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## A rhetoric of existentialism

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# A RHETORIC OF EXISTENTIALISM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This research situates the philosophy of existentialism in the history of rhetorical inquiry, arguing that its focus on intersubjective communication creates both a rhetorical orientation to the world and a unique method of public address called edification. The author addresses misperceptions of existentialism, suggesting that its purported emphasis of alienation and nothingness is misguided, and moves to an understanding of existentialism as concerned with the meaning in life as opposed to the meaning of life. Works from the following existentialists are analyzed and adapted in this research: Soren Kierkegaard, Miguel de Unamuno, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The project begins with an understanding of rhetoric as an existential world-view grounded in communication and contingency—one that extends from the sophists of Ancient Greece to the existentialist movement. It then draws connections between the rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke, and existentialist criticism and literature. The author also demonstrates how existentialism helps recover a sense of rhetorical agency in a postmodern world where agentic action is questioned. A rhetorical model of communication, edification, is then theorized as speech directed to the individuals within a public. Examples of edifying discourse are identified in the works of Erasmus, Angelina Grimké Weld, and John Ruskin. This research aims to show how the concept and interaction of communication are the dominant themes of existentialism, which provides a rhetorical texture of an idea that is often considered the provenance of philosophy. The author also suggests existentialism contributes new ideas about how to theorize rhetoric from both a methodological and practical standpoint.

## INTRODUCTION

“The problems of speech and language are, on the most fundamental level of analysis, inextricably intertwined with the wider problem of human existence. Speaking is an existential project through which human existence in its manifold concreteness comes to expression.”

Calvin O. Schrag, Experience and Being (159)

Burnished with the philosophical reduction, existence before essence, and conflated with absurdity, despair, nihilism, and, nothingness, the academic reputation of existentialism often fares little better than a Dostoevsky buffoon, inebriated and lacerated at the cuff, having been defenestrated out of a local tavern for outstanding debts and outrageous conduct. The existentialists themselves assailed one another and sought distance from the label, so critics of its body of thought are seemingly invited to denunciate or dismiss it. This project tries to turn the tables on this approach to existentialism, arguing that it finds a more profitable articulation by shifting it to be examined as a rhetorical construct. Rather than a defunct philosophy that is seen to endorse a fluid egotism of the self, existentialism can be seen an intellectual enterprise that concentrates on the difficulties that face human beings who experience being by communicating-in-the-world. It posits the necessity of how we *have* to communicate with others, the problems that ensue from this will-to-communication, and a unique method by which we can communicate with others authentically. By teasing out the pervasive yet widely neglected interest in rhetoric in the existentialist canon, I locate this body of thought squarely within the communication discipline. In doing so, I suggest rhetorical inquiry benefits from enfolding existentialism in its domain since the latter richly contributes to the former in a critical, historical, and methodological manner. Adapting existentialism as such transforms what is thought to be an outdated philosophy into an dynamic orientation, method and style of rhetoric.

A rhetoric of existentialism begins by admitting the deficient features of human communication. It emphasizes the possibilities of human relations rather than the perfection of a sought-after determinism which would result in the finality of discourse. In short, existentialism is comfortable with the problematicity of discourse—critical issues faced in life are never completed, but extended so as to generate new questions to be engaged in the future. Examples of this include Kierkegaard's wish to make life more difficult in the face of utilitarianism and easy faith; Miguel Unamuno's favoring of an eternal restlessness to which human relations can be bettered, but never resolved; Jean-Paul Sartre's exposure of the subject in one's naked vulnerability before the other; Simone de Beauvoir's description of the demanding tension between people that existentialism provides; Karl Jaspers' conception of truth as a communicative process of inquiry rather than fixed assertions with a priori warrants; and Gabriel Marcel's emphasis on living with a permanent uneasiness. Despite the ostensible differences among such thinkers under the heading, existentialism, it is this consistent model of communication that binds it together and also answers its fiercest critics. In existentialism one finds an ontological conception of rhetoric, one that focuses on not only how communication flourishes in the world for human beings, but what implications that portends for individual existence.

This project seeks to rehabilitate existentialism by adapting a rhetorical framework in which to conceive a better understanding of it. Existentialism needs not be looked upon as a philosophy, but rather, in appropriating a Burkean vocabulary, an attitude, frame and/or orientation that recognizes and emphasizes the multiplicity of symbolic action. As such, I engage rhetorical inquiry and existentialism to generate a heuristic study that looks to answer a variety of critical problems that beset the humanities. The questions and concerns explored in this study include the marginalized status of existentialism in contemporary scholarship; the dismissal of (sophistic) rhetoric after Plato; whether rhetorical inquiry is limited to the evaluation of suasive

discourse; the fraught categorization of Kenneth Burke; the possibility of rhetorical agency; and the attempt to create a unique form of rhetorical discourse which departs from the Aristotelian categories of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic address. Existentialism challenges and confronts rhetorical inquiry in two distinct ways that become clear in the chapters to follow: first, it articulates a rhetorical orientation to life itself, one that emphasizes the extreme contingency of human situations and highlights the process of intersubjective communication as the only possible avenue of negotiating such situations. Second, its method of communication does not follow the civic discourse model of address. Existentialism offers a rhetoric of edification, which proceeds with neither propositional nor didactic claims to truth because, like postmodernism, it distrusts epistemological certainty, teleological claims of policy, and operates from without a priori assumptions or determinisms. Unlike postmodern and post-humanist philosophies, however, existentialism attempts to recover and encourage a sense of human agency in the contemporary world. I defend existentialism through a rhetorical vocabulary that accentuates how the rhetorical subject is not isolated in his/her subjectivity so long as the possibility of communication exists. Yet unlike a traditionalist account of rhetoric, agency is not assumed and the efficacy of a rhetoric act is not judged by the criterion of historical success. Rather, humans face radically contingent situations which are constrained by what Jean-Paul Sartre considers our facticity; human actors negotiate their social environment with no guarantee that their communicative acts will translate into successful action. Meaning and action are, ultimately, joint efforts corroborated by the dramatism of intersubjective play. Within these limit situations, as Karl Jaspers refers to them, existentialism seeks an authentic rhetoric that avoids inducing conformity with a mass, acknowledges the impossibility of perfect communication, and distrusts *ad populum* reasoning.

Whereas Sartre writes that human beings are condemned to their freedom, a rhetoric of existentialism, as I conceive it, suggests that human beings are condemned to rhetoric. This



condemnation, however, betokens an opportunity for awareness and the cultivation of improved social interaction between subjects and action. Burke and Sartre share this insofar as identifying the negative (though often misconstrued, I think, as nihilistic) function of human ontology. Burke, for instance, writes that language-use is predicated on the negative; Sartre, meanwhile, writes how “nature does not say yes or no...[only] thoughts say no” (“Existentialism and Humanism” 51). Existentialism is comfortable with dealing with the flaws of the communication process, and although criticized for despair and nihilism, existentialism, knowing that the eradication of ambiguity is impossible (Beauvoir), locates a rhetorical subject who embraces the contingency of relations, recognizes difference, and seeks to intensify the lived relation of being-with-others. Where it remains inconsistent as a philosophy among its variegated thinkers, existentialism possesses this frame of acceptance and orients itself to the other through communicative praxis. I continually stress throughout this project that existentialism is not beholden to passivity or cynicism but seeks an active, re-integrative relationship among humans accomplished through the resources of a communicative rhetoric.

My project focuses on existentialism but is not designed as many such book-length projects on the subject, which typically offer a chronological summary of the existentialists beginning with Kierkegaard. As a dissertation on rhetoric, the chapters here are topical, and each one adapts existentialism in a unique manner to address a problem or create a new rhetorical frame. This method is limited in that it does not rehash for the reader a narrative of existentialism, which, while entertaining reading, is often burdened or dominated by the controversial identities and positions of its members from Kierkegaard on through Nietzsche and the German and French existentialists. My aim is to revive this marginalized philosophy through the lens of rhetoric; my hope is that the research and ideas generated in this study challenge some of the accepted beliefs about both existentialism and rhetoric. Since most existentialists concentrate in great detail about

communication, I consider it belonging to the discipline of rhetoric, not philosophy. By adapting this, however, rhetoric is changed anew.

## CHAPTER ONE: EXISTENTIALISM AS A NEO-SOPHISTICAL RHETORICAL ORIENTATION

“[E]xistentialism sends us back to the muck and mire  
of the contingency of human existence;  
like rhetoric, it earns its living there.”

- Michael J. Hyde, “Existentialism” (246)

One of the few contemporary writers who has taken the legacy of existentialism seriously is the recently passed Norman Mailer. A chapter of his 2006 book, The Big Empty, is entitled “Existentialism—Does It Have a Future?” The mercurial novelist suggests that one of the movements founders, Jean-Paul Sartre, “derailed” it by virtue of his professed atheism—godlessness, it is averred, “deprived existentialism of more interesting explorations” (203-4). Mailer voices this concern as early as 1959, expressing dismay over existentialism’s lack of a clearly defined telos: “To be a real existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary) one must be religious; one must have one’s sense of ‘purpose’—whatever the purpose may be” (“The White Negro” 214). Then as now, as his chapter title presages, Mailer hopes to rehabilitate existenz philosophy. To do so, he recommends conceiving God anew—as divorced from the “gargantuan oxymoron” that God is All-Good and All-Powerful: “If existentialism is to flourish (that is, develop through a series of new philosophies building on earlier premises), it needs a God who is no more confident of the end than we are [...] For the end is not written. If it is, there’s no place for existentialism” (Big Empty 205-6). While the claim is accurate in capturing the basis of existentialism’s understanding of life as unfolding without any a priori determinisms, it implicates a correspondence to rhetorical inquiry ranging as far back as Isocrates, who said: “I think it clear to all that it is not in our nature to know in advance what is going to happen” (“Against the Sophists” 2). Neither God nor humans, that is, possess any assurances or knowledge about the future. As such, existentialism should not seek to develop new

metaphysical, philosophical, or spiritual doctrines, as Mailer suggests, but rather ground itself in rhetorical theory. God can retain His perfection (or absence) in Truth, whatever that may be; the interrogative purpose of existentialism Mailer attempts to clarify could more profitably be sought by examining humans, with their propensity for symbolic action and rhetoric, as vehicles driving toward an end that is not yet written and deprived of any a priori certainty. This underscores the warrant sanctioning rhetorical inquiry and existentialism suits it notably well. It is not God who is imperfect; it is the inter-human creation and exchange of meaning that is an ultimately fallible enterprise. As Karl Jaspers writes, “Life, being essentially imperfect, and, as we know, intolerable, is continually seeking to re-fashion the life-order under new forms” (Man in the Modern Age 71). Rhetoric is the result of this imperfection of which Jaspers refers. Existentialism might benefit, then, from a rhetorical framework in order to develop a more effectual means by which to galvanize its corpus and sustain its viability.

My contention is that Mailer’s conception of an imperfect God is a misguided attempt to reorient existentialism. To begin with, Sartre, while a professed atheist, considers existentialism above all “a doctrine of action” concerned with the ensuing responsibility entailed in the freedom of human interaction, not the positing this way or that of metaphysical truths or an excursus “exhaust[ing] itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God” (“Existentialism and Humanism” 46). Elsewhere Sartre acknowledges the Christian spirituality of Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers and the atheism of Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus as being compatible to existentialism (to which can be added the Christian spirituality of Soren Kierkegaard, the Judaism of Martin Buber, the agnosticism of Miguel de Unamuno, and the atheism of Simone de Beauvoir) (27). In light of the spiritual diversity among its thinkers, I shall argue it is a rhetorical orientation that binds them together—one that affords pious spirituality as much as free-thinking. While Mailer’s recognition of the marginalization of existentialism is accurate, I engage it from a

different perspective in order to encourage a heuristic renewal. The discipline of rhetoric, no stranger to marginalization since the time of Plato, offers an appropriate bedfellow to the challenge: their mutual castigation aside, the major works of existentialism cultivate a rhetoric that grounds communication as the ontological basis for human being. Exploring this relationship confirms and expands upon Richard Weaver's suggestion that rhetoric's "topic matter is existential"—"it must deal with the world, the thickness, stubbornness, and power of it" (Language is Sermonic 216, 206). Rhetoric benefits from examining existentialism in such a manner because the latter effectively articulates and revives a rhetorical worldview that captures the perspective of the Greek Sophists, most of whose work is either not extant or severely attenuated by a history of rhetoric inquiry grounded in Plato and Aristotle.

Existentialism inhabits the spatial absence of a genuine rhetorical orientation following Plato's sophistic critique of rhetoric—a lacuna Aristotle and many rhetoricians, who characterize rhetoric as a *technê* of oral, written, and visual persuasion, have not adequately addressed. Since sophistic rhetoric is interested in exploiting "the radical novelty of an ever unfolding present" (Poulakos, Sophistical Rhetoric 190) and existentialism requires an investigation into the "process and the choice of possible action" (Jaspers, Man in the Modern Age 159), a neo-sophistic model of rhetoric develops. In the argument that follows, rhetoric is first advanced as a defining characteristic of the human life-world, not as a branch of epistemology interested in mere persuasion. An examination of the sophistic movement incorporating existentialism is next offered as a way to bridge the latter with rhetoric. I then tease out the attributes of existentialism as an ontological rhetoric and demonstrate how the existentialist preoccupation with freedom dovetails as a clearing for interrogating the creation and exchange of meaning. I conclude this chapter by presenting the resistance to such an orientation that amounts to what I call the Platonic Trap.

## The Movement of Rhetoric

Enfolding existentialism within rhetorical inquiry must first delineate what is meant by rhetoric as a discipline or study. Definitions of rhetoric abound, but scant attention is paid to how a definition of rhetoric is formed. This chapter suggests rhetoric should be considered as a defining *condition* rather than be tied down to a definable *quality*. I offer rhetorical inquiry as a two-part movement that establishes itself ontologically and then transitions to a the creation or evaluation of efficacious discourse. Rhetoric first proceeds by ontologically locating radically contingent situations where beings create and struggle over meaning through the deployment and exchange of symbols. It speaks to the pervasive tension of human relations inherent to beings who necessarily rely on symbol-usage. As Schrag observes, “Rhetoric is the interaction of self and other in dialogue and public encounter,” not limited to argument as a technique but “encompass[ing] the aesthetical, ethical, and social practices of mankind” (“Rhetoric Situated” 170-173). While we find, for instance, twenty-four definitions of rhetoric on the American Rhetoric website, it might be worthwhile to invert rhetoric such that it is not we, as humans, who define rhetoric, but it is we, as humans, who are defined *by* rhetoric. Before clarifying a working definition of rhetoric, there is a need to identify a rhetorical consciousness that permeates the human life-word—recognizing, that is, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr.’s assertion, “To be human, then, is to practice rhetoric” (“From Philosophy to Rhetoric” 58). Rhetoric is the intersection of an ontological relationship between humans and communication in which the malleable properties of language—when deployed, received, and returned—conceive a human life-world that amounts to a rhetorical orientation. As Kenneth Burke writes, “Much of what has been attributed to *rhetoric in particular* is more appropriately attributed to *language in general*” (“Dramatism and Logology” 92). The two are not mutually exclusive, however, and should not be bifurcated as such. While thinkers such as Burke and Schrag have distinguished between the ontological

and epistemological functions of rhetoric, the transitional movement from one to the other should be emphasized. Our very being, as humans, is rhetorically inscribed.

Only *after* having established rhetoric as an existential framework of intersubjective meaning can it—or should it—be pursued as a *technê* of persuasive communication leading to epistemological certainty or teleological change. My contention is that before assessing rhetorical theory, analyzing communicative acts, or teaching rhetorical inquiry, one must furnish a rhetorical world-view that addresses how and why humans rely on communication. Hans Blumenberg illustrates this ontological component: “Rhetoric is an ‘art’ because it is an epitome of difficulties with reality, and reality has been pre-understood, in our tradition, primarily as ‘nature’” (454). Rhetoric thus begins as an ontological perspective prior to any development of its methods and practice. The significance of creating, delivering, and analyzing the situational efficacy of discourse grows out of recognizing the communicative resources that govern the human life-world. According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “Persuasion is [only] possible because men create meaning, because language itself is a motivating force, and because language may be used both to modify man’s basic needs and to influence his symbolically created social and cultural motives” (“Ontological Foundations” 104). It is both necessarily anthropomorphic and intrinsically existentialist in scope because the communicative dynamic inherent to human life creates the very means with which to examine existence. The existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty declares, for instance, “speech inaugurated a new world” and that we “must pay a price for understanding language” (Prose of the World 42-3). “Rhetoric,” Burke likewise asserts in A Rhetoric of Motives, “is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall” (23). Rhetoric initially presents itself as the perforce recognition of this cost of admission to human existence, and, with it, a confrontation with the gaps, imperfections, and messiness that the aptitude for symbolic exchange augurs. Humans are rendered scattershot across Earth and start out with only the

faculty of communicative resources at our disposal to negotiate life with one another. Because these resources are inherently limited and never teleologically completed between persons, this represents, for Jaspers, “the perpetual insufficiency of communication,” and it requires a will to have a genuine awareness of such difficulty (Philosophy 92). A consideration of rhetorical address ensues only subsequent to addressing rhetoric as a fallible coefficient of the human life-world. Existentialism assists in articulating and clarifying rhetoric’s metaphysical condition.

As opposed to asserting a definable rhetoric as a quality of discourse, conceiving rhetoric as a defining characteristic of human experience resituates how a rhetorical situation should be considered. Considering the work of Lloyd Bitzer is instructive here: defining rhetorical activity as a method of response, he writes that an exigence arises that invites utterance and the conditions of a situation dictate how a rhetor creates and presents a discourse to a public. An immediate audience is specified within the rhetorical situation, “consist[ing] only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (8). Bitzer’s characterization of the rhetorical situation can be reduced, however, to an ontological condition. While Bitzer narrows rhetoric down to where historical uncertainty is present, existence itself, for all individuals, carries with it uncertainty and an exigence that demands communicative acts to foster action. “The individual is a fact of existence,” writes Martin Buber, “insofar as he steps into a living relation with other individuals” (Between Man and Man 202). Humans always already respond to their experiences through the creation and exchange of meaning, which is continually situated; therefore, the rhetorical situation must broaden to encompass all communicative activity. Existentialism helps galvanize a rhetoric of the everyday, then. It includes all intersubjective social actions. As Jaspers writes, “in existence I am always in a particular situation [with others]” (Philosophy 183). Humans, he adds, are always “traversing the possibilities of action in every direction in the historic world,” not just historically renowned



actors who instigate change when uncertainty arises (317). Rhetoric should not be restricted to grand historical moments, as Bitzer would have it, for all existents are capable—necessarily so—of communication and action. Since human existence is, in and of itself, provisional, uncertain, and fraught with complications, rhetoric operates interpersonally as well as within publics and between publics. Schrag confirms this by suggesting the following: “Communication, in its variegated postures, is a performance within the *topos* of human affairs and dealings that comprise our social world” (Communicative Praxis 22). He intimates that rhetoric cannot be limited to only those situations which require argumentative discourse to move publics teleologically. Rather, rhetoric presages the a priori condition of human intersubjectivity—that is, the relationship between being and meaning for existents that leads to action. Robert L. Scott also reverses the order of the inquiry mapped out by Bitzer: “[R]hetoric may be the art of persuasion, that is, it may be seen from one angle as a practical capacity to find means to ends on specific occasions; but it must also be seen more broadly as a human potentiality to understand the human condition” (266). Seen here, Bitzer helps describe how rhetoric operates as public address, yet he privileges the epistemological and historical functions of rhetoric rather than exploring the ontological and existentialist foundations. The latter, however, should precede the former in rhetorical inquiry. Doing so creates a more pointed significance: rhetoric is not just the concern with the efficacy of discourse that addresses publics, but first and foremost a grounding of how beings create meaning and initiate action in manifest tension. This framing is typically ignored or merely tacit in its acceptance. Existentialism, though, continually stresses this radically contingent rhetorical orientation to the world.

These two aspects of rhetoric are not forked prongs but a movement or transition from the ontological to teleological. In her work on Buber, Jeanine Czubaroff recognizes an existential-ontological orientation of “dialogical rhetoric” that contrasts the commonly held

pragmatic-epistemological view of “instrumental rhetoric,” which is concerned with persuasion. While the latter is appropriated “to define situations, to resolve problems, [and] to achieve specific goals,” the former is invoked “to acknowledge and respond to the address of the other in the light of her own experienced truth” (174). Czubaroff presents dialogical and instrumental rhetorics as competing forms of discourse, yet her descriptions of dialogical rhetoric, apart from the above definition, betokens an a priori conditional aspect of rhetoric. They should not be paired side by side but expressed as a movement: rhetoric as ontological grounding → rhetoric as suasive discourse toward a telos. As Buber writes, “for in actuality speech does not abide in man [*sic*], but man takes his stand in speech and talks from there” (I and Thou 49). Before creating or examining discourse that a being addresses to other beings, it is vital to first address the function of discourse as a singularly human orientation between beings themselves. Czubaroff captures this by suggesting that by “grasp[ing] the existential implication is to move to an ontological rhetoric” and that “within Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, not only is each human being involved in a two-fold ontological movement, each individual finds her or himself in a concrete, particular biographical-historical situation—bound to a particular time, place, and society” (171). The emphasis sought here, though, is to recognize and privilege the *transition*. The ontological prism of rhetoric sanctions its later role as a *technê*.

### The Sophistical Orientation of Rhetoric

This ontological and existentialist grounding of rhetoric, which locates the deployment and exchange of symbols, communication, as a defining characteristic of human existence, subtly courses through the history of rhetorical theory. Its genesis hearkens back to the sophists, whose work responds not only to the rise of the middle-class in the democratic formation of Ancient Greece, but the evolution from a theocentric worldview, where gods dictate human causality, to an anthropomorphic worldview, where action is dependent upon re-action(s) to the

exchange of discourse. Unlike philosophers of the time such as Plato, the sophists, according to W.K.C. Guthrie, “were rather teachers, lecturers and public speakers whose aim was to influence their own age rather than to be read by posterity” (53). While they are often characterized by their purported mercenary status as teachers-for-hire—a not illegitimate concern—the sophists can also be held up as encouraging oratory in the democratic formation of Greek city-states and articulating the ontological grounding of communication. This latter contribution is often overlooked and underscores the vital first step in conceiving rhetoric as a discipline. Considered here, rhetoric begins as a foundation of the terms of human existence: endowed with communicative resources, existents create, exchange, and re-act to one another through imperfect media. This is a current that courses through sophistic rhetoric—not the rhetorical notion of contingency that refers only to the influence of a particular speech act in a given situation but a view of language and communication as the defining characteristic of human existence. While this conception of contingency could be considered radical, for the sophists—and for the holistic view of rhetoric posited here—it is *fundamental*. As Jacqueline de Romilly writes, “[The sophists] were the first to try to think of the world and life purely in terms of human beings” (238). The extant works of the sophists cohere to advance that we, as humans, are who we are and do the things that we do because of how and what we speak (through the exchange of symbols, the tension of meaning, and the movement toward action).

Tethering the sophists by this rhetorical orientation of contingency helps examine them together in a consistent framework—the works of Protagoras, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus, in particular. Edward Schiappa warns against such a method insofar as sophists “ought to be examined as individuals” because “a specific sophistic view proper of rhetoric cannot yet be identified with confidence” (12, 198). In his debate with John Poulakos, who codifies a sophistic *technê* of rhetoric, Schiappa allows that “a more favorable verdict is possible” if the sophistic

“argument is amended and viewed as an effort toward an existentialist, neosophistic theory of rhetoric” (76). Poulakos hints at but does not emphasize the ontological basis of the sophists’ rhetorical orientation. While he thinks the objective of a rhetorician is to “resolve [our] existential dilemma[s]” (“Toward a Sophistic Definition” 43), Poulakos ultimately reduces sophistic rhetoric to a communicative strategy that is concerned with the opportune moment, the playfulness of discourse, and moving publics toward that which is possible (Sophistical Rhetoric 192). Poulakos, that is, finds the rhetorical practice of the sophists as ontological, not the ideas they generated about the function(s) and significance of communication. Schiappa, by contrast, disagrees with any conception of a totalizing *technê* of sophistic rhetoric. In his individual study of Protagoras, Schiappa finds him to have “conceptualized the scope and function of *logos* in a way that, in retrospect, can be identified as an incipient philosophy of rhetoric” (198). While accepting Schiappa’s concern about galvanizing the respective *technê* of the sophists, Protagoras shares this incipient philosophy of rhetoric with Gorgias, Thrasymachus, and the anonymous author of the Dissoi Logoi. Sophists should be evaluated not by the development and organization of rhetorical treatises but rather their rhetorical worldview, a marked distinction from rhetoric based in the Aristotelian tradition. Galvanizing a sophistic worldview of rhetoric does not constitute, as Schiappa critiques Poulakos, a “historical reconstruction” of “selective interpretation” (70-81), either; by privileging the ontological dynamic of communication, it enlists rhetoric as the primary means with which to negotiate the contingencies of human existence. Like the existentialists, sophists expose the fragile and imperfect resources humans are equipped with to deal with the contingencies of experience.

There are no extant writings or passages from Protagoras, only fragments and ideas attributed to him. Two in particular stand out as providing the existentialist conception of a rhetorical worldview sought here. In Against the Schoolmasters, Sextus quotes Protagoras as

follows: “Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not” (Older Sophists 18). Another version of the passage is found in Hermias’ Pagan Philosophers Defended: “Man is the standard and judge of things, and whatever comes before the sense is a thing, but that which does not is not among the forms of being” (Older Sophists 10). Plato treated this statement with derision, having Socrates comment in the Theaetetus, “I found the beginning of his treatise surprising—the fact that he [Protagoras] didn’t begin his *Truth* by saying that the measure of all things is a pig, or a baboon, or some other creature that has perception” (161c). Plato betrays his misinterpretation, however, by begging the question: Protagoras never purports to advance a Truth in his statement. Protagoras merely emphasizes the primary significance of how humans are responsible beings who always create their *own* meaning (together) and are accountable to evaluate, judge, and respond to it themselves. While Truth underscores the investigative quest of philosophy and theology into the meaning *of* life, the rhetorical orientation advanced by Protagoras concerns itself with the meaning *in* life. Protagoras distrusts inquiry that resides outside the human scope of the forms of being; as a teacher of rhetoric, he is interested in assessing the things that are in a human purview and the transformation of the things that are into the things that could be from a practical, or pragmatic, standpoint. As Poulakos describes sophistic rhetoric, it is “the desire to be other, the wish to move from the sphere of actuality to that of possibility” (“Toward a Sophistic Definition” 46). Poulakos captures here the rhetorical orientation of the sophists, not their organizational *technê*. This worldview is reinforced by the other quote attributed to Protagoras (via Sextus): “Concerning the gods I am unable to say whether they exist or what they are like, for there are many things that hinder me” (Older Sophists 10). The focus is not to *prove* that the gods do not exist, but to extricate humans from relying on the divine realm to foster and

complete action. The burden is re-turned to humans. Thus rhetoric both instigates action *and* signals the awesome responsibility thrust upon human beings.

Human inquiry begins with the examination of how we, as existents, are beholden and defined by the communicative process in which we create and exchange meaning so as to actualize our motives. As Thrasymachus is quoted in The Constitution from Dionysius of Halicarnassus,

since our fortune has reserved us for this later time, in which we submit to <the government of> our city <by others> but <bear> its misfortunes ourselves, and of these the greatest are the work neither of gods nor of chance but of the administration [of persons], one really has to speak. (Older Sophists 90)

Elsewhere Thrasymachus declares “that the gods take no notice of human affairs” (93), which emphasizes the recognition of how humans are responsible for their action. Thrasymachus is not adducing a formal treatise on atheism so much as bestowing accountability on humans—as divorced from the whims of the gods. The anonymous sophistic author of the Dissoi Logoi also intimates as much: “all forms of speech have for their subject matter everything that <exists>” (Older Sophists 292). While the sophists are known primarily as teachers and speakers for hire in the public sphere, they also establish a lasting rhetorical orientation where humans understand themselves by first divorcing casual action from the provenance of the gods and restoring responsibility, via language and speech, to humans.

Many different theories about the nature and practice of rhetoric have ensued since, but this undercurrent of a rhetorical orientation of experience, based on the ontological premises of communication, can be detected elsewhere. For Isocrates, speaking in the “Antidosis”, the deployment of language and symbols are what distinguish humans from other organisms. As a result, rhetoric is a gift and hope that communication affords humans-as-existents:

For in our other faculties, as I said earlier, we do not differ from other living beings, and in fact we are inferior to many in speed, strength, and other resources. But since we have the ability to persuade one another and make clear to ourselves what we want, not only do we avoid living like animals, but we have come together, built cities, made laws, and invented arts. Speech is responsible for nearly all our inventions [...] If one must summarize the power of discourse, we will discover that nothing done prudently occurs without speech, that speech is the leader of all thoughts and actions. (Isocrates 254-7)

Just as communicative speech—or symbolic action, in the words of Kenneth Burke—eliminates the superhuman relationship with the gods, it also distinguishes humans from other living organisms of nature. Rhetoric thus situates humans on an island where we have only others with which to communicate in order to figure out what it is we are going to do and how it is we are going to do it. It both defines who we are, as symbol-using animals, and describes what we do, as motivated persons who must negotiate our experiences with others.

There is a two-fold function in this ontology of rhetoric. One, humans are imminently *responsible* as a result of our reliance on communicating through symbols, a demonstrably imperfect enterprise. While persons may be held accountable to a god or gods in relation to eternal judgment, humans have free discrimination to exercise practical judgment (*krisis*) in the here and now. Though our agency is eminently problematized by the insufficiency and messiness of the discursive deployment of symbols, it manages to create a breach between humans and the gods. Likewise, we, as humans, are differentiated from other living organisms. This latter theme is taken up by Cicero when referring, in his early work, De Inventione, to our “excellent endowment”: “indeed, it appears to me, that it is on this particular that men, who in many points are weaker and lower than the beasts, are especially superior to them, namely, in being able to

speak” (1.4). While Cicero considers speech as that which distinguishes humans from nature, he still cannot unhinge human reliance on the divine realm. In his treatise, The Nature of the Gods, Cicero declares humans must answer the following “important” question:

are the gods inactive and idle, absenting themselves totally from the supervision and government of the universe, or is the opposite true, that they created and established all things from the beginning, and that they continue to control the world and keep it in motion eternally? Unless a judgment is made between these views, we must inevitably labor under grievous misapprehension, in ignorance of the supreme issues. It is conceivable that, if reverence for the gods is removed, trust and the social bond between men and the uniquely pre-eminent virtue of justice will disappear. (1.2-4)

A rhetoric of existentialism, by contrast, makes its stand where Cicero does not go far enough. While he distinguishes humans from animals by virtue of speech, which demonstrates our humanness, it is imperative to illustrate how, by relying on communication, speech renders humans imperfectly human—that is, marks our distinction from godlike ability. Cicero bifurcates the question of the gods: by demanding a judgment between the gods as absent and the gods as deterministic purveyors of human action, he neglects the possibility of both human responsibility *and* divine judgment. For rhetoric to be established and sustained as a significant form of inquiry, a corollary must be added that highlights the significance of the freedom that the gods afford, namely, that rhetoric signals our governance of existence in the here and now whereas the gods judge and govern the hereafter.

St. Augustine pursues this line of thought by mapping out a disconnect between humans and God. As Burke points out, Augustine’s work merits rhetorical study “because he so clearly points up the relation (or disrelation!) between secular words and the theological Word”



(Rhetoric of Religion 50). In doing so, Augustine breaks through the false dilemma created by Cicero. While asserting “God is unspeakable” and “nothing can be spoken in a way worthy of God,” Augustine maintains how God “has sanctioned the homage of the human voice” (On Christian Teaching [De Doctrina Christiana] 11). Language, communication and rhetoric comprise our ontological gifts as humans but also that which demarcates a perfect God from human imperfection. We have recourse to rhetoric precisely because we are not gods (or angels) ourselves. Whether or not a being believes in a divine Being, meaning *in* life remains both corroborated and substantiated through communicative exchange. For believers, God judges us accordingly; not so for freethinkers, but in either case, rhetoric is necessary for humans-as-existents. As Augustine writes, “Words have gained an altogether dominant role among humans in signifying the ideas conceived by the mind that a person wants to reveal” (31). Rhetoric can be seen as a privilege not only sanctioned but foisted upon human beings. Rhetoric is what we possess to *evaluate* what-is and how that what-is can *become* something else.

To haggle with or protest against rhetoric is an adamant refusal to willingly acknowledge how humans, as social creatures, interact with one another by creating and sharing meaning to bring about action. Plato’s refutations of rhetoric and then, later, his crafting of a true rhetoric is ultimately an exercise in cognitive dissonance—an evasion from recognizing the radical contingency that ensues from the responsibility rhetoric entails. Augustine, meanwhile, is comfortable allowing Truth to exist outside of language—*beyond* language—and that we process what purports to be true through a linguistic prism: “even the divinely given signs contained in the holy scriptures have been communicated to us by the human beings who wrote them” (31). This signals a breach between language and Truth. Weaver echoes Augustine here by stating “until we are in possession of a more complete metaphysics and epistemology,” rhetoric and the human relationship with language must be interrogated, never assumed (Language is Sermonic

223). To extend Weaver's assertion, metaphysical claims are never complete because we use language to communicate them; Augustine recognized this and advocated, in the fourth book of De Doctrina Christiana, that rhetoric be employed, much like scripture, as a testament *to* the Truth. Plato thought rhetoric should be the pure transmission of truth from soul to soul. The difference is subtle yet significant: Augustine positions rhetoric as, at best, a testament *to* God and Truth; Plato attempts to furnish rhetoric *as* the transmission of Truth understood by the gods themselves. To fully grasp this distinction is to position rhetoric as, first, a reflection upon which the conditions of human existence are revealed. The imperfection of communication—the fact that humans necessarily *have to* communicate, not transmute, to one another—problematizes rhetoric as such, yet this problematization is productive in the sense that rhetoric enables a proper analysis of motives and can map out strategies for finding better means in which to foster action. This revelatory function of rhetoric, however, exposes the paucity of assertive metaphysical or scientific claims of Truth.

#### Existentialism as Signaling the Death of God and the Gift of Rhetoric

Existentialism helps satisfy rhetoric's initial step as a discipline, providing a rhetorical worldview that is often neglected in the epistemological constructions that seek to define rhetoric. Rhetoric is necessary only if we, as humans, are imperfect beings who must engage in a struggle over the creation and interpretation of meaning as a gateway to action. Both existentialism and rhetoric demand an ontological worldview based on the tensional properties of communication; each unrepentantly discloses a certain fallibility and tenuousness about the experience of humans-as-existents. According to Jaspers, "Since communication in existence is a process, not something complete, its reality is a sense of being deficient" (Philosophy 66). Rhetoric begins with the recognition of this deficiency, how humans rely on the imperfect exchange of symbols as the means with which to act. The deficiency of communication can

never be completely mastered or expunged, yet it can be negotiated with a more productive facility. Thus rhetoric as form, seen as efficacious or instrumental discourse, follows rhetoric as the primary function of the meaning for human-as-existents *in* life. Rhetoric's long history as a deleterious concept extends beyond its purported basis in falsity and probability and stems, as will be addressed in the discussion of Plato below, from its revelation of the insufficient remainder of how we *must* live with one another. Rhetoric helps divorce us from what Nietzsche refers to as being "chained by the Socratic love of knowledge and the delusion of being able thereby able to heal the eternal wound of existence" (The Birth of Tragedy 109). Yet in doing so, rhetoric starts as a recognition of the possibilities afforded to beings in how they interact. Examining rhetoric as the ontological foundation of communication at once both activates and problematizes agency. As Merleau-Ponty writes, communication "invoke[s] our membership in a common world" where "speech must bring meaning into existence" (141). Rhetoric exists as the resulting tension imbued through our communicative resources.

Tracing this progression of rhetoric from the ontological to the teleological liberates rhetoric from its subordinate role in Western thought, which, as Robert Hariman observes, "begins in the zone of the philosophically unacceptable, as an asylum" (47). Developing a rhetoric of existentialism shifts the burden of explanation to Platonic ontology where philosophical and theological worldviews must account for the meaning created *in* life. "Unfortunately," as Poulakos points out, "too many rhetoricians through the ages lacked the sophistical gumption to 'stand by their story,' and sold out to the mythology of 'True rhetoric'" ("Sophistical Rhetoric" 100). Existentialism, however, resituates the incipient rhetorical perspective established by the sophists. To privilege rhetoric as a discipline of inquiry, existentialism clears a space for which rhetoric is needed—nay, required. This space, or clearing, begins by divorcing God from human affairs beginning with a question of accountability: *how*

are humans responsible for their actions? Whereas the philosophy/theology nexus inquires into whether we, as humans, are responsible, existentialism and rhetoric assume responsibility as a warrant that underscores how persons and publics possess motives and act from the fluid exchange of discourse.

The death of God is the starting point of existentialism—for both spiritual-believers and free-thinkers alike. It also establishes rhetoric as the fundamental resource allotted to humans in order to take up the mantle of responsibility for their actions. God’s symbolic death does not kill God, then, but *activates* an accountability of our communicative exchanges with one another. Thus: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,” exclaims Friedrich Nietzsche’s madman, adding, for emphasis or perhaps effrontery, “There has never been a greater deed” (The Gay Science 181). Now it takes, admittedly, a perverse sort of glee to confidently announce the slaying of the divine Himself and then deem it an act that surpasses all others, but Nietzsche is not just lolling about in the bosom of his usual blasphemous self-satisfaction here. Despite what he declares, neither Nietzsche nor his madman, nor anyone else for that matter, killed God. God, for His part, as Henry Miller writes in his novel, Tropic of Capricorn, “can only become more and more God”—never any less (185). If God *is* God, His existence is not, and could never be, threatened by the paltry speech-act of a mortal. I intentionally refer to Nietzsche’s declaration as paltry because it reveals the imperfection of all speech or symbolic action. Communication is by no means a futile exercise, but it remains, as John Durham Peters writes, a struggle that marks “an index of our fallenness” wherein through communication with others we “find our way back to God” (72). Recognizing this imperfection amounts to answering why Nietzsche’s madman considers God’s death a greater deed than anything hitherto. The death of God is not God’s death but ours—what is killed is our ability, as humans, to communicate with the divine, or divinely communicate in a perfect setting with perfect understanding with one another. Our covenant with

God is not eliminated, but re-framed. Nietzsche's declaration amounts to an awareness that clears the space for an opportunity to recognize and actualize the human condition as a rhetorically-inscribed enterprise. It unleashes the fetters of a rhetorical consciousness that cannot, as Plato would have it in the Phaedrus, please the gods themselves through communicative discourse. For Plato, rhetoric should be approached as "a laborious effort a sensible man will make out not in order to speak and act among human beings, but so as to be able to speak and act in a way that pleases the gods as much as possible" (272d-e). Yet humans, equipped with only the imperfect faculties of language at their disposal, lack the technical wherewithal to reach such a firmament. God, as a corollary to Nietzsche's claim, thus loses the power to negotiate the domain of terrestrial meaning. It would be—it would *have* to be, both figuratively and literally—beneath Him. Our covenant with God is broken insofar as we cannot interact with God or have any precise knowledge of Him.

In contradistinction to abolishing or diminishing the wonder of the divine, Nietzsche elevates its significance by divorcing faith from the yoke of paganism whereat God, or a collection of gods, exercises control over causal action in terrestrial affairs. This awesome responsibility, which manifests itself as a burden, falls squarely on human shoulders and can only be negotiated through rhetoric—the continual creation and projection of the tensional dynamic of meaning *in* life. The conception of religion, according to Ernesto Grassi, as the human "endeavor to construct a 'holy and intact' cosmos" that "springs from the experience of the threat to man being consumed by chaos and thus from the necessity of holding the terrible in check by giving reality a fixed meaning," is no longer tenable (Philosophy as Rhetoric 102). Religion is by no means banished, but its authority, Grassi adds, cannot be "recognized as the possibility for binding humanly defined existence to final, universal, holy reality in order to provide man's uncertain, short-lived constructions with security and permanence" (103). By

qualifying religion as such, the possibility of faith remains. It is activated and enacted by, as Viktor Frankl suggests, divine grace: “Grace, however, dwells in the suprahuman dimension and, therefore, appears on the human plane only as a projection” (Psychotherapy and Existentialism 29). Soren Kierkegaard, a devout believer whose work Karl Jaspers conflates with Nietzsche’s in Reason and Existenz, admits as much by posing a similar conception of faith: “If, namely, the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it. But if he does exist, then it is foolishness to want to demonstrate it” (Philosophical Fragments 39). While Kierkegaard has faith, he admits his standing as “only a poor existing human being who neither eternally nor divinely nor theocentrically is able to observe the eternal but must be content with the existing” (Concluding Unscientific Postscript 212). Thus the death of God as a rhetorical act by no means delegitimizes faith but expresses itself as a challenge to the rhetorical being of beings: can humans acknowledge the imperfection of their communicative resources and, if so, will they accept the responsibility that ensues from such an imperfection?

