CHRISTIAN LUNDBERG AND JOSHUA GUNN

"Ouija Board, Are There Any Communications?" Agency, Ontotheology, and the Death of the Humanist Subject, or, Continuing the ARS Conversation

ABSTRACT: This essay responds to Cheryl Geisler's "report" on the discussions about the concept of agency at the 2003 Alliance of Rhetorical Societies conference. We argue that Geisler's report inaccurately and unfairly describes the wide-ranging positions discussed at the conference, particularly by collapsing subjectivity and agency and by advancing a strawperson argument about "postmodernism." In contrast to the humanist understanding, we recommend and describe a negative theology of the subject that adopts a more hospitable posture of uncertainty toward the agent and agency.

No, I was NOT pushing that time.
—Morrissey, "Ouija Board, Ouija Board"

The Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century marks an activist shift in Protestant religious practice in the United States, a turn from Calvinist fatalism toward an active, evangelical conviction in the capacity of humans to act morally and secure their own spiritual salvation. This conviction in moral agency catalyzed a growing belief in spiritualism, the idea that mere mortals could talk to the souls or "spirits" of dead people if they concentrated hard enough or employed the appropriate technological extension of the human sensorium. In the obvious idiom of the telegraph, originally nineteenth-century communiqués from the dead came in the form or "rappings" or "knocks" on tables or walls, which a given "medium" would count to discern if they denoted a "yes," a "no," or a letter of the alphabet (Braude 10-31). Excepting toddlers and accountants, counting is a somewhat tiresome exercise of agency, and so it was only a matter of time before a number of enterprising individuals would develop the "talking board" to ease the labor of mediation.

Most familiar to us as Parker Brothers' "Ouija Board," a talking board was originally a device whereby one placed his or her hands on a heart-shaped planchette, which was then presumably directed by a spirit to glide across an alphabet painted on a wooden board, spelling out messages of requited love and approaching danger.

As a technology ultimately inspired by the Second Great Awakening, the Ouija Board illustrates the anxiety surrounding our many fantasies about human agency, particularly in respect to communication as a transcendent, or even transparent event (see Gunn, "Refitting"; Peters 63-108). However ironic, the belief that one or another could literally speak with the souls of the dearly departed reflects an evangelical subject enthusiastically wedded to a humanist gospel that has elevated agency to the status of the godly, lording over the material and spiritual universe. This transcendent sentiment, sometimes discussed as "ontotheology," was heavily critiqued by Heidegger, who lamented that "it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters himself," even beyond death (Heidegger, "Question" 332).[1] Such a narcissistic "ideology of agency," perhaps born of grief, a fear of death, and/or dreams of divine omnipotence, manifests itself in a technology of instrumentality that treats even our spectral doubles as mere objects or extensions of the human subject's will (ghosts as *Bestand*, "standing-reserve"). From a Heideggerian vantage, the folly of spiritualism points to a critique of the humanist agent as autonomous, the so-called "transcendental subject" rooted in the Kantian tradition.

The practice of a séance also directs our attention to a problem implied in (but also somehow beyond) the transparency or transcendence of the moment of communication: the instabilities of the Cartesian self, or the self-transparent and self-possessed subject of thoroughly conscious intention (the *cogito*; see Descartes). Using a Ouija board, for example, demonstrates that while the exercise of agency takes place in the movement of the planchette, the status and possibly even the existence of the agent who originates the action is undecidable. Consider a story from a March 28, 1886 edition of the *New-York Daily Tribune,* which underscores the way in which the uncanny talking board séance might call our accounts of our own and others' agency into question:

> You take the board in your lap, another person sitting down with you. You each grasp the little table with the thumb and forefinger at each corner next to you. Then the question is asked, "Are there any communications?" Pretty soon you think the other person is pushing the table. He thinks you are doing the same. But the table moves around to "yes" or "no." Then you go on asking questions and the answers are spelled out by the legs of the table resting on the letters one after the other. Sometimes the table will cover two letters with its feet, and then you hang on and ask that the table will be moved from the wrong letter, which is done. Some

> remarkable conversations have been carried on until men have become in a measure superstitious about it. (quoted in "History of the Talking Board," par. 6)

As anyone who has "played" with a talking board will attest, the fun orbits suspicion: either one deceives, or is deceived by, the co-medium, or one is relatively unable to locate the seat of agency: is my partner moving this thing? Am I moving it without knowing it? Is it possible that some unseen spirit—a passed relative or worse, an evil genius—is moving the planchette (and therefore, us)? Although the somewhat admittedly perverse practice of talking to the dead is born of Kantian and Cartesian convictions, it nevertheless opens the question of an uncertain and unsettled subject position or disposition.[2]

Indeed, the Ouija's capacity to demonstrate the unsettled subject becomes apparent as soon as one thinks about the variety of possible assumptions underlying the talking board séance. One could play the game presuming that living human subjects move the planchette, and that they do so either by conscious choice, unconscious choice, or in an act of mutual deferment to the conscious or unconscious movements of their partner. The players could also presume that there is an unspecified ratio of cooperation in moving the planchette between human subjects who sit at the table and dead subjects from the Beyond. Players could also invoke the idea of possession by a spirit who temporarily inhabits one or more of the players at the table and directs the movement of the planchette (viz., "channeling"). Players uncomfortable with the possibility that they are being "played" might decide to give up the Ouija board altogether. Yet, each of these options seems mildly *inhospitable* (none more so than packing up your Ouija board and going home). The idea that the game is solely played out among the living is inhospitable toward the spirits who may wish to join the living in communion; the idea that the spirits "possess" the body of one or more people at the table is inhospitable toward the participation of the living subject who is dispossessed. Finally, the ratio seems a hospitable compromise, but also contains the inherent inhospitality of specifying just how much influence living and dead subjects are allowed to have on the play ("sorry dead spirit, my turn to move the planchette"). Perhaps hospitality toward living and the dead implies that we give up our anxieties about the game and just play, never certain who will be manifest in the communion of the game, and never sure just how they will be manifest. Such an agnostic disposition does not imply that the players should ignore the moves of the planchette or the flows of the spirit; it simply means that players should pay attention to the movements of the game without prefiguring the meaning of the movements, reducing them to an absolutist causal account. This disposition of openness to the Other—to an unconditional "what if"—is what Derrida eventually described as the posture of hospitality (see Caputo, *Prayers*; Derrida, *Specters*).

