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REVISITING KENNETH BURKE: RHETORIC, METAPHOR, HISTORY

The multi-faceted work of American rhetorician Kenneth Duva Burke (1897-1993) continues to exercise the attention of critics. Not only for the sheer breadth of his endeavor, which brackets the realms of rhetoric, philosophy, poetry, aesthetics, literary criticism, and the social sciences, but also for the unwieldy quality of his style, in the eyes of many haphazard and jargon-ridden (Warnock 1986, 64).¹ In fact, the notorious obscurity of Burke's prose, for William Rueckert a distracting "terminological underbrush"² that needs to be hacked away, is counterbalanced by the insights the reader is afforded in the sudden clearings, when Burke's "forest," his unconventional way of arguing, as he says, "by radiations," gives way to trenchant examples and aphorisms, often in the thought-provoking form of paradox.³ A hard read in many respects, Burke can thus be extraordinarily nimble and on occasion light-hearted. Perhaps, these latter features are what sets him more immediately apart from champions of deconstruction, even as their strategies of reading may in some respects be said to hark back to Burke himself.⁴ *Attitudes toward History* (1937) the book I here discuss along with *Permanence and Change* (1935), is said to have inspired De Man's immensely influential

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¹ A self-taught scholar, Burke never completed university studies at Ohio and Columbia, preferring instead to nourish his keen literary and aesthetic interests in the energetic setting of the Greenwich Village avant-garde. He did lecture at the University of Chicago (in 1938 and 1949) among others, but his teaching career gravitated almost exclusively around Bennington College, Vermont, where he taught for nearly 20 years, from 1943 to 1961.

² The forest metaphor seems especially apt to describe the experience of reading Burke, as evidenced for instance in Alpers.

³ Burke mentions the "radiations" of his argument with reference to the "labyrinthine way in which one term involves others" in a note on page VI of his *Attitudes Toward History* (1937). All quotations in this paper are from the 3rd revised edition (Burke 1984), henceforth *ATH*.

⁴ Burke exchanged letters with a number of literary critics and writers over the years, including William Carlos Williams, Malcolm Cowley, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Ralph Ellison, Katherine Anne Porter, Jean Toomer, Hart Crane, and Marianne Moore. A full list of correspondents may be found in "The Kenneth Burke Papers" held in the Special Collections of Pennsylvania State University (<https://www.libraries.psu.edu/findingaids/2619.htm>; Last Visited February 2, 2017). Thinkers Harold Bloom, Stanley Cavell, Susan Sontag, Erving Goffman, Geoffrey Hartman, Edward Said, René Girard, Fredric Jameson, Michael Calvin McGee, Dell Hymes and Clifford Geertz have also paid their tribute to Burke's influence. Recent studies have traced links and analogies between Burke, the literary movement of deconstruction, and, more widely, postmodernism. Robert Wess' *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism* (1996) may be the most assertive, if arguably partisan, recasting of Burke's work in postmodern terms. Assessments more attentive to Burke's nuanced version of constructivism are given by Lentricchia in his contribution to the book edited by White (1982), and by Kastely (1996) who notes that "in his understanding that the human subject is, in part, a construct of language, Burke anticipates and complements much of the contemporary critique of the subject, but in his attempt to induce a 'smiling hypochondriasis' he distinguishes himself from other theorists by his effort to make us into comedians" (308). Analogous reservations had been advanced by Gabin (1987). Accounts of Burke's impact for the 21st century not exclusively tied to postmodernist assumptions may also be found in Biesecker; Brock; Rueckert; White and Brose. A particularly keen and comprehensive reading of Burke's oeuvre which also outlines the shortcomings of previous assessments, including Lentricchia's, is provided by Wolin (2001).



Blindness and Insight (1971).⁵

The purpose of this essay is to re-read Burke's twin volumes and, out of the lush ramifications of his argument, to pick up cues for a more articulate understanding of history and historiography through the lenses of poetry and rhetoric, and *vice versa*. In other words, I want to show how Burke's eclectic approach, based on a keen eye for the workings of rhetoric over a wide and somewhat hazy cultural expanse, greatly enhances our awareness of the ways in which language as a symbolic strategy operates through and across our discursive practices (in literature and history first but also, for instance, in the social sciences). As I do so, I aim to reassert the immediate relevance of the Burkean method (or lack thereof) for liberal academic studies today, in a favorable cultural climate where scholars seem more willing to leave the vantage grounds of high specialization to engage in multidisciplinary exchange: what Burke himself would have called a "forensic" dimension.⁶ A methodical and thorough reading of even one work by Burke is nearly impossible, if only because part of his wide-ranging task lies precisely in addressing the shortcomings and the rigidities of "method" as such against the pliancy of what he calls "the imaginative."⁷ So, as my reading unfolds, it may transpire that I also take up some of the digressive "radiations" I find in Burke, and that my argument falls short, at times, of the scientific stringency academics are trained to expect. To this, Burke would reply that what this type of writing loses in consistency and logical coherence, it gains in cogency, speculative scope and heuristic value.

1. "Curriculum Criticum"

Suggestions that help us situate *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) in Burke's vast production come from the author himself. In his afterword to the third edition of the book (1984), Burke refers to a section, appropriately entitled "Curriculum Criticum," which he had added to the 1953 reprint of another book: *Counter-Statement*.⁸ There, he explains that *ATH* was meant as a "companion volume" to *Permanence and Change* (1935), and as "not just a sequel, but in one respect an early revision of the same" (*ATH*, 377). The six-page "Curriculum Criticum" is invaluable as a loosely biographical self-analysis of what Burke considers his own "curve of development" (*CS* 1953, 212). *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*,⁹ to quote its complete title, is said to mark a shift from an earlier, "adolescent" phase of "aesthetic mysticism" all taken up with Shakespeare's dramaturgic genius, to a much "wider concern with problems of motivation in general," for strategies of "communication, interpretation, orientation, integration, cooperation, transformation, simplification" (*CS*, 213). Burke sees a turning point in his own development as a critic when he became familiar with the writings of Jeremy Bentham and began to explore Bentham's ground-breaking merger of linguistic and sociological lines of inquiry.¹⁰ It is a filigree which runs through Burke's writing career, coloring his vocabulary and qualifying his unorthodox, and to many controversial, standing as a scholar. Burke acknowledges that his own "analysis of language and of human motives at some points overlaps upon literary criticism in the strict sense of the term" but "at many other points it leads into inquiries not central to literary criticism and sometimes literary critics have quarreled with the author for neglecting the problems of literary criticism proper" (*CS*, 218). His research transcends the boundaries of literary studies: he will pursue any line of enquiry touching upon "symbolic motivation and linguistic action."¹¹ *PC* and *ATH* are the two initial

⁵ The passage in question is on page 41 of *ATH*, where Burke notes that "every insight contains its own special kind of blindness." De Man's articulate use of the blindness/insight metaphor is in the chapter "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau" (1971, 102-141).

⁶ Burke (*ATH*, 254) broadly defines "forensic" as any "material supplied by the forum, the market place. The materials of law, parliamentary procedure, traffic regulation, scientific-causal relationships evolved by complex and sophisticated commerce (of both the material and spiritual sorts)."

⁷ The intriguing analogies between Burke's "imaginative" and Lacan's "imaginary" deserve an in-depth treatment which is beyond the restricted scope of this paper.

⁸ *Counter-Statement* was first published in 1931. References in this paper are to the 2nd edition (Burke 1953). Henceforth *CS*.

⁹ Burke (1935). Henceforth *PC*.