From this perspective of a uniquely human confrontation with meaning, Nietzsche does not so much speak against God as *for* God in demanding a measure of accountability in Creation of the activities of social beings in their being. Issued forth by a god of an ungodly personage, this directive pitches us into the untamed sea of the radical contingency of experience where only the tenuous buoyancy of rhetoric keeps us afloat, not the philosopher’s advocacy of a totalizing logical equation solved by an Abstract Ideal of the Good or a theologian’s encouragement of finding solace in divine intervention. As Richard Wolin states, “The secularized ontology of existentialism does away with the perfection of the creator, thus separating Being-in-the-world from the (albeit delusory) security of its former ground” (129). So it is not the philosopher who wishes to elevate to godliness or those for whom certainty is provided by a God who assumes the airs of a philosopher that we look to for help in negotiating what amounts to the oceanic tide of

contingency that confronts existence. It is the rhetorician. The death of God turns us away from the philosopher/theologian nexus of asking and finding out the meaning *of* life and subjects us to the tensional dynamic of meaning *in* life—how it, meaning, is created; how it is understood; how it is misunderstood; and how it brings about cooperation and division among persons within and across communities in their concrete historicity. Although writing in regard to the postmodern devaluation of the philosophical subject, Schrag captures this post-Nietzschean fall-out by announcing: “Philosophy dies so that rhetoric can be born” (“Rhetoric Situated” 166).

Would that He exist, God governs Creation by dispensing eternal judgment (always His meaning), not practical judgment (*krisis*), which is always, as individual existents, ours. Whether God’s judgment is allocated through love or condemnation is and can only be the prerogative of God, yet the practical judgment that ensues from the manifold rhetorical situations that arise in existence re-installs and re-inscribes the pervasive tissue of human contingency. Simone de Beauvoir intimates as much in The Ethics of Ambiguity, asserting that humans are “abandoned on the earth” because their acts are definitive, absolute engagements: a human being qua human being “bears the responsibility for a world, which is not the world of a strange power, but of himself [sic], where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well. A God can pardon, efface, and compensate. But if God does not exist, man’s faults are inexpiable” (16). Nietzsche’s eulogy—that the killing of God is a great deed—is a commemoration because it restores to God what is God’s—the Creation and judgmental meaning *of* life—and re-turns human beings to their rightful ownership and responsibility over the creation of meaning *in* life. As Albert Camus writes, “When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain with his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God” (The Rebel 25). The rebel, for Camus, is not an atheistic political revolutionary, but a person “determined on laying claim to a human situation in

which all the answers are human” (21). This responsibility for meaning, a crisis of *krisis* that manifests itself as a singularly human confrontation with being, is not a possessive deed upon whose claim we can mortgage the future with assurance; it suggests a thrownness where beings are suspended in a tensional flux of struggle. It is not an ownership of meaning, then, but a lease, *our* existence as existents, that inheres a rhetorical texture of consciousness wherein connectivity with other consciousnesses is sought through a dispersion of meaning that can never, as a projection to and between others, deliver a finality of equipoise.

Meaning—how it is created, exchanged, and reacted to—never affects a teleological resolution of purification but remains firmly *within* the tensional dynamic of its own process. The will to meaning, Frankl points out, consists of individual existents “encountering other beings and reaching out for meanings to fulfill” in an “ineradicable” tension between being and meaning (Psychotherapy 8-10). If there is, somehow, a meaning *of* life that can be known, it might be expressed as a negotiation of this tensional dynamic of meaning through the gift of rhetoric, a gift that can only be accepted by acknowledging God’s death in governing intersubjective human relations. Rather than *killing* God through declaring His death, Nietzsche’s pronouncement *matures* the relationship humans can have with God, and, most significantly for the rhetorician, *between, to, and with* others. In her dialogue “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” Beauvoir writes of God, “He is; one can say nothing more. The perfection of his being leaves no place for man” (Philosophical Writings 102). But to accept the gift of rhetoric, humans have to accept God’s perfection—just as long as God’s perfection remains perfect in the divine, not human, realm. Beauvoir, then, is misguided insofar as the perfection of God leaves *everything* to humans precisely because it renders us imperfect. What is this imperfection? I call it the gift of rhetoric. What distinguishes this gift from others is the supreme difficulty in accepting it: for Hyde, rhetoric must be accepted in that “we are called upon to face our



possibilities with anticipation, to assume the responsibility of affirming our freedom through resolute choice, and thus to become consciously/willingly/personally (i.e., authentically) involved in the re-creation of a meaningful existence” (“Call” 378). Acknowledging the death of God inaugurates the gift of rhetoric and activates a thrownness into the complications of symbolic exchange.

### Freedom as Being Condemned to Rhetoric

The gift of rhetoric is a consequence of the freedom from the loss of God’s power to coerce and dictate human action. Human responsibility is restored through a careful examination of how communication motivates persons and publics to incite action. Erich Fromm emphasizes the importance of understanding freedom as a function of existence whereby freedom is not understood as a *freedom-to* but a *freedom-from*—“namely, freedom from the instinctual determination of [human] actions” (31). As with rhetoric, Fromm considers freedom an “ambiguous gift” (32). It begins with the human choice to pursue action, complicated, as it is, by the opportunities of communication. While Fromm is not an existentialist, by stressing *freedom-from* as opposed to *freedom-to*, he captures the orientation where existentialist conceptions of freedom begin. While existentialists decline to address rhetoric specifically in their discussions of freedom, they evince a rhetorical condition of existence. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, considers the death of God as a clearing for freedom and, by extending Nietzsche’s announcement, suggests, as humans, “We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free” (“Existentialism and Humanism” 32). Sartre’s discussion of freedom is not political but ontological. Freedom is not an objective thing that is possessed or suppressed but a condition that humans, as existents, confront as a challenge.

The complications and reservations that have ensued in rhetorical scholarship about Sartre’s articulation and deployment of freedom will be addressed in a later chapter, but it is vital

to establish here that Sartrean freedom is not a teleological gift of liberation where, once delivered into freedom, a grand unity can or will commence. As with Fromm, freedom is an expressive consideration of the condition of existence. Humans, Sartre continually insists, are *condemned* to freedom. In Being and Nothingness, he writes how an individual's freedom is not an essential property of the self but a texture of dynamic presence[-ing] that throws the self "perpetually in[to] question" (566). Above all, freedom, for Sartre, augurs a "plenitude of contingency at the heart of which is itself contingency" (653). The benefit of this condemnation of freedom is the possibility, for the self, of a choice in a given situation—the self's engagement in communicating and acting with others in the plenitude of contingency that saturates existence. It allows for judgment and action, the concomitant ingredients for rhetoric. In The Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle writes: "The origin of action—its efficient, not its final cause—is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end [...] for no one *deliberates* but about what is future and capable of being otherwise" (6.2). For rhetoric, then, freedom flourishes only insofar as it is recognized as a function of responsibility. According to Weaver, "Unless we accept some philosophical interpretation, such as the proposition that freedom consists only in the discharge of responsibility, there seems no possibility of a correlation between the use of the word and circumstantial reality" (The Ethics of Rhetoric 228). While Weaver is somewhat casual in his articulation, he touches upon what needs to be more acutely focused: humans-as-existents are free but, as a result, are ultimately responsible for their actions. We act because we choose, and we choose insofar that we engage in communication with others to decide whither and what to choose. Choice is itself a fundamental ingredient necessary for rhetorical action. As Farrell writes, "The first aim of rhetoric is thus to reflect upon its own inventional regions of choice, in light of the fluctuating potentials of human nature" ("The Tradition of Rhetoric" 175). This ability to choose is, however, continually complicated, problematized, and threatened: "By the

sole fact that our choice is absolute, it is *fragile*; that is, by positing our freedom by means of it, we posit by the same stroke the perpetual possibility that the choice may be a ‘here and now’ which has been made-past in the interests of a ‘beyond’ which I shall be” (Being and Nothingness 598). Sartre expresses freedom as the recognition of the absolute contingency of existence through which a recovery of choice and the (re-)enactment of agency can make itself manifest. There is, then, a rhetorical scope to the conception of how choice confers the freedom of action in the work of Sartre. Finding the free-will/determinism debate a red herring for philosophers, Sartre poses the concept of action as the first condition of freedom (559). Given this privileging of contingency, choice and action in his conceptual sketch of freedom, it is curious that Sartre neglected rhetoric as the fundamental theme of his development of existentialism.

While curious, this lack should come as no surprise. No explicit mention of rhetoric in Sartre’s extensive corpus of work speaks to the power of Plato’s ghost, whose reduction of rhetoric to mere flattery haunts both philosophical and rhetorical inquiry. Galvanizing the work of Sartre and other existentialists to a more coherent, heuristic understanding would require an organization of the themes of existentialism by means of a rhetorical scope rather than the construction of a consistent philosophical system. Concerned with the ontological intersections of discourse, agency, and action in the fundamental contingency of life, existentialists were preoccupied with concepts of rhetoric, they *just weren’t aware of it and therefore did not speak of it*. The existentialists’ lack of familiarity with rhetoric is by no means exclusive to Sartre, either, and should by no means intimidate rhetorical inquiry, which I believe it has. As Hyde, one of the few rhetorical scholars who engages existentialism, indicates in his essay, “Existentialism as the Basis for the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric,” “Despite its rather uneducated view of the art of rhetoric, existentialism reveals itself to be a major source of legitimation for the art” (246).

Perhaps the closest any existentialist came toward considering rhetoric as the warrant that underscores existenz philosophy is found in the conclusion of Miguel de Unamuno's Tragic Sense of Life. Reflecting on the wandering discursivity of his text, Unamuno anticipates "all this commentary of mine [to be accused as] nothing but rhetoric" and whose "divagations will provoke [others] to exclaim, 'Rhetoric, rhetoric, rhetoric! [by those who] would appear to think that virtue is the fruit of knowledge, or rational study, and that even mathematics helps us to be better men'" (286, 292). Unamuno, perhaps by accident, acutely encapsulates the affinity of what both existentialism and rhetorical theory admit to *not* being able to accomplish in contradistinction to philosophy and theology: "[a] catalogu[-ing] [of] the universe, so that it may be handed back to God in order" (308). Where the latter fields of inquiry concern themselves with providing ultimate descriptions so as to deliver a teleological unity of the meaning *of* existence, the former enjoins inquiry to grapple with the creation and struggle over the vortex of meaning inscribed *in* existence. As Ernesto Grassi writes, "The problems of rhetoric hereby apply not merely to a special sphere of human existence but to every human activity and method of action" (Rhetoric as Philosophy 50). This conception of rhetorical inquiry, Grassi adds, takes on an "existential significance." Whereas theology searches for inscriptions of God's meaning in existence and philosophy, beginning with Plato,<sup>1</sup> attempts to elevate communicative meaning to approach a divine sphere of understanding, the existentialist and the rhetorician look to interrogate the saturation of meaning created and struggled over in the forum of existence (that God, would that He exist, provides).

By conflating existentialism and rhetoric and accepting Sartre's condemnation of freedom as a singular human potentiality to negotiate the meaning that is created and struggled over in existence, re-positioning Sartre's articulation of freedom might make it more palatable for rhetorical scholars who express discomfiture with the term.<sup>2</sup> I put forward that, as beings

confronted with a radical sense of contingency and equipped with only symbolic action to negotiate experience, humans are *condemned* to rhetoric. Condemning ourselves to rhetoric is but the first step to better recognize and more profitably actualize the contingency of our human, all-too-human situations. Doing so rejects a retreat into either a carapace of idealized abstractions or a neat utilitarian calculus; it privileges an interrogation of the creation and location of meaning inherent to the challenge of communication. God *is* dead for humans-as-existents, yet we continue to sin before godliness with humility through the imperfection of our communicative resources. Sin, in fact, expresses the challenge of communication itself, that is, encountering others in the deployment of language and the texture of meaning that is both invented and received. Conceived existentially, rhetorically situated beings can freely accept either God or the absence of God but must focus, significantly, on the intersubjective processes by which humans-as-existents communicate so as to foster action.

Condemning ourselves to rhetoric does not condemn rhetoric as such. The existentialist articulation of freedom liberates rhetoric and enables humans to sin before others, not only God, with humility. As Beauvoir writes, “For a freedom wills itself genuinely only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the freedom of others” (*Ethics* 90). Moreover, “to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom” (91). This freedom, which necessitates projecting the self toward others with humility, can only be commiserated through a communicative rhetoric that acknowledges the a priori impossibility of a perfected unity of understanding. Meaning is created through communication, not transmission. Peters captures this distinction by offering a description of the impregnable but ultimately impossible coefficient of discursive collaboration: “This means, at best, communication is a dance of differences, not a junction of spirits”; it is “subject to the

interruptions of contingency”; and it is “the name for those practices that compensate for the fact that we can never be each other” (65, 167, 268). Peters, however, does not accept condemning ourselves to rhetoric. He attempts to extradite the failure of communication by advocating the pressing of the flesh as recompense for the disruptions and gaps that inevitably arise in the communication exchange. While the diagnostics of Peters help more accurately describe the attributes of communicative exchange, his proposal is an evasion *from* the tensional flux of discourse whereas a rhetorically grounded, existentialist understanding of freedom evinces a thrownness *into* the dynamic struggle of meaning. As Grassi writes, humans are “always [rhetorically] situated and must meet claims made upon [them] in the ‘here’ and ‘now’” (“Remarks” 128). It is thus not through the pressing of the flesh that humans are redeemed but rather by the grounding of rhetoric as an interrogation of how we negotiate this freedom of contingency.

Freedom can be expressed as the interactive tension that arises between beings and meaning in existence. As Sartre writes, it “ought not to be envisaged as a metaphysical endowment of human ‘nature’” (What Is Literature? 264), but be recognized as the opportunity to adapt to the contingencies of life. Freedom as such is necessarily rhetorical in scope because it requires consciousness to operationalize the communicative resources that humans possess in the manifold circumstances that existence affords for each individual in his or her relation with others. In The Gay Science, Nietzsche writes of consciousness as “really only a net of communication between human beings; it is only as such that it had to develop; a solitary human being who lived like a beast of prey would not have needed it” (298). A rhetorical consciousness, or the ability to be conscious of the freedom that rhetoric entails in existence, also carries the burden of imperfect communication, which suggests that meaning must be always be created, negotiated, and struggled over. That is, it can never be completed, purified, or transmuted—not

even by a sense or understanding of Truth. Three assumptions are made in asserting this: first, God, who may very well have created the grounds and/or possibility of human existence, does not actively govern or influence the social realm of beings; second, we as humans lack the communicative resources of angels, who can perfectly communicate; and third, we as humans do not possess the ability to telekinetically create social meaning. By making these assumptions, I do not here deny the possibility or reality of Truth—be it of the philosophical, scientific or theological variety. They comprise the warrant of an argument that suggests Truth qua Truth cannot be accessed or ascertained by the deployment of language, communication, which is, from the start, a wholly imperfect enterprise.

#### Truth as a Function of Communication

Truth, in order to be Truth, would necessarily have to divorce itself from language. It could not be dragged down by the complications and messiness of not just language itself, but the fallible media with which it is communicated. Truth *is* Truth or it *is not* Truth. Despite human efforts, language affords no prehensile ability to corral Truth. In his essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” Nietzsche recognizes truth as, at best—or most efficaciously—the recognition of a “form of tautology” (1173). The question of Truth and its resulting distinction from language, however, retains the possibility of Truth. Just as St. Augustine was comfortable with the division between words and things, formulating a faith in truth based on belief, Kierkegaard addresses this by expressing his own personal religious Christian Truth yet admitting the sheer incapacity of communicating it to others: “one person can communicate [Truth] to another, but, please note, not in such a way that the other believes it; whereas, if he communicates it in the form of faith, he does his very best to prevent the other from adopting it directly” (Philosophical Fragments 103). Truth, then, maintains itself as eternal Truth, but only through manifestation, not communication. Elsewhere Kierkegaard writes: “for in the world of

time God and I cannot talk with each other, we have no language in common” (Fear and Trembling 35). We are, as human beings, endowed with the faculties of language, communication, and rhetoric. None of these refute Truth but interrogating them as such admits to lacking the proper resources with which to define, see, and share Truth epistemologically. Despite Plato’s sincere desire, humans cannot communicate through a transmission of Truth from soul to soul. Communication, as the Jaspers quote above demonstrates, signals a certain deficiency from its reliance on language; as such, it inhibits methods of inquiry that purport to claim or discover Truth. But precisely owing to this imperfection we, as humans, have freedom—and because we have freedom, we have rhetoric. “In this sense, freedom might appear to be a curse; it *is* a curse,” writes Sartre. “But it is also the sole source of human greatness” (264). Sartre ushers in a worldview, an orientation, of freedom, but what he and other existentialists fail to offer was a means by which this freedom could be negotiated. Existentialism thus satisfies the initial ontological grounding of rhetoric, but does not emphasize the necessary transition that compensates this negotiation, which amounts to an explicit instrumental rhetoric.

Existentialism has fallen into disrepute because its thinkers establish an ontologically-situated worldview unique to philosophical-system building yet do not consistently or effectively provide any profitable methods to traverse it. On the one hand, existentialism is distrusted for its radical conception of the contingency of existence and its potential for descending into complete relativism; on the other, some harbor suspicions because of its loose interpretation of subjectivity. The historically brief rise and fall of existentialism is not altogether different than the treatment of rhetoric as a discipline over the past 2,500 years. The same qualifying concerns plague both and must be addressed in a more satisfactory manner. Their alliance, while natural, more significantly should be seen as complimentary. It *must* be. In a world where Truth itself



*exists* or *does not exist* in a non-discursive space apart from symbolic exchange, rhetorical inquiry is itself the most constructive means with which to negotiate the ontologically-inscribed situation that existentialism propounds. Rhetoric and existentialism gainfully engage one another in that the latter assists the former in responding to the charges of relativism evinced by philosophy beginning with Plato. Rhetoric buttresses existentialism by providing a practical frame from which to adapt in such an ontological worldview.

### The Platonic Trap

To once more emphasize the qualification above, the condemnation *to* rhetoric espoused here is not, as Plato would have it, a condemnation *of* rhetoric. It is a perspective that observes the tissue of human relations as beholden to the offices of rhetoric. Through rhetoric we, as human existents, find a more supple appreciation for, and a more enhanced ability of, how to assume our responsibilities as the creators and interrogators of meaning *in* life. Conversely, the Platonic Trap is characterized by a recourse to abstract idealism and an evasion from not only the contingent circumstances that confound human experience, but the inherent problematization of the necessary communicative efforts that ensue between beings. When deployed, language is always directional—even in situations where discourse is offered in order to re-confirm something. Yet the Platonic Trap is the complete and utter denial of the complications which the process of communication augurs.

In his dialogues, Plato maieutically works through his mentor, Socrates, having the latter reject any breach between the transmission of content between souls. Content here is taken as what purports to be the truth: “Won’t someone who is to speak well and nobly,” Socrates asks in the Phaedrus, “have to have in mind the truth about the subject he is going to discuss?” (259e). Later Socrates advises that when composing a speech, “First, you must know the truth concerning everything you are speaking or writing about [...] Second, you must understand the

nature of the soul” (277b). Such question-and-answer play rigs the game by presuming that Truth is a quality that existents can possess and then confer onto other existents. As discussed above in the Nietzschean corollary, Truth, if *Truth*, simply exists (*is* or *is not*); Truth cannot be acquired through language as such, let alone delivered on a platter. Plato’s efforts to capture and transmute Truth<sup>3</sup> thus amount to an evasion *from* our complicated, problematized, and ultimately fallible human-ness. The imperfection implied here is by no means tragic, though, for rhetoric provides the means with which to negotiate such conditions—notice, however, that rhetoric does not purport to teleologically *solve* such conditions.

Plato’s preoccupation with the transmission of content between souls is also instrumental in setting the trap. Socrates describes what rhetoricians do without their consent, then enfolds his description neatly with what he, the Platonic Socrates, suggests. Consider the logical flow of the Phaedrus:

Clearly, therefore, Thrasyarchus and anyone else who teaches the art of rhetoric seriously will, first, describe the soul with absolute precision and enable us to understand what it is [...] But those who now write *Arts of Rhetoric*—we were just discussing them—are cunning people: they hide the fact that they know very well everything about the soul [...] Since the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul, whoever intends to be a rhetorician must know how many kinds of soul there are. (271a-d)

By privileging the soul, Plato creates a dualism wherein rhetoric is not a complicated process of persons communicating to one another but a pure distillation of meaning. Yet emphasizing the exploration of the soul, of oneself or that of others, should be distinct from rhetorical inquiry. There exists an inherent disruptive quality of how the deployment of language affects the interaction of beings with one another. As Michel Meyer writes, “Communication,

transcendental or not, reflects the differences between human beings who have to live together. Rhetoric is a mode of expression of those differences, even if argumentation is meant to resolve them by generating some consensus” (Rhetoric, Language, and Reason 5). Plato refuses to accept this and presumes the role of the soul for rhetoricians so as to insert his own definition. Rhetoric does not, or should not, deal with direct communication between souls; the exchange of discourse always already signals a disruption. Burke speaks to this in writing how humans inhabit “bodies that learn [and use] language” and must negotiate the subsequent problematicity thereof. Plato’s suggestion that rhetoricians should put on an air of denial regarding the soul is disingenuous and reflects the wont to privilege a purified encounter of transmission. As opposed to rhetoric, philosophy, for Plato, becomes the exchange of “blessed and spectacular vision[s]” where philosophers see “in pure light because we were pure ourselves, not buried in this thing we are carrying around now, which we call a body, locked in it like an oyster in a shell” (Phaedrus 250b-c). Rhetoric does not purport to have such a luxury, but deals with the thick muck of experience itself. Existentially grounded, rhetoric proposes no evasion. Nietzsche recognizes this and subsequently confronts Plato in The Twilight of the Idols, asserting, “Plato is a coward in the face of reality—*consequently* he flees into the ideal” (88). While Nietzsche’s language is ostensibly charged, his Platonic reversal offers a profitable means by which rhetorical inquiry can avoid fleeing from the stubborn complications of communication.

Rather than resorting to an abstract idealism that looks to advance efficacious discourse toward the Good, rhetoric—as both theory and practice—legitimizes itself by recognizing that, at best, communication is the movement toward that which is possible. The Good can only ever be determined or evaluated as such *after* action—it is a reflective and *post-rhetorical* undertaking. Rhetoric pitches itself forward as a projection device between beings in their being; it is ethical not because a set of a priori values are adhered to or adopted in advance, but insofar as action is

always ever *possible* in a particular situation. The Platonic high-ground flourishes as fear and injects the post-rhetorical conception of an ideal state before the creation and exchange of communication, and the re-action to it, takes place. Grounded in discovering and delivering Truth between souls, Plato attempts to envelop rhetoric into philosophy. This offering necessarily condemns rhetorical inquiry. Understanding the conditions of rhetoric provides a hope with which to combat such weighted die. As Schrag writes in The Resources of Rationality, rhetoric “privileges neither epistemic objects nor interiorized subjects. It is a responsive activity, attending to the incursion of that which is other” (142). Plato’s work is inviting, however, in that it activates a safety mechanism proposing to ensure an idealized finality of purpose. Rhetoric, meanwhile, squares itself with only that which is possible.

In shifting away from Plato, it is vital for rhetorical inquiry to move beyond the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric in two distinct ways. First, rhetoric is not—it *cannot* be—as Aristotle asserts at the beginning of his treatise On Rhetoric, the counterpart (*antistrophos*) to dialectic (1.1.1). Second, rhetorical inquiry is done a disservice when relegated to merely a search for the available means of persuasion in any given situation (1.2.1). Robert Pirsig addresses the first charge in his popular best-seller, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, “outraged that rhetoric had been brought down to the level of dialectic” (471). To ruminate on this really is enough to induce, as Pirsig himself experienced, madness. Why? Simply because rhetoric is damned from the start when it is located as a counterpart to a process, dialectical logic, that defines itself as aimed at Truth and the Platonic ideal of the Good. To Meyer, even this sympathetic view of rhetoric, which ranges from Aristotle to Chaim Perelman, “limits” its proper place as an art and a method of inquiry that defines our existence as socially interactive beings (Rhetoric, Language and Reason 63-9). Seen here, rhetoric consists of the vast spectrum of communicative resources humans possess and deploy ranging from dialectic or formal logic

on the one hand to flattery on the other. Plato is correct by suggesting that rhetoric, if unchecked, could degenerate into a meretricious display of currying favor (Gorgias); this, rhetoricians should readily admit, is always a potential outcome of any discursive exchange. However, Plato's philosopher-king, embodying the noumenal space of the Good and True, also resides on the rhetorical spectrum. In fact, there is no guaranteeing that what purports to be a dialectical endeavor is not itself a form of flattery attempting to disguise its own motives through an overly confident, yet no less machinating, rigor. Dialectic operates, to a degree, as obeisance to a systematic method. As Weaver writes, "Dialectic is abstract reasoning upon the basis of propositions [whereas] rhetoric is the relation of terms of these to the existential world" (Language is Sermonic 162). A perhaps unintended consequence of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric-as-counterpart-to-dialectic, then, is that it legitimizes the Platonic charge of rhetoric-as-flattery.

More accurately, dialectic can be seen as but one form of rhetorical arrangement among others. Weaver suggests that dialectic marks the opening foray of rhetorical discourse—"its first process [is] a dialectic establishing terms which have to do with policy" (The Ethics of Rhetoric 17). Aristotle intimates this as well in his articulation of logos in the Rhetoric,<sup>4</sup> but his opening line unknowingly but necessarily diminishes the significance of his treatise and thereby attenuates rhetoric as mode of inquiry. Dialectic should rather be subordinated to a function of rhetoric—one function among many. The two are not co-equal peers, and should not be treated as such. The privileging of dialectic has been responsible for not only the denigration of rhetoric in Western thought but also the sheer proliferation of philosophical systems. As Weaver writes, "A complete reliance upon dialectic becomes possible only if one accepts something like this Socratic theodicy [from Plato]" (Language is Sermonic 183). On the other hand, rhetoric, for

Weaver, “must deal with the world, the thickness, stubbornness, and power of it [...] Rhetoric has a relationship to the world which logic does not have” (208).

Still, Weaver himself is not immune to lapsing into theodicy. In The Ethics of Rhetoric, he remains tethered to Platonic idealism. “It is impossible to talk about rhetoric as effective expression,” he writes, “without having as a term giving intelligibility to the whole discourse, the Good” (23). He adds: “So rhetoric at its truest seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves, links in that chain extending up toward the ideal, which only the intellect can apprehend and only the soul have affection for” (25). Weaver here walks into the Platonic trap by privileging terms such as the Good, advocating the advocacy of perfection, the ideal, and the soul. While he attempts to draw distinctions between rhetoric and dialectic, ultimately, Weaver endeavors to transform rhetoric into something it is *not*. Rhetoric finds its start as the owning-up to our fallen state as beings engaged in a problematized exchange of meaning through the process of communication with other beings. Humans-as-existents have recourse to rhetoric precisely because we cannot attain the Good, the perfect, or the ideal through a pure transmission of meaning between souls. The Platonic trap Weaver falls into is by no means uncommon, however; Poulakos insightfully laments that “too many rhetoricians through the ages lacked the sophistical gumption to ‘stand by their story,’ and sold out to the mythology of ‘True Rhetoric’” (“Sophistical Rhetoric as a Critique of Culture” 100). Driving a wedge between rhetoric and dialectic, as in Aristotle and Weaver, is, in the last, not *enough*. Rhetoric must initially be sought and understood as an orientation that ontologically locates humans as negotiating the plenitude of contingency that existence affords with but the inherently fallible enterprise of symbolic action. Before rhetoric can be activated as efficacious discourse, it requires a recognition of its own limits—limits, that is, which reflect back on the imperfection that defines humans-as-

existents. Otherwise, rhetorical inquiry is attenuated for it will continually be pitted against those methods of inquiry that purport to corral Truth.

The second qualification of Aristotle concerns how he considers rhetoric a *technê*, or art, of persuasion, then organizes his treatise as a scientific endeavor with structured classifications. Interestingly enough, Aristotle himself warns against this, asserting, “In so far as someone tries to make dialectic or rhetoric not just mental faculties but sciences, he unwittingly obscured their nature by the change, reconstructing them as forms of knowledge of certain underlying facts, rather than only of speech” (1.4.6). Yet Aristotle betrays such a stance by continually objectifying rhetoric into categories. Rhetorical inquiry is better served, though, when its untamed texture engage the flotsam of contingency. Just as existentialism began as a philosophy that dissipates philosophical systems, so, too, is there the need for a rhetoric that distrusts a systematic approach to rhetoric. That existentialism—whose roots can be traced to Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel’s formal use of dialectic—resists analytical and systematic philosophy lends itself to a natural alliance with rhetorical inquiry and a rhetorical orientation. Existentialism contests Plato’s devastating critique and upgrades Aristotle’s encouraging yet limited view of rhetoric. A neo-sophistical orientation of rhetoric, dormant for some time but activated by existentialism, begins redressing the damaged reputation rhetoric has undergone for quite some time—instead of falling into the trap, it moves it beyond the Good into that which is possible.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As Richard Rorty writes in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, “The trouble with Platonic notions is not that they are ‘wrong’ but that there is no way to ‘naturalize’ them or otherwise connect them to the rest of inquiry, or culture, or life” (311).

<sup>2</sup> See Raymie McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” and Joshua Gunn, “Review Essay.” Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, McKerrow bases the praxis of his development of a critical rhetoric as a critique of freedom; Gunn reduces Sartrean freedom to the equation that subjectivity equals truth and as “the last gasp of humanism.” Both studies are addressed more fully in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> In Plato’s *Protagoras*, Socrates recommends: “It is the truth, and our minds, we should be testing” (348a).

<sup>4</sup> “Rhetoric is partly dialectic, and resembles it as we said at the outset; for neither of them is identifiable with knowledge of any specific subject, but they are distinct abilities of supplying words” (Aristotle 1.2.7).



## CHAPTER TWO: EXISTENTIALISM AS EQUIPMENT FOR LIVING: A NEW UNENDING CONVERSATION FOR KENNETH BURKE

“According to [Burke],  
our very existence is rhetorical.”

- William Rueckert, “Rereading Kenneth Burke” (250)

“[Burke] has written an existential rhetoric,  
an ultimate rhetoric which explains why some  
men decide beyond or without pure reason.”

- Craig Smith, “The Medieval Subjugation and  
The Existential Elevation of Rhetoric” (166)

In a 1985 symposium, Bernard L. Brock recounts an anecdote that features a discussion about Kenneth Burke where one of the participants, Robert L. Scott, asks, “What philosophy does Burke’s rhetorical system reflect?” Brock remembers no satisfactory answer being proposed except the suggestion that Burke’s rhetorical theory “was so flexible that it could reflect *any* philosophy” (“Dramatism” 18). Brock was inspired by the question to come up with the concept of paradox as the consistent theme coursing through Burke’s work on rhetoric. I would respond to the question in two ways: first, it is terribly misguided to suggest Burke creates a rhetorical system; any thoroughgoing study of Burke’s long career reveals a distrust of theoretical system-building and a focus on envisaging perspectives through the use of language, expressed in Burkean terms as symbolic action. Southwell points out, for instance, how “Burke’s conception of language means that philosophy as it has been conceived is impossible” (35).<sup>5</sup> In response to the provocative nature of Scott’s question, I offer existentialism as a working rejoinder. It is the one philosophy prepared to deal and match Burke’s ontological interest in communicative interaction. Two passages from disparate members of the existentialist canon illustrate the connection with Burke. First, as Albert Camus contends, “Any philosophical system is, in the last analysis, a theory of language. Every inquiry about being calls into question the

power of words” (Lyrical and Critical Essays 232). Burke, I think, would whole-heartily agree. Walker Percy, meanwhile, considers existentialism to focus on the ontology of language to get beyond behaviorism and scientific empiricism. Existentialism, he writes, “is the discovery of the symbolic transformation as the unique and universal human response” (The Message in the Bottle 280). Much of Burke’s written oeuvre reflects the basic tenets of existentialism that have been mapped out in this project: an ontological perspective of rhetoric that considers the exchange of our communicative resources as that which activates all human social-interaction; a skepticism of teleological ends or any finality of discourse in favor of analyzing the transformative yet transient moments of cooperation; an acknowledgment of the agency of individual expression but an emphasis of the struggle of communicative meaning; and a negation of the belief that humans are secure in their rationality. In short, Burke shares with existentialism an orientation, not a system, predicated on the notion that we, as humans, are fallible beings who rely on an imperfect medium of interaction, communication, which thus renders our existences tenuous yet pregnant with meaning. While existentialism has, in the past, been labeled pessimistic, I hope to demonstrate that it more properly can be evaluated as possessing the poetic humanism of Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical worldview.

All of this is not offered to say, definitively, that Kenneth Burke was an existentialist. He would have most assuredly declined the offer and resisted the label. But so, for that matter, did the existentialists themselves. Almost every existentialist announced, at one point or another, that he or she was not an existentialist—including Jean-Paul Sartre himself. Part of the problem with existentialism’s cold reception in academia is its ties to identity: so-and-so is, or is not, an existentialist. This project tries to move beyond such associations in hopes of reaching a better understanding of existentialism by teasing it out as a heuristic. What ties the variegated themes explored by existentialists together is not a systematic philosophy, but a perspective that

emphasizes the dramatistic situations that saturate human existence and, like Burke, attempts to equip persons with a thoroughgoing understanding of the significance of language, communication, and motives to deal with all forms of social interaction. Burke and the existentialists were both primarily concerned in how to explore life without resorting to the determinisms of rationalism and theology. As Karl Jaspers writes, “Existence-philosophy cannot discover any solution, but can only become real in the multiplicity of thought proceeding from extant origins in the communication from one to another” (Man in the Modern Age 176). First and foremost, Burke and existentialism agree that we, as humans, are not God; and since we cannot be like God or angelic creatures that communicate perfectly, we are imperfect selves who rely on a flawed process of socialization which is consummated by the deployment and reception of language. As such, we are rendered vulnerable with, as Burke writes in the peroration to his 1935 book, Permanence and Change, “no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss” (272). In this chapter I aim to demonstrate that Burke’s vast theoretical contributions to rhetoric possess an existentialist warrant that has been overlooked and pivot to show how Burke’s critical understanding of aesthetics help us better categorize the literary works of existentialism. Ultimately, my goal is to enjoin the ideas of each to precipitate a scholarly conversation between two perspectives that share much in common with one another.

It is worth admitting, up front, the fundamental difference between the two, which I take as a difference of terminology. Whereas Burke creates a grammar as well as new strategies in his explicit discussion of rhetoric, most writers in the existentialist movement, though interested in discussing language and communication, lack a vocabulary with which to negotiate their spheres of influence. Both, however, carry a similar perspective—namely, that each considers language to function as an ontological rhetoric and that human social interaction plays out dramatically

(for Burke) or tensionally (for existentialists such as Beauvoir and Frankl, each of whom employ the word). Though Burke dismisses existentialism as a passing fad isolated within the resistance to the Nazi occupation of France and provides a rather harsh, if not misguided, critique of Kierkegaard in The Rhetoric of Motives,<sup>6</sup> Burke's writings reflect an existentialist view of communication. From his first critical work, Counter-Statement, to his later essays that comprise Language as Symbolic Action, Burke emphasizes the committed, purposeful aspect of language and how it breathes life into our existence. As he writes in Permanence and Change, humans "do not communicate by a neutral vocabulary" since all "language is an implement of action, a device which takes its shape by the cooperative patterns of the group that uses it" (162, 173). This is precisely the stance of all major existentialist thinkers from Kierkegaard to Beauvoir, all of whom grant a fundamental primacy to the act of communication. Taken together, existentialism, as Campbell writes, reflects a Burkean orientation insofar as it "will not permit the slightest separation between man and language" ("Rhetorical Implications" 156-61). Since Burke's most central idea is grounded in the implications for human symbolic action, it would seem both appropriate and apt to consider existentialism, which Sartre considered above all a philosophy of action.

The following sections do not merely explore the similarities between Kenneth Burke and existentialism. It suggests that Burke's theories about rhetoric reflect an existentialist sensibility and then employs Burke's critical methods to "size things up properly," as he recommends in The Philosophy of Literary Form. The first section deals with Burke's rhetorical theories, suggesting that the precepts of existentialism underscore them and serve as its warrant. Specifically, the Burkean parlor is examined as a representative anecdote of existentialism. I then draw a link between Burke's rhetorical theory of identification and Sartre's understanding of human consciousness; this connection underscores the method behind how each thinker

interpreted the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism. The next section employs Burke's methods for literary criticism, wherein he views aesthetics as rhetorical tools, as a way to more carefully locate the dramatistic elements that enfold in existential literature. The existentialist drive for authenticity, I conclude, is reflected in the meta-communication of its literary works of art. Specifically, existentialist literature is seen to present radically contingent situations that demand one's ability to negotiate the meaning in life as opposed to discovering first or final causes that may deliver a meaning of, or for, life. Like Burke, the existentialist author attempts to find ways to avoid degenerating into pure identification, which Sartre calls bad faith.

#### Abandoned in the Burkean Parlor: KB's Existentialist Warrant

Burkean scholars such as Wess ("Pentadic Terms") and Brock ("Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Rhetoric") find within his works a collapse of the traditional dividing line between ontology and epistemology. In a Burkean frame, knowledge is dictated by the drama of human relations fortified by symbolic action. Language, for Burke, can never be transformed into a pure domain of objective facts. As such, knowledge takes on a secondary role to dramatism, which, Burke writes, is concerned with the problems of action and form rather than methods employed to isolate kernels of knowledge (LSA 367, RR 38-39). Knowledge, or the process of knowing, is seen as a function of our ability to symbolically interact with one another, which renders epistemology as inextricably tied to ontological considerations. As Wess writes, Burke moves away from positing any final epistemological program, preferring, instead, the open-endedness of drama whereby knowledge "is not [expressed by] an individual in permanent possession of a knowledge fixed once and for all, but, rather, in symbol-users equipped to converse today better than yesterday and maybe even better tomorrow" ("Pentadic Terms" 168). Existentialism rebels against epistemology in a similar way by enfolding it as, or into, an ontological understanding of communication.

This rebellion begins specifically with Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian system building, a distrust that can be traced all the way back to Plato, who elevated reason as the hallmark of human greatness. The faculty of reason had been celebrated as "the distinguishing mark of man," according to Miguel de Unamuno, but for existentialism, he writes, all reason, all knowledge, becomes a social product that owes its origin to language (Tragic Sense of Life 25). Privileging language by accepting its rich ambiguities, Unamuno considers any "purely rational philosophy" to have been constructed from "an inhuman language—that is to say, one inapt for the needs of life" (144). His thoroughgoing critique of the myth of pure language and pure knowledge resembles Burke's own criticism of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian calculus of a neutral vocabulary, which Burke describes as "a patient labor of hate" (PC 191). Just as existentialists such as Unamuno, above, and Jaspers, who considered all truth and reason to be a function of communication (Reason and Existenz), Burke likewise reduces knowledge to the exchange of our verbal resources. Burke is explicit about this in The Rhetoric of Religion, distinguishing his method of dramatism and logology as ontological compared with "scientism," which is epistemological. In drawing these distinctions, however, Burke is apt to point out that we be "reminded that each ends by implicating the other" (39). For this reason, it is better to say Burke and existentialism collapse the epistemeological/ontological breach rather than necessarily privileging the latter over the former. Both Burke and the existentialists could be seen, from this vantage point, as forerunners to postmodernism or the rhetorical turn in the humanities, which is said to have heralded the destruction of Enlightenment thought and its preoccupation with discovering objective knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Burke's idea of symbolic action is the central theme that binds his corpus together because it suggests that all language use, manifested as communication, functions ontologically. The reason I take the liberty to suggest symbolic action as essential to Burke is because his other

main concepts—dramatism, identification, and logology (among others)—are implications that draw from the belief that we are the symbol-using animal or, as he later put it, bodies that learn language. All verbal acts, as Burke writes in The Philosophy of Literary Form, are to be considered as instances of symbolic action (8). Grounding Burkology, as Stanley Edgar Hyman calls it, in symbolic action is, admittedly, a thesis that could be (strenuously) contested. The justification here is that symbolic action functions as not merely a theory but an orientation to the world itself—one that locates Burke firmly in the existentialist camp. As Bertelsen points out, “The realm of symbolic action, then, is the realm of social existence [...] Thus, all of our talk embodies a statement about existence—an ontological statement” (233). Recognizing symbolic action as fundamental to Burke’s project provides a window into how he viewed the world. After all, Burke’s ingenious ideas do not play out in a theoretical vacuum. By teasing out the implications of symbolic action and all that Burke shares in its wake, an existentialist warrant surfaces that suggests we, as humans, are abandoned on earth with only our communicative resources available to negotiate existence. Burke’s entire career was spent investigating what I have dubbed the central tenet of existentialism: exploring the meaning *in* life as opposed to the meaning *of* life.