In joining the sometimes overly serious conversation concerning the question, "how ought we to understand the concept of rhetorical agency?" we would prefer that the answer was more hospitable to those of us who find "post-" theory useful, truthful, or productively troubling. We favor an uncertain posture towards the flows of agency and agents implied by an open disposition toward the séance, a posture that embraces a restless and roving insecurity as an antidote or even perhaps a subversive supplement to any civil pedagogy. Although Cheryl Geisler rightfully notes that the discussion question of rhetorical agency often melds the ontological (what?) with the ethical (how?), she and others nevertheless seek to infer the former by presenting the latter evangelically, stressing the fundamental necessity of moral activism for civic salvation and charging those with poststructural and/or posthumanist sympathies as advocating a nihilistic brand of Calvinist passivity, often erroneously dubbed "postmodernism." In what follows, we argue that the humanist/evangelical discussion of agency in Geisler's report, published in last summer's issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* suffers from three, interrelated shortcomings: (1) the report repeatedly confuses the subject or agent and agency;[3] (2) this confusion lends credence to a conflation of posthumanism and "postmodernism"; and (3) such a conflation contributes to a misleading account of agential fantasy as a mere "illusion." Insofar as few would deny agency exists, we suggest the debate over status of the humanist subject is actually one-sided and phantasmic, serving to disguise the ghost of ontotheology.

Of Agents and Agency: Confronting Ontotheology

To begin we provide a set of brief background sketches of three representative "postmodernists." We pose sketches of these three exemplars to situate our critique of Geisler's report, for if there is one commonality in the haunting specter of "postmodern" thought, it can be found in the treatment of the human subject. The usual suspects whose thinking we refer to in this essay share a concern with accounts of the human subject as "given" and godly instead of as *produced*. To counter this tendency, building on the critique of humanism begun by Heidegger, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault have produced accounts of the human subject that specify its radical contingency, its fragmentary qualities, and/or its dependence on generative systems beyond the seat of an insular individual consciousness.[4]

One of the points underlying Derrida's employment of *différance*, which strategically applies Saussure's structural linguistics, is that

> language [which only consists of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject. This implies that the subject (in its identity with itself, or eventually in its consciousness of its identity with itself, its self consciousness) is inscribed in language, is a function of language, becomes a *speaking* subject—even in so-called

> 'creation,' or in so-called 'transgression—to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences. (Derrida, *Margins* 15)

Given this account, the subject is never fully present to itself because it is only a product of the functioning of differential signification. This subject does not possess an ontologically stable form or identity other than the one contingently produced in the play of *différance* (see Biesecker, "Rethinking"). Similarly, Lacan situates the genesis of the subject within structures of language, but roots it specifically in the subject's alienating encounter with signification. Lacan's varied and often contradictory corpus presents a picture of the subject as a kind of excess that is generated by the trauma of insertion into the Symbolic order. For Lacan, the condition for the articulation of the subject is its emptiness; subjects come to life within a language that they do not choose and that cannot fully represent or express their affective desires. The subject, or rather the idea of an identity that is presumed synonymous with the human subject, is produced as a suture that attempts to mediate the alienating process of signification. In ways that resemble Derrida's understanding of the speaking subject, for Lacan the subject is an effect of discourse and the surplus generated by continuously negotiating a relationship to the Symbolic order (Lacan, *Écrits* 3-9). Finally, Foucault's work interrogates the givenness of the subject by questioning the presupposition made in various discursive domains (the prison, the mental institution, technologies of sexuality, and so on), that one could render an essential description of the subject or "tell the truth" about it. His general method is one of "problematization," a process that usually entails contradicting the claim that a mode of subjectivity is a natural one by revealing that it is a set of historically specific habits, practices, or performances. To deny the truth of the subject, however, is *not* to deny the existence of subjects. Rather, in problematizing subjectivity Foucault hopes to demonstrate that our doctrine of agency is more the result of the application of *techne* than of the result of metaphysical pre-determination.[5]

These sketches of three critiques of the subject are overly simple, and undoubtedly suppress significant differences and disagreements both within and among the works of Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. Yet, a thoughtful reading of their work supports some provisional claims about the question of agency vis-à-vis the project of the posts (posthumanism, post-Marxism, postmodernism, poststructualism, and so on). First, none of these critics of a commonsense doctrine of agency deny that the subject or representations of the subject exert significant effects, nor do they deny the subject a kind of social effectivity or agency. To the contrary, to point out that the subject is constructed and not naturally given helps to delineate one of our scholarly tasks as that of tracking the rhetorical effects of doctrines of agency. Instead of asking the question of the subject in terms of truth or the veracity of our representations, they demand that we give an account of how our interpretations of actions (of agency)

are often read through, or even prescripted by, a doctrine that centers the agent or the subject as the self-possessed seat of agency. The work of these three "post-" thinkers and their heirs requires that we make a decisive analytical cut between *agency*, understood as the production of effect or action, and the *agent* as the presumed origin of effect or action, which can be a subject, language, ideology, perhaps even a spirit. Because addressing the question of rhetorical agency solely in terms of "agent" and "agency" implies that material change is both naturally and rightfully reducible to the action of the agent, we prefer reframing the question in terms of subjectivity and effect. In other words, we worry that defining the problem of subject and effect as the question of agent and agency prefigures the answer by presuming, by definition, that the agent is directly linked to agency (the potential for action).

Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault's strategies for denaturalizing the subject confound the idea that the simple existence of agency-effects allows us to posit the necessary existence of an agent who initiates these effects. Their critiques of humanist notions of agency combat what Heidegger identified as ontotheology, a kind of thinking that ultimately roots being and truth in divinity. In other words, the habit of reducing agency to the self-transparent human agent is homologous on some level to the cosmological argument for God's existence. Beginning with Aristotle's argument for presuming an unmoved first mover, through Aquinas's reappropriation of his Greek master's account of the first cause, to modern day discourses of creationist evangelicals, the idea that God can be inferred from the presence of movement has been a faithful companion of those theists seeking to reconcile *fides* and *ratio*. The idea that one could infer the existence of something called the "rhetorical agent" from the multiplicity of rhetorical effects has obvious affinities with the argument from first causes. Rendered in the terms of the talking board séance, the ontotheological habit is akin to presuming that the movement of the planchette *proves* the agency of determinate subjects, dead or alive. The interventions of thinkers like Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida caution us from making facile inferences from effect to cause in the form of a characteristically theistic doctrine of rhetorical agency.[6]

Of Ectoplasm, or, the Possession of Agency

Having reframed the "question of rhetorical agency" as a negotiation of subject and effect, we are better prepared to consider the extent to which Geisler's framing of the Evanston discussions is grounded in a natural connection between agency as effect and the inference of a naturally given agent. After a thoughtful reading of Geisler's report, we find that the concept of "possession" surfaces throughout as a trope that yokes agency and agent in the service of an ontotheological humanism.

In her report on the four days of discussion at the ARS revival, Geisler admits that "any attempt to synthesize" or "do justice to the engaging conversations that occupied us" on the topic of agency is "doomed to failure," but that a "thoughtful reading of the posted position papers" and related documents helps to frame the discussion. Geisler continues that the significance of the question of agency is reducible to an engagement with "the post-modern critique of the autonomous agent," which she locates in a 1993 article by Dilip Gaonkar on the "rhetoric of science" (10; see Gaonkar).[7] Ultimately, Geisler frames the discussion on agency at the ARS conference as a reactive *and* productive response to "the post-modern assault" (10). Geisler suggests that the productive responses to the critique of the "ideology of agency," understood here as the humanist subject assumed in Gaonkar's critique, are located in three types of scholarship: scholarship that details and documents the ways in which "subaltern groups" cause social change (10-11; 15); scholarship that explores the conditions and constitution of agency in mass mediated contexts (e.g., as constituted in visual and digital texts; 11-12); and scholarship that explores the teaching of skills and classical norms of citizenship (13-16). In other words, a "consideration of the postmodern critique has stimulated not just 'rear guard' action but a constructive and productive inquiry into the nature of agency and the conditions attached to it" (Leff and Lunsford 63). We do not disagree in total, although we believe that theorizing the relation of rhetoric to subjectivity through the conceptual pair of agent/agency creates interpretive biases that merit closer scrutiny.

As Lynne Clark notes in her position statement, the *OED* defines "agency" as "the faculty of an agent or of acting." Despite a number of alternate accounts of agency at the ARS conference, most of the position papers that Geisler chooses to highlight adopt this "possession" metaphor of agency, explicitly in some cases, and implicitly in others. Throughout her remarks Geisler presents agency as a kind substance, a quantifiable ectoplasm that can be taken from the agent by the presence of social constraints, as well as something that can be given to the agent by the application of appropriate methods. For instance, in her report Geisler relies on the notion of possession to aggressively advance the connection between pedagogy and substantive agency: "only if we can assent to the role of the rhetor in producing efficacious action can we as a discipline have a mission to educate such rhetors to *have* agency" (8; italics ours). Further, agency is not only a possession in that it is something the agent can have, it is also a possession that can be granted, since "developing a society that *grants* agency more broadly may be one of the major challenges for the future of rhetorical studies" (Geisler 10; italics ours). This understanding of agency as a possession is central to reproducing the humanist model of the intentional agent who owns the capacity to make agential choices.[8] The possessive understanding of agency also appears implicitly in Geisler's recognition that agency

can be understood as a "*resource* constructed in particular contexts and in particular ways" (Geisler 7; italics ours). Although this particular employment of the metaphor recognizes that agency is socially constructed, it only does so at the cost of employing a trope that implies that the agent who receives access to this resource is not socially constructed in the same way that the resource may in fact be; the social mediation of agency begs the question of the social construction of the *agent.* Given the tropological structure of the possession metaphor employed here, there must be a pre-given agent who receives access to and employs the resource (here we find echoes of the idea of agency as the *Bestand*, or the standing-reserve of the agent alluded to earlier).[9]

Geisler's text comes closest to specifically addressing the social construction of the agent in her discussion of Atwill's and Langsdorf's papers, which situate the agent in communicative interaction. In response to the situation of the agent in structures of language or, more appropriately for us, the marking of the agent as a rhetorical effect, Geisler hopes for a moderate approach to the implication of the agent's contingency. In a final employment of the possession metaphor, Atwill's and Langsdorf's approaches are praised because they allow the agent to maintain its agency. Geisler claims that their approach would allow the agent to keep its agency, that it allows "agency to remain with the agent and yet acknowledge *its* embedding in the externals of communicative interaction" (Geisler 8; italics ours). Demonstrating remarkable figural acumen, Geisler's amphibolous "its" is a delicious example of the conflation that enables the slippage between agent and agency. Does the "its" refer to agent or agency? Which of the two is embedded in the externals of communicative action? Perhaps, if we are to maintain the doctrine of agency as a possession of the agent, it is more productive to let the amphiboly lie as it is. Such a reading practice, however, would make the decisive analytical cut that we call for difficult.

