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**THE MIND'S SUFFICIENT GRACE:
THE WRITINGS OF KENNETH BURKE, 1931-1941**

by

EVELYN BURG

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

2003

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Abstract**THE MIND'S SUFFICIENT GRACE:
THE WRITINGS OF KENNETH BURKE, 1931-1941****by****Evelyn Burg****Advisor: Professor John Patrick Diggins**

Kenneth Burke is often described as an idiosyncratic, if brilliant American thinker. Though he occasionally appears in the historiography of the nineteen-thirties as an unusually prescient and clear voice, the difficulty of his thought has previously consigned it to the province of literary theorists and the occasional literary historian, allowing him to be neglected by philosophers.

Burke was an early proponent of rhetorical analysis and of situating opinion within its historical context, yet his contributions do not end there. This study shows him as a public intellectual on the left responding to modernity and then to the Depression, not merely by advocating a rhetorical view, or communism, but by also personally reconceiving a modern philosophic worldview that aimed to be morally and emotionally sustaining. Burke used theoretical expertise derived from his practice of literary arts, and from his tenure as a *Dial* critic and editor, to venture into traditionally philosophical issues.

The study covers the first ten years of his complete or published books. The first chapter is a simple biography of Burke through the period under consideration. The second details Burke's intellectual interest in poetic Symbolism and his major

experiment with alternative narrative forms in his novel *Towards a Better Life* (1932), as well as his first comprehensive critical offering, *Counter-Statement* (1931) that expresses his novel rhetorical theory of form.

The third chapter studies the recently published manuscript “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision,” and several articles on politics and propaganda displaying Burke as an astute critic of Marxian concepts as well as a subtle analyst of rhetoric. The fourth chapter investigates his first try at a comprehensive theory, *Permanence and Change* (1935), its characterization of human needs, and Burke’s renovation of teleology. The next chapter examines *Attitudes toward History* (1937) and his picture of the development of societies. Finally, the sixth chapter focuses on Burke’s theory of “symbolic action,” his historical and metaphysical theory of language in contradistinction to the antihistorical views of the New Critics and the antimetaphysical views of the logical positivists. The study’s purpose is to embrace Burke as a philosophical thinker, since this makes his work more coherent for readers.

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This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my parents and grandparents, living and gone.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One The Etymology of a “Word-Man”: Kenneth Burke, 1897-1929	16
Chapter Two Symbol and Form in a Fragmented World: <i>Towards a Better Life and Counter-Statement</i>	46
Chapter Three Perplexities of the Didactic: Burke and Propaganda, 1930-1935	113
Chapter Four <i>Permanence and Change</i> : Reconsidering Purpose in a Relativistic World	175
Chapter Five From Community to Society and Back Again: <i>Attitudes Toward History</i>	246
Chapter Six History and Personality: Symbolic Action and <i>The Philosophy of Literary Form</i>	310
Conclusion	364
Sources	376

INTRODUCTION

In 1925, a young critic named Kenneth Burke closed a letter to his friend Malcolm Cowley with the thought, “I know merely that some subtle thing is all wrong -- perhaps because we are all romantics and hate one another for difficulties inherent in the nature of things.”¹ What is this “nature of things” that, if understood, would make us hate each other less? Kenneth Burke lived for almost a century, throughout which he continued to ask that big question. The major political and philosophical hypotheses of the periods left him dissatisfied; their visions of humanity were too abridged.

Americans are thought to be “allergic” to such forms of universal speculation. Over fifty years ago, the historian Daniel Boorstin ventured that American democracy was unique, possessing its own “genius,” rooted in its specific geography and political evolution “in light of an inheritance.” This inheritance was our having been, in Tocqueville’s words, “born free.” According to Boorstin, America had never produced a philosopher of the stature of Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau, since the role of philosophers was to abstract the universal principles of society from their own particular one and generalize to the others, in order to make a blueprint. European thinkers moved from the particular to the general, but Americans were leery of abstractions; their curiosity was not idle.²

Emerson and the Transcendentalists had certainly received a respectful hearing, and also engaged in the great antislavery debates, but philosophy unlike religion, was considered something of a polite superfluity in America, until the pragmatists at the start

of the twentieth century proved that there might be a philosophy that was actually about practical thinking, about the experimental method itself. Furthermore, metaphysics, the branch of philosophy concerned with the abstract and general's relation to the particular example, has been too often associated with its premodern history, thought to be occult rationales in defense of superstitions, religious orthodoxy, or an entrenched social hierarchy, and that both of these are essentially foreign to a society grounded in liberal freedoms. Pragmatism was both American and modern in that it assiduously avoided offering first principles or engaging metaphysical speculations. Hence, the prejudice held that Americans avoid larger philosophic theories, having little need or desire for them, contented with our own good fortune as it was. Americans are pragmatic, practical, experimental, but not very philosophical or theoretical, and certainly not metaphysical, or so the cliché goes. But as Burke explained, theories and philosophical positions are unavoidable; and believing one can have any philosophy whatsoever, no matter how slight, without a metaphysics is like trying to imagining human life without death; the hard fact is that each only has meaning in terms of the other. We have philosophies, and we should know what they are and how they came to be.

Burke, as a sophisticated twentieth century thinker, used language as his way in to divining our philosophical motives, and explored its metaphysical aspects, with an emphasis on transition and transcendence. Metaphysics had been thoroughly attacked in Europe by Nietzsche and his followers. It held little interest for practical Deweyan Pragmatists, and was shunned by analytic philosophers of his day as "poetry," or plain "nonsense." This was to be the attitude to which postmodernism reacted, a torrent of

philosophical ideas in a parched academic discourse. Yet postmodernists can be judged as beginning with radical relativism as a premise, and the postmodernist Richard Rorty, for example, has famously identified metaphysics with a misguided Enlightenment quest for a “mirror of nature” when in fact, the mirror reflects only the mind or culture that holds it up, a point already made by Burke in 1935. When we add to this the reasonable historical opinion, one hesitates to say “fact,” that metaphysics has often been a rhetorical weapon of the empowered over the disenfranchised, we see why its dismissal has held such appeal.

Burke was unready to banish metaphysics. Burke showed us how one can be American, democratic, a secular thinker, see ideas as historically situated, and yet search out these metaphysical connections underlying art, literature, politics, and science. Burke believed analysis of the metaphysical sort I have described, might serve to enrich and develop equality, not stymie it. Burke had a rather elastic approach: philosophies could be adjusted, rejected; there were good ones and poor ones, and ones that just did not fit the times. Prior to the construction of his philosophic system, Dramatism, he had already begun to tackle a major philosophical issue—that of the relation of ideas to material reality, led to it by his arguing for the political importance of artistic expression. Burke believed his approach allowed various interpretations of phenomena or texts without disintegrating into a complete skepticism, or dissolving knowledge in a radical relativism. He would maintain a skeptical sort of philosophic “realism,” and a philosophic foundationalism of an unusual sort.

Our contemporary “linguistic turn,” our examination of language, which in so

many ways follows Burke's earlier one, postpones philosophical questions he actually tried to answer. Whether we see language as an instrument of dominance, mystification, or moral imagination, we still care about the human motives, the attitudes that cause us to respect or suspect language itself. For in fact, we cannot help but believe there is something behind or underneath the words – something that generates the words, moving them this way or that. Why do we communicate in the first place? What desires do we have? What makes people say what they say, and how is it connected with what they do and why are these things so often different? Whatever the answer, whether we present an unsystematic belief or a more systematic theory, it is a belief or theory about our human nature. And that statement of position is determined by other theories or positions, and the whole caboodle is a philosophy. The historian Thomas Haskell is said to have once described theories as turtles standing on top of turtles, and when asked on what the bottom turtle rested he responded, "nothing, it's turtles all the way down." Yet if we observe that each turtle has some relation to the one above and the one below, and if we are inclined to see any character whatsoever to this connection, or if we try to articulate a tissue that explains the relation of one idea to another, we are operating in the realm of the abstract, the general, and the metaphysical, whether claiming some absolute, external reality for that tissue of connections or not.

The start of the twentieth century was a frantic moment in American intellectual thought. Burke saw modern intellectual fragmentation as a moral opportunity to intellectually regroup and embraced it in an extraordinarily positive way. Burke understood that the by-product of new approaches to knowledge was an inevitable

skepticism about finding any central, synthesizing answer to individual and social crises. Yet he also noted that dogmatic beliefs had been reformulated, rather than disappearing, and the Great Depression was one of those unhappy moments providing the time and need for some reevaluation. Burke was the modern American dervish of the tension between the dogmatism we use to anchor ourselves and the critical consciousness we use to challenge that dogma. He is known for his anticipation of intellectual movements that would flower in the latter part of the century. But what also makes his oeuvre worth investigating is his unusual attempt to show that these opposing attitudes stemmed from the same fundamental creative human impulses, and his complex philosophic vision showed itself uncannily practicable. Furthermore, he was not just interested in abstract, epistemological questions regarding the surety of knowledge, nor in asserting or demolishing its foundations per se. His focus was on the emotional effects that the dissolution of one sort of certainty might have on the social order and its troubling substitutes. Burke was convinced he had found some grounding for our interpretation of action; skepticism was not a final position.

This study examines the first decade of Burke's major critical writings. It examines the early expressions of Burke's particular form of philosophic realism, which might be coined as an "idealism after the fact." For to him ideas were real, and history was their expression. It looks at Burke in his search for "some *consensus omnium bonorum*, some racial faith, some group of commonly accepted assumptions," as his colleague Gorham Munson put it.³

Burke's long career can be divided into stages. If one considers his work prior to,

and during his years at *The Dial*, and his books *Counter-Statement* (1931) and *Towards a Better Life* (1932) as the first stage, as the Burke scholar Jack Selzer does, the decade that follows would be the second stage. That is this study's focus. I have chosen to begin with the first major critical work, *Counter-Statement* and end with *Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), published a decade later. This dissertation covers Burke's books from 1931 to 1941: *Counter-Statement*; *Towards a Better Life*; *Permanence and Change*; *Attitudes toward History*; *Philosophy of Literary Form*, as well as some articles on communism, propaganda and related issues. This is the early phase of Burke's philosophic career.

Burke, even as a critic, examined underlying modern and American philosophical attitudes in order to discuss and, ultimately, change them. By the end of the thirties, he had located and assimilated two significant categories into his thought: psychological symbols and political and economic structures. He devised an original way to discuss the methods humans use to shuttle and negotiate between them. Using literary and philosophical categories he anticipated, by thirty years, some aspects of the later critical movements of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Points he made in the thirties congruent with structuralism, then poststructuralism and postmodernism have all enhanced Burke's reputation. He lived long and remained so engaged as to keep up a lively correspondence and see his works investigated by more than a single generation.

Still, the Burke who anticipated these developments is not the central figure of this study. That figure is the lively mind who approached the modern skeptical world with an erudite, savvy optimism, whose move to the study of language and rhetoric,

what we call today “the linguistic turn” developed from his study and creation of modernist poetry rather than from a systematic philosophic skepticism, and whose “realistic” philosophical position derived from an involvement in the political issues of his day. Burke faced a baffling modernity directly and engaged it with all sides of his personality; he was a public intellectual in the broadest sense.

The study has six chapters. The first is a brief biography up to the Second World War. The next six chapters cover the books in chronological order; the second chapter explores Burke’s literary modernism in his novel *Towards a Better Life* and his first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement*. In that book he begins his discussion of the symbolic in modern life, and incorporates rhetorical issues in his treatment of form.

The third chapter details Burke’s turn to “the social emphasis,” and explores his aesthetic and ethical suggestions on how partisan writing should proceed. His writings during the first years of the Great Depression examined Marxist rhetoric from a larger philosophical perspective, challenging and occasionally baffling his readers.

The fourth chapter examines Burke’s attempt to chart that larger philosophical perspective in terms of first principles; here he gives his abstract portrait of human nature. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke’s arguments go beyond criticism to confront a secular metaphysics directly as a rationale for community. Burke intended to provide the philosophic grounding he believed his era demanded, and attempted to develop a philosophy that might accomplish a major reconciliation between the needs served by an Enlightenment naturalism with those served by an earlier teleology. The study examines Burke’s very conscious effort to harmonize these two historically fractious elements in

his belief system.

Then we move to consider *Attitudes toward History*, Burke's reading of Western history through the literary genres which he argues demonstrate methods of social adaptation. For Burke, life in society requires special human talents, especially aesthetic, "transcendent" ones, and he charts how we channel our rebellious impulses to aesthetic surrogates.

Examination of tensions generated by these earlier analyses leads us in the last chapter, to Burke's famous theory of "symbolic action" in *Philosophy of Literary Form*. The organization of the study sets forth a possible device: *viz.* the chronological structure suggests that the reader view symbolic action as a philosophic realism that recombines poetic symbolism, as Burke understood it, with his rereading of Marxist principles during the Depression. It was also in the early thirties that Burke suffered the traumas of a complicated divorce and an unsuccessful novel, undoubtably a pivot. Burke was transformed from a poet and fiction writer into a philosophical critic, first and foremost. It is therefore only natural to assume that Burke fused symbolism and social action to arrive at "symbolic action." The theory of symbolic action is frequently taken to be the position that literature, as well as more overtly partisan behavior, is a form of political action. While this is not wrong, it is an oversimplification and the last chapter offers some clarification on that topic.

The sixth chapter discusses symbolic action, especially the way Burke attempted to reconcile questions of aesthetic meaning with a theory of action that relies on a principle of mind-body identity. It also discusses Burke's challenging the cordoning off

of various approaches to language in the disciplines that occurred in the Academy during the period.

Though he has many admirers, Burke remains one of the better kept open secrets in American letters and certainly in American philosophy. His name occurs in histories of the Greenwich Village Bohemia of the twenties and on occasion, in discussions of writers in the thirties, as well as in the recollections of writers Matthew Josephson, Munson, Cowley, and other friends and colleagues. He surfaces as a fresh, amazingly contemporary voice from the era in the very different intellectual histories written by Daniel Aaron, John Patrick Diggins, and Michael Denning, as well as in more theoretically focused contemporary discussions on the relation of history to literature by the postmodern Marxist historians and critics Hayden White, Fredric Jameson, and Frank Lentriccia. Despite the difficulty of his writing, a varied collection of writers have cited Burke as a major influence: the postmodernists mentioned above; sociologists Irving Goffman, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, and Herbert Gusfield; the anthropologist Clifford Geertz; critics Frank Lentriccia, Stanley Edgar Hyman, and Denis Donoghue; and the novelist Ralph Ellison, to name just a few.

But one finds practically no mention of him in histories of the New York intelligentsia of the forties and fifties, though in this period, he produced several major works including his *Philosophy of Literary Form*, *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, and *A Rhetoric of Religion*. Though Burke's philosophical/ psychological/ literary system for the analysis of motives, Dramatism, is listed in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), with an extended exegesis by its author,

most other encyclopedias or anthologies outside the field of literary criticism, exclude Burke and his theories.

By the early sixties, Kenneth Burke's major body of work had been completed: seven books and hundreds of articles, essays, and reviews. He was then in the position to receive his initial appraisal as a thinker. However, there were several impediments that prevented Burke from receiving due recognition and a wider readership. For one thing, though he had been teaching since the late forties in distinguished schools, he possessed no doctorate. Not having moved through the ranks of the academy, he remained an independent, unaffiliated thinker. He had no label: no school of thought could claim him, nor he it; his ideas were not easily adapted or adopted. Burke was the best-known practitioner of his original theories.⁴

Simultaneously, American academicians were challenging the theories and practices of the "old left," with which Burke was associated. Having been an outspoken fellow-traveler in the nineteen-thirties, he had then unwittingly and then wittingly alienated writers at *Partisan Review*, a forum where he perhaps might have found the sophisticated readers his work demanded. By the end of the thirties, *Partisan* writers had declared communism as a disastrous experiment similar to fascism, and many intellectuals were bitter about their earlier naiveté. The Cold War only widened these fissures. It was in this historical context that Boorstin described America as blessedly non-theoretical. An association by liberals of grand political schemes and philosophical theories with totalitarianism was so powerful that it could reach across two millennia and blacken Plato, who was held responsible for Western Civilization's hubris and

consequent disasters.⁵ Burke's Dramatism appeared as a system when systems were losing favor. And, to be fair, though even his opponents observed that his writing personality was "ingratiating," his admirers admitted it was not "inviting" owing to its difficulty.⁶

Also, despite having been an aesthete, Burke had also been an early and continuous adversary of the ahistorical New Criticism that came to dominate academic literary theory in the forties and fifties; though he was still respected enough to be read occasionally in the graduate schools. In philosophy departments, the analytic school -- logical positivism -- and its concomitant philosophy of language held sway. Actually, sociologists were the theorists most accepting of Burke's ideas. In an academy moving rapidly toward the extremes of specialization, Burke's ecumenical approach, and his methods of argument, deviating as they did from the accepted norms of the period, help explain his eclipse. A 1974 essay described him as "probably the most controversial literary figure of the past fifty years in America." The author claimed that though Burke was judged by some "to have the finest speculative mind of our time," he was at the same time considered to be "an irresponsible sophist . . . decried as 'mad' and lauded as a 'genius' even in one and the same sentence."⁷

Nevertheless, Burke has not been without serious interpreters. William Rueckert wrote the first full-length comprehensive study of Burke's thought in 1963, revising it nineteen years later, and in 1969, he collected and published a thick stack of critical essays ranging over forty years.⁸ Armin Paul Frank offered a study in 1969.⁹ In the seventies, Burke was rediscovered by the postmodern Marxists and reviews and critical

articles have followed the steady reissue of his books.¹⁰ The last two decades have seen a few full-length studies and a number of books of critical essays on Burke.

Yet, until recently, what has been lacking is any comprehensive narrative limning Burke's thought in context, one that would first depict Burke in his own period before turning to the theoretical concerns of our own. Jack Selzer's *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931*, and Ann Lawren George's dissertation, "Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*: Rhetoric and Culture," as well as Philip C. Wander's essay, "At the Ideological Front," begin this task.¹¹ This dissertation continues it.

It takes issue with some recent Burke scholarship, for example, on the question of whether Burke is a "metaphysical" thinker of any kind and what kind this would be, and also with canonical readings of Burke that too often deny that his work offers a resolved "system."¹² Whether traditionally systematic or not, Burke's thinking is logical and his insights are not occasional or accidental.

More often, the study will build on the impressive Burke scholarship that has preceded it: work by William Rueckert, Armin Frank, Frank Lentriccia, Robert Wess, Crusius, and Greig Henderson, among others. The inherent complexity of Burke's thought has demanded an extraordinary level of theoretical analysis and commitment from his interpreters. Unfortunately, much of this work on Burke is written either in the language of literary criticism, the language of contemporary postmodernism, and/or Marxism. These languages contain their own preconceptions about what Burke must or cannot be. More often, they assume a reader's familiarity with the issues or the oeuvre,

making these writings hard for a Burke novice to use.

In a sense then, this is also a work of “translation.” The intention is to make some of Burke’s philosophic thought accessible to many more readers than heretofore. Whatever our modern skittishness about the term “philosopher” is, it seems that a straightforward explanation of his major concepts is in order and it requires a tolerance for the metaphysical. A further aim is to detail some links to earlier philosophic movements here and abroad, so as to clarify Burke’s thinking for us. As logical positivism takes its place among other intellectual phenomena closely tied to a particular place and moment, there is room to finally include an original American mind from the century that was dominated by American beliefs and values, whatever those values’ strengths or defects. Throughout that century, this original, this vocal fellow, Kenneth Burke was there, a single-minded terrier of a thinker, digging tirelessly for a buried bone to offer us.

1. Kenneth Burke, *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley 1915-1981*, ed. Paul Jay. (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1988; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 175.
2. Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 1-3.
3. Gorham B. Munson, "In and About the Workshop of Kenneth Burke," originally published 1926, and reprinted in *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke*, ed. William Rueckert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1969), 15. Cited subsequently as *Critical Responses*.
4. These were those of "symbolic action," Burke's explanation of the mind-body relation; "Dramatism," his literary, aesthetic method for studying human action; and "Logology," the study of "words about words," which attempts to reveal essential features of human personality by exploring language used in various discussions of the deity.
5. The attacks on Plato came directly from the logician Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), and with only slightly more subtlety by the political theorist Isaiah Berlin in his famous "Two Essays on Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) and in his *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953).
6. Merle E. Brown: "Kenneth Burke" in *American Writers*, Leonard Unger, editor in chief (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974) 1: 264; Harry Slowchower, "Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Symbolic Action," in Rueckert's *Critical Responses*, 131.
7. Brown, *American Writers*, 264.
8. William Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (1963; 2d rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California, 1982), and *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke*.
9. Armin Paul Frank, *Kenneth Burke* (New York: Twayne, 1969).
10. Frank Lentriccia offered a full-length study, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and the same year Hayden White and Margaret Brose edited *Representing Kenneth Burke* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), which includes essays by White, Jameson, and others. For other, briefer discussions, see also: Fredric R. Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) and Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
11. Jack Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); Ann Lawren George, "Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change: Rhetoric and Culture*," (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1997); Philip C. Wander, "At the Ideological Front,"

Communication Studies 42, (Fall 1991),199-218.

12. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 1269.

CHAPTER ONE

The Etymology of a “Word-Man”: Kenneth Burke, 1897-1929

When one hears of Pittsburgh’s centers of education and culture, the elegant and impressive Carnegie-Mellon University may come to mind. More humbly, it is home to Peabody Public High School, a commodious brick edifice, recently remodeled. Numbering the poet-critic-philosopher Kenneth Duva Burke in its first graduating class, it was the last educational institution from which he received any degree. Burke sojourned at two colleges, yet he was already an intellectual personality by the time he left Peabody, which could boast that it is also the alma mater of the dancer Gene Kelly and the artist Romare Bearden.

At the turn of the twentieth century, small cities such as Pittsburgh were at the forefront of America’s emergence as a modern industrial state. What happened in these cities provided the underpinning to the nation’s sociological and political transformations. Though Pittsburgh might have seemed a backwater compared with New York, Boston, or Philadelphia, it was hardly a sleepy hamlet; the region’s class and ethnic politics, violent labor conflicts, and the energy of powerful, profitable industries, steel and railroads particularly, delivered it directly into modernity and gave it vitality. At the intersection of three rivers and a railway hub, accessible and busy, it was in many ways typical of the national transformation; its population doubled between 1890 and 1910. It had swiftly acquired the trappings and amusements of culture together with its

prosperity. Colleges, museums, symphonies, and libraries were financed as social, intellectual, cultural, and civic ambitions grew along with local wealth. And while sociological and intellectual shifts in the larger centers, such as Philadelphia, Chicago and New York soon resulted in changes in their smaller cousins, the conduits led in both directions and the talented traveled them.¹

Pittsburgh was also polyglot: home to an immigrant population and a sizeable African-American community. Eastern Europeans, mostly Polish, had settled there, as well as Irish and Italians, mixing with the older groups -- those of Germans and English extraction -- and immigration continued lured by successful industry. Like all towns, especially in the East, it also had a Jewish population. It appears that at street level, a fair amount of religious and ethnic interchange was inevitable, given the dense arrangement of many neighborhoods. Otherwise, socializing was up to individuals and though relatively peaceful, unlike its more historic and elegant sister to the east, it did not even lay claim to a reputation as a "City of Brotherly Love."

Burke's early letters to his lifelong friend, Malcolm Cowley, and even his stories contain occasional anti-Semitic or other ethnic slurs. He acknowledged these embarrassing remarks in later life, saying that he had grown up "in an uncouth age and neighborhood in which it was taken for granted that minorities 'normally' referred to one another as Dagoes, Hunkies, Niggers, Micks, Kikes and such," though it was now (in the late sixties), "hard even to remember the climate in which such laxities were taken for granted." He did not remove them in later publication of his letters, reasoning that "my subsequent work makes my position quite clear on the subject of ethnocentric bias . . ."²

Though whether comments such as “Jew aesthetics,” and offensive references to his close friend, Matthew Josephson’s ethnicity can be satisfactorily explained in such a way to anyone but Burke, the reader will decide. Thankfully, these comments cease in his writings, including the private ones, by the mid-nineteen-twenties. Early prejudices or no, Burke would develop into a pluralistic thinker.

Burke’s world: fragmentation and discontinuity

By the end of the nineteenth century, socially conscious, innovative artists had responded to the Civil War and the rise of industrialism with a focus on “realism” or factuality. Literary naturalists presented harsh and deterministic yet lively chronicles of war and urban labor, or ones of claustrophobic life among the privileged classes. Photographers might picture the vast, empty natural beauty of the American West, or almost frightening scenes of the crowded often squalid environments of the working poor, such as Jacob Riis’s. Thomas Eakins’s explicit, precisely painted depictions of surgical arenas, and his teaching methods that allowed even female painting students to study nude models typified a readiness to confront the “real.” The most sensational landscapes were those of the awe-inspiring, “sublime” grandeur of nature’s gigantic forces: Niagra Falls, icebergs, violent seas, and valleys dwarfed by dark and wild mountains. Urban painters pictured a very ungenteel, coarse yet colorful urban street life of tenements and dance halls, enervated factory girls and bleeding boxers, and did it in a quick and casual impressionistic manner. Despite the complexity of motivation of the various work, an element of the unexpected, of human beings at the disposal of either brute nature or a fierce society permeated throughout. Sensibilities in the years prior to

the Civil War appeared afterwards to have shuddered with anticipation; and those in the years following the conflict and the assassination, seemed to shiver with its memory, quietly drawing hard conclusions regarding human character. Burke, as a modernist artist would react against the aesthetic realism of the previous century and its claim to accuracy. At the start of his career, he was a strange mixture: a relativist who had yet to decide what things were relative *to*.

Kenneth Burke was born on May 5, 1897, in Pittsburgh, to Lillyan May Duva Burke, a delicately featured brunette, and James Leslie Burke, a loquacious story-telling clerk at the local Westinghouse plant. His paternal grandfather, Mark Antony Burke, had fought in the Civil War, but died before his grandson was born. The mild religious training Kenneth received was in Christian Science, the faith brought into the family by a grandmother. Advocating the “mind-cure,” and the practical power of mental health over physical pain, Burke later credited it as an early influence on his highly complex thought.³ His maternal grandparents, “Mom” and “Pop” were quite close to their grandson and took him with them to Atlantic City on vacations.⁴

He had just begun school when he fell from a second story window causing a painful spinal injury. Despite the Christian Science, the family consulted physicians. These doctors were concerned that a learning disability might have resulted from the accident, and, consistent with the period’s medical knowledge, drastically proscribed normal activity and keeping Kenneth out of school. To occupy him, his mother, for reasons known only to her, gave the little boy a dictionary. The very nondisabled Kenneth carried it around as a substitute teddy bear, and taught himself to use it. He later

commented: “Many people have remarked on what a terrible thing it was for my mother to have given me that dictionary and not instructed me in it. But looking back, I was damned fortunate. Y’see, lots of kids who learn to read the easy way don’t get much out of it, but I had to develop a theory of language!”⁵ The verbal idiosyncracies that sometimes exasperate his readers are the result of this extraordinary intimacy and facility. Burke’s parents soon recognized their son’s prodigious intellectual talent, but opposed his literary passion as a calling with an unprofitable future. Burke later claimed their disapproval was so strong that he began to identify writing with masturbation, resisting neither.⁶ So Kenneth began development owning the language in the way few ever do: his understanding *sui generis* and abstract from inception.

After Kenneth’s high school graduation, in 1915, James Burke was transferred by his firm and moved with his family to Weehawken, New Jersey. While his other close friends went off to college—James Light to Ohio State and Cowley to Harvard, Kenneth stayed in New Jersey, to decide his immediate future. Within a few years they would all migrate to Greenwich Village; Light would become the director of the Provincetown Players.

White collar workers such as James Burke, despite modest means, would have considered themselves either members of the rising or falling middle class, depending on background, ambition, and attitude. According to Burke, his father was concerned that his son make good financially. Burke, whose paternal grandfather fought in the Civil War, came from a “respectable” family of some genuine cultural interests, few pretensions, though little money. Still, it was a family that thought in terms of college

educations, and Kenneth's independence on the subject caused some slight friction in what seemed generally a close and pleasant relationship.

Weehawken's Victorian houses looked across the Hudson to the west-forties; the areas are connected today by the Lincoln Tunnel. The district on the other side was then part of upper Manhattan, becoming its middle as the city migrated northward. Ferries shuttled across the river at multiple points. Burke was inevitably drawn to the city's literary world and he wrangled some introductions through the British writer, Louis Wilkinson, including one to Theodore Dreiser. His comic recounting to Cowley of attending readings at Dreiser's are typical examples of Burke's signature dramatic and ironic self-consciousness. At eighteen, he compared his literary personality to one of Dostoyevsky's more talkative penitents. Cowley's more ordinary newly acquired class affectations, Harvard boasting, and even anti-Semitism, came under withering attacks by the already bohemian Burke.

Burke tried his hand at every type of composition in an almost frenzied attempt to launch a literary career--short stories, poetry, a play, and a novel were begun and some even finished. In 1916, under parental pressure, he went off to Ohio State to join James Light and study under Lewis Lewisohn, who introduced him to the writings of Thomas Mann and the French Symbolists, demonstrating widely ecumenical interests and abilities. He suddenly decided to study music at Ohio, and later wrote serious music criticism. Intending to enter Harvard shortly, Burke stayed there for only one term. As Burke was fluent in both German and French, he could read the most recent modernist literature in those languages (he even attributed a particular interest in "pretty" women to

his reading German romances). While there, Burke also helped his friend Light put out a small literary magazine, the *Sansculotte*.

He began to study Freud and threw himself into modern Russian literature, especially identifying with Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, and the most typical of their characters. But the intellectually mercurial and emotionally immature Burke quickly decided that “the Slavic view was all bosh,” and that “the very things the Slavs all raved against, pettiness, spite, and all that, were laughed at by the Anglo-Saxon temperament.”⁷ Despite this criticism of the Russians, the impression they made on him was powerful, and Burke’s stories and novel all bear the mark of the their Russian authors’ fierce introspective depth, though not their narrative force.

Like other modernists, Burke was interested in the new experiments with literary abstraction. Burke wrote to Cowley, that “my style has become so personal as to have the appearance of being done by a foreigner. Can you imagine a man who knows nothing of the traditional set phrases of a language and yet possesses the language? . . . My almost exclusive reading in French and German, coupled with a incurable loquacity in English has produced a queer sort of honest euphemism.”⁸ He also described his prose as having the vividness not of color, but of a “sharp black triangle on a white glazed paper.”⁹

Burke did not attend Harvard after all, but entered Columbia in 1917, to major in philosophy, claiming that it was “a much better preparation for writing novels than reading novels” could be, and had an extra benefit that “it lends more dignity to my beer.” Burke was now consuming Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson’s essays, and once again reinventing himself. “I am coming to recognize that I don’t have the true ‘lyric

cry'—or better, I always recognized it and wouldn't admit it to myself—and now that I see myself as a professor instead of a poet, perhaps I can turn out a scholarly commentary or two on life." In any case, Burke had to write – poetry, prose, or philosophy – otherwise his future would have to be "poison," or even worse, "a job in my dad's office."¹⁰ But his intention to work on Columbia's literary magazines was frustrated when he was informed they were "exclusively frat affairs."¹¹

Although Burke would not remain at school to become formally trained as a philosopher, the subject enchanted him. He began reading Plato as a teenager and, while attending Columbia, Burke commuted on the Weehawken ferry with a talkative philosophy student. This was Richard McKeon, later to become a well-known Aristotelian and Spinoza scholar at the University of Chicago. A few years later, in 1922, Burke spent a lot of time with McKeon. His friends Cowley and Josephson, not then in New York, wondered at Burke's interest, since they found the philosopher tedious, but Burke claimed that he was a "bright spot in my intellectual life," insisting that he "knows things."¹² McKeon, writing a dissertation on Spinoza at the time, had happened upon the dissertation-writer's dream—a brilliant, indefatigable listener and disputant. These discussions with McKeon seem to have had a strong influence on Burke, but Burke probably saved McKeon and his dissertation from the depressive solipsism that is the peril of the graduate student author.

In the late spring of 1917, Cowley went off to France to drive ambulances. Burke, at home, exasperated by the jingoism brought on by the war, especially in the press, felt that the authentic and actual American attitude was rather that of

“internationalists” who were paradoxically, “overbearingly proud of our nationality.”¹³

In his first letter to Cowley abroad, at the end of May, 1917, Burke wrote excitedly about the Columbia student arrests, the suspension of the labor laws, and President Wilson’s attempts to censor the newspapers. Though his attitude toward America was quite positive, Burke clearly sympathized with those who resisted the draft. Never enthusiastic, he became utterly disillusioned with the war by 1917, distrusting all “making the world safe for democracy” rhetoric, especially in the context of the United States’ government’s refusal to allow American socialists to participate in the Stockholm Congress. He also suspected that when time came for a treaty, the British and French would follow “their traditional policy on the land-grabbing question.”¹⁴

The narrow nationalisms of the Europeans repelled him; he suggested that it was in America, in New York particularly, where “they *have* to speak different languages” that a true “cosmopolis,” of tolerance – a genuine cosmopolitanism might yet be found.¹⁵ Burke soon limited his discussions on politics in the letters to Cowley – it seemed he was not passing the censors and Cowley was not getting the letters. “I never made much of a fetich [*sic*] of the Constitution, but it is rather disconcerting between beers to watch how the Constitution is allowed to go hang,” he grumbled.¹⁶ In the summer of 1917 Burke wrote to Cowley: “I hope to Christ this silly war soon ends before all the world is dead or insane, for it seems inevitable that the final peace settlement will contain nothing more than the compromise that might be possible now.”¹⁷

Like so many bohemians after him, by the start of 1918 Burke had decided to leave Columbia – “school is killing us” – and move to Manhattan in order to begin a life

in art as a “Flaubert,” who was to be “my Talmud, my Homer, my beacon.” Never one for understatement or low expectations, he further admitted that, “I want to be a—a—oh hell, why not? I want to be a—yes—a—genius . . . This is my final showdown. I am in it for life and death this time. Words, words—mountains of words—If I can do that I am saved.” He told Cowley that he had sought the advice of his friend Louis Wilkinson, who had made similar choices, and who told Burke that “he never regretted having done as I want to do,” delighting Burke.¹⁸ The slightly more conventional Cowley, who also believed Burke was “a genius,” advised his friend to finish his school year at least, also warning him that he might want to teach and that he should pursue a Ph.D. in order to guarantee his livelihood. But Burke, paraphrasing Mark Twain, determined that for him, “school is over; from now on begins my academic career, the time has come for study.”¹⁹ All in all, Burke had endured a year of college.

Already a poet, a short story writer, translator, and having been an editor for *Sansculotte*, Burke soon expanded to literary and music criticism. Installing himself in a room in Greenwich Village, at 86 Greenwich Avenue, he immediately dedicated himself to the romantic deprivations of the literary life, as well as the earthly indulgences of the drinking life, socializing with the Provincetown Players, and other writers and artists. Here, throughout the twenties, he worked, played, drank, and corresponded with William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, Alan Tate, Gorham Munson, Philip Wheelwright, and Matthew Josephson -- whom he had met at Columbia -- and the painter Carl Springchorn. He also embarked on a furious regime of study, including modern French, German, and English literature, the classics and philosophy. Having some

publishing experience, he now began writing and working for the small, wildly creative magazines that flourished in the Village. Burke was also soon reviewing for *The New York Times*, *Export Trade*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and managing to survive as a writer.²⁰

In May of 1919, Burke married Lily Batterham, a slim, intelligent Southerner from his Village set, and nine months later, his first daughter was born. In all, he fathered three girls with Lily: Jeanne Elsbeth (Dutchie), Eleanor Duva (Happy), and Frances Batterham. In 1922, he bought a farm in Andover, New Jersey, for fifteen hundred dollars, paying it off incrementally. The Burkes built their own tennis court, and hosted an annual Labor Day party for friends with music and dance, as well as homegrown food and homemade alcohol. He remained in this area for the rest of his life, buying more of the surrounding land over the years.