Declaring that humans are abandoned does not necessarily entail an affirmation or negation of God or religion, either. Burke stresses over and over that this is not even within his critical abilities. In the introduction to The Rhetoric of Religion, for instance, he writes: “It is not within the competence of our project to decide the question [of God] either theistically or atheistically, or even agnostically” (2). Later he would declare, as a demonstration of logology, “Linguistically, *God* can be nothing but a term” (LSA 456). And in an interview conducted in the early 1980s, Burke adds: “You can’t have religious doctrine unless somebody tells it to you. Theology is a function of language” (On Human Nature 380). This is precisely the stand

Kierkegaard, a devout Christian, and Sartre, a committed atheist, made. Asking the question, whether God exists or does not exist, is beyond the communicative resources humans are equipped with. Belief itself occupies a spatial realm that transcends the faculty of discourse. As a result, communicative interaction arises as the most significant aspect to our existence and should be the locus of human inquiry. Human abandonment, for existentialism as well as Burke, is but the point of departure for beginning critical explorations. An illustration of this is worked out in Burke's Permanence and Change:

I do not see why the universe should accommodate itself to a man-made medium of communication [....] Perhaps because we have come to think of ourselves as listening to the universe, as waiting to see what it will prove to us, we have psychotically made the corresponding readjustment of assuming that the universe itself will abide by our rules of discussion and give us its revelations in a cogent manner. (99)

This sentiment reflects existentialism such that, as Jaspers writes, communication is considered “the universal condition of man’s being” (Reason and Existenz 79). It is, that is to say, all we have—or all we can be sure of. The world does not find us; rather, we carve out our projects of discovery through symbolic action. This view, however, provides little comfort. Privileging symbolic action necessitates a view of human life awash in abandonment warded off from pure logical or religious truth. Positing communication as the fundamental, perhaps only recognizable certainty in existence lacks any secure ground since it is a wholly slippery enterprise. Burke’s theory on man as the symbol-using animal finds its fullest expression with not only the statement that we create and use symbols but, more importantly, we necessarily *misuse* symbols. That we coerce or disagree with one another allows for life to unfold as primarily dramatistic rather than scientifically knowable or theologically determined.



In the section of The Rhetoric of Motives where Burke establishes identification, “The Range of Rhetoric,” there is a fruitful display of this existentialist worldview. Our understanding of rhetoric, writes Burke, “lead[s] us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard.” He concludes the section by asserting that “[r]hetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall” (23). The necessary corollary or unspoken warrant to Burke’s view of the fall of Babel, or, as he would work out in The Rhetoric of Religion, man’s fall expressed through original sin in the story of Adam and Eve (172-272), is the inauguration of a world where humans are abandoned but have need of one another through communication. We are abandoned in the world except for the properties and possibilities of symbolic action. This condition of abandonment is the site where Burke and existentialism compliment one another. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “We are in the world, mingled with it, compromised with it,” and communication is our “way of being” through this world (Sense and Non-Sense 147, 93). Burke recognizes the significance of rhetoric in a human life-world governed by contingency rather than reason, but his writings critically dwell on the effects or implications of such a state of affairs. Existentialism, on the other hand, works from the inside out; its major thinkers continually describe the individual’s supreme difficulty in negotiating a world with no a priori legitimization. They lack a facility with rhetoric which would otherwise provide more rich explorations of how to negotiate one’s existence with others. Both, however, share a frame of acceptance that acknowledges the possibility of an extra-human dimension but focuses more introspectively on human-interaction. “We start out,” Camus confirms, “from an acceptance of the world” (The Myth of Sisyphus 64). Thompson and Palmeri clarify this Burkean frame in a comparable way: “Acceptance,” they write, “means dealing with the drama of human action as *it is* but allows one the freedom to ‘thunder against’ it” (277). A frame of acceptance, as Burke describes in the opening to Attitudes Toward History, entails

abandonment—one accepts the world as it works from within rather than determined from without.

Abandonment, in this sense, should not be seen as a terrifying encounter with nothingness or pure relativity. It merely expresses that while we cannot be sure of any truth that can deliver a final meaning of life or an objective set of determined values, we can profitably concentrate on analyzing and devising the means of our all-too-human encounters through a focus on communication. Existentialism would indeed be a thoroughly pessimistic enterprise if it left us standing alone without any recourse to deal with such a state of affairs. Camus, in particular, addresses these charges of pessimism, suggesting that such a philosophy would be one of “discouragement” whereas existentialism explores the problem of civilization thus: “to know whether man, without the help of eternal or rationalistic thought, can unaided create his own values” (Resistance, Rebellion, and Death 57-58). From this vantage point, existentialism does not merely throw up its hands in nihilistic resignation; it paints a poetic view of life that galvanizes our ability to communicate in order to recognize that values and actions are thoroughly creative in scope and open to chance, flux, and purposeful commitment. “We believe,” Camus adds, “that the truth of this age can be found only by living through the drama of it” (59). Recognizing our collective abandonment is merely a point of departure upon which one can begin to more profitably negotiate the symbolic activities of an all-too-human life-world.

To take it a step further, Burke’s unending conversation presented in The Philosophy of Literary Form serves as a representative anecdote<sup>8</sup> of the existentialist notion of abandonment. A representative anecdote, according to Burke in The Grammar of Motives, stems from the human need to create “vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality” (59). He adds that it is reductive in scope that can be understood in terms of drama “in the realm of *action*, as against scientific reduction to sheer *motion*” (61). Here an opportunity arises to stand Burke on his head.

His relaying of an unending conversation in a parlor captures the communicative texture of existentialism and reveals Burke's existential warrant more clearly. In writing this little sketch, Burke, of course, is not attempting to define existentialism but make an account for the source of his dramatistic view of human relations. Its retelling betrays the existentialist implications that underscore Burke's work, however. Dramatism, he begins, starts with "the 'unending conversation' that is going on at the point in history when we are born" (110). Burke then invites the reader to imagine herself entering a parlor, arriving in the middle of a heated discussion in which the participants neither pause nor inform the newcomer about what the discussion entails. After listening for awhile, you, the reader, decide to "put in your oar" and start participating in the discussion. The vicissitudes of the Burkean parlor are such that one person may argue against you while another may defend you while someone else may take a completely different approach altogether. "However," Burke concludes, "the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress" (111). While this certainly serves as an accurate description of the drama of human relations, it also encapsulates existentialism better than any pithy statement, essay or story I know of.

Notice that Burke provides no epistemological grounding that explains why you, the reader, should show up at just such a parlor; who the other persons that inhabit the parlor are, or why they are there; and there are no descriptions of, or explanations for, the parlor itself. All we find is an ontological manifestation of communication between persons who spontaneously come and go. All sense of time and truth exists outside the parlor. The participants of the discussion are equipped with no resources to negotiate the parlor except for focusing their consciousnesses on what is being said and trying to find ways to engage the arguments at hand in order to interact with one another. Like existentialism, Burke draws attention to the discussion at hand. Communicative acts are granted a primacy above the questions of how the parlor came to be and

who the participants of the discussion are. As mentioned above, it rounds out a frame of acceptance to the natural world. Burke points out, a few pages later, that “[w]hatever may be the character of existence in the physical realm, this realm functions but as scenic background when considered from the standpoint of the human realm” (115). The objective of this representative anecdote is to bring the discursiveness of the parlor into sharper focus because the process of symbolic action is the only dominant, pervasive aspect of existence we can be sure of.

Whereas a scientist or theologian might encounter Burke’s parlor and then attempt to discern why it was there and what the meaning behind it was, someone with an existentialist orientation would accept the terms of the parlor and, as the reader is instructed, gauge where the discussion is flowing and put in an oar. In Sartre’s lecture, “Existentialism and Humanism,” he asserts that “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards,” adding, “Man simply is” (28). In Burke’s parlor, you, the reader, are summoned to the parlor without any a priori cause reason: you show up and are disciplined to recognize the flurry of symbolic activity going on around you, and are thus compelled to join in. Imagine, however, someone demonstrating what I might call Sartrean bad faith in the Burkean parlor—perhaps a person with either a scientific or theologically-deterministic orientation. Pretend, for a moment, this person is in fact able to imagine themselves, as Burke instructs, entering a parlor. In keeping with Burke’s anecdote, that person first recognizes her own tardiness. Next, she realizes that a discussion, well-advanced already, is continuing without her. These two factors of the situation immediately arouse feelings of inadequacy, shame, and vulnerability. At this point, you can either accept the parlor for its dynamic, or rebel against it. Recall that a Burkean, or, in my reading, an existentialist, sizes things up and decides to put in an oar, reveling in the odd contingency of fate that should locate oneself in such surroundings. But would everybody? I think not. The person of bad faith, whom I hypothesized above, would halt

the discussion immediately and demand to know whence the parlor came. The discussion would not be permitted to continue unless a satisfactory account of the parlor's origins and make-up had been formulated. If no factual reasoning for the parlor could be assessed or divined, the newcomer would not permit the previous discussion, or a new, spontaneous one, to ensue. Heavens, no. The person of bad faith would demand an inquiry and instruct the other participants to never again impulsively converse until the parlor's constitution was ascertained. Rather than enjoy the meanings that multiply *within* the parlor, this newcomer would want the participants to discover the meaning *of* the parlor.

Besides the question of how the parlor came to be and as to its fundamental essence, the person of bad faith then begins to think, Wait, just who, exactly, are these others who were conversing without me before I arrived? And what were they discussing? The wheels are turning. The prior discussion has little chance of continuing because the person of bad faith cannot accept the dramatistic situation she faces because it is endowed with a sense of absolute contingency. For her, the parlor, the participants of the discussion, and herself, must be justified—whether rationally through a logical explanation or determined through a divine source which created the parlor and governs it by extra-human abilities. This person would then move to demand a full account of when the discussion began, who discussed what, and what the reasons for the discussion were. How, she might ask, can we begin to catalogue the parlor and ourselves? Even if the other participants of the discussion are perturbed by the newcomer's thirst for explanation, they would not be able to resume the discussion since the protests have completely interrupted the flow of dialogue. Some might agree with the person of bad faith, realizing that no discussion can continue until the surrounding environment is accurately assessed. Others might have ideas upon how the parlor was founded—attributing it to a God, a Spaghetti Monster, evolution, astrophysics—and attempt to convince their fellows to join his or her side. Yet another group of

participants might take time to construct arguments that refute the importance of understanding the parlor and plead for a return to the prior spontaneity of the discussions before the newcomer's arrival. It is a dialogical universe come to life in an enfolding drama, which is great...Right?

Well, in one sense, this is certainly in keeping with Burke's parlor such that discussion continues unabated and new conversations arise. It can be said that the newcomer I have in mind is merely putting in an oar until her time is up and that, eventually, she departs with, as Burke imagines, the discussion "still vigorously in progress." Perhaps so; it's only natural that the newcomer will, at some point, not be so new anymore. The problem is that her bad faith has infected the dramatistic texture of the parlor forever more. Since she will never accept the pure contingency of the predicament of people coming and going, having only communicative equipment at their disposal, the newcomer of scientific or theologically-determined bad faith will decisively alter the parlor dynamic. The participants will only have communicative resources to investigate the parlor's origins, whereabouts, and composition, but such inquiries will prohibit the free flow of unending conversations to progress spontaneously. The communicative texture of the parlor will be focused on explanatory knowledge: the ascertainment of facts. Once sides are drawn, newcomers will have to choose sides upon entering. That is to say, instead of how Burke envisions it, where the participants do *not* halt the conversation when a newcomer arrives, the new dynamic dictates that the epistemological camps, be they of a religious or scientific bent, will immediately focus on the newcomer and attempt to recruit her to their side.

Just maybe, though, this was always the case in the parlor. It would certainly be keeping with Burke's work on identification. Besides, he is never clear since he recounts the parlor dynamic in only one paragraph. Suffice it to say, though, Burke's dramatistic orientation

compels a newcomer to not pick sides but to recognize the Human Barnyard in the parlor for what it is: a continual exchange of symbolic activity. Furthermore, Burke does not want the participants to pause so as to inform the newcomer as to what is going on. The discussion, remember, is “heated.” Burke advises that you, the reader, assess the situation “until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; *then* you put in your oar” (my emphasis 110). The point here is that Burke’s ideal candidate for the parlor is an existentialist. Only someone with an existentialist orientation would feel comfortable within the parlor without assessing exactly whence it came. Why? Because only existentialism provides a way to deal with such vulnerability. One grants the situation as an absurd, unjustifiable moment of chance. The self is abandoned with others, but symbolic action provides an opportunity to negotiate the parlor together. Existentialism thus proceeds two-fold: first, as a frame of acceptance that recognizes the abandonment of the self with others; second, it galvanizes communication as a way to negotiate that very experience.

Burke does not say so, but most persons, finding themselves thrown into the parlor, would not wait patiently until they felt comfortable putting in their oar. They would, as with our hypothetical newcomer described above, demand answers and facts to justify why they were thrown into a random parlor among a motley crew of dialogical participants. The existentialist or Burkean dramatist, however, recognizes that she is abandoned in a parlor with others, armed with only the resources of communication at her disposal. She accepts the parlor for what it is and does not demand to know the essence of the parlor. Instead, the Burkean or existentialist grows aware of the situatedness of herself in the parlor, and starts from there.

It is worth acknowledging that the above analysis does not preclude a person of faith or a scientist from adopting the existential frame of acceptance in the Burkean parlor. Take Soren Kierkegaard, for example—a man of immense spiritual faith. How might he respond would that

the plucky Dane be thrown into a Burkean parlor? Limping slightly owing to the imbalance of his body's political economy, which was lampooned in Copenhagen editorial cartoons through the nineteenth century, let us imagine young Soren walking in. Fond of cigars, he lights one and follows the conversation for a time. While listening in and enjoying a long ash, he suddenly begins to feel an immense spiritual weight on his shoulders; as he waits for the right moment to put his oar in, he concludes that there is a divine force that exists outside the parlor to whom he is eternally indebted. Soren knows this to be true because he himself can feel it. As such, he *knows* it. However, Soren recognizes that while he possesses this spiritual truth there is no way of impressing it upon the other parlor members. Communication, he thinks to himself, is the only binding faculty within this parlor. Like St. Augustine before him, Soren can admit the breach between a world full of symbolic action and an extra-human one. Soren firmly believes in his divinely inspired, guiding force outside the parlor, but he also acknowledges the impossibility of confirming it to others from inside the parlor. Though he holds this extra-parlor force close to his breast, he dare not demand others accept it.

In fact, while ruminating about these things, he notices one participant of the discussion trying to force others to accept a certain position which he, the participant, believes in. The participant's tone grows forceful and his person becomes agitated. Why, he cries out, can't every one of you in this parlor accept the truth and validity of what I'm saying? Ah, sighs Soren, who decides this is where he shall put his oar in. The Danish newcomer, not afraid to offend, addresses the increasingly impatient participant with amused condescension: We cannot accept the truth and validity of what you're saying, good sir, because of the fact you are, indeed, *saying* it. We but hold our truths subjectively, which thereby inhibits any chance of you perfectly communicating your truths to us in this here parlor. And no amount of people here who agree with you, should they choose to do so, can confirm your truth. You may logically prove



whatever you like systematically, but you are, alas, using language, which prohibits the communication of truth itself. Whether it is true is quite besides the point, I'm afraid. I, for instance, know and love my God, who created this parlor and placed me here, but never can any of you know this as I know it. It is beyond the resources of this room, unfortunately. A toast, then, is in order: Let our conversations never end in ossified form; may we continue on outspoken and in flux—assured of what we think, but deficient in what we know.

And so it goes with the Burkean parlor, on and on. At least one can hope, for the greatest threat to it is in the human potential for identification, whose perversion of communion is a disease which results in war (RM 34). The next section uses existentialism as a way to examine the problems inherent to our need to identify with one another.

#### Consciousness, Communication, and Identification

In terms of rhetorical theory proper, Burke is best known for conceptualizing identification as the instrumental term of rhetoric over the Aristotelian model of persuasion. Identification has been used as an applied tool for rhetorical criticism, but rarely have scholars explored the philosophical orientation that underscores its conception. Examining it more closely reveals that foregrounding behind the term is a thoroughly existential orientation as to how the self interacts with others. Burke makes this link explicit, stating, “The persuasive identifications of Rhetoric, in being so directly designed for *use*, involve us in a special problem of *consciousness*” (RM 36). Existentialism underscores Burke's ideas here because he demonstrates both the isolation of individuals and the need to communicate: consciousness and intersubjectivity rely on one another continually, and this ebb and flow necessitates the human need of rhetorical identification. Bertelson's work is helpful in pointing out that the corollary to Burke's drive to division is that persons and existence itself is naturally divisive: “In essence, division is the natural state of human existence” (233). As such, we are, as persons, compelled or

drawn to symbolically interact with one another. According to Burke, this is inevitable. “Identification is compensatory to division,” he writes. “If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s very essence” (RM 22). The existentialist position on consciousness is a subtle but definitive corollary to what Burke is trying to say. “[C]onsciousness,” as Merleau-Ponty points out, “is itself the living connection between myself and me and myself and others” (Sense and Non-Sense 95). Division can be expressed as a world inhabited by singular consciousnesses, yet insofar as these singular consciousnesses possess the ability to communicate, they necessarily transcend themselves toward one another through symbolic action. That consciousnesses symbolically interact, they necessarily identify with one another. It is a logical domino effect of the consequences of being: if singular consciousness, then communication with other consciousnesses; when or where there exists communication, then identification necessarily follows.

Identification is not merely a theoretical term Burke came up with but a natural extension of an existentialist worldview that privileges the need, or will, to communicate. Such a world grounded in communication, primarily divided but seeking unification, is thus, as Jaspers writes, “a continually insecure and endangered reality which must always re-establish itself, limit and expand itself, test itself, and push on [....] It exists therefore in the tension of detours, errors, somersaults, and recoveries” (Reason and Existenz 79). Similarly, Burke discusses the human predicament as having

at is command a keen and adventurous equipment for attaining the wherewithal to bring about a state of security, peace, relaxation, comfort, the benign sluggishness of satiety and warmth—yet this very equipment for attaining the state of worldly Nirvana is the soul of turbulence and struggle. (PLF 255)

Identification and division are seen as continually in flux. Such a state of affairs fortifies Burkean identification and can be reduced to a window into singular consciousness to align itself with Sartre's work. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre maps out the two-fold aspect of consciousness: being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) and being-in-itself (*en-soi*). The latter, according to Sartre, occurs when a consciousness or person attempts to erase its being; it is grounded in the wish to become God and not have to deal with consciousness as such. An existent could otherwise lose herself through identification by religious or political fiat or affiliation and thus not have to technically choose one's own being. In the last, being-in-itself is the conscious or unconscious attempt to negate or reduce consciousness to the Burkean understanding of sheer motion. That is, it denies both the significance and possibilities of symbolic action, whereas being-for-itself, according to Sartre, is conscious decision to make choices. As Bell explains Sartre's ontology of consciousness, "A human being exists as an uneasy tension between the two regions of being: the for-itself and the in-itself" (28). If consciousness is a coin, being-in-itself is one side—let us say heads—and being-for-itself is the other—let us say tails.

It is possible here to adapt these tensional modes of consciousness to Burke's understanding of rhetoric. First, it is important to note that he does not privilege identification in order to expunge Aristotle's emphasis on persuasion, which Burke considers "administrative" rhetoric. Rather, they operate together just like a coin: while the latter "centers in the speaker's explicit designs with regard to the confronting of an audience [...]" there are also ways in which we *spontaneously, intuitively, even unconsciously* persuade ourselves" (LSA 302). Since identification is a necessary corollary to our communicative equipment, there is also "implicit" in symbolic action the drive toward perfection, which Burke would later discuss in terms of entelechy (LSA 17; see also RR 246, 300). Being-in-itself reflects this necessary drive for perfection which is grounded in our ability to symbolically interact; and if one reaches perfection

by either becoming God or gaining divine faculties, then one does not have to choose. One can just be—in itself. Erasing the ability to have a consciousness of oneself and the ability to negotiate experience individually represents the dangerous problematic inherent to the application of identification. While identification marks a necessary outcome of symbolic action, it is important, especially in a democracy, to not have persons degenerate into pure identification—or, for that matter, a complete being-in-itself, whose ultimate manifestation, according to Sartre, is bad faith. For Burke, identification can be reduced to the level of substance: one person may become, or think they are becoming, consubstantial—of the same substance—as or with another, “[y]et at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives” (RM 21). In this sense, identification is both necessary and dangerous. A person may be convinced to yield one’s autonomy into a person, cause, idea or god to which they can flee being as such and exercise, as Sartre would say, bad faith. The menace implicated here finds its fullest expression in considering the case of anti-Semitism, of particular interest to both of these thinkers.

This correlation between identification and being or bad faith plays out less abstract and more concrete in their critically applied works. For Burke, it is his famous essay, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” published in the late 1930s but included in the 1941 compilation, The Philosophy of Literary Form. Sartre’s book, Anti-Semite and Jew, was originally published in 1946. The affinity between the two is obvious in its subject matter, but it reflects a common methodological perspective which is grounded in a similar critical worldview. Their terminology differs, however. Whereas Sartre explores anti-Semitism as a function of bad faith and a feeling inimical to French (and European) political/social life, Burke adapts his book review to consider Hitler as a medicine man and a warning call for America such that “we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine

in America” (PLF 191). Since identification, according to Burke, is grounded in the consubstantial wish to “confront the implications of *division*” (RM 22), singling out the Jew was, has been, and is a way in which to fortify substance among a majority in a culture, nation or continent in which Jews or the minority. Both Burke and Sartre treat anti-Semitism in terms of identification rather than religious terms. Specifically, Burke considers Hitler to provide a secular analogue to theological doctrine, whereby “[m]en who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all” (PLF 193), while Sartre suggests the anti-Semite finds comfort in the position because he can lose himself by becoming a “man of the crowd” (Anti-Semite 22). The implications for both is that anti-Semitism does not proceed with an aversion to Jewish theology, but stems from the mere fact that, in every country excepting Israel, Jews are a minority and anti-Semitism serves as the best way to foment solidarity. It proceeds as a function of achieving a purified, totalizing substance, to which the Jew is necessarily excluded.

For Burke, Hitler’s ingenious rhetorical trick was to label the Jews as a scapegoat in order to provide “a noneconomic explanation of economic phenomena” (201). The devastated economic landscape following World War I was so debilitating that the German people were left “ripe for a Hitler” (207). He employed anti-Semitism, according to Burke, to provide a “curative” function that “hand[ed] over one’s ills to a scapegoat.” By doing so, Hitler moved toward a “purification by dissociation” (202). Anti-Semitism can be explained, then, as an outcome of a nation mired in economic depression whereby the “yearning for unity is so great that people are always willing to meet you halfway” (205). Once this power manifests itself, Burke adds, “[t]he efficiency of Hitlerism is the efficiency of the one voice, implemented throughout a total organization” (213). It thus requires complete or pure identification, which itself, as Burke writes in The Rhetoric of Motives, is a “perversion of communion” (22). When Burke wrote his book review, however, he had not completely developed his theory of

identification, which would not appear until 1950. While his work on Hitler is widely celebrated as a feat of rhetorical criticism *par excellence*, it focuses perhaps too much on the economic factors behind the drive for anti-Semitism. This Marxist reading should by no means be discounted, but Burke overlooks some of the more pervasive aspects of his theory of identification which would deal with why people were so amenable not just to Hitler but to an anti-Semitic orientation writ large. If we take Burke's later writings of identification, it would seem to be a given that persons, because of their symbolic make-up, are *always* ripe for a Hitler.

Sartre fills in this gap. His interest is in the "personality of the anti-Semite" (33). Reading Anti-Semite and Jew, one is struck by how Sartre critically negotiates his topic with a Burkean cast—the Burke, that is, from the pages of The Rhetoric of Motives. Sartre's longer work delves into anti-Semitism as it appears in France and Europe as a whole and does not limit it to Hitler's rhetorical effects. Like Burke, though, he suggests anti-Semitism does not stem from a religious difference but is predicated on the ability of a majority to be able to call a Jew "one whom other men consider a Jew" (Anti-Semite 69). That is, Jews can be isolated in contrast to a group that is consubstantial with itself. Sartre then explores what goes into such a decision-making process on an individual level:

The anti-Semite has no illusions about what he is. He considers himself an average man, modestly average, basically mediocre. There is no example of an anti-Semite's claiming superiority over the Jews [...] The phrase, "I hate the Jews," is one that is uttered in chorus; in pronouncing it, one attaches himself to a tradition and to a community—the tradition and community of the mediocre. (22)

For Sartre, anti-Semitism represents bad faith—inauthenticity. One arrives at anti-Semitism in order to be a man of the crowd; this entails an escape from all liberty and all responsibility. People are drawn to anti-Semitism, Sartre is suggesting, not merely because of economic

phenomena but because of a more basic need which Burke later articulates as the inevitability of identification. Since anti-Semitism “favors laziness of mind” (43), it fulfills the wish to flee being, to negate the possibilities of choice in existence. At bottom, Sartre considers the anti-Semite as a person who is afraid, one who fears the human condition (and is in bad faith): “The anti-Semite is a man [sic] who wishes to be pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt—anything except a man” (54). In short, Sartre is comparing the individual move to anti-Semitism as a rejection of symbolic action whereby the anti-Semite can attempt to live by the properties of sheer motion. The very act of using language necessitates an attempt to suture the primal divisions of the existence inherent to consciousness itself.

For existentialism as well as Burke, it is vital to recognize that such a perfect harmony can never be achieved. Would that it could, one may be sure of an underlying pattern of destruction in its wake—the destruction of all human meaning, to begin with. This is not to suggest any residue of identification within symbolic acts necessarily augurs a holocaust. Burke insists on the inevitability of identification within symbolic action. Once it moves toward totalization, though, we find its perverse tendencies. For Burke and Sartre, the act of individually recognizing this condition is the best way to combat a community of persons from degenerating into pure identification, for this totalizing effect need not be limited to anti-Semitism, either. “The Jew only serves” the anti-Semite as a “pretext,” writes Sartre; elsewhere this bad faith manifests itself as a prejudiced aversion to “the Negro or the man of yellow skin” (54). In any such instance, it keeps with the Burkean notion of identification and the problems inherent to symbolic action. Neither Burke nor Sartre moralize about what to do; they merely draw our attention to the properties of identification so that we may aware ourselves as to where we are and what the available choices are in a particular situation. Maximizing one’s awareness of a particular situation can be seen, then, as the key to authenticity: it does not necessarily translate

to making the correct choices, but it ensures avoiding subordinating one's choices to pure identification or consubstantiality.

### A Burkean Analysis of Existentialist Literature

I recounted Burke's parlor above as a representative anecdote that captures the themes and theoretical grounding of existentialism. In this section, I seek to capitalize on Burke's method of literary analysis in his essay, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in which he suggests that literature should be organized "with reference to *strategies*" in "active categories" (PLF 303). Specifically, I want to consider existentialist literature as representative anecdotes of a particular orientation or worldview, the point of which is to create a vocabulary that reflects, selects and deflects reality (GM 59). It functions as rhetorically-endowed communicative acts by the author, and its subject matter is about communication in general. As Kaelin writes, existentialist literature "begins with a complex gesture on the part of the author [who is] inviting an audience to consider the nature of the universe" (131). Yet by and large, the terms often associated with existential literature include absurdity, alienation, despair, and nihilism. This has to do in part with the gloomy subject matter, or situations, that arise in such books, and a great deal with the unsavory characters that inhabit them. Existential dread dominates our understanding of existentialism, and this is not only unfortunate, but terribly flawed. It is as if the decision to pick up and leaf through any novel by Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes From the Underground, Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea, Albert Camus' The Stranger, or Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting For Godot, is not just an exercise in leisurely entertainment, but a statement about how one is feeling—and that feeling might be summed up, in the popular imagination, as lonely and without hope. Viewed through a Burkean lens, however, one may consider existentialist literature as communicative acts that provoke the ontological difficulties with which persons face in negotiating their social experiences.



Besides, how can existentialist literature be considered as an isolated act of solipsistic consciousness if Burke's lessons about how literature operates as a rhetorical act of communication are taken seriously? Authorial invention and the act of reading, which initiates an intersubjective communicative process, would seem to preclude such a foreboding landscape. As early as 1931, with the publication of his first critical work, Counter-Statement, Burke declares "all competent art is a means of communication, however vague the artist's conception of his audience may be" (73). For Burke, any linguistic act "is to be considered as 'symbolic action'"; furthermore, a symbolic act functions as "the *dancing of an attitude*" (The Philosophy of Literary Form 8-9). Fiction does not merely function expressively, he indicates in a 1935 speech, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," delivered to the American Writer's Congress, but operates as propaganda (268). Keeping this in mind, the purpose and style of existentialist literature changes dramatically. Rather than a stamp of approval for egotistic conduct or self-loathing, the literary works of existentialism are presentations of situations that individuals face and the corresponding attitudes with which they face them. Above all, existentialist literature activates an intersubjective process of communication that alerts readers to the need for consciousness of other consciousnesses. In What is Literature?, for instance, Sartre describes how literature only comes into being through the "joint effort" of the author and the reader. "The creative act," he writes, "is only an incomplete and abstract moment in the production of a work," adding, "There is no art except for and by others [...] realized *through* language" (51-52). If we look at rhetoric as Burke does, whereby symbolic acts impress an attitude from one to another in any communicative exchange, the scope of existentialist literature is altered such that it does not function as a descent into the bleak depths of one's singular consciousness. Rather, it activates a forum of meta-communication that describes the sheer difficulty of living in a body that, as Burke says, learns language in a world where only our linguistic resources bring us

together. If there is anything absurd about existential literature, it is the dominant perception that it represents the hopeless descent of the single individual's consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

The writings of one of the few American existentialists, Walker Percy, is instructive in this regard. First, in a very Burkean manner, he suggests that humans should be viewed as man-the-talker or man-the-symbol-monger.<sup>10</sup> "Language, [or] symbolization," he writes, "is the stuff of which our knowledge and awareness of the world are made, the medium through which we see the world" (The Message in the Bottle 17, 150). What this implicates for existentialist literature is that the movement of such art "achieves a reversal through its re-presenting. To picture a truly alienated man, picture a[n] [existentialist] to whom it had never occurred to write a word" (93). The act of writing and reading is thus a communicative endeavor which quashes the idea of existential alienation or, for that matter, art for art's sake. Camus considers such a distorted view of the literary process to be the invention "of a factitious and self-absorbed society" since, as he writes in Resistance, Rebellion and Death, "art cannot be a monologue" (255, 257). Burke shares a similar distrust of pure art in the pages of Counter-Statement. He finds the expressiveness of the author "is too often confused with pure utterance" when it should more properly be seen as "the evocation of emotion" projected to the reader (53). Whether they know it or not, authors, writes Burke, use their "expressiveness as a means of making people seek what they customarily fled and flee what they customarily sought" (67). To size existentialist literature up more properly, as Burke might have us do, I propose that it be seen as the presentation of rhetorical situations which emphasize the contingency of social experiences brokered by intersubjective encounters between consciousnesses. "Existentialist literature was to be social action," writes Kaelin, adding, "It intended to produce change by offering its audience a conception of the human individual consistent with (ironically enough) its true nature: man in face of his coefficient of adversity, a given individual working out his destiny within an

unfriendly environment” (103). This is the consistent, active category that binds such works of art together. Consider existentialism, then, from this angle: consciousness itself is thorny and isolated, but we negotiate our experiences through communicative interaction with other consciousnesses.

I continually stress the focus on intersubjectivity within existentialism throughout this project because it is the lost, or forgotten, component in both the popular as well as received academic imagination. As will be discussed in the next chapter on rhetorical agency, existentialism does not endorse an autonomous, unitary subject free to impose her will as she pleases. What may be considered an existential struggle is the subject’s recognition that she is not alone, that her consciousness necessarily projects outward, via communication, toward others. As Percy writes, to fully understand existentialism, it is vital to see consciousness and intersubjectivity as “inextricably related; they are in fact aspects of the same new orientation toward the world, the symbolic orientation” (274). What existentialism—existentialist literature, in particular—rebels against is the danger of identification highlighted above: it warns against fleeing from being to merge the self into either a process of scientific rationalism, a determinism set in advance by a god, or losing oneself in a public crowd. It posits intersubjectivity as a dramatic interaction of the self’s being-with-others which should never degenerate into negating one’s own being or freedom. This is often taken for an endorsement of fluid egotism, but it most assuredly is not. While his novella, The Stranger, features a man condemned for his indifference, Camus, for instance, warns readers from identifying him, as an author, with his characters. In his book-long essay, The Rebel, Camus describes the radically contingent situatedness of the self that is emphasized in such works of fiction: “I have need of others who have need of me and of each other [...] This individualism is in no sense pleasure; it is perpetual struggle, and, sometimes, unparalleled joy when it reaches the heights of proud compassion” (297).

Existentialist literatures asks and attempts to answer the following questions: How can we live authentically when we have a need to identify with others? That is, how can we symbolically act when we have such a tendency to either lock up our consciousness within itself or to yield it all-too-willingly to others or ideas? Contrary to accepted opinion, existentialism does not permit the refuge of solipsism, but nor does it, for that matter, allow the perversion of communion Burke so eloquently warned against.

Unfortunately, the present critical enterprise is not without difficulty since the characters that inhabit existentialist literature, taken individually, are, to begin with, unlikeable fellows. They are often selfish and preoccupied with only themselves. For instance, Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Camus' protagonist, Meursault, from The Stranger, fail in their ability to possess any empathy for, or reach out to, others. This should not, however, be construed as encapsulating the projected ethos of their authorial creators. What we find over and over in existentialist literature, on the contrary, is the presenting/presencing of situations where individuals have the ability to act with others, rightly or wrongly, or do nothing. The authors of existentialist literature intensify the freedom of contingency in the predicaments and situations individuals face. Some characters rise to these challenges with honor, others fail to act at all, and still others make terrible choices for unspecified reasons. Milan Kundera has written that while some may consider Kafka's works to be preoccupied with the individual's solitude there exists, on the contrary, "[n]ot the curse of solitude but the *violation of solitude* is Kafka's obsession!" (The Art of the Novel 111). Kundera's observation can be extended to the entire canon of existentialist literature. As Burke demonstrates, the literary transaction itself negates the possibility of receding into solipsistic despair. Each literary act of existentialism is a rhetorical enterprise; it cannot be judged merely by the admittedly pervasive failure of its characters—Estragon and Vladimir, who never find Godot in Beckett's play; the final pages of Antoine

Roquentin's diary in Nausea, which shows a man yielding to unjustifiable resignation; Meursault's acquiescence to his own execution; and the conclusion to Kafka's The Trial, where Joseph K. is inexplicably killed before a fair trial. There is, true enough, very little triumph in the narratives of existentialist literature.<sup>11</sup> Its pages are inhabited by anti-heroes who, as Dostoevsky's Underground Man recognizes, "produce a most unpleasant impression" (296). All of these characteristics acknowledge, on the surface, a pessimistic scope, but it is important to move beyond mere character assessment and consider the dramatic situations in existentialist literature. The world of human relations in these books is not governed by reason, or is governed, rather, in a sphere beyond reason. It offers a world in which only the exercise of symbolic action is at human disposal. For far too long now, however, many have evaluated existentialist literature with a focus only directed toward the feelings its characters evoke rather than the situations or attitudes the author presents. It is high time, then, to apply some critical energy to analyzing the orientations of the works taken holistically.

While all literature may be said to function as acts of communication, existentialist literature, in particular, highlights a two-fold aspect of it: the author is communicating to the reader and the consciousness of the characters are haunted by their need to communicate. The violations of solitude which Kundera describes reflect the total will-to-communication, which, for Jaspers, is impossible to deny. Kaelin expresses existentialist literature in terms of "creative communication": an author exercises the rhetorical tool of invention, which necessitates a communicative relationship (98). I would add that, like Burke's parlor, the fundamental theme to existentialist literature is about the process of communication itself, which is why I have described it as a form of meta-communication. Its characters, mostly anti-heroes, experience the need to communicate and the difficulties that arise from this necessity. They can neither escape themselves with a flight into pure being nor break free of others; if they fail, it is because they

attempt one or the other. The fact is, they exist, therefore they communicate. That they communicate entails absolute contingency within the particularity of their situations, the ability to choose, and the responsibility that stems from such choices.

### How (Not) to Wait for God(ot)

Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting For Godot, is an illustrative example of the two-fold element of communication in existentialist literature. In fact, it operates as a Burkean parlor. In Burkean dramatism, the statement, "all life's a stage," is not considered metaphorically, but literally: it serves "as an aid for helping us find answers to the question 'What related observations follow from the proposition that "man is a person, who can act, as distinct from things that can but move"?"' ("Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy" 29). Burke adds, moreover, that dramatism should not be seen as merely drama in and of itself. Rather, he considers it "the systematic use of a model designed to help us define and place the nature of human relationships and of the relations among our terms for the discussion of such matters" (29). It is important to keep this in mind since technically, there is very little drama in Beckett's play—if drama is considered as the coherent structure of a narrative detailed with character trajectory and plot devices. Beckett's play is dramatistic, as opposed to dramatic, such that it reflects the human condition of negotiating our contingent existence through only the resources of symbolic action. Waiting for Godot functions as an intensification of the tensions that result from being bodies that learn language—or, otherwise put in a Burkean vocabulary, the symbol-using animal.

Vladimir and Estragon show up in a Burkean parlor without any a priori justification. While they attempt to figure out their purpose, they are abandoned on stage except for their potential for symbolic activity. They know they are waiting for Godot, but they do not know why this is the case nor when, if ever, Godot will come. They think, however, that should they find Godot, their purpose will be finalized—that is, all will be well. Beckett, of course, does not

permit them to find Godot—or allow Godot to find them—but this wont of purpose or justification on the part of Vladimir and Estragon represents the Sartrean bad faith and/or the drive towards Burkean identification. Godot, for them, represents a purposeful cause by which, in their minds, they can escape the pure contingency of their situations. They symbolically interact with one another and Pozzo, who intermittently appears on stage, because they have to, not because they want to—ultimately, they would like to flee from being in order to be with God or be with God(ot). The God/Godot link is so obvious as to perhaps not even warrant mentioning, but it demonstrates the wish to escape being through pure identification. Whether Godot is an authoritative figure such as a general or political leader or captain of industry (a boss, if you will), or, for that matter, a god, he represents the Vladimir's and Estragon's hope to lose themselves. If they find God(ot), they will then be able to finally abandon the world of talk to which they are already assigned to.

Beckett's play serves as one long exercise in communicative frustration for Vladimir and Estragon. They are not permitted to escape themselves or their communicative abilities, which are necessary. Vladimir cries out, at one point, "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!"(51). It betrays Beckett's attempt to call attention to our condition, which is always situated in the particular, not the abstract, and governed by the resources of symbolic action. It is why Vladimir continues in the following way:

But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate cosigned us! [...] The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflexion [sic], or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing

here, *that* is the question. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear.

We are waiting for Godot to come— (51-52)

Notice how Vladimir recognizes the fundamental contingency and pervasiveness of symbolic action but ultimately rejects it. He wishes to be like an animal of the wild, or function through the properties of sheer motion, as Burke would say. If only, for Vladimir and Estragon, they could react like animals and not have to think or communicate with others. Vladimir fails to realize that there is no such thing as idle discourse. All language is purposeful in and of itself to a particular end through its intersubjective rhetorical texture. The act of communication necessitates a world pregnant with meaning, but Vladimir and Estragon, despite their verbal flurry with one another, cannot recognize this. They have bad faith because they want to negate their own ability to talk with each other.

As the play unfolds, it becomes clear Vladimir and Estragon want out of the Burkean parlor, but Beckett denies them this possibility. It is why, in the final pages of Beckett's play, the two main characters contemplate suicide. They cannot abide by the meaning in life without some greater purpose coming into focus. "I can't go on like this," says Estragon in the conclusion to the play, indicating his exasperation with being a symbol-using animal (61). "We'll hang ourselves to-morrow," Vladimir responds, adding the caveat, "Unless Godot comes." "And if he comes?" asks Estragon, to which Vladimir answers: "We'll be saved." A couple of lines later, the play ends with Vladimir asking if they should go; Estragon agrees, "Yes, let's go," but Beckett's final word before the curtain is the stage direction, "*They do not move.*" The stage, or Burkean parlor, is inescapable. The characters are suspended in communicative flux on stage as the curtain draws to a close. They cannot escape the dramatistic stage of existence.