¹⁰ Burke's interest lies especially in Bentham's "Book of Fallacies" and "Table of the Springs of Action" originally in vol. 2 of *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, published under the Superintendence of his Executor, John Bowring* (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-1843). 11 vols. See Bentham 1983 and 2015.

¹¹ In *CS*, "Curriculum Criticum." See especially pages 212-215 and the concluding paragraph on page 219.



volumes that set the tone for this ambitious scheme.

In very broad and concise terms, both *PC* and *ATH* share an interest in the workings of human motivation: the aim is to make sense of how people, defined as symbol-using (and symbol-abusing animals), explain and respond to the conflicting events, or stimuli, of everyday experience by adopting symbolic “orientations” toward such events. These orientations, or attitudes (in the Burkean sense of incipient actions), attempt to make sense and to use phenomena (be they physical or linguistic; individual or social) by framing them rhetorically and symbolically in a process of interpretation, which invests both language and action. And in their endless and ever-more complex symbolic permutations, these interpretative efforts become in turn objects of interpretation and verbalization among people, via a shared, socialized vocabulary, itself a rhetorical sort of activity which implies persuasive action within a community of speakers. That is what happens, typically, in everyday social interaction when one urges another to accept or reject an idea or a course of action; in the controversial context of political debate; but also in the controlled environment of empirical testing, as a scientist selects a metaphor that guides and ordains her testing and line of research. That is, by extension, what makes the rhetorically infused domains of literature, criticism or creative poetry so inextricably enmeshed with the sanitized realms of science and technology in their manifold embodiments (economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, law). *PC* gives us a first dizzying glimpse of the vast theoretical horizon Burke’s project opens up. He leads us along hazardous paths and across unsteady metaphorical bridges. His line of argument takes twists and turns, digressing from anthropology into philosophy, from literature to sociology, law and psychoanalysis. Now and then disorientation ensues. However, while one would look in vain for the neat arrangement of “clear and distinct ideas” bequeathed to our rigorous Western sensibilities by Descartes, we would be amiss if we failed to discern a way in Burke’s outward madness, a thread in the dense fabric of his prose. One could not fail to see, for instance, that in its puzzling juxtaposition of Pavlovian experiments, Gestalt theory, Nietzschean philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis, *PC* marks a trail of inquiry that keeps a steady focus on the symbolic use of language; a trail later picked up by *ATH*. Burke himself explains that *PC* “thinks of communication in terms of ideal cooperation” and introduces concepts that will be used as a complement in *ATH* to characterize instead “the tactics and patterns of conflict typical of human associations” (CS, 215) along more explicit sociological lines. This is the thread that would eventually emerge in Burke’s crowning achievement: his envisioned triad of “Motivorum Books:” *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), and *A Symbolic of Motives*,¹² meant to “deal with linguistic structures in their logical, rhetorical, and poetic dimensions respectively” (CS, 216).

2. Incongruous metaphors

Since *PC* reflects on a number of key issues and provides an initial vocabulary of human motivation later developed by *ATH*, the best way to approach *ATH* is via a somewhat detailed discussion of select passages in *PC*, which we can link “synoptically” to *ATH* as we proceed. In its title, *PC* sets the twin termini within which Burke’s study of purpose oscillates. History intended as a “philosophy of becoming” denotes change: it is necessarily shaped by ever-shifting cultural contingencies. Yet the neurobiological setup whereby we as humans respond to history, Burke claims, remains largely unchanged: it lies within the province of permanence. In Burke’s own words:

Insofar as the neurological structure remains a constant, there will be a corresponding constancy in the devices by which sociality is maintained. Changes in the environmental structure will, of course, call forth changes in the particularities of rationalization, quite as we

¹² *A Symbolic of Motives* was never completed by Burke. The task fell instead on William H. Rueckert, who selected, arranged and edited material he had collected through extensive correspondence with Burke over the years in *Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950-1955*, published in 2007 (Burke and Rueckert). Burke had also envisioned a possible fourth volume to be entitled “On Human Relations,” with a stress on the ethical dimension of language (“Curriculum Criticum,” CS, 217). One way of approaching Burke’s *Motivorum* triad is to follow Meadows’s suggestion (1957) and think of it in semiotic terms as consisting of Syntactics (Grammar), Pragmatics (Rhetoric), and Semantics (Symbolic). This however greatly simplifies Burke’s understanding of motives along somewhat narrow, efficient lines Burke may have objected to as yet another instance of unguarded “bureaucratization.”



must employ different devices for salvation if we fall into water than if we are sliding down a cliff. But the essentials of purpose and gratification will not change (*PC*, 211).

In philosophical terms:

If we choose to emphasize the shifting particularities, we approach human problems historically, as in the *philosophies of becoming* which seem to have reached their flowering in nineteenth-century thought (Goethe, Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and the vast horde of lesser evolutionary or revolutionary thinkers). If we choose to emphasize the underlying similarities, we return through symbolism to a *philosophy of being*, the Spinozistic concern with man *sub specie aeternitatis*. We replace the metaphor of progress (and its bitter corollary, decadence) with the metaphor of a norm, the notion that at bottom the aims and genius of man have remained fundamentally the same, that temporal events may cause him to get far from his sources, but that he repeatedly struggles to restore, under new particularities, the same basic patterns of the “good life.” (*PC*, 211)

Burke proposes to keep track of these shifting emphases between being and becoming by using what he calls a “perspective by incongruity:” a sort of double-vision loosely based in Nietzschean perspectivism which enables us to detect constants via the symbolic incongruities of historical language patterns.¹³ Insofar as language is an empirically observable phenomenon, the perspective thus achieved is historical, but relies on a trans-historical, metaphorical stretching: “taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring its use to another setting” (*PC*, 118). Examples from the stylistic incongruities of Nietzsche (and his disciple Spengler) are provided to show that he “writes by the same constant reordering of categories that we find in the Shakespearean metaphor” (*PC*, 118). The method introduced here reappears in the “dictionary of pivotal terms” Burke later attached to *ATH*, where it is given a succinct definition:

A method for gauging situations by verbal “atom cracking.” That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category — and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category. (308)

Once again emphasizing the continuity between literary criticism and wider language analysis across the disciplines, Burke explains that a “perspective by incongruity” is in a way an extension of literary wordplay itself:

Perspective by incongruity, or “planned incongruity,” is a methodology of the pun. “Pun” is here itself metaphorically extended. Literally, a pun links by tonal association words hitherto unlinked. “Perspective by incongruity” carries on the same kind of enterprise in linking hitherto unlinked words by rational criteria instead of tonal criteria. (309)

And elsewhere in the same volume Burke proposes a shrewd reassessment of Shakespeare’s own punning

¹³ Burke borrows and adapts Nietzsche’s term from a passage in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (The Gay Science 1882)*: “At bottom, all our actions are incomparably and utterly personal, unique, and boundlessly individual, there is no doubt; but as soon as we translate them into consciousness, they no longer seem to be... This is what I consider to be true phenomenalism and perspectivism: that due to the nature of animal consciousness, the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface-and sign-world, a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator, — that everything which enters consciousness thereby becomes shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, a sign, a herd-mark; that all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization” (Nietzsche, 212). Commenting on the crucial role of the “perspective by incongruity” concept in Burke’s dramatic model, Paul Meadows (1957) rightly pointed out that is “not merely a case of perspective as metaphor (which it is of course), but of perspective *through* metaphor” (87).



as a very necessary step in a graded series that leads to Shakespeare's "Subtle imaginative enterprises."¹⁴ Ultimately, Burke's perspective makes it possible to extend the tools of literary criticism to the realm of language use in general, and to social action as a rhetorical instance of language itself. A phrase Burke repeatedly brings up in *ATH* as the paramount example of social punning is the euphemistic appeal circulated in post-1929 America for a "socialization of losses" meant to compensate for the discomfitures of capitalism.¹⁵