At the same time, he began to work as an assistant editor at *The Dial* literary magazine, commuting to New York. As Burke put it, the entrance of the magazine into his life “was almost as momentous a moment as the act, or accident, of being born.” Over the next decade, Burke wrote poetry, published a number of short stories, collected as *The White Oxen* (1924), reviewed some of the most difficult contemporary theoretical literature, and translated Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, Arthur Schnitzler, and Oswald Spengler for American readers. Much of this appeared in *The Dial*, and in 1928-29, he also serialized his novel there.²¹

A newly married parent at 23, Burke was brimming with ideas in 1920. As an exuberant young modernist, Burke stood just as squarely as others against the restrictions

of the genteel tradition, and any romanticized unity of nature. In 1920, he and Cowley were toying with the idea of forming their own experimental literary schools. They intended that these reflect the two impulses of synthesis and fragmentation—the continuous motion of contemporary life: Cowley suggested calling it the *Courve*, Burke’s invented word. It would join poetry and the plastic arts, and incorporate urban, mechanized experience, as well as the relativity in physics as city dwellers might actually experience it and its focus would be on the fourth dimension: time.²²

A second idea, delving further within the spiritual atomism of a fractured age and an ambitious nation, was inspired indirectly by William Carlos Williams. In his own cultural criticism, Williams asserted that American writing avoided passion and nature since they were associated with a punishing wilderness or frontier; Americans were afraid to make “contact,” and had retreated to a commercial society with a tame poetic tradition.²³ He named his own journal *Contact*. Yet in a note to one of his poems, Williams seems also to have observed that in poetry, the sensual epiphany at which he was so expert – vivid, acute, perfect expression – broke “contact” with the structural unity of the piece, striking some special nerve.²⁴

From this, the intellectually ambitious Burke attempted to locate his and Cowley’s own “school” or philosophy, squashing Cowley’s less abstract idea. He independently arrived at “Integralism.” Burke suggested that “by striving for essences, by attempting to fix one entire facet of approach in a few sentences, we thus attain a unit, so distinct that it almost gains complete independence of the form as a whole.”²⁵ According to Burke, “These units fall together exclusively by emotional laws;” that is,

they were dependent on human psychology. This esoteric notion implied a total rejection of all obviously naturalistic literary techniques and a move into a theory similar to that of the methods of the Symbolists, who were tearing apart narrative structure and reassembling it with an new logic.²⁶

Paradoxically, Integralism's vision of perfect expressive clarity's independence also implied its opposite: confusion and alienation. A flash of insight, similar to what was called the "decisive moment" by the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, was actually the source of discontinuity, individual identity, and disconnection from the wider community or the whole. That wider community was often described as those who didn't necessarily share the insight, and who might very well be offended by it. Aesthetic theories of discontinuity, such as Integralism and others, or Symbolism, expressed their own romance: acuity, insight, and open-mindedness separated the individual from the madding crowd. As the newer perspectives dispersed, Burke perceived a "bohemian versus bourgeois" division gradually spreading throughout mass culture.²⁷

It was summer and Burke was staying with his in-laws in North Carolina, whose "niceness and respectability has turned my brain into a House of Horrors." He had come to the simultaneous conclusion that "it is absolutely impossible for two independent units to exist as one amalgamated unit; . . . protracted spiritual copulation is impossible," indicating a very early disaffection with his marriage.²⁸

The late teens and twenties were an extraordinary time for American publishing. Money was still available for modernist literary projects – the brainchildren of publishers, editors, and writers who were such strong intellectual personalities that they

would set a glamorous standard for over half a century. The magazines *Broom*, *Secession*, *Contact*, *Smart Set* and *The Little Review* published as many of the talented avant-garde poets, writers, and artists of the period as they might jam between their pages. Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, Pirandello, Picasso, Jean Toomer, E.E. Cummings, and Wallace Stevens, all found their way into the short-lived magazines, in some cases with Burke as their editor and with his work alongside theirs. Burke's own poetry and stories were quite experimental: he explored alternatives to traditional narrative structures and favored antiheroes, in modernist fashion. He must have been an valued editor as well, since William Carlos Williams continued to send his own poems to Burke for comments till his death, as did Theodor Roethke, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren.²⁹

Young, free-spirited, and as intense as their authors and editors, the magazines were a way of life apart from the ordinary, perhaps made more so by the start of Prohibition and the introduction of the Comstock decency laws, soon to be used against them. Some were quite short-lived. *Aesthete* 1925 was actually a one-issue lampoon retaliating for a satire of "Greenwich Village Aesthetes" that had ridiculed Cowley, Burke, and Josephson appearing in H.L. Mencken's first *American Mercury*. *Aesthete* skewered the older, established writers: Mencken, Pound, Masters, Sandburg, and Lowell. The antimodern New Humanists also took some comic hits. This mischief between the magazines became rather personal, even involving the throwing of rotten vegetables at one point, and made the papers, delighting the participants.

Burke was just as partisan as his friends. He contributed a fake advertisement to

Aesthete 1925 against Mencken, whom he mock lauded as a middle-brow philistine who offered his readers “consolation” for “prefer[ring] Stephen Benet to Plato.” Burke also defended the Dada movement from one of Waldo Frank’s attacks with “Dada, Dead or Alive.” Yet Burke soon criticized the Dadaists’ intentional destruction of intellectual clarity, objecting to Gertrude Stein for the same reason, since he believed clarity was the “one property which literature possesses to the exclusion of all the other arts.”³⁰

The Dial, Burke’s home for years, had two incarnations. Begun before the First World War, as a vehicle for radical political as well as cultural discussions, it had published Randolph Bourne, Thorstein Veblen, John Dewey, and Charles Beard; and its topics included John Reed’s and Leo Trotsky’s activities. But the First World War had split the left and damaged interest in socialist causes, while the Red Scare and the Comstock censorship laws put expensive, exhausting legal pressure on the radical magazines. Even one of Burke’s stories, “Prince Llan,” came under scrutiny for obscenity and is believed to have caused the suppression of *Broom*.

In 1920, Scofield Thayer and Sibley Watson, a medical doctor, took over *The Dial*. The *Masses*’ editors had been brought to trial in 1918 for interfering with the war effort, and *The Little Review* was involved in the famous *Ulysses* obscenity litigation in 1920. In keeping with their interests, and perhaps also to avoid any legal harassment, *The Dial*’s intellectually sophisticated new publishers now focused on the arts and culture almost exclusively. They spared no expense or effort to fill the magazine with the most original and polished modernist literature, philosophy and art. During this period Burke became heavily involved.³¹

Together with William Carlos Williams' *Contact*, and to a lesser extent, H. L. Mencken's and George Jean Nathan's *Smart Set* – which had been an “adventurous guide” for Burke in high school and later published him – and *The American Mercury*, these literary magazines took aim at the traditional, “puritanical,” genteel culture now involved in the absurdities of Prohibition. Their aim was to invent something purely American and new.³² Williams and the critics Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, and Van Wyck Brooks took up the call to pull together strands of American cultural history and weave them into a coherent “usable past,” in Brooks's famous phrase.

Burke was connected to these literary nationalists, and published in many of these magazines, yet his interest in the French poet, Jules Laforgue and the critic Remy de Gourmont, Thomas Mann, and other European writers and cultural movements, and the polyglot nature of the cities he knew, caused him to see the United States as culturally porous. He was and chose to be cosmopolitan, claiming it as the natural American position. He also discerned, even in the case of a fine artist like William Carlos Williams, a vein of antiintellectualism running through this sort of nationalism.³³

Burke chose “classicism” as opposed to nationalism.³⁴ “The thing I cannot understand is why we should expect America to develop some distinctly un-European art expression. Fighting the same wars, selling the same goods, reading the same books, seeing the same plays, hearing the same music. . . . Politically, economically, socially, racially, traditionally . . . in almost every consideration we are intimately linked up with the great thought currents of Europe.”³⁵ The nationalists confused “a pioneer spirit and the promise of a distinct national entity;” they confused something arising from historical

accident with a relation to a frontier, but that had been a “passing phase” and not what we would offer when developed. Finding himself defending a European tradition, he located points of agreement with the conservative “New Humanism” of Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt who both looked back to Aristotle as their model, though he soon criticized their limitations.³⁶ His arguments for American involvement in European culture had appeared in their journal, *The Bookman*, and Burke stood with the Humanists in favor of the Platonic and Aristotelian belief that an art without moral responsibility or connection with personal life was denuded, a principle with which he would become identified. He also believed art was an issue of decision and discipline, not geographical inheritance, and complained that the artists so celebrated by the nationalists lacked “concern with conscious structure.”³⁷

Still, Burke was careful to separate himself from the Humanists’ conservative aesthetic and political program, which looked back to the premodern as the antidote to the philistinism of an industrial age, and later skirted at the edges of fascism.³⁸ The spiritual moderation they praised, an “inner check,” was entirely inconsistent with Burke’s natural aesthetic exuberance. His own classicism was rebellious and his estheticism passionate – opposed to the commercial status quo – rather than conventional, traditional, or even especially European. His own fiction and poetry was as modern in approach as he could make it. Yet his attitudes were not purely rebellious: one of the “youngest generation,” with Cowley, Cummings, DosPassos, and others, Burke defended them all against Van Wyck Brooks’s denunciations of their “superficiality.” His group was actually “looking for some sound structure,” rejecting

the previous generation because they had not provided it.³⁹

Burke's editors found he "could do anything—and do it with a springy step and the light touch," and his energy and intellectual reach, established him as central to *The Dial*'s workings.⁴⁰ When Alyse Gregory, the managing editor, left in 1925 to nurse her consumptive husband, Burke, Watson, and Marianne Moore worked furiously to maintain it. Burke's resignation in 1926 resulted from a personal argument with Thayer, who despite the ministrations of Freud himself, was undergoing a protracted mental collapse. While suffering paranoid episodes, he would accuse the staff of disloyalty, and when Burke was targeted, he quit.⁴¹

After he left *The Dial*, Burke took a job with the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Trust, researching drug addiction for a year; in the following year he was again hired to study addiction; this time he was to investigate its connection with crime for the Bureau of Social Hygiene. Under these auspices, he ghost-wrote a book, *Dangerous Drugs* (1931) for Colonel Arthur Woods and the Bureau, acquiring a rare expertise for that period, which he imaginatively incorporated within his later critical work.⁴² After Thayer left *The Dial* permanently, Burke, who had remained connected with it, received the eighth *Dial* award; this money paid off his farm. In 1929, the magazine, now managed by Marianne Moore, folded. He forever after referred to it wistfully as a "magic," "wild," and "transcendent place."⁴³

Once *The Dial*'s venue disappeared, Burke began developing some essays he had published earlier and adding new ones, soon producing his first theoretical book, *Counter-Statement* (1931), which offered and explored a new theory of form.

Simultaneously, Burke completed his only novel, *Towards a Better Life* (1932). The Depression was underway. His marriage was collapsing and the novel, with Kierkegaardian irony, described his frantic inner state at the gradual recognition that he had fallen in love with Lily's sister, Elizabeth, "Libbie" Batterham. Burke had three children already with Lily; the painful situation was so laden with symbolic meanings that it nearly drove him, and likely his family, to complete breakdown.⁴⁴ He then divorced Lily and married Libbie, with whom he had two sons. The fireworks that all this must have occasioned are not described in any published materials as of yet, and they can hardly be imagined.

Burke was living something his baffled colleagues could hardly divine from wading through his strange if eloquent novel. The novel registered emotional changes in its protagonist John Neal, his rejection of four women and withdrawal from society, via the shifts and relations of his speech and gestures. It was thus an "anatomy," as Denis Donohue observed after its reissue in 1968. It drew from one of the harshest of intimate ordeals: a divorce with intimations of incest and familial betrayal that more closely resembled the tragic destruction of a "house."

This chaos occurred within the frame of a greater one, that of the Depression, and it forged a different sort of writer. Much later, Cowley perceptively remarked that the novel implicitly contained Burke's philosophy and might be studied that way.⁴⁵ Burke saw the book as his *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, in that like Nietzsche's, it "was my fictive way of summing up the implications of my critical way."⁴⁶ But at the time, neither he nor anyone else could have seen that *Towards a Better Life* contained not only the

summary of earlier ideas but the embryo of subsequent theories. Burke worked through this congeries of crises by writing it, and the challenge to reestablish a family life subsequently, in which he was successful, also aided his identification with the ambivalent, unhappily married genius Coleridge, and contributed insights to Burke's later discussion of symbolic action. His shrewdly observed concepts of "guilt," "justification," and "burden" were likely grounded in the close reading of his own conscience.

Towards a Better Life was generally admired by critics, yet did not catch on with the public as all writers hope, no matter how demanding of that public they might be. Burke was dejected when the book was not successful, though he understood that there had been some self-indulgence involved. Though it shone with intelligence, it did not presume to offer the answers nor the diversion that readers may have desired in the first years of the Great Depression. He observed sadly, "when work ceases to be good legal tender, one is simply in hell. For work and socialization are one."⁴⁷ In the last chapter, Burke lists the "refuges" available to the contemporary human—"madness, travel, drugs, the Faith and death by one's own hand."⁴⁸ Though many of Burke's friends and contemporaries sought one or the other of these (Hart Crane's suicide and Cowley's embracing communism are only two cases), Burke did not, despite some heavy drinking throughout his life. Instead, the moment in question was a turning point for his work, which now moved toward the straightforwardly theoretical.

Though it brought him little money, *Counter-Statement* was at least a critical success, and Burke now had a reputation. Burke, in his early thirties, owned the farm in

Andover, New Jersey, outright and lived in a manner that he would label “agro-bohemian,” ironically calling it “the last cultural lag of the Vanished Frontier.”⁴⁹ Even though his farm was paid off and his family produced much of their own food, the Depression shook him. Despite having created a situation of relative independence for himself, he still had a family, unraveling or not, and he felt vulnerable. “How long will’t be” he wrote Cowley, “until we start to nibble at corners of the estate—until this pathetic little Sir Walter Scott dream, so essential to my scheme of self-respect, begins to turn nightmare?” The aesthetic life in literature he and his friends had known, and the lighter-hearted, renegade society they enjoyed, vanished. In the Depression’s early days, he wrote to Cowley, “I was in town recently, and a pall of forebodings fell upon me. And after the cocktails and the beer had worn off, even before I had gone to bed, I all inside me sobbed, and I said I can’t conceal it, I am getting frightened. Big taxes on big fortunes—it is so obviously the method of reformation without revolution. I don’t see how people can talk of anything else.”⁵⁰

In fact the Spartan realities of Burke’s life remained relatively constant, though he put in extra rows of potatoes on the farm. In hindsight, Burke remarked that though at the time he had “an almost magical fear of destitution,” in fact, he never “passed up a single meal for lack of funds.” Many years later, speaking of his former self, he said his fear had been of “Hollowe’en pumpkins that he himself had hollowed out and had carved with snaggle teeth,” and “their eerie glow was something he had put there.” By then, Burke distrusted the views he held earlier regarding an imminent cataclysm, though like others from the era, he would not apologize for his politics.⁵¹

Sure enough, writers did begin to talk of little else, and Burke plunged into heated debates on new issues. With the Depression, Burke, like his friend Malcolm Cowley and other modernists, found himself having to shift the proportional relations between aesthetics and politics to keep with his principle of counter-statement and personal equilibrium. As Cowley turned toward the political left, he tried to convince Burke of the greater effectiveness of Marxian criticism, but Burke remained skeptical. In an unpublished manuscript, "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision: The Rout of the Esthetes," Burke argued that the esthetic view that had been so quickly abandoned by his fellow writers still contained critical validity and a worthy perspective from which to assess political realities. To Cowley he suggested that if Marxian analyses were at present any livelier than others, it was because the climate attracted livelier writers to the Marxian view, but Marxism was unlikely to make a better writer.⁵²

Still, the Depression radically transformed Burke's thinking; he felt that circumstances now demanded an explicit consideration of social ideals, historical thinking, and techniques for a suitable propaganda. In keeping with his intellectual personality, his involvement was neither simple nor simplistic. Still an aesthete and experimental theorist in a world of sociological critics searching for a reliable orthodoxy, Burke turned to issues of propaganda and found himself at the business end of some nasty, accusatory debate. Happy to be provocative, he was occasionally unprepared for attitudes he would confront. Some of these experiences will be detailed in the third chapter.

Throughout the thirties, Burke traveled with the communists and wrote as a

leftist, though for journals across the political spectrum. He contributed to those of Marxist discussion and opinion, such as *Science and Society*, as well as that boisterous call-to-arms, *The New Masses*, and was a contributing fiction editor at *Direction*, a non-profit glossy arts monthly magazine devoted to American arts and letters, progressive and radical. Burke was a well-known writer and he had an audience; he might have felt that he had now returned to the fertile intellectual world of the little magazines with the issues magnified. He also contributed to *The New Republic* – who published his books *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History* in small dollar editions – *The Nation*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, and even *Reader's Digest*.

Notwithstanding his Village bohemianism, and later his “agro-bohemianism,” Burke at twenty had already claimed that he would be happier if he should “write what I think,” rather than to “live what I think.”⁵³ He had also noticed at eighteen that “I love to write around a grain of philosophy, rather than around a sensation; which proves, I guess, that I am no poet.”⁵⁴ Any ear interested in vivid imagery or musical grace might well prefer his friends Hart Crane’s or Williams’ poetic lines to Burke’s. Still, poetry can say things prose cannot; he occasionally peppered his philosophical writings with his own verse as cryptic illuminations of his points. Not long after, he wrote, “If I could afford it I should give up belles lettres entirely and go in for a few years of niggling with pure ideas. It seems to me, for instance, that the art-process is more interesting than any work of art, and that art seen from a philosophic standpoint begins to have more appeal than when seen from merely artistic standpoints of excellence and interest.”⁵⁵

Burke's cosmopolitanism had never meant any strict adherence to European formulas or tendencies, though he considered many useful for finding "an equilibrium of his own" at all points.⁵⁶ Burke always returned to the present place and situation. The experience of the Depression, its profound effects on the psyches of Americans and his earlier involvement with Symbolism, generated the theories offered in *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History* and helped to forge the theory of "symbolic action" as expressed in the title essay and book, *Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941). Drawing examples from poetry and drama for his theory about human experience, he argued that psychological and philosophical attitudes would form any interpretation of nature that thus became "history," as interpreted: lived, written, spoken, or understood.

1941 saw the publication of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, a collection with a major new title essay, and Burke's statement of an original critical theory: symbolic action. The book's essays from the thirties confirmed Burke as a public intellectual addressing the thought of philosophers, critics, and psychologists across the spectrums of their various disciplines. It also included an earlier review of *Mein Kampf*. The year of publication was that of the United States' entry into the Second World War. A year and a half later, Burke's own desire to aid in the war effort, led the forty-six year old author to write to his fellow theorist of propaganda Harold Lasswell, then with the Experimental Division for the Study of War Time Communications, and volunteer his services. Lasswell responded that if he could think of a proper use for Burke's talents he would, and was likely still pondering a practical place for Burke's subtle philosophical gifts at the war's close, since the offer never seems to have materialized. This allowed Burke to

use the time to labor over his major opus, a major trilogy of philosophic and critical works: *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), which would then be followed in subsequent decades by *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), and *A Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), periods and work not covered by this study. During the forties, Burke was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and a fellow at Princeton's Institute of Advanced Studies, and received other honors.

In 1940, after the Moscow Trials and the Stalin-Hitler pact had already driven many writers on the left to publicly dissociate themselves from the Party, Burke said to Cowley, "through never having been hunkydory with the Party, I now find no occasion to welch . . . I saw enough of their finaglings to be discouraged long ago."⁵⁷ When in the fall of 1952, Burke was under consideration for a visiting professorship at the University of Washington at Seattle, and had almost been assured of success, his earlier fellow-traveling in the Writer's League cost him the post. A disappointed and depressed Burke wrote a New Year poem that noted the numerical reversal from 35 to 53, and that "social conscience" had now become "treason." He later said about his earlier political connections, "Let the slogan be: 'Challenge none, apologize to none, explain to any who will listen.'"⁵⁸ Yet in the revised editions of *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*, both appearing in the fifties, Burke excised a few passages and changed a few words amounting to approximately six pages.⁵⁹ One significant excision is a footnote referring to the Moscow Trials where Burke suggests the defendants might be guilty and gives a psychological rationale for why they might confess whether guilty or not. Sidney Hook, then leading the fight in American literature for Trotsky and against

the Stalinists, seized upon this original note in his *Partisan Review* critique of *Attitudes*, making it one basis for a harsh pan. It upset Burke enough to publish a desperate, indignant letter to which Hook responded with even less kindness. Later salvos between Hook and Burke would fly in the forties, resulting in a dismissive attitude toward his books by *Partisan Review*, a central intellectual influence at that time.⁶⁰

Returning to the less mature writer, at twenty-three, Burke was gestating the first half of his life's work. He asked Cowley,

Why not a book on aesthetics? And aesthetics, based not on metaphysics, but on a philosophy of history? On Spengler, that is, through Hegel. As to those who object to pure theory in art, there is no such thing as pure theory in art. A man precedes himself out of his own emotions; which is a quack way of saying that a man makes principles out of his desires, and then follows these principles instead of following the desires.⁶¹

And foreshadowing a philosophical distinction between humans and the world that would become a staple of his philosophy, he continued, "The prime wonder I suppose is movement; but that is the prime wonder of nature. The prime wonder of man is disintegration."⁶² Nature changed; man transformed.

1. "Historic Pittsburgh" in University of Pittsburgh [database on-line], <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/chronology>; Internet, accessed July 3, 2002.
2. Kenneth Burke, *The Complete White Oxen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), xvii. These remarks appear in the letters between Burke and Malcolm Cowley in *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley*, ed. Paul Jay, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32, 63, 79, 98, hereafter referred to as *Selected Correspondence*.
3. Michael Feehan, "Kenneth Burke and Mary Baker Eddy," *Unending Conversations: New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke*, ed. Greig Henderson and David Cratis Williams (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001): 206.
4. Lewis Baker, "Biography in Progress -- 'Little Kenny Has His Fits,'" in *Pre/Text*, Vol. 6, No. 3-4 (1985): 379-380.
5. Burke quoted in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, ed. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 23.
6. Baker, "Biography," 380.
7. *Selected Correspondence*, 23.
8. *Ibid.*, 41.
9. *Ibid.*, 36.
10. *Ibid.*, 41
11. *Ibid.*, 53.
12. Burke to Josephson, Dec. 27, 1921; quoted in Jack Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 41.
13. *Selected Correspondence*, 37.
14. *Ibid.*, 37-38.
15. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
16. *Ibid.*, 47.
17. *Ibid.*, 49.

18. Ibid., 56.
19. Ibid., 56-58.
20. Jay, *Selected Correspondence*, 6.
21. Kenneth Burke, *The Complete White Oxen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), xi.
22. Cowley, *Selected Correspondence*, 73.
23. William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: A&C Boni, 1925), 175-177.
24. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 77.
25. *Selected Correspondence*, 77.
26. Ibid., 73.
27. Ibid., 73-74, 77. Also see Seltzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 229, n24.
28. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 74-75.
29. Charles W. Mann, "The KB Collection: The Penn State Library," *Pre/Text* 6, (1985): 314-315.
30. *Selected Correspondence*, 103. See also: Kenneth Burke, "Dada, Dead or Alive," *Aesthete* 1925, I (February 1925): 23-26.
31. Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 315, 327; Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 54.
32. Burke, *The Complete White Oxen*, xi.
33. *Selected Correspondence*, 102.
34. Burke to Van Wyck Brooks, quoted in Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 38.
35. Burke, "Chicago and our National Gesture," *The Bookman* 57 (July 1923): 497-501.
36. This fiercely held cosmopolitanism had its own limitations; as Jack Selzer indicates, Burke believed that American Indians and African-Americans, because of segregation, had not and would not affect the mainstream culture (*Kenneth Burke in Greenwich*

Village, 214, n53). But to his credit, African-Americans were not as invisible to Burke as they were to many other critics. He was an early friend and admirer of Ralph Ellison, whom he met in the early forties, and who claimed Burke as a powerful influence; Burke also used examples of racial violence in the South to make relatively subtle points about rhetoric in *Permanence and Change* (1935; 3d revised ed. with a new afterword, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), and he reviewed VanVechten's "Nigger Heaven" reprinted in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). In various work, he mentioned both Ellison and Richard Wright, using Wright's *Native Son* in his *Grammar of Motives* (1945; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) as one of his examples of how dramatic literary structure and ideology inform each other; Burke, *Grammar*, 339.

37. Burke to Van Wyck Brooks, quoted in Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 38.

38. Matthew Josephson reports that Seward Collins, the publisher of *The Bookman*, became an active supporter of fascism in the early thirties. Josephson, *Infidel in the Temple: A Memoir of the Nineteen-thirties* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 16.

39. Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 41.

40. *Ibid.*, 135.

41. *Ibid.*, 133-134.

42. Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 134.

43. *Ibid.*, 133-36; Jay, *Selected Correspondence*, 152.

44. Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 54, 167.

45. *Selected Correspondence*, 189-190.

46. *Ibid.*, 355.

47. *Ibid.*, 208.

48. Kenneth Burke, *Towards a Better Life: Being a Series of Epistles or Declamations by Kenneth Burke* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1932; 2d ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 209.

49. *Selected Correspondence*, 238.

50. *Ibid.*, 195.

51. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (3d edition, unless otherwise indicated), xlviii.

52. *Selected Correspondence*, 198.

53. *Ibid.*, 4.

54. *Ibid.*, 13.

55. *Ibid.*, 80.

56. Selzer, *Burke in Greenwich Village*, 132.

57. Burke, quoted in Robert Wess, *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 56, n4; also in Burke, *Collected Poems, 1915-1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 18-19.

58. Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 213.

59. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) xlix; see also Edward Schiappa and Mary F. Keehner, "The 'Lost' Passages of *Permanence and Change*," *Communication Studies* 42 (Fall 1991): 191-198. See also, Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History* (New York: New Republic, Inc., 1935, 1937 respectively).

60. Eugene Goodheart has called this attitude "ungenerous" in his *Reign of Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 98; and William Rueckert has also remarked that *Partisan Review* was consistently hostile: *Critical Responses*, 96. This is not true of all the editors. Dwight MacDonald continued to solicit Burke's opinions in surveys of writers after this review (Dwight MacDonald to Kenneth Burke, May 20, 1939, Kenneth Burke Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries).

61. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 103.

62. *Ibid.*, 103-104.

CHAPTER TWO

Form in a Splintering World: *Towards a Better Life* and *Counter-Statement*, 1929-1931

There is nothing logical about a pod following a blossom, or fever following germs in the intestines. Yet the art processes should evolve in just this way.

Kenneth Burke (1921)

Burke spent his twenties as an unapologetic aesthete, living in a Thoreau-like rural simplicity. Having grown up in towns, he craved country living and identified it with self-reliance. He fished his pond, made his own rice wine and raised his children. The life clearly agreed with him, for he wrote and wrote. His letters display a mind exploding with ideas and desperately eager to test them on his correspondents. Once the Depression hit, more writers moved out to outlying areas, in order to cut expenses and because the city exposed one daily to the painful consequences of economic disaster. Burke was less an anomaly now, but for him very little changed; he still stayed in the Village periodically and through his writing he remained intimately connected with New York.

Still immersed in the modern art and thought he inherited and promoted, and practicing what he determined were its valid techniques, Burke had accepted modernity as a fact and modernism as a hard-won position from which there was no turning away,

as his years and joy at *The Dial* attested. Throughout the twenties, with the magazine his university, Burke had considered himself a modern aesthete -- someone who saw art and artistic value as the most trustworthy avenue to any truth worth having, the way to the good life. Already in 1921, he had suggested that he should prepare a book on aesthetics, based not on metaphysics, but on "a philosophy of history." He showed a powerful inclination to relate art to history via the new philosophies that saw truth not as fixed, but as relative to time, place, person or interest. He demonstrated both a rough and ready metaphysical expertise as well as a slight naiveté as to the fundamental critical issues:

As to the old idea of welding form and matter, it is linked with the search for the Absolute. The search for the Relative involves the triumph of form over matter, for it is relations which always give matter a new complexion. Thus we accept this much as axiomatic: Art in the deepest sense is always contemporaneous, that is parallels the general complexion of the times.¹

Burke saw form linked with relativism and history. He then believed that "the basic white-and-black distinction between modern and ancient (omitting Heraclitus) is Absolutism and Relativism."² The modern era was relativistic: the flux of forms was triumphing over the immobility of matter. But could forms be pure processes or entirely temporary? And by 1922, Burke had already decided that he wanted to write "a more constructive type of criticism, not merely to attack the existing, but to build up a counter-structure . . . The important thing is to round out one's own conception of intellectual excellence, to develop a consistent and synthetic system of approach. This can be done without growling."³

During the thirties, Burke would craft his own critical modern philosophy from

the particular aesthetic modernism to which he had committed earlier. The present economic crisis was its test. Would the new aesthetics prove workable? Burke believed it could and he set out to explain how one might pick a course that was both critical and open.

His novel, *Towards a Better Life*, and then the first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement*, were begun prior to the Crash and written almost simultaneously. Here, he demonstrated how aesthetic modernism might still sustain artists, critics, and their audiences. Earlier, Burke had begun to explore rhetorical issues and how poetic language entwined with history in his own essays as well as his reviews. And he had developed and revised his own modernism in a manner that would be able to contribute something original and unexpected to new debates. He defended poetic operations as a linguistic model, a representation of communication. This was not merely an issue of style, but also a debate over what was most important to convey, what should not be lost in the rush to acquire data as a tool for the competitive arena. He also rooted language and poetry in bodily experience, and would continue to expand on this idea through *Philosophy of Literary Form*. And, though he would never neglect the “thinking of the body,” he would gradually become more and more interested in the inherent power of the linguistic tendency itself.

Burke’s critical offering, *Counter-Statement*, arrived on a scene that was newly interested in critical theories. As he observed, “I doubt whether any publisher in New York would have as much as considered my remote critical elucubrations . . . in 1929.”⁴ The Depression had leveled the literary playing field; for some it was a sudden chance to

be published. For speculative thinkers of Burke's order, it presented the opportunity to define what a healthy modern culture might look like; it was a moment to discard the inferior and gather together the precious. Burke also moved into political instruction with his political "Program" in *Counter-Statement*, suggesting how aesthetes, the modernists especially concerned with internal formal relations in literature, might sabotage and moderate the excesses of a technological capitalism that, as many had suspected, was in need of restraint.

Naturalism, contingency, discontinuity: the new realities

When we call Burke a "modernist" or a "modern" we mean several things at once. First, he grew up during a key phase of American modernization prior to the First World War; this included industrialism, the explosion in immigration and emigration, urbanization, the explosion of new technologies, and the concomitant changes in social and political life. Burke was someone quite conscious of these historical changes. Second, Burke's critical writings would discuss the larger intellectual shifts and attitudes that had produced a technological approach, and he examined the development of capitalism and the arrival of modernity, the sum of these tremendous developments. Burke was also a modernist writer, who in response to contemporary life rejected the pretenses of narrative literary forms and foregrounded method, multiplied perspectives, and challenged the high art/low art distinctions with his subject matter, though he did not like some other writers attempt to abandon the omniscient narrator. Finally, and key for this study, Burke was a naturalist, that is he accepted the modern repositioning of the human being, though he would wrangle with this concept extensively, as we shall see.

Naturalism as an intellectual approach had its sources in an almost infinite set of social changes and historical events going back for centuries. But for nineteenth and twentieth century intellectual history, Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace's "Natural Selection" (1861), and the radical reworking of their period's tentative evolutionary theories, were naturalism's theoretical terminal of embarkation. The development of evolutionary theory had been underway for more than a century prior to their discovery, it was Darwin and Wallace's analysis of the natural mechanism that "selected" individuals and species according to their abilities to adapt to an environment that finally crushed what remained of an imagined static and Providential "Great Chain of Being," that had humanity surveying the rest of nature from its pinnacle. The species was supposedly disabused of its presumptions and sent back to the randomly mutating, contingent, unpredictable natural history that had made it and to which its members were entirely vulnerable.

By the end of the century, theoretical physics followed a similar path and replaced Newton's relatively orderly view of physical nature with an atomistic caprice. For example, in 1904, the Austrian mathematician, Ludwig Boltzmann, described the revolution proceeding in his field. Boltzmann's hypothesis suggested that material/physical nature was not a vacuum-free continuum (a plenum), a view held as far back as Descartes, but was instead composed of particles, molecular, atomic and sub-atomic, with empty space, "nothing," in-between.⁵ T. E. Hulme, a young Cambridge scholar, noted that though the eighteenth century had elaborated on a universal principle of continuity, yet "the destruction of this concept is an urgent necessity of the present."⁶

This discontinuity shattering the Newtonian view of a lawful, orderly natural universe outside the mind was also invading the relationship of the mind to that universe. Quantum physics demonstrated that studying objects affected them, dissolving the proper, static subject-object relation of knower to thing known. Using these new paradigms, the physical, mathematical, and biological sciences discovered further evidence promoting theories that stressed randomness and fragmentation in the way the environment and universe changed, and demonstrating that order or system was a construct impressed upon nature by human imagination, not human reason. Nature, heedless of men's designs, only imposed mindless movement and force. Everything in experience was historical; contingent on countless other accidents and continually changing, as Darwin suggested. Some, like Boltzmann, suggested that from this point onward, in order not to be misled further by formalist prejudices, science and intellect should rely strictly on the empirically observable properties of matter.

So, one feature of early twentieth century intellectual life was the replacement of unity with "discontinuity." There was no unified "whole" or "system" in physical nature resolving itself in a final interconnected and complex perfection, as the idealist philosophers Josiah Royce at Harvard, or Francis Herbert Bradley at Oxford held – no continuity – merely particular individual parts acting independently. And there was little of certainty beyond sense experience, modified in more general discussions to "experience."

Over fifty years ago, Morton White chronicled the movement of American intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's movement away from

“formalist,” or idealist approaches in philosophy, history, law, and the social sciences to new, “naturalistic” ones. This “revolt against formalism,” was also a rejection of the literary “genteel tradition,” criticized for avoiding the natural, actual, or “real.”⁷

Discarding the burdens of formalism stimulated all aspects of intellectual creativity in the United States. In philosophy, the pragmatists, C. S. Peirce, William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey rejected large philosophic systems and deductive logic in favor of the results-oriented methods of induction and the psychology of process and action. Dewey generalized the scientific method as the model of all human effort. So, whether or not discontinuity was the central theme of the period, the early decades of the twentieth century certainly do offer the picture of an exhausted metaphysical idealism in free fall, and the putative unity of nature shot apart as energetic intellectuals turned from the a priori to the a posteriori, from system to method.⁸

Of course, the various characters involved differed on how to organize the radical new insights. Some held fast to the need for some objective measure for reality, looking to science and its methods of empirical observation to provide it. These were positivists. A varied group, the positivists argued that only testable data were reliable, a position that would harden into logical positivism. Others decided that human experience and personal subjectivity was the site of interest. For a time American pragmatists managed to combine these views.

Soon Philosophy had begun to split again, not this time into old orthodoxy and new heresy, but into two general camps, that of a devotion to hard science, its form of intuition and its inductive logic, as opposed to the more impressionistic and subjective.

The mathematicians, Ernst Mach and Gottlob Frege, as well as Fritz Mauthner, Rudolf Carnap, and the Vienna Circle of philosophers began historical and critical projects to deliver language from any lingering metaphysical association.⁹

Bergson: continuity within contingency

At the same time, there were also immediate philosophic responses to this description of reality as discontinuous and entirely fragmented, since it implied a rigid, alienating division. The Austrian and French philosophers Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and Henri Bergson (1859-1941), had been thoroughly trained in mathematics and science; Bergson was also a medical doctor. Both were skeptical about some extended philosophical reasoning drawn from the new scientific discoveries. Both Husserl and Bergson, subsequently classed as “phenomenologists,” challenged the rising positivism, which they saw as neglecting subjective, intuitive, and creative human experience, and they instead stressed the unifying ability of human insight. It was Bergson who had greater influence in the United States at the time, and with whom William James had a reciprocal influence and admiration; both James and Bergson offered important ideas Burke would use.¹⁰

In his book *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson argued for the interconnectedness of all reality based on everpresent motion. Accepting flux though not fragmentation, he reasoned that if everything “flowed,” there must be a source for this energy; and he suggested a life force, an *élan vital* that moved evolution and mankind forward in a progressive manner.¹¹ The theory of relativity and Darwin’s own theory had suggested

that nature's behavior was random and not progressive. Yet since the material evidence of rapid scientific, social, and economic change was so plain, one needed to take an attitude toward it: the choices were either optimism or pessimism of varying degrees.