To understand this play as an exercise about communication divorces Beckett, the dramatist, from his characters. The conditional situation of the play is what is significant, not the



fact that Vladimir and Estragon do not find Godot. While it is necessary that the characters fail in their attempt to erase their being in order to find a purpose or *the* purpose that God(ot) promises, they still have one another as well as the ability to communicate. This, I think, is the lasting impression of Beckett's play, and it is why we have seen in recent years performances staged in bleak or hostile landscapes. A performance was staged in San Quentin prison in 1957, Susan Sontag directed it in Sarajevo in 1993 amidst a civil war, and the artist Paul Chan orchestrated a performance of it in New Orleans' 9<sup>th</sup> ward in 2007. The point of each performance was not to emphasize the hopelessness of each situation but reflect the common bond of vulnerability, which can only be met with communication as it is existentially understood. Ultimately, all we can be sure of are the possibilities of symbolic action that we share despite the fact we cannot compute it mathematically. "Life totters," writes Jaspers as an illustration of this theme, "not really understanding the speech it is itself using" (Man in the Modern Age 79). While our abandonment is thus stark and visceral, it possesses that binding aspect of our nature, communication, which ties us together and upon which a better future can be actualized.

### Communicating from the Underground

While Beckett's play is meant not just for an isolated act of reading consumption, but public performance, existentialist novellas and novels suppose a greater difficulty. Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground is an interesting case study in this regard. Walter Kaufmann, who helped frame the existentialist canon with the 1956 publication of his reader, Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre,<sup>12</sup> included only the first section of Dostoevsky's novella in his reader. While quite obviously Kaufmann, serving as an editor, has page limits and structural constraints prohibiting the inclusion of the entire work, it is curious that he dismisses the second portion of Notes as unnecessary to Dostoevsky's work as a whole. I draw attention to this prior to discussing Dostoevsky's book in order to demonstrate the purposeful disregard of any social

interaction within the text by the protagonist with others, which happens only in the second part. To read the first portion of Notes is to witness a long, polemical digression from a singular consciousness. It is a quite fascinating soliloquy, but by reading only the first installment of the text one fails to witness the narrator being rendered vulnerable by others—and that, ultimately, is our situation—his situation—in existence. After being embarrassed by a group of associates—it would be a stretch to call them friends—the Underground Man returns to his previous isolation and decides that while he only likes playing with words himself, “what I really want is that you all should go to hell” (290). This sentiment would later be reflected in Sartre’s play, No Exit, whose conclusion finds the antagonist exclaiming, “Hell is other people!” While this may be construed as support for an egotistic view or solipsism, the point of these works is to demonstrate the inability to wish away other persons. A more fundamental question arises as well: who can the reader believe—Dostoevsky, who is writing the book as an act of public communication, or the Underground Man, who is mired in his contempt for humanity?

This question ultimately surfaces when considering any work of existentialist literature. We have no choice but to communicate with others. Even if our interpersonal communicative efforts fail, as in the case of the Underground Man, we must exercise the will-to-communicate in some manner, and, in this case, it is the composition of “notes” for a reading public. It is why, despite his evocation of solitude, the Underground Man continually peppers his writing by addressing his readership as “gentlemen”. This betrays Dostoevsky’s attempt to speak through his protagonist, who considers himself a coward but is aware that, in the act of writing, he is reaching an audience: “If it is not for the benefit of the public, why should I not simply recall these incidents in my own mind without putting them on paper?” asks the Underground Man (214). The answer is simple: despite himself, the Underground Man cannot escape his total will-to-communicate. By evoking a sense of personal feeling, Dostoevsky’s narrator is thus

provoking his audience in a rhetorical act. Even though, as a character, the Underground Man rejects his opportunity to be with others, calcifying his criticisms with self-righteous disgust, this does not amount to a mere surface endorsement by Dostoevsky of a retreat into solipsism. In fact, Dostoevsky is demonstrating the impossibility of the position in which such a character adopts by virtue of writing as a communicative endeavor.

While the Underground Man is contemptible in his concern for others, he is not without justification for his opinions. Like much of existentialist literature, the Underground Man rejects the rationalist account of human nature prevalent in the nineteenth century, just as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche critique Hegel and Plato, respectively. In particular, the self-assurances of scientism are Dostoevsky's target; he imbues the Underground Man with both distrust and hatred for the wish to rationally codify the universe. The existentialist texture of this book is reflected in Dostoevsky's unwillingness to permit any finalized, teleological account for human actions and motivations:

[S]cience will teach man [...] so that everything he does is not by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature. Consequently we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions and life will become exceedingly easy for him. All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000 and entered into an index [...so that] everything will be so clearly calculated and noted that there will be no more deeds or adventures in the world.

(200)

Dostoevsky teases out scienticism as resulting in a human nightmare where our very humanness is erased—being as such is collapsed into a mathematical model of exactitude. The will to calculate everything by scientific or religious decree is an illustration of bad faith; it reflects the

wish to flee being as such and reduce human interaction to the re-activity of sheer motion. Dostoevsky approaches human rationality as does Unamuno and other existentialists as well as Burke,<sup>13</sup> where it is considered but one aspect of our human capabilities. “You see, gentleman, reason is an excellent thing, there’s no disputing that,” says the Underground Man, “but reason satisfies only the rational side of man’s nature, while will is a manifestation of the whole life, that is, of the whole of human life including reason and all the impulses” (203). Now Dostoevsky is not explicit about the primacy of communication as Burke is, but consider the above passage by adding “the will-to-communicate” as a manifestation of the whole life. This is what Jaspers does in discussing existence in terms of the manifestation of communication—or the self’s “communicative manifestation” in the world (Philosophy 92). As it has been remarked above, though, manifesting communication as ontologically grounded provides a slippery ground for which to evaluate and negotiate our human life-world.

It reflects our fallibility and the inability to perfect human interaction or relations. This is why existentialists such as Dostoevsky can admit through his Underground Man that although life “is often worthless, yet it is still life and not simply extracting square roots” (203). The above statement captures the existentialist orientation to life such that there is no a priori justification for the meaning of life, but at the same time a totalizing frame of relativity is avoided because life itself, pregnant with meaning from our symbolic activity, is lived with others in an interaction of meaning in existence. While on the one hand Dostoevsky could be interpreted as being pessimistic here, a Burkean frame allows us to consider Dostoevsky’s Underground Man as presenting life as dramatistic in scope. Man, writes Dostoevsky, “is a frivolous and incongruous creature, and perhaps, like a chess player, loves the process of the game, not the end of it” (208). Yet many people, as it was hypothesized when considering the Burkean parlor, reject a dramatistic or existential view of life. It is why Vladimir and Estragon want to enfold

themselves in God(ot) or flee being through suicide. Science and religion are not to be eliminated, but their goal to discover a complete account of all human actions and motivations can be seen as misguided. Existentialism proposes that we negotiate the hand we are dealt, moving our chips forward without certainty as to whether we will win the hand. As Dostoevsky writes in the conclusion to Notes from the Underground, “It’s a burden to us even to be human beings—men with our own real body and blood; we are *ashamed* of it, we think it a disgrace and try to contrive to be some sort of impossible generalized man” (297). This sentiment reflects Beauvoir’s claim that “[u]niversal, absolute man exists nowhere” (Ethics 112). We are ashamed of ourselves as symbol-users, that is, and thus we drive toward a state of perfection or entelechy instead of accepting the ambiguities which being the symbol-using animal presupposes. Existentialist literature attempts to move us toward accepting the insecurity of our contingent situations without bad faith, which would be the self’s acquiescence to the temptations of pure identification.

### Awakening to the Pursuit of Meaning

Pure identification has many faces for its appeals come in many varieties. While Dostoevsky’s Underground Man rejects the scientific form of identification so common in his era, enfolding the self into a theological doctrine is a pervasive inducement evident throughout human history. This theme is best captured in Herman Hesse’s Siddhartha, when its title character meets with Gotama, the Buddha, and learns his teaching but ultimately declines the offer to join his following. After spending a great deal of time learning from Gotama, Siddhartha’s best friend and traveling companion, Govinda, asks to join the teachings and follow the path of salvation. He is accepted, and then encourages Siddhartha to do the same. “When he heard Govinda’s words,” writes Hesse, “Siddhartha awakened as if from a sleep” (29-30). Siddhartha’s awakening is both literal and metaphorical; he realizes that if he were to join the

Buddha, he would be fleeing his own being. He had been asleep during his time with the other monks because he had tried to escape being as such. Upon recognizing this, Siddhartha does not try to warn Govinda against accepting the Buddha—in fact, he is pleased that his friend will be choosing his own path, for once—and suggests, despite Govinda’s protesting, that he be at peace: “The Illustrious One’s teachings are very good,” says Siddhartha. “How could I find a flaw in them?” (31). Notice that Siddhartha is not rejecting the logic of Gotama, only his own following of it. That is, Siddhartha accepts the validity of the Buddha, but does not want to enfold his being into the pure identification of Gotama’s following.

Before leaving, Siddhartha summons the courage to go speak with Gotama and tell him that he is continuing his pilgrimage anew. Siddhartha ultimately rejects Gotama’s teaching, he tells him, because he implicitly finds a gap in the ability “of rising above the world, of salvation” (31). Specifically, Siddhartha cannot accept this “break” in the ability to communicate the self’s Enlightenment:

To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment. The teachings of the enlightened Buddha embrace much, they teach much—how to live righteously, how to avoid evil. But there is one thing that this clear, worthy instruction does not contain; it does not contain the secret of what the Illustrious One himself experienced—he alone among hundreds of thousands. (34)

It is thus a function of the inability to communicate truth, or enlightenment, upon which Siddhartha delivers his rejection. It is impossible to exactly know how to be the Buddha, Siddhartha is suggesting, because only the Buddha himself experienced enlightenment himself. It is why in our hypothetical Burkean parlor above Kierkegaard possessed a truth but dared not demand others to submit to it, nor anyone else’s truth. To communicate truth is to simulate it,

and, once simulated, you have but a mimetic process that can never capture the texture of the truth sought.

As such, Siddhartha does not want to simulate the experience of Gotama's enlightenment, but find his own through his own actions and motivations. "I must judge for myself," Siddhartha tells the Buddha, adding,

I must choose and reject [on my own....] If I were one of your followers, I fear that it would only be on the surface, that I would deceive myself that I was at peace and had attained salvation, while in truth the Self would continue to live and grow, for it would have been transformed into your teachings, into my allegiance and love for you and for the community of the monks. (35)

Siddhartha declines the offer to join the Buddha because he is worried by the temptation of pure identification and bad faith. He knows that to become one of Gotama's followers would necessitate subordinating the freedom of both his consciousness and his person to the Buddha's community of thought and being. Later in the book, when Siddhartha describes the Buddha to his lover, Kamala, he articulates the temptation of such pure identification: "Thousands of young men hear his teachings every day and follow his instructions every hour, but they are all falling leaves; they have not the wisdom and guide within themselves" (72). This does not preclude Siddhartha, however, of admiring Gotama as a man of wisdom to whom one can learn a great deal from. For Siddhartha, Gotama is a teacher to be respected, not a leader to follow. One absorbs the teachings of others and incorporates their texture so as to transform one's life. Teaching, that is, *awakens* the self to a higher sense of consciousness which thereby transforms one's motivations and actions.<sup>14</sup>

Pure identification purports to solve the riddle of the self, though. It presents an opportunity to flee being and actualize a static state of existence, one which comports with the

properties of sheer motion. Siddhartha reflects on his time with Gotama and realizes that he was trying to fly from it through deception. He then comes to the conclusion that he is “one and [is] separated and different from everybody else,” but at the same time he can no longer be afraid and try to conceal being with a flight of fancy outside the self into “the unknown innermost, the nucleus of all things, Atman, Life, the Divine, the Absolute” (38). In short, Siddhartha realizes he should be concentrating on the existential meaning(s) that abound(s) in life, not a quest for the meaning of life. To this end, he discovers the fundamental primacy of communication—that it problematizes our lives, our goals, and our interactions.

When Siddhartha, after many years, encounters Govinda at the end of the book, he describes to his friend why a finalized telos prohibits the ability to “see many things that are under your nose” (140). Specifically, Siddhartha refers to the impossibility of two people exchanging their truths to one another. When Govinda wants to know, after all these years, what wisdom Siddhartha has divined, the latter apologizes for his inability to communicate them with any true clarity:

I have had many thoughts, but it would be difficult for me to tell you about them. But this is one thought that has impressed me, Govinda. Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish [...] For example, a truth can only be expressed and enveloped in words. (141-42)

The difference between the two men become quite clear: Govinda, after a long life spent with Gotama and his followers, “still [has] restlessness in his heart and his seeking was unsatisfied” because he continually looks for the meaning of life and is obsessed by it (139). On the contrary, Siddhartha recognizes that language itself precludes the ability to actualize any finality to such a search. For him, the fundamental disconnect is language and communication. “Words do not



express thoughts very well,” he tells Govinda. “They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish” (145). Siddhartha thus grants that we are abandoned to symbolic action within a natural world full of division, and, as such, should “learn to love the world, and no longer compare it with some kind of desired imaginary world, some imaginary vision of perfection, but to leave it as it is, to love and be glad to belong to it” (144). Within this passage is a frame of acceptance which signals a comfort with the dramatism of the Burkean parlor. Siddhartha acknowledges the implicit imperfections of such a world governed by symbolic action, telling Govinda that this “is what prevents you from finding peace, perhaps there are too many words, for even salvation and virtue” (146). “Nirvana,” he adds, “is not a thing; there is only the word Nirvana.”

Siddhartha’s enlightenment, by contrast, is predicated on the existentialist commitment to manifest a total will-to-communication. As such, he exercises authenticity. Siddhartha realizes that he is within a Burkean parlor and chooses to see what is going on and then put in an oar.<sup>15</sup> “[H]ere we find ourselves within the maze of meanings, within the conflict of words,” he explains to Govinda, who reflects on the difference between the Illustrious One’s teachings, which are “clear, straightforward, comprehensible” and his friend’s, which can be considered “strange, wild or laughable” (147, 148). Yet Govinda realizes in the book’s final pages that Siddhartha’s smile of extreme “simultaneousness” is similar to that of Gotama’s and it marks his, Siddhartha’s, own enlightenment (151). Siddhartha is enlightened, Govinda realizes, because he employs the Buddha’s teachings but adapts them to his own means; Siddhartha, that is to say, does not enfold his being into pure identification. Whereas Govinda continually *searches* for the explanation of first and final causes by trying to flee from himself, Hesse’s existentialist, Siddhartha, persistently *negotiates* the situations that arise in life by his own choices—which are, at times, misguided, but reflect, regardless, his own authentic experiencing of the world.

Siddhartha's rejection of the Buddha and his conclusions may be seen as pessimistic, but they are merely a corollary to a human life-world that plays itself out in a Burkean parlor. On this account, existentialist literature can be actively categorized as representative anecdotes that exhibit an orientation to the world which highlights the contingency and non-reason, beyond-reason and the irrationality of such a place where we have only recourse to symbolic action. It directs us toward the maze of meanings within the human universe, which operates within a natural world that it is distinct from but inextricably linked with. The situations which appear in the pages of existentialist literature present uncomfortable aspects about our condition: the inability to secure any *prima facie* cause or final goal to life; the difficulties involved in our interactions with others; and the temptation of acquiescing to bad faith and identification. All persons, in their particular situations, must negotiate the meanings in life, and this is where existentialist literature directs us. Reading these works, one is disciplined to consider the Burkean parlor to which the chance of circumstance has assigned him or her. It is the rhetorical ploy and hope of these authors to convince the reader to begin concentrating on the maze within the parlor rather than getting caught up and exasperated with the meanings outside of it. Don't fret for God(ot) to allocate a sense of purpose for you, is the coherent message of these works. For, truly, hell is other people, as Sartre's antagonist concludes in his play, but they are also, as Merleau-Ponty writes of Sartre's play, "indispensable to our salvation" since "[w]e are so intermingled with them that we must make what order we can out of this chaos" (Sense and Non-Sense 41). We can but communicate in a world fraught with peril, but we can do so patiently and with others authentically if we try. Resisting the urge to lock up consciousness in solipsistic bad faith or purely identify the self with a cause is the very foundation not just of existentialism as a philosophy, but a communicative ethics of a Burkean cast.

## Endnotes

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, by 1968, for instance, Sartre wrote the following: “In our view *Philosophy* does not exist” (Search For a Method 3).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Burke’s misreading of Kierkegaard, see Ercolini, “Burke Contra Kierkegaard.” Not only does Ercolini recount Burke’s flawed interpretation of Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, she suggests that Burke’s unfavorable conception of existentialism comports with its unflattering characterization in America (215). Elsewhere Burke associates existentialism with a preoccupation with nothingness as opposed to his, Burke’s, linguistic negative (Language as Symbolic Action 10). Considering existentialism as nihilistic is a common refrain used to critique existentialism, but I think a more careful review of the ideas and methods Burke sought reveal closer connections and a spark a more fruitful Burkean conversation.

<sup>7</sup> Implicit in this pre-postmodern connection is the chronological trajectory of the works of Burke and existentialism. Besides the contributions of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, existentialism plays out in the same time period as Burke’s written career, extending from the 1930s to the 1960s. I find in both Burke and existentialism a great deal of anticipation of some the founding characteristics of postmodern thought.

<sup>8</sup> I owe to Robert Wess, “Pentadic Terms and Master Tropes” (168), for the idea that the “Burkean parlor” functions as a representative anecdote, but he sees it as a microcosm of Burke’s methodology writ large whereas I am attempting to adapt it to existentialism.

<sup>9</sup> While absurdity and existentialism are related in particular to Camus, it is important to note the context in which he invoked absurdity. By absurd, Camus merely suggests there is no rational explanation for our being or existence, but importantly, beyond that, he writes: “the absurd can be considered only as a part of departure” (Lyrical and Critical Essays 159). This is significant for the common view of existentialism stops at, Oh, the existentialists think this world—or this life—is absurd. Taken as a point of departure, though, we find existentialists prepared to deal with a world not necessarily governed by reason. As Camus writes, “Accepting the absurdity of everything around is one step, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful” (346).

<sup>10</sup> In Signposts in a Strange Land, Percy puts it another way, sizing up humans as *homo symbolificus* (120).

<sup>11</sup> In an explicit connection between Burke and existentialism, Kaelin writes how the failures found in the pages of existentialist literature are because they serve as “novels of reaction of which Burke had spoken: to depict its pathetic shortcomings and abortive justice” (103).

<sup>12</sup> On the stature of Kaufmann’s text, which is still in print, and its contribution to shaping public conceptions of existentialism, see George Cotkin’s Existential America, 134-35.

<sup>13</sup> And, for that matter, Richard Weaver, who, as discussed in Chapter 1, find the human capacity for rational thought only one aspect of our selves—not the driving, motivating force.

<sup>14</sup> Towards the conclusion of the book, Siddhartha observes that while he “came to distrust doctrines and teachers and turn [his] back on them,” he has enjoyed learning under “many teachers” (141).

<sup>15</sup> The fact that Siddhartha ends his days as a ferryman whose job it is to, quite literally, put in an oar is, ostensibly, coincidental.

### CHAPTER THREE: PLAYING HEIDEGGER'S FOOL: TOWARD A SARTREAN CONCEPTION OF RHETORICAL AGENCY

“About ‘humanism,’ perhaps more decorticated nonsense has been written and spoken than any other single subject, including God.”

- Richard Lanham, Literacy and the Survival of Humanism

Rhetoric is no stranger to controversy. It has perforce sought to regenerate and/or renew its own justification as a study continually within the Western intellectual tradition. What distinguishes the controversy of rhetorical agency as unique is that rhetoricians find themselves divided into warring factions. It touches upon not only issues of method, but questions the very identity of a discipline re-emerging yet problematized following the “rhetorical turn” in the humanities. Whereas typically rhetoricians could organize and articulate a resistance to outside epistemological truth-claims propounded by philosophy, the hard sciences, and theology, rhetoric is now threatened from within.<sup>16</sup> Castigating such villains as Plato and Bishop Sprat or taking solace in the (perhaps) fatalistically appropriate defenestration of Peter Ramus will not resolve the question of agency. But we can begin by blaming someone. I choose Heidegger. This reproach does not follow from any paucity of philosophical validity or his moral failings as university rector in 1933; it is my contention that the hullabaloo over agency in rhetorical scholarship begins with a misunderstanding and negligence of existentialism and its relationship to humanism, which we can trace back squarely to Heidegger. For postmodern rhetoricians, the genesis of their ideas purportedly begins with Heidegger’s critique of Jean-Paul Sartre, which destabilizes the notion of subjectivity and drives a wedge between his thought and the malevolent forces of existentialism and humanism (Gunn, “Mourning Humanism” 78-80). Yet this understanding is a passive acquiescence that unfairly dismisses existentialism and its contribution to rhetoric. In Heidegger’s 1947 “Letter on Humanism,” he censures humanism(s)

as presupposing “the most universal ‘essence’ of man to be obvious” with an a priori understanding of humans as “an *animal rationale*” (202). While this may describe Enlightenment/modernist modes of thought handed down from Descartes, Kant and Hegel—reaching back, presumably, all the way to Plato—Heidegger’s attribution of this charge to humanism is flawed. As Ernesto Grassi writes in Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism, humanism “has *no* relationship to the rationalistic approach of Descartes and his attempt to found a new philosophy of the sciences. On the other hand, modern thought, beginning with Descartes, did everything in its power to obscure the importance of the Humanistic tradition” (my emphasis, 78).

In contrast to what Heidegger intimates, humanism has a rich relationship with rhetoric that extends back to the Greek sophists. Protagoras, among other sophists, invested his exploration of negotiating human experience by emphasizing how language begets human interaction. Far from privileging rationality or lending a primacy to logical truth, humanism, Grassi points out, offers a counter-statement by beginning “with the problem of the word, not with things or beings. Its concern is with language in its primary sense as a way to give meaning in a situation and to answer claims made upon man” (“Remarks” 127-8). Heidegger’s “Letter” may have sparked, as Gunn writes, the post-theory movement that “finds its fullest expression in the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault” (80)—and whose contributions I by no means wish to diminish—yet it comes at the expense of denigrating existentialism and humanism to the ash-heap of modernity and ignoring the movement’s emphasis of rhetorical themes that negotiate the postmodern problematization of agency. If, indeed, “rhetorical scholars have been haunted for some time by the death of the humanistic subject” and suffering “from a kind of melancholia” (Gunn 97-8), it owes to a mis-reading, if not outright neglect, of existentialism’s contribution to re-sculpting humanism in a new frame based on “communication

as a ‘way of being’—against the Kantian [and Cartesian] ‘I think’” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense 93). Unfortunately, as Schrag points out, “Postmodernism will have no truck with the existentialists’ resolve to salvage the ‘existential subject’ in the aftermath of the demise of the sovereign rational subject. [...] The existential subject goes the way of all the rest” (Resources 45). The impetus of this study is that it’s worth another shot. The question of rhetorical agency finds breathing room by re-conceptualizing Sartre’s articulation of subjectivity; doing so requires exposing rhetoricians to postmodern misconceptions of existentialism and reviving a more faithful understanding of the themes existentialism, Sartre in particular, articulates.

One might imagine more traditionally attuned rhetoricians who seek to re-establish a classical, Isocratean view of humanistic rhetoric (see Clark, “The Critical Servant,” and Leff, “Tradition and Agency”) would refute Heidegger, but alas, he is not dealt with, and there is nary a defense of Sartre or existentialism. While both sides of the debate generate a flurry of scholarly activity addressing the opposition, each camp has grown entrenched, accusing the other of straw(-person) arguments. The question of rhetorical agency thus finds itself locked in an impasse: classical rhetoricians worry about the postmodern implications of the death of the subject—whether, that is, rhetorical practice is viable, let alone efficacious (Geisler, “How Ought?”); postmodern rhetoricians remain uncomfortable with the residue of modernism that posits agency as the ability of a rhetor to instigate action based on a fluid sense of choice (Lundberg and Gunn, “Ouija Board”). Foss, Waters, and Armada attempt to sidestep the controversy by suggesting a “view of agency [that] privileges self over structure” and claiming to “leave to others the concern about how postmodernism or posthumanism affects the teaching of rhetoric” (“Agentic Orientation” 227), but the two are not mutually exclusive. Burying this aside in an endnote, the authors fan the flames of the debate: to develop an agentic orientation *is* to

pass judgment on how postmodernism affects rhetoric. The debate carries a significance which must be addressed and directly confronted. In terms of the agentic action of the rhetorical subject, we find, in the postmodern, the likeness of Prince Hamlet: distressed, flooded with an excess of knowledge, and incapable of negotiating experience with any response-ability whatsoever; in the traditional rhetorical conception of agency, meanwhile, we find Theodore Roosevelt's Man in the Arena: an autonomous agent, typically male, who instrumentally exercises his will over others in order instigate action with moral clarity. Yet as Kenneth Burke's *The Lord* continually reminds his naïve interlocutor, Satan, "It's more complicated than that" (*The Rhetoric of Religion* 304).

Seeking common ground, Campbell denies this "vast chasm separating classical, modern, and postmodern theories" of rhetoric, suggesting scholars instead explore "synthetic, complex views of authorship as articulation, of the power of form, as it emerges in texts of all sorts, of the role of audiences in appropriating and reinterpreting texts when they emerge and through time, and of the links of all these to the cultural context, material and symbolic, in which discourse circulates" ("Agency" 8). Heeding Campbell's call, I move toward an understanding of agency in this chapter that galvanizes rhetoric's traditional relationship with humanism but is not unnecessarily timid to acknowledge the contributions of postmodern thought. Clarifying and exhuming the richer qualities of humanism that contribute to rhetoric also signals that which should be divorced from Enlightenment/modernist notions of subjectivity. A more amenable understanding of rhetorical agency to both postmodern and traditional rhetoricians might seek to collapse both distinctions, and instead posit a complicated agentic process based on Sartrean existentialism, which locates the *possibilities of response-ability* that an individual, whose meaning is always appropriated by others, strives to make available in a particular situation. To

accomplish this, a more rhetorically grounded, original reading of both Heidegger *and* Sartre and the existentialists is essential.

In the end, rhetoric will still need its humanism, yet must neither swallow its past deficiencies nor discard them whole. Grassi realizes this necessity by asserting how humanism ruptures the primacy of logic and “takes rhetoric as the starting point for philosophizing and attains a new understanding of scientific thought which no longer is identified with derivations from necessary and universal premises. It breaks with the mathematical ideal of knowledge” (Rhetoric as Philosophy 72). It is important, then, to clarify the differences between humanistic and Enlightenment/modernist conceptions of thought in order to re-create a constitutive space for a conception of agency to flourish. Driving this wedge by no means marks a critique of the postmodern questioning of agency for it is not, in itself, a threat to rhetoric’s humanistic past. Lundberg and Gunn are justified by asserting the “threat of posthumanism (or as it is known in rhetorical studies, ‘post-modernism’) is a phantom tiger, a specter that haunts and causes great trembling, but only because it is mistakenly said to bring the plague of agential paralysis” (93). Indeed so, yet the postmodern camp has failed, perhaps intentionally, to adequately enfold the problematization of the subject back into the undeniable aspects of humanism immersed in rhetoric’s past. As Schrag indicates, “The future within a postmodern scheme of things makes few demands, issues no call for decisive action, and appears to afford little in the way of possibilities for an emancipation from oppressive power relations and distorted communication” (Resources 46). Nick Turnbull points out that rhetoricalizing the process of agency and reason, as in postmodern-influenced theories that advance anti-foundationalism, “does not rehabilitate rhetoric” because it is not constitutive (“Rhetorical Agency” 220). Creating a breach between humanism and modernism helps advance a Sartrean agentic orientation conducive to the postmodern paradigm, for it returns us to identifying and correcting the misunderstanding to



which Heidegger is here held responsible. The work of Giambattista Vico, of which Grassi is a frequent commentator, elucidates this: reexamining his critique of Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon divorces the humanistic study of topics, as Vico configures rhetoric, from the interior search and positing of truth common to the Enlightenment (“On Method in Contemporary Fields of Study” 35-9). Existentialism belongs to the former and not the latter. As I hope to make clear in these pages, re-conceiving existentialism by adapting it to a rhetorical framework constitutively affirms the humanistic component of agency by complicating yet preserving its *possibility* while at the same time distinguishing itself from the assumed subjectivity of Cartesian and neo-Kantian modes of thought. Making an effort to synthesize these admittedly tricky elements of theory and practice elevates, strengthens, and provides a suppler rigor with which to conduct rhetorical inquiry. A new, syncretic approach is therefore required.

I re-turn this understanding of rhetoric to an intimacy with existentialism by expanding upon the earlier work by rhetoricians such as Campbell, Schrag, Hyde and Craig R. Smith.<sup>17</sup> I hope to suture the controversial wedge driven into the question of agency by advancing a rhetoric culled from the ideas of Sartre among other existentialists.<sup>18</sup> While exhuming the humanistic potential that allows for identifying and analyzing the suasory discourse and symbolic exchange which lead to action, rhetorical inquiry must simultaneously establish and sustain an appreciation for the contextual economic, linguistic, and social forces that affect the creation and delivery of, and response to, rhetorical activity—whether exercised in the form of a speech, novel, essay, documentary film, editorial cartoon, et al. The ability to identify that which constrains the causal effect of rhetorical acts—what Sartre refers to in Being and Nothingness as facticity—is both vital and necessary. To maintain and enhance its legitimacy as a theory and practice, however, rhetoric must acknowledge the possibilities of response-ability for the rhetor as well as the audience in a given situation. Agency is very much, as Campbell suggests,

perverse, promiscuous and protean (“Agency” 2); and as she herself once acknowledged, existentialists such as Sartre consider humans as intrinsically rhetorical beings who must risk their agency in a symbolic process rife with complications (“Rhetorical Implications” 157-8). I maintain a confidence and hope throughout this essay that existentialism, while often considered a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of subjectivity, offers, upon closer inspection, a theory of agentic action based on the contingency of response-ability in a particularized, destabilized life-world. These qualities dovetail comfortably with the vocabulary of rhetorical scholarship, and in spite of Heidegger’s accepted reading, existentialism inherently provides a foundation for a conception of agency that benefits rhetorical inquiry. In the following, I identify the deleterious effects and misguided influence of Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism”—how, in particular, it has lavished opprobrium and concealed the rhetorical texture of Sartre’s work, demonstrate how existentialism corresponds to rhetoric’s historical relationship with humanism, and detail how this contributes to a new understanding of agency that both revives and provokes the possibility of agency for a de-centered subject in the contemporary world.

### Heidegger’s Fool

Heidegger’s disengagement from existentialism has been viewed as leaving Sartre holding on to the tattered remnants of Cartesian subjectivity. As Gunn writes, “In the Western intellectual tradition, the critique of humanism is often said to begin with reaction to Jean-Paul Sartre’s celebration of freedom” (79). Sartre’s 1945 lecture, “Existentialism and Humanism,” is thus considered the “last gasp of humanism in continental philosophy,” a legacy that reaches back to the sophist Protagoras’ declamation that man is the measure of all things (80).<sup>19</sup> Sizing things up in Main Trends in Philosophy, Paul Ricouer observes: “The label ‘humanist’ then is attached to any philosophy of the subject deriving from the Cartesian *cogito* or from Kantian *transcendental* philosophy,” of which existentialism is erroneously conflated and rendered as

“the chosen target for anti-humanism—as if it were the final, fully developed expression of a philosophy of the subject” (351, 357). Ricouer suggests that by doing so, scholars make an “unwarranted and purely polemical identification” that overlooks the “existential reinterpretation” of the subject which destroys “the tranquil unity of the neo-Kantian subject” (357). It must be recognized that both Heidegger *and* existentialists critique Enlightenment/modernist conceptions of subjectivity. As Schrag writes, the existentialists “all collaborated in an assault on the subject of modernity” and that “postmodernism and existentialism would appear to be on common ground in their shared dissatisfaction with the Cartesian invention of mind and the hegemony of the theoretico-epistemological paradigm” (Resources 45). Heidegger merely accepts credit by divorcing himself from Sartre with an assertive relish which not only conceals the existentialist anticipation of postmodern thought but otherwise attenuates the rich dialogue which ensues between thinkers such as Sartre, Jaspers, Marcel, Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir—not to mention Heidegger himself. The latter actualizes this neglect by not only critiquing Cartesian thought but conflating it with humanism (“Letter” 202-10). Considering Vico’s severe treatment of Descartes in the humanistic pantheon of thought, Heidegger’s reasoning is both misguided and flawed (see Grassi, Heidegger and the Question 74-5, and Vico, “On Method in Contemporary Fields of Study” 32-45).

Sartre’s lecture, in fact, distinguishes two opposing camps of humanism. The first theory “upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value,” which, according to Sartre, leads to fascism (44-5). The humanism of existentialism, by contrast,

remind[s] man that there is no legislator but himself [sic]; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one

of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human. (45)

Sartre offers a re-articulation of humanism, one that recognizes the sheer possibilities of response-ability that persons retain at their disposal. As individuals, our acts are both committed and purposive, but always compromised by negotiating that very experience with others. The first humanism of which Sartre speaks may be compartmentalized with the Enlightenment emphasis on meliorism with a clearly defined telos. As Hazel E. Barnes explains, “The kind of humanism which Sartre is willing to claim for existentialism does not take human nature as something already given, but as something which is perpetually being made” (Humanistic Existentialism 225). Elsewhere Barnes explains that existentialism opposes the Enlightenment in two distinct ways: first, existentialist “faith in the possibility of human improvement is not a conviction of inevitable progress” (445); second, whereas the “progress of Rational Man was quantitative [...] Existentialist faith does not clearly foresee its goal. Its confidence lies in the conviction that if it moves forward, it will discover points worth climbing to” (An Existentialist Ethics 446). Ultimately, Sartre suggests that the future is always open to doubt, unknowable, and depends on agentic action, which is itself an erratic fluctuation of interaction between individuals and *not* the providence of the instrumental manifestation of one’s individual will. Yet Jacques Derrida derides existentialism as belonging to the first camp of humanism, failing to recognize the dichotomy described by Sartre. Existentialism, writes Derrida, is a humanism because it retains an “uninterrupted metaphysical familiarity with that which, so naturally, links the *we* of the philosopher to ‘we men,’ to the *we* in the horizon of humanity” (“The Ends of Man” 131). As discussed below, part of this mis-reading is based on Sartre’s own careless emphasis and organization of his lecture, but it remains important to recognize here that while Sartre aims to re-sculpt humanism by fragmenting the common understanding of human interaction, his project

is received as but another philosophy of the subject that promises teleological progress. The result: Sartre and existentialism have been cast as a myopic wing of outdated modernist thought whose time has come and gone while Heidegger's work has become privileged discourse and sacred ground.

Tilottama Rajan describes Sartre's reputation as distorted ever since the publication of Heidegger's "Letter": "'Heidegger' has come to figure what can be kept and purified from the phenomenological pre-text of deconstruction [and postmodern thought], while the 'naïve' parts of this legacy have been condensed in 'Sartre'" (Deconstruction and the Remainders of Phenomenology 55). Much like Plato's attack on rhetoric in the Gorgias, Heidegger employs a specific style to denigrate existentialism in the "Letter." The formula is simple and methodical: exaggerate the idea(s) you are addressing (conflate Sartre with Cartesian logic); gain leverage hiding behind abstractions (Plato's search for Truth, Heidegger's quest to interrogate the question of being); and maintain an apodictic tone throughout which serves as luring bait for posterity. Like Gorgias, Sartre is rendered a sophist dunce, both confused and puerile. An intimate, personal letter, Heidegger's "Letter"—immediately published, mind you—responds to Sartre's 1945 address. Interestingly, the lecture is a reprisal of a lesser-known magazine article for *Action* he had published the year before, titled "A More Precise Characterization of Existentialism." While no evidence indicates Heidegger read this short tract, Sartre, in defending existentialism from both fascist and communist critiques at the time in what amounts to an apologia, admits the influence of Heidegger but, apropos the latter's involvement with the Nazis, declares this: "Heidegger has no character; there's the truth of the matter," adding, "If we discover our own thinking in that of another philosopher, if we ask him for techniques and methods that can give us access to new problems, does this mean we espouse every one of his theories?" (156). Sartre thus exercises a simple ad hominem to account for Heidegger's

membership in the National Socialist Party but absolves his theoretical work insofar as it stimulates philosophical thought. While it cannot be proved Heidegger was aware of or smarted from Sartre's attack on his character, we can nonetheless observe Heidegger's resistance to being grouped in the existentialist camp. Wishing to distance himself from the existentialist label is neither surprising nor cause for censure,<sup>20</sup> but I call into question Heidegger's ability to effectively evaluate Sartre's philosophy in light of the fact he never deigned to touch Sartre's 1943 opus, Being and Nothingness.<sup>21</sup>

Neglecting Being and Nothingness is a not insignificant oversight, for Heidegger, postmodernists, and rhetorical scholars alike. While Sartre directly engages Descartes in a discussion of consciousness, the heuristic of this work might be considered the degree to which he demonstrates the *failure* of the cogito and how, by inverting it, an adumbration of communication facilitated by alterity arises. Sartre declares the cogito as merely "a point of departure that throws the subject onto the Other" (338). The self is "no longer [the] master of a situation" because of the look of Other, he writes (355). This theme is most perspicuously acute in Part III of the book, where Sartre's focus shifts to the motility of language, the viscous nature of the body, and the presence of the self and other. Sartre transposes the Cartesian ideal by rupturing the interiority which the cogito privileges. As Michel Meyer observes in Rhetoric, Language, and Reason, Sartre breaks consciousness from "its traditional Cartesian texture" well before Foucault, Derrida and Lacan (29). Sartre makes this break explicit as well: "I exist therefore for myself as known by the Other—in particular in my very facticity," he writes. "I exist for myself as a body known by the Other" (460). This relationship between the consciousness of the self and the Other is brokered by an intersubjective communicative relationship through the creation and exchange of discourse. "I *am* language," Sartre asserts, adding that language "forms part of the *human condition* [...] and] is therefore not distinct from

the recognition of the Other's existence. The Other's upsurge confronting me as a look makes language arise as the condition of my being" (485-6). Despite his preoccupation with consciousness and grappling with the cogito—which should not, as it has in the past, be construed as an endorsement—Sartre can be seen as one of the first thinkers to develop a sense of alterity and destabilize Cartesian subjectivity. He discounts autonomous expression and thought in favor of recognizing the intersubjective construction of meaning. The self *offers* discourse but its expression cannot truly reflect its pure conscious thought because the communicative exchange is always beholden to the Other:

Thus the 'meaning' of my expressions always escapes me. [...] I constitute my language as an incomplete phenomenon of flight outside myself. As soon as I express myself, I can only guess at the meaning of what I express—i.e., the meaning of what I am—since in this perspective to express and to be are one. The Other is always there, present and experienced as the one who gives to language its meaning." (486-7)

Far from being a fluid sense of subjectivity, agency, for Sartre, is a complicated process facilitated by the self's awareness of and communicative projection toward the presence of the Other. The self engages the Other in a struggle over meaning over which it possesses only a modicum of autonomy. Humans are endowed with language and must rely on it, but we neither individually establish nor fully control its operations.

It may come as a surprise that there are close parallels here between Sartre and the post-humanist thinker, Judith Butler. In Excitable Speech, Butler writes: "The address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy" (26). She continues by positing a self as both ontologically grounded *and* thrown in flux by the elusive quality of symbolic action:

[L]anguage is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression. This means that the subject has its own ‘existence’ implicated in a language that precedes and exceeds the subject, a language whose historicity includes a past and future that exceeds that of the subject who speaks.

(28)

This is very much in tune with Sartre’s efforts at describing the unequivocal relationship between the subject and its grappling with language: “No element of language can be invoked without the whole of language foregathering behind it, in all its riches and restrictions” (Between Existentialism and Marxism 279). Both thinkers posit that a self or individual consciousness cannot guarantee its own expression because of the communicative remainder whose potential for meaning is always processed with others, never autonomously expressed. As Butler writes, “Because the agency of the subject is not a property of the subject, an inherent will or freedom, but an effect of power, it is constrained but *not determined* in advance” (my emphasis, 139). Agency, then, is that existential struggle in which the self engages being-with-others through communication which leads to the possibilities of response-ability. It is characterized by a tensional dynamic that arises between persons, dictated by circumstances, and is not an instrumental manifestation of one’s own individual will.