(D)illusions of Rejection

Opposing the equivocation of agent as an unverified conceptual possibility and agency as the real presence of action, we part ways with Geisler's characterization of postmodern theory. In her report Geisler strongly argues against what she sees as an unproductive response to the critique of the self-transparent, autonomous agent: the "abandonment" of the concept or idea of agency. Exclusively basing her observations on one, short position paper, Geisler notes that although "most rhetoricians at the ARS took for granted some level of efficacy for rhetorical action . . . . others suggested that this was an illusion" (12).[10] Gunn is singled out for suggesting that agency is a sham and for suggesting that the failure of rhetoricians to jettison the concept is "cowardice."[11] "Although some at ARS argued that coming to grips with the illusion of agency is the only honest thing to do," Geisler reports she observed

two important rejoinders, one ontological ("is"), the other, ethical ("ought"): first, those studying the subaltern have demonstrated that agency exists; and second, abandoning agency entails the "cost of the irrelevancy of rhetoric" (15-16).

Although Geisler's report may reflect a "thoughtful reading," it certainly is far from a charitable one, particularly in respect to those rhetoricians who have embraced so-called "post-modern" theory.[12] The equivocation of agent and agency enables a strategic conflation of the critique of humanism with postmodernism, the latter serving alternately as a scapegoat ("postmodernism will destroy rhetorical studies!") and epithet ("damn you postmodernists!"). Although it is certainly the case that we can identify a number of thinkers associated with the category of the postmodern (e.g., Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, Lyotard, and so on), and although we suspect a number of rhetoricians would identify their work as participating in a postmodern idiom, there is little consensus in the academy about what postmodernism means (see Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*; Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn*; and Jameson). The only common thread that seems to hold the idiom of postmodernity together is the critique of the humanist subject as the center of the universe and, as Protagoras has said, the measure of all things, "of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not" (Sextus 18). In other words, Geisler is overly ambitious in her application of the term "postmodern" or "post-modern" to the critique of humanism, or posthumanism. As we noted earlier, this critique is often traced to the work of Heidegger on ontotheology, and later, to that of Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan. Heidegger critiques Sartre's existentialism as an arrogant, romantic humanism that leads to a ruthless, righteous instrumentality; Derrida's theory of deconstruction demonstrates the violence of notions of unity, presence, self-mastery, and transcendence; Foucault's work collectively points to the subject as a function or fold of discourse; and Lacan's theory suggests that the Symbolic itself is an agent. None of these thinkers, however, would argue that rhetors do not produce effects. Instead, they focus on the implications of making reference to an "acting subject" as the exclusive means for theorizing the capacity to act. For example, to return to our séance allegory, Lacan might insist that the Symbolic is more in control of the people in a séance than they know, that the planchette as the *objet a* has more agency than the medium, or that the enjoyment in playing the game produces the fantasy of acting agents. Yet, insofar as Lacan wrote and lectured about his ideas, it is simply silly to insist that he or his compatriot critics of humanist agency were flippant about the capacity for rhetorical action.[13]

Despite the absurdity of the move, Geisler repeatedly and mistakenly reduces the critique of the humanist subject to a kind of pomo flippancy, to the inability of an individual to engender social change, and ultimately to a denial

of the capacity to act altogether.[14] In the same issue Leff makes a similar inference, amplifying the cries of moral censure in Geisler's account:

> It is possible, of course, to declare that rhetoric should break entirely with tradition, toss concerns about agency into the trash heap of obsolete ideologies, and go about the business of interpretation without any qualms of conscience. This option, however, proves to have limited appeal. In the first place, it is dangerous. Teachers of writing and speaking can pursue an unrestrained deconstruction of agency of speakers and writers only at the risk of theorizing themselves out of jobs. Secondly, qualms of conscience—perhaps even of collective consciousness—assert themselves. (Leff and Lunsford 62)

To return to our séance allegory, for Geisler and Leff, those who embrace the "post-modern" critique are somehow mindlessly moved around by the agency of the planchette (the Symbolic, ideology, discourse, History, and so on), while those who find "comfort" in the "traditional model of [the] humanist agent" can plainly see that *someone* is moving it around (Geisler 14). Yet we would respond that even though someone or something is acting on the planchette in a séance, it does not follow that agency must necessarily be rooted in an autonomous, intending human agent—however conscious or stricken with conscience she may be. Nor does the mere fact of movement allow for a discernment of the movement's cause without pre-reading the situation through the lens of a humanist account of an agent producing agency; the undeniable existence of agency, in other words, does not prove that the autonomous subject is therefore its source.

Our concern is that rhetorical theorists should be more honest about the secret interpretive work done by their ontotheological framework for interpreting agency as an extension of the agent. Even Leff has argued that the classical rhetorical agent comprises a fundamental ambivalence between rhetoric and audience, contradicting claims that "humanistic rhetoric valorizes and centers itself on the individual agent" ("Tradition" 138; also see Gunn, *Modern* 136-137). In other words, rhetoricians have long accepted some form of the argument that subjectivity is *not* autonomous and have rejected the self-sufficiency of the subject. Indeed, that there is a discussion about "agency" at all means, at least tacitly, that we have rejected "an ontology of agency that freezes the concept in static theoretical space" (Leff and Lunsford 63). What remains to be seen is a rigorous rejection of the ontotheological, despite the well-known (and tacitly accepted) problematization of the ontology of agency. What is really at issue is not so much the "is" of agency but the "how," as well as the way in which the two are linked.