Bergson justified his optimism by suggesting that truth was defined by action; and that as reality flowed, "we flow with it; and we call true any affirmation which, in guiding us through moving reality, gives us a grip upon it and places us under more favorable conditions for acting," a view quite consistent with William James's Pragmatism.¹² The material world, though apparently fractured, was, Bergson alleged, actually a unity of "becoming," a mystical "single flux" from which human insight might draw. This insight took place within time but was of an imperceptible duration; it was *in* time yet not fully *of* it. As all was in flux, only action as process, also indivisible, could take place within it. If one stood back from the theory, one received a picture of a continuously active totality in which individuals participated with less or greater consciousness of their position or movement.¹³

Bergson also contributed to a revitalized modern spirituality and emphasized an assertive, active free will operating in the middle of this flux, quite similar to James's famous "will to believe." Not only philosophers such as James found Bergson's ideas convincing and perhaps reassuring, but modern writers derived inspiration from his faith in intuition and the connection of the human mind with reality's moving current. Bergson was *de rigueur* reading among the American intelligentsia for a while; even Dewey, a positivistic Pragmatist, who saw the incremental, instrumental scientific method as the model of mind, still praised him highly.¹⁴ But the stricter British and

Viennese positivists found this French metaphysical thinking vague, sentimental, suspiciously religious, and way too elastic. As Bertrand Russell put it, Bergson was “soft.”¹⁵

American pragmatists held to a more flexible form of positivism, with James exemplifying objectivist/subjectivist fence straddling at both its most astute and inconsistent. But neither camp was willing to associate themselves with the previous formalism. The new disciplines that had arisen, psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology, for example, had their feet in both the subjective and objective, and were called “social sciences,” reflecting the ambivalence. They used modern empirical research to defend intuitive claims about subjective experience and human behavior, trying to analyze and predict the apparently unpredictable, while stressing their scientific methods.

Whether these intellectual developments were the causes or the effects of modernization, or whether that question any longer really made sense, as Burke would soon wonder, the sensations of that modernization were unavoidable. Steam, steel, telegraphy – even without the discoveries of the new quantum physics, kinetic theory of gases, microscopic biology, or moving picture – the existing definitions of space and time would necessarily have come under question as natural obstacles to human will melted at the touch of human ingenuity. New technologies were distinguished by an attention to motion and speed: the cinema replaced photography, internal combustion replaced steam engines, invisible electricity usurped gas, while electrons bounced in supposedly stationary objects. Strange invisible realities squirmed beneath visible facts.

Popular intellectual culture can be relied upon to evade consistency and assimilate whatever ideas either sparkle or suit a purpose. Bergson's teeming connected holism and Boltzmann's random atomism were views that may have contradicted each other, but the common denominator was movement and contingency, and in very different ways they both demonstrated not only a new arbitrariness appearing in descriptions of nature, but also that these descriptions were still contested and under construction: a young Burke took notice.

The symbolic moment

A new concern with the symbol was an expression and reaction to certain marked changes in the texture of life from the turn of the century onward. Burke's generation's interest in criticism, in the techniques used in art and its development, and the viewing of narrative representation as the manipulation of linguistic and social symbols was both a development of the larger naturalistic tendencies and a response to them. The symbolic was central to the dream theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and to the anthropological and ethnological investigations into isolated tribes' rituals made by Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Even the economist Thorstein Veblen used ethnology to illustrate that production was motivated less by necessity than by an apparently ever-present desire for symbolic gratifications and displays. The symbol as an object of empirical study guided the linguistic research of the poet, scholar and critic, I. A. Richards, and studies in modern logic, already investigated extensively by the American Pragmatist C. S. Peirce, who was widely ignored at the time, were brought to American

attention by the elegant British thinkers Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead. The logicians concerns were “symbolic” in quite another sense, for the logical positivists would design a quasi-mathematical symbolic language that was purportedly free of those emotional human symbolic ambiguities that beset ordinary language. Yet all these theories demonstrated a sudden preoccupation with the symbol as the key to one or another hidden, less articulated world, often radically different from the familiar one.

Freudian symbolism

If humans were part of nature and that nature was arbitrary, and not ordered, then that which was natural within them was as chaotic as the world without. So, from where did the systems that they imposed – civilization, culture – derive? Explanations proliferated.

When Freud arrived in Massachussetts with colleagues Carl Jung and Sandor Ferenczi in 1909, to accept a degree from Clark University and deliver a series of lectures launching their psychoanalytic theories in the United States, he immediately gained an enthusiastic following. Freud’s influential *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) had not only presented a colorful world of symbol and myth affecting our lives in the most intimate ways, but also “made explicit the notion that the wish is father to the thought,” presenting dreamers and neurotics as unintentionally creative in an almost literary sense, since dreams were wishes dramatized and rewritten by the dreamer.¹⁶

Consistent with the general interest in hidden reality and its symbolic representation, Freud chronicled a subconscious mind pursuing a vivid, violent, sensual, truly theatrical existence beneath the formal presentation of the self, and moreover, his

examples were taken from classical tragedy. The unconscious did not follow the logic of traditional causality or syllogistic reasoning; the links were associative, and the symbolic representations constructed by the dreamer or subject. Thus modern man was essentially poetic, even though Freud himself was often bizarrely reductive in his analyses of artists and saw poetry as little more than an evasion of reality.¹⁷

Understandably, writers found Freud's usage of symbol and metaphor to represent how we "truly" think and feel highly significant. Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann both frankly explored Freudian themes of sexuality, guilt, punishment, and fear of the father.¹⁸ Freud's effect on the intelligentsia was quickly publicized. In 1915, the debonair Max Eastman, editor of the revolutionary *Masses* in its most imaginative incarnation, promised that psychoanalysis was a form of powerful "magic" that could call all insecurities and nervous disorders "their true name," thus allowing them "to dissolve like the charms in a fairy story."¹⁹ He spoke as a psychoanalytic patient, yet the possibilities for criticism was irresistible. Freudian critics, Van Wyck Brooks for a time among them, went to work locating biographical and emotional reasons for literary decisions. Freud's ideas were put aside by many critical writers during the politicized thirties, when private neuroses seemed at the very least malapropos, yet reappeared when Marxism fell from favor in American intellectual circles after the war.²⁰ Burke also drew the parallels between psychoanalysis and symbolist art.²¹ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud also offered his more explicitly tragic theories of Sisyphus-like repetition compulsions and of a death instinct, locked in dramatic battle with the erotic.²² Burke's interest in Freud continued throughout the thirties and throughout his career, and he

retained the general Freudian interest in the biographical, yet it was always a respectfully critical one.

Poetic Symbolism

As a poet and a novelist, Burke had embedded himself in literary modernism, one side of which was the Symbolist movement in poetry. As Burke noted, even nationalistic writers like William Carlos Williams could not help but be influenced by these European ideas, since they stood in such clear opposition to both the suffocating literary gentility of the previous century as well as the literary naturalism that had set out to demolish it. And French *Symbolisme* was directly connected with American literature; it counted Poe and Whitman as two of its heroes.

The poetic Symbolism with which Burke identified began at least in part as the reaction to French literary naturalism of the previous century. It took some of the same subject matter liberated by the naturalistic writers Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert -- the psychic and economic chaos wreaked by the realities of modern life within an antiquated social system -- but used an aesthetic, associative technique rather than a moral, narrative one. They integrated the textures of their kinetic, ready-made environment.

Acutely sensitive and prophetic, the Symbolists, like miner's canaries, headed toward the depths of human emotion to register the hazards entailed in the new ways of living. Contingency, discontinuity, and fragmentation, not in theory but in life, served as a well of sensibility from which they drew. Building energy in Paris in the 1880's, a central inspiration for the movement was an ironic, playful sonnet written years earlier by

Arthur Rimbaud that assigned colors and images to each vowel. A large and various group of writers, it grew out of the French literary coterie that had reacted to realism: the *décadents*. Their heroes were the laudanum-addicted Baudelaire and the equally afflicted Poe; their brilliant apotheosis, the amoral, bisexual adventurer, Rimbaud. Writers theorizing their movement, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Jules Laforgue in France, and W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, and Walter Pater in Ireland and England, emphasized a social alienation and an art-for-art's-sake attitude, an approach that could be traced back to the earliest *décadents* Théophile Gautier, and even Pushkin, who used it as a way to defend art from tsarist interference.²³ Symons described their attempt as one to “spiritualise [*sic*] literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. ” All unimpressed by “facts” of any kind, they were ill-suited to serve as standard bearers of any philosophy of social reform.²⁴

The Symbolists also bluntly opposed rationalism in the forms of positivism and materialism.²⁵ “Description is banished so that beautiful things may be evoked , magically . . . Mystery is no longer feared.”²⁶ Rimbaud had wanted to “arrive at the unknown through the disordering of all the senses,” to lose rationality, and he used alcohol and hashish to this end.²⁷ Similar to Walt Whitman, but without the optimism, he aimed toward an undisciplined idealism or mysticism.²⁸ Rimbaud declared, “The poet makes himself a visionary through a long, a prodigious and rational disordering of *all* the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, keeping only their quintessences.”²⁹

Symbolists celebrated the urban netherworld and the passionate awareness of the

spiritual wanderer, who savored a cosmic vagrancy in the absence of traditional religious conviction. This attitude was no mere affectation. It expressed a previously uncharted form of loneliness and arose from a willful openness to the chaotic new sensations modernity offered, the futility of its resplendent possibility, and the personal opportunity available in withdrawal. Nietzsche called this new rootless freedom “weightlessness.”³⁰

Most Symbolists had begun their careers using traditional rhyming forms. But after reading Whitman, poets such as Laforgue, taught themselves to write the free verse Baudelaire had dreamed of: “musical without rhyme and without rhythm.”³¹ Their signature technique was a fractured juxtaposition of ideas, rather than a narrative harmony of imagery. These ideas were then represented by symbols, sometimes culled from the visual arts, myth, or religion, sometimes from modern life: abstract, dreamlike, highly personal and unconventional, described for an English-reading public by T.S. Eliot’s *Sacred Wood* (1920) and Edmund Wilson’s *Axel’s Castle* (1931).

Burke had his own favorites among the Symbolists and modernist authors, and his choice and analysis of certain figures in *Counter-Statement* gives us a clear indication of the direction of his theoretical interests. Burke was now ready to offer a sociological history of the modern in literature. Sketching broadly, he traveled as far back as the medieval thinkers, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment to explain the present, a move begun by T. S. Eliot who had already linked historical situation to artists’ psychological fracture and surety of style or its lack. Burke took his cue from Eliot and explored writer’s attitudes toward the changes surrounding them as expressed in language. *Counter-Statement*’s concerns were primarily literary, and in literature the

most obvious transformation had been that of the liberation of rhetorical form from narrative realism and the rise of abstract idioms.

The discussion began with the writers who for Burke, exemplified the discontinuous, layered, and associative aspects of modernism: Flaubert, Walter Pater, and the critic Rémy de Gourmont. In another chapter, he used Thomas Mann and André Gide to represent modernism's apparent outsider morality, their commitment to what Nietzsche had named a "transvaluation of values." In this way, Burke linked a Symbolist technique to a Symbolist psychology and a Symbolist ethic, making them all central to the modern concept of form.

Creation of a "pure" literature: Flaubert, Pater, De Gourmont

Though Flaubert had been categorized as a literary Naturalist, Burke represented him as a Symbolist and a frustrated literary modern, aesthetically ambivalent. Though Flaubert collected realistic details to fill his novels, he confessed to wishing to write a "pure literature," separating form from content and making technique the subject. Suggesting that the most beautiful works were "those with the least matter," the creator of *Emma Bovary* and Frédéric Moreau wished to create a book "about nothing, a book without any exterior tie, . . . sustained by the internal force of its style;" its precision would create a "sublime" effect. Unlike Balzac or Stendahl, who attempted to make their prose disappear, Flaubert dreamt about displaying structure, technique, and language, yet he never fully developed his writing in this direction. Since the narratives of the novels required accurate, realistic detail, his aesthetic and his medium clashed. Burke explains, "Despite his many art-to-display-art preferences, he was attempting to

write under an art-to-conceal-art aesthetic.” So, Flaubert created work that was neither entirely natural nor abstract, and accordingly, his inability to choose the abstract over the literal left him fussing over a scrubbed prose.³²

In his analysis of his hero Flaubert, whose own ambition to be a genius was symbolically expressed in *Madame Bovary*’s desire to live above her station, he exemplified a type of criticism that went beyond formal description or ordinary psychology. In his analysis of the novelist’s aesthetic project, its tensions and symbols, Burke looked at technique from a philosophic and historical perspective.

Though less interesting as a literary personality, Pater’s modernism was more successful than Flaubert’s. Pater’s imagery of transition, of twilight, “of emergence and evanescence,” and the stylized movement of the paragraphs in a chapter, symbolically revealed his acquiescence to his transitive cultural position. In his *Marius the Epicurean*, the central subject is a violent massacre, but it is just obliquely mentioned throughout the piece. For such a writer, content was the opportunity for the display of technique: Pater’s “principle” of art was achieved in the “critical tracing of . . . conscious artistic structure.” Rather than pursuing directness and power, Pater presented “numerous angles of approach,” constantly calling attention to the mechanics of communication.³³

Rémy De Gourmont powerfully affected Burke. An admired critic of the period before the First World War, he suggested that complex ideas, generally identified as unified, having become intellectual commonplaces or even clichés, might be split apart into their components allowing for creative realignments. De Gourmont censured historians, who rather than challenging these atrophied connections, continued to “build”

on them, entrenching them further. For example, “decadence” and “Byzantium,” had been connected and continually associated, leading to any number of prejudices and errors.³⁴

De Gourmont also suggested that ideas were not connected via a stable “reason,” but rather by our fluctuating desires and interests. Thus if desires changed, so could ideas be split apart and rearranged more suitably.³⁵ His “dissociation of ideas” incorporated the associationist psychology and historical and cultural relativism of the eighteenth century French Enlightenment, together with the themes of discontinuity of the early twentieth century, expressed visually in surrealism, cubism, and collage.³⁶ Burke saw this principle of arbitrary intellectual linkage as sufficiently skeptical, yet still optimistic enough to suggest possible change. And the disassociation of ideas was “clearly a companion discovery to that of symbolism” for which De Gourmont was a leading advocate.³⁷

De Gourmont’s ideas held further attractions for Burke; almost all are neglected here. But one other important tendency Burke located in De Gourmont was his “Super-Copernican,” antiteleological attitude that not only denied the world as the nucleus of the cosmos, but denied man as the center of the world. Even Darwin made man too central according to De Gourmont, who insisted, “man was neither first nor last upon the earth.”³⁸

Burke’s affection for these writers displayed aspects of his own modernism: art’s oblique relation to “truth” through analysis of structure or form rather than a direct literal relation; and the breaking apart of ideas into constituent elements, which when joined

with “numerous angles of approach,” would develop into Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” in *Permanence and Change*, and a cornerstone of Burke’s early thought. What Burke said of Rémy de Gourmont, might also be said of himself: “De Gourmont never forgot that a man is of no more importance in relation to the stars than a grasshopper. Nor did he forget that a man in relation to himself is of tremendous importance.”³⁹

Mann and Gide: moral ironists

Mann and Gide offered themes of sickness, homosexuality, and the disillusion of heterosexual union. Mann’s characters strove for self-discipline; they were unhappily self-conscious of their personal failures, while Gide’s provocatively announced their own corruption and dissipation. One type of life was symbolized as a closed fist of repression, the other an open one of lassitude. Yet Burke delved further to note that Gide’s amorality was actually an assertion of a drastic moral individualism and thus a new religious responsibility: “an excess of scruples,” while it was Mann who had suggested that the duty of the artist was ““a sympathy with the abyss.”” The “hero” of *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach is a spectator to his own moral conflicts, creating ambivalence to the second power. In both, the forbidden, the corrupt, and the sinful are inevitably at the heart of the ethical, making for a desperate but hopeless pursuit of some form of self-respect.

Thus, these authors exemplified “critical” writers. Mann “defined the problematical as the proper sphere of art, and created “a cult of conflict, a deliberate entertaining of moral vacillation,” while Gide, under the name of immorality, was really

an ethical pluralist and a champion of contingency, “on guard lest the possible be obscured by the real.” Gide claimed he thought of writing an imaginary history of a nation in all detail, “To prove that the history of man could have been different—our habits, morals, customs, tastes, judgements, standards of beauty could have all been different—and yet the humanity of mankind would remain the same.”⁴⁰

Defiantly deviant at all moments, these writers were ironists. They tried to “make us at home in indecision . . . to humanize the state of doubt,” in the presence of what Burke saw as the “new wilderness . . . a wilderness not of nature but of social forces.” Their importance was that they corroded truisms. Theirs was a “disintegrating art,” precious because problematical and experimental, wearing down “those expansionistic certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms.”⁴¹

More explicitly than other modernist critics, and prior to the thirties, Burke had already engaged the question of what the historical contingency of ideas meant for literature and how literature as symbolic expression expressed and affected history. Thus, after the start of the Depression, when so many of his colleagues turned to Marxist criticism as an effective historical strategy, Burke saw it as a rather blunt instrument compared with his own sophisticated one. For Burke had begun with the dual assumptions that not only were aesthetic philosophies historically situated, but that history as experienced was actually aesthetic.

Integralism and *Towards A Better Life*: Burke’s literary symbolism

In his early stories, Burke was more concerned to exercise his theories about how

rhetorical forms interacted than to recreate obviously lifelike situations or emotions. He tried to fill the stories with the perfect smaller forms his Integralism had advanced. Some of these were “better than [his] theories,” according to Cowley, since they sustained a reader’s interest despite their abstract rationales, evidence perhaps that the rationales were not baseless.⁴² Burke was prepared to substitute psychological and symbolic association for traditional narrative logic, putting himself on the side of the literary radicals. In an early letter to Thayer, Burke claimed that “Narrative is no more an organic necessity to fiction than melody is to music,” and that it should only be brought in by an author to answer a particular aesthetic need. Making narrative contingent rather than necessary, Burke implied that the chronologically structured plot was a part of a historical development rather than a necessary feature of literature:

Literature and music, because they exist in time – in contradistinction to painting, sculpture and architecture, which exist in space -- had accepted this arbitrary thread of progress because it was the simplest method of establishing a temporal gradation which, while being graded also retained the feeling of unity. An essentially artistic progression, however would have its basis in something more exact than this mere illusion of development.⁴³

The more “exact” things he suggested were “a sequence of form-units, expository, argumentative, oratorical,” or emotional ones such as “lugubrious,” “brilliant,” or “matter-of-fact.” That is, each argument, exposition, or oratorical event owned its own rhetorical form or structure; it was independent, though the nature of one form would call forth another, just as one emotion or attitude calls forth a complementary or opposing one.⁴⁴ In his preface to the novel he said, “There is no reason why prose should continue to be judged good prose purely because it trails along somewhat like the line left by the

passage of a caterpillar. Why should an author spend a year or more on a single book, and end by talking as he would on the spur of the moment?"⁴⁵

Previously, according to Burke, action had been determined by conflict, but "in abstract writing there is no form of this nature . . . There is no conflict because the plot is the hero; and a plot either does things or does not . . . A challengelike beginning and a coda end—and in between the main thing is diversity of attack, turning here and then there. With, of course, somewhat of a splurge before the coda."⁴⁶ Each paragraph had to be crafted into a "microcosm" of the whole. In keeping with the modernist movements of the day, technique would be central. These units were connected dramatically through the character's psychological associations. Burke's experimental writing shows characters' emotional development by connecting them with an associative tissue of linguistic relations, rather than by developing a linear narrative, though the aim was still "a unity of effect," rather than the random, "idle" connections of the Dadaists.⁴⁷

Burke's novel, *Towards a Better Life*, tells the "story" of John Neal in the form of "declamations," strange unsent letters to another male character, as he pursues and rejects four women, one of whom he singularly torments, thus alienating himself from his friends. But it has almost no action whatsoever. Its subject is eloquence: the power of human language to express an encyclopedic variety of inner psychological states with tortuous precision, and this expression's ability to impress a listener. Burke warned the reader that "Lamentation, rejoicing, beseechment, admonition, sayings and invective—these seemed to me central matters, while a plot in which they might occur

seemed peripheral, little more than a pretext, justifiable not as ‘a good story,’ but only insofar as it could bring these six characteristics to the fore.”⁴⁸ The novel closes with the hero descending into an autistic state where his reality is entirely internal, he stops communicating in order to listen only to his own emotional cacophony. Despite his aesthetic modernism, Burke certainly did not see his own views as those of an isolate; that way lay doom.

While clearly the work of a fascinating mind, reading *Towards a Better Life* is a bit like listening to a highly articulate friend as he brings a crisis into being and then suffers its consequences, while verbalizing all nuances. It is to some as taxing as hours-long telephone calls in the middle of the night. One reader remarked to Cowley that “Burke certainly makes the reader work,” and Cowley warned Burke that while his “nominal rather than verbal style” was suited to complex ideas; in the case of simple ideas, it ran the “danger of self-caricature,” since none of the characters ever sounded anything like ordinary people.⁴⁹ Like a Freudian dream, these were all only one person in a highly “unnatural” situation: their agonized author. As William Rueckert put it, “in this book he took himself apart in order to put himself together in a new way,” a new sort of man and a new sort of writer.⁵⁰

Burke defended the novel’s difficulty, saying he saw no great virtue in “naturalness in writing,” of the sort so praised in Hemingway. He considered the novel autobiographical and purgative: “I rely on the Declamations to burn away certain very uncomfortable parts of me.” Yet the level of abstraction would pose a challenge to any biographer looking for explicit parallels with its author’s daily life.⁵¹ Even an

enthusiastic reviewer in the *Humanist Bookman* remarked that the novel “lacked sensuousness;” its “beauties . . . those of the agile mind; its excitements . . . the pleasures of alert and keen perceptions.”⁵² Cowley’s review in *The New Republic* suggested a strong similarity to Karl Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, in that both describe a life dedicated to the transvaluation of all values, and the consequent penalties of a self-imposed isolation.⁵³ *The Nation*’s reviewer, Robert Cantwell, observed that the book was essentially in second person singular, and hortatory, with Burke “attacking” his audience.⁵⁴ Denis Donoghue, in discussing its 1968 reissue, categorized it as “an anatomy of dissociation,” and suggested that Burke had invented an alienated hero by deciding that “alienation is the appropriate situation of the reader vis-à-vis the book.”⁵⁵ The book bears a biographical comparison to Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*; both novels inaugurated radically new perspectives and lives for their authors. As for the concern with language over plot, Burke was following moves begun by James Joyce; after him, the writers Delmore Schwartz and Jane Bowles, among others, would offer similar narratives reversing the roles of action and language.

Burke’s novel offered a modern, alienated antihero, but it allowed the reader to remain alienated as well; speech acts replaced naturalistic characters. In fact, one could argue that in every novel the characters are represented by speech acts, but in this one the subject was modernistic: it was expression per se, not a particular case, and the reader was expected to somehow identify with the protagonist as a language user under duress. Despite his valid claim that *Towards A Better Life* contained his basic philosophy in novelistic form, Burke found that the rhetorical issues that concerned him were more

effectively explored in criticism. When the book was rejected by readers, Burke learned a hard lesson: readers want to sympathize; familiarity was key for identification; and identification was necessary to persuasion.

Burke and the Critics: Eliot, Wilson, and Richards

Ralph Ellison once distinguished between a writer's "relatives" and his "ancestors." Ancestors were those who had set the terms of the discussion in which one placed oneself; relatives were those of one's own generation with whom one debated its issues. Burke was more sensitive than most critics regarding who his ancestors actually were, and he was even ready to argue with them. Yet Burke's distinctive philosophic modernism was crafted within the context of multiple conversations with relatives. The views of the many critics whom Burke used or answered in his books were philosophically significant, since it was with and against their readings of the connections between the symbolic and the nonsymbolic worlds, that he would delineate his own.⁵⁶

When Burke collected and recast the articles that would comprise *Counter-Statement*, he was in his thirties and had spent a decade investigating the connection of art with personality, politics, society, and history. Burke was antiformalist enough to see that literary movements were not *sui generis* but were environmental, contextual, and historically conditioned. Yet literature as a conscious creation functioned by its own rules within history, and so should literary criticism. In 1919, he had already complained that it was "a shame that literature is not more of a tradition that is picked up and carried

on, as painting is or philosophy.” He observed that “They can speak of painting before and after Cezanne, or philosophy before and after Kant, but the mechanism of literature has been too much neglected to have a pivot on which it swings.”⁵⁷ By 1921, Burke had already distinguished between the “prophetic” and “critical” (spontaneous versus intellectual) artists, using Flaubert as an example of the newer critical type, and had noted “the incompleteness of either romanticism, realism, or a mixture of the two.”⁵⁸ Thus, Burke felt there were specific historical transformations occurring in literature that needed charting.

T.S. Eliot articulated a philosophy of history for modern literary criticism in his famous essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”(1919), divining an explanation for how poets might create novel forms yet still function within a special, discrete tradition.⁵⁹ He held a vision of culture more historical than that of traditionalists who, following Matthew Arnold, thought of culture as a society’s contribution to a timeless body of refined artistic and intellectual pursuits then bequeathed to subsequent generations.

Eliot described the role of the modernist writer as one self-consciously embedded in a complex literary history. He suggested a close focus on the literary tradition as a distinct world, reorganized with each major artistic breakthrough. Thus, to fully grasp a poem’s position required a high level of erudition; Eliot’s quintessential high modernist work, *The Waste Land* (1922), was published replete with multiple citations within the text to aid in its proper cultural-historical location as well as guide its associations. The meaning of a great modern poem had an almost occult power and complexity that allowed it to transform and realign the tradition.⁶⁰ According to Eliot, “the historical

sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence: the historical sense compels a man to write . . . with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe . . . and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” This view of historical transformation was somewhat grandiose and mystical: “What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the new works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves.”⁶¹

In this manner, Eliot merged an artistic process with a historical idealism. Unsurprisingly, this approach moved him in conservative, sometimes reactionary directions. Eliot was modern and historical enough to observe that poets expressed the anxieties and desires of their periods. Yet, he was also nostalgic for the preanxious period of social and emotional unity he saw exemplified by the late Renaissance, especially Dante, and sixteenth century “metaphysical poets,” such as Donne, though once his own critical conversion was complete, he saw even Donne as too divided and modern a thinker.⁶² Eliot viewed the unquestioned supremacy of religious faith during this early period as having preserved a philosophic coordination of the sensual, moral, and intellectual life, and producing a social hierarchy grounded in a shared ideology. It offered its members social cohesion, while skepticism and individualism shattered this harmony.⁶³ His vision, expressed in his journal, *The Criterion*, demanded extensive learning and perhaps because of this, tended toward a philosophical esotericism and hermeticism that was still quite ahistorical.

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke decided to take the historical view quite seriously,

giving a modern reading of Shakespeare. He respectfully differed from Eliot on *Hamlet*. Eliot had considered the play an artistic failure since the “objective correlative,” his term for a proportional correspondence between a character’s dramatic situation and his or her expressed emotion, was lacking. Hamlet’s disgust was vaster than his mother’s insignificant shamelessness.⁶⁴ Burke, neither agreed nor disagreed exactly, but suggested that the play’s general essayistic tone represented Shakespeare’s own subjective concerns arising from the cultural transitions of the sixteenth century. Hamlet symbolized the playwright’s own anxieties over questions of feudal honor now in conflict with rising naturalistic attitudes and mercantile values. The play thus represented a “concomitant questioning of both his life and his methods.” The drama was less an expression of artistic failure or success than the exposure of the process of a writer working through a historically given problem.⁶⁵

In this way, Burke’s understanding of literary history was less a fetish of tradition than a portrait of transition. More interested in discovering the elements that comprised his own tradition and modernism’s place in it, he had less interest in imposing a premodern ideal. Eliot became even more involved in praising the virtues of the past and lamenting the present while fascism ascended in the background. Burke found this “troublesome extra baggage” reduced Eliot’s value as a critic.⁶⁶ Though Burke was certainly concerned with a work’s formal internal structure, especially as a modernist, his theory of form would begin to state an aesthetic that would also include attention to the explicit individual political and personal interests of writers and critics outside the obviously literary. Burke, like Eliot saw writers working within a tradition that could be

chronicled and would affect their work, but he also centered his theories in the individual agency of the author. And, while Burke was himself remarkably erudite, he held a more relaxed approach to literary creativity, not rooting it in stern scholarship as Eliot had.

In the same year that Burke's *Counter-Statement* appeared, Edmund Wilson offered his *Axel's Castle*, which presented the French Symbolist movement's literary and historical position, explaining its influence on the English speaking T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Gertrude Stein. Wilson described symbolism an almost dialectical reaction to the literary Naturalism of the previous century, itself a reaction to the individualism of Romanticism, which in turn had responded to Classicism. Then Wilson ended with a strange "either/or" for poetry's future. The first alternative he derived from the 1890's prose poem by the Symbolist Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. This poem has its cloistered hero, Axel, remaining in a secluded castle with his lover, which holds a fabled treasure, and relinquishing the pleasures, pains, and passions of real life since they will, inevitably, disappoint. The lovers finally commit suicide together in an unconsummated passion.⁶⁷

Rimbaud represented the other option. Wilson drew him as the romantic outlaw: first destroying his fellow-Symbolist and lover Paul Verlaine's family life and, after writing his brilliant *Season in Hell* at the age of nineteen, giving up literature entirely for an exotic existence that included enlisting in and deserting from the Dutch army, traveling with a circus, settling in Africa, and dying of syphilis in Marseille.⁶⁸ Wilson left the obvious homosexual elements unexplored. Wilson himself declared these as obviously impossible alternatives if literature was to continue, suggesting that Paul Valéry and Proust had played out the Symbolist passivity to the fullest.⁶⁹ He expected

that the historical fluctuations would cease finally in a new unity, a “radical simplification,” that combined both Naturalistic subjects and Symbolist techniques.⁷⁰

Wilson’s decadence/primitivism alternatives, both strong elements in twenties modernism, seemed a false dichotomy to Burke.⁷¹ He clearly agreed a new unity was needed, and in his novel had attempted just such a fusion of subject and technique. Certainly the choice between the disappearance of literature into Axel’s silent world, or the dissolution of literature within a ferocious, omnivorous immersion in life, amounted to the same imploding retreat and could never have been the guiding purpose behind modernist Symbolism.

Wilson soon made clear his own choice and turned toward the social sphere, becoming a communist and releasing *To the Finland Station* (1932). Chronicling the development of European socialism, he illustrated the transformation of the political-historical approach to culture into a revolutionary mentality; the story culminated with the start of Lenin and Trotsky’s revolution. But in his earlier work, Wilson suggested ideas that Burke saw as serious challenges, and would attempt to examine later. Wilson observed that “our ideas about the ‘logic’ of language are likely to be superficial,” as the process taking place behind words was “still a very mysterious one.” He noted that “we assume that being *convinced* of things is something quite different from having them *suggested* to us; but the suggestive language of the Symbolist poet is really performing the same sort of function as the reasonable language of the realistic novelist or even the severe technical languages of science.” Wilson continued,

The only difference between the language of Symbolism and the literary

languages to which we are more accustomed, is that the former indicates relations which, . . . cut through or underlie those in terms of which we have been in the habit of thinking; and that it deals with them by means of . . . a literary shorthand which makes complex ideas more easily more manageable.⁷²

Symbolism was, like modern scientific theory, moving “toward a new conception of reality,” that might ultimately “make art and science one.”⁷³

Whatever his differences with *Axel's Castle*, Burke clearly took its concerns to heart. Burke would not abandon Symbolism; it had arisen from the problematic tension occasioned by changes that had only intensified as they gained momentum, and he was fiercely attached to its insights. Burke already saw literary history not entirely as a back and forth dialectic, nor as a pure progression, but as Eliot had originally advanced: as a cumulative body of resource. He would also use Symbolism's lessons as Wilson had advised, in order to locate a possible unity within the social predicament.

Another, very different sort of critic who powerfully impressed Burke was Cambridge critic, I. A. Richards, who achieved fame with *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) together with C. K. Ogden, and then *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924).⁷⁴ I. A. Richards was an independent thinker, and in the tradition of a earlier project by another English thinker, Jeremy Bentham, he, together with Ogden, also organized an abbreviated English vocabulary of 850 words, their “Basic English.” They believed the lexicon was sufficient to describe all ordinary situations and would allow nonnative speakers to rapidly learn the language. Richards tested his theory while teaching English in Peking. *The Principles*, highly controversial, offered a theory of meaning based on an experimentally tested, scientific psychology and its connection to physiology.

Despite his very different aesthetics, Burke managed to find aspects of Richards' positivistic, behavioristic approach useful since it addressed the mind-body relation in a modern way. Both art-for-art's-sake romantics and instrumental scientists had divided the apparently "useless" impractical poetic thinking from other types, defensively celebrating or politely denigrating it. Richards demurred, calling this special poetic consciousness a "phantom esthetic state," giving instead a naturalistic psychological account of the values in literature that readers reported, and at one level at least, unifying consciousness.⁷⁵ Yet Richards also reinstated the distinction in both his *Principles of Literary Criticism* and then in *Science and Poetry*, suggesting that science offered "statements" while poetry instead gave "pseudo-statements." Its propositions were believed only "provisionally," in order to contribute to their effect, which was to support us during life's vicissitudes. Thus, once again, fact and value were distinct; art was concerned with value.⁷⁶

Richards, who also gave some fine readings of poems, recommended that criticism should concern itself with describing the psychological and neurological processes occurring within author and reader. Though this resulted in some simplistic applications of biology to art appreciation, including some rather odd diagramming, the conviction that poetry involved actual physical responses was one Burke accepted. Richards also offered a general theory of value based on function. The poem's meaning became relative to its effect in the reader. "Anything is valuable which satisfies an appetency [appetite]."⁷⁷ Beauty was the effect on the subject. This ethic was a hedonistic calculus: the value of literature was to be found in its maximization of

satisfaction and minimizing of frustration; the purpose of its effects was to balance impulses promoting “the most valuable states of mind . . . those which involve the widest and most comprehensive co-ordination of activities and the least curtailment, conflict, starvation and restriction.” The poet was the most typical, noneccentric person who communicated his commonality rather than information.⁷⁸ One may note a discord between the quantitative, utilitarian notion of this maximization and the qualitative aesthetic one of proper balance and healthy attitudes, but in any case, Richards arrived at what David Daiches called a “psychological humanism.” Richards had made the reader’s physiological reaction the focus, and this was something new.⁷⁹

Richards’ interest in psychology, Gestalt and behaviorist, and the connection to appetite was taken up and developed by Burke immediately in *Counter-Statement*’s description of “form,” and developed further in *Permanence and Change*. Burke then tackled the link between the physical and the psychical in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Richards and Burke also shared the idea that poetry was a prototype for thinking, as well as the notion that the poet somehow represented a “norm.” Still, was it an absence of eccentricity that made for clear communication? When Burke broached this question, the answer was always “no.”

The destiny of poetic humanism

Eventually, “discontinuity” became a defense used even by the very groups whose credibility it originally challenged. The critic, Joseph Wood Krutch, noted in 1929 that science had gained preeminence over philosophy by way of its knack for producing wonderful technology and transforming human life. Science’s destructive impulse,

represented by Darwin's removal of man from the top of a preordained natural order or the dislocation of the earth from the center of the universe, had shown these earlier beliefs to be poetic fictions, "illusions." Krutch observed that some unnamed religious philosophers, desperate to preserve a tattered dignity for their point of view, now argued for an intellectual "discontinuity" – a disconnection between disciplines: a separate sphere for questions of the spirit or the brain. Naturalistic, positivistic thinkers and idealist ones both agreed to separate questions of fact and value. And philosophy, in order to retain respect as "rational" was pressed to become more like science. Finding itself on the ropes in the disciplines, a declining metaphysics had already begun retreating to a position of defensive impotence, now a "science of possibilities" rather than one of realities.⁸⁰ Krutch had considered himself and those of his own traditionally metaphysical, "poetic" view marooned in the modern "natural" universe; he concluded that science had crushed the poetic "illusion" of human importance. Still, he would hang on to his earlier values, preferring that "We should rather die as men rather than live as animals."⁸¹

Counter-Statement judged that Krutch had overstated the situation. Darwinism might have destroyed the ideology supporting tragic drama, but the tragic spirit was still alive and well, as evidenced by Krutch's own tragic critical attitude. In fact, beliefs about man's central role in the universe had never been essentially poetic or tragic, poets had made them so and presumably could make a different view poetic. Science had not destroyed poetry, according to Burke. "For if tragedy is a sense of man's intimate participation in processes beyond himself, we find that science has replaced the older

metaphysical structure with an historical structure that gives the individual man ample grounds to feel such participation.” At this point, Burke felt that the loss of a personal relationship to Providence was amply compensated by “a personal relationship to the slow, unwieldy movements of human society.” Burke asserted that Nietzsche had shown history had at least as much “tragic dignity” as theology, noting that Wordsworth had predicted that poets might bring “sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself.” Therefore, not to worry, the tragic attitude and the poetry it inspired would be with us for the duration.⁸²

Burke and Spengler

Oswald Spengler had argued to the contrary in his pessimistic *Decline of the West* (1918). That book had given Burke an early “jolt;” and he translated the introduction of the revised edition in 1924 for *Dial* readers. In *Permanence and Change*, he turned certain of Spengler’s stylistic habits on their head to serve antithetical purposes from the author’s. And, in the book after that, *Attitudes Towards History*, Burke, still grappling with Spengler, offered his own analogous explanation of cultural and social development, though with a very different ethic.⁸³ In *Counter-Statement*, he directly challenged Spengler’s claims that art was ineffectual since it was quarantined within a culture, an element of Spengler’s rejection of Enlightenment universalism.