Whereas rationalist thought, beginning with Plato, assumes the qualities of language as a given, Sartre belongs to the humanist camp Grassi describes above which begins by interrogating the relationship between the self and others through the operations of discourse. Sartre’s assertion that “the being of human reality is originally not a substance but a lived relation” demonstrates his commitment to distinguishing his humanistic endeavor from the Enlightenment/modernist method (735). In Being and Nothingness, the communicative exchange of meaning also reflects an ontological disposition of our human orientation: “[T]o know how to



speak is not to know how to pronounce and understand words in general; it is to know how to speak a certain language and by it to manifest one's belonging to humanity..." (657). Sartre's continued interest with language as indivisible to human experience is captured by the contingency within which the self *necessarily* acts by discursively engaging others. For Sartre, being is manifested through the creation of meaning, which requires an outward corporeal projection and reception of discourse. "Language," he writes, "does not speak all by itself," for each individual "finds himself in the presence of *meanings* which do not come in the world through him" (660, 666). While Sartre here anticipates the rhetorical turn by discussing how the operations of language and communication throw the self into doubt and thereby destabilize subjectivity, he neglects to discuss rhetoric proper. For lacking a vocabulary to deal with rhetoric, he can be faulted for not "completing" the intersubjective project first generated in Being and Nothingness,<sup>22</sup> but not ignored.

Gunn, for instance, betrays an unfamiliarity with Sartre's text by advancing the idiom of haunting to help recover the ethical foundations of rhetorical practice ("Mourning Humanism" 80). Gunn's interest in haunting as a means of re-creating the possibility of agency for rhetorical practice is not flawed as such, but using Sartre as a foil bypasses his original contribution to the idea and drives an unnecessary wedge between postmodernism/post-humanism and existentialism. While Gunn relies on Derrida and Lacan to inform his articulation of hauntology, he fails to acknowledge how Sartre conceives of consciousness, the *cogito* in particular, as haunted (Being and Nothingness 364). The self, Sartre affirms, "comes to haunt the unreflective consciousness" of itself (349). Later he writes of the consciousness of the self: "I am haunted by this being which I fear to encounter someday at the turn of the path, this being which is so strange to me and which is yet *my being* and which I know that I shall never encounter in spite of all my efforts to do so" (481). Improbably—or precisely because Sartre is dismissed and Being

and Nothingness is not considered viable reading for rhetorical scholars—Gunn discredits Sartre, whose work “provides a necessary centrality for the Cartesian *cogito*,” and embraces “the figure of the specter or *revenant* as a haunting reminder that we can never completely reckon with the past, nor secure the future” (79, 83). This overlooks the fact Sartre first raises the notion that consciousness possesses a specter that affects and problematizes one’s own subjectivity. Elsewhere, Lundberg and Gunn, who distill from Heidegger’s “Letter” that Sartre proffers “an arrogant, romantic humanism that leads to a ruthless, righteous instrumentality,” pivot and develop a hauntological postmodern articulation of agency. “We favor an uncertain posture towards the flows of agency and agents implied by an open disposition toward the séance,” they write, “a posture that embraces a restless and roving insecurity as an antidote or even perhaps a subversive supplement to any civil pedagogy” (“Ouija Board” 86). Again, there is no protest offered here with invoking the idiom of haunting as a method of inquiry to describe or understand agency. But if future scholarship in rhetorical studies is to be preoccupied with the haunting of the subject, it should be recognized that the haunted rhetorical agent is inextricably tied to Sartre. Postmodernism can have all the fun it wants in beating the corpse of the modernist subject and problematizing rhetorical agency; accusing Sartre of what amounts to a charge of Cartesian necrophilia, however, is both dubious scholarship and harmful to future research. Considering existentialism’s foreshadowing, if not downright proximity to many post-theories—“hauntology” is but one—Sartre’s baleful reputation on behalf of the accepted Heidegger narrative intimidates rhetorical scholars from a consideration of Being and Nothingness and examining the rich elasticity of Sartre’s creative, strange, and prolific career.<sup>23</sup>

What can or should be seen as truly problematic in the pages of Sartre’s tomb is not that he attempts to advance an updated, neo-modernist version of subjectivity, but his tone and attitude towards how the self encounters the Other. Sartre laments how the Other, by virtue of

his/her presence, limits the self's freedom to render shame and humiliation. It is as if Sartre is whining about the death of the subject, and perhaps, admittedly, he is. Sartre's famous play, No Exit, undoubtedly contributes to this sorrow by the antagonist, Garcin's, assertion: "Hell is—other people!" According to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the play, Sartre should be evaluated on his discussion of alterity as an act of *recognition* rather than a detection of the pathos with which he responds: "If other people are the instruments of our torture, it is first and foremost because they are indispensable to our salvation. We are so intermingled with them that we must make what order we can out of this chaos" (Sense and Non-Sense 41). While Merleau-Ponty was both a colleague, and, as Sartre acknowledged, an inspiration, it is odd but nonetheless significant that thinkers who otherwise express disdain for Sartre's philosophy find merit in his plays and novels. In Theodor Adorno's polemic, Negative Dialectics, he ridicules existentialism as reveling in "obtundity," possessing an "authoritarian style," and beholden to an "old idealistic category of the free act of the subject," yet "honors Sartre that this [complication of subjectivity] shows up in his plays, against his philosophical chef d'oeuvre" (127-128, 49-50). Fredric Jameson agrees, suggesting "the 'ideas' of this philosopher's play [No Exit] are wholly different in quality from the thoughts developed in the philosophical works" (Sartre: The Origins of a Style 3). Derrida joins in as well, denigrating the "humanism that marks Sartre's philosophical discourse in its depths" but praising the adroit method with which he "very surely and very ironically take[s] [humanism] apart in [the novel] *Nausea*" ("The Ends of Man" 153).<sup>24</sup> These three "compliments" assume the Heidegger-driven narrative of Sartrean existentialism as privileging modernist subjectivity and ignore Sartre's actual efforts to struggle with how the self exists in a necessarily eristic relationship with alterity. Because Sartre grapples with the *cogito* in Being and Nothingness, it is presupposed that Sartre upholds the tradition rather than confronts it. His attitude may not comport with the postmodern vehement opposition to subjectivity, but

Sartre provides an early, unique conception of alterity whereby the Other's presence provokes the necessary task of discursive engagement without which the self cannot function.

Surprisingly, though, many consider Heidegger, not Sartre, the inspiration for postmodern thought. One explanation for this comes down to a matter of vocabulary: Sartre explores consciousness intersubjectively but is beholden to a modernist lexicon. In the peroration to Excitable Speech, Butler dismisses the "discourse of modernity" as "tainted" because it "reinvokes the contexts of oppression in which they were previously used" yet suggests "compel[ling] the terms of modernity to embrace those they have traditionally excluded" (160-1). Sartre, then, should not be dismissed, but updated and transformed so as to extract the rich qualities of his work which are hobbled by his outdated grammar. Heidegger, for his part, deftly creates an innovative semantic form with which to communicate that is amenable to postmodern discourse. Heidegger intimates this early on in his grand work, Being and Time: "With regard to the awkwardness and 'inelegance' of expression in the following analyses, we may remark that it is one thing to report narratively about *beings* and another to grasp beings in their *being*. On the latter task not only most of the words are lacking but above all the 'grammar'" (34). For this Heidegger, not Sartre, should be commended. It is the Heidegger of Being and Time who trail-blazes an entirely new conception of ontology, writes Ilham Dilam in Existential Critiques of Cartesianism, whereas Sartre "engages with Cartesian thinking" in order to suggest "the body is no longer an instrument of the mind, nor a veil which hides others from me, nor is consciousness the being in which I am insulated from other people" (97). Both provide remarkable contributions to how scholars consider the relationship of the self to language, but Heidegger does not emphasize, as does Sartre, meaning as it relates to others.<sup>25</sup> In the "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger perceptively questions our human ability to expressively master the control of language, warning about "the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence

of the private,” yet fails to consider language as fashioning a primacy of intersubjective meaning. “Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being,” writes Heidegger, adding, “In its essence language is not the utterance of an organism; nor is it the expression of a living thing. Nor can it ever be thought in an essential way in terms of its symbolic character, perhaps not even in terms of the character of signification” (199, 206). Again and again, Heidegger enfolds language into his search to ask about the meaning of being for beings themselves, whereas Sartre insists upon the significance of interrogating how beings *create* and *struggle over* meaning. Often a neglected part of his oeuvre, Sartre would pursue this theme continually, writing, as late as 1974, “In other words, man is the being who transforms his being into *meaning*, and through whom *meaning* comes into the world” (Between Marxism and Existentialism 160). While Heidegger exercises what might be considered a purely philosophical bent into the self’s questioning of the meaning of being, expressed as Da-sein, Sartre probes broadly rhetorical themes whereby the self’s understanding of consciousness necessarily relies on the creative, complicated production of intersubjective communication. A more Sartrean expression of being is given by Simone de Beauvoir: “To make being ‘be’ is to communicate with others by means of being” (The Ethics of Ambiguity 71).

It should be stressed that there is no discounting of Heidegger’s critique of the Enlightenment’s attachment to logic and the primacy of rationality here, only a rejection of its conflation with humanism. When he writes, for instance, “we are so filled with ‘logic’ that anything that disturbs the habitual somnolence of prevailing opinion is automatically registered as a despicable contradiction” (226), I merely rejoin that this is very much in keeping with Sartre as opposed to driving a wedge between Heidegger himself and existentialism. Two works of weighty significance in the existentialist oeuvre, Kierkegaard’s critique of systematic philosophy in the pseudonymously published Prefaces and Unamuno’s Tragic Sense of Life, presage the

questioning of the confidence inherent to the Enlightenment's emphasis of logical/rational thought. Heidegger's decision to divorce himself from existentialism can be accepted but must acknowledge a debt to existentialism and phenomenology. Edmund Husserl, to whom Heidegger dedicates Being and Time and would allegedly later expel from the University of Heidelberg,<sup>26</sup> observes the deficiencies of modern thought; the bankruptcy of equating philosophy with science; and warns against the teleology of European rationality as early as 1911 (Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy). While Heidegger's argumentative style is perhaps more strident in executing the death knell of the modernist subject, "Letter on Humanism" is consistent with the counter-discourse of subjectivity inherent to existentialism.

While much is made of Sartre's mis-reading of Heidegger—"a monstrous translation," in Derrida's words ("The Ends of Man" 130)—few if any scholars have questioned Heidegger's accuracy in evaluating Sartre. Considering Heidegger's purposive disregard of Being and Nothingness and a possible resentment owing to the ad hominem with which Sartre explained Heidegger's membership in the N.S.P., it is curious that some avail to judge Sartre based on Heidegger's limited interpretation found in "Letter on Humanism." Attributing to Heidegger the origins for erasing or problematizing rhetorical agency raises another uncomfortable problematic for scholars—there was an incentive for Heidegger to shift his stance on the subject's ability to decide upon or choose to engage in rhetorical practice. Discrediting the *sheer possibility* of agency absolves Heidegger of his speeches and articles in support of the Führer. In particular, the locus of Heidegger's November, 11 1933 address in Leipzig, "Declaration of Support for Adolph Hitler and the National Socialist State," delivered the day before the plebiscite vote to manifest support—again—for Hitler as Führer, can be expunged by virtue of Heidegger's later negation of agency. He begins the speech thus:

The German people has been summoned by the Fuhrer to vote; the Fuhrer, however, is asking nothing from the people. Rather, he is giving the people the possibility of making, directly, the highest free decision of all: whether the entire people wants its own existence [*Dasein*] or whether it does *not* want it. Tomorrow the people will choose nothing less than its future. (49)

Bringing into light this speech is not aimed at embarrassing Heidegger or showing his moral failings so much as a demonstration of how agentic action, for both rhetors and the publics to whom they address, is continually problematized...*but never wholly eliminated*. In delivering this speech, Heidegger, as a university rector, was thrust in a precarious position from which he shortly thereafter absconded owing to serious misgivings (see “Letter to the Rector of Freiburg University”). So, too, were the German people, or *Volk*: coming out of a depression, looking for something to rally around, their freedom of choice was limited to voting for but one candidate only, or not voting at all. Yet both Heidegger and the German people, in a particularized situation, *responded* to the *possibilities* of agentic action. The volitional constraints of Heidegger’s speech and the vote itself requires more probing into their motives than the cursory analysis provided here, but what should be emphasized, in examining agency, is the response-ability of rhetorical practice. Whereas responsibility of both rhetors and publics often possesses a moral framework, the duty of scholars is to, first and foremost, identify symbolic acts that enable an ability—any ability—with which to respond. For Heidegger to exculpate himself, it was necessary not only to qualify his membership, which he does in “Letter to the Rector” and the 1976 interview, “Only a God Can Save Us,” but to distance himself from the theoretical underpinnings he advanced at the time.

The passage cited above is easy to evade ex post facto on account of a mutual professional hostility between Heidegger and the N.S.P. leadership in 1934 and beyond, but to

complete the transition, Heidegger had to synthesize a critique on his rhetorical practice as well as his theoretical scope. In the “Declaration” speech, for instance, Heidegger asserts: “From now on, each and every thing demands decision, and every deed demands responsibility” (52). This is certainly keeping with the existentialist view of contingency and action. Along with Merleau-Ponty and Camus, Sartre struggled in the French Resistance against the Vichy government, writing afterward, “We were never more free than during the German occupation [....] The circumstances, atrocious as they often were, finally made it possible for us to live, without pretense or false shame, the hectic and impossible existence that is known as the lot of man” (“Republic of Silence”). The point here, again, is not to uphold the French existentialists as morally superior to Heidegger based on the value of their decisions. What needs proper focus is the complicated aspect of agentic action, which, always already problematized and situated, offers the possibility of the ability to respond. Heidegger’s apologia can very well be accepted, but his brokering of yet another teleological theorem must be questioned with more introspection. His claim to have initially supported National Socialism because it appeared to contribute, in his view, “to overcoming Europe’s disarray and the crisis of the Western spirit” (“Letter to the Rector” 62) is diametrically contrasted with Heidegger’s later claim that all “human thought and endeavor” “will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the present condition of the world” (“Only a God Can Save Us” 107). However qualified, though, humans are response-able in their interactions with others—no matter how manipulated the situation is. If this very *possibility* is eliminated, then there is little sense in exploring rhetoric at all. Rhetorical scholarship requires the ability to detect and monitor the degree to which symbolic acts foster or limit action, probing the depths of motive and the economic and social contingencies therein. Far from entertaining notions of Truth or the Good, rhetoric reflects that which was and that which is *possible* as both potentiality and actuality. Heidegger’s theoretical



retreat into the question of being and the poetics of language are valuable in themselves, but his later qualification of response-ability—of persons being able to respond in a given situation and the significance of recognizing the self as thrownness into negotiating one’s existential being-with-others—limits the possibility of agentic action without which rhetoric, as a study, cannot be conceived. Heidegger deserves recognition for his contributions to creating an ontology that breaks from the Western intellectual tradition, yet the cost of dismissing the canon of existentialism and the tradition of humanism—as opposed to Enlightenment/modernist thought—is too high a price for rhetorical scholars.

### The (Stipulated) Freedom of Agentic Action

In the aforementioned lecture, “Existentialism and Humanism,” which began as a magazine article and was later published in essay and then expanded into book form, Sartre attempts to clarify, defend, and organize existentialism as a holistic body of thought. “My purpose here,” Sartre begins the address, “is to offer a defense of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it” (25). Specifically, Sartre responds to conservative-laden charges that existentialism inaugurates a “quietism of despair” that plunges human beings into anguish. Both the lecture and the preceding magazine article, “A More Precise Characterization,” offer an apologia of not only existentialism as a philosophy, but the thinkers, including but not limited to Heidegger, who are associated with it. What invites such severe admonishment for those critiquing the lecture is Sartre, in the introduction, asserts that “we base our doctrine upon pure subjectivity—upon the Cartesian ‘I think’” (26). First, Sartre inappropriately characterizes existentialism as a doctrine. As he would write later in his career, “I do not like to talk about existentialism [anymore ....] To name it is to wrap it up and tie the knot” (Search For a Method xxxviii). What lends existentialism its dynamic texture as a philosophy is the very notion that it is *against systematic philosophy* and consists of a series of conversations

between thinkers who grapple with ontology of communication through a myriad of rhetorical devices. But the real umbrage taken with the quote, which deserves its share of rebuke, finds Sartre intimating that existentialism champions the cogito and pure subjectivity. Oddly, this reverses that which Sartre explores in Being and Nothingness, where he considers “the cogito as a point of departure that throws the subject onto the Other” (338). Later in the 1945 lecture, he suggests what ties existentialism together is “that we must begin from the subjective” by emphasizing the existence of the self over its essence and that “there cannot be any other truth than this, *I think, therefore I am*” (26, 38). Sartre fails again to employ the appropriate vocabulary and forgets to invoke the subjective as a point of departure and posit the projection of the self into an intersubjective relation of being; he only hints at this by declaring existentialism *begins* from the subjective. A little while later, though, Sartre switches tack and returns to qualifying modernist thought as he had in Being and Nothingness:

But the subjectivity which we thus postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism, for as we have demonstrated, it is not only one’s own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say “I think” we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. [...] I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. (“Existentialism and Humanism” 39)

Throughout the lecture, Sartre plays fast and loose by casually tossing around “subjectivity” and “freedom”—themes not exactly prized by postmodern thought. While I hope to have demonstrated Sartre’s innovative way in dealing with subjectivity in Being and Nothingness in

spite of his lack of facility in dealing with it in the lecture, an analysis of the existentialist concept of freedom is in order to begin articulating existentialism as a grounds for agentic action.

Freedom is a concept that smacks of the Enlightenment, meeting both mistrust and resistance in postmodern thought. Consider the above quote from Gunn, which scorns Sartre's "celebration of freedom" via Heidegger's critique, and the work of Raymie McKerrow, whose project of a Critical Rhetoric, informed by Michel Foucault's resistance to "normative structures," offers a Critique of Freedom that identifies discourses of power and "*symbolism which addresses publics*" (96-101). Derrida, meanwhile, finds the "thematization" of such terms as responsibility and freedom as "always inadequate" (*The Gift of Death* 26). "In order to be responsible," he avers, "it is necessary to answer to or answer what being responsible means" (25). Existentialists over and again stipulate freedom and responsibility, but do not re-frame the terminology in a satisfactory manner. It has thus been inferred that Sartre and existentialism, by virtue of engaging such a concept as freedom, advance the very same ideograph that President George W. Bush communicates, most evident in his 2005 Inaugural Address (27 instances). Arrogating this neo-conservative articulation of freedom to existentialism is not only mistaken, it suppresses a potential counter-statement that would discomfit those who envisage freedom as a possession to be won or lost. Rather than purport, like postmodernism, to offer a critique of freedom, existentialism stipulates freedom as a condition that inheres a rhetorical texture to human experience. In "Existentialism and Humanism," Sartre speaks of how we, as humans, are *condemned* to freedom. It is not an object that can be granted, commandeered, or misplaced en masse, let alone provide the grounds for a "celebration"; freedom, for Sartre, is a pervasive and problematic quality that reflects a particularized self who perforce negotiates the radical contingency of one's experiences with others. Existence is not only rife with complications, it provides no a priori excuse—neither God nor human nature is responsible for our actions. The

existentialist discussion of freedom is not a political attribute that can be acquired or jettisoned but an orientation that throws beings into a lived relation. It requires a recognition of the human propensity to communicate and foster action in particularized situations, and this awareness thrusts the self into actualizing the response-abilities available. The self neither automatically nor necessarily guarantees responsibility, in a moral sense, upon realizing this, but acknowledging freedom as this condition catalyzes the *possibility* for the self to become response-able in a particular situation. Somehow, though, existentialism is seen to possess a modernist texture which it by no means encourages.

The condition of freedom in which persons find themselves thrown into a symbolic relation with others, then, is the starting point for which a Sartrean conception of agency begins. The actualization of our response-abilities as individuals are both committed and purposive, and never determined in advance—regardless of the purity of one’s motives. As Hyde writes, “Existentialists speak a rhetoric in the name of freedom” (“Existentialism” 232). Yet existentialism *compromises* our common understanding of freedom, handed down from the Enlightenment, which suggests that a subject possesses autonomy over one’s agentic action. Sartre demonstrates how the freedom the self possesses is always already qualified by a struggle over which others dictate the meaning of one’s choices and expressions. If, as Gunn writes, rhetorical criticism should become “a movement to demystify discourses that presume freedom and autonomy” (“Refiguring Fantasy” 45), postmodern rhetorics need a counter-statement and re-articulation of freedom commensurate with such criticism. Existentialism provides just such a constitutive space. Sartre offers this by recognizing the “perpetual disequilibrium” of an individual’s situational constraints and possibilities; additionally, he warns, “it would be a mistake here to accuse” existentialism “of giving to man a freedom-fetish” (Search For a Method 151). An existentialist understanding of agency would reject, then, an agentic orientation that

privileges “choice because its location is internal,” as Foss, Waters, and Armada have recently proposed (221). Existentialism does not fully dispose of an agent’s choice to act, but compromises that very choice because it only arises through an unavoidable commitment to act with others. As Barnes writes, “Existentialist freedom of choice emphatically does not mean that a person can do whatever he chooses or that all persons are born with equivalent potentialities” (An Existentialist Ethics 58). Freedom, rather, is a conditional gateway to an agentic orientation that places both situational constraints and possibilities of response-ability where an individual necessarily engages with others. Sartre maintains that “one chooses in view of others, and in view of others one chooses himself” (“Existentialism and Humanism” 42). Elsewhere he writes:

the human condition requires us to choose in ignorance; it is ignorance which makes morality possible. If we knew all the factors which condition phenomena, if we gambled on a sure thing, the risk would disappear; and with the risk, the courage and the fear, the waiting, the final joy and effort; we would be listless gods, but certainly not men. (What is Literature? 242)

An agent possesses choice insofar as one necessarily commits to negotiating social experience as an encompassing being-with-others. Emirbayer and Miche’s definition of agency “as a temporally embedded process of social engagement” (“What is Agency?” 963) keeps with Sartre such that existentialism can be seen to provide rhetorical agency with a de-centered view of subjectivity by which to determine how a rhetor more fully actualizes the possibilities available in communicating with others so as to instigate action. Based on a conditional understanding of freedom that maintains the possibilities of response-ability, a Sartrean conception of rhetorical agency problematizes the degree, or motive, of choice a rhetor finds available in a given situation. Campbell defines the Sartrean rhetorical agent as “initiat[ing] a symbolic process which mediates between his private vision and the perceptions of others in order to create the

preconditions out of which cooperative action may arise. He acts as a catalyst and can be successful only insofar as others participate in his act” (“Rhetorical Implications” 158). As a Sartrean project, rhetorical agency becomes an agglomeration of the possible response-abilities available to an individual who performatively interacts with others in a given situation. An agent rhetorically *acts* insofar as she brokers a symbolic offering to which others lend it meaning and decide *how* to interpret and respond to the address.

### Moving Forward

The task for rhetorical scholars conducting inquiry and navigating the question of agency becomes one of identifying and evaluating the elastic flux of potential and actualized response-abilities between rhetors and publics engaged in symbolic action. This is not to be construed, however, as a call to affirm purely causal relationships between rhetoric and action. Whereas the historicism of a linear, absolute progression that traces means to ends conceals the vagaries of communication, rhetoric exposes the ruptures inherent to it. In addition to availing oneself and others to the possibilities of response-ability in a situation, a Sartrean conception of agency emphasizes the creation of and struggle over meaning. The rhetorical subject pitches forward in communication unaware of how, and by what means, others will re-construct the meaning of one’s expression. How publics respond or do not respond, and with what ability, is never pre-determined. Inscribing an existentialist texture to rhetorical agency doesn’t allow for a telos or a final delivery of ends through a perfect assortment of means. Meaning is always thrown into a tensional activity that must be negotiated by all individuals as a catalyst for action. As Craig Smith writes, “Existentialists are not always in agreement on their ends, but implicit in their philosophies is the elevation of a means, rhetoric” (“Medieval Subjugation” 170). Elevating the *means* of symbolic action divorces rhetoric from its preoccupation with the Platonic Good of responsibility—which, posited a priori, inscribes a moral texture to rhetoric that it does not, or

should not, possess—and inaugurates a better appreciation for recognizing the possibilities of response-ability in situational activity. A more appropriate rhetorical orientation leads us back to St. Augustine, who suggests, in On Christian Teaching, the *indifferent* nature of rhetoric. The point of distinction with Plato here is that invoking the Good must ensue or follow action itself and manifest itself as judgment, not as prescription.

Similarly, existentialism lacerates this conflation of responsibility with the Good. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The very will to be good makes goodness false, since it directs us toward ourselves at the moment we should be directed toward the other” (Sense and Non-Sense 74). Sartre addresses this specifically as well: “A Platonic Good that would exist in and by itself makes no sense,” adding that “it matters little whether the Good *is*” (Selected Writings 197, 199). The Good, for existentialism, cannot be *pursued*; it must *ensue* as a result of the self’s commitment *with* others. Sartre adds: “The notion of Good demands the plurality of consciousnesses and even the plurality of commitments [...] So the Good is necessarily the quest of concrete subjectivities existing in the world amidst other hostile or merely diversely orientated subjectivities” (200). Responsibility cannot be posited prescriptively as moral guidance, then. It is, rather, a judgment that ensues based on the possible response-abilities available in a particular situation. Rhetorical criticism would here find itself as an injunction to trace the ensuing potentialities and actualizations of response-ability and *only then* pronounce a moral judgment on the responsibility of an act.

For his part, Derrida is absolutely justified in calling into question the thematization of responsibility. It has, as he suggests, been exercised in paradox and secrecy—if not, I would add, outright abstraction so as to conceal its moral texture (The Gift of Death 27). Yet it is also important to recognize how existentialism cultivates a fresh perspective on responsibility: the term is not tethered to a call for a moral Good, but deployed as the recognition, as Karl Jaspers

writes, of a complicated “process and the choice of possible action” (Man in the Modern Age 159). Re-framing the concept of responsibility into a search for the response-abilities available in a particular situation also shifts the method by which we understand a rhetorical act: whereas rhetorical practice, in a traditional sense, envisages an individual agentic act that *pursues* a goal, we might now understand rhetoric as persuasion that *ensues* based on the existentialist engagement of being-with-others through communicative resources that are necessarily flawed and unequipped to transmit a perfect distillation of meaning. Rhetorical criticism should aim to discover the ensuing response-abilities of individuals who are limited by contextual factors (facticity) yet awash in the *possibilities* of choice that are necessarily corroborated, resisted, or commandeered anew by others. Even if a symbolic act advances as didactical or propositional in its tone, the rhetorical subject’s address is arrested at the behest of others who furnish its meaning.

To recognize the efficacy of rhetorical practice as ensuing and not as something pursued is to locate an agent as waging an element of risk. A rhetorical actor does not agentially *act* but rather *interacts* in a performative engagement with others whereby communicative meaning always eludes the rhetor in address. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “the phenomenon of communication and meaning” is only made possible by abandoning “the fantasy of pure language” (The Prose of the World 22). At the same time, the possibilities of response-ability remain manifest insofar as we necessarily interact with one another:

Language must *surround* each speaking subject, like an instrument with its own inertia, its own demands, constraints, and internal logic, and must nevertheless remain open to the initiatives of the subject, always capable of the displacement of meanings, the ambiguities, and the functional substitutions which this logic its lurching gait. (Sense and Non-Sense 87)



We cannot then but have agency, yet this agentic orientation is not based on a fluid availability of choice; agency redounds as our conditional freedom throws us into a displacement of meaning with others, always and again beholden to the contingencies that arise. Individuals actualize response-abilities, but the admixture of language, motive, and contextual structures temper the degree of responsibility one wishes to attain.

What I hope to have catalyzed here is a qualification of the postmodern reception of both existentialism and humanism, which is typically manifested askance. Similarly, a traditional understanding of rhetorical agency requires channeling the existentialist re-framing of humanism in the contemporary world. As Richard Lanham writes, “Humanism’s social task begins, then, by making man self-conscious about his motives” (Literacy and the Survival of Humanism 137). Existentialism emphasizes this component of experience, and requires us to re-examine agentic action as necessary but also intersubjectively mediated by communication between the self and others. Heidegger is no doubt a torch-bearer who exposed the deficiencies of both classical and modern philosophy, but “Letter on Humanism,” as a grounding for understanding rhetorical agency, obscures more profitable investigations. While Heidegger claims to have ended the whole of Western metaphysics and philosophy, we should ask ourselves whether he should be permitted to erase the possibility of rhetoric itself. Occluding agency and, with it, the contributions of existentialist thought, intimidate scholars from exploring new avenues of rhetorical practice whereby the traditional, Isocratean agentic orientation can be both problematized and strengthened. The work of Sartre reflects the rhetorical texture of human experience—nay, the unavoidable necessity of it (Campbell, “Rhetorical Implications” 157)—and should be expanded, not dismissed.

## Endnotes

<sup>16</sup> Well, at least since 1965, with the publication of Edwin Black's Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method. The question of agency, then, amounts to this 40-year internecine struggle coming to a tipping point, with, seemingly, issues of scholarly identity, the classical canon, and the future of editorial control at stake. See also Dilip Gaonkar, "Object and Method in Rhetorical Criticism: From Wichelns to Leff and McGee."

<sup>17</sup> I hope to specifically capitalize on and further develop Campbell's 1971 article, "The Rhetorical Implications of the Axiology of Jean-Paul Sartre." My only qualification of these scholars, whose work I consider invaluable, is that they did not go *far enough* in asserting the relationship between rhetoric and existentialism, which I will argue should be continually interrogated and matured.

<sup>18</sup> While Sartre is the particular focus here, it is impossible to discuss existentialism without acknowledging the rich dialogic texture of the movement, beginning with Søren Kierkegaard and extending through Miguel de Unamuno, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir.

<sup>19</sup> It is a charge Sartre would no doubt accept, considering he writes, in Being and Nothingness, "Man can no longer encounter anything but the human" (681).

<sup>20</sup> No uncommon thing, that, for it became a rite of passage among existentialists to say they were not existentialists—Camus, Marcel, even Sartre would later distance himself from the label. Viktor Frankl writes, for instance, that "it is safe to say that there are as many existentialisms as there are existentialists" (Psychotherapy and Existentialism vii). Additionally, Hazel E. Barnes asserts in Humanistic Existentialism that Albert Camus was never *more* of an existentialist than when he distinguishes himself from Sartre (244).

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger gave away his copy to Hans-Georg Gadamer (Rajan 56, 308n4; see also Richard Wolin, The Terms of Cultural Criticism 238).

<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Levinas writes that Sartre, "though stopping short of a full analysis, makes the striking observation that the Other is a pure hole in the world [of the subject] (Humanism of the Other 39). Fredric Jameson accuses Sartre of "cutting the dialectic off short" at the end of Being and Nothingness and leaving a number of "unanswered questions" (Sartre: The Origins of a Style 182, 203). In an interview with Richard Wolin, Jürgen Habermas expresses a similar sentiment by decrying the fact that "Sartre doesn't solve intersubjectivity in the third part of Being and Nothingness (497). This critique of Sartre is warranted only insofar as scholars recognize the significance of Sartre's *demonstration* of the cogito's failure and engage his "point of departure" as opening up new pathways of rhetorical inquiry. See Campbell, "The Ontological Foundations of Rhetorical Theory" and "The Rhetorical Implications of the Axiology of Jean-Paul Sartre."

<sup>23</sup> For more on the relationship between Sartre and postmodern and/or post-humanist theories, see Martin Beck Matusick's consideration of Foucault and Sartre in "Existential Social Theory After the Poststructuralist and Communication Turns" (149-57) and Rajan's assertion that Sartre anticipates Slavoj Žižek and Julia Kristeva (68-9).

<sup>24</sup> Derrida goes so far as to endorse the protagonist of the novel, Roquentin, who "levels the worst charges against humanism, against all humanistic styles" (153; see 160n). Again, I would caution conflating humanism with the professed Enlightenment/modernist model of epistemology. In the same essay, Derrida points out the similarities between Heidegger and Sartre, suggesting that despite the former's "not insignificant rhetoric" leveled at the latter in "Letter on Humanism," *both* perpetuate an outdated "metaphysical humanism" (see 134-150).

<sup>25</sup> See Hyde, "The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and the Question of Rhetoric," for an analysis of how the Heidegger of Being and Time, recognizing Aristotle's Rhetoric, does emphasize existence as a thrownness into being-with-others. In Hyde's interpretation, Dasein does not inhere rhetoric as persuasion, but the "enactment of *krisis*" and the "cultivation of *phronesis*" (382).

<sup>26</sup> See Richard Wolin, The Politics of Being 4, 172n12 for a discussion of the rumor. For Heidegger's denial, see his 1976 interview, "Only a God Can Save Us," in The Heidegger Controversy: A Political Reader.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: THEORIZING EDIFICATION: DIGGING THE THOU FROM THE THEY

“Just don’t get ontological. Now now.  
I couldn’t bear it if you were  
ontological with me.”

- Woody Allen, The Insanity Defense (107)

In A Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke posits the limits of existentialism: “Rhetorically, it could serve well during the period of Nazi occupation [of France],” he writes, but “after the fall of the Nazis, the particular social conditions of the occupation no longer prevailed” (254-55). By panning the movement as a passing fad, Burke touches upon a rarely considered theme (yet fails to develop or pursue this observation in full)—that existentialism operates primarily as a method of communication with which to negotiate the contingencies of human experience, not a descriptive enterprise intended to categorize an onto-theological metaphysics. Burke’s pithy observation demonstrates how existentialism functions rhetorically as opposed to advancing a philosophical dogma. Perhaps this explains why only sixteen years after attempting to define the philosophy in a magazine article, “A More Precise Characterization of Existentialism,” Jean-Paul Sartre, writing in 1960, dismisses it as an ideology and “a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge, which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated” (Search For a Method 8). “In fact,” Sartre adds, “existentialism has suffered an eclipse” (14). His later attenuation of existentialism owes to a dialectical movement to enfold it as a method by which, as Hazel E Barnes writes, Sartre’s project of a “revitalized neo-Marxism” could be actualized (An Existentialist Ethics 33). Sartre’s purpose in altering the goal of existentialism possesses a rhetorical, not merely dialectical, texture. If existentialism has been eclipsed, it is precisely because it opposes the crafting of a systematic philosophy and maintains a “passionate concern with questions that arise from life, the moral

pathos, and the firm belief that, to be serious, philosophy has to be lived” (Kaufmann 51). Burke is thus correct in his assessment of existentialism as a rhetorical enterprise, yet it should not be limited to one specific historical exigence but expanded to encompass the possibilities of communication across a broad range of circumstances that require rhetorical action.

Existentialism theoretically lays the groundwork for conceiving an edifying species of rhetoric—a genre that both encompasses and transcends the traditional Aristotelian models of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. Specifically, edifying speech functions ontologically. It represents discourse which seeks to re-position attitudes or encourage an audience to adopt a different orientation as the primary means of persuasion. Geared towards challenging the individual selves within a public rather than securing agreement from a public towards a specific goal, it possesses a thoroughly interrogative texture that brings about a radical questioning of consciousness—not unlike Michel Meyer development of a problematological rhetoric. As such, edification is a communicative rhetoric that necessitates a change in viewpoints prior to actualizing a change in endpoints. The conception of a telos, or the ends of a discourse, is thus qualified. Whereas the civic discourse model of rhetoric often proposes to advance or maintain legal and social structures for a better future, edifying speech suggests that change must also occur beyond structures—by individuals who engage the socius through an interrogation of accepted norms and the enactment of new conceptions of being itself.

While the first chapter suggests existentialism advances a neo-Sophistical worldview, here I intend to expand and develop the qualities of existentialist communication that function as edifying public address. The following will identify examples of this genre. Existentialism must be seen beyond Burke’s limited purview of merely contributing to the resistance in occupied France. While it is acknowledged that existentialists such as Sartre and Albert Camus designed a method to actively struggle against the German occupation,<sup>27</sup> the implanted seeds of an edifying

rhetoric, first developed by Soren Kierkegaard, can be seen to adapt to *kairos* across the broad contingencies that arise as exigencies in life. Karl Jaspers refers, for instance, to a multiplicity of boundary situations whereby existentialist communication begins with the recognition “that in existence I am always in a particular situation. I am not general, not the entirety of possibilities. I exist in certain social circumstances at a certain time in history” (Philosophy 183). To this Sartre himself adds: “The speaker is [always] in a situation in language; he is invested by words” (What Is Literature? 30). Considered rhetorically, existentialism crafts a unique genre of public address that encourages individuals to singularly impact the society by whom they are inscribed. For the edifying rhetor, only by first attempting to re-position individual consciousnesses can sites of resistance or particular responsive action ensue. The performance of such a publicly-inscribed communicative act is expressed solely toward individual auditors themselves, not a mass or universal audience. In performing this directional speech, an edifying rhetor renders conspicuous, or explicitly severs, the consubstantiality of a public in order to initiate this process of interrogativity. As the title of this chapter indicates, the method of this style of address is the process by which, through discourse, a rhetor draws out the singular Thou<sup>28</sup> from the public They.

Edifying rhetoric also exposes the gap, or lack of guarantee, between a given discourse and the material conditions it seeks to realize. It is why no deliberative telos is offered and edifying rhetoric remains relegated to the realm of fostering a shift in attitudes or a change in consciousness. Edification calls attention to the paucity of law and social theory because neither can ever guarantee a perfected structure of human relations. The point is not to herald the attributes of anarchism, but to suggest that social change is not homologous to creation of new laws or the changing of those which are extant. We might draw in scope, then, with Emma Goldman, who, in her 1917 “Address to the Jury,” stated:

Never can a new idea move within the law. It matters not whether that idea pertains to political and social changes or to any other domain of human thought and expression—to science, literature, music; in fact, everything that makes for freedom and joy and beauty must refuse to move within the law. How can it be otherwise? The law is stationary, fixed, mechanical, ‘a chariot wheel’ which grinds all alike without regard to time, place and condition, without ever taking into account cause and effect, without ever going into the complexity of the human soul. Progress knows nothing of fixity. It cannot be pressed into a definite mould. It cannot bow to the dictum, ‘I have ruled,’ ‘I am the regulating finger of God.’ Progress is ever renewing, ever becoming, ever changing—never is it within the law. (“Address to the Jury”)

Though Goldman was, in fact, an anarchist, her point is taken for the rhetorical purposes outlined here such that it is the creativity of our actions, not the alignment of legal structures, which foster social change. Edifying rhetoric outstrips linear logic and seeks to bring about the adoption of new attitudes and/or changes in consciousness as the first step towards activating resistance and social change. The persuasion sought in this rhetorical dynamic is not beholden to advancing or visualizing specific results, either; it ensues based on the responsive action of the auditors. As Kierkegaard writes in The Point of View, “Even though a person refuses to go along to the place which one is endeavoring to lead him, there is still one thing that can be done for him: compel him to become aware” (50). This marks the ontological movement of consciousness sought in a rhetoric of edification. Awareness, or the confrontation of one’s orientation to the social world, is the primary bridge upon which responsive action is initiated.

Rather than rely on propositional assertions that seek agreement, consent, or legitimization from a public, edifying speech features stipulations of doxastic knowledge which

challenge normative truth claims. Edifying rhetoric employs this confrontation of doxa because, as Richard Rorty indicates, it is a thoroughly re-active movement of consciousness. Just as existentialism finds within its corpus Kierkegaard's protean, if not radical, conception of Christian faith and Jean-Paul Sartre's original postulations of freedom, the examples of edifying public address considered in the next chapter begin with similar stipulations of accepted beliefs and facts. Like Kierkegaard, Erasmus, in Praise of Folly, attempts to encourage others to reconsider or interrogate what it means to be Christian. The masks of pseudonym and irony conceal the interrogative method, which strives to draw forth a moment of acute, ontological shock that severs one's Christian-ness from a function of identity. Angelina Grimké Weld's abolitionist rhetoric sought to challenge the justificatory argument for slavery rooted in scripture in her pamphlet, "Appeal to Christian Women of the South," and confronted Northern audiences by explaining how their apathy was complicit in perpetuating slavery in her address, "Speech at Pennsylvania Hall". To precipitate change, she refuted the accepted perceptions of slavery and called upon citizens, particular to the specific context, to change their viewpoint as the first step to activate responsive conduct towards the abolition of slavery. John Ruskin, meanwhile, throws into doubt the dominant social theory of the Victorian era, utilitarianism, in his essay, "Unto This Last," by demonstrating that the field of economics is an amoral fiction of one's statistical imagination. For Ruskin, social improvements must begin with a rejection of the quantification of human life. He wants his audience to start viewing life itself as a qualitative endeavor as opposed to a theoretical construct. Invited to suggest his ideas on the impending design and construction of a new Market Exchange in London, Ruskin, in his public lecture, "Traffic," refuses to capitulate and instead interrogates the audience members to ask the purpose behind the building. In each of these cases, the speakers communicate through an edifying frame of address that confronts publics in order to arrest an acute moment of ontological awareness for each

individual auditor or reader. Each rhetor discursively interrogates others so as to re-position consciousness as means with which to re-orient a public to future action.