The Second Great Equivocation, or, Rhetoric's Ethical Righteousness

We are suggesting that the threat of posthumanism (or as it is known in rhetorical studies, "post-modernism") is a phantom paper tiger, a specter that haunts and causes great trembling, but only because it is mistakenly said to bring the plague of agential paralysis. Geisler's claim that "the facts on the ground do not appear to support the proposition that rhetorical agency is illusionary" presumes such a proposition was made; to our knowledge, the only thinker who has come close to this suggestion is Jean Baudrillard, and we're fairly confident his claims are strategically mischievous and provocative. Just because we might argue that the posthumanist subject is performed, split, interpellated, or a function of discourse, tropology, rhetoric, and so on does not mean rhetors do not exert agential effects in pursuit of their interests; indeed, we certainly have a well-documented history of our acting against them.

Insofar as the first "argument from fact" offered in response to the pseudo-problem of the existence of agency is much ado about something, that something must be the second "argument of value" (Geisler 15-16). In this respect, the argument of straw regarding the "illusion of agency" participates in a consequentialist logic designed to lead us to ethical imperatives. In the ARS discussions in print and during the conference, rhetorical humanists tended to hitch ethical questions to issues of pedagogy. Leff's commentary on Geisler's report strongly emphasizes the ethical import of teaching rhetoric:

> Rhetoricians believe that their work ought to make students more effective agents in the public world, and rhetoric is, Geisler recalls, "the art of doing in language." The exercise of agency in and through language is close to the core of this art, and should it abandon the goal of being efficacious in the world, Geisler wonders whether its teachers would still be rhetoricians. In the face of this pedagogical undercurrent, it is no surprise that rhetoricians have reacted against doctrines that thoroughly suppress the exercise of individual agency through language. (Leff and Lunsford 62)

In other words, the "ought" is driving the humanist critique of the posthumanist critique of the "is." And this ought *is* heavily indebted to a romantic understanding of the subject, rooted less in the figure of the classical rhetor in Aristotle and Cicero than in the anxious character of Antoine Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea*: if humans are the measure of all things, if it seems as though we everywhere and always encounter ourselves in this world by means of *rhetoric*, then invention entails a tremendous responsibility (also see Scott 14-17).

The enthymematic element here is that responsibility confers agency, and to recoil from the freedom that demands choice is, in some sense, to suffer social death or rhetorical impotence. Hence our characterization of the pomo specter as a Calvinist harbinger of radical passivity and the trauma

of a totalizing determinism: from the humanist vantage, symbolic action or rhetoric as "doing in language" assumes contingency and freedom; freedom demands making choices and locating responsibility in the individual who chooses; failing to make choices presumably because they are always already scripted in the illusion of agency is therefore failure to understand rhetoric and assume responsibility for one's symbolic choices. For Geisler, separating the fact of agency from the value of responsibility and choice is fundamentally *immoral*. Hence she asks,

> What shall we, as critics, say to our fellow citizens about their potential and obligations with respect to becoming rhetorical agents? What shall we, as critics, say to our fellow citizens about their potential and obligations? If neither our students nor our fellow citizens have such potential or obligations—if agency is illusory—we may sidestep these questions . . . as irrelevant. (16)

What emerges from Geisler's report is ultimately a variation of "is/ought" problem first identified by Hume and later dubbed the "naturalistic fallacy" by G. E. More. Here we find the specific moral incarnation of inferring cause from effect, the equivocation of agency as the capacity to act and participatory citizenship as a moral duty.

In light of the tacit acceptance of the critique of the autonomous subject, the question is not really "how ought we to understand the concept of rhetorical agency?" but "where do we locate responsibility when agency is exercised?" If as subjects we are interpellated by ideology to invest in our own unhappiness, who is responsible? Further, if we are unable to determine the seat of agency, then are we robbed of our ability to locate lying and to censure deception? And perhaps most importantly, who or what gives us the right as teachers and critics to determine good and bad norms of civic engagement? For Geisler, to answer these kinds of questions simply by arguing that agency exists *is not enough*, because rhetorical ontotheology demands some locus of agency to secure the gospel of rhetoric *as* civic responsibility. This understanding of rhetoric participates in what we term rhetorical evangelicalism, an approach to the study and teaching of rhetoric that is ethically righteous in respect to the classical norms of civic culture, and particularly the moral responsibility of "civic engagement." Because of "the attachment of rhetorical agency to a vision of political change," Ronald Walter Greene argues that rhetorical critics and theorists have been increasingly pushed into "becoming moral entrepreneurs scolding, correcting, and encouraging the body politic to improve the quality and quantity of political participation" (189). From Greene's perspective, the problem with insisting that rhetorical agency always concerns political (or civic) effectivity is that it and puts us into an intellectual straight-jacket:

> whether the model [of political communication] imagines rhetorical agency in terms of reinventing cultural traditions (hermeneutics) or in terms of collective action (social movements), the emphasis on rhetorical agency as a model of political communication, prefigures the significance of rhetorical agency as always already in support of, or opposition to, the institutional structures of power. Thus a permanent anxiety about the character of rhetorical agency is made inevitable, because [it] suspends dialectically between structures of power . . . and the possibility of social change. To break out of this dialectical anxiety requires more than an alternative model of communication; it requires the abandonment of the dialectical interface between structure and change. (198)