Spengler had offered a metaphorical categorization of all cultural history into cycles – four seasons – and aligned his subsequent judgments as to the respective value of a society’s art. Spengler drew an invidious distinction between a pure, distinctive, vital, initiating “culture” and a complex, decadent, closing “civilization.” The latter was

cosmopolitan and disconnected from the soil; it was universal in its rationalism and humanism, attenuated and weak. More importantly, since civilizations were self-contained entities, there was insufficient continuity between them to allow for application of ideas from one to another. In a sense, we were all intellectual prisoners to the mystical metaphor, closed systems, organizing our cultures. Each civilization or society remained absolutely different from any other, except that it followed the pattern of development and deterioration Spengler believed *he* had somehow divined as inevitable.⁸⁴

Spengler asserted that the modern period had reached its own completion and decadence, manifested in the conquest of the mechanical over the organic. Though he agreed that his age was overly mechanistic, the early Burke would argue that this was not an inevitability, attitudes might be altered. Though attracted to Spengler's vast synthetic imagination, and his contemporary attempt to devise a thorough philosophy of history, the cosmopolitan Burke gave meticulous counter-arguments to sabotage the radical cultural subjectivity Spengler used to alienate one society absolutely from another.

For example, in Spengler's scheme, the color blue and perspective were not used by the ancient Greeks who were "corporeal" and interested in the present. Our contemporary ambitious, "Faustian" culture since it was interested in the future and past and therefore also in distance of space and time, therefore used blue and perspective. But why, asked Burke, should we see this as a radical difference? It seemed rather a similarity, since it asserted that blue symbolized "distance" to both cultures. How did Spengler justify drawing the line at cultural subjectivity, when he might have logically

extended this subjectivity to historical epochs? Then he might have found cross-cultural similarities of similar periods; for example, “spring” mentalities in two different cultures should be more similar than “winter” and “spring” in the same culture, thus challenging Spengler’s rigid homogeneity of national heritage.⁸⁵ Burke discerned no rational reason for Spengler’s “aesthetic defeatism,” and he ventured to justify modern art as, at the very least, as an expression of a unique *Zeitgeist* and interesting in that way.

Though Spengler’s historical determinism, unlike Marx’s, placed the economic and aesthetic on equal footing, his deterministic theory of historical seasons consigned the modern era to artistic failure since it was supposedly a scientific period. Burke asked, what measure could Spengler use to judge one period’s art inferior to another, given his historical periodization? “There is no criterion of comparative excellence in his scheme of the symbolic or representative. He can ask only that a work typify the characteristics of the era out of which it arises.”⁸⁶

Burke also grasped the fiercely reactionary and deterministic implications of Spengler’s metaphors, charging that the trope was value-laden and without philosophical justification. “Spengler’s whole conception of values contains his conclusions in advance. Which may, it is true, be the predicament of us all—but is more vicious in his case because he masks his personal choice as the verdict of all history.”⁸⁷ On the left were materialists and on the right, idealists. In a 1923 review of a work by the Hegelian idealist Giovanni Gentile, then Mussolini’s minister of education, he suggested Gentile was merely an optimistic version of Spengler:

The vaunted glory of his idealism was that it preserved the dignity of man by showing him as a free creative spirit, a creature of triumphant free will

who was continually mis-seeing the world in his own image. . . . one may legitimately question whether this is, after all, the highest imaginable type of freedom. It would be like envying a lunatic who thought he was king of the universe, and strutted about grandly with a feather duster tied to his coat. For here surely is the acme of idealistic freedom.”

And, in fact, this philosophy of history had now led to fascism: “the bleakest philosophy of determinism on record.”⁸⁸

***Counter-Statement* : historical aesthetics and the history of the modern**

Counter-Statement expressed Burke’s intention to run counter to his age and culture: “by wit, by fancy, by anathema, by versatility,” in order to prevent it from becoming “too assertively, too hopelessly itself,” and perpetuating its special errors.⁸⁹ Assuming an audience confused by the culture of modern industrial capitalism at a particularly dismal moment, he argued for a humane modern critical theory and a related politic. Here, Burke gave his own readings of the Symbolist movement and those he considered its representative practitioners; he also reviewed the social role of art in modern Western society. He offered both a political-aesthetic analysis and then a *modus operandi* for socially progressive critics. At the heart of it all, he debuted a new, modern theory of form.

The psychology of form: rhetoric and art

It was this theory of form that his contemporaries recognized as the signal original contribution of *Counter-Statement*. One reviewer noted its “revolutionary importance,” since it offered a principle that “brings a natural, not a dialectic, clarity into the field of esthetics.”⁹⁰ In his chapter, “Psychology and Form,” Burke explained that the psychology involved in drama is not that of the character in the scene, but rather that of

the audience. Their emotional attitudes helped to determine precisely what sort of cultural event the poem would be. Here was a startling shift in perspective from earlier criticism and an early anticipation of both reader-response criticism and the general rhetorical emphasis that came into its own forty years later. Similar to the pragmatists before him, context was central to meaning for Burke. What was useful would not be replaced but expanded; art and literature were “equipment for living.”⁹¹

He broke with the earlier Romantic view of the artist as a god or craftsman inventing characters whose purpose and meaning was solely dependent on their author’s intentions. He also departed from Eliot’s modernist view that held that those technical concerns accessible by expert criticism were the location of meaning, though he did spend a chapter detailing the specialized rhetorical forms. More “democratic” and naturalistic than earlier views was his openly acknowledged author communicating with active audience on mutual terms, using shared symbols, rather than with an aesthetic deity or a community of elites.

For Burke, “form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of an auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite,” though that satisfaction may require a temporary frustration. The emotional rise and fall of contrasting tones in Hamlet’s early speeches, which follow trumpets, put the audience on sensory alert for the dramatic action to follow. “If in a work of art, the poet says something . . . about a meeting, writes in such a way that we desire to observe that meeting, and then, if he places that meeting before us – that is form.” And in the example of Mark Anthony’s famous speech, “the value lies in the fact that his words are shaping the future of the audience’s desires,” not the historical

audience in ancient Rome, but Shakespeare's own, a point that might seem obvious today, but was quite surprising when it was written.⁹²

Burke went far beyond Richards in defining psychology and form in terms of each other. In this way, form was really a type of action; Burke replaced idealistic notions of mind and soul with a very present-minded sort of appeal to an audience that had a simultaneously physiological and emotional response.⁹³ Poets played on the physical, aural, and dramatic expectations of the auditor; Shakespeare worked his audience. Sultry, oppressive images would eventually make the reader desire to be provided with a literary fresh breeze, arriving in one or another symbol. "This is, of course, the real meaning of artistic felicity – an exaltation at the correctness of the procedure."⁹⁴ That poetry might continue to reach generations in different situations was due to our physiological similarities.

Burke also distinguished the psychology of information from the psychology of form. At that time, even the apprehension of form was considered an acquisition of information. He argued that while expression always conveys some information, it could not be the primary value of art since that could be done more effectively in other ways. To prove the distinction, Burke pointed out that the psychology of information relies for interest on its ability to evoke suspense or surprise and thus operates with diminishing returns upon subsequent readings. Yet we engage again and again with Hamlet's dialogue with Guildenstern: the value of information is in the new; that of form is in the "natural."⁹⁵

Eloquence

Therefore, “Truth in art is not the discovery of facts, not an addition to human knowledge in the scientific sense of the word.”⁹⁶ Yet in another way, the artist held a social power, since he might transform expectations and values, transformations that in modern mass society had obvious consequences. For Burke, “It is . . . the audience which dreams, while the artist oversees the conditions which determine this dream. He is the manipulator of blood, brains, heart, and bowels which, while we sleep, dictate the mould of our desires.”⁹⁷ (It is not the artist’s own dream, as was suggested by psychoanalytic criticism; the composer is not made sleepy by the lullaby.) The psychology of form replaced novelty with eloquence – a formal excellence. A result of craft, eloquence is the resonance of major and minor themes throughout a work, so that at almost any point, multiple readings, viewings or hearings, and investigation into its formal aspects will reveal a multifaceted unity.⁹⁸

Form, psychology, and eloquence were therefore identical for Burke. And so, “eloquence is no mere plaster added to a framework of more stable qualities,” it is the “end of art, and is thus its essence.”⁹⁹ And “Eloquence by our definition would not be situated in such rigid distinctions between ‘good taste’ and ‘bad taste’. . . . The artist shows respect for his subject, not by laying a wreath at its feet but by the fulness of his preoccupation with it.” This complexity required “such intensity and spontaneity of purpose as can arise only out of situations in life itself;” creativity was as biographical as it was technical.¹⁰⁰

Eloquence had its own special psychology and motivation. It was a consistency

of expressive concerns exerting their own discipline and satisfying the author as well as the audience: "The artist begins with his emotion, he translates this emotion into a mechanism for arousing emotion in others, and thus his interest in his own emotion permeates his interest in the treatment."¹⁰¹ Self-expression is not merely "utterance," it is directed by craft. For example, Van Wyck Brooks's famous psychoanalytic interpretation of Mark Twain had portrayed the adolescent Samuel Clemens, at the moment of his father's death, making a fateful promise to his mother to be "good" and sacrificing his artistic soul, a pattern of repression he then repeated with his wife.¹⁰² According to Brooks, Twain had actually wanted to be a more "serious" writer, his ambitions then thwarted by his conflicted promises to these women.

Burke's argued that Twain had actually adjusted his priorities during his career: "Mark Twain . . . transformed the bitterness that he *wanted* to utter, into the humor that he *could* evoke." This was a struggle between two kinds of self-expression, with Twain deciding to elicit "what he best could, rather than utter more and evoke less."¹⁰³ In a letter to Cowley, he remarked that it was "absurd to think, with Brooks, that Twain again and again *frustrated* his desire to express satire or tragedy, when the very persistence of his humor showed that he was obeying some inner drive, expressing some force, in choosing again and again to *evoke* humor."¹⁰⁴ Thus, Burke eschewed the romance that depicted the artist sacrificing his work for the sake of his family, as well as the primitive Freudianism that had a passive Twain at the mercy of neurotic guilt. He preferred instead to picture a forceful Twain working his talents for the sake of his life.¹⁰⁵

Eloquence consciously followed the patterns of the body. Biology, the

experience of natural forces, such as the seasons, and historical situations generated an audience's expectations. Authors might or might not intentionally meet these expectations in their creations of form or not, but such expectations would be present in their approaches. They would an author's situation or problem. Since an audience is not homogeneous even within a culture, especially in a pluralistic one, Burke's analysis stressed biological consistency as the basis for this common desire. Only someone as relentlessly intellectual as Burke could imagine the corporeal as a safe, simple yardstick to ground common sense.

A cultural history of art

Though Burke's theory of form now suggested that the poet's role was inherently a public one, in order to suggest a critical theory and related political "program," he needed to realistically assess the arts' position in modern society. Too often the modern poet did not really understand the public or vice versa, so Burke explained how this misunderstanding occurred. The industrial world produced leisure, education, and disposable wealth, encouraging the proliferation of art. This same culture of rationalized production and specialization was able to assimilate many artistic skills for further productive sophistication. But the fine arts held a secondary, dispensable position. Although the popular arts of advertising, entertainment, and design were becoming huge industries, with power of their own, the fine arts, especially modernist forms, held outsider status, a position encouraged at the time by its supporters and practitioners, according to Burke.

In “The Status of Art,” the chapter containing the aforementioned critique of Spengler, Burke charted the modern diminution of the status of the fine arts, beginning with the Enlightenment. Kant defined the aesthetic as “purposiveness without purpose,” and indicated the existence of a new “use” criterion. As this was during a period that had begun to stress the value of labor, its reputation was reduced. Art was becoming one of many commodities within the new economy. The Bohemian art-for-art’s-sake movements of the latter nineteenth century arose partially as conservators of aesthetic values per se, against these puritanical and practical values of usefulness and production. And the more abstract twentieth century work, the modern art pieces, whether Dadaistic, cubistic, atonal, or stream of consciousness, eschewed obvious narrative content, and were flamboyantly useless.¹⁰⁶ Since contemporary life was concerned with that which could be integrated within bureaucratic and technological systems, art was further alienated from public interest.

In the later nineteenth century, in order to protect novelists from prosecutions for indecency such as Flaubert’s, art was credited with “unmorality”[sic]. This was another push toward the realm of the abstruse and ineffectual. In reality, according to Burke, art and culture were hardly neutral and were busily promoting an actual “transvaluation of values,” sensed correctly by their opponents. The practical, efficient, optimistic principle – the bourgeois – was bumping up against a principle of inefficiency, curiosity, non-conformity and vacillation, and so on – the bohemian. Some artists therefore chose to offend, and an overt “bourgeois-Bohemian” conflict developed. The stylistic innovations of Symbolism – its associationism, emotionalism, and ellipsis, purposely neglected

explanatory connections. Since there was no corresponding critical theory to explain to the artist the underlying purpose of this method, and Burke seemed to believe artists needed theory, they assumed obscurity in modern art to be the essential element and emphasized it, wilfully antagonizing the ordinary reader and providing no maps.¹⁰⁷ In an age where a newly literate public was inundated with propagandistic art tailored to their comprehension and pleasure, fine artists specialized, producing “pure” art for an elect. Still, a powerful trickle down effect followed as derivative art pillaged the avant-garde.¹⁰⁸

Burke was one of the earliest critics to note that the first “modern” artists, the Symbolists and the Naturalist writers, rather than operating with values radically opposed to their society, were, in a sense, actually, “struggling to alter the moral code in keeping with the changes brought about by science and technology.” This was effected by the “extending of the beautiful into the realm of the previously repugnant.” So, in a sense they were accommodating the new order.¹⁰⁹

Still, artists served to reconcile individuals to change, industrial or otherwise, by forging a relationship with it, fractious as it might be. And they also distinguished and preserved the precious. He suggested that those scandalous artistic creations of the previous century, such as Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, were actually attacking the ethos of production from a conservative perspective. Baudelaire called himself a “sinner;” and “sin” as a concept was incongruent with contemporary values. “Baudelaire courts poverty, lamentation, sullenness, a discipline of internal strife . . . what could be more ‘conservative’ than this, what more unlike the young Californian with his benign circle of culture, progress, and prosperity, or his football conception of discipline?”¹¹⁰

Radical aesthetes through their innovations, created compasses for the new environment, but they too were attached to elements from the past. But some audiences only saw the destruction of traditional aesthetic sensibilities and perceived only the hammer taken to carefully crafted, but now teetering mores.

Even more than aestheticism, Burke believed that Freudian and Marxian “causation” theories were responsible for most seriously damaging the modern understanding of art’s consequence. The Freudian interpreters defined artistic expression as a result or by-product of frustrated wishes, analogous to dreams. Dreams were subjective, and private, while “all competent art is a means of communication,” and essentially public, “however vague the artist’s conception of his audience may be.”¹¹¹ Though highly cultured himself, Freud had reinforced a puritanical attitude toward art as a second-best substitute, when he depicted DaVinci as neurotically compensating for his homosexuality with his artistic achievements. More importantly, his views narrowed the significance of art to the purely personal, and cultural history to a private history, measured by the ahistorical template of an archetypal family drama. Burke drily observed: “A man may become aesthetically entangled because of some sexual difficulty – but he may as truly become sexually entangled because of some aesthetic difficulty.” He proposed that “many a prowler would sacrifice his night if he could but write a good paragraph by doing so.”¹¹²

Artists do not come by default. Beethoven’s bungled social life was not the stimulus to his talent. He spent his mental and emotional energy on music and so did not become adept in society; Nietzsche’s peculiarly intense and negative insights were his

strength, not a cover for a different weakness. The artist was often pictured as hobbled, a misfit, and as a Romantic representation of the subjective self, yet Burke noted that art as compensation for failure in another sphere might go both ways: “To every poet who became a poet after a failure in business, there are at least a hundred business men who became business men after failure in poetry.”¹¹³ Furthermore, as for the charge of “escape,” commonly leveled against artists by those more practical types, psychoanalytic or revolutionary, Burke observed that on the contrary, artists used trauma as subject matter and were therefore more ready to embrace it than men of action who had no “professional interest” in suffering.¹¹⁴

Marx had asserted, “It is not the consciousness of men that specifies their being, but on the contrary, their social being that specifies their consciousness.”¹¹⁵ Burke read this as another illogical causal theory with the wrong sort of dependence on history. Though he readily acknowledged that art changed along with society, he advised, “it is not very sound dialectic to assume that, because two things change concomitantly, one can be called exclusively the cause of the other.” Turning away from the materialistic view, he challenged, “if mere concurrence can prove causation, why could not an opponent assume from the same facts that the changes in art and ideas caused the changes in economic conditions? We know, for example, that the feminist ‘aesthetic’ served as preparation for the enfranchisement of women: here is an obvious example of an attitude’s affecting a change in social structure.” History might be argued materialistically or idealistically with equal logic.¹¹⁶

Certainly, the difference between the author’s era and the reader’s might obscure

or even block a complete understanding of a literary work. Swift's novels required extensive annotation in order to make sense of the references. But Burke insisted that "this is always true in some degree," since "in the last analysis, any reader surrounds each word and each act with a *unique* set of his own previous experiences." Still, what was the ultimate significance of this difference for our opinions anyway? Is it an anachronism for us today to elevate Melville's reputation from the lower one he enjoyed, or actually suffered, during his life? While there exists no perfect communication between ages or people, Burke suggested that there remained this essential "margin of overlap" in the author and reader's experiences, which made human communication possible. This was due, "if to nothing else, to the fact that man's biologic functions are uniform."¹¹⁷

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke already offered the germ of his theory of "symbolic action," a view that certainly owed something to both James's and Dewey's pragmatism. He said: "In one sense, art or ideas do 'reflect' a situation, since they are a way of dealing with a situation. When a man solves a problem, however, we should hardly say that his solution was 'caused' by the problem to be solved. The problem may limit the *nature* of his solution, but the problem can remain unsolved forever unless he *adds* to the solution." Though rejecting material or mechanical determinism, Burke still refused to be classed with the traditionalists. "Our argument is not intended as a plea for free will," he insisted.¹¹⁸

Though Burke was willing to endorse determinism conditionally, he saw economic causation as only one among a matrix of causal factors, comprising what he

called in general terms, “the nature of things.” In fact, “Drive the logic of economic causation to the point where economic determinism becomes cosmic determinism, and the detractors of art are necessarily silenced, for their own detractions become but the output of the universal mill, their preferences mere personal choices devoid of ‘absolute’ sanction.” The logic behind economic determinism actually reduced the importance of the economic argument.¹¹⁹

In sum, according to Burke, artists cannot be created by their debilities, nor by history, though, undoubtably, these affect the character of art. Once one allows art as poetry to stand in for life and language as Burke would do, one can extend this to the central principle that Burke offered to counter the determinism of so many modern interpretive systems: we do not live by default, since life is too difficult, not to mention, engaging.¹²⁰ His theory was “an attempt to schematize many critical concepts which have been more or less in the air since psychology took the place of metaphysics as a foundation for aesthetic theory.” With his deft, naturalistic analysis of form, Burke delivered art into the foreground of human action.¹²¹

The body and role of the symbol: essentialism

“Crescendo, contrast, comparison, repetition, disclosure, reversal, expansion, contraction and so on,” can appear in a variety of shapes, yet our response is due to a capacity for appreciation that Burke suggested was “inherent in the very germ-plasm of man,” i.e., innate. Referring to Plato, he observed that those forms described above were mixtures of the basic ones of “unity” and “diversity.” Burke allied with the Platonic

position that the sensory world of appearance was a manifestation of a divine archetypal order.¹²² He opposed the views of the medieval scholastic nominalists, and many later forms of nominalism, which, in contrast, claimed that only particulars existed; the universals were abstracted from collections of those particulars and mere linguistic conveniences mistakenly reified as metaphysical reality. Though he made no claims for their external independent reality, he believed that there were universal mental forms, which is why Burke has been called a structuralist.¹²³ “For we need but take his [Plato’s] universals out of heaven and situate them in the human mind (a process begun by Kant), making them not metaphysical but psychological,” for them to hold.¹²⁴ “There need not be a ‘divine contrast’ in heaven for me to appreciate a contrast; but there *must be* in my mind a sense of contrast.” And he further suggested that “a specific metaphor, exemplified by specific images is an ‘individuation.’ . . . In this sense we would restore the Platonic relationship between form and matter.”¹²⁵

Anthropology had offered empirical evidence demonstrating apparent cycles to culture that yet did not change in “essence,” though they were particularized variously.¹²⁶ Our continuous expressions were “mockery, despair, grimness, sang-froid, wonder, lamentation, melancholy, hatred, hopefulness, bashfulness, relief, boredom, dislike,” and were called “universal” since “all men under certain conditions and not in mental or physical collapse, are capable of experiencing them.”¹²⁷ Burke now wanted to salvage Platonic metaphysics as a structure without appearing too hopelessly naive about its particulars or accepting a discredited idealism. Making the Platonic Forms mental constructs seemed an obvious solution. In this early analysis, Burke merely postponed

explaining his metaphysics, shunting it onto the shoulders of psychology, which itself needed to be justified and grounded.

These innate forms were made real in individuals. In the case of the poet, he or she had a mood or emotion arising from experience; this was externalized by a selection of symbolic forms in the same way a dreamer finds symbols representing his discomfort or pleasure. Yet as a conscious creation, the form held its own demands. For Burke the symbol was a “principle of logical guidance,” an organizing principle within expression that made for its repetition in “changing details which preserve as a constant the original ratio.”¹²⁸ He explained, “The originating emotion makes for emotional consistency within the parts: the symbol demands a logical consistency within this emotional consistency. In a horror story about a murder . . . the emotion of horror will suggest details associated with horror, but the specific symbol of murder will limit the details of horror to those adapted to murder.”¹²⁹ Technique made it work. Thus, *Counter-Statement* emphasized that symbols were universal with an inner logic, and form was public and rhetorical. The latter claim was the more startling one.

Program: “When in Rome do as the Greeks—When in Europe do as the Chinese.”

Though art was “eternal,” approaches were keyed to varied situations and required different emphases. Burke had offered a critical theory that corresponded to Symbolist methodology, now he would present its political complement.¹³⁰ Prior to the invention of mustard gas, war might have been described as heroic; now it resembled mosquito extermination. The self-reliance and individualism of pioneer life were suited to laissez-

faire governance, yet that was clearly poorly suited to the present dislocations of the industrial state. Neither true nor false; propriety was to be judged by the health of the society, now evidently failing. What attitude should one then promote? Burke took an early foray into publicly advising artists how to write propaganda.

Burke saw his period's ideological conflict as between the agrarian and industrial ethos. The artist was the middleman, embodying "a mixture of retentions and innovations," in order to humanize historical change, in this case, industrialism. He or she ought to stress emotions that favored "acceptance" of grand cultural change by developing terminology that engaged the new, if only with hostility. Burke's meaning of acceptance was not the obvious one; it was not an acquiescence but rather an openness to engagement. One was in the present, there was no way to withdraw.¹³¹

The modern artist invariably found himself at odds with the lingering conservatism of various segments of society. Though they may have functioned within it, society's members had not yet recognized the principles underlying the transformation of the culture, and held a traditional work ethic; the industrialists championed toil despite making seasonal layoffs. The vagaries of industrial production cycles, radically different from the annual ones of agriculture, called for value shifts to accommodate a new "leisure."¹³² To locate the appropriate attitudes, artists might take a page from the last century and resurrect the "bourgeois-Bohemian" distinction. The bourgeois was dogmatic, the bohemian, negative. The end was to prevent the practical from attaining complete ubiquity. Burke had no worries that aesthetic skepticism would ever triumph: "We may depend upon it that even a world rigorously schooled in doubt will be

dogmatical enough.”¹³³

So much for the general attitude; what was the concomitant general political form?

Burke, in 1931, found the political analogies to be those of “fascism” and “democracy.” By fascism, Burke meant the centralization of production, distribution, and general decision making that countered “democracy” – a democracy that was the decentered “bungling” clash of party interests, and “a system of checks and counterchecks.” The fascists optimistically and irrationally presumed that the central power would be “benevolent and capable.” Burke drily remarked, “Why they make such cautious plans, after this beginning, I do not know—for once you postulate human virtue as the foundation of a system, you are a dullard indeed if you can’t make up a thousand schemes for a good society.”¹³⁴ Sounding very like James Madison in *The Federalist*, he continued, “a society is sound only if it can prosper on its vices, since virtues are by very definition rare and exceptional.”¹³⁵ Since the aesthetic view opposed central authority, it should favor this “organized distrust” of democracy.¹³⁶ Burke advocated a systemic method for hobbling the ubiquity of public opinion, though unlike Madison, he wished to change men’s minds ideologically, not merely channel their behavior practically. “When a system becomes so complex that it requires a high degree of perfection for its survival, when it can’t provide a civilized living by shoddy, unintelligent, lethargic methods, then mankind had better change the system for a system which can provide a civilized living by shoddy, unintelligent, lethargic methods.”¹³⁷

The bohemian diversionary tactics would “discourage industry.” To avoid the misery and economic instability that occurred under such discouragement, its wealth must

be redistributed by nationalization, income and inheritance taxes, and the “dole,” allowing workers to continue to buy during the slack seasons – the plan was a cartoon sketch of the modern welfare state.¹³⁸

To maintain morale during this necessary leisure, an ethic other than that of economic ambition was needed.¹³⁹ Though one group was modern, the other premodern, radicals should band with the conservative agrarians despite their cultural differences. The artist “will *strive assiduously* to fit the world for leisure,” in his or her inefficient way. Thus, while everyone wanted to solve the Depression by replacing jobs, Burke suggested artists might substitute new attitudes toward unemployment instead.¹⁴⁰

Though the theory of form *Counter-Statement* offered was in many cases well-received, it was inevitable that Burke would take some heat for his sketchy, ironic political program. No one noted at the time that it was a restatement of certain liberal principles with an aesthetic sidecar, and liberalism had not avoided the original economic mess and quite reasonably might be blamed for it. He received a critical review from the zealous Granville Hicks, editor at the procommunist *New Masses*, who, focusing only on the “Program,” called the book’s political approach “simplistic,” asserting that Burke’s concern with technique exposed him as interested in it alone.¹⁴¹ Joshua Kunitz in *The New Republic* was more judicious, yet suggested Burke’s political program was an “innocuous and petty nihilism,” since it argued the writer might sabotage capitalism by merely portraying the human elements contrary to its values and regimentation, as opposed to something more forthrightly political.¹⁴² Burke now found himself grouped with writers who indulged in a “leisure class dilettantism.”¹⁴³

Summary: Burke's modernism

Burke's version of modernism was both his aesthetic answer to the technological and the assertion of its greater suitability given the general context. The use criteria denigrated the aesthetic by definition, as Dewey had found when he struggled with only partial success to find a meaningful place for it within his own pragmatic modernistic scheme.

By the latter nineteen-twenties, Dewey was now worrying over an "eclipse of the public," a public unprepared for the politics generated by modernity and withdrawn from public life.¹⁴⁴ Burke actually carried pragmatic ideas a step further, insisting that the public was very present for those with eyes to see it, even in the creation of aesthetic meaning. Politics might be found here too, though that was a hard sell. Burke's centering form within the rhetorical and placing the rhetorical in human nature and biology, were early statements of two central principles and the start of a truly modern critical theory. Burke now began to put together elements for a modern aesthetic that would also include a psychology, ethics, and politics. He grounded it in actual literary history as well. Once Burke placed form and forms in relation to contexts and to audience psychology, and to rhetoric, as he did in this book, he generated the germ of a new philosophy of history. The century's intellectual history would bear out its logic with the development of post-structuralism and postmodernism. His view implied an elevation of symbolic association over syllogistic reasoning, and a challenge to traditional notions of causality and thus temporality.

Burke had also developed his brand of philosophic "realism" in his quasi-Platonic

psychology, and his reciprocal theory of form, to counter what he saw as the too naive idealism of the genteel tradition that preceded him, as well as the excesses of materialistic naturalism. He was the first modern critic to stress that the purpose of the literary or dramatic work is rhetorical, in that all language is rhetorical and persuasive. *Counter-Statement* ends by asserting that the effects artists strive to attain are inevitably natural, whether they obey conventional forms or unconventional ones, because the desire to evoke, to communicate, is ultimately natural, whatever the rhetorical craft employed. And, Burke suggested, if the artist's tradition does not yet offer what is needed, one "may be justified in violating these expectancies . . . on the chance that other men may join him and by their convergence make such procedures the 'norm.'"¹⁴⁵ Burke's ideal use for art gives a picture of the culture absorbing and normalizing aesthetic innovation as part of nonviolent historical transformation; the purpose of the artist's "interference," and "disintegration," was the graceful, conscious move from present to future.

Burke kept faith with the aesthetic developments that had formed him during the twenties. *Counter-Statement* is as close to a sustained explanation of his own aesthetic modernism as *Towards a Better Life* is its example. The Depression, and the perceived need for social revision, quickly turned writers from modern abstract experimentation towards realism again, since realism seemed well-suited to persuasion and propaganda. Interest in the proletarian experience grew: Mike Gold advertised for stories of and by waitresses, longshoremen, and lumberjacks for the *New Masses*; and Cowley, now the influential book editor at *The New Republic*, converted to Marxist criticism.¹⁴⁶ Given the social situation and the growing national esprit de corps, as well as the demand for social

realism and proletarian fiction, more and more writers joined the long, unwieldy phalanx on the left, including Burke. Burke would soon need to battle for his aesthetic attitude to an audience he hardly expected and to a degree he never anticipated.

1. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 103.
2. Ibid.
2. Ibid., 119.
3. Ibid, 192-193.
5. This and other examples of “discontinuity” are to be found throughout William R. Everdell’s lively *The First Moderns*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press paperback, 1998).
6. T. E. Hulme quoted in Joseph Wood Krutch’s *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harvest, 1956), 138.
7. Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 4, 6, 11-31, 220-221.
8. William Everdell, in his *First Moderns*, argues that it was.
9. Avrum Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 30, 32, 54-56; Everdell, *First Moderns*, 43-45; Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 121-127, 133-134, 145, 211, 212, 215; H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (1959, Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1979), 398-401.
10. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (1935; Harper Torchbook, 1964), 338, 340-358; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 105-107, 112-113, 114-125, 341; Everdell, *First Moderns*, 185-86, 203, 291.
11. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, introd. by Irving Edman (New York: Random House, 1944), 25-27, 29-30, 95-98, 149-150, 154, 183-186, 209, 277-278, 289, 294-295.
12. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T.L. Hulme, (London: 1913); Henri Bergson’s *Time and Free Will* quoted in David Shi, *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 279-281; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 112.
13. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 9, 12-14, 26-27, 30, 58, 117-118, 204, 252, 272-273, 288, 297, 335-336, 401, and *passim*.
14. Robert M. Crunden, *Body and Soul: The Making of American Modernism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 50, 54-55; Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday Press, 1995), 171, 441; Shi, *Facing Facts*, 279-282.

15. Bertrand Russell, Review of J. Alexander Gunn's *French Philosophical Development since Comte*, in *The Dial* 74 (January 1923): 91.
16. For a brief synopsis of these key issues in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, see Peter Gay's *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 106-109, 114-117, 119.
17. Carl Becker quoted by Malcolm Cowley in *Books that Changed Our Minds*, ed. Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith (New York: The Kelmscott Editions 1939), 6.
18. Lionel Trilling "Freud and Literature," *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950; New York: Anchor Books ed. 1953), 37; Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (1959; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 34, 52, 77-80, 107-108, 335.
19. Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 150.
20. Richard King, *Party of Eros: Radical Social Thought and the Realm of Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 37-38, 43-46; Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 5-7.
21. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 21.
22. Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 50-53.
23. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, general ed., (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 750, 752. For Georgi Plekhanov's discussion of Pushkin, see Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn, Edward Shils, eds., *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, vol. 3, *Art and Social Life*. (London: Chadwyck and Healey, 1978), 9.
24. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1980), 5.
25. Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 71; Everdell, *First Moderns*, 96; A.G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France, 1885-1895* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 21-22.
26. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, 5.
27. Arthur Rimbaud to George Izambard, May 13, 1871. Reprinted in *Illuminations*, trans. Louise Varès (New York: New Directions, 1957), xxvii.
28. Everdell, *First Moderns*, 96.
29. Rimbaud to Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871. *Illuminations*, xxx.

30. Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 239.

31. Everdell, *First Moderns*, 96. Charles Baudelaire quoted by Louise Varèse, in *Illuminations*, xxi.

32. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 6-9.

33. *Ibid.*, 12.

34. Rémy de Gourmont, "The Dissociation of Ideas" in *Selected Writings*, trans., ed. and with introd. by Glenn S. Burne (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 11-45.

35. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 22-23.

36. The principle of psychological association was a commonplace of the radical Enlightenment. Spinoza, the Baron d'Holbach, Etienne Condillac, and then David Hume all targeted the Aristotelian scheme, which asserted an inner causal necessity and relationship between events that was then perceived rationally. For associationists, there was no true logical necessity connecting events in the physical world, only the experience of sequence that caused a mental connection. John Stuart Mill also held to an associationist psychology in the nineteenth century. To one degree or another, these thinkers all suggested that men imposed human logic on events.

37. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 23.

38. *Ibid.*, 19.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 103-4.

41. *Ibid.*, 105.

42. *Selected Correspondence*, 92.

43. Burke to Thayer, quoted in Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 99.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Burke, *Towards a Better Life*, xx.

46. Burke to Munson, in Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 101.

47. *Selected Correspondence*, 132. Burke's approach in his story "My Dear Mrs. Wurtelbach" led Cowley to note some affinities with Dadaism. Dadaists were of many varieties, but they generally celebrated the ready-made, the mechanical, the kinetic, the

random, and anarchically flouted system and rules for form, preferring surprise and new perspectives as their effects. As mentioned previously, Burke found Dadaists frustrating in their disregard for clarity. Jack Selzer, who has described Burke's Greenwich Village years in detail, reports that Burke convinced Gorham Munson to move his magazine, *Secession* away from Dada. Yet to Cowley he also announced, "YET AT THE SAME TIME I ADMIT THAT IF ANYONE OF US DOES ANYTHING OF LASTING IMPORT, IT WILL BE DONE WITH THE SAME EQUIPMENT WHICH THE DADAISTS ARE USING [Burke's emphasis]."

48. Burke, *Towards a Better Life*, xii.

49. *Selected Correspondence*, 189.

50. Rueckert's "A Field Guide to Kenneth Burke" in *Extensions of the Burkean System*, ed. James W. Chesebro (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 14.

51. *Selected Correspondence*, 195.

52. Isidor Schneider in *Critical Responses*, 37.

53. Malcolm Cowley, *Ibid.*, 31.

54. Robert Cantwell, *Ibid.*, 34.

55. Denis Donoghue, *Ibid.*, 482, 480.

56. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 213.

57. *Selected Correspondence*, 67.

58. *Selected Correspondence*, 99.

59. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 3-11.

60. *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

61. *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

62. Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 157-158.

63. T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: A Christian Society and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 293-294, 296. In this essay, Eliot also stated: "The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic; and the vestige of

manners may be left to a few survivors of a vanishing class who, their sensibility untrained by either religion or art and their minds unfurnished with the material for witty conversation, will have no context in their lives to give value to their behavior. And deterioration on the higher levels is a matter of concern, . . . to the whole people," 294.

64. Burke, *Counter-Statement* 197-198, n4.

65. *Ibid.*, 197.

66. Burke, "Exceptional Improvisation," reprinted in *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 422.

67. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, intro. by Hugh Kenner (1931; New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1991), 260-64.

68. *Ibid.*, 269-283.

69. *Ibid.*, 293-94.

70. *Ibid.*, 297.

71. Douglass, *Terrible Honesty*, 282-283, 288; Crunden, *Body and Soul*, 33, 124.

72. Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, 296.

