Engaging Modernisms, Emerging Posthumanisms, and the Rhetorics of Doing

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Three essays in the previous issue of JAC—Susan Giroux’s “Race, Rhetoric, and the Contest over Civic Education,” John Trimbur’s “Agency and the Death of the Author,” and Ross Winterowd’s “Where the Action Is”—utilize distinctions between, for example, practice and theory, activity and passivity, and production and reception in order to argue for rhetorics that value doing. These “rhetorics of doing” privilege utilitarian and civic forms of discursive production; accordingly, all three authors are concerned with forms of agency that do something. These concerns in turn raise questions about the ways that agency is theorized, practiced, and taught in academic and public arenas. Of particular interest in Giroux and Winterowd is the privileged status of literary studies obtained at the expense of the more utilitarian, practical orientation of rhetoric and composition. Although an overly sharp distinction seems to be made...
between doing and being, I do not think that such binary constructions are of particular importance except insofar as they help secure a place for composition over and against literary studies. Nevertheless, it is worth examining what is accomplished in these essays, especially the privileging of action, practice, and doing in the face of narratives concerning the loss of agency and other crises affiliated with the cynical malaise of postmodernism. Although I am sympathetic to much of what is argued in these essays—especially the way they attempt to counter the continued devaluation of rhetoric and composition—I also admit to a certain unease. It is as if these arguments run too smoothly or dispense with their targets too expediently. My sense is that this need for doing something is itself a symptom, a reaction against problems posed but not surmounted by postmodern theories and practices. If this is so, what could we gain from a comparison of modernist, postmodernist, and posthuman understandings of agency insofar as they are tied to a rhetoric of doing?

Giroux is not directly concerned with the problem of agency in a postmodern world but with the ways education addresses and constructs citizenship and, in turn, the ways those definitions of citizenship inform public practices and debates. In her fine and detailed study, Giroux demonstrates that a form of citizenship called "ascriptive Americanism" came to dominate education in the nineteenth century, and that its ascendancy was conterminous with the ascendancy of literary studies and the waning of rhetoric (324). As the classically derived notion of the citizen-rhetor cum active political participant was swept aside, and a new notion of citizenship determined by innate capacities such as blood, race, and heredity was installed, so too did the educational emphasis shift from doing, as determined by one's performance of public duties, to being, in which one already had ingrained that which was good and proper. Notions of skilled public service were abandoned, and what became essential for a citizen was the formation of good character (331). In Giroux's view, this kind of ascriptive Americanism underlies the "great books" movement and is implicit in current conservative calls by Jeffrey Hart, Harold Bloom, and E.D. Hirsch for a body of common literary knowledge that is eminently traditional and Eurocentric (339). Furthermore, it is receptive rather than productive, and thus it is also complicitous with market traditions that increasingly underwrite the vocationalization of higher education at the expense of democratic traditions that favor an active, productive citizen-rhetor.

Like Giroux, Winterowd also takes issue with literary studies based on the trope of doing versus being. As he puts it, "The salient characteristic
of literary theory and scholarship is just this: they *do* very little or nothing*" (300). Taking swipes at a variety of literary phenomena, Winterowd mocks environmental approaches to literature ("Yeah! Now I see: *Moby Dick* in the context of 'Save the Whales'") and the literature faculty's ignorance of composition scholarship. He even mocks poetic creativity with his "ode," such as it is, to a parsnip ("Oh, vegetable melancholic . . .") (301, 308). It is wild and wicked stuff, to be sure. I laugh where I am supposed to laugh, and I understand the bitter ironies and mild outrages that characterize Winterowd's—and composition's—befuddlement at literature's continuing primacy in English departments. Winterowd argues that a separation must be made between the orientation of the Romantics, whose privileging of imagination underwrites the scorn that literati levy at other, utilitarian forms of writing, and the orientation of rhetoricians, who emphasize a wide variety of textual approaches (304-06). Such practicality makes rhetoric a form of doing that goes far beyond a literary meaning-making that is divorced from applicability.