The notion of "perspective by incongruity" is central to Burke's project because it triggers his interest in the language of drama as a vocabulary that simultaneously applies to all kinds of language-based endeavors and yet avoids the pitfall of impossible "neutrality," which social and political disciplines pursue in their awed emulation of science. To use his words, "perspective by incongruity" "makes for a dramatic vocabulary, with weighting and counter-weighting, in contrast with the liberal ideal of neutral naming in the characterization of processes" (*ATH*, 311). The whole edifice of Burke's criticism may be said to rely on the central role given in *PC* and *ATH* to this type of metaphorical reorienting or undermining of accepted norms. By a considerable margin, and arguably with finer interpretative nuances, Burke's line of inquiry anticipates both the highly popular forays of cognitive theorists like George Lakoff¹⁶ and the metaphorical peregrinations of deconstruction. Metaphors, Burke insists, reveal the kind of "hitherto unsuspected connectives which we may note in the progressions of a dream" (*PC*, 118). The new "verbal linkages" metaphors provide startle us and enlighten us by challenging "our old categories of orientation" (*PC*, 121). That happens not only in the overtly poetic realm of literature but, more importantly and more misleadingly, in the contributions of science, "rated precisely by reason of the new ways they suggested for characterizing and classifying events."¹⁷ The emphasis Burke places on the continuity between poetry and science in this perspective deserves to be quoted in full:

Indeed, as the documents of science pile up, are we not coming to see that whole works of scientific research, even entire schools, are hardly more than the patient repetition, in all its ramifications, of a fertile metaphor? Thus we have, at different eras in history, considered man

¹⁴ Burke's analysis of Shakespeare's punning is brilliant: "The whole matter, incidentally, might suggest the need of a more charitable attitude towards the atrocious puns in Shakespeare. It is customary to dismiss them as mere 'concessions to the populace.' The crude members of his audience had to have their clowning. So Shakespeare simply 'tithed,' his apologists tell us in effect. He gave the *vulgus* just enough atrocious jingles to make them endure his subtler imaginative enterprises. We doubt this. Had he not sometimes 'punned atrociously' in his blunt jingles, he could not have 'punned subtly' in his most delicate metaphorical leaps. The blunt tonal pun and the subtle metaphorical pun are merely opposite ends of a single 'graded series.' His specialization in such matters required him to run the whole gamut. We may even say that, had he not sometimes punned atrociously, he would by the same token have had to drop some of his most vigorous characters from his plays. We do not mean literally that the vigor of their lines depended Upon jingles. Their best lines are most often the ones in which there are no jingles. We mean that, by beginning with puns, he could *refine* them as he proceeded; but had he begun by legislating against them, he would have had nothing to refine" (*ATH*, 239).

¹⁵ "In line with such thinking, we cannot say enough in praise of the concept, 'the socialization of losses,' as a pun for liquidating the false rigidity of concepts and for inducing quick convertibility from moralistic to economic categories. The operation of this salvation device in the investment field has its counterpart in the 'curative' doctrine of 'original sin' whereby a man 'socializes' his personal loss by holding that *all* men are guilty" (*ATH*, 312). It would be interesting, but beyond the scope of this essay, to reflect on Burke's dramatic reading as a thought-provoking corrective to the generalized unease recently voiced by economists on the idea of "socializing" losses, as seen for instance in an online post by author WashingtonsBlog with the title "Government's Socialization of Losses Is Destroying the Real Economy." The post cites economists Roubini and Taleb, journalist Scheer and Italian historian Gaetano Salvemini to denounce what is seen as the metastatic degeneration inherent in the concept of a "socialization of losses," as "the State pays for the blunders of private enterprise... Profit is private and individual. Loss is public and social." <http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2009/09/roubini-and-taleb-governments-socialization-of-losses-is-destroying-the-real-economy.html>, last accessed 24.02.2017.

¹⁶ Lakoff's extensive exploration of metaphor crosses multiple disciplinary fields over more than 20 years. See Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (2012).

¹⁷ By way of example Burke refers to Darwin's powerful "anthropoid" metaphor (*PC*, 120).



as the son of God, as an animal, as a political or economic brick, as a machine, each such metaphor, and a hundred others, serving as the cue for an unending line of data and generalizations. The attempt to fix argument by analogy as a distinct kind of process, separable from logical argument, seems increasingly futile. [...] The heuristic value of scientific analogies is quite like the surprise of metaphor. The difference seems to be that the scientific analogy is more patiently pursued, being employed to inform an entire work or movement, where the poet uses his metaphor for a glimpse only. (Yet even here we may find a similarity; the complete works of the poet show signs of a unified attitude precisely such as may be summed up in one metaphor: “He calls life a dream...or a pilgrimage...a carnival...or a labyrinth”). (*PC*, 126)

PC is devoted to tracing, analyzing and illustrating the basic continuity that exists between categories such as “Analogy, Metaphor, Abstraction, Classification, Interest, Expectancy, and Intention” (136) which Burke sees as deeply inter-related. They are to be found, he observes, in all facets of human endeavor (literature, history, the sciences) and are not limited to the medium of language *per se* but rather invest the broader spectrum of communication, also as expressed in purposive action, intention and expectation. Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” is the tactic needed to “crack” and refine the elaborate constructions of language in all its manifestations.

In any event, the confluence of scientific revelations, of minute and comprehensive schemes whereby we find new readings for the character of events, is in itself the evidence that Perspective by Incongruity is both needed and extensively practised. Were we to summarize the totality of its effects, advocating as an exhortation what has already spontaneously occurred, we might say that planned incongruity should be deliberately cultivated for the purpose of experimentally wrenching apart all those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which still remain with us. It should subject language to the same “cracking” process that chemists now use in their refining of oil. (*PC*, 156)

As we anticipated, this “wrenching apart” of language is uncannily close to the deconstructionist view of reading typified in De Man’s strategy of “blindness and insight,” although Burke’s would not seem to subscribe to the belief that “the interpretation of everyday language is a Sisyphean task, a task without end and without progress, for the other is always free to make what he wants differ from what he says he wants” (De Man 1971, 11). In an individualist stance that could very well be taken as representative of the whole deconstructionist enterprise, De Man would seem to freeze human communication in a sort of intersubjective act of interpretation that is forever mishandled and misapplied. There seems to be in De Man an underlying hang-up on a truth/falsehood dichotomy that is irrelevant to Burke’s dramatic view.¹⁸ Burke’s focus is, rather, on communication as a social act and project, less concerned with truth or falsehood than with the sensitive and sensible application of language to the exigencies of historical compromise within a community.¹⁹ Some of the most perceptive remarks Burke has to offer in *PC* have to do with such social process of endless interpretation of history, itself prone to the lures and the pitfalls of analogical extension. The business of interpretation is accomplished by the two processes of over-simplification and analogical extension. We over-simplify a given event when we characterize it from the standpoint of a given interest —

¹⁸ See for instance De Man (164): “Could we conceive of a literary history that would not truncate literature by putting us misleadingly into or outside it, that would be able to maintain the literary *aporia* throughout, account at the same time for the truth and the falsehood of the knowledge literature conveys about itself, distinguish rigorously between metaphorical and historical language, and account for literary modernity as well as for its historicity? Clearly, such a conception would imply a revision of the notion of history and, beyond that, of the notion of time on which our idea of history is based.”

