening [the woman at this point is sobbing]. And I want you to know that what takes the person from us physically, does not affect them now on the other side, and I have to stress this because so many times when we look at a tragedy, when we look at a tragic event, when we look at an accident, when we look at something like September 11th, when we look at an event, you know, that seems controllable because it's not health care related [bar and text appear at the lower part of the screen that reads, “Psychic reading connects Veronica with her son, Eddie, who passed in a car accident”], when we have a tragic event, and it's not something that can be treated with medication, um, it leaves an out-of-control feeling in our lives, like how could this have taken place, why did this have to happen? What we need to do, and this is something that is a very difficult thing, but to understand [*sic*] is that the event that takes the person from you doesn't affect that person outside of the physical body. And my focus is on letting you know that, one, he's still here [is counting with fingers], OK, he got me up here. Um, number two, making sure that you know as mom, that there are other people who's [*sic*] with your boy, taking care of him on the other side. And one day you guys will have the opportunity, when it's the right time, to get together again, and, and, and be a family in the way that you need to. [Edward fishes again, and the reading continues for three more minutes.]

In an interesting psychological twist on problem-solution technique, Edward reminds the audience of profound moments of trauma, then dispenses a Platonic visualization of the hereafter. Such a Platonic vision is the Western root of our contemporary idea of soul-to-soul communication.⁶⁶

In part, cold reading works because, first, people tend to forget the information they originally volunteer, only remembering the unusual hit or odd match,⁶⁷ and second, they tend to forget that people and their experiences actually are more similar than different. Consider, for example, the final segment of the “Steven Can Finally Speak Clearly” episode, which features a failed cold reading. Although the

woman in this reading confirms almost nothing, after the reading she swears Edward was uncannily correct.

Edward: One, two, third row from this section over here. This lady with the stripes on. Nope, not that lady [boom mike operator moves to another woman], that lady. Right next to you. Ha ha. You thought you were safe right? [The woman smiles and the audience laughs.] Um, I dunno if this is your father that's coming through, but I got an older male that's coming through, that's coming through around you. OK, I wanna talk about Pauly or Paul [woman looks perplexed]. Where's the "P" connection around you? They're telling me to talk to you about a "P" [she shakes her head negatively]. Like Paul. [The woman's companion says something to her, and there is a two second pause.] Take a moment, take a deep breath, think about who you are connected to. Like, is there a Paul, Paula, connected to you, in your family [very long pause of six seconds]. Who'd you come with? [Two women next to the side raise their hands.] You guys all related, or just friends?

Woman 2: Just friends.

Edward: OK. Even though you are just friends you all are family in my head, just for today. But, I'm coming to you [he points to the first woman spoken to]. Your friend just basically gave you a look like, you're on your own babe [audience laughs; woman still shakes her head negatively].

Woman 2: Sorry!

Edward: [There is another six second pause; he sighs.] Somebody else, lemme add this in, they wanna talk about suicide. Somebody's actions brought about their passing.

Woman 2: [Raises hand] I have a suicide in my family. An aunt. Her name is Cookie.

Edward: Her real name is not Paula, right?

Woman 2: No, no.

Edward: OK, I ... There's a definite father figure that wants me to come through here [the first woman looks befuddled]. And there's no father-in-law, no stepfather that's passed?

Woman 1: [shaking head] No. My father had a cousin whose name was Paul.

Edward: Has Paul passed?

Woman: Yes.

Edward: OK, but it's on your dad's side of the family?

Woman: Yes.

Edward: OK. And they're talking about somebody who passes from gynecological cancer. So it's gotta be like they had something like [waves hand across midsection] ovarian cancer, they had something lower, cancer in this area [the woman is stone-faced, and there is another long pause]. [Confidently] This happens, I get stuck, we stare until we move through it. The lady just behind you just went [sighs and rolls his eyes; the audience laughs].

Having encountered much resistance in the first woman, Edward moves on to the women next to her who seemed more willing to engage the fantasy for the remainder of the segment. Nevertheless, in the "post-analysis" interview (a short interview segment in which those read talk about the reading), the women cement the fantasy by retroactively fitting the reading into their lives. Although the first woman read did not seem to find the reading very convincing as it was occurring, after the reading she expressed some embarrassment for not working well with Edward, as well as astonishment about Edward's accuracy in describing her deceased grandmother, who had survived cancer early in life. The trouble with Paul was forgotten.