There is something slightly off-kilter in these exhortations to *do*. It is as if the postmodern period of slackening, as Lyotard describes it in *The Postmodern Condition*, has now entered an even looser period of cynicism, ennui, and, above all, inaction. Literary studies has been less than forthcoming with new courses of possible action. Having lost the author, the subject, agency, direction, purpose, and the clarity and certainty of decision—what Diane Davis calls, in a description of one of the orienting motifs of Avital Ronell's work, "certitude's withdrawal"—we are now, it appears, somewhat lost. Where do we go from where, and what do we do in an age in which indeterminacy is foregrounded? Giroux, Trimbur, and Winterowd suggest that one way to cut through the postmodern fog of indecision is to saddle education with the drive to do something, to come down from the heights of interpretative play and cultural indoctrination and commit to theories and actions that are practical and public. Thus, Giroux advocates a civic education that prepares students for public discourse and action (an orientation steeped in the humanities and the democratic values that are an aid against corporate market forces), while Winterowd wants to return English education to a focus on real-world writing that does something.

Trimbur's essay stages these issues in a useful, concrete manner. He begins with an examination of the narratives proclaiming the death of the author, and then joins Lester Faigley in tying the loss of a stable subject to an accompanying loss of a viable theory of agency (285). In *Fragments of Rationality*, Faigley compares the advent of postmodern narratives that
destabilized subjects, foundational metanarratives, and centering essentialisms to "a terrorist bomb that demolishes bystanders and even its maker as well as the target" (44). In Discerning the Subject, Paul Smith also takes on the problem of agency in the wake of the author's death, seeing much of the problem as stemming from Foucault, whose theory of the subject "is more incapable than not of becoming an agent of large social change" (168 n.1). Smith posits a theory of agency that arises from the negotiation of multiple and conflicted subject positions, but Trimbur is unconvinced by this kind of thinking, finding it and other similar examples to be theoretical reactions with little practical import beyond their palliative use as persuasive "structures of feeling." In other words, in Trimbur's view, it is only in the wake of the death of the author and other such narratives that we would want to have a theory of agency in the first place, and our assent to them is less a matter of their capacity to explain than "their resonance with our lived experience" (287).

Agency, then, is less a matter of theoretical explanation than it is the recognition of an excessive bubbling over as people struggle and live; it is not so much a theory of agency that legitimates and guides action than it is an expression of our feelings about action and its justification (288). Thus, Trimbur notes that post-Marxists now ruefully refer to "what we used to call 'class struggle'" as a way of realigning agency away from the political (class struggle as actual engagement) toward the textual (class struggle as discursive event) (289-90). This is meant to illustrate a transformation in how agency is experienced. There is now a lack of certainty in motive or an inadequacy of nerve regarding the necessary socio-political tasks. One source for this transformation in how we feel about agency, according to Trimbur, is the poststructuralist condemnation of the way in which the Enlightenment and its Universal Subject leads to terror. As a counter-narrative, Trimbur proposes an examination of the literary underground flourishing during the last twenty-five years of France's Old Regime. These relatively unknown writers—or libellistes—were literary lowlifes who published a steady stream of smutty, vicious, scandalous material mocking aristocratic decadence and articulating a revolutionary point of view "for the people" (294).

I take it that the point Trimbur wants to make in discussing the libellistes is that they were engaged agents of social change, and even though they were modernist subjects, they were not the sort who, it could be argued, contributed to the Enlightenment terror. Indeed, quite the opposite is true: these modernist subjects were active agents doing the undefined work of freedom. In comparison to the present time, they do not
display the bad faith that characterizes so many postmodernists who
apparently lack the commitment to do this kind of work, fearing that it will
lead to further terror. From Trimbur’s perspective—that is, from within
a framework of modernist subjectivity—the *libellistes* serve as examples
of the kind of action that could be, or perhaps is, taking place today. They
are autonomous producers working against oppression and injustice for
the larger social good.