¹⁹ Along similar lines, Gabin (1987, 207, note 2) voices, I believe, a legitimate concern when she says that ascription of Burke to the deconstructionist agenda is debatable at best, since “post-structuralism makes language ‘intransitive’ (Barthes, 166, for example: ‘The field of the writer is nothing but writing itself [...] the only area [...] for the one who writes.’) or self-referential, while Burke sees language as sets of terms which do refer to, or symbolically encompass, historical situations, even as these terms also move ‘logologically,’ or according to their own logical possibilities.”



and we attempt to invent a similar characterization for other events by analogy. The great difficulty with the method in the judging of historical events is that it requires the rectification of false analogies through trial and error, whereas the vast bungling complexes of history do not recur. For this reason, those who attempt to interpret history by ambitiously driven analogical extensions lay much emphasis upon the factors of history that can be called recurrent. But one can note the recurrent only by abstracting certain qualities from the given historical complexities. One must have special informing interests of his own. Hence, in the study of historic movements, one must violate the tenor of any culture as the members of that culture knew it. Similarly, one must violate the tenor of one's own culture as the members of his culture know it. Hence the perspective by incongruity to which the historian or sociologist is automatically pledged. The modern attempts to study *processes* can lead just as surely to analogical over-extension as did the old medieval attempt to relate events by the search for their *essence*²⁰ (*PC*, 140-141).

In *PC*, the articulate discussion of history in its relationship to language gives shape to a vocabulary of key concepts that undergird Burke's far-reaching analysis of Western history in *ATH*. Burke uses the term "orientation" to refer to the way humans or communities relate, respond or act upon the contingencies of experience.²¹ In simple words, an orientation could be said to be "a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be" (*PC*, 23). Burke shrewdly connects his idea of orientation to the psychoanalytical concept of "rationalization" and, having detected the bias that the word "rationalization" conveys against a presumably neutral "reason," he concludes in fact that "one school's reason is another school's rationalization" (31): ultimately all and any type of language is tinged with evaluative bias. With this inescapable mystification in mind, Burke proceeds to use rationalization as a descriptive synonym of "orientation" and point out three leading orders of rationalization in Western culture around the broad categories of magic, religion and science.²² *ATH* subsumes the insights of the "orientation" and "rationalization" terms under the broader and more versatile semantic umbrella of a word like "attitude." The word, inspired partly by Ogden and Richards,²³ had already been used by Burke in *PC* to discuss, for instance, the ambiguity inherent in the kind of critical judgment that would dismiss some poetry as "escapist" (15). In *ATH* "attitude" comes forcefully to the fore, as the compelling, titular term Burke uses to convey the naming of a process or condition from a "meditative, or moralizing or even hortatory point of view" (III). In other words, and against any pretense of neutrality, the word "attitude" stresses the evaluative bias any interpretation of history unavoidably entails. In his introductory remarks, Burke qualifies the methodological usefulness of the word "attitude" for his understanding of history as a recurring alternation, namely, of "attitudes:" broad cultural frames of acceptance or rejection in the face of evil.²⁴ The basic attitudes of "Yes,

²⁰ Incidentally, this discussion also seems to anticipate anthropologist Kenneth Pike's emic/etic distinction (Pike 1967).

²¹ Orientation is somewhat close to the Foucauldian notion of *episteme*. However, while Foucault's term may be said to describe "the body of ideas which shape the perception of knowledge at a particular period. The communal presuppositions about knowledge and its nature and limits," (OED v. *episteme*) orientation implies the exquisitely rhetorical concepts of motion, ingratiation, and inducement.

²² See especially this note (*ATH*, 164): "The church developed a rationalization of reason. The 'debunkers' developed a rationalized critique of this rationalization. That is, the church built on the foundations of guilt, and the rationalism of the anti-church debunked the guilt. Hence, since the church rationalization was collective in its emphases, the critique of it became individualistic (finally attaining its reduction to absurdity in the thinking of Max Stirner). Accordingly, we hold that one cannot 'debunk' guilt completely without arriving at a disintegrative, anti-social philosophy."

²³ While discussing the notion of "attitudes as incipient acts" Burke explicitly mentions Richards (*PC*, 323): "Has not Richards himself, in his 'Principles of Literary Criticism,' recognized an integral relationship between thought and action? He there tells us that an attitude is an incipient plan of action, and that the poet can modify our attitudes. Furthermore, fictions are implicit in our acts. In other words, freedom must be defined by purpose. Otherwise we are simply 'free' to continue flying apart from one another in the direction of mental 'chaos'."

²⁴ Burke notes that "In the face of anguish, injustice, disease, and death one adopts policies. One constructs his notion of the universe or history, and shapes attitudes in keeping. Be he poet or scientist, one defines the 'human situation' as amply as his imagination permits; then, with this ample definition in mind, he singles out certain functions or relationships are either friendly or unfriendly" (*ATH*, 3). Consequently, "by 'frames of acceptance' we mean the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it" (*ATH*, 5). As for rejection, Burke defines it as "a by-



No and the Intermediate realm of Maybe” (II) provide Burke with the starting ground for his inquiry into literary genres (tragedy, satire, fantasy, comedy), frames whereby such attitudes are “both subtly and grandly symbolized.” This in turns leads him to consider a “Curve of History” for Western culture, laid out in the shape of a five-act play (*Act I. Evangelical Christianity; Act II. Mediaeval Synthesis; Act III. Protestantism; Act IV. Early Capitalism; Act V. Collectivism*). The passage is momentous at least in two related respects. First, because it shows us the dynamic linkage Burke discerns early on between literature and life, between literary theory and social theory, between, for instance, the use of symbols in rhetoric and in science. Secondly, because it signals Burke’s use of a “dramatistic” image (based on the cultural analogy of drama) which would later become the center point of his theory (dramatism) and spark an impressive number of investigations by scholars across the disciplines.²⁵ As has been rightly pointed out, for Burke “the relationship between life and theater is literal rather than metaphorical,” in the sense that “humans enact real roles on live stages as they attempt to impact others” and “these dramas guide the ways that individuals, groups, and organizations conduct their behaviors” (*ATH*, 321). The word “attitude” appropriately conveys such symbol-infused and dramatistically inclined disposition. And since all instances of human language are attitudinal, Burke feels entitled to advocate his own guiding orientation, “the attitude of attitudes” he envisages in a comic frame, defined as a “methodic view of human antics as comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy” (*ATH*, III). Burke repeatedly invokes the effectiveness of the comic frame throughout *ATH* as a non-cynical corrective against bias. It is “charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to the ways in which people ‘cash in on’ their moral assets, and even use moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes — but it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure to be the last word on human motivation” (*ATH*, 107). Ultimately, the comic frame is a powerful symbolic tool of personal and social emancipation that promotes self-awareness to rise above one’s shortcomings or tap, for instance, the symbolic strategies shrewdly pursued by large corporate entities:²⁶

The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to “transcend” occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his “assets” column, under the head of “experience.” Thus we “win” by subtly changing the rules of the game — and by a mere trick of bookkeeping, like the accountants for big utility corporations, we make “assets” out of “liabilities.” And can we, in our humbleness, do better than apply in our own way the wise devices of these leviathans, thereby “democratizing” a salvation device as we encourage it to filter from the top down? In sum, the comic frame should enable people “to be observers of themselves, while acting.” Its ultimate

product of ‘acceptance’ [...], primarily a matter of emphasis, [...] that takes its color from an attitude towards some reigning symbol of authority, stressing a shift in the allegiance to symbols of authority. It is the heretical aspect of an orthodoxy — and as such, it has much in common with the ‘frame of acceptance’ that it rejects” (*ATH*, 21-22).