The edifying method of speech possesses a uniquely confrontational aspect in that it does not proceed didactically to coerce or demand capitulation through judgment. An edifying rhetor throws the burden of meaning and action onto individuals within publics during the speech-act. As Craig Smith writes, the rhetoric of existentialism “advocates, it does not dictate” (168). It “want[s] people to speak a rhetoric rather than merely allowing themselves to be spoken by a rhetoric” (Hyde 231). Rorty explains in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature that “edifying discourse is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (360). In “Kierkegaard’s Theory of Communication,” Raymond Anderson demonstrates how this form of communication emphasizes “process rather than result,” whereby the goal “is not to clarify an idea, secure acceptance of a proposal, or arouse emotion, but to stimulate the recipient into independent activity” (9, 7). The rhetor who edifies admits that the expression offered is communicated on insecure ground where it may very well be dismissed or judged as insufficient or misguided. It is a rhetorical approach limited in scope such that an edifying rhetor must acknowledge up front that he/she might fail. While limited, this existential leap of edifying rhetoric is an inherently ethical communicative act: the meaning and telos of a rhetor’s discourse is deferred to others. Expression is offered to begin the process of awareness and actualization towards future change, but the individual auditor possesses the freedom to interpret it however one wants, including outright dismissal. For this reason, edifying speech is communicated affectively so as to bring about the process of interrogativity, but with the awareness that it proceeds in risk.



Jaspers considers this risk significant, for it is nothing less than a rejection of the dignity humans often assume in assigning to themselves the distinction of possessing a wholly rational being with which to communicate.

Such dignity is jeopardized in existential communication, and at the same time it remains indelible. [...] Communication liquefies all things, to let new solidities emerge. None of them may be held fast as certain; the communicative potential is still obscure, but it encompasses all we know. Communication is conceivable only with a limitless mobility of standpoints, and thus with pliant readiness to yield.

(Philosophy 69)

This risk jeopardizes the social construction of identity and meaning engendered between persons in a rhetorical situation. Often we seek to rely on rationality to suture this gap, but it is, for the edifying rhetor, insufficient. As Hyde indicates, existentialism “is rooted in [a] reactive stance against the tradition of classical rationalism” (216). Would that humans were all rationally perfect actors, there would be no need of rhetoric—or existentialism, for that matter. The future can never be calculated from either a rhetorical or an existentialist point of view. Future developments are a creative process that rely on the performative interaction we have with one another. Yet this is not to suggest humans are incapable of rationality. While acknowledging the capacity for rational thought and behavior as “indispensable,” Richard Weaver writes how our selves are just not merely limited to it: “humanity [also] includes emotionality, or the capacity to feel and suffer, to know pleasure, and it includes the capacity for aesthetic satisfaction, and, what can only be suggested, a yearning to be in relation with something infinite” (Language is Sermonic 204). Similarly, the existentialist Gabriel Marcel traces the rationally dominated view of human life back to Aristotle, considering it a false formula (Problematic Man). It is at best, according to Marcel, a psychological project that attempts to conceal “the rapport between

reason and articulate language” (24-25). This reflects, in short, a resistance to confining ourselves to a rationally dominated utilitarian view of human relations. To deny these aspects of human experience, messy as they may be, is the very stuff of inauthenticity, or, as Sartre would say, bad faith. Marcel proposes that instead of searching for a static realm of perfection through rationality, we should maintain “ourselves actively in a permeable state” of flux where no equilibrium can be guaranteed—to either the self or others (Philosophy of Existentialism 38). Edifying rhetoric explicitly taps into this flotsam of contingency, drawing out the problematization of unity between the rhetor and his/her individual interlocutors. Its aim is to bring about not just judgment but a process of interrogativity which aims to arrest, to introspect, to unsettle, and, above all, to motivate other individuals individually.

The following sections theoretically map the genre of edifying rhetoric. First, I review Rorty’s discussion of edifying discourse in the last chapter to his seminal work, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. While he accurately describes existentialism as advancing an original style, Rorty fails to locate it as a rhetorical construct and thus marginalizes it. The work of Kierkegaard is then examined to highlight the dangers of appealing to phantom publics. While his writings are very distrustful of mass audiences and democratic majorities, I show that Kierkegaard ultimately seeks an authentic rhetoric that permits a singular movement of consciousness and responsive engagement. Functioning as a rhetorical appeal, I demonstrate how edifying rhetoric attempts to rupture the consubstantiality of a public in order to speak directly to individual selves. The Stokeley Carmichael idiom, *dig yourself*, is aligned with Kierkegaard’s development of indirect communication as a method by which to enact edification. Edifying speech is next considered as a foil to communicating with a universal audience. As counterpoint, Michel Meyer’s problematological conception of interrogativity is invoked to portray edification as a rhetorical construct that privileges a radical questioning of consciousness. The distinctions between

soliciting judgment and interrogativity are drawn out as a basis of exploring the Socratic method. Edifying speech, I argue, privileges the Socratic role of asking questions and directing speech to individual auditors, but not so as to clarify the truth of a given matter. Unlike the Socratic rhetorical encounter, edifying speech suspends judgment in order to sustain interrogativity continually in flux. I conclude by consenting that edification is a species of rhetoric that might not succeed as what we typically construe as efficacious discourse, but suggest it furnishes rhetorical inquiry with a unique method to classify those discourses which solicit an ontological shock of consciousness.

### Rorty and Edifying Discourse

For Rorty, edifying discourse is a style that “put[s] the very idea of universal communication, and of systematic philosophy, in doubt [...] Nobody will predict his own actions, thoughts, theories, poems, etc., before deciding upon or inventing them” (387). We find here a creative, if not wholly radical, emphasis of inventio. There exists no a priori method or system from which to communicate a given argument in edifying rhetoric because edifying rhetoric is a creative method that seeks to stultify doxastic knowledge. As such, Rorty explains that existentialism “is an *intrinsically reactive* movement of thought, one which has point only in opposition to the tradition” (366). By emphasizing the recalcitrance of existentialism, edifying thinkers, in Rorty’s view, intentionally remain on the periphery. Rorty insists on emphasizing edification as a philosophy rather than a method of communication, yet he continually betrays the rhetorical texture readily apparent in existentialism:

[T]he point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth [...]. Edifying philosophy is not only abnormal but reactive, having sense only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation by

proposals for universal commensuration through the hypostatization of some privileged set of descriptions. (377)

Existentialism starts from the proposition that nothing is finished, that life itself is open to the creativity and responsibility of our words and actions. The claim of all edifying rhetoric, to which existentialism subscribes, reflects that we can never actualize perfected structures of human relations.

A contradiction arises in Rorty's conception, though, between rhetorical invention and the reactive nature of edifying discourse. Whereas "[g]reat systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments," writes Rorty, "[g]reat edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over" (369). But how can edifying rhetoric at once keep the conversation going yet dissipate as the conditions of a dominant discourse change? While it is portrayed here as fleeting and trivial, I argue that existentialist communication does not willingly abdicate its own contentions within an argument; it merely reflects the rhetorical view that communicative action plays out in narrow, finite situations that unfurl with meaning and the possibilities of responsive action. Conceived existentially, rhetoric amounts to singular performances of communicative acts directed to others—not so as to finish or win an argument, but as a situational, suggestive movement of consciousness that relates to *kairos*.

All rhetoric, besides, is, to a degree, reactive. To deny this would empty rhetoric of its capacity for eliciting a response from an audience in situations characterized by the exigencies that arise in life. We communicate because we have to communicate with one another, and since persons communicate via imperfect media—symbols—there is perhaps always sought, but never completed, a teleological sense of unity where material conditions can reflect that which a given discourse advances. When rhetorical public address is evaluated, there is the temptation to link

causal relations between the speech-act and the historical actualities that follow. Taken as a persuasive speech-act, rhetorical performance is often seen as purifying the exigence that arises or teleologically concluding the situation at hand. An edifying conception of rhetorical action, however, problematizes the exigence at hand. The tensions within the rhetorical situation are intensified, not eliminated. Operating as either a method of criticism or a performance of communication, edifying rhetoric thus exposes the rupture between speech and the world. All rhetoric fails in that it proceeds symbolically, not materially. That rhetoric fails to perfectly corroborate our given reality and future possibilities of actualization does not mean all speech wallows in failure, though—it merely signals the uneasiness with which communication is offered and received. Whereas “the principle objective of wisdom such as it has been defined at all times consists after all in exorcising uneasiness” so as to achieve a “spiritual equilibrium,” Marcel writes (Problematic Man 78), rhetoric can be seen as reflecting the existentialist admission of uneasiness in human social relations. As such, Marcel indicates that “one can at bottom only limit oneself to specifying directions, far from formulating dogmatic statements which would run a great risk of deforming the subtle realities which one intends to treat” (71). Edifying rhetoric thus does not proceed with didactic assertions of truth or the affirmation of endoxa but as suggestive offerings to a public that question the present towards a future which lacks any guarantee. What such discourse re-acts against, then, is not just systematic philosophy, but the thought that communication could somehow be endowed with qualities that would render communication no longer necessary. Jaspers confirms this, writing, “Since communication in existence is a process, not something complete, its reality is a sense of being deficient” (Philosophy 66). The existentialist articulation of this deficiency thus expresses itself as an aversion to persuading a mass audience through the procurement of a categorical agreement with whom one addresses.

## Kierkegaard, the Crowd, and Indirect Communication

A consistent theme of existentialism is its deep distrust of public majorities and their influence on the single individual. This revulsion is made manifest by Kierkegaard in his pithy declaration, the crowd is untruth, and is corroborated by others in the existentialist canon<sup>29</sup>.

Tracing this theme, Howard Tuttle notes:

This abstract nonentity, the public, is not composed of real persons; it is everyone and nobody, an aggregate of units who have no names. As a class of abstract spectators, it can create nothing real or helpful. [...] The individual who was previously responsible to eternity has been replaced by an equality of numbers, and the individual has been relegated to the crowd. (31)

Adapting existentialism to a rhetorical method of address requires inverting this dynamic to reveal how an individual may impact a public. The objective is to prevent persons from abdicating their potential responsive action by merely floating with the ebb of a mass public. It is not, as some might assume, a call to egotistic self-action; rather, edifying rhetoric is speech that proposes to enable our being-with-others in a more pro-active manner. Demanding interrogation, existentialism seeks an authentic rhetoric that neither conforms nor gratifies but energizes and motivates the individuals within an audience to experience a moment of ontological awareness and re-orientation.

For Kierkegaard, the crowd is untruth because it is a collective will that disciplines people to shake off the self in order to ebb and flow with a phantom public majority. “[T]he public is a colossal something,” he writes in Two Ages, “an abstract void and vacuum that is all and nothing,” to which he adds: “The public is all and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless. One may speak to a whole nation in the name of a public, and yet the public is less than one ever so insignificant human being” (93). Crowds seek the agreement of

universal truths that can be broadly projected across the particular contingencies of life. Kierkegaard rejects this monolithic stratum of human relations and conduct as “cowardliness” (Point of View 108). In Two Ages, he poses the dilemma thus:

It is not uncommon to hear a man who has become confused about what he should do in a particular situation complain about the unique nature of the situation, thinking that he could easily act if the situation were a great event with only one either/or. This is a mistake and a hallucination of the understanding. There is no such situation. The presence of the crucial either/or depends on an individual’s own impassioned desire directed toward acting decisively, upon the individual’s own intrinsic competence, and therefore a competent man covets an either/or in every situation because he does not want anything more. (67)

This extended passage conveys the edifying resistance to a rhetoric of universality. Kierkegaard suggests that in “the present age”, dominated by the democratic mass, persons have lost the fervor and zeal for independent thought characteristic of “the age of revolution”. “[T]oday,” he writes, “we are everywhere lavishly regaled with pragmatic rules, a calculus of considerations, etc.” (70). It is not a critique of democracy as such; Kierkegaard laments, rather, the dearth of authentic communication within democratic communication. “To win a crowd is not such a great art; all that is needed for that is some talent, a certain dose of untruth, and a little familiarity with human passions” (Point of View 109). While at first glance this resembles a Platonic critique of rhetoric, it is offered as the means with which to conceive a new style of communication: edifying discourse.

Kierkegaard seeks a rhetoric which does not merely elicit consent, but directs a dialectical movement of a singular consciousness in the communicative act. For him, “persuasion is not a matter between two people but is the path in the life-view” (Two Ages 19). Passing

judgment on a speaker or a speech, he suggests, is an inherently passive exercise. Kierkegaard craves those communicative acts which solicit an interrogative movement of consciousness within a rhetorical situation instead of having the participants “shrewdly transform themselves into a crowd of spectators who with the enormous smugness of shrewdness would pretend that they were the ones who cunningly and ironically led [the speaker] on to this high enthusiasm...” (73). In distinction to the rhetoric which Kierkegaard finds so deficient, if not treacherous, he reflexively describes the edifying form of address as indirect communication.

The task of indirect communication is to encourage reflection in the communication recipient. “It means that one does not begin directly with what one wishes to communicate but begins by taking the other’s delusion at face value,” he writes (Point of View 54). The objective, Kierkegaard writes in Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments (hereafter CUP), is that “the secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free” (74). Persuasion here is not pursued directly, through gaining agreement from an audience brought together by discourse. Instead, communication is offered inter-personally through variegated forms—that is, one speaks to a public, but addresses the singular consciousnesses who comprise a mass. According to Kierkegaard, his maieutic method of adopting pseudonyms “shake[s] off ‘the crowd’ in order to get hold of ‘the single individual,’ religiously understood” (Point of View 9). Kierkegaard rejects a direct persuasion model of argument, noting, “By a direct attack, [the speaker] only strengthens a person in the illusion and also infuriates him” (43). The rhetor must strike a delicate balance between the confrontational texture of edification and the possibility of the auditor’s dismissal. An indirect manner of address seeks to sustain the auditor’s attention by moving from the aesthetic or poetic; only after having established a rapport with the audience can a rhetor proceed to move towards the ethical. A communicative act should



be “approached from behind,” in Kierkegaard’s view—one invites an individual, not an entire audience, to individually persuade themselves upon listening to or reading a communicative act.

“Direct communication,” by contrast, “requires certainty, but certainty is impossible for a person in the process of becoming, and it is indeed a deception.” Because its privileges objectivity, grounded in rational discourse, direct communication “communicates right away and at most resorts to assurances about its truth, to recommendations and promises about how all people someday will accept this truth—so sure it is” (CUP 74). Kierkegaard, however, seeks to intensify the intersubjective relationship in the communicative act by avoiding direct communication, which aims to dominate a rhetorical act through appeals to validity. Indirect communication opposes suturing an agreement between the rhetor and the audience or relying on the credibility of a set of data.<sup>30</sup> It ruptures soul-sharing between persons and locates meaning as an active process of individual awareness and responsive reflection. “[C]ommunication is a work of art,” writes Kierkegaard; “it is doubly-reflected, and its first form is the subtlety that the subjective individuals must be held devoutly apart from one another and must not run coagulatingly together in objectivity” (79). Persuasion within edifying rhetoric thus ensues based on the conscious interrogative reflection of singular individuals. As such, the power of suasory discourse in edifying speech is possessed neither by the rhetor nor the ad populum influence of the crowd. It exists only in the possibility of the individual who interprets the discourse. In one instance, Kierkegaard speaks to the unknown individual in whom he seeks to arouse a moment of acute ontological shock: “I do not know who you are; I do not know where you are; I do not know your name. Yet you are my hope, my joy, my pride, and covertly my honor. It comforts me that you now have this opportunity” (Point of View 105). It is only through the individual’s heightened awareness of one’s own consciousness that Kierkegaard can claim any efficacy or success. In short, he wants you, the auditor/reader, to consider the discourse offered in hopes of

bringing about change. Any rhetorical efficacy of the discourse, meanwhile, “depends upon very many things and above all upon whether he himself is willing. Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief—in all eternity, that I cannot do” (50). By distinguishing the individual from the crowd, Kierkegaard here offers the essence of edifying rhetoric.

Kierkegaard also takes time to point out the contrast of rhetorical styles between his position and that of a politician. Whereas the latter covets a crowd, en masse, convinced of his ability to call publics together through discourse, the former elevates the single individual to “the category of spirit, of spiritual awakening.” This characterizes edification insofar as it operates, according to Kierkegaard, as “diametrically oppos[ed] to politics” and the traditional model of civic discourse (The Point of View 121). Having neither “orated [n]or thundered...[nor] lectured,” Kierkegaard does not wish to be confused with a politician because his goal is not to secure the agreement of a majority (88). Instead, he seeks to

become involved with everyone if possible, but always individually...in order to split up a crowd or speak to a crowd, not in order to form a crowd but in order that one or two individuals might go home from the gathering and become the single individual. (109)

Kierkegaard’s hostility to the crowd, whom he repeatedly considers full of untruth, is not expressed as an admonition of deliberative democracy, but the lack of authenticity that flourishes in a democracy. He cautions against putting stock in a mob orator to deliver social equipoise: “If the age is waiting for a hero, it surely waits in vain; instead there will more likely come one who in divine weakness will teach people obedience” (124). This is the danger he continually warns against—that the phantom public will discipline individuals so as to dissipate their consciousnesses in what Sartre would later call bad faith or what Burke might consider pure identification.

To better understand the method of indirect communication in edifying discourse, it is instructive to examine Kierkegaard's rhetoric in relationship to what he, as a writer, sought to accomplish. In The Point of View, one of his last works as an author, Kierkegaard recounts the tactics of his career, and how he had to employ poetic devices as a precursor to engage the audience with his true goal throughout his life's work. His goal was to describe the personal difficulty of "becoming a Christian, with direct and indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom..." (23). "Becoming a Christian" is, for Kierkegaard, that ontological moment of awareness he seeks to encourage in other individuals. Explaining the rhetoricity of his written oeuvre, Kierkegaard rejects the direct communication model of persuasion and looks to form a "communication of reflection." Much of his early written work, Kierkegaard writes, is carried out "maieutically with esthetic production" in order to attract specific individuals within an audience. Kierkegaard's project moves to an awakened religious consciousness; the aesthetic writings open up a dialogue with individuals so "the religious is introduced so quickly that those who, moved by the esthetic, decide to follow along are suddenly standing right in the middle of the decisive qualifications of the essentially Christian, are at least prompted to become *aware*" (Point of View 7). Kierkegaard's writings reflect the transition between speech, thought, and action. His own objective was spiritually motivated but he did not want his readers to merely agree with him; Kierkegaard sought to provoke an interrogation of his readership. While all edifying rhetoric does not necessarily share Kierkegaard's belief or want to encourage a more dynamic understanding of Christianity—at times, in fact, it can be used to vehemently discount religious themes—the model is consistent insofar as it includes the stipulation of terms and a communication intended for particular selves within a public to re-orient oneself to the discourse offered. Most importantly, Kierkegaard resolves to dig the thou from the they. The mass society of Christendom, for Kierkegaard, represents an illusion of religious belief—it functions as the

crowd or they which disciplines the individual. To him, only a person's subjective consciousness arrives at an understanding of a truth about God. Christendom, writes Kierkegaard, has misappropriated Christianity. "My task," he writes, "is to revise the definition of a Christian" (Attack Upon 'Christendom' 284). Along with encouraging an awareness and inspiring reflection in the subjective consciousness of an individual, Kierkegaard sees his "task" as "precisely to shed light on this scoundrel trick that to the benefit of the princes of the Church, of the pastors, of mediocrity—under the name of Christian fervor and zeal (how sophisticated!)—has procured these millions" (Point of View 125). Kierkegaard seems intent on preparing individuals with how to wield through the rhetoric of not only the crowd that surrounds the individual, but the messages disseminated therein.

Even though Kierkegaard's objective throughout his career is to usher in the truth of Christianity, he continually confronts what he calls Christendom and refuses to consider himself a Christian. The motive here, for Kierkegaard, is to arrest an individual's complicity in the identification of being Christian with other Christians as the defining characteristic of being Christian. Kierkegaard thus effects an irruption of the consubstantiality in considering oneself a Christian. The chapter heading of one of the essays that comprise his Attack Upon 'Christendom' is entitled, "When all are Christians, Christianity eo ipso does not exist." Kierkegaard begins the work by adding, "When once it is pointed out, this is very easily seen, and once seen it can never be forgotten" (166). While Burke speaks of the cunning and ingenuity of the identification properties of rhetoric, Kierkegaard's edifying communication seeks to simultaneously expose it and diminish its power. "If we are all Christians," Kierkegaard writes, "the concept is annulled, being a Christian is something which lies before the beginning [...] for the whole thing rests upon the assumption that we are all Christians, which is precisely the knavish way of doing away with Christianity" (166-7). Earlier he writes, "where all are

Christians, the situation is this: to call oneself a Christian is the means whereby one secures oneself against all sorts of inconveniences and discomforts” (27). By communicating to the singular other within a public, though, a rhetor who edifies offers reluctant testimony in the communication situation in order to foster a double-reflection in the individuals to whom one addresses.

Kierkegaard also discusses what might be considered the consubstantiation of Christendom, achieved through a discussion of priests.<sup>31</sup> The “priestly corporation which speculates in human numbers” attempts to maintain Christian publics, Kierkegaard writes, “in such a cheap and agreeable way” (Attack 151). Pointing this out—irrupting the consubstantiality of Christendom, that is—comprises what Kierkegaard calls “the difficulty of my task.” There exists, indeed, a great difficulty for edifying rhetorical invention insofar as it aims at re-activating awareness and not attaining categorical agreement. To resist the properties of Christian identification, Kierkegaard considers the idea of a Christian nation or continent to be an illusion “due doubtless to the power which number exercises over the imagination” (30). Priests, Kierkegaard contends, are those persons of authority who strive to maintain a calculus of numerical advantage that the identity of being Christian affords. They have constructed and perpetuated what he considers Christendom, “acquired millions and millions of Christians” so as to establish an identity, not a faith. Kierkegaard attempts to divorce Christianity from being a possession. To do so, Kierkegaard, writing in 1855 shortly before his death, refuses to call himself a Christian. “It is this I must constantly reiterate,” he says, “and which everyone who would understand my quite peculiar task must train himself to be able to understand” (Attack 282). Although Christianity is the centripetal force of his work as an author, Kierkegaard’s refusal to identify himself as a Christian is meant to inspire the double reflection in members of his audience so that they might re-consider Christian faith as opposed to merely reveling in their

identity as a Christian in Christendom. “For my part I do not call myself a ‘Christian’ (thus keeping the ideal free),” he adds, “but I am able to make it evident that the others are that still less than I” (283). Ultimately, Kierkegaard’s communicative efforts are, like all edifying rhetoric, not to address the public itself but rather inspire and unsettle the individuals within a public.

### Dig Yourself (Out of Identification)

By cutting through the consubstantiation of publics, edifying rhetoric does not flatter the mass. Whereas the traditional rhetorical actor may be seen to encourage publics to seek a sense of unity through discourse, the edifying rhetor does not allow this to happen. Edification exposes the ingrained failure in the attempt to truly identify with one another. It is, as Jaspers writes, a rupture: “I destroy communication by my very pursuit of it in the largest possible number” (*Philosophy* 55). This primary deficiency or failure does not bring about a quietism of despair but the opportunity to struggle with one another, which Jaspers describes as the manifestation of existentialist communication. “It is a struggle,” Jaspers writes, “in which both combatants dare to show themselves without reserve and to allow themselves to be thrown into question” (60). The dare Jaspers refers to is the risk which Kierkegaard sought to undertake—the very stuff of edifying rhetoric.

One way to consider the manifestation of this jeopardy or risk is expressed by Stokely Carmichael in his “Black Power” speech at the University of California-Berkeley in 1966. “Dig yourself,” he demands of the audience throughout the speech. This command functions as a directive to the particular selves of a public to individually struggle with the rhetor’s expression. The meaning and responsive action of a communicative act is *thrown* toward members of the audience: each auditor must re-configure what is being articulated, what is at stake, and how to respond. Even if this is not verbalized explicitly, *dig yourself*, employed as a trope, attempts to

unsettle through an edifying double-reflection where the auditor or reader is asked to reconstruct the meaning of what is communicated and then interrogate oneself with questions he or she might otherwise ignore. While *dig yourself* is a colloquialism particular to Carmichael and the American vernacular, it permeates all edifying discourse. For instance, in Letters to a Young Poet, a text central to an existentialist understanding of communication, Rainer Maria Rilke asks of his interlocutor to “dig deep into yourself” (11). An act of edifying rhetoric can be seen to communicate with a public as an exigence arises, but directs its address to particular selves within a public. As Hyde writes, “existentialists are for an authentic rhetoric: a rhetoric of the Self and for the Other (Self)” (234). The command, to *dig yourself*, is not just a suggestive phrase, but an immanent call between singular consciousnesses amidst the thicket of public fanfare.

While the conditions of the rhetorical situation may call for addressing an audience composed of one or more publics, the edifying rhetor always communicates dialogically on the interpersonal level. She does so in order to arouse the cognizance of interpellation within individual communication recipients. “[T]he very act of addressing,” writes Charland, “is rhetorical” because “[i]nterpellation occurs at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation” (“Constitutive Rhetoric” 138). Typically this is seen as the foundation of efficacious public address: calling forth a public or a people together through discourse. Charland suggests this method of suturing an audience within a rhetorical situation is a ruse, writing, “In purely objective terms, the only human reality is that of the individual; groups, whether as small as a Sunday school class or as big as a whole society, are infused with an artificial identity” (“In Search of ‘The People’” 242). The edifying rhetor tacks away from such interpellated unity, rendering public communication singular because only individuals can *dig* themselves—a public is incapable. Such a rhetorical construct is characterized by a rhetor who strives to activate

individual reflection and re-action to what is communicated—to divorce, that is, persons from the publics in which they are inscribed in order to arrest the individual's apathy. The common purview of a rhetorical situation is that the auditor is implied through discourse, as Edwin Black explains in "The Second Persona" (111-12). However, by demanding that individual auditors dig themselves, an edifying rhetor explicitly jars his audience loose from one another.

Invoking dig yourself exposes the flux between the identification and division of a public within a communicative act. While Burke writes, in A Rhetoric of Motives, that "rhetorical motive, through the resources of identification, can operate without conscious direction by any particular agent" (35), edifying speech renders the formation and properties of identification conspicuous for its interlocutors. In attempting to unsettle the particular selves within a public, the edifying rhetor intends to irrupt the tethering of souls—that is, she looks to cause an irruption of the consubstantiality which betokens identification. For Burke, identification trumps persuasion as the key principle of efficacious symbolic action because to an audience, the rhetor "can seem to have ignored rhetorical considerations" (37). As a result, the publics addressed, "in varying degrees of deliberateness and unawareness," impose upon themselves, by virtue of the ingenuousness and cunning of identification, the motive(s) of the rhetor: "[T]he persuasive identifications of Rhetoric, in being so directly designed for *use*, involve us in a special problem of *consciousness*, as exemplified in the Rhetorician's particular *purpose* for a given statement" (36). Yet by asking individuals within an audience to *dig* themselves, an edifying rhetor calls attention to the process whereby identification is often substantiated. Edification is composed of those rhetorical acts which distance themselves from calling forth an identification between rhetor and audience despite the fact that, as Burke suggests, it is the rhetorical trope *par excellence*. The risk here is that an edifying rhetor risks not only his or her expression, but limits the breadth of the potentiality of one's persuasion in a communicative act.



## Interrogating the Universal Audience

What edifying discourse, considered as a rhetorical construct, proposes instead is a methodological counter-statement to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's development of the universal audience. Whereas a rhetor's appeal to the universal audience is a calling forth, through discourse, of an audience composed of highly rational men and women to agreement, edifying rhetoric suggests this is impossible. The edifying wager, which may be purchased at the expense of an orator's own efficacy, is that public agreement, when reached, has a stagnant effect that limits the possibilities of change. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write that "argumentation addressed to a universal audience must convince the reader that the reasons addressed are of a compelling character, that they are self-evident, and possess an absolute and timeless validity, independent of local or historical contingencies" (32). Communicating to a universal audience is advanced as a revelatory practice that purports to unveil the essence of things for a public to understand and consent to. Edifying speech, by contrast, vivifies the radical particularity of existence for each individual and seeks to re-orient the auditor's relationship to one's immediate experience within the realm of social interaction.

Interestingly, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are transparent in their disdain of the existentialist method of communication. They suggest that whereas typically a speaker who recognizes a "thesis [that] harbor[s] inconsistencies which would lay him open to the charge of incoherence [...] will normally make a choice between them," existentialists such as Kierkegaard adopt various methods of address which "represent the furthest degree of dissociation to which the desire to advance every possible alternative can lead, without any renunciation of incompatible arguments" (486). The speech genre of edification set forth here does not require them, however. It is but one option readily available to the edifying rhetor who, employing indirect communication, begins with an aesthetic appeal before moving towards an ethical

questioning of consciousness. Edifying speech can and does proceed argumentatively within a rhetorical situation, yet its aims are different than the usual deliberative function of rhetorical practice.

What drives a wedge between edification and the program of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca is the emphasis of dissociation. The authors of The New Rhetoric write that dissociation “consists in affirming that elements which should remain separate and independent have been improperly associated” (411). The theoretical purpose of dissociation, they suggest, is that “it leads to a solution that will also be valid for the future, because, by remodeling our conception of reality, it prevents the reappearance of the same incompatible elements” (413). Here Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are accurate in describing a major function of edifying speech: it breaks accepted connections to which a public subscribes so as to remodel our conception of reality. However, the authors write that to argue effectively and not bring about exclusion from a public, a rhetor should seek to employ dissociation as a “compromise” and at “minimum cost” (413). Edifying rhetors, it might be said, and as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out themselves, exacerbate dissociation within a given discourse. They don’t seek to compromise at a minimum cost for the public agreement of a universal audience, but jar loose the connective tissue of conventions, norms, facts and values.

As distinct from the calling forth a universal audience, edifying speech aligns more closely to Michel Meyer’s problematological conception of rhetoric and his critique of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. “The notion of a universal audience does not help much,” writes Meyer. “It cancels out the subjectivism associated with the idea of audience, but, on the other hand, it ceases to be an operational concept, since it can only be understood as a metaphor” (Rhetoric, Language, and Reason 49). “Rhetoric,” he adds, “cannot ground objective validity in an imaginary audience that nobody in particular can impersonate” (50). Meyer distrusts the

universal audience because the rhetor must proceed in an “assertoric” manner in order to call it forth; doing so seeks a judgment which would thereby silence the problematicity in question rather than consider the new questions which inevitably arise from a rhetorical act. As Meyer sees it, “Playing with the problematological character of discourse, the locutor produces an answer, knowing it is a request, a request directed to the Other for another answer, a request that immanent in the first answer” (99). Edification also proceeds as a problematological request, and, by risking its request to the freedom of the other, edifying rhetoric becomes a thoroughly affective and interrogative communicative act to singular others as opposed to the reaching of an agreement with a universal audience.

Edifying speech thus assumes Meyer’s call for a radical, interrogative questioning as the basis of rhetorical address. Because the edifying rhetor attempts to spark within the auditor a moment of acute, ontological shock, such rhetoric causes a radically immanent questioning of oneself. To wit, Meyer writes:

When one does put a question to someone, the other must become aware that he is in question, that he must justify himself by adopting a definite standpoint on the very question as he justifies his answer. A speaker is all the more convincing when he leaves the conclusion to the other to draw, rather than immediately supplying him with the answer and leaving him with little choice in the matter.<sup>32</sup>

(Problematology 223)

Rather than securing agreement from an audience, then, the rhetoric which Meyer advances throws each auditor into a process of interrogative questioning in order to share in the creation of meaning.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, this is what the edifying rhetor demands: activating the auditor’s role in the rhetorical situation so that he or she might channel the discourse spoken, interrogate it, attempt to furnish it with meaning, and then actively respond in the future. To bring this about, however,

requires challenging the audience as a whole because the rhetor must elicit the interrogation of each auditor individually.

Such an argumentative method explicitly rejects Aristotle's advice in the Rhetoric. He warns against interrogative techniques, writing that "if the opponent resists, you seem to be [already] defeated; for it is not possible to ask a series of questions because of the [mental] weakness of the audience" (3.18.4). For Aristotle, an interrogative questioning must only be pursued if "the balance of truth is in one's favor" (3.18.6). An argument by edification proceeds otherwise; it tacks away from what is typically considered the arrangement of efficacious discourse in order to heighten the tension of the rhetorical encounter through interrogativity—both in the speaker's discourse and the auditor's reception of it. Moreover, the edifying rhetor admits up front that truth is not necessarily on the speaker's side—at least to the extent that edification challenges accepted truths and norms. The risk of exclusion is thus always present since the auditor may grow alienated or chastened and dismiss the edifying rhetor. The rhetorical transaction in edifying discourse is that while immersed in the communicative act, listeners must process the expression and begin to question themselves. In composing and communicating an edifying address, then, it is incumbent upon the rhetor to seek ways in which to confront individuals within a public without having audience pass judgment too quickly. Kierkegaard's development of indirect communication is one such way—a stylistic appeal to which an audience is first treated to an aesthetic display of poetics. A delicate balance must be struck in order to challenge the auditor through a frame of interrogativity but not lose those to whom one is addressing to dismissal.

There is a subtle difference between eliciting interrogation and making a judgment worth exploring in a rhetorical act as well. Aristotle, for instance, suggests "rhetoric is concerned with making a judgment" (2.1.2). Edifying speech moves us away from judgment, however. While

casting judgment requires an act of individual preference, it is inherently passive since an auditor can maintain a disengagement from the discourse presented. As mentioned above, audiences can limit themselves to merely passing judgment on the speaker's ethos if they choose. Interrogation, by contrast, entails an act of deliberating self-consciousness by the other in the processing of a rhetor's given discourse. Whereas calling forth a universal audience solicits judgment, often bifurcated, in order to reach agreement, a rhetoric of interrogativity demands a movement of consciousness that cannot be grounded in the evaluation of ethos. As Raymond Anderson writes, "The persuasive speaker seeks to capitalize on *ethos*; the edifying speaker seeks to minimize it" (5). In the edifying rhetorical encounter, the auditor is directed to internalize the expression and then re-orient oneself to the message. Passing judgment deflects back to the speaker or her discourse, but interrogation engages the auditor as a necessary participant in what that message will mean going forward. As Meyer writes, "A judgment has a validity that is independent of the situation which brings it forth, whereas interrogation is circumstantial; it ensues from a contingent occasion linked to given individuals in a particular situation, and truth cannot depend on it" (Rhetoric 70). Elsewhere he notes that "judgment represses interrogativity (hence its autonomy) to the benefit of an essence which justifies what it says as being true, that is, not false" (Problematology 94). Notice how Meyer suggests judgment privileges essences, justificatory discourse, and that which is true as opposed to interrogation, which is directed towards the contingent and the particular engagement of the other. His critique of judgment stems from the fact that casting or passing judgment on a matter purports to eliminate the problematicity of a given discourse, which, in Meyer's view, can never be fully resolved. The very nature of language—and how it is operationalized in communication—precludes the ability to arrive at a telos, according to Meyer. It is why he also levels of a critique of Plato, who seeks "precisely a conception of answerhood which eliminates any possible reference to the

problematicity of a statement” (Problematology 79). Yet the figure of Socrates, in the Platonic dialogues, privileges questioning and the dialogic encounter (Bahktin; Grano), which might be considered edifying discourse or resembling problematology, so how might we reconcile such contradictory elements? Can not Socrates be considered an edifying rhetor? In a word, no. Meyer’s judgment/interrogativity distinction clears this up. In the next section, I suggest that Socrates may resemble edifying rhetoric such that he engages only individual interlocutors and exercises the use of the question, but whereas edifying rhetors solicit an interrogation of the other’s consciousness, Socrates, in Plato’s re-telling, seeks only to bring about clarification towards judgment.

### Exploring the Socratic

In the Gorgias, Socrates explains to Polus, Gorgias’ student, that he distrusts rhetoric because it seeks to persuade an audience without fully being aware of a discourse’s content. In a philosophical engagement, on the contrary, Socrates says he only has to

know how to produce one witness to the truth of my assertions, the man himself with whom I am holding the argument (the others, the mob, I can dispense with); and I do know how to put the vote to one man at a time, though I will not hold conversations with a crowd. (474)

In the Apology, similarly, Socrates tells the audience that it might seem “strange that I do go around counseling these things and being a busybody in private, but that in public I do not dare to go up before the multitude to counsel the city” (31c). It is unmistakably clear that, despite Plato’s readership in the last 2,000-plus years, Socrates wants to have no truck with the hoi-polloi. On the one hand, Socrates resembles edifying discourse in that he distrusts crowds and the mob. Notice how he quite literally dispenses with the crowd; a rhetorical act of public speech, Socrates declares, is beneath him. Despite this initial likeness, edifying speech offers a

counterpoint to Socrates: while one should be aware of the dangers of ad populum fallacies and the static quality of mass agreement,<sup>34</sup> it is still vital to address publics confronted with an impending exigence. One should not fear or dismiss the need to engage a rhetorical situation, but operate *within* the occasion in order to elicit the process of interrogativity for others. Socrates refuses to hold a conversation with a crowd...except, that is, when he has to defend himself in court, which comprises Plato's Apology.

Socrates discursively draws out the individual from the jury in his trial, keeping with the methods of edifying speech. In Heidegger's reading, Plato intimates, through Socrates, that rhetoric is about clearing an ontological foundation for the directing of another's soul (Plato's Sophist). In edifying speech, we have the same ontological clearing, but its purpose is a movement of interrogative consciousness for which there are no ready made answers that resolve the exigence. The auditor must decide what orientation he or she wishes to adopt and whether and in what manner to responsively act. Socrates differs in the Apology by "beg[ging]" the jurors to

leave aside the manner of my speech—for perhaps it may be worse, but perhaps better—and instead consider this very thing and apply your mind to this: whether the things I say are just or not. For this is the virtue of a judge. (18a)

Earlier, he accuses his accusers of having "said little or nothing true, while from me you will hear the whole truth" (17b). That is, Socratic rhetoric is offered as a test of validity of what might be deemed the truth. One wins an argument insofar as an agreement is commensurate with an approval of the terms to be validated. The wedge between Socratic and edifying speech is that the former seeks to determine the validity of a given issue to which he, Socrates, and his interlocutor engage. As Grano notes vis-à-vis Bakhtin, the Socratic method is "aimed at testing truth and undermining false conceit" (7). Zappen, also drawing from Bakhtin, describes Socratic

rhetoric as that which tests “people and ideas, not a means of persuading others to accept his ideas, thus imposing his ideas upon them” (66). Socrates’ objective, mapped out in the Gorgias and quoted above, is to produce truth witnesses. While he may deploy a set of questions in the dialectical encounter so as to challenge an interlocutor, it does not amount to Meyer’s conception of radical questioning as the basis of a rhetoric because Socrates continually seeks a clarification towards a more general conclusion.

Questions, in the Socratic encounter, are deployed in order to secure answers which would teleologically solve a dilemma. The use of questions themselves, however, do not necessarily translate to Meyer’s construct of rhetorical questioning. For Meyer, questioning is not just the method, but the objective: “The more the speaker uses explicit interrogatives, the more has judged his statement to be problematical; he takes on as his own task the posing of questions which his listener could or would have posed” (Problematology 247). Yet even in Plato’s aporetic dialogues, which are heralded as a more ironic display of playful ignorance and non-knowledge (Vlastos), Socrates interrogates his foils through anacrisis, “a means for eliciting and provoking the words of one’s interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly” (Bakhtin 110, quoted in Grano 8). In doing so, Socrates remains beholden to a Perelman and Aristotelian frame of mere agreement. The Socratic method should be seen as thoroughly teleological as opposed to edifying discourse, which seeks a residual transformation of consciousness suspended in the flux of meaning. The exchange of discourse is always a messy affair, and it is through the negotiation of this muck which we collectively share our experiences and transform them into future action. Meaning never rests from an edifying and problematological viewpoint; the struggle is forever on-going. Dialectic, however, suggests that meaning can somehow be completed in acts of discursive exchange.<sup>35</sup> As such, Meyer finds that “Dialectic [ultimately] ceases to be interrogative, and instead becomes the method (episteme) for



arriving at the answer, at that which is valid in truth in reality” (Problematology 72). Meyer considers Socrates as suffering from a need to tease an argument toward its completion, whose interest is only “in resolving problems, closing off the question—[through] methods of resolution” (96). In contradistinction, edifying speech exacerbates the dissociative tension or problematicity of a rhetorical situation and leaves meaning continually pursued in the ongoing exchange.