It is at this point that my uneasiness emerges. As I read Trimbur’s
description of the *libellistes*, I wondered about a variety of contemporary
figures who might be called latter-day *libellistes*, including the Sex Pistols
(and punk rock in general), Lenny Bruce, Charles Bukowski, Michael
Moore, Public Enemy, Annie Sprinkle, Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks, Wendy
O. Williams, NWA, William S. Burroughs, Rage Against the Machine,
Cheech and Chong, Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrls, Orlan, Marilyn Manson, and
many more. If these authors, comedians, musicians, and performance
artists are latter-day *libellistes*, I wonder if we might also speak of them,
as Trimbur does of the *libellistes*, as “organic intellectuals who speak for
the people” (294; emphasis added). If they are not, perhaps this is an
indication that all is not well with modernist narratives in postmodern
times. I recall a Marilyn Manson concert last year in Dallas that was
greeted with howls of outrage from the local populace, including one
particularly articulate man who, when interviewed on the local news,
could only say repeatedly, “Marilyn Manson is wrong.” Does Manson
speak for him, even though he does not know or will not acknowledge it?
And if Manson does speak for him, what message is being articulated? If
this foregrounds the question of representation, can we also ask if
representation, conceived in modernist terms, has anything left to contribu­
tute to postmodern conceptions of subjectivity?

These questions about Manson are intriguing, but I would like to set
them aside for a moment and focus on subjectivity. Trimbur argues that
the postmodern conception of the subject as decentered, fragmented, and
nomadic is satisfactory so long as we recall that it is “a description of
social experience in the era of late capitalism,” perhaps indicating that
against this narrative the modernist subject functions as an alternative
description, if not an objection, to the functioning of late capital (295).
And yet, just a few pages earlier, Trimbur emphasizes that the *libellistes*
actually had to write for a living. It would be fair to add, then, that the
modernist subjectivity they embody is also a description of social expe­
rience in the age of early capital. If that is so, it would follow that neither
description of subjectivity carries any substantial theoretical weight aside
from its embeddedness in a particular socio-economic location. Why, then, would either of these descriptions of subjectivity warrant a defense, partial or otherwise?

Of course, Trimbur is correct to point out that action does not necessarily require a corresponding theory to precede and underwrite it; this is one of the points that the libellistes are meant to demonstrate. This is the reason he wants to defend the modernist subject _qua_ author: he or she is a producer. Such a person of action is not hamstrung by "debilitating irony or doubt" and can experience an empowering sense of joining together with others for positive, historical action. It is easy enough to see where this is leading. Along with this affirmative knowledge that one is in solidarity with like-minded others comes the narrative of "workers against bosses, the people against the ruling bloc, the oppressed against their oppressors" (295). In other words, not only is the modernist subject a person of action—which, in comparison, makes the postmodern subject an ineffective, discursive relay point—but the modernist subject is one who can clearly discern what is to be done. The modernist subject can determine who is powerful, unjust, and oppressive and do something about it. In this capacity lies its strength, according to Trimbur, and the reason it should be preserved. Furthermore, given this power to discern and do, questions of representation do not become as troublesome as they are for postmodernists. The people require a voice, and the modernist subject is one who can fulfill that representative role for them and aid in organizing collective socio-political action. Identification underwrites these two functions of the modernist subject: the author maintains a distinctive, _productive_ identity; and the masses can be said to identify enough with the discursive productions of the author who can be identified as their representative and organizational focal point.