²⁵ The definition of Dramatism given in the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (320-322 v. *Dramatism*) is both succinct and far-reaching: “dramatism seeks to understand the human world as a symbolic world of drama in which language is a strategic, motivated response to specific situations. As such, language is viewed as a mode of symbolic action rather than a repository of knowledge, and the use of language or other symbols to induce cooperation among human beings is the focus of investigation.”

²⁶ The far-reaching implications of Burke’s “comic corrective” would call for a separate, in-depth treatment. One of the most perceptive analysis of the issue is still James Kastely’s article on “Kenneth Burke’s Comic Rejoinder to the Cult of Empire” (1996). Kastely brought out the momentous issues and potentials in Burke’s comic corrective model when he noted that Burke teaches us “how to trip up an increasingly efficient set of motives that threaten us by their logic’s push to perfection” and that his “insights into hierarchy as a motive within language and his comedic and therapeutic heckling of the twin empires of capitalism and technology provide critical resources that are needed for the recovery of a democracy that is vital and inclusive yet still respects difference” (307). “The dominance of capitalism and the increasing growth of technology,” Kastely forcefully argues, “make Burke’s criticism especially relevant today to the study of literature and the teaching of writing, for his comic rejoinders to capitalism and technology can become theoretical and pedagogical resources for critics and educators seeking ways of resisting a hegemony whose very success threatens a new disaster and even deeper forms of alienation” (307). His highly plausible conclusion is that “comic



would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would “transcend” himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational. (*ATH*, 171)

Burke’s focus on attitudes brings up the issue of motivation, of why “people do as they do,” and leads him to consider motives a “shorthand for action.” This is a direction Burke takes as early as *PC*, where it becomes clear that motive, as distinct from sheer motion, is central to Burke’s theory. Since both motive and motion are voiced through language, both are rhetorically infused. Motion, however, may best be understood as a form of truncated motivation, duly trimmed for the purposes of a scientific inquiry which is based on empirical proof and transferred to the realm of inanimate objects.

Whereas all organisms are critical, man seeks by verbalization to perfect a methodology of criticism. Such verbalization involves the attempt to reason, hence involves a consideration of the motives which he assigns for his acts. Accordingly, we have advanced as follows: (a) there is a sense of relationships, developed by the contingencies of experience; (b) this sense of relationships is our orientation; (c) our orientation largely involves matters of expectancy, and affects our choice of means with reference to the future; (d) in the human sphere, the subject of expectancy and the judgment as to what is proper in conduct is largely bound up with the subject of motives, for if we know why people do as they do, we feel that we know what to expect of them and of ourselves, and we shape our decisions and judgments and policies to take such expectancies into account. (*PC*, 28-29)

Piety, another key Burkean notion, is what emerges as humans set up their communities in accordance with patterns of motivation and expectancy, it is a “schema of orientation, since it involves the putting together of experiences. The orientation may be right or wrong; it can guide or mis-guide” (*PC*, 101). Piety involves a sense of propriety, of “what properly goes with what,” (99) and in this respect it is the moral equivalent of property. Burke plays around the sociological “appropriateness” of the property/propriety pun, insofar as it unveils the continuity between the material and symbolic dimensions of social life. It comes as no surprise then that the vagaries of society may be glimpsed through the nuances of style. The stylistic modulations of language provide a graded series of words, a sort of semantic palette well-suited to metaphorical extensions and conversions. That makes it possible, for instance, for two commonly unrelated words to be linked along a continuous sequence of analogical extensions (*PC*, 185-86), or for an accepted notion to be “keyed up” or “keyed down” for purposes of persuasion. By way of example, Burke shows us what such keying up or down can achieve with a maxim such as “Philosophy is the product of wonder:”

It so happens that Veblen situated the origin of philosophic, or scientific speculation in “idle curiosity.” Now, if you key up idle curiosity, you might get curiosity pure and simple. If you key up curiosity, you get interest. Key up interest, and you get wonder. Key up wonder, you get reverence. And so to awe, fear, and dread. Thus, by conversion upwards, we can modulate from Veblen’s formula, through Whitehead’s, to an assertion that “Philosophy is the product of terror.” (*PC*, 189)

The importance Burke gives to the graded nuances of style in *PC* perhaps serves to explain the puzzling layout of *ATH*, already partly laid out above. It is only fitting that an “implacably American” literary critic like Burke (Gabin 1987, 196)²⁷ should start a volume on history by paying homage to the stylistic coordinates laid

strategies would allow us to see that empire — the temptation to perfect one’s control of the world — is an abiding concern for human race [*sic*]” (324).

²⁷ Gabin asks whether Burke is indeed “implacably American” as Bloom and Fletcher among others would have it, or whether he is the embodiment of “the major *-isms* in European literary, rhetorical, and social thought (1987, 197), as implied for instance by Lentricchia and Valesio. Her essay concludes with an open-ended invitation “to spin out in exemplary Burkean fashion, through keen analysis and insight, the complex coordinates of the titles” (206) which make Burke a sign, or “vessel” of multiple connotations: “We can call



out by three quintessentially American writers: William James, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Their writings are offered as examples of “well-rounded or picturesque frames of acceptance” rooted in style. Thus, James’ bewildering “bursting into metaphor living in contradiction” qualifies his “resistance to [...] procedures,” to the procedural, or in Burkean terms, the bureaucratizing ethos of his contemporaries. It is a response and a reaction against a reductionist excess of method, the “*streng wissenschaftlich*” that for James would exclude “too much of vital importance” (*ATH*, 14). Whitman’s “unseen existences” give us a “poetic replica” of James: in Burke’s words “like James, he resorted to pluralism as a way of seeing an organized unity of purpose behind diversity” (*ATH*, 14) and applied this pluralistic appetite to his own identity, which he wanted poetically scattered “among men and women.” Finally, Emerson’s essay writing gravitates around the idea that “in all evil, there is inevitably some compensatory good,” another strategy or “salvation device” that euphemistically allocates conflict and crisis under the heading of positive experience:

For everything you have missed, you have gained something else. A bad government creates the resistances that cure its badness. The swindler swindles himself. And so on, ingeniously, for many pages, with examples from physics, biology, and human history. (18)

Having pointed out the language-infused attitudes to life of specifically American writers such as James, Whitman, and Emerson, Burke can zoom out to consider, at a higher level of generality and applicability, the stylistic features of broad poetic categories (tragedy, comedy, humor, satire, burlesque, grotesque, didactic) with a view to uncovering the kind of frames of acceptance or rejection these uphold. For “each of the great poetic forms stresses its own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time” (34). In other words, literary genres are expressive forms that record trans-historical attitudes of acceptance or rejection. This discussion concludes Part I of *ATH*, appropriately titled “Acceptance and Rejection.” Part II (*The Curve of History*) zooms back in, pulling the large poetic categories outlined previously back into the fray of history. Each of the historical phases Burke charts in the five-act drama we discussed earlier is here seen through the lenses of the poetic frames associated with the literary genres outlined above, as part of a historical process of endless merger and division that complicates the texture of Western history itself. Perhaps counterintuitively, Part III of *ATH* zooms out once again to consider the broader symbolic issue of ritual as a subtle fusion of “poetic image and rhetorical idea” (*ATH*, III).²⁸ Burke’s reminder that the imagery of poetry differs from purely sensory imagery because it is “saturated with ideas” serves to highlight the continuity that exists between the language of poetic ritual and the language of social interaction, of history and of science.

