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*Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the
Return of the Subject* by Thomas Rickert

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Thomas Rickert had a falling-out with his brother, and this distresses him so much that his disrupted relation is described as “traumatic.” Rickert reports that while listening to a portable CD player during a run on an unexpectedly warm winter day, a song by the now defunct jazz/rock band Morphine reminded him of a happy time at a pool hall with his brother (24). Mediated—or better, medicated—by music, the homological happiness of running in the sun and a positive past memory also resurfaced a painful relational rupture, the reason of which Rickert omits to underscore that mysterious, “little detail or object” of the Real that marks his singular finitude as a writing subject (216 n. 11). We’ll want to come back to this curiously deliberate omission, but for the present we note Rickert is not simply an undead author but a human being with relations and feelings. He is not just a gifted scholar or a bundle of reflections, but a nexus of body and movement and words and affect. If there is anything that Rickert’s study can be said to work through with brilliance, humor, and grace, it is the reality of complex personhood.

Rickert’s brotherly confession comes in Chapter 1 as a way to introduce a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity, and more specifically, to help illustrate how trauma works itself out as an afterwardness or “belatedness” (*Nachträglichkeit*): traumatic events from the past are not reckoned with or worked-through until some coincidence or reminder, such as a similar

sensory experience, reintroduces the event in doubled re-presentation (18–27). This implies the “subject” (a paradigm person) is a kind of time-delay, a self-conscious temporal moving that becomes this way through re-presentation. The rhetorical subject is analogously a retrojected reckoning with events past (not all traumatic) that Rickert identifies as a scene of writing, a locus that has important implications for rhetorical studies in general and writing pedagogy in particular. Rickert’s logic is as follows: if we agree that the subject is a belated one in the psychoanalytic sense, then how we teach rhetoric needs to change. Rickert opens the book with the observation that his students are producing excellent cultural critiques but that such critiques do not lead the students to change their actions (1–7), perhaps evidence enough that something is not quite right in a classroom grounded by “cultural studies pedagogy” and ideology critique—or at the very least, proof that something *has changed*. The opening gambit is simply that a “postpedagogy” premised on an understanding of rhetorical subjectivity as belatedness is better than a *status quo* rooted in the rational subject of the Enlightenment.

Mostly through a Žižek-filtered, Lacanian lens, *Acts of Enjoyment* then undertakes a retake of the rhetorical field, frequently scanning from the traumatic ontology of the rhetorical subject to that domain of knowledge that we hold dear, the subject of rhetoric. In Chapter 2, the (primal) scene thus shifts from the slo-mo subject to rhetorical studies, initially through a reassessment of Kinneavy’s “communications triangle,” but ultimately in response to the shock treatment of poststructuralism. The initial theoretical traumas introduced by Victor Vitanza, Diane Davis, Sharon Crowley, and others discussed in Chapter 1 are threaded into an account of “post-structural” redress in Chapter 2: as is true of all forms of trauma, the initial poststructural jolt delivered to the concept of subjectivity was deadened; poststructural theory was eventually used to “shore up rather than challenge Kinneavy’s triangle” (37). To truly work-through our traumatized subject in both senses, we need a second trauma: Lacanian psychoanalysis. Presumably, “poststructuralist thought” is to be opposed because it has no account of the subject (21–24); “Lacan,” after all, “is not a poststructuralist” (48). The remainder of the chapter is then used to deploy Lacan’s conceptual lexicon.

Just as challenges to Kinneavy’s triangle failed to unseat it as a disciplinary commonplace, Rickert argues that poststructuralist challenges to humanist theories of agency can be read as a circuitous defense of the self-present subject. Chapter 3 attempts to replace the positionality of Foucault’s subject—one that negotiates “multifarious power flows and their complex

entwinements” (69)—with a Lacanian subject. For Rickert, the latter cannot be reduced to the symbolic, and this is what makes it more useful for rhetorics aimed at accounting for the affective and nonrational. In psychoanalysis, there is a “something else”—something that the “social cannot absorb” (69). If the subject forms around this “something else,” then our pedagogies should be shifted to account for that which slips through the symbolic cracks. Rickert examines how poststructuralist theory has been taken up by James Berlin, Linda Brodkey, and Susan Miller in order to note how they share a view of the subject in terms of positionality and a view of rhetoric as a set of tools for negotiating such positionality. Rickert’s discussion of Berlin is particularly interesting considering the recent publication of Byron Hawk’s *A Counter-History of Composition* (2007). Both Hawk and Rickert are students of Vitanza, and both spend a great deal of time carefully and respectfully critiquing Berlin’s theory and pedagogy. Berlin’s disagreements with Vitanza are well-documented (see Vitanza 1997), and Berlin’s influence on the field of rhetoric and composition has been immense. It seems clear that Rickert, Hawk, and others are looking to reintroduce Vitanza, an often marginalized voice in disciplinary discussions. Still, Rickert moves his discussion beyond a critique of Berlin to show how poststructuralist theories can fall short of fully questioning the self-present, conscious subject. He offers psychoanalysis as a way to supplement discussions of the subject in terms of positionality and fragmentation with an understanding of the subject as fundamentally fissured.