Although we think that the idea of "breaking out" from the project (if not condition) of mediation, of finding an "escape route" from a reckoning with the dialectic of structure and struggle, is a too romantic for our tastes, Greene's claim that a dogged commitment to conflating agency and responsibility leads to a permanent anxiety is well taken.[15] If we locate the First Great Awakening to the post- idioms in rhetorical studies as a shift toward hermeneutics (see Leff and Caulfield; Leff and Lunsford, 62), then the Second Great Awakening is the characteristically evangelical response to the neurosis that Greene identifies, an increasingly apocalyptic humanism and an enterprise of moral entrepreneurship that would extend our role as teachers and critics to that of lording over civic space.[16] We do not necessarily disagree with an understanding of rhetorical studies as having an ethical mission (defined by the imperative to generate normatively good civic action), but we do urge a consideration of *our* qualms of conscience concerning a characteristically conservative claim to moral righteousness in response to post- theory. Although some rhetoricians may find moral entrepreneurship a "productive" direction, we are not so converted.

Concluding Remarks: Giving up the Geis(t)ler?

In our response to Geisler's report on the ARS conference discussions concerning rhetorical agency, we have attempted to provide a more faithful account of the posthumanist critique of the subject or agent, which we think functions as a straw-person in her argument. We suggested that an equivocation of agent and agency is at the center of Geisler's report, and that the agency-as-possession metaphor indicates that this equivocation is ontotheological in aim and scope. Ultimately, we concluded that ethical righteousness, couched in the language of pedagogy, is behind the claim that agency proves the existence of the humanist agent, that the "how" determines the "is." Although we do not necessarily disagree with claiming an ethical mission for

rhetorical studies, we suggest that the allegory of ARS tent revival ought to be replaced with the allegory of the séance, with the possibility that the specter of language and other ghosts move us more than we know.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not point out that problematizing the idea of the agent does not necessarily create an *a priori* rejection of the doctrine of responsibility. In fact, we suggest that responsibility demands such a problematization *and* that such a problematization can generate an alternate model of responsibility. For example, Derrida borrows from the Heideggerian maxim that "speaking is responding" to argue that responsibility ought not be framed as a normative imperative on the agent to own up to the consequences of its intentions and actions. Instead, "response"-ability marks the idea that every action, discursive or otherwise, is only born of an engagement with the set of conditions that produced it. This is the logical implication of the idea that every act of speaking is an act of response. Thus, argues Caputo,

> if Derrida is a renegade . . . he is a highly responsible one. The work of deconstruction is set in motion, engaged (engage) only by a pledge of responsibility, indeed of unlimited responsibility, because a "limited responsibility" (drawing oneself into a corporate circle) is just an excuse to credit oneself with a good conscience . . . deconstruction is set in motion by something that calls upon us and addresses us, overtakes and even overwhelms us, to which we must respond, and so be responsive and responsible. . . . such questioning, be assured, arises from the height—or depths—of responsibility. (Caputo, *Deconstruction* 51)

The implication of this claim is that any call for normative doctrines of responsibility determined by the agential choices of the subject paradoxically entails a *deferral* of responsibility. The deferral concerns the tendency of accounts of the responsible subject to pre-determine the choices of the subject by the force of metaphysical law. An unconditional responsibility, here entailed in the call to deconstruction, rejects the casuistry that tethers the future actions of an agent to a doctrine about that agent's naturalness or givenness, and therefore to a set of protocols to which the agent must adhere to exercise responsibility. We suggest that instead of avoiding responsibility, a relentless questioning of the conditions of the production of the agent, and a close textual engagement with the agential narrative and the agent's texts, affirms an unconditional commitment to responding, and ultimately to responsibility, despite the threat of undermining our corporate attempts to credit the rhetoric community with good conscience.

In bringing our response to a close, we suggest that a more hospitable conversation about the rhetorical agent might entail three moves. First, we propose an alternate discourse of possession that can be read against the trope of agents possessing agency. Rosemary Ellen Guiley's entry in the *Harper's*

Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience notes that "some demonologists say the Ouija opens the door to possession by evil spirits" (Guiley 419). Although we will stop short of advocating a rhetorical demonology (necromancy is perhaps more apt), we hope that our séance allegory—the spiritualist idiom of possession from without—helps to encourage a discourse counter to the hegemony of possessing agency. What happens to the conventional rhetorical account of agency if it starts out by presuming that the agency possesses the agent, as opposed to the agent possessing agency as an instrument or substance? Such a narrative refocuses our attention on the ways that the subject is an effect of structures, forces, and modes of enjoyment that *might* precede or produce it. This reversal of agent's relation to agency directs attention to quintessentially rhetorical concerns: to the constitutive function of trope, to modes of address, to the dialectics of identification and difference, and even to the power of concealing exercises of *techne* under the veil of the natural.

Second, to the extent that we rhetoricians ought to worry about such things, the reversal of "possessing" to "possessed" is obviously more hospitable to the concerns of posthumanist thinking, and none more so than Lacan's. The French psychoanalyst's earliest work dealt with the phenomena of "automatism," the perception by paranoid patients that something outside of them controlled their thought processes (Lacan, *Seminar III* 29-43). In response to the problem of accounting for automatism while denying the external reality of the paranoid delusion, Lacan began to theorize the agency of the structures that produced both the perceptions of the subject and the perceiving subject. Lacan thus ultimately attributes agency to tropes, to the Symbolic, and to enjoyment (Lacan, *Écrits* 138-168; also see Lacan, *Seminar XX* 3,56). This agency possesses the subject, thereby bringing the fantasy of the agent to life. For Lacan, the "response"-ible reading of the dynamics of subjectivity requires reference to rhetoric (Lundberg 500-501). In short, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory can help rhetoricians navigate the posthumanist theoretical landscape in a characteristically rhetorical way.