Since a problematological orientation which aligns with existentialism implies that meaning is continually transformed in permanent flux, resolving a particular exigence is not the telos sought in a rhetorical act. The objective of the rhetorical situation in edifying discourse amounts to the very act of addressing that particular exigence in order to generate an interrogative conversation with the individuals of a public. It is comfortable with the ambiguity of meaning and agrees to negotiate it with others in a permeable state. Up until now I have suggested, drawing from Meyer, that Socrates, whether assuming the airs of madcap ironist or serious apologist, seeks the clarification of terms so as to finalize meaning in the dialectical encounter. Yet if Meyer’s problematological design has merit, ultimately, Socrates will be dissatisfied with this process—and he often is. Whenever meaning is threatened in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates himself feels threatened by this crisis. The Socratic mask of irony, I’m suggesting, is a screen to veil the sheer horror of contingency and the irresolute, wholly discursive texture of meaning. Edifying rhetoric employs irony as well, but does so in order to intensify the struggle over meaning. We find over and over again, however, that Socrates feels exposed by the fallibility of the dialectical encounter to secure meaning. As such, he goes on the attack like a wounded animal. Socrates maintains a playful tone, but he betrays exasperation about the exchange of discourse as thoroughly objectionable. After growing perturbed with Protagoras’ inability to articulate conceptions of the role of the sophist, virtue, and poetry,

Socrates sighs: “It is the truth, and our minds, we should be testing. If you want to go on with your questions, I am ready to offer myself as an answerer; or if you prefer, be my respondent, to bring to conclusion the discussion which we broke off in the middle” (Protagoras 348a). Socrates is visibly irritated by the lack of closure in the discussion. He wants meaning, damn-it, and he wants it now. This crisis of meaning and its resulting Socratic sting is also apparent in his critique of Agathon’s eulogy about love in the Symposium. With the Socratic gift of mock deprecation and playful ostentation (Vlastos), he exclaims:

I was so naïve that I thought the point of any eulogy was to tell the truth about the subject! I thought that, with the truth before you, you were supposed to select from among the facts the ones that were most to your subject’s credit and then present them so as to show him in the best possible light. [...] What you do is describe your subject in the most generous and glowing terms, whether or not there’s any truth to them. It needn’t bother you if you’re making it up. Our assignment apparently means that each of us is to deliver a specious eulogy of Love, rather than actually praise him. (198d-e)

Continuing this playful dance of condescension, Socrates asks Phaedrus if it would be acceptable if he, Socrates, could dispense with declamation or form and deliver a speech “which tells you the truth about Love and lets words and phrases out in any old order?” (199b). While Socrates is flexing his acerbic wit leading up to his speech, it masks how very threatened Socrates is by the struggle for definition and the validity of the terms in question. He wants to grasp the meaning of love with clarity and without pretense—a cue, it would seem, for the deficient gaps inherent to rhetorical discourse. Socrates can be seen as a rhetorical figure who closely resembles yet ultimately differs from edifying rhetoric. So what, then, might edifying rhetoric look like?

## Endnotes

<sup>27</sup> Burke's reasoning is as follows: existentialism couched their sites of resistance as a literary movement concerned with the aesthetic as a way to elude censorship yet indirectly or simultaneously curry support (254). "The movement had relevance," Burke writes wistfully if not condescendingly, "as the translation of a political predicament into 'cosmological' terms" (255). He goes on to suggest that after the War, existentialism founded a dialectical movement that could be "reduced to suicide." The objective here, in mapping a theoretical construct of edification, is to harness the rhetorical strategies of existentialism's rhetoric of resistance and project them broadly onto exigencies that may arise.

<sup>28</sup> In a broader sense, the speech genre described here relies upon and adapts the word of Martin Buber, who calls for the I to speak to a Thou, not an It. Writing on Buber, Czubaroff suggests a clear distinction between instrumental rhetoric, which is pragmatic and geared towards an epistemological orientation, and dialogic rhetoric, which flourishes on an existential-ontological nexus of situating the self with the other (174-76). My work aims to adapt the dialogic encounter, which is often described interpersonally, to rhetorical situations that involve mass publics.

<sup>29</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche's description of the herd instinct in The Gay Science; Jose Ortega y Gasset's characterization of the mass-man in The Revolt of the Masses; and Heidegger's discussion of the they in Being and Time.

<sup>30</sup> "In a logical system," writes Kierkegaard, "nothing may be incorporated that has a relation to existence, that is not indifferent to existence" (CUP 110).

<sup>31</sup> This is not unlike Burke's conception of the priestly function of upholding the status quo in Attitudes Toward History.

<sup>32</sup> Meyer expresses a similar, though no less instructive, thought in Rhetoric: "An argument is all the more convincing for a given person (or group of persons) when this person is led to draw the conclusion for himself (or herself). The force of an argument varies directly with the freedom left to the addressed individual: the arguments that are imposed are seldom convincing; an argument is all the stronger when the addressee is free to reject it" (51).

<sup>33</sup> As Meyer writes in Rhetoric, "Meaning is neither the answer nor the question but the link between question and answer" (91). Because we rely on the exchange of discourse to negotiate experience, rhetoric, for Meyer, locates humans as forever suspended in the struggle over meaning.

<sup>34</sup> Ober notes the ad populum fallacy was a real danger to Athenian democracy, to which Demosthenes represents the epitome of rhetoric that merely flatters the prevailing majority: "But it is not the speech (logos) of a rhetor, Aeschines, or the power of his voice which are his worth, but it lies rather in his preference for the same things as the many and in his hating and loving the same things as his homeland. Having such a disposition, everything a man says will be patriotic" (quoted in Ober 167).

<sup>35</sup> It is here Grano, it would seem, disagrees. "In Socratic practice," he writes, "an interpenetration of voices produces unfinalizable dialogue, as evidenced by various textual collisions between Socrates's interior voice and the exterior voices of others (diviners, interlocutors) that cannot settle into a dogmatic one-sidedness" (10). While it is admitted that Plato's dialogues can be interpreted as inhabiting a world of endless, dialogical play, this does not appear to either Plato or Socrates' intent. A key feature consistent throughout the Platonic universe—across the early aporetic dialogues to the later, more didactic ones such as the Republic—is that Socrates insists on having others clarify their terms so as to answer the problem. Note: this Socratic critique, taken holistically, is not an effort to impugn the Socratic method found in Plato's dialogues, but only to draw out the differences between it and edifying discourse. The two remain, as outlined above, closely related; using Socrates as a foil is but the means to more clearly articulate the theoretical mapping of edification.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE RISKS OF EDIFYING PUBLIC ADDRESS: A GUIDE

Most of my endeavor has always been to  
unsettle my neighbors, to rouse their hearts,  
to afflict them with what I can.

- Miguel de Unamuno, Perplexities and Paradoxes (5)

Every act of communication implicitly  
affirms the possibility of communication.

- Stephen Howard Browne, Angelina Grimké (80)

The previous chapter theoretically mapped out the contours of an edifying rhetoric. This chapter explores examples of what such a method of public address looks like. My objective here is to identify and analyze rhetorical acts that are delivered through an edifying frame and to examine, in particular, works not typically associated with existentialism. The work of Erasmus, Angelina Grimké Weld and John Ruskin is considered here as rhetoric which edifies. Each rhetor challenges accepted norms in order to spark a reflection of consciousness in the individuals of the public to whom they address. In edifying rhetoric, soliciting a sharp questioning of the self marks the necessary first step towards activating a future movement of praxis in others. Edification is endowed with risk and often fails historically in a causal manner for the rhetor addresses the exigence of a situation without visualizing a specific endpoint. The edifying rhetor is she who admits to not being able to guarantee a teleological description of actualized structures which will commence in the future. Edifying speech concentrates on the means, not the ends, of a rhetorical act; it operates solely on the level of appealing to other consciousnesses in hopes of bringing about an acute ontological moment of awareness and reflection in others. It is within this communicative dynamic that the consubstantiality of a public is divorced from itself with the hope that individuals or citizens can negotiate their social experience with more committed, responsible actions. An edifying act of rhetoric, moreover, does not advance so as to

bring closure to a given exigence but to intensify the problematicity of a situation. It is a call not just for agreement or change, but emphasizes a need to re-orient the other's attitude or consciousness in a particular location at a particular time. The heuristic of analyzing Erasmus, Grimké and Ruskin is such that despite our divorce from the particularity of their communicative acts, we may trace and perhaps feel the dynamic, arresting qualities latent in edifying rhetoric.

The edifying frame of rhetoric inherent to existentialism, the view here suggests, should serve as the movement's legacy. It may not be seen as a profitable enterprise towards purchasing an efficacious impact on publics, but functions as a valuable rhetorical tool to help future rhetorical actors invent, arrange, and stylize their discourse suited to individuals within a public. As the examples here demonstrate, adopting an edifying frame often results from the failure of the civic model of deliberation. That is, edification offers another avenue or method with which to impact persons. Desiderius Erasmus, for instance, jettisoned his didactic communicative style and shifted to an edifying frame in Praise of Folly, published amidst the controversial period of the Reformation. A satirical tract written for his friend, Sir Thomas More, Praise of Folly reflects his wish to negotiate the concerns about the Catholic Church: rather than have it implode by the impending Lutheran revolution, Erasmus, through the wit of a divine pseudonym, cultivates a re-conception of Christian faith in which a change of consciousness could better organize the Church and pacify those expressing serious grievances. His project failed in that he was assailed by both Catholics and Protestants alike during his life. The Reformation, moreover, did split Europe, and by 1559, twenty-three years after his death, Erasmus' works were banned by Rome and all throughout Europe (Levi 29). Slavery, likewise, was not abolished through Grimké's rhetoric of the 1830s—it was, in fact, prolonged and expanded until the Civil War—yet her acts of public communication stand out as encouraging her contemporaries to challenge apathy and create sites of resistance whereby those to whom she addressed might find “satisfaction of

having done what [they] could” (323). It was not an indulgent enterprise but the sincere commitment of one’s effort to redress the sins of slavery, which, for Grimké, began with a challenge to the consciousnesses of those unknowingly complicit in perpetuating slavery. Then we have Ruskin, who protested against utilitarianism and theories about the political economy. These ideas were, in fact, energized by the Anglo-American emphasis on Social Darwinism in the late 1800s, yet it was Ruskin’s series of essays, which comprise Unto This Last, that sparked a moment of arresting consciousness for a young Mohandas K. Gandhi—inspiring him to return from South Africa to his native India. One resorts to edifying rhetoric, it would seem, when legal and social structures prove ineffectual. The implementation of edifying rhetoric reflects the need for a change in consciousness or attitudes, not merely the altering of preexisting social norms.

While each rhetor considered here navigates a unique spatial and temporal exigence—and indeed, it will become clear, unsuccessfully so—their contributions remain heuristically solvent insofar as the rhetorical performances elevate individual awareness and prepare the groundwork for individuals to engage praxially within a public sphere. Rhetoric should not be seen as only that which is historically efficacious. What residue of their work remains open for study and/or celebration as “good oratory,” I suggest, is that in reading their rhetoric today, one finds arresting moments of consciousness which cause a renewed questioning of the self. Though any rhetorical situation depends on a particular exigence and none of these writers, it would seem, composed for posterity, the works of Erasmus, Grimké, and Ruskin remain fresh because they ontologically strike later readers into a problematological questioning of the self’s orientation to spirituality, race, and economics adapted to the present. Then as now, the future remains open to deliberation which constitutes, as Aristotle wrote in the Rhetoric, “whatever, by their nature, are within our power [to change] and of which the inception lies within us” (1.4.3). In edifying rhetoric, change begins with a movement of consciousness—and even then, there are

no assurances or guarantees that evaluating consciousness will move in a manner commensurate with the rhetor's objectives. This movement, however, marks the first step of empowering agency in others.

### Erasmus and the Goddess of Edification

In 1504, Erasmus of Rotterdam published Enchiridion Militis Christiani, which translates to the Handbook of the Christian Soldier. One of his first written works, the Enchiridion serves as a strict and didactic “moral ‘how-to’ book” for Christians to become more authentically spiritual (Rummel 138). In a 1518 prefatory letter added to a later publication of the Enchiridion, Erasmus betrays his objective: “I could see that the common body of Christians was corrupt not only in its affections but in its ideas” (138). Specifically, he intended to challenge “those people, I mean, who reek of earthly things and twist the Gospel teaching to serve earthly appetites, compelling it to be the slave of human ambition and to enhance their own discreditable gains and their despotic rule” (139). According to Levi, the “whole background” of the Enchiridion “was neo-platonist, from the Socratic exhortation to self-knowledge to the psychology of spiritual progress” (24). Erasmus delivers his instructions in an assertive manner. Yet the didactic, logical-driven model of persuasion ultimately fails Erasmus in this early work. Later, instead of playing the scold, he sought a new manner with which to communicate his evangelical humanism—and found one, on a 1509 English retreat to Thomas More's estate, where he composed Praise of Folly, which was published in 1511. As Erasmus would write in a public apologia for Folly addressed to the disapproving theologian, Martin Dorp,

My aim in Folly was exactly the same as in my other works. Only the presentation was different. In the Enchiridion I simply outlined the pattern of Christian life. [...] And in Folly I expressed the same ideas as those in Enchiridion, but in the

form of a joke. I wanted to advise, not to rebuke, to do good, not injury, to work for, not against, the interests of men. (Folly 215)

The objective in reviving an analysis of Folly here is to demonstrate how Erasmus did not merely write a joke, as he insists, but adopts, in his most enduring work, an edifying frame of rhetoric.

To show the contrast between the frames in which Erasmus communicated, first consider the Enchiridion. It reads as a series of rhetorical questions and epistles that operate through the construction of polemical syllogisms: “What good is it that a few grains of salt have been put on your tongue if your soul remains unsalted? The body has been annointed [*sic*], but the soul remains unannointed” (144). This increasingly predictable formula often comprises Erasmus’s claims, and the rhetor functions as a scold.

You gaze with awe at what is purported to be the tunic or shroud of Christ, and [yet] you read the oracles of Christ apathetically? You think it is an immense privilege to have a tiny particle of the cross in your home. But that is nothing compared to the mystery of the cross. (145)

Religion is articulated here as an ongoing individual quest whose purpose is never actualized in the visible world, which Erasmus would also pursue in Folly. Any claims to a perfect finalization of spirituality are deemed in-authentic. Erasmus is dissatisfied with the observance of what he calls “silly little ceremonies, instituted by mere men” (151). Rather than encouraging a moment of ontological awareness for the reader to consider, he attempts to describe the faults of his audience: “You venerate the wood of the cross; better to follow the mystery of the cross” (152). An individual’s relation to objects cannot establish faith by itself, Erasmus suggests—only an inner-reflection of the subject can bring this about: “Do not tell me now that charity consists in being an assiduous churchgoer, prostrating yourself before the statues of the saints, lighting candles, and repeating a certain number of prayers. God has no need of this” (150). Again,



Erasmus disputes and rallies against the conspicuousness of religion as opposed to how he conceives of the individual's subjective relationship with spirituality, yet he does so from a privileged ethos whereat he, Erasmus, a theologian, delivers knowledge as a possession rather than a process.

Erasmus's tone in the Enchiridion scoffs at his readership, singling them out, individually, as in-authentic. While Erasmus seeks to encourage a more authentic re-conception and form of Christianity, his method of address belittles the reader and orients a hostile relationship between rhetor and auditor. He relies on guilt and shame to incite his reader to change. The following affirmations provide a glimpse of the kind of explicit admonishment that Erasmus' instruction offers: "With greatest care must you repair the bankruptcy of the soul" (143); "If you confide in him without reflecting...God will hate your gross and flabby religion" (144); and "There are no vices more dangerous than those which simulate virtue" (146). The writing here proceeds didactically, very sure of itself. It features, coincidentally, the confidence of assertion which Erasmus lobbies against.

Praise of Folly serves as a conduit for Erasmus to amplify his fundamental intention cloaked through another rhetorical device and forum. In contrast to his earlier work, which relies on explicit instruction, speaking through the Goddess Folly enables Erasmus to express himself more creatively and activate publics who engage the address. As Gordon states, "What the author labors at in the Enchiridion he plays with in the *Moria* [Folly]" (77). A distinguishing characteristic, writes Gordon, is how, in the latter work, the reader's "mind is undone by speech...and is indirectly prodded to reach out for faith to achieve wholeness" (198). This is by no means unintentional. To accomplish his task, Erasmus sought an edifying method to carry and even conceal his message, which was not to grant expediency to the growing Reformation, but to appeal to the Church in such a way to redress its problems. According to Levi, "Folly's

inconsistencies are deliberately introduced in the interests of achieving the extraordinary control of satirical nuance and ambiguity Erasmus required, if he was to solicit reform and not set fire to a revolution” (16). Whereas Erasmus solicits reform in the Enchiridion through a deliberative model of persuasion, Erasmus, by adopting an edifying frame, allows for his readership to become involved with his message in Folly. Doing so attenuates the ingrained hostility between rhetor and auditor; provides a more entertaining, inviting style in which to address the reader; and, by virtue of an ambiguous method, forces the reader to question the veracity of the construction and grammar of the text as well as the opinions advanced therein.

In Folly, Erasmus speaks to the audience, not at them. In this Erasmus admits the fallibility of himself (author) and the narrator (Goddess) whom he chooses to employ:

Why I have I appeared today in this unaccustomed garb? Well, you shall hear the reason if you have no objection to lending me your ears—no, not the ones you use for preachers of sermons, but the ears you usually prick up for mountebanks, clowns and fools, the sort of ears that once upon a time our friend Midas listened with to Pan. I’ve a fancy to play the Sophist before you, and I don’t mean by that one of the tribe today who cram tiresome trivialities into the heads of schoolboys and teach them a more than feminine obstinacy in disputation—no, I shall follow the ancients who chose the name Sophist in preference to the damaging title of philosopher or lover of wisdom. (64)

In this opening passage, Erasmus invites, rather than demands, the reader to consider that which will be advanced. Folly qualifies her own ethos by playing the sophist, as opposed the Enchiridion, where Erasmus, the theologian, wields his authority as leverage. Doubt is thus thrown onto just what, exactly, the meaning of the text is. The auditor must discover for oneself the arguments and opinions present, reconciling the silly and the serious throughout. In stark

contrast to the later Socrates, who, under the guidance of Plato, “seeks demonstrative knowledge and is confident that he finds it” (48), Erasmus shifts his discourse in a new trajectory.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the Enchiridion operates from the logical progression of syllogistic admonishments, Folly’s method includes a seething cauldron of digressions, qualifications, and paradoxes, all of which obscure the message being carried so the reader can ontologically consider it.

In the above passage, Folly speaks of her “fancy to play the sophist.” How to reconcile, then, Socrates’s refutation of sophistry in Plato’s Gorgias? In a paradoxical manner, Erasmus attempts to collapse this dichotomy by relying on both the sophistic and the Socratic. Clarence Miller suggests as much in referring to the Erasmus of Folly as a “dialectical sophist” and a “consummate rhetorician” (85). Erasmus supports the claim by ridiculing philosophy as “a profession for asses” since “the happier branches of knowledge are those which are more nearly related to folly, and by far the happiest men are those who have no traffic at all with any kind of learning and follow nature for their only guide” (Folly 114). Those who would “strive after wisdom are the furthest from happiness,” writes Erasmus, because only fools “speak frankly and tell the truth, and what is more praiseworthy than truth?” (116, 118). Erasmus tethers the Socratic method to sophistic utility, throwing doubt on Platonic notions of wisdom and truth. In the previous chapter, edification was theorized as borrowing from the Platonic Socrates insofar as it privileges questions and irony, but distancing itself from the Socratic insistence on securing meaning or wisdom. Erasmus is a theologian willing to risk the truth by offering it up so others can more profitably think of it themselves. It is a joint, intersubjective process which Erasmus initiates. Years after expressing his frustrations about the common lot of Christians by attempting to dominate the rhetorical situation, Erasmus respects his audience and appeals to them not just as an equal, but as an imaginary goddess of silliness so that they might come to consider the veiled truth locked deep within themselves. Erasmus challenges the auditor to abandon a

physical, external devotion to spirituality and turn towards subjective introspection as the best means with which to glorify God. The distinction between the two works is that the Goddess Folly is addressing the reader, not Erasmus himself. Erasmus' assertion that "the mystery of salvation had been hidden from the wise but revealed to little children, that is, to fools," proceeds as less hostile (197). Erasmus does not command or declare; he edifies. There is continually a double-reflection at play in the communicative transaction. As the goddess Folly comically entertains, the reader perhaps laughs and enjoys the occasional bout of whimsy, but, more significantly, the reader reflects. The reader necessarily reflects. The process of reading Folly becomes itself a task of ontological awareness and a movement of consciousness.

The inversion (and subversion) of wisdom and truth are applied to Folly's analysis of Jesus Christ. Christ as a fool is central to Erasmus's objective—or, better yet, Erasmus's wont of cultivating a subjective consideration of spirituality in his reader. Having acclimated the reader to the style and tone of the work, Erasmus, finally, can devote the last portion of Folly to impressing the exigence of his religious discourse on the individual. Folly's observations that Christ's "special delight [was/is] in little children, women and fishermen"; his decision to ride a donkey when he could have strode upon a lion; and his naming of all "those who are destined for eternal life his sheep, though there is no animal so stupid" (198)—are evidence of Jesus' proclivity for the lighthearted, according to Erasmus. And "though he is the wisdom of the Father," Erasmus adds, "[Christ] was made something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind" (198). In his description of Christ's teaching to the apostles, Erasmus writes how Jesus "taught them to shun wisdom, and made his appeal through the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things, which live their lives by natural instinct alone, free from care or purpose" (199). Erasmus wants the pious to consider themselves not without a degree of folly and to consider wisdom, moreover, as an intersubjective process

that is never eliminated. This is keeping with Erasmus's critique of religion found in Enchiridion, but by elevating spiritual levity, as a tool through which he can discursively render the spiritual realm as a subjective pursuit, not an epistemic assumption or attainment, Erasmus shifts the approach of his argument from admonishment and hostility to awareness and invitation. "[Only] the biggest fools of all appear to be those who have once been wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety," he writes, perhaps itself a twist of phrase in which Folly indicts her progenitor, Erasmus, as foolish (201). An admission, of sorts, which criticizes the stern rhetorical frame Erasmus formerly communicated from.

Crafting his address through edification, Erasmus, in the very last pages, permits himself—perhaps cannot abstain himself from—a dalliance in the polemical spirit of the Enchiridion. Yet his moral and spiritual exhortations arrive after 200 pages of otherwise ludic prose, highly stylized and entertaining. Like Kierkegaard, Erasmus shifts the rhetorical model of address by at first aesthetically arousing the reader's interest, and only afterwards advancing one's point of view. By then, the reader is amenable to considering Folly's suggestions. The reader has not been scolded, but invited, after an aesthetic appeal, to consider a rhetoric commensurate with the exigence. For Erasmus, edification provides an indirect method of persuasive discourse, drawing the auditor's attention with an aesthetically pleasing (albeit nonplussed) mediation of irony and paradox, only to advance an argument once one's attention is captured.

Oddly, the critical reception of Folly has pointed out that these last past pages are not consistent with the rest of the text. That, however, is an almost indulgent and perverse tautology: the entire text up to the peroration is not consistent with itself. Erasmus deploys the goddess, Folly, as a method to indirectly engage and entertain for the very purpose that, having drawn the reader in, Erasmus can advance his evangelical humanistic ideals. It should not be a startling

surprise, given Erasmus's work in the Enchiridion, that Folly should attack "the crowd" for thinking "the sacrifice of the mass means no more than crowding as close as possible to the altars, hearing the sound of words, and watching ritual down to the smallest detail" (205). But is this the Goddess, at this point, addressing the reader? The following passage, referring to authentic spirituality, mirrors the quotes cited above from the Enchiridion: "the pious man throughout his whole life withdraws from the things of the body and is drawn towards what is eternal, invisible and spiritual" (205-6). We find an almost exact textual replication between the two works, but the timing, style and method leading up to what Erasmus wanted to, at bottom, express change the dynamic completely. The communicative texture of Erasmus' rhetoric is altered so as to privilege the freedom of his interlocutor in the rhetorical situation.

The search for meaning in Praise of Folly operates on a meta-textual level, then. In Erasmus's expression and interaction with Folly, a female Goddess, I contend that the two of them, together, call into question the discursive creation of a constituted authorship and identity. This is not an ideological position advanced inasmuch as that which can be detected in the blur of text itself. Erasmus writes (and Folly says): "I am myself wherever I am, and no one can pretend I'm not—especially those who lay special claim to be called the personification of Wisdom" (67). But just who, exactly, is the "myself" of this statement referring to? At one point, Folly exclaims how she wishes she "could change [her] face and don a theologian's garb! Still, if I had too many of the trappings of theology I'm afraid someone might take me for a thief and accuse me of secretly pillaging the desks of our Masters" (187). Folly, of course, wishes in vain: quite obviously, she is herself a theologian's creation, based on theological principles; her lament articulates that which brings her forth by the author's discourse. Elsewhere Folly refers to "my friend Erasmus, whom I mention by name from time to time by way of a compliment" (190). And so is it that Erasmus employs the voice of Folly, or is it Folly who utilizes the pen of

Erasmus? The reader must negotiate this question subjectively throughout one's reading of Folly, at all times pivoting to consider the meaning of the text, which, as edifying discourse, is left open to struggle with. This struggle is a function of Erasmus not only trusting his audience, but respecting them. Like all edifying rhetoric, Erasmus jeopardizes his expression as a rhetor. It proceeds as a flight outside himself which hopes to spark a movement of consciousness in others. Unlike the Enchiridion, where meaning is established and clarified by a rhetor who wields authority from a privileged ethos, Erasmus, in Praise of Folly, questions his own assertions as an example for his readership so that they, too, can undergo a questioning of consciousness.

Minnich and Meissner write how Erasmus cloaked his opinions by using "rhetorical ambiguities that abhorred the clear distinctions, stark assertions, and univocal truths characteristic of scholastic theology," thereby solidifying his "belief that the path of wisdom lay in rhetorical eloquence rather than in the rational analysis of the scholastics" (605). The authors assert that Erasmus chose this "polished style [as] an elaborate attempt to veil [an] inner arrogance" brought about by his "injured narcissism" (622). While I admit to having neither the capacity nor training to challenge the accuracy of Minnich and Meissner's psychoanalytic interpretation of Erasmus's life, the latter's motivation in composing Folly as an opportunity to "redeem some sense of inner value" can be resisted (623). Both before Folly was published, in his letter to Thomas More, and in his apologia, delivered to Martin Dorp a few years following the initial publication, Erasmus is very clear about his motivation for exercising irony, obfuscation, ostentation, and wit. "Jokes," he writes to More, "can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people we know" (Folly 59). Later he adds: "The world will pass its own judgment on me, but unless my 'self-love' entirely deceives me, my praise of folly has not been altogether foolish" (59). Minnich and Meissner

clearly disagree, deeming the writing of Folly as “allow[ing] the release and channeling of long repressed energies in Erasmus, which found expression in an outburst of playful inspiration” (610). The problem here is that Erasmus’s core message does not change from the Enchiridion to Praise of Folly. I grant that Minnich and Meissner may very well be accurate that “a smoldering rage seemed to color his experience and to diffuse itself more generally against all mankind” once the “religio-humanistic ideals” failed to materialize (616). However, Erasmus, seen as adopting an edifying frame of rhetoric in Folly, did not shift his beliefs or become disillusioned. Rather, he merely amplified his message in a manner quite consistent with his earlier work so as to more effectively advance those ideals. He found, in his mouthpiece, Folly, a whimsical vehicle with which to drive the seriousness at the core of his thought.

Whereas in the Platonic dialectic mapped out in the Phaedrus, communication proceeds in perfect agreement from soul to soul, edification functions intersubjectively as an imperfect enterprise shuttling between active consciousnesses. Praise of Folly, the title of which is a Greek pun, translated to Moriae Encomium, is, quite literally, addressed to a single individual, Thomas More—Erasmus’ friend and colleague whose estate he was vacationing at in 1509. In edifying discourse, the meaning of a rhetorical act is placed at the disposal of the interlocutor. The preface appended to the work, which Erasmus addressed explicitly to More, reflects this central theme:

It is dedicated to you, so henceforth it is yours, not mine. There may well be plenty of critical folk rushing in to slander it, some saying that my bit of nonsense is too frivolous for a theologian and others that it has a sarcastic bite which ill becomes Christian decorum. (Folly 56-57)

Though Praise of Folly has enjoyed a broad readership in its almost 500-year longevity, Erasmus intended it to proceed intersubjectively—to arouse one’s individual consciousness in an act of considerable folly. Erasmus leaves it to More, explicitly, but also to every other reader,



implicitly. The above passage indicates that Erasmus also anticipated the fierce reaction with which Folly was met—confirmed, no less, by the criticisms by Martin Dorp and other conservative reactionaries. As Erasmus points out to More in the preface, he wanted to cause a break from “the sensitivity of present-day ears which can bear to hear practically nothing but honorific titles” (60). The caustic yet jovial tone of Praise of Folly, which functions as a species of edification, is offered as a unique method to negotiate the terrain of a tumultuous period. Erasmus was not disillusioned, as some have suggested, but attempted to find new ways in which to communicate his ideas. While this particular work may not have enjoyed the imminent, efficacious success Erasmus wished to induce in his contemporaries and avoid the Reformation, Praise of Folly enjoys an enduring quality owing to its edifying style. Past and future readers who encounter the work have and will continue to pick it up and ruminate over their own faith and follies because Erasmus, through his silly Goddess, Folly, sparks individuals, then as now, to consider a radical questioning of one’s own consciousness. Yet while Erasmus mediates through an ontological rhetoric, he shies away, ultimately, from instructing individuals *how* to negotiate their experiences. Whereas he seeks a more authentic faith, this does not translate into an explicit account of social action itself. Edifying aims to bring about awareness and subjective re-evaluation, as Erasmus has demonstrated, but in the remaining rhetors considered, a more explicit level of transition from consciousness to action itself is articulated.

#### Edifying Rhetoric in the Works of Angelina Grimké Weld

This process of positioning a movement of consciousness as a gateway to action is particularly acute in the two works of Grimké analyzed here—the pamphlet, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” written in 1836, and “Speech at Pennsylvania Hall” in Philadelphia, delivered on May 16, 1838. After writing the “Appeal” and having it distributed, Grimké was not permitted back in her native South Carolina for fear of imprisonment and mortal

danger (Browne 72). Like Erasmus, Grimké would find her works both confiscated and banned. The gathering mob outside her Philadelphia speech, meanwhile, shattered the windows of the newly constructed Pennsylvania Hall while she was speaking and burned it to the ground later that night. “In publicity leading up to the event,” writes Campbell, “she was denounced in the papers by the Massachusetts clergy as ‘a Godless woman,’ a ‘he-woman,’ even ‘the devil incarnate’” (The Rhetorical Act 198). We find, then, not just a level of risk in the expression of Grimké’s rhetorical acts, but risk in the very act of her communicative efforts. Ultimately, Grimké withdrew from public life shortly after the Pennsylvania Hall speech in 1838, yet lived until 1879. Frequently battling illness and attending to the education and rearing of her children, she participated in attending public events and conducted research for abolitionist texts, but her active rhetorical life lasted only four years (Brown 167-69). Grimké’s rhetoric evinces how a rhetor calls upon individuals to *dig themselves* such that both the rhetor and individual audience members put themselves at risk. Both works addressed here begin by rupturing the consubstantiality of the audience, engage the publics to whom she communicates on an individual level in order to have them question themselves, and then lead from a greater ontological awareness of the self to the possibility of enacting social change.

Consider, first, the opening paragraph of the Appeal:

Respected Friends, It is because I feel a deep and tender interest in your present and eternal welfare that I am willing thus publicly to address you. Some of you have loved me as a relative, and some have felt bound to me in Christian sympathy, and Gospel friendship; and even when compelled by a strong sense of duty, to break those outward bonds of union which bound us together as members of the same community, and members of the same religious denomination, you were generous enough to give me credit, for sincerity as a Christian, though you

believed I had been most strangely deceived. I thanked you then for your kindness, and I ask you now, for the sake of former confidence, and friendship, to read the following pages in the spirit of calm investigation and fervent prayer.

(36)

Notice how the edifying discourse is characterized by a rhetorical movement that renders conspicuous both the communication situation and the reader's interpellated self. Grimké reflexively calls attention to how she will address "you"—in this case, a privileged woman of the South. Next, she speaks of a common affinity the rhetor and the audience share, Christianity; but then, having recognized the consubstantiality, Grimké shatters it and asks the individual communication recipient to re-consider what just such a faith amounts to on a singular basis. Later in the address, she writes: "Oh! then that the Christians of the south would ponder these things in their hearts, and awake to the vast responsibilities which rest upon them as this important crisis" (54). Grimké solicits their consciousnesses first, and only then, later in the speech, seeks commitment.

The Appeal functions, as Browne writes, with a "revitalized conception of human agency" (81). The form departs from a standard work of rhetorical deliberation in that Grimké repeatedly questions accepted religious norms and social customs. She then transforms the mode of questioning into agential action: responding to why she, Grimké, should appeal to women to foster change, she writes, "I know you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do; and if you really suppose you can do nothing to overthrow slavery, you are greatly mistaken" (Appeal 54). As a rhetor, Grimké does not allow for indifference; her reader must choose, and if she does not choose, then that is a choice for perpetuating the slavery establishment. Her essay challenges and confronts, above all. At the very moment Grimké brokers a sense of identification—as a woman, as a Christian, as a

southerner—she ruptures it to confront the individual reader in a moment of awareness. As Browne writes, the Appeal attempts to

unburden these citizens from the weight of false community and the past it represents. In this, the destructive phase of the text, the author refused to her audience its own appeal to history, religion, gender, or class, the consequence of which was to give guilt no place to hide—not even in faith itself. (72)

Grimké accomplishes this task by utilizing the edifying method of questioning—not just the asking of questions to her audience, but by pursuing her interlocutors to question themselves. Questions, in this frame, need not be answered to the rhetor. As Meyer indicates, the point of rhetorical questioning is that it leads to interrogativity. “I appeal to you, my friends, as mothers; Are you willing to enslave your children? You start back with horror and indignation at such a question. But why, if slavery is no wrong to those upon whom it is imposed?” (51). Grimké here counters the argument that slavery provides a good, carefree life for those enslaved by calling forth an ontological moment of questioning for her readership to consider. She solicits empathy by sparking a moment of thought in her readership.

After bringing about this spark of consciousness by refuting the Biblical justification for slavery and burdening her reader to question the accepted legitimization of it, Grimké, in the second half of the pamphlet, maps out a proposal to cultivate agency for her audience. A four-step process that begins with the subjective and moves to the public sphere, she instructs her readers to read, pray, speak out, and then, as the last step, act. Agency, for Grimké and all edifying rhetoric, is a process with no guarantee of a teleological endpoint often associated with deliberative speech. Action is the final step of this rhetorical movement, and does not necessary translate to change—only the possibility of change. For Grimké, one must first study the Bible introspectively and notice how the Old Testament talks of servants, never abject slavery, and that

the figure of Jesus ushers in a sense of agape which prohibits one person from owning or controlling another being. Whereas in her Pennsylvania Hall speech, Grimké instructs her audience to read abolitionist publications, she adapts to the South in “Letter” and recommends the agential action which is available to her readership. What renders the Appeal as a particular embodiment of edifying rhetoric, however, is Grimké’s discussion of prayer. In an implicit reference to the Book of Matthew 6:5-8, she writes:

When you have entered into your closets, and shut to [sic] the doors, then pray to your father, who seeth in secret, that he would open your eyes to see whether slavery is sinful, and if it is, that he would enable you to bear a faithful, open and unshrinking testimony against it, and to do so whatever your hands find to do, leaving the consequences entirely to [God]. (55-56)

Grimké’s suggestion of prayer is the subjective movement of consciousness found in all edifying rhetoric. In the Appeal, as we saw with Erasmus and Kierkegaard, it is fundamentally religious in scope, but with other existentialists, such as Sartre or Beauvoir, it possesses a thoroughly secular analogue. Whether religious or secular in the content of the appeal, it is a rhetorical effect galvanized by inspiring the other to think and to consider, ponder and ruminate, question and evaluate as a prior condition to taking action. The process is made explicit, too, as evident in Grimké’s four-step call to action.

Appealing through an ontological, subjective rhetoric is, at times, necessary. Edification is employed as a tool to wield through public recalcitrance, which is often static and fraught with an ingrained consubstantiality almost impossible to negotiate. Demanding agreement up front in such a rhetorical act would be dismissed. As a southerner, Grimké is well aware of how interpellated an affluent white female would be to question the norms of slavery. She therefore sought to establish identification as a southern Christian woman—but only briefly—as a design

to later rupture consubstantiality and burden the individual reader to pray in secret. The above passage suggests a movement from prayer, seen here as a radical questioning of the self (“to open your eyes to see whether slavery is sinful”) to the possibility of agency (“to bear a faithful, open and unshrinking testimony against it, and to do whatsoever your hands find to do”) to not worrying about the teleological results of one’s actions (“leaving the consequences entirely to [God]”). In edifying rhetoric, agential action is never predetermined or guaranteed; it is marked by a movement in which the self negotiates its agential possibilities within one’s own public sphere. Relying on spirituality as the main thrust of her appeal, Grimké locates the results of this possibility in God, yet even the divine is no guarantee. For Grimké, creating sites of resistance is an individual duty or responsibility—specifically, for her, a Christian one.

Only after beseeching her readers to experience an ontological shock of awareness as to the cruelty of slavery does Grimké proceed with an explicit call to action. Speaking on the subject proceeds acting on the subject in the Appeal:

Speak then to your relatives, your friends, your acquaintances on the subject of slavery; be not afraid if you are conscientiously convinced it is sinful, to say so openly, but calmly, and let your sentiments be known. [...] Above all, try to persuade your husband, father, brothers and sons, that slavery is a crime against God and man, and that it is a great sin to keep human beings in such abject ignorance. (56)

Grimké appeals to the very risk of the action entailed in her rhetorical address. She privileges duty above the wickedness of certain laws and the possibility of failure. “Consequences, my dear friends, belong no more to you, than they did to these Apostles,” Grimké explains. “Duty is ours and events are God’s” (58). The ontological appeal of her edifying rhetoric serves to activate in her readership a sense of duty to act regardless of the results. Later in the pamphlet, Grimké even

calls attention to the rhetorical situation by admitting her purpose: “my object has been to arouse you, as the wives and mothers, daughters and sisters, of the South, to a sense of duty as women, and as Christian women, on that great subject [...] until the polluted temple of slavery fall and crumble into ruin” (64-65). Edification thus begins by arousing one’s consciousness as a catalyst to induce action—or, in Grimké’s words, duty.

The same method applied to a different rhetorical situation appears in Grimké’s Speech at Pennsylvania Hall. From the very beginning of the speech, delivered in a hostile setting, Grimké confronts her audience by identifying with them and then rupturing the consubstantiality: “Men, brethren and fathers—mothers, daughters and sisters, what came ye out to see? A reed shaken with the wind? Is it curiosity merely, or a deep sympathy with the perishing slave, that has brought this large audience together?” (318-19). Grimké’s purpose here is not limited to garnering support for the abolitionist cause or to oppose the hostility to it—evidenced by the gathering mob outside—but to arrest the apathy and complicity of the members of her immediate audience. For Grimké, her listeners cannot merely agree with the abolitionist movement; they must individually grow cognizant of the importance to join the struggle themselves—and then do so, actively. The shared identification of their beliefs is considered a red-herring to activating social change. It perhaps soothes one’s conscience, but Grimké wants each listener to experience an ontological moment of awareness which will transform the individual to actively participate. Notice the movement in the following passage, where Grimké positions a change of consciousness as the necessary task leads to transformative change:

Do you ask, then, ‘what has the North to do?’ I answer, cast out first the spirit of slavery in your own hearts, and then lend your aid to convert the South. Each one present has a work to do, be his or her situation what it may, however limited their means, or insignificant their supposed influence. The great men of this country

will not do this work; the church will never do it. A desire to please the world, to keep the favor of all parties and of all conditions, makes them dumb on this and every other unpopular subject. (319)

Grimké does not permit her audience either apathy or agreement. She addresses them singularly, such that “each” has a work to do once casting the spirit of slavery from one’s own heart. The spirit of slavery, for Grimké, infects even those who are not slaveholders or those explicitly hostile to abolition. It permeates those who would only acknowledge the ills of slavery, but not wish to do anything about it. She observes later in the speech, for instance, “We may talk of occupying neutral ground, but on this subject, in its present attitude, there is no such thing as neutral ground” (321). Grimké thus forces choice, which is brought about by reflection and then action. Though Japp considers Grimké’s rhetorical persona to speak “with the voice of moral authority, as one ordained of God to bring a message to the people” (211), her speech is edifying insofar as the power of her ethos and her message is continually thrown onto the audience themselves. The objective, for Grimké, is to empower her audience, not merely herself. She does not deliver truth so much as speak through a wholly reactive rhetoric to enable a sense of agency in her listeners.