73. *Ibid.*, 297.

74. In answering Cowley's 1938 survey, Burke credited C. K. Ogden's *Library of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Method* as an important antidote to Spengler's influence in his own thinking: *Books that Changed Our Minds*, 10.

75. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1928), 11-12, 14, 16-17, 84-91, 116, 146, 231.

76. Richards, *Principles*, 278. *Books that Changed Our Minds*, 167.

77. Richards, *Principles*, 59, 45.

78. *Ibid.*, 26, 191, 194, 196; 197; 281, 234-235.

79. *Books that Changed Our Minds*, 167.

80. Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, 154.

81. *Ibid.*, 169; quoted by Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 201.

82. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 200; Wordsworth quoted by Burke, 202.

83. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History* (1937; 1959; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Unless otherwise noted, all references will be to the third edition.
84. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, 1926-28).
85. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 86-87.
86. *Ibid.*, 88.
87. *Ibid.*, 9.
88. Kenneth Burke, "Realism and Idealism," a review of Giovanni Gentile's *The Reform of Education in The Dial* 74, (January 1923), 99.
89. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 115, 105.
90. Isidor Schneider in *Critical Responses*, 22.
91. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 31; *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 293.
92. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 31, 33.
93. *Ibid.*, 31.
94. *Ibid.*, 37.
95. We should also take Burke's critique of art as information as a caution for interpreting what he means by "symbolic action." It is easily read as merely answering the New Critics' elitism with a naturalistic historicism: a placement of the piece in the real world, via its political relevance or some biographical data. But given a notion of art and form that is so formal and universal, this cannot be entirely apt. Burke is also quite antinaturalistic, displaying his early connection with and affection for the Symbolist movement as exemplified by Baudelaire and Laforgue.
96. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 42.
97. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
98. *Ibid.*, 42.
99. *Ibid.*, 41.
100. *Ibid.*, 170.
101. *Ibid.*, 55.

102. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1920). Brooks later retracted some of his argument in his second edition, which came out a year after *Counter-Statement*.

103. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 53.

104. *Selected Correspondence*, 171.

105. In the following year, the historian and critic Bernard DeVoto published *Mark Twain's America* (Boston: Little Brown, & Co., 1932), savaging Brook's thesis and providing some historical evidence against his interpretation.

106. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 64-65.

107. *Ibid.*, 68-69.

108. *Ibid.*, 71.

109. *Ibid.*, 67.

110. *Ibid.*

111. *Ibid.*, 73.

112. *Ibid.*, 75.

113. *Ibid.*, 73.

114. *Ibid.*, 74-75.

115. Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*," in *Marx, Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 159-60.

116. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 80.

117. *Ibid.*, 78.

118. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 81.

119. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 80-81.

120. In his own *Art as Experience*, a few years later, Dewey would also try to naturalize the aesthetic as part of a continuity of human experience, calling for situating artworks within their historical and social contexts. He also suggested that aesthetic experience was intuitive, animistic and religious, neither obviously rational nor overtly useful except

in that it improved the quality of life by integrating the physical and the mental; but he did not explain how art transformed our thinking, since he believed that was the role of science. See *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. and intro., John McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press paperback, 1981), 526-40, 544-53.

121. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, ix.

122. *Ibid.*, 143.

123. See Frank Lentriccia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 67. Herbert Gusfield argues against characterizing Burke as a structuralist in his introduction to *On Symbols and Society: Kenneth Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989), 17.

124. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 48.

125. *Ibid.*, 46-47.

126. *Ibid.*, 48.

127. *Ibid.*, 149

128. *Ibid.*, 60.

129. *Ibid.*, 61.

130. *Ibid.*, 113.

131. *Ibid.*, 108.

132. *Ibid.*, 109-110.

133. *Ibid.*, 111-113.

134. Though Mussolini had Italy, Hitler had not yet taken control of Germany. Burke's view of fascism was of course limited by his place in history. His later books would show greater sophistication.

135. To observe some notable similarities, see Madison on checks and balances, philosopher kings, public opinion and faction, and organized distrust, *Federalist*, numbers 10, 49, 51, and 55, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, edited and with an introduction by Garry Wills (New York: Bantam, 1988). One fundamental difference that needs noting is that Madison was defending a republic as a limitation on democratic excesses and the troubles of faction, a position Burke partly shares in his intention to hobble the ubiquity of public opinion. Yet Burke, with some inaccuracy, refers to this without qualification, as a "democratic" method. One might

reasonably argue that democracy can check and preserve itself with its own diversity of opinion and fragmentation of power, but then this would need a clearer argument than Burke gives here.

136. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 114.

137. *Ibid.*, 120.

138. *Ibid.*, 115-116.

139. What Burke did see, most likely due to his friendship with the Southern Agrarian Allen Tate, was that agrarianism as a philosophy was aligned with antiindustrial radicalism. What he did not see was that there was a less than certain historical basis for this philosophical opposition, since though the methods of farming were in many ways quite different from those of industry, they were not absolutely different, especially as the purpose was profit, whether made or not. Tate was positive towards Burke's recommendation of this alliance, yet he severely criticized Burke's concern with readers' reactions and with Burke's assertion of a rhetorical motive in literature and argued for the idealistic views that would soon inform the New Criticism; see Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 155 -158.

140. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 118.

141. Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U. S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 157; Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 155. Hicks turned against the Party by the end of the decade and later denounced some former colleagues to the HUAC. Josephson, *Infidel*, 359-360.

142. Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 289.

143. C. Hartley Grattan, quoted in Ann Lawren George, "Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*: Rhetoric and Culture" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 101. Originally in *The Forum* (November 1932), 285-86. As well as a careful reading of *Permanence and Change*, George's dissertation contains a lucid discussion of "Auscultation, Creation and Revision" as cultural criticism.

144. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press, 1991), 110-142.

145. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 212.

146. Daniel Aaron *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*, with a new preface by Alan Wald (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 304.

CHAPTER 3

Perplexities of the Didactic: Burke and Propaganda, 1930-1935

This eternal art will have its functions since poets are citizens. Poetry will no longer accompany action but will lead it.

Arthur Rimbaud (1871)

The move from America's present to future had not proved to be as graceful as one might have hoped. Though Burke, like other creative minds of the teens and twenties, was ready to encourage forms of mental "disintegration," as a liberation from failing perspectives, even his earliest work shows that he worried over a "sound structure" that would provide a basis for cultural, psychological, and social integration. Once the economy broke apart, what that sound structure should be became a matter of contention calling up recruits to the various sides.

Though Burke always leaned leftward and did not expect the economy to heal itself, he had no sense of how intransigent the Depression would actually be. A serious recession had occurred in 1920, but it lasted less than two years. The Great Depression's continuity and totality despite various national efforts, made it seem quite possible that the system really was collapsing. Burke, like others believed it and advocated a leftist program. Burke would pay for his brand of fellow-traveling both in the world of literary and academic politics, both in the thirties and later.

This chapter will examine Burke's writings on propaganda and political subjects for the left, and the constant, if not always adroit, independence of the ideas he developed on its behalf. Burke would argue for "boring from within" American culture and values, instead of trying to completely overturn them from without; he found himself boring from within to change the left as well. Burke's interest in propaganda grew naturally from his concerns both with rhetorical form and with the historical situation in which he and other writers found themselves. It linked him to previous philosophers not the least, Plato, who in *The Republic* so famously chastised the poets of his own time for miseducating the public.

Collapse

The fall had been fast and the impact quite painful. The Depression's grim effects are common historical knowledge. Still, as the years take us further away from it and it becomes easier to forget how in how many ways it created us, we might want to think back on it before considering our characters' actions within that context. It is impossible to understand the appeal of the Communist Party for so many intellectuals and artists, without keeping the Depression in view.

Though less than three percent of Americans owned securities in 1929, the Crash snapped up the shades on more than one nasty weakness in the American economy, not just Wall Street's.¹ By 1932, unemployment was guesstimated at twenty-five percent nationally, with clearly much higher concentrations in some areas and among some ethnic groups.² The gross national product had declined twenty-five percent from its

pre-Crash level and farm income declined sixty percent in those three years.³ During the decade, suicides rose noticeably in the United States.⁴ The problems of modernity and industrialization now seemed overwhelming, yet the antique, agricultural portions of the economy had either vanished or were in even worse condition than the industrial ones. The advanced European economies, whether due to their ties to the United States or independent of it also suffered a collapse in 1931.⁵

Initially, much of the business community maintained a faith that Burke thought blind: “prosperity followed depression before, therefore it will follow again,” and conservatives waited for the economy to adjust itself.⁶ The writer on economics, Stuart Chase, suggested that this policy had the advantage in that “it obviates thought.”⁷ Hoover’s stabs at public spending programs fell flat, constrained as they were by the reigning economic faith, which stressed balanced budgets, and the President’s personal appeals to business for cooperation in specific instances frequently went unheeded. Grave errors in political judgment, such as the military routing of the veteran’s Bonus Army that marched on Washington, demanding an early payment of their bonuses, made the Hoover administration appear both feeble and cruel.⁸

Though it was understood that depressions spiraled when unemployed people could no longer purchase manufactured goods, if orders were down, workers were out. In 1932, the darkest year, Henry Ford, who had successfully kept unions out of his shop, dismissed over three-quarters of the company’s workers, in a town where his was the major industry. That year, a corporate economist wrote to Washington that “the outstanding feature of this great depression is that the economic order developed since

the Reformation and the Great Society developed since the Fall of the Roman Empire have come to be threatened, not by the destructive impact of external or natural forces, but by a spontaneous disintegration from within, because of an incipient failure of collective will and political wisdom, and because of a lack of sound ideology on the part of the ruling classes and of the leaders. Now the economic order . . . is reverting to . . . feudalism and barter.”⁹ The Depression created an environment where expectations for one’s future could hardly sink fast enough to match reality. Later, Matthew Josephson put it bluntly: “In those days if you lost a job, it was forever.”¹⁰

Enraged farmers were dumping their almost worthless produce publicly. Bank failures accelerated. Private guards and police were firing into demonstrations killing strikers. Depositors took their cash from the banks, and everyone cut their spending either by necessity, in anticipation of necessity, or from a sense of propriety. Roosevelt’s attempts at alternative solutions, such as the voluntary schemes that began the New Deal, were fraught with administrative difficulties and often failed. And in 1934, Roosevelt personally interceded to prevent the auto industry from forming unions independent of management control.¹¹

Even the tentative moves Roosevelt made stirred virulent opposition, such as the aggressive attacks of the American Liberty League, sponsored by the Du Ponts. Then, Supreme Court decisions against the already hobbled National Recovery Administration forestalled options for Washington to continue to use the Constitution’s commerce clause to direct a recovery, exasperating the President to the point where he hatched his ill-starred Court-packing scheme.

FDR was just one frustrated citizen. Of 21,000 clergymen who answered a questionnaire in 1934 that included a question on whether capitalism or a “cooperative commonwealth” was more consistent with the teachings of Jesus, only five percent chose capitalism and over twenty-five declared themselves for socialism directly. Another alternative to traditional capitalism was fascism, already ensconced in Italy, rising rapidly in Germany and with significant sympathetic parties or figures throughout the European nations, Great Britain, and the United States. The question was not whether capitalism would end, but when, and what would replace it.¹²

Though Burke had moments when he feared poverty, and thought he might have to sell pieces of his land, he seems to have been well-prepared for the catastrophe. The farm was paid for, he had a large garden and remarkable skill with it; he had dammed a stream on his property and created a pond now thriving with fish. The money he made with his writing seemed sufficient to get by. In fact, he observed in the summer of 1931, that things were rather jolly at the farm since visitors came frequently on weekends to enjoy the tennis court he had built, the wine he made, and the continuous conversation. Also, this was probably the period during which he and Libbie were developing their complex relationship, though they may not have been aware of it. During the weekdays he was very busy with *Counter-Statement* and *Towards a Better Life*. But within the next year and a half, with the collapse of his marriage to Lily and the failure of his novel, Burke suffered a near mental collapse. When another large manuscript was rejected by a previously friendly editor, this usually ebullient personality found himself uncharacteristically discouraged.¹³

The shared anxiety and pressure of the Depression also created an audience with specific interests and concerns, and an excitement over potential solutions. Marx's predictions of pauperization for the working classes and the collapse of the petit-bourgeoisie, i.e., due to escalating depressions under capitalism appeared quite apt, especially as he had envisioned England and America might not need revolution to turn to socialism. Thus, those who favored violent revolution and those who didn't might still consider themselves Marxists. Almost no plan was so eccentric that it couldn't get a serious hearing from quite reasonable persons, and novel economic schemes, far odder and less researched than any Marx had suggested, abounded.¹⁴

With people now taking to the roads and sleeping in the streets, and newspapers and newsreels publicizing it, interest increased in interpretative schemes, and large numbers of impassioned writers expanded the growing community of the literary left. Many artists, having felt peripheral to American politics previously, and continually reinforced in their pessimistic opinions of capitalism by events, now tried to supply an appropriate literature.¹⁵ Though the left-wing magazines had been in partial eclipse, *The New Masses* had been resurrected in the spring of 1926, and Michael Gold, Joshua Kunitz, and Matthew Josephson were only three of the many writers who had visited the Soviet Union, and were now prepared to extol its relative virtues. While in the United States, lynchings and bloody strikes grew more frequent, and the signs of despair and neglect more pervasive, stories and pictures of an enthusiastic, and energetic Russian people making almost inconceivable economic and social strides appeared in the press.¹⁶ At the same time, the fascist movements in Italy and Germany, and especially the

spreading Nazi terror, appeared as immediate threats to anyone with a concern for liberty and justice. Writers and artists, students, and intellectuals of all sorts, who might have otherwise remained more remote from the political scene gravitated to antifascist organizations, the most vociferous was the Communist Party. Once the Spanish Civil War erupted by mid-decade, and the only government that appeared willing to aid the weak Republic against Franco's fascist army was that of the U.S.S.R., the Party's credibility in America was at its peak.

Writers like Malcolm Cowley had always been politically engaged, but the crisis focused their approach. Open-ended relativism, with its epistemological and ethical equivocations, had already seemed "flabby" by the end of the twenties. Now the question of how to locate human purpose in the modern world remained. The search was on for newly assertive interpretations. Marxism offered its muscular theory of the proletariat and the Party delivered a variety of practical, psychological benefits: a reason for hope, forums for serious discussion; publication and a readership, the satisfaction of devoting one's energy to the common good, enthusiastic personnel to mount dramatic productions, and even occasional monies or patrons for writers and artists before and besides programs created by the WPA. Much of the period's propaganda literature, with less ambiguity rather than more, expressed the Party credo with portraits of worthy laborers or victimized minorities, ruthless social structures, and class struggle. And many of the period's most energetic literary talents – Cowley, Richard Wright, Theodore Dreiser, Lincoln Steffens, Sherwood Anderson, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford, Mike Gold, John Dos Passos, James Farrell, Clifford Odets, Tillie Olson, Nathaniel West,

Josephine Herbst, John Steinbeck, James Burnham, Matthew Josephson, and Ralph Ellison, among many others – could be found writing “propaganda” at one point or another, and writing for communist journals, whether they became Party members or not.¹⁷

In 1934, the year Burke was completing *Permanence and Change*, Matthew Josephson published *The Robber Barons*, a highly critical retelling of the stories of Rockefeller, Carnegie and Morgan, and an immediate bestseller. Malcolm Cowley, in his group portrait of the moderns, *Exile's Return*, closed by sounding a call for artists to now support workers in the “class struggle.” In the same year, *The Decline of American Capitalism* by Lewis Corey (born Louis Fraina), called for a cultural front for the needed socialist revolution; he followed it immediately with *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (1935), arguing for strikes and mass demonstrations, and describing the new class of salaried employees and professionals as in fact vulnerable members of the proletariat. All these books were taken seriously and sold well. In the political arena, 1934 also saw Louisiana's Senator “Kingfish” Huey Long present his “Share Our Wealth” plan, proposing a one hundred percent tax on million dollar incomes and a national seizure of the largest fortunes.¹⁸

Even the pragmatist, John Dewey, credited as a calm philosophic theorist of American liberalism and experimentalism, could now be heard rejecting the New Deal as hopeless tinkering and calling for centralized, systematic social control of the forces of production; and Reinhold Niebuhr, already a dark, prognosticating public conscience, rejected capitalism for communism. Meanwhile, farm foreclosures and business

collapses continued and any improvements in the overall economy were barely perceptible on the street, despite an ambitious and experimental Administration.¹⁹

The Southern Agrarians

There were a variety of social and economic ideas and movements that responded to the call for alternatives to industrial capitalism. One is of significance for American letters, since it showcased some critics whose later ideas would become key in the universities after the Second World War, several of these were intellectual sparring partners of Burke's. The latter twenties had offered the traditionalistic and restrained literary philosophy of the New Humanists; the Depression brought forth the "Southern Agrarians."

The Scopes trial had brought bad publicity to the South. This group of young southern writers were determined to show that their region might serve as a cultural model rather than an intellectual embarrassment. Inspired by T.S. Eliot, British culture, English author Hilaire Belloc's *Restoration of Property*, and offended by the crass commercialism of modern capitalism now apparently in retreat, they idealized pastoral values supposedly sustained by Southern culture despite the loss of the Civil War. Their antiindustrial political program, like many, advocated redistribution of land. At the same time, they defended the South's hierarchy, leisure, and its caste by color, all of which were rooted in a grim history of chattel slavery.²⁰ The movement, expressed in its manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, included a number of young writers and scholars of distinction: Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, John Gould Fletcher,

Donald Davidson, and others, many of whom would recant their racist views later. But other aspects of this critical philosophy gained influence in the academy when, in the nineteen-forties, some of these writers became champions of a “New Criticism” that held sway for several decades.²¹

Public Response

The immediate particulars of life usually offer a more compelling explanation for a personal situation than unfamiliar and impersonal ideologies. Not everyone suffered equally at the time, and, as William James had observed a few generations earlier, suffering is experienced individually. Despite the vast energy artists and journalists invested in fomenting protest and conflict, historians have described a public that demonstrated a bewildering “stoic passivity as the Depression grindstone rolled over them.”²² The historian Gerald W. Johnson could still write in early 1932, that, “the revolutionists have gained no following worth mentioning in this country. . . . To date the capitalist system seems to be as firmly entrenched in America as the Republic herself . . .”²³ Americans, still ascribing to an ideology of hard work and success, seemed willing to shoulder personal responsibility for their difficulties and unready to identify with a universal proletariat, though they did muster the energy to oust the Hoover administration. The propagandists were faced with a severe challenge, and Burke charged that they were all too ready to preach revolution to the believing choir, as opposed to engaging American ideology on its own terms and convert nonbelievers effectively. Unlike his colleagues, perhaps because he had read Werner Sombardt, who

had already offered explanations for socialism's failure to capture the American worker, Burke understood how tricky any conversion process would be. Much of *Permanence and Change* (1935) details his conclusions regarding this process.

Several years earlier, perhaps a little injured by some of Burke's criticism of his Marxist enthusiasms, Cowley responded by suggesting "another pattern of behavior," for his friend, about whom he was "deeply concerned and disturbed," accusing Burke of drinking excessively, and of falling into a bourgeois nihilism. "I'm not saying either, Come on over into our nice Red pasture and play with all us communist boys. That would be swell, but you're not going to do it so what's the use of arguing about it." Cowley recommended politics as a cure for Burke's psychological conflict. With the inconsistency friendly criticism often displays, Cowley, a few lines later proposed that "just getting a job" might do the trick.²⁴ Burke never took Cowley's advice entirely, admitting the drinking, but always insisting he was no nihilist. But he did turn to political engagement as a way of transforming his inner demons by trying to reconcile history and, if not truth, then truthfulness, in a relativistic world. He got himself a job, so to speak, as a teacher. He had argued for the cause of art in the twenties. He now began counseling Marxist and other writers to trust that art would return the favor and argue their cause.²⁵

Burke's method was to publish early drafts of his ideas in articles and then to revise and develop the more theoretical pieces within books. He produced a number of reviews and articles between the publication of *Counter-Statement* and *Towards a Better Life* and of *Permanence and Change*. He also wrote a long pivotal essay, the draft of a

book, in 1932, that “languished” unpublished until 1993.²⁶

“From aestheticism to the social emphasis”

In 1931, after he had published *Counter-Statement*, and had finished and “sold” *Towards a Better Life*, for no advance, Burke thought he might write a pamphlet called “Invective Against the Republican Party, using some of the juicier bits of our history since the Civil War for my pot-boiling substance, but continually branching into my definitions of the good life, my Summons to Poets, and the like.” He would also show that “each depression in our history was remedied not by the ‘course of events,’ but by the introduction of a new element that whipped up the old nag, started things going again until this temporary remedy in turn had failed.” According to Burke, things were not “bound to come back of their own accord,” rather, “we must take a new step to bring them back.”²⁷ The “pamphlet” turned out to be a group of articles.

Burke had already spoofed the apparent absurdities of consumer capitalism. “Waste—The Future of Prosperity” was an ironic piece dedicated to Henry Ford, published in *The New Republic* in 1930, and the same year abridged in *Reader's Digest*. He named Ford’s arguments for increased production and consumption, the “Theory of the Economic Value of Waste,” sending up their futility:

More and more every year, under the guidance of Mr. Ford, our people are being taught to buy what they don’t need and to replace it before it is worn out . . . To Mr. Ford we owe the discovery that our national welfare depends upon attaining the maximum rate of the destruction of our natural resources. The more we learn to use what we do not need, the greater our consumption; the greater our consumption, the greater our production; and the greater our production, the greater our prosperity.

It seemed, Burke said, that “If people can be taught to waste enough, they can be kept

busy for at least eighteen hours a day replacing the wasted commodities. . . *For though there is a limit to what a man can use, there is no limit whatever to what he can waste.*²⁸

Ford's "theory" demonstrated that "culture resides, not in leisure, but in work," since "one man's extra radio is another man's bread." Furthermore, in this theory, "war is the basis of culture . . . An intelligently managed war can leave whole nations to be rebuilt, thus providing work at peak productivity for millions of the surviving population."²⁹ What we call "planned obsolescence;" Burke called "better methods of deterioration." A particular object of Burke's spleen was the razor blade: "experts . . . are seriously at work on the problem of producing a blade which will afford one perfect shave and then completely refrain, being henceforth not even good for corns." The "Car of the Future," would "give super-performance for twelve months, attaining speeds three times the maximum limit" and show itself "as sensitive to the touch, as responsive, as a thoroughbred or a sweetheart." Such perfection would not menace prosperity, "for of a sudden at the end of twelve months, preferably at the time of the annual automobile show, this car will fall into a thousand pieces; a kind of Eighty-one-horse Shay."³⁰

Taking a swipe at Prohibition, now in its final moments, Burke predicted that if water were outlawed, the expansions of the prison system might provide further stimulus to the economy. Advertising provided jobs for the "priesthood" of all these trades. Burke had seen the future. His own consolation was that all this instantaneous obsolescence offered the "sage," surviving at the edges of the waste economy, the option of surrounding himself with a kingdom of this left-over stuff, such as "old-model nose straighteners," or "antiquated breeds of mechanical horses," "mission-style electric

toasters,” “unfinished correspondence courses,” and so on. To avoid purchasing the useless razor, the indigent philosopher would instead wear “a beard soaked with Flit.”³¹

Anticipating attitudes a counterculture would offer thirty years later, even here Burke’s critical mind worked in several directions. Though he could later half seriously suggest luxury spending as a stimulus to the economy, he continued to see the mindless proliferation of goods and novelties as a waste of human energy and ecologically disastrous.

Dilemmas of the didactic

Burke expressed the typical aesthete’s attitude towards modern consumer materialism. But he was critical of the theoretical materialism of the Marxists as well. In “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision,” “War, Response and Contradiction”(1933), “The Nature of Art Under Capitalism”(1933), and “My Approach to Communism,”(1934), his then quite controversial speech to the American Writer’s Congress in 1935, “Revolutionary Symbolism in America,” as well as his contribution to the “What is Americanism?” symposium organized by *Partisan Review and Anvil* in 1936, Burke constructed his position on communism by examining how propaganda might best be used to promote it; this in turn was the beginning of a decade’s work on interpretation, language and social change.³² When a Marxist faith could not accommodate what Burke knew of the operations of language, he challenged it. At a time when politics were seen as governed by the principles of actual international relations or rigid economic realities, Burke observed that in mass society the issues were the fluid, psychological ones of

language, persuasion, and perception. His opinions at times were so farsighted that even his theoretically sophisticated colleagues had difficulty understanding them.³³

These issues were not without an inherent ambiguity. Intellectuals' and artists' relation to power has always been fraught. What are the responsibilities of artists who wish to serve the public good?

At moments in these essays we see Burke stumping or "plumping grandly" as he later put it, for communism, only to inevitably veer off on his own. We also witness another Burke, the aesthetic, confessedly "bourgeois" Burke advising writers on methods for writing propaganda, if one is willing to redefine fine writing as the best propaganda, as opposed to propaganda as the best sort of writing.³⁴

In "Auscultation," Burke gave a sustained, detailed critique of Marxian materialism, but at the time, practically no one read it except the editor at *Hound and Horn*, who considered it "unreal."³⁵ Coming at a point in his life when he was extremely fragile, this rejection was so demoralizing that Burke abandoned the manuscript rather than submit it elsewhere.³⁶ He streamlined and simplified his arguments against Marxian materialism for *Permanence and Change*. On the one hand, Burke had a utopian vision, on the other, he believed in "boring from within" using aesthetics. It is perhaps not so surprising that the editor found a piece that focused so closely on the technical and conceptual distinctions in persuasive language "unreal," within the context of motivating citizens.

Auscultation

"Auscultation" is listening to the body with a stethoscope. "Auscultation,

Creation, and Revision: The Rout of the Esthetes, Literature, Marxism and Beyond,” advanced that theorizing a class dichotomy in culture and art was poor logic and weak propaganda and that materialism ignored greater human consistencies that were biological and thus relatively ahistorical. Appeal was grounded in these consistencies. Burke criticized the Greenwich Village writers (one assumes he is referring to Cowley, Josephson, Granville Hicks, Van Wyck Brooks, Edmund Wilson, and Robert Cantwell), for having “‘cleared out,’” as soon as “the word ‘esthete’ was leveled at them,” to run after proletarian replacements of one kind or another.³⁷ Burke said he had originally written “Auscultation” as an argument with Wilson’s *Axel’s Castle*.³⁸ In the nineteen-twenties Burke had defended aestheticism from the sociological criticism of V. F. Calverton and developed this in *Counter-Statement*.³⁹ This allowed technological attitudes to remain in place, “denuding” the proletariat in the process, since he was denied access to cultural sources that might empower him.⁴⁰ In this essay, Burke demonstrated a mastery of the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the traditional Marxian antipodes of “Bourgeois” and “Proletarian.” Challenging the Marxist method of “antithetical” argument, and arguing for a rhetoric of unity to replace it, he claimed writers were unifiers by definition, in that they achieved rhetorical effectiveness through identification, and this identification was essentially coalescent not antithetical.

Because of the present crisis, writers spotlighted economics and it appeared as the central verity. Burke saw the Depression as temporary, if extended, the problems he located were the larger, more amorphous cultural ones that caused and accepted the Depression in the first place. But these were now considered “chimerical.” He pointed

out that the debate was over theories not things in any case, and suggested three sources of value and ideology, some historically conditioned, some permanent: primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary reality and source for our ideas is our irrepressible and universal biological “essence” in its patterns of mental and physical growth; the secondary is our direct practical engagement with nature – that of primitive life where tools are hand-shaped and propitiation “dog-like” and direct; and the tertiary reality is the advanced modern world of the mechanical, technological and capitalistic. It was the tertiary, technological world that was suffering an “economic cancer.” Though during the boom, tertiary reality had seemed quite “real” to the public, in bust it became “real” to the political writers Burke critiqued; and those other realities, the biological and primitive ones that still attracted some poets were dismissed as “chimerical” – ghosts.⁴¹

Burke demanded to know whether Marx’s theory of history really made sense. It was impossible to believe that productive forces caused reactions entirely specific to a single class, since untangling bourgeois psychology from proletarian psychology, and bourgeois culture from proletarian culture was proving itself impossible. Was bourgeois artistic pleasure so different from its proletarian counterpart?⁴² And interest and class were hardly identical, since there were serious divisions within the proletariat in different fields, as well as odd collaborations between industrial owners and workers, against the farming class, who Burke believed was the most victimized. Moreover, Burke wryly observed that determinists only rigorously applied their principles to the bourgeoisie:

While they are eager to show how a bourgeois, as the result of economic determinism, *simply cannot help* thinking bourgeois thoughts, they exhort the antithetically placed proletariat to *please think* antithetical proletarian

thoughts. This discrepancy always bewilders the non-Marxian, who can never understand why the bourgeois learned his lessons so easily under the promptings of necessity, whereas the proletarian, who was exposed to antithetical promptings, still requires considerable coaxing.⁴³

The bourgeois and proletarian were more similar than not, as were the aesthetes and literary Marxists. And within the groups, members were also all different from each other, in ways that propagandists must consider. Marxian ideology might be gripping, but the sociology derived from its causal view, was implausible.⁴⁴ Yet, Burke was not an individualist; he agreed that liberal or Romantic individualism was “at once a splendid way of keeping men aroused, and a poor way of helping men to remove the factors that arouse them.” So, if literary creativity and cultural change was not a simple product of social relations, and a Romantic model that left social change to individual will was politically quietist, Burke needed to find another way to connect theory to praxis, thought to action.⁴⁵

Yes, environment affected us; but was it really so “external?” Marx had reacted against the “human nature” economists who had explained society with a human “constant” -- presumably the stable “economic man” of the Manchester school. Marx, in evolutionary style, demonstrated that we had adapted to various environments with varying ideologies, and concluded that our thinking was determined by environmental forces. Yet since the organic productive forces, our bodies, were constant, that portion of the environment relating to them might be legitimately considered constant. So, the ideology deriving from those forces would be relatively stable.

Had we, in gaining levers, lost hands, such considerations would not arise.
But insofar as we retain hands, and insofar as levers themselves are

merely stronger hands, we may expect us all to have “hand thoughts.” That is, through all of us there will run patterns of thinking to duplicate the hand’s function of “grasping.” Other human “constants” overriding the bourgeois-proletarian distinction can suggest themselves ad libitum: “pugnacity” as the brain’s equivalent of the fist; “love of clarity” as the ideological projection of the eye; bodily projection “made mental” as logical firmness or aggressiveness of style; the function of the palate finally leading to canons of “taste.”⁴⁶

Burke was clearly convinced the body was a more likely material cause for our ideas than productive relations, and if body and mind were two aspects of one thing, we might actually reconceive those relations. To clarify, Burke was not saying that a pseudo-Platonic disembodied “pugnacity” invented the fist, but that the delineated concept “fist” might have its source in the species’ sensing of its own pugilism. He observed, “A device . . . gets its ‘nature’ as an environmental factor partly from the nature of the ideological scheme into which it is introduced.”⁴⁷ That is, ideology was at play prior to the decision of what made something environmental in the first place.

In any case, though the complexities of the modern tertiary world would suggest that complexities can arise without design . . . we should be as justified logically in reversing our scheme of the relationship between the physical and the mental by adopting something like Bergson’s notion of the *élan vital*, . . . making the aim prior to the organ, rather than the organ prior to the pattern (hence pugnacity would lead to the invention of the fist).⁴⁸

Burke also revisited teleology and idealism, using them to critique Marx’s too rigid view of human creativity as governed by material purpose and motive:

Airplanes . . . can serve to carry serum across snow barriers to plague-stricken cities, or as a convenient means of dropping bombs upon them, but it is most likely that neither use was an instigation to aeronautical invention. To assume with Marx that a productive force dictates the nature of its future activity . . . is to overlook the fact that gunpowder was discovered in the Orient independent of its discovery in the West and that

it was used there for pretty sky displays alone, and not until the West brought its ideology to those far shores did Orientals learn the “real” use of gunpowder.⁴⁹

Burke connected his own defense of the communist program to a nontraditional humanism that would see no unbridgeable distinctions between classes, since “the very concept of the ‘system’ should lead rather to the realization . . . that bourgeois and proletarian alike accommodated their thinking to the imperious demands of a profit-economy.”⁵⁰ Burke had drained class accusation and thus a certain energy from Marxian rhetoric by pursuing its logic.

Marxists argued that bourgeois art was oppressive and discriminatory in its very inception, a function of the imbalanced societies from which it arose. In denying the antithesis between bourgeois and proletarian consciousness, Burke reopened the avenue for aesthetes to actually transform American life by dramatizing moral possibility – renaming the world and offering a new perspective so that the citizenry might suit modernity to itself rather than the other way around. The present crisis had created a window of evangelical opportunity. Burke cited Jesus, a “wheeler-propagandist,” as an example of the true artist who propounded a “new configuration of meanings;” and those meanings were framed in universalistic terms. Paul, the proletarian critics, in “exhorting the recruited” was doing the lesser task of “convincing the convinced.” And the broader frame they were all seeking, the future, was “a discovery too *unpredictable* for us to be guided toward it by the mere automatic guidance of a schematic *opposite*.”⁵¹ A writer interested in conversion, “must drop . . . the note of *Anthesis*, so ably suited for convincing the convinced, and so thoroughly unsuited to anything else.”⁵²

Nevertheless, by the time he wrote *Permanence and Change*, Burke, judging from the many persons who could not fathom his subtleties, and from the political environment, resignedly confessed that Marx's "appeal to a flat counter-morality, . . . is much more likely to continue as the only way in which people are equipped to act, even though they do thereby lay themselves open to the likelihood of being alternately cheated for their good and cheated for their harm."⁵³

Struggle: propaganda

Burke had written music criticism for *The Dial*, and served in the same capacity for *The Nation* from 1933-1936. He continued with his book reviews and essays, though most of his efforts were involved in the book he began after the failure of "Auscultation," that would become *Permanence and Change*. In many of the articles during this period, Burke explicitly discussed propaganda. While his concerns have been called "technical," more than political, in fact technique and politics are functions of a philosophical psychology.⁵⁴

Burke previously had enjoyed a small, astute literary following for his major criticism, essays, short stories, and his novel, though this last seems to have consisted solely of friends and reviewers. Now the interest in form he developed in *Counter-Statement* moved into an explicit concern with communication and even more explicitly with propaganda, with Burke further developing the connections between the communicative and the persuasive. His instruction was generally directed to his fellow writers, though "Waste – The Future of Prosperity" was abridged for *The Reader's*

*Digest.*⁵⁵

Burke had remarked that what is in a man's interest and what he is actually interested in are not always the same thing. Burke had already pointed out the hortatory aspect of artistic expression in the nature of appeal itself. During a period of binary description and factionalism, he consistently searched for the consensual. At this point, because of the social situation, and because he traveled with the era's communists, he focused on how to reconcile their ends with a literature that would appeal to an American audience comfortable with certain notions of freedom and individualism.

For example, in 1931, in *The New Republic*, Edmund Wilson called for "a genuine opposition," that would "take Communism away from the Communists," and take it "without ambiguity or reservations," a seizure by which they would assert "emphatically that their ultimate goal is ownership of the means of production by the government." Wilson further suggested industrial based soviets replace congressional representation and that "some new manifesto" supplant the Declaration and the Constitution.⁵⁶

In his challenge to Wilson's article, "Boring From Within," Burke insisted that such a tactic would merely antagonize the intended audience. He insisted that the cause should be argued using the accepted ideology. With a deflating acerbity and a disheartening foresight, he suggested anyone planning such a revolutionary move should better name it "the Home Policy," call nationalization "popular participation," and "carry on a nation-wide 'educational' campaign denying up and down that the program had anything to do with the nationalization of industry," sending out free copies of the

Constitution from the Home Policy headquarters, to boot. Watch your language, Burke cautioned, if you really want to win over the American public.⁵⁷

The apparent intention of “War, Response, and Contradiction,”(1933), was to clarify didactic methods noting their potential unintended consequences. The psychology that would be presented in *Permanence and Change* began to emerge from these discussions of audience reaction.