Third, if we are in fact dealing with a covertly theistic discourse of the subject (paired with all the evangelistic fervor that one might expect), perhaps reference to the ontotheological is more helpful than some may realize. Atheism, of course, is one possible response to posthumanism, as if to withdraw from a séance, or worse, as if to join our doggedly positivistic colleagues in the hard sciences.[17] We think that there is another, characteristically agonistic possibility: a negative theology of the subject (see Bernauer). *Prima facie*, negative theology seems like a kind of atheism: it begins by pointing out that the particularity of language necessitates that all descriptions on an infinite God (even positive ones) do violence to God, and thus calls for a stripping away of the names and presumed qualities of the divine.[18] All representations

of God in this system, though necessary for devotional practice, participate in a subtle idolatry. Yet, it should go without saying that to deny the existence of God also participates in violence toward God, and an idolatry of its own. In marking the impossibility of truth in describing God, the *via negativa* opens a hospitable and responsible horizon for receiving the divine. By analogy, Foucault argues that a negative theology of the subject does not deny the possibility of subjectivity, but instead demands that we strip away all the various discursive attributions of qualities and possessions to the subject with the hope of liberating subjectivity from the ossified bounds of the agent as a technology for organizing the experience of subjectivity. Perhaps a similar negative theology of the rhetorical agent would allow rhetoric to be practiced without the agent as the decisive horizon for rhetorical agency? This project would call for a thick theorization of the rhetorical effects of doctrines of agency, and for inquiry into the function of persuasion as a systemic effect/affect beyond the individual agent—in collectivities, discursive formations, new technologies, and so on. Far from denying rhetorical study the fruits of its labor, such an agnostic disposition of hospitality asks for nothing more than a restless and relentless thinking. Casting the problem of rhetorical agency as a rhetorical affect, instead of as a point of origin for rhetorical effect, requires us to think about the agent and its relation to agency as one trope among others that productively and destructively constrains the exercise of our critical imagination. This move requires faithfulness to the analytical cut separating the doctrine of the subject or agent as an ontological claim from the social and rhetorical effects that are wrought by presuming a specific configuration of the subject. Adopting such a disposition, we sit patiently and with wonder, ready for surprise, open to possible joy, to the Messianic return (even if joy or the Messiah never come). We wait openly, as if having just asked, "Ouija Board, are there any communications?"

Department of Communication Studies
University of Texas at Austin and Northwestern University

Notes

1. Foucault, following Heidegger, also diagnoses a latent theistic tendency in humanism. Framing the gospel of humanism as an "absolutization" of the human subject, he observes that in the wake of the oft proclaimed death of God, the image of "man (sic)" had become that of a "God incarnated in humanity." (Bernauer 68; Foucault "Foucault Responds" 38).
2. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes, rhetorical agency "is perverse, that is, inherently protean, ambiguous, open to reversal" (2).

3. Technically speaking, we should make a strict separation between the "subject" and "the agent," insofar as we will eventually claim, following Lacan, that language is an agent itself. We recognize, however, that most people mean "subject" when using the term "agent" and so we will continue the habit.
4. For the beginning of this posthumanist line of thought, see Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism."
5. Thus, Foucault suggests an alternate term "subjectivization" which is "the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity which is, of course *only one of the given possibilities* of organization of a self consciousness" (Foucault, "Return of Morality" 253; italics ours).
6. We do not need to turn to the reflections of continental thinkers to make these points. In fact, upon reading the ARS position statements we found many voices that resonate with this general line of argument. Lundberg's position statement points out that "subjectivity (the question of the agent) implies a question of the ontological foundations (or lack thereof) of human being, and subsequently (but not exclusively) action. Agency implies a functional account of action or the potential for action, and as a functional account one does not necessarily have to rely on a firm answer to the question of subjectivity to address agency. Thus the question of agency brackets the question of subjectivity in a significant way, though a view of subjectivity is necessarily implied in thinking about agency." We find similar concerns with the production of subjectivity or the agent as analytically separate from the question of agency in the statements of Barbara Biesecker, Diane Davis, Renu Dube, Randall Iden, John Kirby, James McDaniel, John Lucaites, and Brett Ommen. This is not an exhaustive list, but this sampling does provide evidence that this line of criticism exerted a significant voice in the Evanston discussions on agency.
7. The more significant critique of "the ideology of agency," however, is Barbara Biesecker's "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric."
8. Geisler's argument for the desirability of this model is consistently made in the name of teaching: "a rhetorical agent seen to make choices among the available means of persuasion is an agent rhetoricians can educate to make the best choices" (11). Despite claims to a polysemous presentation of agency and caveats about the productive influence of "postmodernism," the "comfort of the traditional model of the humanist agent" stealthily slides from a consoling presupposition of the tradition to a formal imperative for the future (11). When combined with the claim that if rhetoric is avert the risk of irrelevance it must be able to generate change, comfort in the traditional, possessive view of the subject sounds like a precondition for the relevance of the discipline or, more menacingly, an argument *ad consquentiam*.