Unconscious Desire and the Fantasy of Communication: Encouraging Transference

Edward's technique of reading a subject, however, does not explain *why* it is persuasive. That the woman felt embarrassed about not understanding the information Edward fed her, however, does. Although Edward is unusually skilled at cold reading, often taking large risks by making guesses about a deceased person that concern strange, sometimes potentially offensive, acts, the cold reading merely produces a rhetorical script (the retroactive prophecy). The embarrassment of the woman who would not cooperate, however, reveals a dynamic of power and desire: Edward *disciplined* her many times during the reading by loudly sighing after long pauses, looking at her reproachfully, reprimanding her ("This happens, I get stuck, we stare until we move through it"), and finally, even ridiculing her (by indicating that the woman behind her was displeased). In more common terms, it is Edward's charisma, his ability to eroticize the moment of connection, his ability to exploit the desire of his "patients," that explain the show's compelling magic. It is Edward the pop star, Edward the Other whom the audience wants to please, that puts desire into play. In addition to discipline, another way Edward sets himself up as the Other to be pleased is by demanding that the audience validate his hits. Prior to every taping Edward explains that the audience must affirm or nod to everything that he gets right, since the spirits are not always clear. By demanding validation both before the show and in the moment of a failed cold reading, Edward crafts himself as a stimulus for the desiring of his audience. Through the fantasy of talking to the dead, Edward cues the fundamental fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) with discipline and demand. Further, as barred subjects, the audience only believes in the conscious fantasy if Edward can successfully promise and hoard the *a*.

In psychoanalytic terms, much like a therapist, a preacher, a priest, and a teacher, Edward is the "subject [who is] supposed to know" in the context of the séance, an individual who harbors something (the *a*)—usually a god-like knowledge—that the audience or analysand wants.⁶⁸ In psychotherapy, the analyst initially becomes this all-knowing Other in order to discern the analysand's fundamental fantasy and to reconfigure it to enable the work of analysis.⁶⁹ This initial stage of analysis is termed "transference," which generally results in an inappropriate attribution of feelings and characteristics to the analyst (for example, in therapy it is common for the analysand initially to fall in love with the analyst, attributing to him or her feelings s/he has for a parental figure).⁷⁰ The key difficulty of transference is that it leads to suggestibility, a kind of tacit hypnosis. *A subject in transference is highly suggestible*, which can be dangerous and actually hinder the work of analysis. For this reason hypnosis and other forms of suggestion are typically avoided in psychotherapy. In contrast, ego psychology and hypnotic therapy use the process of transference to suggest correctives; the therapist tells the patient what to do to get better (for example, for smoking cessation). In psychoanalysis, however, transference is "worked through" until the analysand begins to regard the analyst as an Other literally to *use* for her own analytic work. In reality, the "subject [who is] supposed to know" is the unconscious of the analysand, and only by working through those depths will symptoms begin to

disappear. In psychotherapy, the work of analysis is not done by the analyst but by the patient.

Edward's rhetorical practice reflects the process of transference because it depends entirely on his becoming the subject supposed to know who hijacks an individual's fundamental fantasy (not only in the studio, but for viewers at home as well). Hence, the success of cold reading is not reducible to gullibility or technique, but depends on the way in which Edward uses cold reading as a hypnogogic, directing desire within the fantasy of communication. Edward is, literally, a medium through which the fantasy of communication moves, connecting the presumed souls of two communicants across that ubiquitous gap between Self and Other. As a "medium" Edward steps into the fantasy and becomes the keeper of the *a*, the desire of the Other or deceased relative. In the exchange with the man about his "thorny" father, for example, Edward is confident and forceful; with his body language he communicates to the man that *he knows more than he is letting on*, hoarding the *a* and creating a powerful pull on the man's desire to know. This is a profoundly emotional gesture that creates pleasure among participants and viewers because of the fundamental fantasy it brings to the fore, the narrative of how the split subject understands the cause of her desire. For this reason, crying while knowing intellectually Edward may be a phony makes sense: Talking to the dead—to the Other who cannot talk back—is a satisfying display of narcissism. Just knowing the Other is "all right and safe" is a comfort because, in the end, the fantasy helps one to avoid taking responsibility for one's own castration, for one's own symbolicity.

Concluding Remarks: Making Bridges, Traversing the Fantasy

Larry King: What by definition is a medium? What do you do?