At this point, things get tricky. I do not want to disagree with Trimbur and thereby be seen as coming down on the side of oppression and injustice; nor would I want to come to the defense of this waffling, stifled postmodern subject, hoisted on its own ironic petard, apparently incapable of making historically important distinctions of value and of taking decisive action, collective or otherwise. Who would want to defend such a notion of subjectivity? At the same time, in the rush to do something in the name of justice or freedom, I would not want to set aside so quickly postmodern critiques of identity/identification or postmodern doubt concerning the certitudes secured by received metanarratives (for example, Marxism).
I would like to shift tracks slightly to take up the issue not of *doing* in itself, but of doing *what*. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings takes note of the ways in which the word *excellence* functions in the university today. Excellence is a goal, an evaluative criterion, and a marketing description. Universities sell themselves as excellent, strive to maintain excellence, and are ranked according to how well they in fact achieve excellence. The problem is, however, that the term *excellence* "has no content." Readings explains, "it is hence neither true nor false, neither ignorant nor self-conscious. It may be unjust, but we cannot seek its injustice in terms of a regime of truth or of self-knowledge. . . . It is not determined in relation to any identifiable instance of political power" (13). As he goes on to explain, *excellence* becomes a free-floating term that everyone accepts in advance (who, after all, would be against excellence?) yet whose application varies widely, although typically it advances corporate, market-driven interests.

This same feature of the rhetorics of doing is ultimately the source of my unease. Who would not be for doing something that is just? Who would not obtain a felt sense of presence and agency from joining together to accomplish something for the civic good? But precisely here we see the problem: what is good; what is just? These terms, like the term *excellence*, are devoid of content. Thus, to return to my example of Marilyn Manson, the local citizen who thinks Manson is "wrong" believes he is doing a public service by coming out to protest. Manson, meanwhile, sees himself as an artistic provocateur who is accomplishing a larger social good by mocking stale, entrenched narratives and institutions. To seal the connection to the eighteenth-century *libellistes*, whom Trimbur sees as seething with "resentment and class hatred" against the wealthy upper class, I would argue that Manson similarly lampoons "the beautiful people" who judge others by the size of their steeples. (The equation of a religious icon with genitalia is a blatantly sacrilegious turn of phrase that also seethes with resentment and class hatred.) Who is doing good here? Who is advancing the work of freedom? How would we decide? How would we settle the questions of representation and identification that arise from the conflicts Manson and other provocateurs raise? Attempting to answer these questions throws us back into hermeneutics (and epistemology). Although I would not suggest that literary studies supplies the best means for teaching the subtleties of the interpretative arts, I will claim that the impasses raised by the small matter regarding Manson—and further seen in more substantial debates across the social landscape—underscore how this rhetoric that is calling us to *do something* can be just as problematic.
as the ineffectiveness of literary studies. By this I mean that although I am sympathetic to Winterowd's efforts to revalue rhetoric over literary studies, I do not think that rhetoric is best served by opposing literary studies on the grounds of the distinction between doing/producing and being/receiving.

The hermeneutic impasse is connected to the issue of epistemology. In "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority," Patricia Bizzell argues that the anti-foundational position is caught in an untenable contradiction. Since it denies all foundations, she claims, such a position cannot then claim that particular values are worth pursuing. Every political claim of value, according to this line of reasoning, is caught within a recursive anti-foundationalism that will call that value into question. Like Trimbur, Bizzell seeks a way out of this epistemological impasse through recourse to the political struggle to be an authority regarding social and political value, to be forthright about one's ideological motivations, and to join together as humanists "to create and share utopian rhetoric" (674). In this way, rhetorical authority is posited as the means to fill out the empty content of terms such as freedom and justice. Ultimately, however, this position—which, as I see it, is similar to the one Trimbur is advocating—is closely aligned with the realism/idealism debate. Anti-foundationalism, social constructionism, and idealism share in common the denial of objectivity and, hence, any accurate representation of the real world. Arguing again for some form of realism—whether in the form of injustice, class struggle, or the good—sneaks foundationalism back into epistemology. What the various returns to foundationalism have in common, however, is a retreat into the very weak position of authoritatively calling on some "good" foundationalisms to oppose the "bad" ones, which are often called into question precisely on the grounds that they are foundational. Such a position is snared by untenable contradiction, a condition stemming in large part from the modernist epistemology that frames it. This problem is addressed effectively by Cary Wolfe, who argues that certain strands of poststructuralism, pragmatism, and systems theory can aid in the production of posthuman rhetorics and epistemologies that seek legitimated forms of knowledge and value without shirking from the void opened up by postmodern self-reflexivity and its attendant challenge to all forms of self-critical awareness and autonomy.