9. Geisler's summation of McDaniel's call for one version of the analytical cut we develop in this essay follows a similar figural pattern: "the agency of the good man speaking well becomes neither necessary fantasy nor liberal delusion, but one of a number of ideological configurations that emerge in specific historical contexts to form, if you will, the landscape of agency" (Geisler 7). Here again, there is a fundamental recognition that *agency* is the product of social construction, but it is still presented as a possession of "the good man speaking well," though the context for the exercise of agency changes in this configuration, the basic assertion that agency is a possession of the human subject does not change: agency is the possession of the agent. This same configuration is present in her representation of John Angus Campbell's and James Jasinski's position statements: "According to Jasinski, an improvisation metaphor may allow us to sidestep the critique of liberal humanism by acknowledging the contingency of all action while at the same time allowing the rhetor the power to respond to those shifting circumstances" (Geisler 7). Yet again, agency is figured as context dependent, but this is only a mild impediment to be overcome by the power of invention, here unquestionably possessed by the rhetor.

10. That paper is Gunn's, which we produce here in full because it is brief: "In their epilogue to the popular textbook, *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit sketch an imaginary debate among two camps of rhetorical scholars: On the left, we have a number of 'postmodern' rhetoricians who argue that the agency of rhetors is 'prestructured' by ideology; on the other left, 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.' This magical third way is said to situate agency among lived relations in a 'social interaction,' thereby mediating the tensions between determinism and free will. Whether such a solution makes sense (in the words of Edward Schiappa, this seems to me like another proposal for 'sophisticated modernism'), this imaginary debate continues to fuel the current hand-wringing over agency that the ARS Conference is designed to address. My position is that this debate is, in fact, a discipline-specific misrecognition or fantasy. Fantasies provide, simultaneously, a frame within which to exercise agency as well as a shield from the abject horror of contingency. In this light, my position on the concept of rhetorical agency is that it only became a critical concept at the threshold of its own fictional dissolution. As the caption point of a central crisis-fantasy particular to U.S. rhetorical studies, the questioning of the rhetorical agent is, in fact, 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. The debate-fantasy over the possibility of agency has also been a shield from the investigation of unconscious suasive processes as well (processes that challenge the assumptions of the debate, of course). Functioning much as the concept of "text" did the late 1970s and 1980s (documented in the widely read edited collection, *Texts in Context*), the question of rhetorical agency provides a frame for scholarly endeavor that, if dissolved, risks a direct confrontation with the madness of irrelevance."

11. Douglas Walton notes that "the straw man fallacy occurs when an arguer's position is misrepresented by being misquoted, exaggerated, or otherwise distorted" (22). Claiming that agency is a fantasy is not the same as claiming it is not real, nor does a failure to recognize the phantasmic nature of subjectivity reduce to the charge of cowardice.

12. In fact, her reading is far from correct as well. Gunn never says agency is an illusion, nor does he advocate its abandonment, yet his position is characterized as an amoral, nihilistic embrace of a ridiculous "post-modern" position. Part of the problem is semantic: "illusion" is a misreading of "fantasy," which in psychoanalytic theory is not "fancy" but that which yields the self or "I" a positive consistency. Fantasy can be understood as a rhetorical structure that retroactively assigns meaning to human, sensory encounter and explains to us what we desire (see Gunn, "Refitting Fantasy"; Gunn, "On Dead Subjects"; Lundberg; Žižek, *Plague* 3-44).

13. Nor do any of these thinkers have an easy relationship with the term "postmodern," or with many of the presuppositions attached to postmodern theories by anxious rhetoricians. Foucault, for example, was suspicious of the imprecision and arbitrariness associated with the term. In response to a question regarding the specter of postmodernity he quips: "What are we calling postmodernity? I am not up to date . . . . I've never understood what was meant . . . by the word modernity . . . neither do I grasp the kind of problems intended by this term—or how they would be common to people thought of as being 'postmodern.'" (Foucault, "Critical Theory" 33-34). Lacan (a thinker whose work informed much of Gunn's original statement on agency) can also only be framed as a "postmodernist" by ignoring significant portions of his work on the significance of the symbolic, the name of the father, and his account of subject formation (see Gunn, "On Dead Subjects"; Lundberg) Secondary interpreters of Lacan's such as Žižek, Badiou, and Laclau argue that his work provides an *antidote* to the problems of postmodernism by allowing a new theorization of the universal or by preventing a descent into sheer romanticism (see Badiou; Žižek, *Ticklish*).

14. We find the absence of any mention of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's plenary session paper conspicuous. In "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," Campbell likens herself to Odysseus steering among the rhetorical tradition, the

Charybdis of poststructural feminist theory, and the Scylla of "Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault" (1). The result is a provocative and insightful rumination on rhetoric's relation to social change. Although we disagree with some of her claims, Campbell's paper most clearly and directly articulates the challenge that we face as rhetorical critics in an increasingly "postmodern" world, and is the most faithful report of the agency issues discussed at the ARS conference.

15. Many so-called "postmodern" positions seem to call for, paradoxically, the transcendence of transcendence, for escaping or breaking free from any dialectical ontology. Nevertheless, in fairness to Greene we should underscore that his materialist project includes both a critique of the romantic doctrine behind the turn to hermeneutics (ethics) as well as a "de-Hegelizing" of Marxism (politics). In personal communication, Greene noted that his political commitments and "theory work together to challenge the ontology of mediation that is the real locus of the disciplinary debate on such things as humanist/posthumanist," and warned us not to disarticulate the political and ethical. We agree that mediation is central to the disciplinary debate on agency; however, we are not ready to abandon it as a method, an aim, or as a general rhetorical project.

16. This is obviously related to Gaonkar's global warning about "big" rhetoric (see Gaonkar; and Schiappa).

17. Regrettably, atheism has been the unfortunate tendency in rhetorical studies. As a result, our understanding of religion and theology is overly-simplistic and narrow. We are encouraged, however, by the Spring, 2005 issue of *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, which explores the relationship between religious faith and scholarly invention.

18. The most significant founding work in this regard is Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's "Divine Names."

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