The essay began with a debate between Archibald MacLeish and Malcolm Cowley in *The New Republic* over how facts should be presented in a book of essays: *The First World War*.⁵⁸ MacLeish had objected that the editorial choices had neglected the positive, heroic aspects of that war, and asserted that the “truth” had not been told. Taking the relativistic position, Burke dispatched MacLeish’s “naive realism.” Attitudes toward war changed with the generations and context. This was especially true if one was putatively examining a past war but anticipating a future one. He noted the title’s “First” actually suggested a subtext of the European situation, now against a backdrop of a resurgent American isolationism.⁵⁹ Defending a modern conception of historiographical purpose, Burke insisted that in any case, no one should or could be compelled to hold one unchangeable opinion about a war’s nature. “Why must we attempt to uphold, by strange canons of ‘truth,’ the ‘1916 character’ of war?” Here he agreed with Cowley: interpretations of history were themselves continuously conditioned by history and an element of persuasion and local relevance was inevitable and desirable.⁶⁰

Still, since the didactic concern of that book was really not the question of how

the poet felt about the last war, but how the audience might feel about the next one, MacLeish did have a point. According to Burke, writers should not assume a direct “stimulus-response” of revulsion for or any consequent deterrence from elaborate depictions of violence, as perhaps the editor of the book had assumed. The process of a reader’s identification was too complex. Audiences so exposed were as likely to become desensitized to violence or even acquire a taste for it. Reactions were unpredictable not merely because people were different, but because “*irrationality or contradictoriness of response* is basic to human psychology . . . particularly at those depths of human sensitiveness which are implicated in the religious, ethical, poetic, or volitional aspects of man.”⁶¹

Here, he gently instructed Cowley, who had tried to refute MacLeish by locating contradictions within his article. Since modern capitalism was contradictory, as Cowley’s magazine, *The New Republic* so often explained, and writers’ imaginations were related to their environment, contradictions in political attitudes were inevitable. For example, social reforms often interfere with deeper change, but how can one not advocate them? Liberals, communists, and socialists all continually found themselves caught in that contradiction. Burke suggested that what was needed were concepts that could “shuttle” back and forth between contradictions, i.e., more supple concepts.⁶²

Any cultural change also operated in contradictory ways, one toward acquiescence to the status quo, the other moving “beyond” it. “Emancipation,” a principle in the rise of bourgeois liberalism and capitalism was now a term used by the communists to exhort the faithful. Literacy produced obedient capitalists, but it had also

interfered with completely naive accommodation to the system. Criticism, originally directed toward the feudal hierarchies of church and nobility, in the nineteenth century began to transform into a criticism of commerce, via Marx and so many of the various aesthetic movements of that period. The competitive “Scramble,” the “*vocational*,” and the “good life” that was its purpose, the “*vacational*,” led to a “breach between art and life,” allowing individuals to privately play the stock market while publicly praying or writing for the revolution, and capitalism fed all ethics.⁶³

As the modernist, ironic Burke explained, contradiction was at the heart of human psychology and physiology and not merely confined to capitalism. Charles Sherrington’s research was cited as a physiological justification for this opinion; he had recently demonstrated that what was called “consciousness” was involved in the pursuit of nourishment, and once satiety was attained it relaxed into somnolence.⁶⁴ This explained our seeking peace “ever by the questionable Rooseveltian device of fighting for it.” Poetic exhortation, closer to biology than the discursive forms, necessarily led to moral contradictions.⁶⁵

Recommending by tragedy

The cult of death certainly possesses a powerful appeal, relevant to the global politics of Burke’s day and ours, and aesthetics revealed our motivational complexity. An “essayistic,” recommendation for a cause stresses utility; a poetic recommendation more likely would use tragedy and sacrifice to demonstrate value, in the classic manner of the Crucifixion. As Christianity could build salvation around the image of a god in anguish, so also, our “great ‘tragedies of individualism,’ such as Shakespeare’s, preceded

the spread of individualist ethics throughout our social structure.”⁶⁶ In this way, the sufferings of war, “are precisely the foremost ethical symbols of commendation.” The fact that “by the ethical contradiction, categories as logically distinct as service and disservice, advantage and disaster, become fundamentally intertwined,” would allow such a symbol to trump any simple utilitarian motive.⁶⁷

On the other hand, painting vivid, complex pictures, and richly informing the imagination contributed directly to a reader’s making a morally informed choice. “Let war be put forward *as a cultural way of life, as one channel of effort in which people can be profoundly human*, and you induce in the reader the fullest possible response to war, precisely such a response as might best lead one to appreciate the preferable ways of peace.”⁶⁸

Burke’s logic returned to his premise that all communication was in fact hortatory and persuasive. So, when Burke suggested that “propaganda” should evoke its desired response by offering as complex a human portrait as possible, he was saying that in this way it would be most convincing. But what would it convince *of*? In suggesting the form, Burke actually recast the content, because it delivered a human psychology rooted in contradiction. This accommodation of contradiction in personality, is what we generally understand as good writing: such writing breaks down preconceptions. On the other hand, propaganda, as we generally understand it today, does intend to evoke a visceral response: Its purpose is a rush to judgment. Suddenly persuasion and propaganda took on very different almost opposed meanings. Either Burke contradicted himself or demolished the distinctions. Perhaps Burke was returning the term to its

original reference—that of the early Church propagating the true faith. As for his politics, here, and then in his next two books, Burke seems to have approached communism similarly – as a spacious coalition of general values, most distinctly non-Marxist, filling in a great many of the blanks with his own hopeful imagination. History might be relative, but aesthetics was not since it was tied to the body. ⁶⁹

As for now suggesting contradiction at the center of the hortatory, Burke was adding something to rhetoric that was very new. Also, though he did not explore it fully here, he was offering a vision of the person and of social change that was ironic, liberal yet social, rather than competitive. Marx had noted that societies were broken by their contradictions; Burke observed that contradiction was at the root of the species. The pursuit of consistency by “critical fiat” succeeded only in having “embittered a great many people’s relations with one another in recent years.” No doubt. ⁷⁰

“The Nature of Art Under Capitalism,” and “My Approach to Communism” show Burke’s more polemic side. As the Depression deepened and widened, despite the election of Roosevelt and the start of the New Deal, Burke was willing to stump for more radical measures. He kept his focus, of course, on literature and rhetoric. In the “Nature of Art under Capitalism,” Burke used Veblen’s famous distinction between business and industry, or the making of money and work, to claim that work was ethical, as it used competitive equipment -- the individual’s talents – for cooperative goals. Though he criticized these theories and theorists in other venues, he brought forward Dewey, and the “entire Darwinian point of view,” which emphasized “the growth of moral systems out of practical needs,” the Marxian “cult of the proletariat,” as well as the Protestant Ethic, to

demonstrate the accepted ethical dimensions of work.

Business both exploited and thwarted this desire to be useful, since it operated without concern for the commonweal, and tolerated a “partial paralysis” so as to maintain itself. The question was hardly “What is good for business?” but “What is business good for?”⁷¹ Capitalism, especially in hard times, stymied cooperation while stressing competition and leaving only crime or war as the arena for our aggressive energy, which could be much better directed toward group effort and social cohesion.

While most of us cannot sustain too much complexity, Burke could not brook simple-mindedness. Here he compared “pure” to political art. In Burke’s view, pure art did make for a “state of resignation, or acceptance,” to social limitations. It imaginatively linked ideas that could never be joined in practical life. Traditionally, it allowed for the cathartic breaking of taboos without the practical consequences. Within an unsound capitalist system, the resignation allowed by pure art would become “a social menace.” To avoid this fatalism, “there must be a large *corrective or propaganda* element in art,” he said, reiterating a point from *Counter-Statement*.⁷² So, how to do it?

Burke took up the cause of the audience, including the less revolutionary reading or viewing audiences of his revolutionary writing audience. Harsh proletarian literature portrayed “so little of the qualities in mankind worth saving,” and promoted a “cult of disaster.” As such, it encouraged passivity and acquiescence to “sheer dismalness.” He ended his essay by defending the “pure” and not-so-pure popular art: the screwball comedies and romances of Hollywood. These sentimental forms of expression, helped to make life under the system tolerable. They alleviated pressure and in this way helped to

relieve and rejuvenate the people who needed to act. Therefore, despite the dismissal of such cultural production by propagandists of the more high-minded sort, such as Cowley or Wilson, according to Burke, matinee idols, romances and so forth, were “following a direction basically so sound that one might wish more of our pretentious authors were attempting to do the same thing more pretentiously.” He closed his polemic, “Perhaps more of Dickens is needed, even at the risk of excessive tearfulness.”⁷³

Undoubtedly many writers on the left listened to Burke, especially in these more popular venues, and it is likely that he raised the standard of popular literature with proletarian subjects a few notches. His suggestions were ones talented writers would likely follow intuitively with a little encouragement. But one could understand how a political critic might not follow the reasoning. Was art supposed to make us accept our lot or not? Were bread and circuses now a good thing? Should art serve politics or the other way around?

“My Approach to Communism,” (1934) is the clearest example of which specifics Burke adopted from Marxism, though he could not resist diverging from Marx even before the end of his essay. Much of his general outline of capitalism could be found elsewhere, especially in John Strachey’s *The Coming Struggle for Power* (1933), a well-respected popular analysis.⁷⁴

He offered four justifications for communism: “rational, ethical, historical, and esthetic.” The “rational” motive adopted the Marxist premise that capitalism is imperialistic. Burke stated the analysis common to the period: A closed national frontier requires opening foreign markets; these are floated with risky loans, but once those

economies develop, they set up trade barriers, frustrate the original expansion, and send the economy skidding. Expanding local consumer credit creates mounting debt; while the return to barter and subsistence farming (advocated then by private charities and even the Roosevelt Administration), exacerbates the problem for other industrial and farm workers.

Reinvesting profits increases production, aggravating the need for expanding markets. Wages must increase to increase purchasing power. But supposedly, capitalism will not allow this in principle; and, adding a dose of Veblen to Marx, Burke's proposed solution was that profits should be squandered in luxury and conspicuous consumption – waste.

The two alternatives to capitalism were communism or fascism. Communism turned business management over to the state and worker as “the fulcrum of the governmental policies and purposes,” while fascism, using business as a tool, delivered the state to businessmen and business ideals, and thus committed itself to imperialism. This vision of capitalism as imperialistically pressed on simpler economies, was developed from Marx's by the British theorist J.A. Hobson.⁷⁵

Burke's originality resurfaced when he turned to American culture and focused on the ethical, historical, and aesthetic rationales for communism. American capitalism and the American Protestant Ethic had created an ideology he called “Naive Fascism.” A frantic acquisitive materialism ran throughout the culture, top and bottom: “the same ideals of purpose, training, and method galvanized the victims as the victors.” Such universal cupidity alienated and confused those writers who discerned “errors in the

national psychology.” For example, Walt Whitman’s expansive, democratic poetry stood “in the somewhat ambiguous position of enunciating a philosophy which sometimes looks like the *bona fide* vision of a better world, and at other times suggests the poetic adumbrations of Rotarianism.” Before Louis Hartz, before Richard Hofstadter, the poet Burke observed the consensual tendencies in the American psyche.⁷⁶

Previously, a lingering “morality,” an absence of cynicism, allowed citizens to accept grand aggregations of wealth and socialized the wealthy to philanthropy; perhaps the Pittsburgh boy was remembering Carnegie building up his hometown. But as monopolistic capitalism expanded, it seized greater control. When the left arose against it, and a moral crisis approached, the “priesthood,” required to uphold the common values – clergy, educators, copywriters, and journalists – also turned against it. Burke predicted that those who would now be entirely eliminated, would turn to crime, and this was surely the era of the Dillinger and Barrow gangs.⁷⁷

So far, Burke had stayed consistent with other journalistic treatments or adaptations of Marxian principles.⁷⁸ Now he admitted to a “somewhat personal manipulation” of materialist doctrine, “the teaching that the nature of man’s productive forces determines the nature of his thinking.” He offered his own reading of Western history – expanded in *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*. Burke rewrote the Marxian version of production as organized by three “rationalizations”: magic, religion, and science. Referring to James Frazer’s influential anthropological treatise on myth, *The Golden Bough*, Burke asserted that magic rationalized control over the forces of nature, in a manner “largely erroneous but also largely correct,” since its

methods “stimulated a set of practical procedures . . . satisfactorily attuned to the environmental conditions.” Religion rationalized those forces of human cooperation and service supporting and supported by the Church and the feudal structure; and following this, science rationalized the control of technology or the machine. The typical scientific test of “success” was perfected by a technique of “isolation” corresponding to the entire individualistic trend of all post-Renaissance thought; the “anguish of the romantics” responded to these developments.⁷⁹

Our culture must be “re-humanized” under a fourth rationalization – Communism – which would once again measure use in reference to “cultural and humane ends as a whole,” and he suggested that it aimed at a kind of “industrial medievalism.”⁸⁰ Though we would balk at any such notion today, Burke’s point was that the Marxian “new equilibrium” would return society to a common sense of cultural purpose as opposed to the brutal competition of capitalism, and the fragmentation of liberalism, often depicted as a moral, political, and social cacophony too easily exploited either by the weak and corrupt or the strong and corrupt. On the right, the New Agrarians wished to turn away from the vulgar egalitarian clamor of industrial capitalism to either the greater stability of the pre-industrial South, or for Belloc, small capitalist enterprise, or in the case of Eliot, an ethnic homogeneity on the model of Europe, where it was imagined that the educated intellectual might still find a more respected place.

Burke repeatedly argued for radical change in the service of permanence and stability, but he felt it might yet be pluralistic, egalitarian, and ultimately parliamentary. But here again, we can ask, how consistent could those values be with any sort of

“medievalism” where the commonality was religious hegemony and the social order was firmly hierarchical?

Burke’s aesthetic rationale for communism, was that under such stasis, art would flower since shared values encouraged a high level of communication. Again, in a keen twist on Marx, Burke called these values a “superstructure” that the artist used. In unstable periods, this superstructure disintegrated into “individualistic differentiations,” and the artist could not connect with his audience. Without shared cultural language and references, artistic production used the lowest common denomination or currency; and the desperate desire for diversion lowered audience standards.⁸¹

Burke clearly assimilated certain Marxian beliefs about history’s relation to culture to his views. But Marx had claimed that the superstructure formed artists, not that artists used it and needed it. Burke’s artists were free to a degree; while connected with their audiences, they could affect history as well as be affected by it, and Burke’s bidirectionalism did not really cohere with the progressive dialectic.

“Revolutionary Symbolism in America”

In 1932, pressured by Cowley, regarding his own politics, he explained that he was “not a joiner of societies,” but “a literary man,” who could “only welcome communism by converting it into my own vocabulary.” At this point, he was writing “Auscultation, Creation and Revision,” and gestating *Permanence and Change* (1935); they would have “the communist objectives, and the communist tenor,” yet the “approach” would be “the approach that seems significant to me.”⁸²

In 1935, the John Reed clubs, promoters of radical writing, sponsored the first American Writer's Congress, actually a Party move to disband the independent clubs with their local small fry membership and their radical proletarian magazines, in order to create one large more prestigious League of American Writers under centralized control: a major shift in policy.⁸³ Burke, as a sympathetic writer of some reputation and not a Party member, was invited to speak, a sign that organizers were looking to broaden the League's base.⁸⁴ Barbara Foley has called Burke "the quirkiest" of the Party's allies.⁸⁵ One reviewer suggested that Burke's attitude toward political Marxism was "that of a dog gingerly flirting with a porcupine." His talk, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," at the 1935 Writers' Congress was a demonstration of the fractiousness of this prickly relationship.⁸⁶

Sounding more like Edward Bernays than Friedrich Engels, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," described the class struggle as one of several "myths" competing for ascendancy in the modern world. This myth required a symbol: the technocrat's engineer, or a particular charismatic demagogue like Long or Father Coughlin. Speaking as a propagandist rather than an organizer, Burke argued that Party rhetoric would hardly appeal to Americans as it stood: the expression "the people" should replace "the worker," as the unifying symbol of communal identification. The proletarian symbol emphasized the antimony in the immediate conflict, yet it had "the disadvantage of not sufficiently embodying within its connotations the *ideal* incentive, the eventual state of unification that is expected to flow from it." The symbol of "the people," also had "the tactical advantage of pointing more definitely in the direction of

unity,” since it contained not only the revolutionary slogan but “the *ideal*, the ultimate classless feature which the revolution would bring about,” and was a “richer” symbol of allegiance.

Burke was persuaded that “one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle class values—just as the Church invariably converted pagans by making the local deities into saints.” Since Americans already honored “the people,” it might use “nationalistic conditioning,” and at the same time “combat the forces that hide their class prerogatives behind a communal ideology.” More significantly, Burke insisted rhetoric should embody the actual intention it expressed as much as possible, in this case social unity.⁸⁷ For this bit of public relations prescience Burke was shouted down, labeled a “traitor,” and accused of social fascism, though the popular front would soon use these maneuvers to make “people’s” causes generally acceptable.⁸⁸

Burke was dodging and weaving between two rhetorical tactics. The question was which expression would stir people to action better; which would foment feelings of the need for action in the largest number of people, yet alienate the fewest. Returning to familiar patriotic terms in the American historical tradition seemed to him more effective, since it did not require any overt, conscious shifts in loyalties, yet still worked toward communistic goals. Burke was shrewd enough to see that an ideological base that would elicit an automatic response to a concept such as “the worker” was lacking in American society at that time. And, though the culture of work was threatened by the Depression, he pointed out that work, as drudgery, was what most people still wished to

avoid: an aesthetic point. “There are few people who really want to work, let us say, as a human cog in an automobile factory, or as gatherers of vegetables on a big truck farm. Such rigorous ways of life enlist our *sympathies* but not our *ambitions*. Our ideal is as afar as possible to *eliminate* such kinds of work, or to reduce its strenuousness to a minimum.”⁸⁹ He did admit that a completely universalized art would paper over real social and economic divisions, denying the actual “underlying economic disunity,” and he further admitted that he was speaking as a “bourgeois.”⁹⁰

The immediate response was quite aggressive; both Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, leading Party figures and *Masses* editors, denounced him. Burke, shaken, always concerned with audience reaction, had been trying to appeal, not alienate. After the hostile, almost violent reception his ideas received, he explained that he had been “speaking technically to a group of literary experts, hence I felt justified in using the word [myth] in a special sense,” stressing, “A poet’s myths . . . are *real*.”⁹¹

The discussion that followed the speech revealed members’ worries. If the working class were a myth, it might be thought on par with other myths including those of fascism. The term “the people” actually had some distasteful associations since Hitler had conjured the “*volk*,” (already tied to an earlier blood and soil nationalism). Freeman, soon to find himself on the outs with the Party, observed that though the political concept of “the people” had risen with the “bourgeois revolution,” as an answer to eighteenth century class divisions, that revolution had atrophied into new classes; therefore the Party needed a special term to describe them.⁹² The expression had been used divisively against workers by none other than the reactionary celebrities, Father Coughlin and

General Johnson, who in attacking the San Francisco general strike had blamed workers for “holding up the people.”⁹³ Burke, optimistically, saw the term “people” as a contested area that the left might recapture from the right and was less concerned with distinguishing one faction from another than creating unity between them. Why leave Hitler or Coughlin with sole possession of such a resonant word?

While the more dogmatic members of the audience saw future unity as the ideal and present class division as the means, Burke saw unity as potentially both means and end, existing and ideal. Propaganda was only possible according to Burke, “insofar as the propagandizer and the propagandized have kindred values, share the same base of reference. . . . I may turn you against a certain institution, such as capitalism, by showing you that it makes for injustice. But . . . my arguments . . . would be pointless . . . unless you were relatively in agreement with me as to the desirability of justice.” Thus Burke held fast to ethical universals that transcended historical particulars. He argued that a doctrine of “antithetical moralities,” or class morality, actually incapacitated a writer, encouraging him to “condemn” rather than to “wheel and deal.” He would not back down stressing unity, social responsibility, even “citizenship.”⁹⁴

Echoing “War, Response and Contradiction,” he repeated no tactic was ever apolitical, yet it was always more believable when offering not “a few schematic situations” but as “full a cultural texture” as an artist could manage,” – a well-imagined universe. He followed with, “in the last analysis, art strains toward *universalization*. It tends to leap imaginatively the class divisions of the moment and go after modes of thought that would apply to a society freed of class divisions. It seeks to consider the

problems of *man*, not of *classes of men*,” thus “the symbol of ‘the people’ makes more naturally for such *propaganda by inclusion* than does the strictly proletarian symbol . . . since the symbol of ‘the people’ contains connotation of both oppression and of unity.”⁹⁵

In a letter to the radical novelist Robert Cantwell from this period, Burke criticized Cowley’s and Josephson’s Marxism, since, “Like all neophytes, they accept too much.” Then he asked Cantwell to do him a favor. “Upon meeting convinced Marxists, ‘elicit from them their definition of a class. . . For I wonder how a man can be ‘class-conscious,’ as so many now seem to be, without knowing what a ‘class’ is.” Burke then destroyed any notion of class-consciousness that disengaged it from individual interest, less of the economic than the personal sort, what Burke would call our “preoccupations.”

I do believe in classes (in the sense that there are classes of carrot-eaters, classes of people with freckles, classes of people with incomes between five and six thousand dollars a year, classes of people who have piles, classes of people out of work, classes of people who earn their living by digging coal, classes of people who clip coupons, classes of people who used to clip coupons . . . classes of people who believe in class-consciousness.) “Classes” in this sense are a linguistic convenience, – they are easily discussable . . . Now, what I want is a definition of economically antithetical classes whereby I can distinguish the acts, thoughts, criteria, method of sustenance, etc. of the proletarian class from those of the bourgeois class.⁹⁶

A reasonable question, to which it seemed no one would provide a satisfactory answer. “What is being asked for—on the basis of what?” he queried. If action was required on behalf of a class struggle, “then it should surely be asked for on the basis of a definition of a ‘class.’”⁹⁷

What were the symbols with which modern people now involved in myriad personal activities, and located within highly complex societies, could really identify?

The question became a problem for his next two books, and for the social analysts, market researchers, and structuralists of the following decades. Even the Party would need to relax its terminology to ingratiate itself, and Burke had predicted the way it would go. Though hypotheticals of this sort are rather futile in historical studies, one may wonder had the American left been more linguistically flexible and listened to Burke, might we have more socialism in America today? Perhaps, but since it likely wouldn't be called socialism, we would never know. One thing we can know is that once the Party policy leaders began moves along these lines, they had a brief public success, though the Moscow Trials in 1936 and 1937, brutal moves against Trotskyists in Spain, and then the Stalin-Hitler pact changed the landscape once again.⁹⁸

How exceptional is America?

Only a few months after Burke's speech at the American Writers' Congress, George Dimitrov, then general secretary of the Soviet Comintern, announced the drastic shift in policy at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International. This was the "popular front"—the making of common cause with Social Democrats and trade unions as a "people's anti-fascist front." Dimitrov offered Party support for all antifascist states and instructed American communists to support The New Deal. Fellow-traveling celebrities were brought forward to represent the views of the front rather than stricter, lesser known communists. For example, the next Writer's Congress featured Ernest Hemingway as its glamorous and somewhat equivocal centerpiece, who in keeping with his novels' protagonists, championed action over ideological debate on

behalf of the Spanish Republic.⁹⁹

The front now moderated the more strident Party rhetoric regarding class and the focus on developing a proletarian literature (an issue that throughout remained highly contentious), to accommodate the attitudinal diversity of the antifascist nations, bourgeois or not. Party thinking was to adapt to local priorities.¹⁰⁰ Contentiousness over doctrine was now an obsolete attitude, the goal was adaptability and flexibility not purity, a turnabout that left many former faithfuls outside a new pale, and excuses were found to harass them and brush them aside.¹⁰¹ Now, another abstract term would be contested: “Americanism.”

Earl Browder, the Party presidential candidate in 1936, offered the slogan: “Communism is twentieth century Americanism,” and Burke contributed to a symposium on “What is Americanism?” jointly sponsored by the newly merged *Partisan Review* and *Anvil* already in its final moments. The Party’s change of approach used a method similar to Burke’s “middle-class values” program. While spotlighting celebrities who were communists and allowing them to state their various opinions, the popular front muffled Party participation in some coalitions or organizations in order to attract a wider range of involvement. In literature, writers were encouraged to return to the examination of liberal and democratic ideals; once again the search was on for another “usable past” within an American tradition, one that might bring together radicals and liberals. Ironically inspired at least in part by a Moscow directive, though even more by a need to fight fascism, a quantity of critical talent turned again to the question of an indigenous tradition.¹⁰²

In the twenties, Burke had challenged that era's literary nationalism. Burke's answer to this go-round's "Americanism" was consistent with his earlier position on America's fundamental connection to Europe and its natural cosmopolitanism. He did acknowledge certain facts of American cultural difference, but he used these as a rationale for a possible connection. What Burke found finally distinct and perhaps insuperable, was the American attitude toward theory or philosophy itself.¹⁰³

Burke looked at a larger, cultural picture: that of modernity generally, not only political or economic forms. Thus, while accepting principles that would later rest at the heart of American exceptionalism—our ideological distinction from Europe rooted in our very different histories – he explained the differences between modern American and European attitudes as one of degree not absolute difference. Since America had no "feudal socialism," and had annihilated Indian culture and dismantled the slave system, it had eliminated any alternative social structures, instead offering "the almost perfect milieu for the full flowering of bourgeois-capitalist thought, in all its rigorousness." Because of this perfect exemplification, "we find significant trends in Europe anticipated here and expressed with greater zealousness. (Poe in letters—Peirce in philosophy—Ives in music.)"¹⁰⁴ This observation, startling for when it was uttered, refers to Poe's Symbolism, Peirce's modern symbolic logic, and the composer Charles Ives's radical, atonal uses of various sounds, all of whose intellectual methods subsequently appeared in Europe, and are conceived incorrectly by many, according to Burke, to have originated there. America epitomized the modern for better or worse.

Burke also admitted that American finance capitalism's "abstractions" created a

materialistic social uniformity here, but America was no more a slave to cupidity than Europe, nor was “the brutal struggle for individual riches” the essence of America; the nation just held fewer restraints and more organized opportunities for the play of greed.

Burke returned to the tradition to note that Americans had also protested the rise of the capitalistic rationalization, for example, Brook Farm, the Oneida Colony, or the aesthetic enclaves, as part of the general Romantic movement. Often communistically inclined, they were the alternatives to the “sea of capitalism.”¹⁰⁵ The “Communist job” was to “make clear why you can only make a good island by changing the whole damned sea.” Unfortunately the “usual communist” attacked religion, rather than demonstrating how communism might be the fulfillment of its ideals once a Marxian critical terminology was incorporated. Burke believed “The use of such critique can be as ‘American’ as anything.”¹⁰⁶

Since no trend was particularly American, critics found themselves embarrassed when searching for a solely American source. Burke noted that Granville Hicks had called any and all rebellious nineteenth century romanticism “revolutionary,” yet in fact, much romanticism was reactionary.¹⁰⁷ Owing to an overly ‘American’ emphasis, Hicks had overlooked a common cosmopolitan feature of his subjects, “*The fact that so many of them so naturally incorporated foreign material in their thinking whenever they found such material serviceable*” (Burke’s italics).¹⁰⁸

Marx should not be presented as an infallible prophet, but rather a “forerunner.” Burke attacked the tendency to reject all scientific thought since Marx as “bourgeois,” as equivalent to “the Ptolmeic attacks on Copernicanism,” and reactionary. Modern

psychology and relativistic physics should be incorporated since “A philosophy proves its value, not by what new material it must *categorically reject*, but by what new material it can *assimilate*.”¹⁰⁹

While the *Partisan Review* editors, influenced in part by Trotsky, believed that American literature had to be “Europeanized” before it could be socialistic, and writers such as Hicks were struggling to show socialism as indigenously American, Burke avoided the overreaching of both positions by arguing that a cosmopolitan conceptual scavenging was quite American. But this also denigrated Marx’s special importance and implied independent American purposes. Burke thought in terms of an evolution of opinion that would make itself felt via democratic forums, formal and informal rather than any social revolution.¹¹⁰

Yet Burke did worry over the American resistance to philosophy as a mere “parlor sport.” Though it might appear the natural condition to some, capitalism was a philosophical system of values requiring opposition from a philosophical alternative. Philosophies had very practical, material consequences. The storms in the Dust Bowl were to him evidence that a bad philosophy “may even ruin the climate of a whole continent.”¹¹¹ In Burke’s view, economic warfare, brutality toward the ecology, uncritical scientism were capitalistic; communism as a conscious thoughtful rejection of those attitudes, as Burke decided communism might be or become, had to be something better.

What sort of communist was Burke?

One might reasonably maintain that there were as many types of communism as there were communists in the United States, despite the constant efforts of leaders to establish doctrinal consistency and obedience. This is no wonder, since official doctrine changed with the vagaries of Stalin's paranoia and demanded continuous personal rationalization in order to be taken seriously.

Permanence and Change came out in 1935. A few months after his "Americanism" contribution appeared in 1936, the famous Moscow trials began. Burke was rather insulated, invested through his literary community in believing that the socialist experiment might show success and he did not immediately denounce the trials as fraudulent. Rather, in a footnote in *Attitudes Toward History*, the subsequent volume, discussed the possible psychologies of the confessors, a gesture that was to cause him some embarrassment. It is emblematic of Burke's independence in his thought and his life, that there remained a corner of his personality that could never fully understand anyone being otherwise, but it is also indicative of an abstraction that would cause his isolation. Louis Untermeyer called Burke, "A candid and complete cerebralist."¹² Also, everyone seemed to respect Burke's extraordinary intellectual talents and decency; these talents and his instinct to keep away from the practical may have momentarily shielded him from bitter realities. Poets may be permitted careless politics, but a critical theorist and those aspiring to political theory will probably be expected to explain themselves sooner or later. So what kind of communist was Burke, and does it matter?

Whatever his sympathies, the independent Burke could never "sign on the dotted line," and therefore never joined the Party.¹³ Yet Burke unequivocally declared himself

for “the philosophy of communism,” so it behooves us to discover what he was thinking.¹¹⁴

In *Counter-Statement*, *Permanence and Change*, and *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke advocated redistribution of wealth via taxes, government control of major industries and banks and the “dole,” as the center of the new economy. His three books contained several paragraphs explicitly defending his sort of communism as an appropriate alternative to competitive finance capitalism.¹¹⁵ He also criticized the business ethos from a Marxian angle in essays. He lectured at the New York John Reed Club Writer’s School, spoke at the Congress, and was willing to be arrested on a Party sponsored picket line supporting a local union.¹¹⁶ As Burke’s political recommendations were also those of the 1932 CP platform, this was enough for Burke to consider himself a “communist” in 1935 and then to be considered one in 1952. Burke’s literary focus connected him to the cultural concerns of the earlier “Lyrical Left” of the teens and twenties. His distrust of technology and concern with the technical, rhetorical aspect of language, its expression of will, anticipated some of the attitudes of the “New Left” of the sixties and those of what John Patrick Diggins has called the “Academic Left,” who in the seventies and eighties depersonalized power and thus universalized suspicion, respectively.¹¹⁷

The typical fellow-traveler of the period has been described as joining the front organizations, “understanding” the Soviet Union, dismissing criticism of communism as Red-baiting, and “taking over more or less consciously parts of Communist ideology.”¹¹⁸ Burke was more a leader or an independent in any Party forum, and always brilliant and

imaginative, but though an original intellectual personality in other ways, he was a rather typical fellow-traveler in this sense. Burke was really rather disinterested in the Soviet Union except as an ideal, and seemed for a time at least to choose to imagine Stalin to be what Stalin's machine claimed he was, rather than what he really was. Burke's political opinions changed, but he did no public recantations or denunciations.

In his "Curriculum Criticum," written in 1967, Burke described his endorsement of communism thus: "the experimental author [of *Permanence and Change*], then contritely eager to think of himself as part of an over-all partnership had plumped grandly for that word too," along with community, communion, and communication. He continued, "though the term is traditionally liberal and idealistic, . . . it has recently been endowed with egregiously particular associations." According to Burke, "communism" had particularly suited his poetico-political speculations of that time since he thought that secular communities might be formed after "the many theocratic or theologically tinged colonies that were attempted during the earlier stages of our nation's history," that had all modified private property to joint ownership.¹¹⁹ Communism was another utopian model and popular at the time. That explains Burke's concept of communism, yet it does not explain his belief in the regime's basic good will. The debate was not only about terms: language has an almost endless flexibility that events do not, one reason Sidney Hook would challenge Burke so aggressively. Burke had been so concerned with the impact of rhetoric on events, he failed to see real events determining the significance of words, including his own.

Michael Denning is quite skeptical about Burke's revisions and considers his

excisions as censoring his own true radicalism and his rationale “coy.” He says that Burke’s original editions are more coherent, since he never replaced the excised conclusions, which were final references for the need for communism, thus Denning implies a putative ideological purpose is needed to make sense of the books. Whatever shortcomings the books have, and they have many as far as intelligibility goes, they are far too complex to be clarified so easily by any closing reference to the desirability of communism, especially when Burke still mentions cooperation and even communism frequently within the bodies of those works. Does Denning’s political placement clarify the ambiguities in the books? In referring to *Permanence and Change*, Denning suggests: “Burke was more a communist . . . than a Marxist. For Burke, Marxism was the orthodox tradition—represented by John Strachey’s influential works—that stressed the primacy of productive forces. He saw Marx’s theory of ideology as a version of debunking, part of the tradition of Bentham and Veblen. For the debunkers, ideology was always pejorative; since Burke wished to stress the necessity of symbolic action, of word magic, he ‘translated’ ideology into more neutral terms, like ‘attitude’ and ‘orientation’.”¹²⁰ Actually, Burke himself explained it somewhat differently. He claimed, in 1983, that he had used ideology in *Counter-Statement* to describe *Weltanschauung* or general orientation, but after reading *The German Ideology*, “I abandoned the use of the term in the neutral sense and read it in the light of Marx’s attacks on Hegel, who treats ideas as the motive force in history (in their role as unfoldings of the Absolute Idea), whereas Marx treats ideas as but ‘superstructural’ reflections of changing conditions in the material superstructure. . . I end by stoutly

maintaining that both derivations exemplify the ‘genetic fallacy,’ and regardless of how our aptitude for ‘symbolicity’ came to be a part of our physiological structure, once it began to develop it manifested a nature of its own.”¹²¹ It wasn’t that Marx’s term had a pejorative connotation that disturbed Burke, but that it expressed a causal theory – materialism – that he believed to be false. “Attitude” and “orientation” are not more neutral, they just carry less causal baggage, so Burke was free to make his own more idealistic assertions.

But returning to our question, is anything clarified by saying that Burke was a communist rather than a Marxist, especially if one believes he was more comfortable with his relations with the Party than he admitted later, as Denning insists he was? It seems one might more accurately claim that as far as his thinking and personal affiliations, he was far more interested in Marx than in the details of real, historical communism.

In his book, Denning makes a case for a cultural communism that is extremely imprecise. It is as if he wished to distinguish Burke from other Old Leftists on the basis of their being what are today sometimes called “vulgar Marxists,” while he was not, a compliment that would sound backhanded to the egalitarian, language obsessed Burke.¹²² Those persons who studied Marxism before it was moved upstairs were clearly under the impression that its purpose, its hope, was with the vulgar, as in the vulgate, and that this was a virtue, not a shortcoming. One would ask, at what point does Burke’s Marxism stop being Marxism and become “Burkism?”

Samuel Southwell has argued that Burke is not Marxist; that he merely had a few

Marxist opinions. “What civilized human being does not?” asks Southwell.¹²³ While we can sympathize with the spirit of the remark, which is designed to focus interest on Burke’s purely philosophical views, on which Southwell makes some perceptive points, it ignores the very real sociological imprint on Burke’s work, recognized by Talcott Parsons for one, that was at least in part attributable to a serious consideration and partial absorption of Marxian principles of history.¹²⁴ Southwell, whose concern is to elucidate Burke’s philosophical similarities with Martin Heidegger, the twentieth century’s more famous mystical philosopher of language who enthusiastically supported fascism, has placed himself in the unfortunate position of having to separate politics from philosophy, if he is to sustain a comparison of the two thinkers. As for all “civilized” human beings holding some Marxist opinions, Southwell might want to reevaluate his other subject in the light of his own standard.