Hand-in-hand with questions concerning the role of hermeneutics and epistemology is a large-scale, deep-seated sense of frustration with the postmodern condition cum malaise. It is not quite a problem of agency, for I am largely in agreement with Trimbur when he states that the need
to explain agency theoretically is a function of postmodernism's reactionary stance toward modernism, and I further share his sense that agency is a continually occurring excess. However, we should wonder when this felt sense of frustration in turn underwrites a reactionary stance against the postmodern in favor of a nostalgic modernist clarity of purpose. If doing is what is needed, and if production is what is called for, then it should be directed toward narratives, myths, and theories that inspire and seduce, that warrant belief and faith in their possibilities. For that to occur, I think, such narratives, myths, and theories will have to build on and work through postmodernism, and not modernism. It is postmodernism that has most advanced our understanding of the intricacies of subjectivity, the flows of power and knowledge, and the rhetorical, anti-foundational nature of language. How would be it possible to elide the cynical malaise we associate with postmodernism by means of a simple call to action, to doing something? Such a call is an evasion, ultimately, of the problems posed by postmodernism. Until concepts such as freedom, justice, the good, excellence and so forth can be supplied with content that is defined and situated in terms of various posthumanist narratives that are now gaining wide circulation (such as Wolfe's), any call to doing, especially collective doing, is bound to falter. This is the lesson of the postmodern. Every attempt to actualize the content-less abstract is bound to reinscribe new problems, new inequities, new foundations, new manifestations of force—in other words, to raise again the specter of terror. The modernist subject who feels empowered to speak for others or who, as Trimbur advocates, is at least positioned as a “vital point to organize around” also carries with it the Enlightenment ideal of designing “social futures” that are subject to direct human planning, control, and intervention (296, 297).

Like Trimbur—as well as Giroux and Winterowd—I agree that problems attendant with doing the work of freedom should in no way stop that work. Unlike them, I argue that we should take more seriously the postmodernist insights into the problems inherent in the modernist drive to realize the great abstractions—truth, justice, goodness, freedom—in the material present for a Universal Subject that will agree with the content of these abstractions. These postmodern insights should temper our joy and confidence, not in the work or in the doing, but in the outcome. That is, we should experience more joy and have more confidence in our partiality precisely because there are those who choose not to act or join together in solidarity. Perhaps it is in these refusals, in these manifestations of social antagonism, that wisdom can be said to reside. Wisdom in this sense would be quite different from the wisdom that is associated with
the modernist subject that Trimbur advocates. Instead, this would be a postmodern, even posthuman form of wisdom: wisdom as emergence. Such wisdom cannot be said to arise from any particular individual; instead, it arises from patterns of interactions among many interacting, cooperating, and conflicting individuals. As Greil Marcus writes in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, the power to transform is all in the "leaps from one moment to the next, in the impossibility of the transitions" (61). Here Marcus describes a form of emergence—that is, the metaorganizational patterns that arise in the face of the calm, cool calculus of individual reason or the rationale of the collective. Such patterns cannot be traced back to their origins, just as the graceful motion of a flock of birds cannot be deduced from the flight of one bird.¹

The concept of emergence has everything to do with the contingency of knowledge, just as it also touches on our conception of the human subject. In other words, *emergence* is one of the terms that begins to describe what Wolfe calls "the productive and necessary relationship between antagonistic beliefs in the social sphere" (xvii). The issues that so often arise in postmodern discourses—the corrosive effects of circularity, self-reference, and recursivity on established modernist narratives concerning the possibility of autonomous subjects planning and controlling the realm of the social—can be reconfigured for posthuman accounts not as problems to be surmounted but as keystones to rethinking what human subjects are as they live and produce within the social. If the blind spot of modernism is the Other—as Ronell seems to indicate when she states that she is "stupid before the other"—then the concept of emergence can be said to highlight how the other (even a recalcitrant, antagonistic other) is productive and necessary (267). A posthuman epistemology incorporates this notion of antagonism rather than seeking to sidestep it through foundationalism or other conceptual routes.²