John Edward, alleged psychic: Basically I act as a bridge, I go between the physical world and the non-physical world. And what I do—I'm somewhat of a waiter—I go to the other side, not literally go there, but I go to the other side and get information and bring it out and I serve my client the information and hope that they understand it.⁷¹

In this essay I have argued that a psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy helps to recover a (royal) road of criticism not taken, largely because the poststructural critique of communication had yet to inform disciplinary conversations. In the wake of the fragmentation of the text on the one hand, and the decentering of the subject on the other, a psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy posits mediation as the fantastic work of communication, offering subjects a sense of autonomy and protecting them from the maddening impossibility of the Real. I argued that common to all conscious fantasies is a more fundamental fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$), the psychical source of suasive power, which directs desire and gives the world a fantasmic coherence. I illustrated the suasive work of the fundamental fantasy with a brief analysis of the show *Crossing Over with John Edward*, which works to persuade audiences that Edward communicates with their deceased relatives.

Of course, to claim that communication is a fantasy is also to claim that it is a

fiction. One presumes one is “connecting” with the Other when, in fact, one is traversing a narcissistic fantasy. Nonetheless, communication occurs in practice as cooperation or as the coordination of effects; indeed, the miracle of communication as (mis)identification is reason enough for the continued relevance of the communication model. “To say that communication in the sense of shared minds is impossible,” argues Peters, “is not to say that we cannot cooperate splendidly.”⁷² A psychoanalytic perspective on fantasy, like most perspectives on rhetoric, however, only retains communication as a concept insofar as the agent is also understood as a product of fantasy. Agency and fantasy are a Möbius strip, one that continues twisting and working because of the desire created at the moment of castration, the desire that pulsates between fantasy and the Real. Thus, agency is radically exterior, an enfolding of the scripts or fantasies that constitute social reality.

Nothing is more demonstrative of the utility and necessity of the concept of fantasy than the rhetorical agent, whose existence or non-existence has become the central problem of rhetorical theory since the incorporation of poststructuralism. In their epilogue to the popular textbook, *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, for example, John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit sketch an imaginary debate between two camps of rhetorical scholars: On one side, there are a number of “postmodern” (or better, poststructural) rhetoricians who argue that the agency of rhetors is “prestructured” by ideology; on the other, we have “modernists” who claim empirical evidence for human agency in the social and material world. Because of the assumed incommensurability of each position, Lucaites and Condit characterize the debate as a contemporary theoretical impasse that can be resolved only by “reconstituting our understanding of agency as a function of complex speaker-audience interactions.”⁷³ This magical third way is said to situate agency among lived relations in social interaction, thereby mediating the tensions between determinism and free will.

Whether such a solution makes sense,⁷⁴ this imaginary debate continues to fuel the current hand-wringing over agency. Such a debate is a discipline-specific misrecognition or fantasy. Insofar as fantasies offer, simultaneously, a frame within which to exercise agency and a shield from the horror of contingency, our contemporary anxiety about the rhetorical agent is a generative or productive scholarly neurosis; in other words, the question of rhetorical agency is a fundamental *topos* for scholarly invention that forestalls any satisfactory answer. Unfortunately, the debate-fantasy over the possibility of agency has been a shield from the investigation of unconscious suasive processes as well (processes that challenge the assumptions of the debate, of course). Functioning much like the fantasy debate over the existence or status of text in the late 1970s and 1980s, documented in the widely read edited collection, *Texts in Context*,⁷⁵ the current fixation on rhetorical agency offers a frame for scholarly endeavor that, if dissolved, risks a direct confrontation with the madness of irrelevance. Insofar as the rhetorical agent has been dead for a very long time, rhetorical scholars should recognize, beyond a narrow historicism, that we are psychics, that we perform cold readings, that talking to the dead is what we do.