3. Cookery

By this tortuous and somewhat dizzying route, we eventually reach the contentious core of Burke’s volume on history: the idea that, in a sense, “history constantly repeats itself” (*ATH*, III): “that is, though every historical period is unique as regards its particular set of circumstances and persons, the tenor of men’s policies for confronting such manifold conditions has a synthesizing function.” Periods of history will necessarily differ in their contingent combinations, but because of our substantially unchanging neurobiological setup as symbol-using animals, which Burke would claim is only partially molded by contingencies themselves, one can trace broad attitudinal frames of “permanence” that re-emerge throughout history itself. What follows in the concluding chapter of *ATH* is a glossary of technical words (Burke would say “attitudinizing terms”) that try to make sense of history’s recurrent features: “attitudinal terms for confronting kinds of quandary that *mutatis mutandis* recur under various historical condition” (III). Burke’s own “attitude to history” engenders controversy because it lays him open to the charge, revived by his critics at regular intervals, of advocating two equally deplorable courses of action. At best, a “formalistic,

KB American thinker or European, structuralist or post-structuralist, linguist or social psychologist, ideologist or ontologist; certainly he is a complex reality too large for any labels, a ‘vessel’ of diverse significations, many yet to be explained” (206).

²⁸ This somewhat perplexing section on the symbolism of ritual has been persuasively read in the context of James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) by Gibson, who helps us situate Burke’s work historically in the cultural and literary landscape of the time.



mythic approach”²⁹ to history that harbors a conservative point of view and harks back to Platonic essentialism in its ahistorical thrust (in Burke’s words, the tempting proposition that there is “the same ‘old Adam’ in all of us;” *ATH*, 420). At worst, a toxic sort of sophistical “cookery,” censured by Plato himself in his *Gorgias*, which would reduce histories to “products of ‘recipes’ — combinations, recombinations, re-makes, and warmed over scraps of the same basic plots” (Brown and Lyman 1978). Burke himself addresses such criticism in his lengthy *Afterward* to the third edition of the *ATH* (1984). He does so by bringing up the issue of *proportion*, which he discusses elsewhere³⁰ with regard to realism in fiction. The elusive question Burke, as a literary critic, poses when “trying to decide just how accurate even an intentionally ‘realistic’ story is likely to be, as a record of the ‘reality’ it is designed to portray” (*ATH*, 421) is the same question Burke, as a rhetorician, would extend to other types of “stories” like those of history and science. It is the question that takes us back to the twin termini in the title of the book, between what changes and what remains the same:

The extent to which a given work adequately represents the proportion of a given motive, as modified by the proportions of other reinforcing or corrective motives. [...] But the very nature of literature as a bid for the reader attention invites kinds of emphasis that are analogous to the function of headlines in the news. (422)

While Burke himself is very much aware of the historical conditioning his own perspective carries, there certainly remains, for Burke, an “ingredient of *permanence*” that is taken “to motivate our kind of symbol-using organism while at the same time allowing for countless histories of change” (420). To recognize this inexorable ingredient is to recognize the need for proportion in our account of ourselves and our histories, and to keep sharply in mind the reductions that any model, including an avowedly historical or scientific one, is bound to impose, by virtue of the symbolic nature of the linguistic frames it uses. Critics have legitimately asked in what way Burke’s “muddling through” — his penchant for what comes across at times as brass improvisation rather than rigorous criticism — is any different from sheer relativism.³¹ As Wayne Booth pointed out convincingly long ago, however, in a long article on Burke’s “way of knowing” that started with the apologetic tones of a belated convert to his “dramatistic” perspective, Burke is rather the avowed antagonist of relativism.³² I would subscribe to Booth’s conclusion that Burke’s is “a fully developed pluralism, one that repudiates relativism and irrationalism but at the same time embraces all meanings, at least potentially” (Booth 1974, 21). This takes us back to the issue of “permanence” in history. Behind and beyond change, there remain the “fixtures of man’s existence,” starting with the minimal recognition, for example “that we are bodies” (Booth, 14). We must always be on guard against the equally impairing extremes of “disembodied symbolism” that ignores our material existence and the “scientistic” temptation to reduce all to sheer material motion. Dramatism is meant to aid us in this arduous task, towards what Burke calls the purification of conflict (*Ad bellum purificandum*).³³ Permanence and change are inherent in the

²⁹ In an article written by Lyman (1978, 87–88). Lyman talks about “another formalistic, mythic approach” that “derives from the world of Kenneth Burke.”

³⁰ Burke, *Towards a Better Life* (1982) and “*Realisms, Occidental Style*” in Amirthanayagam.

³¹ Notorious examples of Burke’s criticism are given by Booth (1974).

³² Booth detects a general “air of condescension” in contemporary assessments of Burke’s literary criticism by famous scholars like René Wellek, who like many others was willing to praise Burke’s imaginative powers only to ultimately dismiss him as irresponsible, as some sort of “idiot savant.” He also records his own “early and quick dismissal” of Burke’s outlandish readings of Conrad and Coleridge (2-3). Booth explains that “having cut his moorings from conventional norms of proof, Burke is naturally accused of having no norms at all” (7). That, however, misrepresents Burke’s pluralistic approach, since “the contrast between his kind of pluralism and relativism is fundamental to his program” (7). Schaeffer (14) homed in on the extent and quality of this crucial contrast by reminding us that, while it obviously resonates with the ironic attitude of a pragmatist like Rorty, Burke’s approach consciously holds out against die-hard relativism because he sees it as paradoxically devoid of irony, a key ingredient in his comedic attitude towards the “competing partialities” of language. The full quote from a *Grammar of Motives* (512) reads “relativism is got by the fragmentation of either drama or dialectic. That is, if you isolate any one agent in a drama, or any one advocate in a dialogue, and see the whole in terms of his position alone, you have the purely relativistic.”

³³ The phrase is found on the opening flyleaf to Burke’s *Grammar of Motives* and is part of a larger sentence written by hand on a wall in his personal library: “potius convincere quam conviciari / ad bellum purificandum”



dramatistic model, “both an open system encompassing all possible systems and an aggressive pursuit of one possible critical language, the language that chooses language-as-action as its subject matter and tries to show what happens when everything worth looking at is looked at on the basis of this choice” (21). I think Booth correctly interprets Burke’s undertaking when he concludes that “confidence must be maintained in the difference between good criticism and bad, and we must develop criteria for distinguishing the discourse that saves from that which curses” (14). Sheer action will not suffice.

4. Burke at work

Language is itself a mode of action, because one uses language to elicit responses or frame courses of action, to address or redress. But the act of naming is complex and multifaceted, ill-suited to the reductions or simplifications which the vast bureaucratized apparatus of technology (In Burke’s times much as in our own) requires for the sake of efficiency and productivity. For naming operates on the qualitative grounds of rhetoric, while the self-sustaining mechanism of production has a marked quantitative emphasis, rooted in Cartesianism and Ramism;³⁴ the material equivalent of the stance taken by the Faustian man “who would fulfill his destiny at all costs.”³⁵ Burke warns:

“Action” by all means. But in a complex world, there are many kinds of action. Action requires programs — programs require vocabulary. To act wisely, in concert, we must use many words. If we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues. We must name the friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something about them. In naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior. (*ATH*, 4)

Naming must enable “to do something” about the “friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships:” this is the sense in which it can be a means of salvation as opposed to a paralyzing curse. Booth refers, I think, to this crucial issue when he speaks of a “discourse that saves” in the sentence I quoted above. Nonetheless, the changing contingencies of history and the human tendency to “cash in on” any possibility offered by the system make it impossible for any linguistic framing of our world and its attending practices to endure forever. Using the “perspective by incongruity” he had developed in *PC*, in *ATH* Burke describes this relentless process of decay as a “bureaucratization of the imaginative,” whereby the original imaginative frame of words used to name the world is strained beyond its limits through casuistry. In Burke’s own words:

Any organized mode of understanding and acting offers its own possibilities of laxity. In time, there occurs a proliferation of the habits that take advantage of these opportunities. The exploitation of such habits will itself become organized, “bureaucratized,” until the given mode of understanding and acting has been stretched to its “Malthusian limits.” A culture then faces a crisis, the need for a “revolution” of sufficient scope to make new opportunities for exploitation possible. (27)

or “better to prove than to reprove.” In a very perceptive analysis of the motto, possibly created by Burke himself, Scott Wible links it to Burke’s aim to curb “our zealous attempts to destroy.” An extended quote is in order here: “Burke explains in *A Grammar of Motives* that we need to develop not only an attitude of ‘linguistic skepticism’ but also a method for analyzing human relations in terms of the linguistic instrument. Indeed, Burke argues, one can truly assume an attitude of ‘humanistic contemplation’ only through a method of systematically analyzing how human beings’ ‘absurd ambitions [...] have their source in faulty terminologies.’ The phrase *Ad bellum purificandum* emphasizes attitude, as it reflects Burke’s hope that we ‘bring ourselves to be content with humbler satisfactions’ than political, financial, and social competition. Interestingly, the newly discovered quotation above Burke’s window seems to situate attitude in relation to method. This method of proving or demonstrating rather than reviling or reproaching, Burke explains in the *Grammar*, would entail ‘an elaborate analysis of linguistic foibles’ toward the end of developing a theory about how symbolic action shapes and transforms human activity.” In Zappen, Halloran, and Wible.

³⁴ A classic, articulate discussion of the impact of Ramism and Cartesianism on rhetoric is given by Walter Ong in his seminal book on Ramus.

³⁵ In one of his many sociologically infused readings of Shakespeare, Burke sees Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as the “adumbration” of that type of man (*ATH*, 24).



In fact, Burke considers the concept of a “bureaucratization of the imaginative” his major critical asset in *ATH*, paralleling and complementing the equally central insight of “perspective by incongruity” in *PC*. The lengthy explanation he gives in the corresponding entry of his dictionary of “pivotal terms” makes it clear that this formula names “a basic process of history” and possibly, at a higher level of generalization quite simply “the process of dying.” The underlying contrast that Burke’s perspective combines in an incongruous paradox is that between the “pliancy, liquidity” and “vernal” aspect of the imaginative and the morbid hardening, the sclerosis induced by bureaucratization, “an unwieldy word, perhaps even an onomatopoeia, since it sounds as bungling as the situation it would characterize” (*ATH*, 225).

Gide has said somewhere that he distrusts the carrying-out of one possibility because it necessarily restricts other possibilities. Call the possibilities “imaginative.” And call the carrying-out of *one* possibility the *bureaucratization* of the imaginative. An imaginative possibility (usually at the start Utopian) is bureaucratized when it is embodied in the realities of a social texture, in all the complexity of language and habits, in the property relationships, the methods of government, production and distribution, and in the development of rituals that re-enforce the same emphasis. (225)

Sociologically, the bureaucratization of the imaginative is tied up with *alienation*,³⁶ borrowed from Marxist theory to refer here more specifically to the “estrangement,” both material and spiritual, experienced by people who no longer “own” their world because they see it as unreasonable. This predicament is typically brought about by a “class of people who have a very real ‘stake in’ the retention of the ailing bureaucratization” (226). Burke’s insightful addition to Marx and Spengler consists in tracing “alienation” back to the much more encompassing workings of language and style. For a scholar vilified as obscure, Burke is, I think, especially terse on these points:

A given material order of production and distribution gives rise to a corresponding set of manners. (In other words, insofar as the productive pattern attains fixity, it engenders fixed habits, typical occupations, stock situations, and moral evaluations in keeping. These are all summed up, in human material, as manners). The equivalent of these manners in poetry is style. Style is the ritualistic projection or completion of manners (as when the need of “push” and “drive” in selling attains its stylistic counterpart in the breezy hero). As the productive order changes, manners must adapt themselves accordingly. But by the time the need for this re-shaping of manners has risen, a whole tradition of “good style” has evolved and been “bureaucratized” (its embodiment giving new writers the “cues” that induce them to perpetuate its standards). Writers suffer impoverishments of “alienation” insofar as they attempt to retain and cultivate these purely traditional values of style, “projecting” from one literary heir to the next, while the productive order that gave rise to them has been radically altered, and a corresponding code of new manners has “slid out from in under” the traditional style. (201)

And again:

Alienation creeps into literature in this wise: a given productive pattern leads to the crystallization of a corresponding pattern of manners. These manners are in turn projected into literary tradition as style. And new men arise to form themselves in keeping with these norms of style. However, even as they do so, the rise of new material causes the productive pattern to be altered. Hence, it “slides out from in under” the stylistic tradition by which the writers are still forming themselves. (219)

The “bureaucratization of the imaginative” paradox, anticipating by many years what would be popularized

³⁶ “Alienation” is another pivotal term Burke traces back to Marxist theory and connects to Spengler’s contrast between culture and civilization (216-217).



as “Parkinson’s Law” in the realm of economics,³⁷ has for Burke a much wider scope of application and a far-reaching heuristic potential. It is in fact what enables Burke to detect continuities between society, science and literature and to advocate a continuous crossing of disciplinary fields, the most striking and possibly underrated feature of his best criticism. Bureaucratization inhabits and shapes from within the project of Western science:

In the modern laboratory, the procedure of invention itself (the very essence of the imaginative) has been bureaucratized. Since the time of the Renaissance, the West has been accumulating and perfecting a methodology of invention, so that improvements can now be coached by routine. Science, knowledge, is the bureaucratization of wisdom. (228)

It is for scholars trained in dramatism to approach the linguistic tangle that brings science, society and literature together, to detect common threads, find semantic knots and track down implications and implicatures within the unlimited array of possible meanings language opens up to us. Where science makes for reduction and limitation in our use of language, Burke recommends expansion and exploration. In the imperfect context of everyday human transactions, the lethal precision of Occam’s razor must give way to a “comic” frame, which accepts and uses a proliferation of perspectives.³⁸ The debunking and simplification of human motives must stop short of utter devastation, humility obtained without humiliation (344).

The pragmatic slant of Burke’s project may be better understood if we turn, by way of conclusion, to an essay published two years after *ATH*, where Burke deployed the vocabulary he had developed in *PC* and *ATH* to make sense of “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” (1939).³⁹ Burke deplores the unproductive outrage, and the “far too many vandalistic comments” that the publication of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in unexpurgated translation provoked at the time. He argues instead for a careful reading of the book along dramatic lines as a way of understanding the “kind of medicine [...] this medicine-man has concocted,” with a view to forestalling similar future developments on American soil. Burke’s analysis looks at a number of significant threads that give texture to Hitler’s insidious rhetoric: the rooting of issues in a mythical locus (Munich); the subtle secularization of a pre-existing, shared religious pattern; the evocation of sexual symbolism that qualifies the Fuhrer as a male leader of a female country; the projective device of scapegoating against the Jews; the powerful call to a triadic virtue of reason, humility and sacrifice; and the subtle recasting of an unfriendly parliament as a babel of conflicting voices. Hitler’s rhetoric served as a “unification device” that, Burke maintains, relied on four key features: 1) the idea of the “inborn dignity” of Aryan people and their nation; 2) the “purification by dissociation” achieved by a projection device that “hands over one’s ills to a scapegoat,” here identified in a racial other; 3) the “symbolic rebirth” (*PLF* 1941, 202) Hitler’s followers experience by the successful application of the first two principles above and; 4) the commercial use of the project itself, once Hitler’s “non-economic interpretation of economic ills” (204) effectively deflects attention

³⁷ The “observation that ‘work expands to fill the time available for its completion,’ and that a sufficiently large bureaucracy will generate enough internal work to keep itself ‘busy’ and so justify its continued existence without commensurate output. Proposed in 1955 in jest by the UK political analyst and historian Cyril Northcote Parkinson (1909-93) while criticizing the British Admiralty (which was growing bigger while the number of sailors and ships under its care was going down). It is quoted more as a keen insight into the functioning of large organizations than as an empirical reality.”