Chapter 4 explains how notions of a rational subject ground cultural studies pedagogies that aim to teach ideology critique. For Rickert, the shortcomings of such pedagogies are rooted in a “rationalist view of knowledge” (99). Ideology is not a screen that hides reality, instead it is “the complex dialectical interplay between our conscious and unconscious selves as they emerge in specific social practices and material environments” (100). Ideological critique, as it plays out in cultural studies pedagogies, assumes that once the inner-workings of the ideological illusion are revealed, students will begin to act differently. The observation that opens *Acts of Enjoyment*—students’ willingness to say “Yeah, I know I don’t need these seventy-five-dollar designer blue jeans, but ...’ [spending ensues]” (2)—challenges this myth. Fantasy structures undergird the pedagogical relationship, and this means that teachers never actually confront “students” but instead interact with their own fantasy of what those students are or should be. Further, students are driven by affective, nonrational desires that frustrate any attempt to impart knowledge. This view of the pedagogical

situation is a messy and frustrating one, but Rickert is careful to note that the situation is not hopeless. Given this book's argument, it would be odd for Rickert to stop at the level of critique when discussing cultural studies pedagogies, and he does explain that his is an argument of "re/thinking" and "re/designing." Rickert is not asking rhetoricians to do away with critique but rather to "think carefully about how critique and pedagogy go together" (110). Following Žižek, Rickert suggests that a more productive move would be to extract the kernel of enjoyment and identify with it. Thus, we could note that our scapegoat (whatever or whoever it might be) is fundamentally fissured, and that this fissure is the exact thing we share with it. He points to one of Žižek's favorite examples, the Jews: "we must recognize in the 'excesses' attributed to 'Jews' the truth about ourselves" (Žižek qtd. in Rickert 129). This chapter closes with a discussion of ethics. Whereas cultural studies pedagogy "aspires to be ethical, noble, and good" it falls short of such goals by "[bringing] with it phantasmatic assumptions about society, harmony, and conflict that directly shape its sense of the good and its praxis" (136). Rickert argues that psychoanalysis might offer a more ethical approach by resisting the urge to think that our teaching has created "critical, autonomous agents" (119).

Chapter 5 offers review and analysis of various theories of power and resistance. Rickert uses the differences between Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Žižek to explain the problematic that drives the book—the shortcomings of a pedagogy that aims at liberation, critical awareness, and ideology critique. By reducing power to the discursive, theories of power such as Butler's and Foucault's are unable to explain why "[j]ettisoning a law because of its particular content does not necessarily pose a threat to 'Law' in general" (142). He offers the theories of Žižek as a useful way to account for this missing piece, but he is careful not to make Žižek's work into a silver bullet: "Žižek's theories are not 'it,' the magic formula that will resolve our personal and social conflicts" (151). Instead, Žižek allows for the "working-through" that Rickert references throughout the text. One instance of this working through is Rickert's response to the narratives of Sharon Crowley and Judith Fetterley regarding student resistance in feminist classrooms. Crowley and Fetterley offer stories of male students feeling silenced in their classrooms and of female students siding with the silenced men. Crowley and Fetterley conclude that "males effectively still hold more power than females and that this power differential effectively silenced women and disrupted the potential social good offered by the course content" (153). Rickert wonders whether the resistance of these male

students was linked to the classroom power dynamic rather than the course content: “From the Lacanian perspective, there is a fissure between teacher and student that cannot be bridged, not so much despite the specific content as because of it. The students are not learning what the teacher directly wants them to learn. They are learning from, and reacting to, what emerges in excess of the specific content” (158). He argues that cultural studies based pedagogies do not “explain the mechanisms whereby sexist behavior can return, as if through the back door, even in a feminist classroom that is directly addressing sexism” (153). Further, Rickert offers the resistance of such students as a sign of hope. If students resist teachers, then there is hope that they will resist in other situations.

In Chapter 6, “Hands Up! You’re Free,” Rickert extends this critique of resistance into the classroom in order to address Lenin’s famous question. At stake is a pernicious “pedagogy of control” and its “idealized actualization of an empowering critical consciousness in students,” and its replacement, a postpedagogy of “the Act” (165). Previously defined in Chapter 1 as “a particularly potent form of invention, or an unleashing of the eventual within the ongoing, belated processes of symbolic integration” (31–32), the Act is Rickert’s Deleuzian version of the “magic moment” in teaching experience, a startling or unexpected occurrence that makes new, previously unacknowledged rhetorics possible. The Act is made possible by embracing a number of deadlocks, the most important being the false promise of a transformative student/teacher relationship:

perhaps this pedagogical fissure [the impossibility of a harmonious student/teacher relationship] can be seen to work for us, to enable us in productive ways. We might then take seriously the impossibility of knowing the areas of contention and struggle that will be most important to our students’ lives or of assuming that our lines of contention will be theirs. Pedagogy could reflect this concern by promoting the idea that each student’s life is its own *telos*: the individual struggles of each student cannot and should not necessarily mirror our own. This is but one reason for rethinking cultural studies pedagogies and their focus on oppositional and ultimately Oedipalizing strategies, moving toward less critical and more inventional pedagogies. (164–65)