Notes

- [1] John Edward, *Crossing Over: The Stories Behind the Stories* (New York: Princess Books, 2001), xix.
- [2] For an overview of the wide range of commodities offered, see John Edward's website, accessed 4 May 2003; <http://www.johnedward.net/>
- [3] Susanne Ault, "Crossing Over with John Edward" *Broadcasting and Cable* 131 (8 Jan. 2001): 44.
- [4] Ault, 44.
- [5] See David Marks and Richard Kammann, *The Psychology of the Psychic* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1980); and Richard Wiseman, *Deception and Self-Deception: Investigating Psychics* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997).
- [6] Edward has been the subject of many critiques. See Leon Jaroff, "Talking to the Dead: To Reach Those Who Have 'Crossed Over,' John Edward May Have Crossed One Line Too Many," *Time* (5 March 2001): 52.
- [7] For alternate accounts, see John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
- [8] For related work on fantasy, see James P. McDaniel, "Fantasm: The Triumph of Form (An Essay on the Democratic Sublime)," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 48–66; and James P. McDaniel, "Figures for New Frontiers, From Davy Crockett to Cyberspace Gurus," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002): 91–111.
- [9] The terms "Self" and "Other" are capitalized throughout this essay in order to emphasize their status in the symbolic. For further discussion, see Lacan's seminar on the difference between the little other (a subject "like me") and the Big Other (radical alterity, ultimately the symbolic itself). Jacques Lacan, "Introduction of the Big Other," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book Two: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 235–247.
- [10] Peters, 268.
- [11] Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 38–39.
- [12] For a clear, secondary gloss, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), esp. 16–25.
- [13] See Barbara Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from within the Thematic of *Différance*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22 (1989): 110–130.
- [14] Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Communication* 54 (1990): 274–289.
- [15] See Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91–111; and Ronald Walter Greene, "Another Materialist Rhetoric," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998): 21–41.
- [16] Peters, 265.
- [17] See Ronald Walter Greene, "Global Citizenship: Three Challenges to the Idea of Rhetorical Mediation," in *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement*, ed. Gerard A. Hauser and Amy E. Grim (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003), 165–173.
- [18] Grossberg, *We Gotta*, 41.
- [19] Grossberg, *We Gotta*, 40.
- [20] Grossberg, *We Gotta*, 52–53. Also see Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies, Modern Logics, and Theories of Globalisation," in *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, ed. Angela McRobbie (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 7–35; and Lawrence

- Grossberg, "The Culture Studies' Crossroads Blues," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 1 (1998): 65–82.
- [21] Even before Grossberg abandoned mediation, he advocated abandoning rhetoric. See Lawrence Grossberg, "Marxist Dialectics and Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 235–249.
- [22] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 462.
- [23] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "fantasy."
- [24] Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "In Defense of Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Look at the Theory and Its Criticisms After Two Decades," *Communication Theory* 4 (1994): 265.
- [25] Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 397.
- [26] Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," 397.
- [27] For the most recent work done with FTA, see John F. Cragan, Donald C. Shields, and Ernest Bormann, "Defending Symbolic Convergence Theory From an Imaginary Gunn," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 366–372.
- [28] See Sigmund Freud, "Katharina," trans. James Strachey, in *Psychological Writings and Letters*, ed. Sander L. Gilman (New York: Continuum, 1995), 1–10; and Sigmund Freud, "Letters to Fliess," trans. Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey, *Psychological Writings*, 11–16. For a discussion of Freud's early theory, see Gerald N. Izenberg, "Seduced and Abandoned: The Rise and Fall of Freud's Seduction Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*, ed. Jerome Neu (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25–43. Also see the discussion of "psychical reality" in J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 363–364. The origin of Freud's seduction theory has been contested, however; see Allen Esterson, "Jeffrey Masson and Freud's Seduction Theory: A New Fable Based on Old Myths," *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (1998): 1–21.
- [29] See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 59–61; J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 314–319; Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), esp. 177–181.
- [30] Evans, 59.
- [31] Robert Freed Bales, *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 18.
- [32] Bales, 137.
- [33] Bormann has characterized Bales as only "hinting" at the mapping of "irrational and unconscious forces," arguably misleading scholars into believing that Bales was a reluctant Freudian. Bales insists that the "mysterious drag" of fantasy is unquestionably "due to the fact that the fantasies aroused [among groups] are partly unconscious, because they are repressed." See Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years Later," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 290; and Bales, 138.
- [34] Bales, 138–139.
- [35] Ernest G. Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 5.
- [36] The heated exchange between G. P. Mohrmann and Ernest G. Bormann in 1982 is a good example. See Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years Later," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 288–305; and G. P. Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism: A Peroration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 306–313.
- [37] Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "In Defense of Symbolic Convergence Theory," 270.
- [38] Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "Three Decades of Developing,