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/Parkinson-s-Law.html>. Last Visited February 5, 2017.

³⁸ “The mystifications of the priestly euphemisms, presenting the most materialistic of acts in transcendently ‘eulogistic coverings,’ provided us with instruments too blunt for discerning the play of economic factors. The de-bunking vocabulary (that really flowered with its great founder, Bentham, who developed not merely a *method* of debunking but a *methodology* of debunking, while a group of mere epigones have been cashing in on his genius for a century, bureaucratizing his imaginative inventions in various kinds of ‘muck-raking’ enterprises) can disclose material interests with great precision. *Too* great precision, in fact. For though the doctrine of *Zweck im Recht* (Von Ihering, *Law as a Means to an End*, 1913) is a veritable Occam’s razor for the simplification of human motives, teaching us the role that *special material interests* play in the ‘impartial’ manipulations of the law, showing us that law can be privately owned like any other property, it can be too thorough; in lowering human dignity so greatly, it lowers us all” (*ATH*, 166).

³⁹ Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941) 191–220. Henceforth *PLF*.



from economic factors by attacking “Jew finance.” All this, Burke notes, is held together by the forceful argumentative device of “endless repetition,” and a combining or coalescing of contradictory sets of equations or images (images of disarray and disunity and a call for order and unity) that is analogous to the way a poet combines or coalesces images. There are of course ways in which Burke’s insightful analysis of Hitler reminds us of the self-conscious debunking initiated by Bentham and more recently embodied by deconstruction. But it needs to be stressed that Burke’s approach differs from the out-and-out demystification pursued by the former two in at least one important respect: his appeal for the use of the “charitable comic frame” we mentioned earlier. A comic frame, Burke explains, shows us “how an act can ‘dialectically’ contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both ‘service’ and ‘spoils.’ Or, viewing the matter in terms of ecological balance [...], one might say of the comic frame: it also makes us sensitive to the point at which one of these ingredients becomes hypertrophied, with the corresponding atrophy of the other. A well-balanced ecology requires the symbiosis of the two” (*ATH*, 167). Incidentally, Burke’s insistence on the serviceability of the comic frame to make sense of society explains what some may see as a conservative ambivalence in Burke’s final assessment of how Hitler distorts “a fundamentally religious patterns of thought.”⁴⁰

Burke’s essay on Hitler has often been praised in the past for its prophetic import and its appeal endures. Last year, it came back to the fore in the US as a way of understanding the popularity of Donald Trump, which eventually led to his election. Without obviously meaning to trace a direct analogy between Hitler and Trump, blogger Cody A. Jackson, for instance, applied Burke’s dramatic frame to Trump’s campaign and showed how the features Burke had detected can be applied to the current political climate as well (the idea of inborn dignity, epitomized in the “Make America Great Again” slogan; the scapegoating device involving Mexicans, Syrians and Muslim; the rhetoric of Symbolic Rebirth based on an insistent dis-identification with the culpable others; and the blatant commercial use Trump’s rhetoric encourages and justifies). Multiple references to Burke’s essay in conjunction with Trump may be found elsewhere online.⁴¹ Burke’s dramatism

⁴⁰ “As for the basic Nazi trick: the ‘curative’ unification by a fictitious devil-function, gradually made convincing by the sloganizing repetitiousness of standard advertising technique — the opposition must be as unwearying in the attack upon it. It may well be that people, in their human frailty, require an enemy as well as a goal. Very well: Hitlerism itself has provided us with such an enemy — and the clear example of its operation is guaranty that we have, in him and all he stands for, no purely fictitious ‘devil-function’ made to look like a world menace by rhetorical blandishments, but a reality whose ominousness is clarified by the record of its conduct to date. In selecting his brand of doctrine as our ‘scapegoat,’ and in tracking down its equivalents in America, we shall be at the very center of accuracy. The Nazis themselves have made the task of clarification easier. [...] But above all, I believe, we must make it apparent that Hitler appeals by relying upon a bastardization of fundamentally religious patterns of thought. In this, if properly presented, there is no slight to religion. There is nothing in religion proper that requires a fascist state. There is much in religion, when misused, that does lead to a fascist state. There is a Latin proverb, *Corruptio optimi pessima*, ‘the corruption of the best is the worst.’ And it is the corrupters of religion who are a major menace to the world today, in giving the profound patterns of religious thought a crude and sinister distortion. Our job, then, our anti-Hitler Battle, is to find all available ways of making the Hitlerite distortions of religion apparent, in order that politicians of his kind in America be unable to perform a similar swindle. The desire for unity is genuine and admirable. The desire for national unity, in the present state of the world, is genuine and admirable. But this unity, if attained on a deceptive basis, by emotional trickeries that shift our criticism from the accurate locus of our trouble, is no unity at all” (*PLF*, 218-219).

⁴¹ Burke is also mentioned in Ico Maly’s “How did Trump get this far? Explaining Trump’s Message” at <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/how-did-trump-get-far>.

Stephanie Martin and Christopher Salinas refer to Burke online in “In the wake of tragedy, Trump takes rhetoric of fear to a whole new level” *The Conversation*, June 16, 2016. <http://theconversation.com/in-the-wake-of-tragedy-trump-takes-rhetoric-of-fear-to-a-whole-new-level-61069>.

See also Rebecca Dixon and Justin Velten’s “Donald Trump’s Process of Political Persuasion: Using Communication Theory to Explain an Unexpected Voter-Rally during the 2016 Presidential Campaign.” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, Vol. 6, No 3; June 2016. And Haley Klepatzki’s *Post #6: Rhetoric of the Holocaust*, posted 16 October 2016;

<https://blogs.longwood.edu/haleybloginrhetoricandpublicculture/2016/10/16/post-6-rhetoric-of-the-holocaust/>. Naomi Clark’s “#DonaldTrump: Our Scapegoat of the Moment” also discusses Trump with relation to the essay but, in truly Burkean fashion, reminds us of the dangers implicit in our own scapegoating of Trump



seems more relevant than ever.

My cursory analysis of *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History* was meant to show that Burke's approach matters if one wishes to come to terms with the close enmeshment that exists between disciplines (literature, history, sociology, economics, law) which the current system of professional specialization would prefer to consider in strict isolation for the purposes of efficiency, production and prestige. In particular, I believe Burke's work provides a strong case for the liberal pursuit of literary, aesthetic, and stylistic studies at a time when their overall standing and their applicability to our everyday lives is systematically questioned. Yet, it is by virtue of their symbolic latitude, the fact that their range is ample and their boundaries hazy, that these studies can discern paths and afford vistas lost to the quantitative precision of more specialized approaches. Blazing a trail that would be followed by countless scholars after him, Burke brings constantly to the surface the links between our worldviews and our metaphors, our histories and our stories, our scientific models and our writing styles. He gives us invaluable terms for making sense of literary language *and* style in ways that bear directly upon the language of history, society, economics, law and science. It is for us to accept his challenge.

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Finally, an interesting educational perspective on the issue is given by Goyland Williams in "Teaching through Trump," published Dec. 13, 2106. <http://www.blackteacherproject.org/teaching-through-trump/>. Last Visited date for all the web resources above is February 16, 2017.



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