If this postpedagogy of the Act seems a bit fuzzy, it is deliberate, for any attempt to specify the Act in detail misses Rickert’s attempt to remind rhetoricians of the singular, affective lives of students. To specify what the

Act will be for Ruby Rhetor is to sew-up possibility and chance in advance. Of course, for those familiar with psychoanalysis, one might object that such a wait-and-see strategy of “de-Oedipalization” is merely the countertransference in postmodern disguise, the law-of-the-daddy coming in through a Deleuzian back door, so to speak. Be that as it may, taken on its own conceptual terms, Rickert’s argument is consistent, however much it might frustrate the model-minded: “static, stagnant, rote, schematic, call-it-what-you-will application of psychoanalysis to rhetoric,” says Rickert, “is precisely what we do not need” (200). Owing to institutional constraints, pragmatic realities, and the expectations of administrators and students alike, rhetoricians cannot abandon the imperative to teach skills and produce grammar savvy students. A psychoanalytic postpedagogy of the Act, however, might help us to inhabit “these writerly precepts ... differently” (164).

Ultimately what is at stake in the postpedagogy of the Act is the subject of *jouissance* (enjoyment); Rickert’s book might be characterized as *writing enjoyment back into the subject of rhetoric*. Rickert’s own understanding of *jouissance* is complex, but in shorthand we can designate the term as the affect, however socially permissible or naughty, particular to any given person. Rickert has made the case—and we think effectively so—that rhetorical studies has neglected the subject of *jouissance* by obsessing almost entirely on words-on-the-page, ignoring the affective locus of invention. When students are taught to resist and critique culture with arguments but denied any personal, embodied, or affective connection to their writing, when feelings get slighted by the almighty signifier, the transformation enabled by enjoyment never arrives. To understand how this is the case, it is helpful to describe the “two faces” of the subject.

As Bruce Fink (2004) explains, for Lacan the subject is actually a composite of the subject of the signifier and the subject of enjoyment (142–43). The subject of the signifier refers to that part of self that is intimately connected to language and symbolic, and it is the proper scene for what we term “knowledge.” The subject of enjoyment, however, is that “face” of the self that concerns affect, and often in ways that transcend our more common understanding of pleasure and pain. Although these two subjects cannot be harmonized (for Lacan, the fact that humans can enjoy beyond representation is what makes us human), one can evoke the other and both are necessary for personal transformation. Rickert’s mysterious yet personal confessional in the first chapter is one of the few instances in the book when he gives his own enjoyment some direct play, and in a manner that serves to illustrate his arguments about

enjoyment: writing comes from feeling, and without feeling, writing is sterile, boring, rote. “Acts of Enjoyment” is thus a phrase that captures the “magic moment” of Rickert’s theory of teaching in its truest, transformational sense, an emotional contingency that leads to the invention of transformation and insight.

Rickert’s study is a welcome addition to the exploration of psychoanalysis already underway in composition studies, the latest voice in a conversation that began with Vitanza and Metzger’s work in *Pre/Text* and elsewhere (see Vitanza 1995; Metzger 1995 and 2007). *Acts of Enjoyment* is also an accessible introduction to the relation between rhetoric and psychoanalysis for the rhetors in the communication studies community. Owing to his institutional relation, Rickert’s most direct audience is affiliated with English departments, yet rhetoricians of the speech-stripe would be mistaken to ignore this important book. Insofar as speech is a kind of writing, Rickert’s *Acts of Enjoyment* is the best introduction to Lacan’s utility and importance to all of rhetorical studies.

We might close with one more mention of Rickert’s *jouissance*. In addition to his falling-out with his brother, we find another traumatic irruption in the text’s “Retrospective”:

In a restaurant the other day, I saw someone eating quesadillas, and there was something in the ritualized manner in which the food was eaten, the relish with which it was chewed, that raised my hackles. Yes, you might say I am being irrational. But that is precisely the point. *Jouissance* emerges anywhere, everywhere, and it is something that eludes our conscious control. It inspires reactions in us about what we do and how we see ourselves and it provokes reactions in us concerning others. (205)

Rickert argues that such moments are common and that they “[call] to mind our narcissistic relation to our own *jouissance*, present, but never to the extent we retroactively posit, and hence always somehow insufficient” (205). And so if we’ve read him in the appropriate spirit, the pedagogical point would be to *not* psychoanalyze Rickert’s omissions and slips, but to see them as a point of departure—and sometimes to allow authors to enjoy their inventional resources without critique.

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