Daniel Aaron describes Burke this way: “Implicit in all of Burke’s social and aesthetic theorizing was his belief in the autonomy of the artist and the priority of art over politics. His Communism, if you could call it such, was not deeply or religiously felt; rather, it was a strategy, a tactic, a type of organization. His social attitudes, Granville Hicks observed with some justice, were those ‘of a man who is principally interested in technique,’ and his talk before the first Writer’s Congress in 1935 characteristically dealt with an operational problem—propaganda.”¹²⁵

There is much truth in this description. Burke was a writer and not a politician; his model for communication was the poetic, and his ideal type – not yet fully developed at this time—was man as symbol-user. But it does violence to Burke’s entire project to

characterize Burke's aestheticism as implying an autonomy or "priority" of art. If we define Burke's politics and communism as a new, more commodious orientation similar in range to the religious one of the medievals, or the scientistic one of capitalism, it certainly was deeply felt. We would be carelessly following a "scientific" model, if we read his interest in "technique" as one that excluded values and was not therefore profoundly concerned with politics. Burke's conception of technique was that of an eloquence expressing the common human values, neglected only at risk to both the individual and his society. The intention of technique was thoughtful transformation. We have argued for Burke as an aesthete, and Burke's own arguments insist that the aesthetic position was potentially a valid political one. If he was mistaken about this, then his project was fundamentally flawed from its inception. If he was correct, then not only should his theories be tested against history, and we can see that they fared well in this regard, but he was as responsible for his political errors as he was for his sociological and theoretical acuity.

Addressing the second question, it does matter, for several reasons. 1. He said he was "thirty-minded," that he was formed by that period, clearly his activities then were important to him, and if we are interested in him, they are important to us as well. 2. Burke is a difficult theorist. Any clarity on his opinions would be welcome. He is so catholic in his sources, that one needs information on their proper measure. Burke assimilated some Marxian principles and rejected others, quite explicitly. 3. Most importantly Burke was to promote a literary theory that incorporated biography and biographical politics as part of its method of analysis. Furthermore, that theory was itself

a political statement. It would, therefore, undermine that theory, in a study of this sort, not to take Burke's own personal political commitments as seriously as we can.

Furthermore, it is also not up to the interpreter to decide whether Burke's political opinions are forgivable or forgettable, but to present as honest a picture as she can.

Frank Lentriccia insists Burke was "a powerful thinker on the left," and says sensibly that "though there is a lot of Marx in Burke, Burke is not a Marxist—like the most interesting thinkers in America, he's a liberal on the wild side, who does not fear the regions of antinomianism." He then calls Burke a "Western Marxist."¹²⁶ Yet in Lentriccia's *Criticism and Social Change* (1983), though he places him on the left, in treating the books that Burke wrote in this period and subsequently, he worries over Burke's "bloodless" essentialism in his search for a common human nature, and ultimately finds "quietism of literary politics a forgone conclusion" in Burke's aestheticism. So we are once again returned to the debate to which Burke began responding in "Auscultation," and again left bewildered by attempts to categorize our subject.¹²⁷

But if we do not soft-pedal or rename Burke's communism, then what can we say about it? Not very much. As most of the authors writing about Burke say it is clearly not any sort of Marxist-Leninism. It is also not any real Marxism since it rejects materialism and class-consciousness. Nor is it any serious communism that would include more a partial redistribution of wealth attached to a sociological reading of history, occasionally influenced by the period's leftists. Actually, as Burke noted, he went along with the communists' economic program. But as imaginative as Burke was, he could not believe

in the magic of materialism. Though changing the economic structure would have undoubtedly resulted in intellectual transformations, and these were quite unpredictable, he was realistic enough to see that for any change of that sort to occur there needed to be a change in consciousness first. The then-current theory of class-consciousness was too abridged a picture of mind to ever generate a propaganda that might effect such a change in the United States. Far from being a “cold-blooded Platonism” as Lentriccia suggests, Burke’s analysis of American ideology and his critiques of Marxism – his skepticism – stand up quite well, while his readings of the technical operations of capitalism, not original to him, do so less. As the political environment changed, Burke shed even more of these convictions. And in *Attitudes Toward History*, he struggled to find some portion of the Marxist theory of history that might function within his views.

Burke was public about his personal specific political opinions, and he never implied they were considered with the same precision as his generally political-philosophical ones. He and Cowley managed to keep their naive faith in the general good effects of the Soviet regime. Cowley had even visited Spain and was convinced that the some of the communist suppression of the socialists and anarcho-syndicalists was justified; he also defended the trials. If Burke was relying on him, he should have been as skeptical here as he was of Cowley’s critical theories. He criticized its aesthetic policies in both *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*, but in the context of the actual events this would appear rather tame.¹²⁸

He had written to Matthew Josephson, that while “Marxism does provide some necessary admonition to our faulty institutions,” yet it was “exactly 180 degrees short of

being a completely rounded philosophy of human motivation.”¹²⁹ In 1940, already reconsidering his fractious dealings with the Party, Burke described his earlier attitudes thus:

That I was never merely handling a political issue—that, when I was trying overtly to patch something up on the political plane, I was covertly making symbolic passes designed to patch up personal problems totally not-political. (It has always been my conviction that political symbolism is of this sort—which is both the basis of my analysis of literary action and the fundamental reason why the officialdom always felt there was something phoney about my approach. The officialdom has always held to a very rudimentary and naive kind of realism. . . . I have never for an instant believed in its accuracy, as a statement about human motivation.)¹³⁰

Burke did say that he was “grateful” that the Party’s program had helped focus him during those harsh moments of the early Depression and his divorce.¹³¹ His family was breaking up and his novel had met little success. In a later prologue to *Permanence and Change*, he described it as “a book as authors in those days sometimes put together, to keep them from falling apart.”¹³² Thus while most people projected their private needs onto their politics, and rarely acknowledged it, Burke insisted the political was personal.

Burke offered a cultural approach to political problems. His program was certainly no shortcut, provided no guaranteed reaction, and was likely to produce art as individualistic as that of the bourgeois periods. In altering forms, one changes minds; in changing minds, one transfigures action. . . eventually. This may well be dialectical, but it is not materialism, nor economic determinism; it is a progressive humanism of an aesthetic sort. It presumes the motive of the propagandist is a better, more humane society flying under any flag.

1. David M. Kennedy *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41, 58-59.
2. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York, Random House, 1993), 75. In New York the unemployment figures for African Americans were close to fifty percent and hundreds of thousands of Chicanos in the west and southwest were deported to Mexico to free up jobs for now desperate white workers. See Alan Brinkley's *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993), 659-661. See also, Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 57, 87. On the difficulties of getting an adequate statistic, see John A. Garraty, *The Great Depression* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1987), 100-102; Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 163-167.
3. Brinkley, *Unfinished Nation*, 656-68; Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 58, 163.
4. Matthew Josephson *Infidel in the Temple: A Memoir of the Nineteen-Thirties* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 30; Garraty, *The Great Depression*, 109.
5. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 65-78; Mc Elvaine, 28.
6. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 196.
7. McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 30.
8. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 92.
9. Alexander Sachs quoted by Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 14-15.
10. Josephson, *Infidel*, 139; Garraty, *The Great Depression*, 109-110.
11. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 104, 149, 153-54, 292-296, 297.
12. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 156.
13. Kenneth Burke, "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision: The Rout of the Esthetes, Literature, Marxism and Beyond," in *Extensions of the Burkean System*, ed. James W. Chesebro (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 45. See also Jay, *Selected Correspondence*, 153.
14. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 222-227.
15. *Ibid.*, 303-04.
16. Aaron, *Writers*, 52-54.

17. Foley, *Radical Representations*, 20, 21, 23, 48, 49-50, 171, 203n, 284-208, *passim*; Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 103-123; Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 222; Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 437; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, (New York: Grove Press, 1983) xv,xvi, 43, 203, 204, 206, 207, 209, 210, 211, 213, 218, 294, 258, 300, 312, 313.

18. For a sympathetic reading of Corey's books see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 100-01; for a negative one see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 3, *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 169-170.

19. Both *World Tomorrow* poll results and quotation from Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action* in Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 156; Niebuhr's opinions, Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 157-59.

20. Hilaire Belloc was a European hero to this movement.

21. Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, et al. *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962).

22. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 89, 174-175 See also John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 146. Garraty notes that the tendency to blame oneself was international, not only American: see *The Great Depression*, 112-113.

23. From Gerald W. Johnson, "The Average American and the Depression," quoted in Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 89.

24. Cowley, *Selected Correspondence*, 201-202.

25. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 203.

26. Burke, "Auscultation," 46.

27. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 196.

28. Burke, "Waste: The Future of Prosperity," *The New Republic* 73 (July 16, 1930): 228-229.

29. *Ibid.*, 229.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 230-231.

32. "War, Response, and Contradiction," and "The Nature of Art under Capitalism," reprinted in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 234-257, and 314-322, respectively; "My Approach to Communism," *The New Masses* 10 (20 March 1934): 16, 18-20; "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," reprinted in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, eds. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 267-273. "What is Americanism?" (A symposium on Marxism and the American tradition), *Partisan Review and Anvil* 3 (April 20, 1936): 9-11.
33. See Paul Jay, "Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric," *American Literary History* 1, (Fall 1989): 535-553: 536.
34. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 273.
35. Who this editor was is not absolutely clear since Burke never identifies him. Ann Lawren George names Lincoln Kirstein in her "Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*," 101-102.
36. Burke, "Auscultation" 45.
37. Ibid., 61. For a partial list of these writers see Paul Jay, "Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric," *American Literary History* 1 (Fall 1989): 536.
38. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 213.
39. Jay, "Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric," 538.
40. Ibid., 104, 143. Burke's friend Ralph Ellison offered an extended version of this argument in the sixties first against Irving Howe in his essay[s] "The World and the Jug," reprinted in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 107-143.
41. Burke, "Auscultation," 64-65.
42. Ibid., 104.
43. Ibid., 117.
44. Ibid., 130.
45. Ibid., 70.
46. Ibid., 120.
47. Ibid., 122.
48. Ibid., 121-122.

49. Ibid., 122.
50. Ibid., 172.
51. Ibid., 163, 172.
52. Ibid., 169.
53. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 192-93.
54. Granville Hicks quoted in Aaron, *Writers*, 290.
55. Burke's "Waste-The Future of Prosperity" was abridged and reprinted in *The Reader's Digest* 17 (October 1930): 481-483.
56. Edmund Wilson, "An Appeal to Progressives," *The New Republic* 65, (January 14, 1931): 38.
57. Burke, "Boring From Within," *The New Republic* 65 (February 4, 1931): 327.
58. *The First World War: A Photographic History*, ed. with an introduction by Laurence Stallings (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1933).
59. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 386-88.
60. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 238
61. Ibid., 244.
62. Ibid., 245.
63. Ibid., 248.
64. Charles Sherrington won the Nobel Prize for physiology in 1932.
65. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 248, 249.
66. Ibid., 252.
67. Ibid., 253.
68. Ibid., 240-241.
69. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 61-62.
70. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 249.

71. Ibid., 316-17.

72. Ibid., 321.

73. Ibid., 322.

74. Garraty, *The Great Depression*, 168. A year later, in *Permanence and Change*, Burke critiqued Strachey's acceptance of productive relations as the initial cause of spiritual attitudes and cultural forms, 225-26.

75. J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1965), see Chapter 2.

76. Burke, "My Approach to Communism," 18.

77. Ibid.

78. Besides John Strachey's popular treatment, Thomas Amlie, a founder of the Farm-Labor Movement and the League for Independent Political Action, both non-communist radical, anticapitalist organizations, offered a similar analysis of capitalism in his "The Collapse of Capitalism" (1933), and in speeches. Alfred Bingham's magazine *Common Sense* was also a forum for these views. Bingham authored *Insurgent America: Revolt of the Middle Classes* (New York: Harper, 1935), suggesting that the movement focus its attention not on a proletariat but on a middle class that, if ignored on too many sides, might turn to fascism. Bingham advocated a production for use after the EPIC plan, where unemployed workers should produce goods for their own consumption. Amlie and Bingham also criticized the communists and searched for "American" solutions prior to the popular front's moves in that direction. Yet Bingham was also a technocrat, a position with which Burke had few affinities. In "What is Americanism?" Burke suggests that though EPIC is in the American utopian tradition, it is impractical and too small; see "What is Americanism?," 10. For discussions of Amlie and Bingham, see Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 143-151; Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 220-221.

79. Burke, "My Approach to Communism," 19.

80. Ibid., 20.

81. Ibid.

82. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 202-203. In his note, Jay claims the book Burke referred to was *Permanence and Change*; see Jay, *Selected Correspondence*, 203 n2; Ann Lawren George suggests that he is referring to "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision," since the year is only 1932, and that work preceded the published one; see George, "Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*," 107. George's conclusion seems justified.

83. Aaron, *Writers*, 282-285.
84. Robert Wess, *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, and Post-Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.
85. Foley, *Radical Representations*, 126.
86. Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 290.
87. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," a speech to the American Writers' Congress, April 26, 1935. Reprinted in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, 267-273.
88. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 352-354; Aaron, *Writers*, 356-359, 367-68; Foley, *Radical Representations*, 79, 124, 127.
89. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 269.
90. *Ibid.*, 273.
91. Burke, quoted by Allen Tate in "Mr. Burke and the Historical Experiment," in *Critical Responses*, 63.
92. Aaron, *Writers*, 368-371.
93. "Discussion of Burke's Speech at the Congress, April 27, 1935," in Simons and Melia, 274-280.
94. "Revolutionary Symbolism," 271.
95. *Ibid.*, 272. See also Gordon S. Wood's extensive discussion of John Adams's use of "people," and the rhetoric of "the people" in Whig politics of the day, in *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 329-330, 362-363, 366-372, 534, 540, 603, 607, *passim*.
96. Burke, Letter to Robert Cantwell, marked "1935?," Kenneth Burke Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries. Cantwell was then a West Coast writer living in New York, with connections to the I.W.W. and the author of *Laugh and Lie Down* and *Land of Plenty*.
97. *Ibid.*
98. For attitudes on the Left regarding the Moscow Trials, the Spanish Civil War, and the Stalin-Hitler pact, see: Aaron, *Writers*, 334, 337-339, 341; Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 62-63, 68, 86, 154-155, 164, 186; Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 175-

187; Terry Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) 97, 109; Harvey Klehr and John L. Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York : Twayne Publishers, 1992), 90, and Klehr, *Heyday*, 358-363; James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc), 157-159, 165, 206, 216. For personal testaments see: Irving Howe, "Sad Events of Long Ago," *dissent* (Summer 1988), 373-376; *The God That Failed*, Arthur Koestler, et al, ed. Richard H. Crossman (New York: Harper, 1949), especially the Richard Wright chapter. For one eyewitness account of the Spanish Civil War, see George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938), which had a negligible effect on public opinion since on its first publication, 700 copies sold; it was not reissued until 1952.

99. Aaron, *Writers*, 360.

100. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 133-134, 140-141, 145; Aaron, *Writers*, 270-271; Foley, *Radical Representations*, 79, 126-128.

101. Aaron describes Freeman's case in *Writers*, 270-271.

102. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 139, 160.

103. After the Second World War and the Party's collapse in the U.S., German fascism, and Russian and Chinese communism would be seen as distinctly "totalitarian." The issue of America's apparent inoculation from non-liberal ideologies arose. It was explained in part by the "exceptional" nature of American society, noted early by Alexis de Tocqueville as one relatively free of class resentments, having never possessed an entrenched nobility and thus not requiring a social revolution. It was further implied that foreign theories tailored to fundamentally different political cultures were not applicable, and by then it already seemed that one reality or another, from decade to decade, had always interfered with the American assimilation of socialist values. This time, the popular front had inspired further research on the American tradition only to collapse after the Moscow Trials and the German-Soviet alliance. Writers had been trained to find the similarities, but when the Party's universalist program was consigned to disarray, only the American particulars were left behind.

104. Burke, "What is Americanism?," 9.

105. *Ibid.*, 9-10.

106. *Ibid.*, 10.

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*, 11.

109. Ibid.
110. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 117.
111. In 1937, Burke mentioned the ecology explicitly in *Attitudes Toward History*, 300.
112. Aaron, *Writers*, 79.
113. *Selected Correspondence*, 202-203.
114. Burke, "What is Americanism?," 11.
115. Edward Schiappa and Mary F. Keehner have collected the excisions from *Permanence and Change* and placed them side by side with the changes in their article, "The 'Lost' Passages of *Permanence and Change*," cited earlier. See also Burke, *Counter-Statement*, "Curriculum Criticum" in the 1953 and 1968 editions, 215.
116. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 108; Josephson, *Infidel*, 356-357.
117. Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 279.
118. Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Knopf, Vintage edition, 1956), 154-56, 276.
119. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 215.
120. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 439-440.
121. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 304.
122. For one use of the term, see Nelson, *Repression and Recovery*, 123.
123. Samuel Southwell, *Kenneth Burke and Martin Heidegger: With a Note Against Deconstruction* (Gainesville: University of Florida Humanities Monograph, 1987), 82.
124. As editor, Parsons gave Burke's "Dramatism" an entry in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (under "Interaction"), as well as arranging to have him speak and teach at Harvard. Though a critic of Parsons's sociology, C. Wright Mills was also a Burke admirer. See Burke's "Afterword: In Retrospective Prospect, in *Attitudes Toward History*, 401.
125. Aaron, *Writers*, 290.
126. "Analysis of Burke's Speech by Frank Lentriccia," in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, 281-296: 281.

127. Frank Lentriccia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 66, 69.

128. Aaron, *Writers*, 337-338, 344.

129. Quoted in Foley, *Radical Representations*, 158.

130. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 236.

131. *Ibid.*, 232.

132. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, xlvii.

CHAPTER 4

Permanence and Change: Reconsidering Purpose in a Relativistic World

I do not conceive Socialist policy as tied to any particular theory, but to a faith. . . . On a group of theories one can found a school; but on a group of values one can found a culture, a civilization, a new way of living together among men.

Ignazio Silone (1949)

In 1935, though still poor and living out the Depression, Burke made his move toward a better life. By the time he began his second family, he had become established as the writer he had set out for Greenwich Village to become. He had three books to his name, a collection of stories, a novel, an admired book of criticism, and had completed and sold a fourth book to *The New Republic's* imprint. He was thirty-eight and had published well over a dozen poems, almost thirty essays, seven years of music reviews for *The Nation*, as well as some longer essays on musical subjects. He had also published over seventy reviews in various magazines and journals, and had translated works by Thomas Mann, Spengler, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Emile Ludwig, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rolf de Maré, and others.

His name could be found on the masthead of several magazines including *The Masses* and *The Nation* as a consulting editor; he now also began contributing to sociological, literary, and political journals. Possessing an extraordinary energy and living in dramatic times, he kept up a large correspondence and was regularly called on

for editorial advice. Though not known by the public, Burke was a well-recognized figure of distinction in his field, already what one reviewer would call him, “a critic’s critic par excellence.”¹ Yet he had always intended more; he aspired to be a “genius,” and give voice to inchoate ideas. In the years between the completion of *Counter-Statement* and the publication of *Permanence and Change* (1935), Burke began to explore theoretical questions regarding history and society. It was a time of singular instability and, by 1935, Burke believed that the prevailing cultural environment – technological capitalism and the philosophies-of-use that complemented it – was also inherently unstable. Unfortunately, modern art had insufficient resources to provide a thorough-going alternative vision, and artists seemed to swing from rejecting politics to obeying them. Despite his accomplishments, the times, his exhausting personal life, and the rejection of “Auscultation,” made the period one of stimulating confusion and anxiety for him, and Burke turned to work to organize himself. He later described *Permanence and Change* as

written in the early days of the Great Depression, at a time when there was a general feeling that our traditional ways were headed for a tremendous change, maybe even a permanent collapse. . . . Not knowing quite where he was, this particular author took notes on “orientation.” Not being sure how to read the signs, he took notes on “interpretation.” Finding himself divided, he took notes on division. . . . In sum, being in a motivational quandary, he wrote on “motivation.”²

Now that capitalism had revealed its weaknesses, the time seemed ripe to present an alternative cultural politic.

As for communism, Burke had complained to Cowley in 1934 that “insofar as it is a merely political and economic expedient, I can consider it as hardly more than social

dentistry: a contribution to the “good life” in precisely the sense that the pulling of a bad toothe [*sic*] would be.” He concluded that, “Only if it can be placed in some sentimental, non-rational framework does it seem to me to be adequately pointed. In other words: only if it can really substitute for religion.”³ For the rest of the decade, poetry would remain his model for creative thought, though religion would be the model for a comprehensive ideology.

It is almost impossible to classify the books, but as Burke gradually builds his sociological philosophy, *Permanence and Change* serves as a psychological foundation for a critical theory, or an ethical foundation for a psychology. In answering how we might locate a basic permanence or stability and a social unity in a modern interpretive world whose intellectual methods were focused on observing change, Burke began with the very fluctuant and apparently divisive concept of “interest.” This term was key in the early years of the social sciences: a cornerstone of pragmatist psychology and one that connoted early American political theory, especially Madison in *The Federalist*, and a rather incongruous choice for an advocate of communism.⁴

But though he began with the private drive, he would take it in a number of unusual directions. In further pursuit of a unifying attitude, he used this notion of “interest” as the central motive in interpretation, beginning with the antiteleological position that such relativism would imply, and then with ingenious argument, reasserted a modern form of teleology and animism as natural to thought that would then connect the individual consciousness to the world around it. Ultimately, Burke believed that the variety of contemporary perspectives – generated by social pluralism, immigration,

emigration and global travel as well as the rise of new disciplines – multiple insights into reality that were yet incongruous and at times even incommensurable, had as much potential to unite the race as to divide it. He maintained that with the correct overview, or Ur-perspective, we might reason our way toward a mystical position incorporating a larger social bond.

Using Dewey, Veblen, and Santayana as frames of reference, Burke offered his psychological reasons that prevented our moral adaptation to newer circumstances and proposed a supple method, modeled on Symbolism, called “perspective by incongruity” for correcting it.⁵

He defended his psychology against its methodological competitors – Freudianism, Marxism, or positivisms of various sorts – by showing that these other portraits of mind, which premised it as beginning its history as divided against itself or against its own experience were untenable. In his critiques of Bentham and Veblen, Burke also explained language as both expressing not only interest but power as well as sociality; he argued that it incorporated both selfish and altruistic motives: but like Dewey, he argued that these too were united.⁶

Thus, Burke insisted that language confirmed humans as unified and also perennially social even when behaving in ways that appeared quite otherwise, but he did not fully answer how we cope with the very real frictions involved in an actual history. He tried to correct this deficiency in the following volume, *Attitudes Toward History*. This chapter will detail the philosophical dilemmas his time presented, Burke’s solutions in *Permanence and Change*, concluding with the problems his book left unresolved.

Philosophical dilemmas of the 1930's: naturalism and relativism

A decade earlier, the twenty-eight year old Burke had conceptual difficulties with a rather abstract article he planned to call "The Margin of Permanence." Already engrossed with issues of social and intellectual stability and their relation to each other, a problem that preoccupied American critics and philosophers in the twenties, he wrote to Malcolm Cowley that he wanted to "take up the two chief methods of attack on permanency: that of historical changes and that of psychological types": that is, historical relativism – the conviction that all ideas were relative to a historical situation, and subjectivism – the conviction that all interpretation of experience was based on personal history or personality.⁷ Involved in a promising career, and situated at the heart of New York's intellectual life, Burke's letters from the twenties radiate intellectual confidence. He believed that the anxiety raised by the dizzying profusion of current views – and the rapid pace at which it delivered them – might yet be resolved with lucid philosophical and critical analysis, and that he was the man to do it.

As has been described by R. Jackson Wilson, "intellectuals were deprived of a stable world view by the implications of evolution. In several forms, Darwinian, Spencerian, and Hegelian, evolutionary theories convinced one thinker after another that man was, in origin, at least, an animal, that the world was altogether in process, and that categories and ideals that had been presumed to be stable were subject to change."⁸ Though both the Social and Reform Darwinists tried to find their own familiar optimistic silver linings, it soon became clear that this was a new intellectual and moral universe.

Indeed, modern environmentalists had tried to put the brakes on certain sorts of

moral relativism, without much success. In the previous century, Darwin, dismayed that his theory was used as an argument for abandoning scruples about economic inequality – since nature sorted society out, why interfere? – reminded his readers of the existence of species cooperation; Marx argued that some cultural products were mere outgrowths of historical structures, yet also pictured history as concluding: social divisions would end in a wholesome political order. (The revolutionary, Lenin, had no patience with questions of relativism: he held to a naive realist account of the world where everything was more or less as it appeared, stable and good for the revolution, or bad for it, with the rule of the Party of the proletariat as the ultimate good.)⁹

The Reform Darwinists, Chauncey Wright, Charles Saunders Peirce, William James, John Fiske, Lester Frank Ward, and Edward A. Ross, and the literary naturalists of the latter part of the nineteenth century, had stressed environmental factors in order to counteract Social Darwinism's depiction of those at the economic crest as inherently superior, yet this use of one form of environmentalism to combat another more rigid one, only added to the apparent disappearance of a stable human identity and permanent values.¹⁰ "The apostle of relativity is destined to be destroyed by the child of his own brain," predicted the historian Charles Beard, whose classic *Economic Origins of the Constitution* (1913) had made its own contributions to that era's historical relativity by picturing the founding document as a product of economic interest rather than statesmanship.¹¹

Philosophically, questions of meaning arose; formal logic diverged from "criticism," a less systematic hodgepodge of political, literary, and traditional

philosophic discussions. Logic and logical positivism, especially the Vienna Circle on the Continent, struggled to find a method to locate reliable propositions that could withstand scrutiny; while those few who followed Nietzsche's "perspectivism" embraced or accepted relativism, by accepting that thought was "interpretation."¹²

Long prior to 1929, intellectuals, influenced by Marx's philosophy of history as well as by the Darwinian doctrine of continuous change, had redefined what thinking "historically" meant, – to something other than the belief that historical chronicles or biographies provided a certain sort of useful knowledge. On the contrary, progressive historians such as Vernon Parrington and Charles Beard had already suggested that the harmonious, heroic interpretations of the past were suspect, having served entrenched "interests" by romanticizing and valorizing historical figures, who themselves possessed the sensibilities of their class.

The new disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, all suggested that all beliefs might be ultimately found to spring from historical or environmental conditions. Such conditions changed continuously; and so as needs changed, what was called "truth" changed: it was "relative" to time and place. Furthermore, these historical conditions were independent forces, beyond the control of the individuals involved, yet determining them. Though this argument was useful for sweeping away atrophied belief systems, it also implied that the accidents of a soulless history absolutely determined culture and even personality.¹³ This meant that any vision of society that relied on an idealistic "disinterest" was hardly possible, given the human situation as a living part of a continuously moving tableau.¹⁴

Shifting notions of personal volition and social responsibility were an inevitable result of a modern, polyglot urban society often controlled by machine politics, which bore few resemblances to the more orderly, homogenous rural community of the earlier period.¹⁵ As one response, *The New Republic* founder and theorist Herbert Croly had suggested that a strong, well-organized national state devoted to the commonweal might substitute for the bygone disinterestedness and personal heroics of local leaders.¹⁶ Yet the disillusioned generation that followed the First World War was less inclined toward confidence in government and social reform of any sort; they turned to individualistic hedonism instead, and even liberal intellectuals worried about an emerging nihilism.¹⁷

In the teens, cultural critics had already worried over the loss of community, tracing it to Americans' desiccated culture, a moral and cultural boosterism, myopia, or fear. Dewey noted that the public, rather than involving themselves more fully in democracy and making a better society, had become "eclipsed," withdrawing to private personal concerns. Joseph Wood Krutch was imaginative enough to perceive that there existed a modern philosophic trauma, yet could imagine no attitude other than one of tragic resistance or acceptance. Man as a living organism in a changing society demanded a new ethos. Yet, each new interpretation of man in each new discipline entailed a new set of social relations. What should people expect and give to each other, if the traditional forms of cooperation via church and state were fading?¹⁸

American interest in Marx in the first two decades of the century had been in great part an attempt to break away from remnants of the Protestant Ethic and the ethos of the Gilded Age; one could still hear justifications of disparities of wealth and power

attributed to nature's sorting mechanism just prior to the Depression.¹⁹ Interest in Freud was mainly a reaction to what was left of a morally repressive Calvinism. In general, these new views were quite liberating if only for their radical difference from those which preceded them. During those early years, an intellectual like Max Eastman or Walter Lippman could be fascinated and convinced by the perspectives of both psychoanalysis and revolutionary Marxism. But then in the thirties, the intimate family drama described by Freud seemed to some an inapt and trivial model in the context of the international political one.²⁰ As Burke had complained in his unpublished "Auscultation, Creation and Revision," the aesthetes, previously interested in questions of symbol and subconscious were "routed" by the social situation and switched to sociological criticism with alacrity.²¹

In 1925, Burke was concerned less with the social or moral problems of relativism and more with the philosophical, interpretive ones. At its extreme, modern skepticism meant that nothing transcended natural, social, or personal history. There could be no truth sustained through time, across cultures, or between persons of the same time and culture, and thus no genuine communication, nor a mutually dependent politic that would depend on such communication.

He remarked to Cowley that "sociological criticism deals with the mortality of art from age to age, aesthetic standards being looked upon as the result of sociological conditions," and contrarily, "the psychology of . . . Jung deals with art's failure to be universal, in the sense that a pure introvert could not find sympathetic expression in the work created by a pure extravert [*sic*]." As a committed aesthete, Burke could not accept

positions that would leave artistic value at the mercy of time or individual idiosyncrasy. He would “show that the doctrine of absolute mortality and incommunicability [radical change and absolute discontinuity] is as untenable as the doctrine of absolute permanence” since, if followed completely, it would result in “absurdity” or solipsism. Once he could demonstrate a “margin of overlap,” in human behavior, it would be a short step to extend it “until the personality of one culture is seen as overlapping in its expression the essential experiences of the personality of another culture.”²²

Appreciation and practice of literature presumes emotions shared in common. Burke’s literary knowledge lent him this intuitive certainty in the face of the dilemmas his critical views posed, while his philosophical mind saw a logical pressure for this continuity. Seeking a convincing argument for human continuity and therefore the universal value of art, he referred again to Jung’s psychological theories: Jung claimed “certain basic divisions of mankind which are constantly re-individuated,” and his theories regarding symbols, though overly schematic, were consistent with some of Burke’s. Burke absorbed Jung’s famous concept of the “collective unconscious”—an inarticulate, underlying symbolic pattern in human beings, rooted in shared biology and expressed in cross-cultural consistencies.

Nor did Burke entirely reject Spengler. Spengler’s repetitive natural organic cycles of cultural growth and decay, recurring in all cultures, also suggested universal patterns. Though Burke found Spengler’s assertion that history was entirely subject to a single system overly personal and melodramatic, he respected Spengler’s attempt to locate cultural if not intercultural continuity. Spengler had suggested seeing the rise of

“each art to suit a specific set of conditions,” and as expressing “the typical mind of the culture in which it originated.” Creativity was rooted in shared questions.²³

Burke never did publish his “Margin of Permanence,” at least not in that early form. He could not dispatch these questions at the time; perhaps 1925 did not demand their immediate answer, or perhaps the issue needed a greater philosophical maturity than even this brilliant twenty-seven year old author could supply.

Once the Depression arrived and there was a pressing need for revisions to the polity, relativism held less appeal, since it did not aid in one’s resolve. Burke acknowledged that Marxism offered a coherent modern reading of history and a basis for action. Yet he was too committed to insights he had gleaned from the practice of the writer’s craft and aesthetic modernism to accept Marxian materialism as it stood either in 1930 or 1935. Marx’s theory was not the comprehensive overview that could serve as a final technique of demystification since it not only possessed its own unstated ambiguities, but the nature of its rhetorical appeal that was divisive, militated against its own stated moral purpose.²⁴ After the publication of *Counter-Statement*, the criticism it received and the rejection of “Auscultation,” he realized that he would need to offer a broader modern synthesis on the order of earlier ones of metaphysics or theology. This synthesis would need to rest on the new social sciences. *Permanence and Change* was his first attempt at this sort of grand systematic thinking.²⁵

While working on *Permanence and Change*, he explained to Cowley that he was now trying to write about the process of interpretation itself, and noted, “The criticism of religion, said Marx, is the beginning of all criticism. . . . What might be the *end*? Surely,

someone has said, or will say, that the end of all criticism is the criticism of criticism.”²⁶

Burke would be the one to give a review of the corrosive critical tendencies of his own period that placed everything in flux, and everyone at its mercy, and show how they might yet be located within a larger, coherent scheme.

Despite the *esprit de corps* emerging in response to the Depression, one that included the expansion of the American Communist Party, splinter parties and organizations, as well as the Ku Klux Klan, with the rise of fascism in Europe and its sympathizers here, society often appeared as an arbitrary realm caught between predation and pathos. Burke, like others, saw the historical periods under religious hegemony as a symbol of relative orderliness and a sense of common purpose, a familiar reference of the period’s left and right. T.S. Eliot, for example, who had become a naturalized Englishman, had publicly announced that he was now a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”²⁷ Yet, unlike Eliot, Burke felt that modernity needed to find its own way to reintegrate its participants, and this opinion was subtly connected with being situated as an American.

Burke wrote to Cowley: “I believe Eliot is right in everything except his *exile*, which is a very momentous thing to be wrong in. He is able to begin too far along, with too many refinements—we must begin with rougher things. And there is a certain advantage in our requirement, for I think that these rougher things should never be neglected, as they can so easily be, once it has become cheap to hire servants to empty your bizbod for you. A cultural scheme that does not empty its own bizbod is a house erected upon the sands.” This contents of this bedpan were the vexations of a particular

worldview. By 1933, that view – technological capitalism – had emptied its nastier contents on the doorstep.²⁸ What were these?

In ordinary life, the “new” scientific/technological/capitalistic perspective was utilitarian; *use* was its ideal, and the people’s identities were embedded in such use, yet the “natural” and “cyclical” depressions periodically left workers of all sorts, useless, disconnected, purposeless, or fearful. And, while offering more apparent freedom for individuality, this sort of culture simultaneously seemed to make individuals disappear, and even those in the new disciplines who tried to approach this problem by explaining it, the psychologists, sociologists or anthropologists, often seemed only to exacerbate it. The perspective encouraged feelings of personal ambition, and at the same time suggested individual persons were ever more invisible and impotent by depicting the new forces and systems as nonhuman and all-powerful. This would be particularly frightening in the context of economic disaster.

Now the task became one of describing the human personality in a wholesome way, as subject neither to endless chaos and competition nor stability under repression. As he described it in *Permanence and Change*, Burke’s job was to establish a modern portrait of human action, one that moved away from the Manchester school’s “economic man,” Nietzsche’s warrior, or the Social Darwinists’ “predator,” or the liberals’ atomistic individual, to a more cooperative, social one.²⁹ The great modern theoretical discoveries (especially Darwinism), the technological worldview, and the ailing system of the production and distribution of goods – modern finance capitalism – all pictured man as passive instrument, manipulated by either nature or society. Burke described it:

For the *logical* rationalization has tended to shape its accounts of the universal process without regard for the most characteristic patterns of individual human experience: the sense of *acting upon something* rather than *being acted upon by something*. The spontaneous words for human motivation all imply the element of *choice*; but the scientific words imply *compulsion*.³⁰

The Romantic Nietzsche, and the religious William James had both attempted to preserve human agency. The drama that had been drained from the universe would be rediscovered in human volition, whether in Nietzsche's "will to power," or James's "will to believe." Burke wished to establish a peaceful form of human agency while remaining secular.

A decade later, Burke decided he might use contemporary relativism as a springboard to develop his theories of stability. He saw the pluralism of modern life, and the fragmentation of disciplines and perspectives, "A Babel of new orientations," chaotic or not, as a philosophical opportunity not to be missed, advising that "The myriad orientations will be tragically wasted, the genius of one of the world's most vigorous centuries [the eighteenth] will be allowed to go unused, unless we can adapt its very welter of interpretations as skeptical grounding for our own certainties." The twentieth century began with pluralism and relativism as its birthrights, it would have to earn its claim to order.³¹ Gestating the book, now a decade later, Burke proposed to Cowley that the crisis situation indicated that "appropriate ways of seeing and feeling must be formulated and symbolized," yet he also asked, "what guides this 'appropriateness' if not some point of reference already there?" This point, he suggested, would be "the ancient demands of the body, crying out against their slighting in each new historic emphasis . . .

Thus, the sensitiveness to the *new* moves in the channel of biological demands persisting *out of the past*.³² So, in *Permanence and Change*, Burke began examining the links between history (change/nature) and culture (attempts to make sense of history), and by the beginning of the next decade, he had arrived at his theory of “symbolic action.”