- Grounding, and Using Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT)," *Communication Yearbook* 25 (2001): 273.
- [39] The proposed meaning of "motive" for the upcoming edition of the *OED* is "Senses relating to inner impulses and mental activities." *Oxford English Dictionary*, new edition (draft, 2000), s.v. "motive." Accessed 17 May 2003; <http://www.oed.com/>
- [40] Of course, Kenneth Burke had recast motive as a dramatic narrative structure many years prior to symbolic convergence theory. For Burke, motives are retroactive stories or names for past *acts*, for bridging a gap or "intermediate area of expression that is not wholly deliberate, yet not wholly unconscious. It lies midway between aimless utterance and speech directly purposive." Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xiii. The difference between Burke's divining rod for motive, the pentad, and fantasy theme analysis, however, is the motor. Although Burke held that motives were discernible "in the text," he also seemed to recognize the existence of unconscious impulses. For example, Burke's argument that humans are "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy" or "moved by a sense of order" and "rotten with perfection" imply impulses of which we are usually unaware. Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 3–24. Also see Mark Wright, "Burkean and Freudian Theories of Identification," *Communication Quarterly* 42 (1994): 301–310; and Mark Wright, "Identification and the Preconscious," *Communication Studies* 44 (1994): 144–156.
- [41] This is why G. P. Mohrmann claimed fantasy was a "tautology." See G.P. Mohrmann, "An Essay on Fantasy Theme Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 109–132.
- [42] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism: A Peroration," 310. Insofar as an explanation of compelling, suave "forces" is lacking, it could be argued that fantasy theme criticism does not seem to be *rhetorical* criticism, an observation that is punctuated by the social scientific rechristening of the theory in later years. In one of their latest summaries of the theory, Bormann, Cragan, and Shields suggest that "one of the unique characteristics of SCT is that it is a *general theory* built on the model of the natural sciences." Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, "Three Decades of Developing," 272.
- [43] This is especially the case in film studies. See Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Manchester University Press/St. Martin's Press, 1996), esp. 67–104; and Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), esp. 15–26.
- [44] See Philippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 118–139.
- [45] See Barbara A. Biesecker, "Rhetorical Studies and the 'New' Psychoanalysis: What's the Real Problem? or Framing the Problem of the Real," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 222–259.
- [46] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 3. Strictly speaking, the Real does not exist; nonetheless, it plays a crucial role in the symbolic order.
- [47] Bales, 153.
- [48] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 1–2.
- [49] Bales, 152.
- [50] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror State as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," trans. Alan Sheridan, in *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 1–7.
- [51] Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2. Also see Jacques Lacan, "The Topic of the Imaginary," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book One: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 71–88.
- [52] I have deliberately avoided the discussion of what is given up—the phallus—in the main text because it is frequently misunderstood as a penis, which it is not. Regardless of one's sex, the *phallus* is the imaginary and symbolic notion of wholeness, completeness, and unity that

- functions *formally* as the object one must attain for power, male or female. There have been many criticisms of Lacan's use of the phallus as the "ultimate signifier," because it can be said to be a "transcendental signified" (Derrida) or a reification of patriarchy. See Dylan Evans's entry on the concept in his *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 140–144; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45–100.
- [53] For Lacan this cause is always "the desire of the Other," in the sense that the true or Real *a* is the desire for the Other's desire. See Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 50–71.
- [54] In Lacan's latest theoretical formulations, desire and drive are two separate concepts. In Lacan's earlier work the goal of analysis was to let the analysand put his or her own desire into play. Later, however, Lacan realized desire is always articulated to the Other, so he focused on the liberation of one's "drives." See Fink, 205–217.
- [55] Fink, 53–54.
- [56] Edward, 42.
- [57] Edward, 41.
- [58] See Peters, 63–108 and 137–176. Peters is particularly interested in how communication teletechnologies, beginning with the telegraph, amplified the communication fantasy to its logical extreme: communing with spirits.
- [59] Peters, 94.
- [60] Peters, 2.
- [61] See James Randi, *Flim-Flam: Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and Other Delusions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).
- [62] Jaroff, 52.
- [63] *Crossing Over With John Edward*, "Steven Can Finally Speak Clearly," broadcast 19 May 2003 (syndicated), WGMB (FOX affiliate) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- [64] See Sarah Trenholm and Arthur Jensen, *Interpersonal Communication*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000). When I teach interpersonal communication I point out to students that, in our society, our label for a good listener is "psychic."
- [65] Edward, 3.
- [66] Peters, 33–51.
- [67] See Marks and Kammann, 155–199.
- [68] Jacques Lacan, "The Subject Who is Supposed to Know, Of the First Dyad, and of the Good," trans. Jacques-Alain Miller, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 230–243.
- [69] What happens is that the analyst sets himself up as a cause of desire, eventually courting identification. Once identification occurs, the patient will begin *blaming* the analyst for his or her troubles, standing in as both the Other and the cause of desire. The end goal is for the patient to stop demanding the Other to produce the *a*. See Fink, 28–41.
- [70] See Fink, 28–41.
- [71] *Larry King Live*, first broadcast 19 June 1988 by CNN.
- [72] Peters, 21.
- [73] John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill, *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 611–12. This statement is patently mystifying.
- [74] In the words of Edward Schiappa, this seems to me like another good proposal for "sophisticated modernism." See Edward Schiappa, "Sophisticated Modernism and the Continuing Importance of Argument Evaluation," in G. Thomas Goodnight (Ed.), *Arguing Communication and Culture*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 2002), 51–58.
- [75] *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989).