The extended passage above reflects this reactive nature of edifying rhetoric. Because political and religious leaders, as well as the law, failed to redress the wrongs of slavery, Grimké prepares an ontological framework in which her audience members can orient themselves to action. To accomplish this, Grimké approaches her audience singularly—to the individuals themselves as harbingers of change. They have to exercise their agency since politics and the law are inadequate structures to create change. As Browne writes, Grimké “rhetorically separated her listeners from themselves—that is, effected a break in consciousness between complacent spectatorship and authentic engagement—she reconnected identity and agency immediately



thereafter” (154). This observation indicates the consubstantial rupture of agreement with those in her immediate audience who are predisposed to sympathize with abolition. Grimké suggests that unless one is willing to make an effort to eradicate slavery, they can be associated with the hostile forces outside the hall. This rhetorical effect is purely edifying in this instance. The immediate audience must recognize their own complicity with slavery and anti-abolitionist sentiment in order to be able to combat it.

In analyzing the speech, both Browne and Campbell consider Grimké a prophetic witness. The power of the witness, writes Browne, is that the rhetor sees and speaks in ways “to make others see and speak in ways heretofore unthought of” (155). For Campbell, “enact[ing] the role of [a] prophet” creates a rhetorical persona that legitimizes one’s speech such that “to reject [Grimké] and her word was to deny prophecy” (Man Cannot Speak for Her 30-31). These comments are consistent with an edifying frame of rhetoric: as a speaker, Grimké wants the individual members of her audience to see things differently, as she does, by thinking differently. Once this new orientation of questioning one’s consciousness is provoked, then Grimké can proceed to be specific by soliciting commitment from her audience. In both thought and action throughout the speech, she wants listeners to recognize the risks and opportunities that are presented. “Here is an opportunity for doing something now,” Grimké says toward the conclusion. “Every man and woman present may do something by showing that we fear not a mob, and, in the midst of threatenings and reviling, by opening our mouths for the dumb and pleading the cause of those who are ready to perish” (322). The only recourse to action for northern women at the time, she stresses, is the use of petition. Whereas men have the ability to utilize the ballot box, women can exercise their agency by petitioning the government for a redress of grievances, as articulated in the First Amendment. The point in urging the

dissemination of petitions is both a means to combating slavery as well as locating for her audience members a method by which to exercise their agency.

Grimké concludes the speech by citing how instrumental British women were in abolishing slavery throughout the British empire. This provides a concrete example of how other women, lacking the possibility to vote, functioned as agents of social change. The final statement of the speech reads as follows: “Let the zeal and love, the faith and works of our English sisters quicken ours—that while the slaves continue to suffer, and when they shout deliverance, we may feel that satisfaction of having done what we could” (323). Here we find the hope of possibility similar to the Appeal, but without the religious connotations. Grimké admits the risks and immense difficulties in both rhetorical works because her goal is to arouse an ontological realization of how speech itself can function as change. “There is nothing to be feared from those who would stop our mouths,” she says in the Pennsylvania Hall speech (322). Agency itself is thus a double-risk: it portends not only the possibility of one’s own failure in achieving an objective, but one exercises it with the knowledge that great harm could be inflicted upon the self. Grimké encourages her audience to own up to this double-risk. It is, as she indicates in both works, a duty. Grimké’s edifying rhetorical works stand out as an exemplar of one who would locate herself, and her listeners, deep in this risk.

#### John Ruskin and the Ontological Movement of Edifying Discourse

John Ruskin was a celebrated critic of aesthetics, renown in nineteenth century England for his writings on painting and architecture. His work was featured in major British periodicals in addition to the publication of his multi-volume work, Modern Painters, and The Stones of Venice. His career trajectory changed in 1860, however, with the publication of a series of essays on the political economy that comprise Unto This Last. Ruskin considered this his most valuable work,<sup>37</sup> yet it did not sell the 1,000 copies of its first printing ten years later (Wilmer 29). One

review, decrying the new direction of Britain's foremost art critic, declared that "the world would simply refuse to be 'preached to death by a mad governess; and denounced the essays as 'windy hysterics', 'absolute nonsense' and 'intolerable twaddle'" (quoted in Wilmer 28). The immediate reception of Unto This Last was neither well-received nor celebrated, yet its heuristic quality may be seen in its latent rhetorical effect exercised on Mohandas K. Gandhi, who, in 1904, received the book as a present while working as a lawyer in South Africa. After reading Unto This Last on a twenty-four hour train ride from Johannesburg to Durban, Gandhi wrote, "The book was impossible to lay aside, once I had begun it. It gripped me. [...] I could not get any sleep that night. I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book" (Gandhi 56). Ruskin's impact on Gandhi, which the latter describes as bringing about "an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life" (56), traces the rhetorical impact of an edifying encounter. Ruskin's essays do not tell Gandhi what to do as the manifestation of instrumental will, but arouse a movement of consciousness in Gandhi to consider the possibilities of one's ability to foster change. Elizabeth T. McLaughlin captures this edifying rhetorical movement in her book, Ruskin and Gandhi:

Gandhi interpreted Unto This Last primarily as an expression of attitude. [...] Gandhi read Ruskin as Ruskin longed to be read, as a teacher of virtue stimulating growth through an I-Thou encounter that aided Gandhi to achieve his own identity, to discover his "own deepest convictions," and to fulfill his insight, as he always did, by existential commitment. (23)

Ruskin's rhetorical effect on Gandhi thus serves as a clear example of how edifying rhetoric functions on the plane of attitudinal change and by attempting to position a movement of consciousness. It also suggests that even those communicative acts which imminently fail possess a latent rhetorical texture which inspires an edifying moment that encourages an individual to

consider what it would take to bring about a personal transformation to foster social change within one's community.

In Unto This Last, Ruskin offers a refutation of economics proper. The book functions as a reactive rhetoric to the age and public to whom it is spoken. Within the refutation redounds a commentary on how the individual should negotiate one's social interactions. It is not, however, a ringing endorsement of a fluid sense of egotism. As McLaughlin writes, "Aware that the self is a social self and the structure of personality and the structure of society influence each other, Ruskin consider[s] inner moral change rather than the alteration of external arrangements the best means of improving the social order" (55). In particular, Ruskin's rhetoric reflects the edifying position that social improvements begin with a change in the orientation of those individuals who comprise a public. "[A]ll effectual advancement towards this true felicity of the human race must be by individual, not public effort," he writes in the book's peroration, adding, "Certain general measures may aid, certain revised laws guide, such advancement; but the measure and law which have first to be determined are those of each man's home" (226). What he does not say explicitly, but is evident in all three aspects of edifying rhetoric considered here, is that responsive individual effort is the necessary first step to bringing about change. For edification, one leads to the other; that is, rather, the attitude of individuals must be re-positioned in order to allow for a public space amenable to change to flourish.<sup>38</sup> Part of this attempt to shift the orientation of a public resembles the project of Kierkegaard, who, as Rubenstein points out, intended to expose the flaws of an "overly confident nineteenth century" through an "a/methodology [that] keeps existence and uncertainty as the heart of philosophical reflection" (451-52). Similarly, Ruskin takes umbrage with the easy self-assurance with which utilitarianism proceeded in Britain. He wants his readers to not merely swallow the logical efficiency of a quantitative theory but to find a respect for and consider the social dynamic that an economic

exchange possesses. “Observe, I neither impugn nor doubt the conclusion of the science if its terms are accepted,” writes Ruskin in the opening of the series of essays. “I am simply uninterested in them, as I should be in those of a science of gymnastics which assumed that men had no skeletons” (168). He attributes the paucity of economics as the inability to deal with “motive power,” which, “as an unknown quantity, enters into all the political economist’s equations, without his knowledge, and falsifies every one of their results” (170). Motive power, as Ruskin conceives it, “render[s] every one of the ordinary political economist’s calculations nugatory” (171). Ruskin, it would appear, operates from a rhetorical worldview that privileges a focus on the motives of a situation to evaluate it. This approaches Kenneth Burke’s interest in motives as well as Deidre McCloskey’s critique of economic theory in her 1985 book, The Rhetoric of Economics.<sup>39</sup>

Ruskin ultimately rejects economics as a science on the grounds that it does not contribute value to human beings despite the fact that its very foundation purports to maximize value. Since the study of the political economy assigns the ontological value of the single individual to its codified formulas, the field remains, for Ruskin, a “bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology” (Unto 209). Ruskin articulates the distinction by teasing out the respective differences in obtaining wealth: “Profit, or material gain, is attainable only by construction or by discovery; not by exchange. Whenever material gain follows exchange, for every *plus* there is a precisely equal *minus*” (213). Profit, then, is a purely subjective enterprise: only the single individual can “construct” or “discover” gain for oneself. Supply and demand, meanwhile, relate only to a mass and rely on the “Science of Exchange,” a flawed system that offers only the illusion of “gain” and “acquisition.” For Ruskin, a more authentic or ethical theory of economics would have to be “dependent on more than [just] arithmetic” (211). Specifically, he asserts that there exists no true profit in exchange because it is

predicated on the advantage of how one person, through economic leverage, exercises domination over another person. A more equitable consideration of economics, Ruskin asserts, would have to identify “advantage on both sides [...] to the persons exchanging” (214). We find, in Ruskin’s terms, a dialectical operation where the motives of a given situation must be considered.

Ruskin’s discourse on labor also operates through an existentialist method of analysis. Characterizing positive labor as “that which produces life” and negative as “that which produces death,” the immediacy of existence can be seen to dominate how Ruskin analyzes labor. His criticism of capital that produces capital, additionally, employs metaphoric language, comparing such tactics to “bulb producing bulb, never in tulip; seed issuing in seed, never in bread” (218). Capital does not itself exist as such, for it is not producible for human consumption. Ruskin dismisses such exercises of wealth insofar that capital does not contribute to the immediate value of individuals: “Production does not consist in things laboriously made, but in things serviceably consumable; and the question for the nation is not how much labor it employs, but how much life it produces” (221). Ruskin is reflective in his treatment of the political economy, encouraging greater awareness among individuals in the marketplace. Such value, for Ruskin, brings about one revelatory fact: “THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE” (222). And as with Sartre’s notion of responsibility for all persons, “the man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost,” writes Ruskin, “has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others” (222). Ruskin wants to sever the cord of rationality binding the calculus of human behavior together so as to curry recognition of the existential situation facing humanity. Ultimately, liberal capitalism and utilitarianism offends Ruskin’s taste in Unto This Last by the assumption that “human actions [...] are] guided by balances of expediency” (169). He shudders at the thought that behavior can be calculated by an

objective formula: “No man ever knew, or can know, what will be the ultimate result to himself, or to others, of any given line of conduct.” He adds that an accurate description of economic theory can be reduced to “the art of establishing the maximum inequality in our own favor” (182). To this, Ruskin protests again and again in order to oppose the certainty of the age as manifested in writings on the political economy:

None of these things you can know. One thing only can you know: namely, whether this dealing of yours is a just and faithful one, which is all you need concern yourself about respecting it; sure thus to have done your own part in bringing about ultimately in the world a state of things which will not issue in pillage or in death. (188)

By privileging what he considers motive power, Ruskin highlights the rhetorical and existentialist theme of radical contingency in situational action. All economic exchanges are governed by a rhetorical transaction since “the chief value and virtue of money consists in its having power over human beings.” Emphasizing this point sparks an immediacy of ontological awareness which confronts the deterministic measures of economic choice.

Human behavior is neither governed nor dictated in a vacuum. As with the rhetoric of Angelina Grimké, individuals, in Ruskin’s schematic, contain within themselves the potential for agency. The system of economic exchange, for Ruskin, is not quantifiable since the “force of the guinea you have in your pocket depends wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbor’s pocket” and that “money power is always imperfect and doubtful; there are many things which cannot be reached with it, other which cannot be retained with it” (180-81, 188). Operating through the seemingly relativistic guise of interaction, neither predictable nor necessarily discernable, economic theory wrongly assumes rationalistic choice. Furthermore, Ruskin wants his readership to consider the “wholly *moral* element in demand: that is to say, when you give a

man half a crown, it depends on his disposition whether he is rich or poor with it” (207). The essays lack a specific positive articulation of structural change, too, since the Ruskin’s *modus operandi* is that of edification. The closest he approaches in advancing a cause is to consider how people deal with economic exchange—that is, to see it a new light:

We need examples of people who, leaving heaven to decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for themselves that they will be happy in it and have resolved to seek—not greater wealth, but simpler pleasure; not higher fortune, but deeper felicity; making the first of possessions, self-possession; and honoring themselves in the harmless pride and calm pursuits of peace. (227)

This passage resembles Grimké in her acceptance of the risks entailed with human action. The edifying leap is thus that which affords no guarantee in results, but only the dedication of responding to a duty thus exercised. “And though absolute justice be unattainable,” writes Ruskin, “as much justice as we need for all practical use is attainable by all those who make it their aim” (194). There is no endpoint offered in Ruskin’s rhetoric. He cannot guarantee the perfection of economic structures, but he does want people to grow more cognizant and reconsider accepted norms and values.<sup>40</sup>

Towards the final pages of the last essay of the book, entitled “Ad Valorem”, Ruskin maps out why he is interested in motivating the singular individual to respond to his work. He addresses his readership on a completely intersubjective plane: “In all buying, consider first, what condition of existence you cause in the producers of what you buy” (227). It becomes clear that the objective of the essays is to encourage a moment of subjective awareness—the relationship between the self and of others. This rhetorical movement is recognized in a letter by Ruskin’s editor at the time, Thomas Carlyle: “You go down thro’ those unfortunate Dismal-Science people [...] like a fit of British Cholera—threatening to be fatal. I have read your paper



with exhilaration, often with laughter, with Bravissimo!—Such a thing flung suddenly into half a million dull British heads on the say day, will do a great deal of good” (Correspondence 89). Carlyle captures both the reactive and singular rhetorical texture of edification. Ruskin embodies edifying rhetoric in Unto This Last because he confronts accepted norms and communicates to his readership on an individual basis, teasing out the singular from the mass. While the book may not have been met with commercial or political success at the time it was published, its rhetorical power arrested Gandhi such that he recounts “discover[ing] some of my deepest convictions in this great book of Ruskin, and that is why it so captured me and made me transform my life” (Gandhi 56). To Gandhi, Ruskin was a poet—“one who can call forth the good latent in the human breast.” In a sense, edifying rhetoric shares with poetry the risk of suspending meaning in the ears, eyes, hands, and minds of the interlocutor. Like poets, edifying rhetors offer expression with no guarantee of meaning or results. The rhetorical impact of edification is thus not dictated, but affected through subjective consideration and interpretation.

#### Whither Edifying Public Address?

The three rhetorical figures considered here, combined with the preceding theorization of edification, are offered to map out and identify a unique species of rhetoric with the hope that rhetoricians can distinguish and employ such communicative strategies in the future. While rhetoric is often associated with finding practical ends to particular situations, the lasting virtue of edification and the three rhetors considered here is that we find an individual change in orientation or attitude instrumental to preparing the groundwork of future action. Edification amounts to a building block whereby a rhetor recognizes the limits to the rhetorical situation and attempts to create the conditions of a consciousness amenable to future change. As evident by the historical failure of the three persons considered here, an edifying rhetorical act is not identified by the causal success of the historical situation. Persuasion is something that ensues and is not

something pursued. It does, however, seek to motivate the agency of the individuals to whom an address is communicated, leaving the undefined future to the consideration and action of others.

The question of poetics within the edifying act is also something scholars should consider. What, for instance, does beginning with an aesthetic frame amount to? Does it always equate to immediate failure but fame in posterity? In the case of Erasmus, Grimké, and Ruskin, we find three persons equally castigated by their contemporaries for their rhetorical efforts; none of them lived to see the changes they were trying to effect. Is it merely the aesthetic flourish of their style that we commemorate? Perhaps in part, but one cannot limit it to that. Erasmus, Grimké and Ruskin have been read and will continue to be read because they focus and inspire one's attitude despite the distance in years, language, and geography. Edification, it would seem, functions beyond the immediate exigence of a rhetorical situation; it prepares a shift in individual consciousness that translates beyond the immediate historical setting. They certainly did not intend to fail rhetorically in their communicative acts, but Erasmus, Grimké and Ruskin were willing to wager their expressions as an index of duty or virtue. Each transcended structures of law and politics for a moment of ontological awareness in the hopes that future social structures may be sutured with individual attitudes that demand greater fairness, equality, and concerns for others.

### Endnotes

<sup>36</sup> For an analysis of the similarities between Erasmus's Enchiridion and Plato's Republic, see Gordon, 75-78, in which the former's invisible world and the latter's noumenal world are conflated.

<sup>37</sup> In the 1862 preface of Unto This Last's publication in book form, Ruskin writes that despite the fact the essays "were reprobated in a violent manner [...] I believe them to be the best, that is to say, the truest, rightest-worded, and most serviceable things I have ever written" (161).

<sup>38</sup> We find a similar rhetorical theme stressed in Ruskin's 1864 lecture, "Of Kings' Treasuries," later published as Sesame and Lillies: "There is only one cure for public distress—and that is public education, directed to make men thoughtful, merciful, and just. There are, indeed, many laws conceivable which would greatly better and strengthen the national temper; but, for the most part, they are such that as the national temper must be much bettered before it would bear" (66).

<sup>39</sup> Oddly, McCloskey does not cite Ruskin, whose essay would seem to strengthen the argument.

<sup>40</sup> One of Ruskin's objectives to reaching a more equitable social frame is discussed in the 1862 preface appended to the essays in book form: "if we once can get a sufficient quantity of honesty in our captains [of industry], the organization of labor is easy, and will develop itself without quarrel or difficulty; but if we cannot get honesty in our captains, the organization of labor is evermore impossible" (163).

## CONCLUSION

“After this [rhetorical] turn [in the humanities], joining communicative structures of speech-acts with their existential praxis-dimension is not only theoretically possible. It is crucial for a more thorough critical theory of liberation.”

- Martin Beck Matustik, “Existential Social Theory” (159)

This project has sought to establish and fortify new understandings of rhetorical inquiry and existentialism. Often categorized as an epistemological subset of philosophy proper, existentialism is advanced here as a rhetorical orientation to the world whose primary focus is negotiating the meaning in life. This idea of a rhetorical worldview, grounded in an ontological view of communication first conceived by the sophists and later actualized by existentialism, suggests that the discipline of rhetoric should not be limited to explorations and evaluations of suasive discourse. Specifically, I argue that rhetorical inquiry should expand its breadth into a two-fold process that begins by recognizing how humans are existentially situated within the world: equipped with only communicative resources to negotiate the meaning *in* life, humans have little recourse to the security of scientific or theological truth(s) to guide their social interactions and projects, let alone evince a meaning *of* life. Only having first established this ontological framework of human relations and social interaction can or should rhetorical inquiry move toward articulating methods of understanding about the efficacy of communicative practices. The formatting of this project reflects this view of rhetoric in that the first two chapters are concerned with the ontological foundations of rhetoric and its necessary convergence with existentialism; the third chapter, which addresses the controversial topic of agency, serves as a bridge which affords the possibilities of rhetorical action; and the final two chapters conceptualize and apply a unique species of rhetorical address, edification, which is adapted from the methods by which the existentialists themselves communicated. As such, it moves from

emphasizing the significance of discursive interaction itself to the ways in which the content and form of a particular kind of discourse can affect publics more authentically.

This is not to suggest that one is privileged over the other. Rather, it reflects my understanding that to conduct rhetorical inquiry is to require a discussion of both. Rhetoric is *about* the world and *in* the world such that humans necessarily interact with what Kenneth Burke calls symbolic action. It is not limited to evaluating merely *how* we communicate; rhetoric deals with the wherefore of communication by bodies that learn language. My thesis can be encapsulated thus: In order to examine singular rhetorical acts one must first acknowledge the fallibility and tenuousness of the very symbol systems by which we (have to) communicate (with). Humans are primarily divided as singular consciousnesses in existence, yet the resources of communication or symbolic action betoken a drive for identification with one another. The need to suture this divisive gap manifests itself as both an urge and a necessity, but it is also dangerous insofar as the illusion of consubstantiation can degenerate into bad faith. An authentic rhetoric is necessary, then, to balance transcending the biological divisions of existence and the totalizing frame of pure identification. I have argued that existentialism provides an orientation to the world grounded in the primacy of symbolic action and the ability to negotiate social experiences with an authentic rhetoric, edification, which cautions itself against the temptations of pure identification. Conceived as a rhetorical construct, existentialism recognizes the imperfections inherent to communication yet is prepared to face the contingencies and uncertainties that abound with creativity and humility. While to many it remains a defunct philosophy of the past, a more thorough-going research of existentialism demonstrates that its focus resides in exploring *why* we, as humans, communicate, and *how* we, as humans, might better communicate with one another. In this conclusion, I summarize and highlight the heuristic value of each chapter while presenting some of the limitations to my study. I also consider how

my project can catalyze future research in communication studies and where it can be located among scholarship in the humanities—rhetorical inquiry in particular.

The first chapter of this project posits that existentialism revives a neo-sophistical orientation of rhetoric. Based on the extant writings of the Greek sophists, I articulate a worldview that is grounded upon recognizing the ontological aspects of communication. I argue that while this rhetorical orientation to the world has been overlooked in the history of rhetoric since Plato and Aristotle, subtle traces of it surface in the works of Cicero, St. Augustine and Giambattista Vico. My central claim is that while it is acknowledged by more contemporary rhetoricians such as Richard Weaver and Ernesto Grassi, its fullest expression is galvanized by the existentialist movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Adapting the tenets of existentialism in such a way moves rhetoric away from discovering the True or the Good and locates rhetorical inquiry as an orientation *to* the world as much as an understanding *of* the world. This neo-sophistical view of rhetoric begins, I argue, with Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God—but this death by no means speaks to any factual account of God's existence. It merely signals the abandonment of human social interaction to symbolic action, which relies on the imperfect process of communication between persons. Rhetorical inquiry and existentialism converge in that both are concerned with negotiating the meaning in life as opposed to discovering the meaning of life. The latter may reflect the methodologies and objectives of philosophy, science, and theology, but it is beyond the communicative capacities/capabilities of bodies that learn language, as understood by both rhetoric and existentialism. A neo-sophistical view of rhetoric, I argue, operates as a function of the existentialist concept of freedom, as mapped out by Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and Simone de Beauvoir. A larger claim I advance here is that we, as humans, are condemned to rhetoric in that we cannot escape the total will-to-communication outlined by existentialists such as Merleau-Ponty and Jaspers. By emphasizing

the ontological aspects of communication inherent to rhetoric, it is my contention that rhetorical inquiry should no longer fall into the Platonic Trap, which subordinates rhetoric to dialectic and that which is True or Good. I demonstrate how this focus on the purity of the validity of communicative interaction ultimately harms rhetorical inquiry as a discipline.

My hope is that this chapter will add to the effort of rhetoricians who correct the injustices leveled against the sophists. Some may inquire as to whether this is still necessary—an understandable concern. To this I would rejoin that any time the term, rhetoric, is invoked in the popular imagination as a way to signal empty speech or bullshit, this reflects Plato's critique of rhetoric found in the Gorgias, and, to a lesser extent, the Phaedrus. To gain more traction in the popular imagination, rhetoric can be renewed as an intellectual enterprise which is existentially grounded in a neo-sophistical worldview. The sophists were not simply literary mercenaries but thinkers who understood how our lives are defined by the negotiation of communication. They were, in short, the first existentialists. It is of great importance that rhetoric be understood as both how language can be used more effectively *and* the significance of why language is intersubjectively communicated by existing persons. Both the sophists and the existentialists continually emphasize this, which should be emphasized as a central tenet to rhetorical inquiry rather than be ignored or dismissed as a philosophical endeavor. Whether fair or not, it is the duty of rhetoricians to rehabilitate an understanding of rhetoric—not just to advance scholarly knowledge but to advance and teach the heuristic qualities of rhetoric. As such, definitions of rhetoric should expand beyond merely an investigation of the faculties of persuasion and encompass a broader vantage point upon which to understand social interaction. Existentialism captures this lost orientation and helps re-articulate the marginalized understanding of rhetoric.

Chapter 2 begins a conversation between existentialism and Kenneth Burke, who is often considered the father of contemporary rhetoric. I am careful to not call Burke an existentialist

since it is misguided to reduce existentialism to identity or membership—for even the existentialists themselves resisted the label. As the first chapter indicates, existentialism provides an orientation to the world grounded in contingency and negotiated by communication, one beyond pure reason and fully adapted by the ontological interaction of language. By contesting Burke's own understanding of existentialism, I suggest that his work aligns with it insofar as both sought to collapse the distinctions between epistemology and ontology. Both, that is, were preoccupied with the fungible texture of communication, which eliminates the possibility of capturing knowledge as a static truth-claim. The unending conversations of the well-known Burkean parlor, first described in his 1941 compilation, The Philosophy of Literary Form, is then examined as a representative anecdote for existentialism. I argue that the contingency of the parlor, which lacks any a priori justification, mirrors the existentialist understanding of human abandonment in the world. The revelation here is that while each individual is a unique, solitary consciousness, taken together, we, as humans, necessarily rely on one another to create and furnish meaning(s) in existence. First, though, each individual must adopt a frame of acceptance to enter the Burkean parlor without bad faith, which would necessitate focusing on the meaning of the parlor. To this end, I envisage an individual who enters the parlor with a scientific or theologically-determined orientation, and contrast this by hypothesizing how Søren Kierkegaard would adapt to the parlor. A danger to the Burkean parlor, I suggest, is the temptation for its inhabitants to preoccupy themselves with justifying the parlor and creating a totalizing frame of identification with one another. The danger of identification is then explored by comparing the critical works of Burke and Sartre regarding anti-Semitism; each attempts to caution against the attraction for publics to degenerate into bad faith, which I consider a corollary to Burkean identification. Rhetoric will always feature a consubstantial drive to link people together for a common purpose, but it must not proceed as a totalizing frame of pure identification which



would abolish any sense of agency or choice for an individual consciousness. The last section suggests existentialist literature functions rhetorically as acts of meta-communication and serves as representative anecdotes which situate characters who struggle between isolating themselves from the world and joining a group or cause in pure identification. Specifically, I examine Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting For Godot, Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground, and Herman Hesse's Siddhartha as rhetorical acts that encourage readers to realize the primacy of communication and reflect on how to authentically act.

While I am sensitive to Burkean interpretations which would otherwise prohibit an association with existentialism, my adaptation of Burke allows for a clearer articulation of what existentialism offers—namely, an orientation to the world grounded in symbolic action. In general, my project aims at rendering existentialism more palatable to rhetorical scholarship, and though such figures as Calvin O. Schrag, Craig Smith, Michael Hyde and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell have alluded to such a connection, it has never entirely been fleshed out. In fact, I admit that such a project linking Burke with existentialism is not worthy of a chapter, but might, as I move forward, be grounds for a book-length study that incorporates literary and rhetorical criticism, the ontology of communication, and the rhetoric of religion. This chapter serves as a stepping-stone that can inspire future scholarship with Burke's legion of academic followers, of which I include myself. My hope is that this essay, like the entire project, will challenge the common understanding of rhetoric and be critically challenged to defend itself, as I am prepared to do. As the anecdotal opening to the chapter hints at, it is difficult to pigeon-hole Burke. My aim, then, has not been to label Burke an existentialist, but to demonstrate the shared perspectives between the two.

Chapter 3 articulates a Sartrean account of rhetorical agency, which has been a controversial topic in contemporary rhetorical scholarship. I first implicate Heidegger's

misguided reading of existentialism as intimidating rhetorical scholars to consider it as a worthy intellectual enterprise and grounding for conceiving a concept of agency. A great deal of published work relies on Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," which sullies the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. This chapter refutes such a view and demonstrates how existentialism contributes to an understanding of agency that might satisfy both traditional and postmodernist rhetorical scholars. In particular, I demonstrate how existentialism maintains the possibilities of responsibility within the rhetorical act of expression but acknowledges that this by no means guarantees meaning, which must be corroborated by others. At the behest of an audience of interlocutors, the rhetor cannot dominate the meaning of one's expression. As Sartre indicates, communication is but a flight outside the self, and this can never be considered an autonomous property for it is others who share in the ownership of the meaning. An existentialist account of rhetorical agency thus manifests itself as the free exercise of individual expression within the facticity of a rhetorical situation and dependent upon an audience to breathe life into the meaning of such a communicative act. Since the existentialist account of freedom details both the radical contingency and the limiting circumstances of a situation, we can begin to see rhetorical agency as always that which is possible rather than the causal explanations of historical action found in traditional rhetoric and the negation of agency evident in postmodern scholarship.

I seek not only to correct misunderstandings about existentialism but to identify the misguided conflation between modernism and humanism as well, which is reflected in the title of Heidegger's essay. Humanism is, as Ernesto Grassi writes, a rhetorical endeavor that concentrates on how being is tied up with the problematic uses of language. Modernism, by contrast, begins with Cartesian thought and posits an unfettered, fluid sense of consciousness and agency. Rhetorical inquiry and existentialism belong to the former camp—not the latter—yet this is continually taken for granted. In refuting Heidegger's analysis of humanism and

existentialism, I do not mean to discount his corpus of works, but I think it is fruitful for rhetorical scholars to begin more closely considering existentialism, with its focus on language and *meaning*, as opposed to concentrating on Heidegger, who investigated language as it discloses our abstract understanding of *being*. While it is perhaps fashionable in the wake of Derrida, Foucault, and the death of the subject to call oneself a post-humanist, I question the implications for rhetorical scholarship since the humanistic subject, as understood from Vico to Grassi and by existentialism, is already de-centered. Existentialism serves as a profitable way to begin recognizing and analyzing how agency functions because it features the idea of a rhetorical agent who, grounded in the contingency of a situation, addresses a public with a communicative act that is offered as the risk of a meaning and becoming which is always corroborated or enacted later with the help of others. The efficacy of a rhetorical act should not be interpreted on the causal criteria of its historical success, but the possibilities of response-ability which a rhetorical agent attempts to activate for the individuals of her audience. At the risk of sounding naïve and overly optimistic, I think an existentialist account of rhetorical agency serves as middle ground in which both camps of the divide might find agreement. For traditional rhetorical scholars, there still exists the freedom of agential invention within the rhetorical situation; for postmodernists, the rhetorical agent is not viewed as in complete control of the situation insofar as one's facticity and expression is complicated by structural limitations and the feedback of others.

While Grassi insists over and over again what humanism explores and what it does not, his call fails to gain much traction with the post-humanist camp. One way in which this chapter may be extended is by moving beyond rhetorical agency and trying to conceive a new conception of humanism within rhetorical studies. I might begin by calling it ex-humanism, which would refer to exhuming the richer qualities of humanism without the baggage of the modernist subject. Its

name offers a new direction away from the abundance of “post”-theories, and it would seek to inclusion rather than exclusion: ex-humanism would mix the canon of existentialism—in particular, the works which focus explicitly on communication—with the writings of Vico, Burke, and, more recently, that of Michel Meyer, Richard Rorty (maybe), Henry W. Johnstone, Martin Beck Matustik, Schrag, and Campbell. Ex-humanistic thought might be characterized as the sincere effort to recover a sense of agency while simultaneously acknowledging the anti-foundational, de-centering process of the rhetorical turn in the humanities. It is, of course, a project in its nascent conceptual stages, but these thinkers merit an active, critical categorization from which they are often denied by postmodernism and posthumanism. Existentialism has suffered from being limited to only existentialists, the identity of which is problematic, so it might benefit from expanding rather than limiting its scope. I have not been so bold to discard the term entirely because this project has argued that the main consistency within existentialism is a rhetorical orientation that emphasizes communication, but it might be profitable in the future to divorce the existentialists from their heading if a rhetorical understanding of existentialism is found unconvincing or wanting.

The last two chapters formulate a particular genre of speech which I call edification. The first is a conceptual theorization of edifying discourse, the second an application of identifying rhetorical acts which communicate with an edifying frame. To conceive edification as a species of rhetoric, I examine how existentialism rhetorically communicates. Unlike the Aristotelian models of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic, which are geared toward actualizing a telos, edification advances as an ontological rhetorical address which re-positions attitudes of the individuals of an audience. It does not seek categorical agreement from a public but looks to interrogate the individual members of an audience. Edifying speech attempts to create a change in viewpoint without guaranteeing the actualization of a specific endpoint. I use the term

ontological shock as a way to understand edification as those rhetorical acts which explicitly try to bring about a change in consciousness. It is public address geared toward the individuals of an audience as opposed to the group en masse. As such, edification contrasts Perelman's articulation of the universal audience, which is based on calling forth a universalized public through rational deliberation, and Plato's drive for truth, which is grounded in the Socratic method. Edification takes its cues from Kierkegaard's understanding of indirect communication: a rhetor can only speak to individuals and incite them to independent thought and activities; one cannot communicate the truth through didactic propositions. Edifying rhetoric proceeds in risk such that this type of discourse is offered to the freedom of others, who might reject it, and relies on the individuals of a public to furnish the communicative act with meaning. As a rhetorical method, edification does not pursue persuasion, but lets it ensue based on the will of others. A quote I have repeated throughout this project is Michael Hyde's contention that existentialists want people to speak a rhetoric rather than be spoken by a rhetoric. Edification captures this quality in that it does not seek pure identification, which can be presented as either an idea such as that which is true or good, or a public to which an individual can float with the mass. By contrast, edifying rhetoric sparks a movement of consciousness where the interlocutor of the audience may *dig themselves* authentically by becoming more aware of the situation at hand, re-considering the common understandings of the topic presented, and finding a way to negotiate one's social environment.

After theoretically sketching a rhetoric of edification, the last chapter examines three rhetorical actors who adopt an edifying frame with which to communicate. The works of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Angelina Grimké and John Ruskin are explored as illustrations of this particular species of rhetoric. Analyzed through the prism of edification, each rhetor can be seen as attempting to provoke an ontological spark in their contemporaries. None of the three specify

an endpoint to their communicative acts; each is invested in activating a change in consciousness for the individuals of their readership and/or audience so as to lead to an alteration of the means which can lead to social change. In surveying these figures, it is admitted that each initially fail to cultivate immediate historical success, but their work remains heuristically solvent insofar as they are honored by posterity owing to the edifying texture of each address. Erasmus, Grimké and Ruskin proceeded with a risk, aware that their rhetoric might fall on deaf ears. However, they enable the possibility of agency in those who listen or read their works. This is most evident in Ruskin's residual impact on Gandhi, who recounts the ontological shock of reading Unto This Last and resolves to change his life. One of the characteristics of edifying address is that the interlocutor does not merely follow the discourse offered, but adapts and applies it, after conscious reflection, to one's own life so as to activate social change. Gandhi adopts the orientation Ruskin considers, not the specific policies uttered. Edifying rhetoric seeks to alter the consciousness of individuals within a public since even the passing of laws cannot guarantee the freedom of others. Its ultimate goal is to re-position attitudes, not draft legislation. In doing so, edification, as evident in the work of Erasmus, Grimké, and Ruskin, rupture the consubstantial agreements of a public. Such a rhetoric challenges individual members of a rhetorical audience insofar as the auditor or reader is asked to confront oneself and question the accepted truths of an epoch. A reworking of the public address from these three rhetors is examined such that others may begin to identify other acts of edification, and that it be seen as unique strategy of discourse apart from the Aristotelian models of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic rhetoric.

Developing and applying edification is offered to gain acceptance as a new rhetorical construct of discourse. Unlike other models, it does not pursue agreement or that which is efficacious. My goal is that rhetoricians might consider the method of edification when examining other discourses of confrontational rhetoric and extend it beyond what I have traced

out here. Erasmus, Grimké and Ruskin are three selections of rhetorical actors who adopt an edifying frame, but I want to encourage others to identify more and begin interpreting the performance of rhetorical acts apart the historical efficacy of particular addresses. I think my work on edification helps recognize what a rhetoric of authenticity might look like because it avoids the pitfalls of consubstantiation and pure identification. It acknowledges the drive to identify with one another, but does not yield to the temptation of purchasing success at the price of bad faith. As such, an existentialist account of authenticity has taken this understanding of rhetoric to the shores of ethics. A rhetorical act is ethical not by the causal effect of its pragmatic good(-ness), which can only be evaluated through an a fortiori historical reconstruction of the rhetorical situation, but by the authenticity of its performance. That is to say, a rhetor is ethical or authentic insofar as she exposes the risk of her expression to the individuals of a public, who then furnish the communicative act with meaning. An unethical act of rhetoric finds a rhetor attempting to dominate the meaning of one's own expression and failing to pay deference to the fact that meaning is a joint effort. Edification represents a form of rhetorical communication that renders its own discursive offering explicit in the hope that individuals may experience a call to responsibly consider the address and then *interact* with meaning. The auditor or reader is disciplined to participate individually since the address encourages a reaction of any kind; existentialism and the edifying frame of rhetoric suggest that not choosing is itself a choice. An edifying rhetoric does not permit the auditor or reader to purely identify with the rhetor or the public to whom the discourse is addressed. Yet having articulated what an ethical rhetoric of authenticity may look like theoretically and how it has been deployed in the past in Chapters 4 and 5, it is fair to ask whether such a rhetoric is possible in a globalized world.

The short of it is I don't know. I have my hopes, but am as of yet uncertain. I would argue the rational-based methodology of public communicative interaction advanced by

Perelman, Habermas, and, more recently, Al Gore, attempts to create a fair and equitable rhetorical network of society, but it does so by ignoring both the creative and the fallible aspects of human communicative practices. Their intentions are sound, yet they underestimate the inventiveness of language, with its gifts of irony and its pervasive misunderstandings when communicated, and the radical contingency of human affairs. Ultimately, they think rhetoric can be controlled, its dynamic qualities arrested so as to ensure the integrity of communicative interaction—hence their reliance on reason. On the other hand, postmodern or posthumanist rhetorics challenge any totalizing social frames of communication and question the freedom of the rhetorical agent in the contemporary world. Existentialism anticipates some of these postmodern criticisms yet also provides a profitable middle ground wherein persons can recognize their inextricable ties to one another yet admit difference in a matter that lets them move forward. It offers a way to look at the world and negotiate oneself within the world. Despite the multiplicity of languages that abound, communication itself is the one certainty we can be aware of. The problem, of course, is that communication necessary leads to uncertainty.

Anything is possible when God, would that He exists, does not play puppet-master, but these possibilities require the risks of committed rhetorical acts from persons who are aware of their potential failure. What the phrase, existential struggle, refers to is not the pain of an isolated, lonely consciousness, but the realization of just how hard it is to be-with-others in a world without pre-set values or determined outcomes. There is an implicit failure to the human condition, and this struggle signals both a need for and the deficiency of rhetoric in a world without assurances. Rhetoric is that faculty which we possess to negotiate the existential struggle of a species continually suspicious of itself, ever prone to war, and fearful of uncertainty. To deny the preponderance of rhetorical communication is to exercise bad faith, and to focus solely on the Good or the True is a way to avoid our rhetorical being as existents. We have no



guarantees other than nothing itself is guaranteed, but, with that, existentialism and rhetoric ultimately turn our attention to the hopes of a future that may never be actualized but always remains possible. As such, we can begin to conceive a rhetoric of virtue through our existential commitments—something evident in the work of Grimké and Ruskin, in particular.

It may not be popular to admit, but the existentialists *are* correct in their assessment of a world where God is dead and his absence, indeed, permits everything. Should the outpost of humanity outlined here be met with suspicions of pure relativism, know that its result is not that nothing matters—rather, everything can be seen to matter. A bountiful texture of meaning must continually be constructed, decoded, and processed with the help of others. Indeed, the relativism to which rhetoric has been charged with for over 2,000 years and whose mantle was resuscitated by the existentialists should be confronted with openness. The existentialists have been critiqued for saying life is meaningless. On the contrary, existentialism presents life as meaning-full—in fact, absurdly so. Not because of any a priori justification, but by the sheer proliferation of rhetorical interactions that abound. Our existence is thus rhetorically inscribed and suffused with meaning. This project has attempted to acknowledge the insecurity of our being and how existentialism arouses a rhetorical view of life that allows us to negotiate the anxieties of such a world with an authentic humility. While the faculties of communication prohibit actualizing the Good or reaching the Truth, we may, in the last, exercise rhetorical practices that risk encouraging one another to consider what might be better in the future given the radical contingency of the ever-unfolding present and the failures of the past. Perfection, clearly, is not of this realm; hence the need to equip ourselves with a rhetorical worldview that harnesses our ability to communicate with humility, openness, and an awareness of our own symbolic deficiencies.

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## VITA

Zachary Gershberg was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1980 to Jay Gershberg and Deborah Murray. He attended The Nichols School and graduated in 1998. At Ithaca College, Mr. Gershberg pursued two Bachelor of Science degrees: one in cinema and photography, the other in sports information and communication. After a brief stint working with Warner Brothers Studios in Burbank, California, he moved to Hawaii to become a journalist, writing for the Honolulu Weekly newspaper. There Mr. Gershberg enrolled in a master's program at Hawaii Pacific University and wrote his thesis on the essays of Mark Twain. After earning a Master of Arts in communication degree from Hawaii Pacific University, he pursued a doctorate in rhetoric for the Communication Studies Department of Louisiana State University.

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