At the conclusion of his essay, Trimbur describes an "overwhelming sense of contingency and objectivism—of feeling 'cast' into the world . . . without recourse to collective self-defining action" (297). What is ultimately at stake in describing an author-producer in terms of a liberal, choosing agent acting on the behalf of or collectively with others is precisely the need to overcome a sense of the overwhelming oppressiveness of the massive Being of late capital. The solution seems to be a narrative that returns us to the modernist notion of a unified, producing subject who is no longer tangled in the webs of contingency, self-reflexivity, and recursiveness. Giroux, too, is concerned with the produc-
tion of rhetorically-skilled citizens suited for active public interaction over and against the pressure of market-driven, corporatizing forces and the passivity fostered by literary studies. Meanwhile, Winterowd, who downplays the overtly political stance taken by Giroux and Trimbur, criticizes the elevated status of literary studies that is secured at the expense of rhetoric and its emphasis on productive, utilitarian arts.

In the end, however, these varied calls for rhetorics of doing fall short of the challenge posed by the postmodern condition. The advent of posthumanism marks a transformation in how subjectivity, agency, and action are conceived. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles remarks, “When narrative functionalities change, a new kind of reader is produced by the text” (47). What goes unsaid here is that when narrative functionalities change, a new kind of author-producer also emerges. That author-producer will not be the modernist subject that Trimbur defends, but it could be the new citizen-rhetor that Giroux seeks. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to do more than give a brief sketch of what such a posthuman author-producer might be. It would not be the liberal subject who owes nothing to society; rather, it would be what Hayles calls “a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction,” so that no clear distinction exists between an autonomous individual and the social-machinic environment in which it is embedded. Freedom would be radically reconceived by such a narrative because, as Hayles argues, the liberal notion of achieving freedom from the wills of others will be challenged by the fact that there is no longer an “a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will” (3, 4). Further challenges to modernism posed by the posthuman include Trimbur’s faith in social engineering, a faith predicated on the ability to achieve control. But, as Hayles states, “Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures” (288). The challenge for thinkers, writers, artists, and teachers is to create new narratives out of posthuman theory that can incorporate, work within, and make peace with what is antagonistic, uncontrollable, chaotic, and emergent in human affairs.

These brief remarks on the posthuman are undoubtedly too incomplete to be very compelling. However, if they can accomplish something, it would be to hold open the possibility for rethinking relations between rhetoric, epistemology, and hermeneutics in the postmodern age in a way that does not stage a return to modernist narratives of authority, subjec-
tivity, and agency in order to secure knowledge, power, and value. Rather than find ways to sidestep, ignore, or suppress the thorny impasses raised by postmodern theory, we need to push through those impasses. Posthumanist theory provides a promising means to accomplish this task and to reclaim rhetoric as a productive art.

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Notes

1. For more on emergence than I can touch on here, see De Landa, Hayles, and Kelly. For a critique of Kelly, see Best and Kellner.

2. The work of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek bears similarities to posthumanist thinking regarding the productive, necessary use of social antagonism.

Works Cited


Quodlibeta on Agency and Other Virtual Matters: A Response to John Trimbur

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Reading is hard. It is made harder when our interpretive grids function as gatekeepers against new ideas or ideas that run counter to our current understanding. But I think it is hardest when we encounter "counterjectionist" thinking. A counterjectionist poses something old in the guise of something new. If the counterjectionist is successful, he or she trips up readers by tricking them into thinking they, too, feel the resonance of the old in the new. Admittedly, it is next to impossible to posit the new in new terms (or to see the new with new eyes). I would call this event something like "projectionist" thinking. It also falls into the category of the virtual,