Purpose/teleology

In 1929, Krutch had described our philosophical removal from the center of the universe as resulting in an age of “bourgeois security” with “its own dull comforts, for if we have not much to gain neither have we much to lose.”³³ It was shortly discovered that we had a great deal to lose. The abandonment of teleology, the faith in a purposeful universe, resulted in this statistical, passive individual described as the public one. Now that the economy cast the public adrift, the issue seemed central to Burke. His discussion in *Permanence and Change* began with the modern, pragmatist concept of an interested interpretation, harking back to the liberal concept of an interested individual. Yet he also considered the need for a universe of moral significance. Interpretation rooted in human interest was *purposeful* – directional, intentional, and ethical, not merely externally driven and mindless.³⁴

The assertion of an intelligent ruling principle in nature itself or “reality,” we know as “teleology.” According to Burke, language itself, especially poetic language, is teleological. According to Burke, attempts to interpret reality without admitting purpose results in its covert reappearance. Purpose is an inevitable motive in human behavior, since it is the interested reading of personal significance into incoherent experience.

Teleology as a motive: a genealogy of criticism

Yet what made the modern world modern was precisely the rejection of teleology or purpose as a central principle: nature was random and endless. The idea that man has no special spot in nature and that there is no supernatural design or “purpose” evinced in the extant universe was a central modern tenet. Modern science demonstrated that no clever gods or demons were pulling the strings, nor did physical or biological laws necessarily promote order or happiness, though some kept trying to recast the theories in an optimistic light. Darwin’s theories actually suggested Natural Selection operating by default: nature mindlessly killed off at least as much as it supported. Purpose implies intention, order, and free will; the modern view of nature was all contingency and chaos on the one hand, and (mechanical) determinism on the other.

Another tenet of this modern approach was that the behavior of individuals, human or nonhuman, is not directed supernaturally, or by obscure inner forces, but rather by other existing natural things that come into contact with them, *vis a tergo* or “push.” The conviction that the laws of nature are available to human reason and observation, and not veiled and dependent on revelation, we call naturalism; the philosophic version of naturalism that distrusts all but material discoveries arrived at via a scientific method—positivism.³⁵

Burke consistently opposed positivism, tackling it in all his early books, as too presumptuous, narrow, and destructive of the poetic. Toward naturalism he took a halfway position: its critical aspect was useful – its dogmatic aspect limiting; he did not reject modern science, in fact his grasp of theory was always sensitive and highly

sophisticated. But if Burke was to represent purpose as more than sentimental impressions regarding intention, motive, and agency, he would have to revise the concept within the context of a worldview that was naturalistic, whether it be Darwinian, Marxian, Freudian, or any other sort. Therefore, in order to renovate purpose, he needed to subject the naturalism that had dismissed it to a precise logical critique. He seems to have managed this by forging an original argument from various principles in the European philosophical tradition and Anglo-American social thought.

Spinoza's refutation of the "Argument from Design"

To further clarify Burke's own naturalism and distinguish it from positivism, and possibly grasp one source of Burke's facility, it may be helpful to examine Spinoza's argument against teleology. Burke cited Spinoza (1632-1677) frequently, always with approval, and there is agreement among Burke scholars that he was deeply influenced by Spinoza.³⁶ As early as 1921, Burke claimed that "philosophically, I turn to Spinoza; critically, to the dogmatism of Aristotle," likely influenced in both by Richard McKeon. Matthew Josephson later remarked that as a young *Dial* editor, "Burke was hell-bent on leading American literature back to the true path of Spinoza and Goethe, his literary idols of the moment," and away from the destructive chaos of Dada.³⁷

Though Spinoza's work was considered dangerous in his time and banned, shortly after his early death one small section of the *Ethics* managed to find its way into a clandestine distribution during the Enlightenment. This was the famous deductive argument against Aristotelian teleology (final causes), staunchly defended at the time by

theologians of various religions. Taken together with his previously published historical Biblical analysis, Spinoza presented a critical corollary to a Copernican world-view.³⁸

The argument runs: As God is infinite, He lacks for nothing. But since people are moved by infinite things of which they are unaware, they imagine themselves free and act with ends in mind. Judging nature by themselves, they infer it also acts with a purpose and then attribute this to a personal God like themselves. The nature of intention or purpose indicates desire, desire implies need, therefore it implies finitude. As an infinite God is complete and needs nothing, and can have no purposes or ends, nor act by fiat or will. So, there can be no design of an Aristotelian or deistic sort to the universe, nor any anthropomorphic God (Spinoza identified God with nature.) This is the logical refutation of the “argument from design,” a cornerstone of early philosophic naturalism. According to Spinoza, after recognizing nature’s power, man had vainly attempted to anthropomorphize it in order to explain it to himself, succeeding only in making the deity and men appear “all mad together.” That is, teleology unwittingly placed human perspective at the center of all nature, making human passions, vulnerabilities, and frailties the universe’s rationale.³⁹

Burke referred to unconscious anthropomorphizing as the “pathetic fallacy.”⁴⁰ But he also suggested that once acknowledged and not read into the cosmos as an untouchable science, teleological thinking might be permissible. For example, it was so necessary to poetry, which compels us to view nature in the most personal terms and forces human characteristics onto its descriptions. If yellow factory smoke “slides along the street” or minutes “change place” in Eliot’s or Shakespeare’s poetry, these are

anthropomorphic descriptions, characterizing nature in human terms, as all descriptions, even scientific ones must do. Thus, Burke would subsequently argue that even science relied on teleological presumptions. Not only because scientists had specific intentions, but because their experiments were premised on teleological metaphors and structured in ways that were not so different from the frankly teleological and metaphorical poetic expression. As a defender of the “poetic” and as a humanist, Burke would focus his philosophy not on what he as a modern knew to be an impassive cosmos, but on our metaphorical compensations for its indifference: our continual reanimation of the world.

From finality to efficiency: the modern and mechanical

The universe did not operate with ends in view; theorists replaced these ends with a mechanical “efficient” causality, in the eighteenth century understood as *vis a tergo* (the term Burke uses), or as stated earlier, the “push” of one thing against another. This was a further step in the disintegration of the traditional human whose inner life was the dramatic center and dominion of organized religion. Despite his own historical bent and sociological interests, Burke was leery of too much determinism, too much mechanical “push” and insufficient “pull” in descriptions of human behavior.⁴¹ Even in his early writings, Burke contended with naturalism’s deterministic tendency by always stressing symbolism of one sort or another – poetic, Freudian, mythological, or religious. Symbolism of any type was human and internal—it drew the world closer by investing objects of perception with emotional significance.⁴²

Returning purpose or teleology to the heart of human action via symbolism and

language, might preserve agency and yet remain modern, avoiding an obscure “free will” or any supernaturalism. The issue of God and divine intervention remained moot.

Synopsis of Burke’s argument in *Permanence and Change* (in three parts)

Permanence and Change has three sections. The first sets up the general premises and the problem; the second, offers a critical and constructive method; the third, a proposed solution. Each secondary or tertiary issue mentioned involves a miniature argument of its own: this is dialectical argumentation in the expansive Platonic sense.⁴³

Philosophically, Burke’s book was conceived as a substitution for the positivistic, pragmatic attitude of his era that had replaced the human with the technological. It also argued that the individual is fundamentally social even when selfish and therefore, cooperation is natural to him.⁴⁴ A key element in his explanation is the previously mentioned teleological principle of purpose, constantly reappearing despite all efforts to deny it. The book ends with an argument for a mystical perspective. It also offers an argument against Nietzsche, whom Burke considers the quintessential philosopher of the technological transition and its anxieties.⁴⁵ While Nietzsche’s views on interpretation frequently dovetailed with Burke’s, they arrived at opposite conclusions about the human character.

1. Orientation

Interest and consciousness

With droll examples from behavioral and gestalt psychological experiments with

children and animals, Burke argued that “all living things are critics,” since their baseline interest in survival and their instinct to develop to species’ potential roots a point of view. Thus experience necessarily involves a critical discrimination. A trout, once being hooked and then escaping, learns “a nicer discrimination between food and bait.”

Therefore, Burke’s originating premise is that life is defined by the activity of a critical consciousness as awareness pursuing survival. The simplest change of interpretation is the conditioned reflex, and much of one’s orientation is reliant on this sort of quasi-reflexive psychological preference. This combination of physical energy and critical ability seems a commonality between all that lives, human, fauna and perhaps even flora. Yet, unlike animals, humans use language, which gets them into and out of trouble; we are able to not only to revise our interpretations, but “interpret” the interpretation itself. Humans can be wrong and know it.⁴⁶

Orientations and rationalizations

To cope with the exigencies of circumstance—the dramas of life—we interweave these interested perspectives, shaping them into “orientations” so as to form reasonable expectations for future experience. We make sense of the world by developing a structure of meaning. Because human physiology is similar, and events within places and periods are also similar, there will be multiple points of contact between many individual perspectives: these intersections become general shared orientations.⁴⁷

At some point, the shared orientations are organized by the major interpretive talents – “prophets,” – into “rationalizations,” or general belief systems. These

accommodate disparate and even contradictory ideas within quasi-coherent and elastic schemes that promote survival, rationales and general methods for the active cooperation that improves life. According to Burke, the major rationalizations of the Western world have been magic, religion, and science, each with a corresponding style of communication corresponding to the historical development of the scheme. The basic orientation offers the individual the necessary concepts and terminology to develop a social identity and to be able to describe his motives to himself and others.⁴⁸

Motive

“Motive” is a major term in Burke’s lexicon. We need to articulate what people do and why they do it in order to predict future occurrences. In “Auscultation,” Burke, consistent with a relativistic approach to psychology, had argued that stimuli do not possess an absolute meaning; they are dependent on the context in which the subject locates them. Here he cited behaviorist experiments where even dogs made relational connections to find their food, and babies were conditioned with loud noises to fear rabbits that they would otherwise pet, offering more evidence that situations are ambiguous and relative.⁴⁹

If members of a culture continually find themselves experiencing similar ambivalence in situations, they will develop a term capturing the conflicting feelings: e.g., “duty” describes the subjective struggle between the desire to please another or oneself; “suspicion” designates a variety of clashing signals, some fear-inducing, some not. Our words for motives are “rough, shorthand descriptions,” capturing the nature of a

complex situation, culturally situated – a jumble of emotion, understood in a cultural context.⁵⁰ In this sense then, language *is* historically situated.

Resistance to change: “occupational psychosis” or “trained incapacity”

A problem arises when an unexpected element enters and there is a “cultural lag” between the rationalization and a present social situation. Dewey had noted that “mental and moral beliefs and ideals change more slowly than outward conditions.”⁵¹ And entrenched institutions or individuals may resist adapting to change for any number of reasons, often to their own detriment.

Critics often saw this resistance to their new interpretations of reality as benighted. According to Burke, the Freudians argued that there was a disjunction between a principle of “pleasure” and one of “reality” that led people to prefer the pleasure of their delusions about their own or others’ motives over the pain of exposure. Left-wing social criticism, such as that of the vociferous Michael Gold, or even the more temperate Cowley, claimed that readers who preferred an apolitical literature were withdrawing or “escaping,” – victims we might say of “false consciousness.”⁵²

Burke argued otherwise. He challenged the not-so-subtle moralism of these approaches, using associative and behavioristic examples to arrive at a commonsense hedonism. If wholesome survival is the fundamental interest, pleasure, versus pain, *is* the reality principle. Furthermore, any “escape” from pain and turn to pleasure is a natural impulse for the organism, reasonable and universal. This could not be a form of error, or any false consciousness; it was a very genuine consciousness.

For Burke, cultural lag and social error were instead missed connections, misdirected blame, or false attributions of causality that Burke names “faulty means-selecting.” One rather extreme example of such faulty reasoning he offers is that of economically blighted Southern whites responding to their economic troubles with racial violence. In content, Burke’s theory was quite similar to the Marxist one, yet his attitude was far more conciliatory than divisive, and it resisted covering the “reserves of private judgment” with a scientific veneer. Burke’s views had a different tenor from those of Freudians or Marxists, who averred that in fitting the individual to society, education repressed or oppressed him, as it compelled us to internalize forces inimical to our well-being.

Faulty means-selecting was an almost inevitable miseducation. Chickens trained to respond to a bell for food, will run just as quickly to their slaughter if the same bell is rung.⁵³ The orientation instructed its members in complex techniques of social interaction and production. And in learning to do, see, or create things in one manner rather than another, its members developed what Dewey had called an “occupational psychoses,” or as Veblen described it with even greater ambivalence, they arrived at “trained incapacity,” toward other approaches.

2. “Perspective by incongruity”

Burke avoided the romantic view that set the individual against his society or age. Orientations were defended not by social approbation or censure, nor by external class control, but by the efficacy of their own explanatory power and our mental habits. His

novel method of critical attack on the entrenched value system was a form of systematized, ironic nonsense stylistically reminiscent of Symbolism and meant to slightly jolt the lethargic thinker stimulating her curiosity: “perspective by incongruity.” Since the contemporary scientific rationalization was so dominant, to dissociate such a network required cultivating a novel form of poetical skepticism. Perspective by incongruity was “a kind of vision got by seeing one order in terms of another,” – a way to be intentionally anachronistic or malapropos.⁵⁴ The goal was the kind of “disintegration” described in *Counter-Statement*, together with an intention to forge a new unified orientation within this fracture, one that would be a Nietzschean “transvaluation of values.” There was something of a perspective by incongruity in any modern alternative ideological system, but Burke had now distilled and named the technique. He counseled that a “planned incongruity should be deliberately cultivated for the purpose of experientially wrenching apart all those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which still remain with us,” subjecting language to “the same ‘cracking’ process that chemists now use in their refining of oil.”⁵⁵

He also suggested that there was a proper procedure for these mental-moral “conversions,” which he based on his analysis of the way humans create value and order for themselves. To explain this, Burke synthesized ideas, techniques and mannerisms found in Santayana, Nietzsche, Spengler, Bergson, and Freud, with ideas of De Gourmont, unmentioned but as we see, very present.

Piety and Conversion

Ogden and Richards, as well as Jung, had researched attitudes toward particular symbols – father, tree, circle – and observed that ordinary images were laden with emotional associations and significance. Particular associations might be personal, yet some symbols were cross-cultural and others almost universal (mother and father, for example). From Santayana, Burke took the concept of “piety” as a “reverent attachment to the sources of his [man’s] being and the steadying of his life by that attachment.”⁵⁶ These “sources” are represented by especially resonant consistent symbols, associations often made in childhood simultaneously with the acquisition of language. Similar to Burke’s earlier depiction of form as raising and fulfilling of emotional expectations, piety is also “*the sense of what properly goes with what*,” that is, an inner sense of order that first selects experience and then organizes it within a “complex interpretive network.”⁵⁷ In this way we create “altars”: precious personal systems that have their own conventions rooted in taboos. According to Burke, humans may not be rational, but they are “methodical” and construct an unconscious architecture of proper procedure for our linguistic systems whether they are those of daily life, work, criminal behavior, or even slang.⁵⁸

Owing to this, rhetorical appeal – viz. propaganda – cannot be based purely on “logic,” since each orientation, personal or cultural, is logical, given its own framework of concern. Undermining any aspect of that structure would naturally inspire a healthy resistance to the desecration of meaningful, morally integrating symbols.

Burke derived an original method from Nietzsche’s perspectivism and Spengler’s

abstractions. Nietzsche had described modern experience as the almost maddening proliferation of perspectives. His “dart-like” language of incongruous words mirrored this frenzied reality. Taking another Nietzschean idea, Spengler reconceived history as endlessly recurring cycles in the manner of the ancients, rather than the linear, progressive manner of continuous novelty in which the moderns viewed it. In order to link the historical and relative with the cyclical and timeless, Spengler bridged time by associating concepts across history and cultures, offering such odd connections as “Arabian Puritanism,” or comparing the later European Enlightenment with the Hellenistic period.⁵⁹

Burke had found fault with Spengler’s philosophy, yet he appreciated his stylistic flexibility in creating “conceptual gargoyles,” or verbal connections that violated the standard expectations of chronology. As Symbolism had done in the poetic sphere, and De Gourmont had argued for history, this rhetorical device offered the odd juxtapositions necessary for a fresh look at an orientation and its associations. Such grotesqueries expressed “the quasi-mystical attempt being made to see around the edges of the orientation in which the poet or thinker lives.” And this tendency was not to be entirely explained by historical conditions.⁶⁰

Thomas Carlyle had famously complained that his own time was “out of joint.” “Incongruity” was the perfect term for the modern crisis of competing symbols, and a “perspective by incongruity” the suitably ironic, yet gentle technique for disorienting and then reorienting people, detaching them from their vestigial pieties and the altars so dedicated. To radically sever persons from their systems was unwise, they needed to be

gradually reintegrated within another system of sustained complexity: beliefs on which they could reconstruct their lives. In all this they could hardly be conceived purely as passive victims of false notions but needed to be conceived as intellectual agents. Still, this agency had to be qualified; it should not be an attempted dominance by science or will, as positivism or Nietzsche's form of voluntarism proposed. That was what technological capitalism had attempted and it had boomeranged.

“Analogical” versus “logical” thinking: Burke versus positivism

Burke used poetic creativity as the alternative model for agency and thought. To establish greater credibility for poetic thinking, Burke had to unseat scientific method then at the pinnacle of rational technique. Deweyan pragmatism had lauded the scientific method and induction as the model for rational thought. A more extreme logical positivism envisioned an abstract syntax that would disallow any statement not falsifiable by actual testing. Analogical reasoning or metaphor was assumed the contrary of rational thinking that strove to be entirely concrete. Other critics, I. A. Richards, for example, were ready to accept that metaphorical, “pseudo- statements” were different from factual ones. He maintained their practical value was found in their ability to improve the quality and the level of our otherwise animal life and he stressed literature's special imaginative province.⁶¹

Burke was unwilling to concede so much. Since our existence was not really animal but linguistic and these tendencies were aspects of survival and development, they could not be irrational. So, in 1935, Burke reexamined the truth claims of logical

argument and objective experiment. Bergson had suggested that rather than abstract terms, we should actually use metaphors, since a general term is really a name for the set of analogies between particulars, anyway. Burke observed that the abstraction used continually by science was in fact, analogy by another name. He explained: We abstract from our past experiences to form reasonable, logical expectancies or operate intentionally. For instance, experiments also generalize when they draw conclusions: the generalization, the consistent similarity or dissimilarity of result, must be metaphorically analogous, or it would not be called logical. An inductive experiment repeats an activity with a number of subjects and then draws a conclusion; the subjects are recognized as like-each-other and the generalization is based on their likeness to nonsubjects. Fundamentally, scientists depended on analogy just as poets did, although they were less aware of their own metaphorical tendencies.⁶²

Furthermore, such analogical thought is generated from a locus of interest. Interest and abstraction are interdependent since “an interest itself takes its shape from a prior body of classifications,” and “Clearness and consecutiveness of thinking . . . depends primarily upon clearness in our interests.”⁶³ According to Burke, all discoveries, scientific and mathematic, as well as artistic and practical, are “analogical extensions,” where one extends insights via abstraction from one area of interest to another.⁶⁴ For example, fires, acids, the sun, can all burn. “Hence one’s interests in this matter enable him to analyze both fire and acids as having a burn-character.” Yet if our interest changes, we “will approach events with a new ideality, reclassifying them, putting things together that were in different classes, and dividing things that had been together.”⁶⁵

Burke went further with his challenge. Though it is imagined that we structure arguments according to the disinterested rules of logical proof, the fact is that all arguments are in some way circular: “the conclusion had led to the selection and arrangement of the data . . . From what we want to arrive at we deduce our ways of getting there, though the conventions of logical exposition usually present things the other way around.”⁶⁶ So, in order for an expository writer to explain her own thesis even if it involves someone else’s reasoning, there must first be some grasp, however imperfect, of both the thinker’s conclusions as well as the writer’s prior to all else, though they are both explained in the opposite order and may encompass unforeseen data. Using a narrative as an example, Burke claims that “To make us weep contentedly at the final reunion of brother and sister, the poet hangs telltale lockets about the necks of the little waifs lost in chapter one. . . . It is in this sense that we call a demonstration by Euclid merely additional matter created out of . . . the nature of the original proposition,” that is, an example of deductive logical reasoning. “The *true corollaries* of a proposition are usually called its *proof*.”⁶⁷

Applying this to science, “we should say that the ‘data’ evolved by those who would prove that men are machines, or the sons of God, or chemical compounds, etc., are observations moulded [*sic*] by the informing point of view.” Burke echoed research in physics and even that of the logical positivists themselves, who were also grappling with aspects of the fact that scientific information seemed to be terribly vulnerable to the observer’s presence. Burke insisted that there was nothing “scandalous” here, unless we suppose “that the very universe must be bungling and misguided unless it proceeds in

accordance with the conventions of a barrister's plea. . . . Our notion of causality as a succession of pushes from behind is thus a disguised way of insisting that experience abide by the conventions of a good argument."⁶⁸

There was actually something intellectually scandalous here, since it appeared to collapse the ground from whatever epistemological stability remained, and implied that all creative activity was a mirror of the individual or his society, and thus history, rather than one of a constant, independent nature. Since testing must be circumscribed by limited interests in order to yield unambiguous results, and so even empirical success was relative. Burke asked: "Is the success of nitro-glycerine adequately tested, . . . when a charge of it blows up an experimental rock, or when it has been distributed throughout the explosive social structure of the world?"⁶⁹ In a point that has been repeated many times since, Burke observed that even the apparently pragmatic criterion was inevitably dependent on a value system, an ethical test of the tests, one in "the region of Weltanschauung, of cultural, moral, political emphases, of ambition, concepts of the good life, notions of ultimate human purpose."⁷⁰

Burke observed that "scientific" interpreters look for what appears recurrent, for example, Spengler's rising and declining epochs, or Marx's "Oppressors and Oppressed." Yet in fact, since "the vast bungling complexes of history do not recur," they were particular, and thus there can be nothing really "objective," in those general interpretations. Once informing interests compel us to abstract special characteristics to discuss, what we today call "essentialism," we "violate the tenor of any culture as the members of that culture know it," including our own. That does not mean we shouldn't

do it, since we will have to in any case. “Hence the perspective by incongruity to which the historian or sociologist is automatically pledged.” Looking at any number of particulars, abstracting a similarity and naming it with the “metaphorical” or general term, is always a “perspective by incongruity,” and always anachronistic, creative and active.⁷¹

So, beginning with our biological interest, our linguistic gifts immediately involved us with symbols. Once operating at a complex level, these became analogical, forming tissues of connection via simplification and generalization and linking ideas to each other; when formalized, these were called “arguments” or “proofs.” The fact that experimentation was not absolutely open, that it was determined by form in the operation of its critiques, explained cultural lag.⁷²

Conversion: Freud

Burke believed that one might turn the relativity of language to effective purpose in orienting the many present intellectual perspectives. Once perspective by incongruity had loosened an orientation’s hold on an individual, he now needed to integrate himself within a new system. It should be broad, flexible, and therefore sufficiently metaphysical to accommodate the one interested perspective together with the vast collection of others. Unfortunately, the major critical offerings inadequately grasped the positive nature of human creativity. Burke used Freudian psychoanalytic theory to illustrate a modern conversion process, yet explained how it ultimately neglected or misread the intellectual and active character of interpretation.

Modern secular conversions moved away from the religious drama, in which people felt too consequential and thus too guilty, offering ethical reductions. For example, Freud's "six abnormal types," including the homeoerotic and masturbatory, were categories of sexual deviance so elastic that they included almost everyone, and thereby convinced the patient that a personal punishment was unlikely. The patient's intimate and anxious concern was "impiously" replaced with a more public, incongruous, and ordinary description—a "conversion downwards," much as exposing a shadow to be just an old coat might calm a frightened child. In psychoanalysis, the source of anxiety would now be a "mere" fantasy, neurosis, or perversion, and the method was effective.⁷³

Yet Burke had claimed that people were social and orderly by nature: their piety, use of analogy, and transformations were "methodical" and wholesome, this fundamentally challenged the Freudian view. The question of mental illness appeared a direct counter to Burke's argument since it presented a situation where the individual was allegedly destroyed by his nature and history from within. Repression and regression theories, and the supposition of a death instinct argued in that direction, claiming that trauma, the extremes of life itself, set off self-destructive internal patterns that could undo development when triggered. Though he was not opposed to all forms of psychoanalysis, Burke, perhaps relying on the Christian Science of his childhood, did not believe that there was anything inherent in basic human nature that was self-destructive.⁷⁴

The Freudian view argued that since a nonrational pleasure seeking was at the center of the person, the method for dealing with psychic pain was to submerge it in the recesses of memory. Social integration, rather than unifying the personality as Burke

would have it, or providing effective coping mechanisms, further repressed the memory. This submerged trauma did grave damage by expressing itself in unexplained neurotic behaviors. Therefore, the theory portrayed the mind as riven when it internalized social values, “regressing” to a primitive state in moments of stress.⁷⁵

We have already seen why Burke thought that the pursuit of pleasure was perfectly rational. Burke suggested a neurotic behavior, such as claustrophobia, might be more naturally described as an automatic protective response to the original experience, now applied to situations that bore associative resemblances to that first one: less self-destruction than self-preservation. The episodes of neurotic fear were neither a return to a prerational state, nor a repressed memory at all, but rather the consequence of a lesson remembered so well it had become an automatic *method* of self-defense, with a set of pieties and altars that, prior to analysis, had never been reassessed or even acknowledged. If now recognized, they might be understood as a sound response to a frightening or upsetting situation no longer extant, rather than an irrational one. This could be accomplished without resorting to Freud’s abnormal types or notions of repression.

What was called “regression” was not a return to a preintellectual, emotive, primal condition, but rather a matter of how people interpreted signs within a context. For example, under torture, even the mild-mannered behaved “regressively”—violently or pathetically. Burke says, “Suppose that, in accordance with his orientation, he [someone] is persuaded that he stands beneath a Damoclean sword, or that he hears a Bellerophontic letter, . . . If some primitive response arises under such a situation, are we not really dealing with something so *intellectual* as a matter of interpretation, and is not

the affective response . . . quite in keeping with the meaning of the situation as it presents itself to him?" In such a case, paranoia is not pure irrationality but a case of "faulty means-selecting." In Burke's hopeful view, even the mentally ill retained method and some agency, via interpretation, operating under the same principles as the sane.⁷⁶

More evidence that the process was intellectual and social was the fact that theory and discussion functioned as part of the Freudian conversion by dispelling the fevered privacy of neurosis. Yet in dismantling the patient's illness, it also destroyed the carefully constructed pietistic "altars" by which the patient had integrated himself, without suggesting a new synthesis. Burke praised the approach of the English psychiatrist William McDougall, author of the then famous *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908), who was known for his defense of a "fixed structure of mind," and an instinct theory that ran counter to the environmentalism of many other psychologists.⁷⁷ McDougall claimed that he carefully incorporated the patient's former values, and acknowledged rather than dismissed the submerged alternate "personalities," tolerating a level of emotional cacophony.⁷⁸ Using a "dissociative" process of analysis, McDougall supposedly helped his patients absorb these personalities and the values they represented, into a new order under the dominant "self-regarding impulse," strong enough to hold together the conflicting tendencies.⁷⁹

Burke's point was that trauma is not destiny. Once rationality develops, it can determine the affective life that originally helped form it, and therefore the mind is not forever dependent, passively determined, or even explained by the irrational experiences of childhood, nor by its original orientation. So though any individual mind may be

irreparably damaged, it does not begin as self-destructive, whatever the appearances to the contrary. And we can admit that suicides are choosing the less painful alternative. Furthermore, even neurotic persons can turn a theoretical engrossment with their problems into a coping method; interest trumping illness.

To the question why one subject and not another has paranoid delusions at all, Burke suggested such fears are a talent or “genius” for being affected in a certain way by historical events—a certain unfortunate sensitivity parallel to poetic creativity. This will likely strike some as a dated or sentimental view, but if we think about it, there is really nothing in this view that would preclude any actual form of therapy that worked, even something as grim as shock treatment. It does not treat the illness as a thing in itself, but rather as a morbid receptivity now interfering with function.⁸⁰

3. The Basis of Simplification: Permanence

Economics and metabiology: Marx

Permanence and Change attempted to establish a continuity within change. According to Burke, our philosophies of progress were philosophies of “becoming.” They emphasized flux. In this final section, Burke pressed for a humanistic metaphysics of “being,” one that would stress the commonalities of men throughout the ages, honoring their consistent needs, so that we might base social planning not on what humans should become, but on what they were and could become. “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 he repeatedly struggles to restore, under new particularities, the same basic patterns of the ‘good life.’”⁸¹

Whether he favored communism or not, he spent pages hammering at materialism, using John Strachey’s popular treatment as his foil. In so doing, he challenged the concept of historical causation as well. According to Burke, to begin the historical causal chain with production was arbitrary. Burke insisted, “There must at least have been certain purely psychological factors, judgments concerning the ends and means of living, interest in mechanical speculation, which prompted men to pour so much effort and ambition into the development of machinery at all.” Though Strachey traced the “cult of liberty” arising in the battle for free markets (thus uniting liberty and capitalism in a way that might please our conservatives today), Burke suggested that since the species survived by locomotion, it would necessarily possess a natural desire for “freedom of movement,” with or without markets.⁸²

Burke merged the biological, emotional, and linguistic, offering his own “dialectical biologism, framed in keeping with the hyphenated usage, mind-body,” patterned after “a somewhat Spinozistic conception of substance as possessing two integrally interlocking modes.” Similar to materialism, in that it emphasized that “food and shelter in both their primitive forms and their cultural projections are *necessities* of the ‘good life,’” it was also in partial keeping with idealism, since it saw culture and economic structures as expressions of this natural biological-intellectual personality, not merely the results of material conditions and it considered “all of man’s historic institutions . . . the externalization of biologic, or non-historic factors.” It was

“dialectical,” as opposed to mechanical, since it held that historic textures were the result of the interactions between the historically given and the trans-temporal and trans-cultural. This new system would be a “metabiology.” So, the philosophy of being was a metabiology: based in human need, it yet acknowledged the intellectual, the symbolic, to be an equal force in history.⁸³

Skepticism to mysticism: the sterilization of conflict by the ego-altruistic merger

However, accepting a metabiological self-interest, one grounded in the survival mechanism, did not lead immediately to a vision of a healthy, unified society with improved communication – on the contrary.

Burke repeated a point from “War, Response, and Contradiction”: consciousness was manifested in the acts of hunting or grasping for food; thus Nietzsche had seen the warrior as the species ideal. As Sherrington had shown, the desire for “Nirvana,” paradoxically thrust us into the hunt. Our biology was dependent upon such tension; it generated the conflicts and motives that moved us to action. We could never satisfy our needs absolutely, or “the military equipment of nervous agility, of bodily and mental muscle, would fall into decay,” and the human form would collapse. Thus, the sense of having unconsciously transgressed by reason of our ambitious self-interest was endemic to the nature of our human situation. Since we overstep ourselves and interfere with others, human struggle and purpose also resulted in an expiatory impulse. Persuasive language required the appreciation of conflict: “At the roots of the ethical there is tragedy.”⁸⁴

Poetic and rhetorical forms intuitively exploited this fracture and conflict at the

heart of communication; even poetry or interpretative schemes that promised a final quiescence, promoted an ultimate peace with roiling descriptions of pain and sacrifice. So, though we might believe a revolution will produce a world without struggle and conflict, or that a cleansed language can root out all falsehood and inequity, the verbal justifications for the effort will contrarily emphasize conflict, isolation, danger, and difficult labor, glamorizing the otherwise mundane utilitarian benefit. Put plainly, worthiness alone makes a weak pitch.⁸⁵

As a poet, Burke accepted the “magical” power of language; he acknowledged that “morals are fists,” and that a fractious element lived at the root of language and consciousness itself and thus society. The fact that speech was hortatory, that it was relative to the perspective and the desires of the speaker, and that it expressed a will-to-power had been observed much earlier in the history of philosophy by the English political philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). A distressed Bentham found that language was eulogistic or dyslogistic; trying to infect its hearers with an attitude, it was rarely ethically neutral, though neutrality was Bentham’s ideal.⁸⁶ Bentham’s purpose had been to deny political and religious authorities the use of these rhetorical coverings for their bids at control of a gullible public. Bentham, and subsequently the pragmatist Charles Saunders Peirce, conceived similar projects – they aimed to cleanse ethical and intellectual obscurity from language with simplified vocabularies, thus bringing a desired transparency into the political and philosophical arenas. When Burke was writing, the logical positivists were then designing their impersonal symbolic language systems, codes that would neutralize propositions for the sake of clarity.

However, if conflict was at the foundation of society as well as cooperation, attempts such as Bentham's were futile, as least as far as human action was concerned. According to Burke, Bentham's distrustful "skeptical analysis of speech" actually brought him "into a realm of conceptual relativity which is usually the property of mystics," since to drain out aggressive, persuasive elements from communication, would leave us speechless.⁸⁷

The ego-altruistic merger

If the problem of power was inescapable, was Nietzsche then correct in his picture of our essence as isolated and combative? Burke said no. Language demonstrated that man was actually always social. True, this combative element did need to be "sterilized," in some way, or Burke's theories regarding society might devolve into something similar to Hobbes's atomistic *bellum omnium contra omne*, with the shrewdest rhetors arrogating the greatest power to themselves. Burke was searching for a way that we might accept this combative element in ourselves without allowing it to become the essential definition of human consciousness.

Burke's predecessor, Thorstein Veblen, also had tried to "sterilize" the aggression involved in human action. In his *Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (1914), Veblen endeavored to detour the tragic aspect of human ambition and provide a possible model for an alternative to finance capitalism. Veblen split action and "industry" into two sorts of drives: the instinct of predation or "exploit" (self-aggrandizement illustrated by the hunt and "male"), and that of workmanship

(exemplified by farming and nest building and “female”). The first, combative, warlike and wasteful; the second, social and constructive. By following one model as opposed to the other, he thought we might purify the harsher, competitive aspect of getting a living into one more social and less repressive and selfish.⁸⁸

Burke shrewdly observed that in action, and certainly in action as industriousness, these two impulses were hardly distinct: instead he proposed that we recognize an “egoistic-altruistic merger.”⁸⁹ The egoistic was our awareness of self; the altruistic was awareness of the world outside the self. A carpenter building a house for pay was also building it for someone else. Even a nest was a shelter, which was also a tool for survival, and thus a weapon in the Darwinian struggle; it was built with the “competitive equipment,” employing “techniques of suppression and control.” All activity engaged both forms of consciousness. Again Burke suggested that a unity with two perspectives might replace a duality.⁹⁰

Piaget had observed that persuasion develops in children as a socialized replacement for force. “The individuality of the child’s desires and intentions acts as a *socializing* factor by inducing him to perfect *logical* modes of thought as distinct from ‘autistic.’” Thus though linguistic persuasion always bore the mark of its origins as a method for getting one’s way, it involved reasoning with others in a manner that tried to pull them to oneself and move toward them.⁹¹

Though Veblen had ironically debunked capitalism by portraying its useless, ritualistic waste as a compulsive, primitive quest for distinction, Burke asked seriously whether in actual practice pursuit of wealth was not in fact an almost religious altruism,

a “tragic” sacrifice to a social role? And working, itself social, to some might have even more value than getting paid. The differences in quality were in the objects of devotion, not in absolutes. “Despite our great mass of documentation as to the relativity of values, we still tend to think of evil as a specific isolable entity, unchangeably itself, rather than as the neutral or the good seen from a different point of view.”⁹² Though the debunking materialists tended to interpret acts as egoistic, and religion, according to Burke, might have seen the same acts as lower forms of altruism, neither was absolutely true, since the terms were actually relative to each other. To characterize an act as either altruistic or egoistic, “*some other judgment* must enter,” by which to measure it. Burke insisted that “Egoism cannot operate unless it so transcends itself that it becomes *qualitatively* different.” According to Burke, we name a good outside ourselves, and then make personal sacrifices to its altar.⁹³

Mysticism

According to Burke, “We tend to rate the ‘motives’ of an act proportionately to the act’s consequences; yet there may be much genuine ferocity in an amusingly futile rejoinder, while the hand that releases a deadly explosive may be moved by obedience alone”: which is selfish and which is not? Because “a given event can be at once good, evil, and neutral, dependent on the frame of reference by which we ‘place’ it,” and “insofar as we may (and frequently must) consider several frames of reference simultaneously,” the actual event itself “tends to become morally nondescript,” or actually indescribable. Without a context, we cannot claim any distinct single meaning

for an event, thus if we imagine the infinite possible interpretations, we are overcome by the unknowns. And therefore, he tells us, the logical consequence of a pluralistic world is the arrival at a de facto mysticism.⁹⁴

Party leader Earl Browder is said to have defined a liberal as someone “who raises doubt and indecision to the level of a principle,” and in presenting his relativism as mysticism argument, Burke admitted that, “At this point the ‘muddle-headedness’ of liberals verges on the ‘irrationality of mystics.’” Since there are these multiple interests, and therefore multiple perspectives from which to view any act, its nature is forever ambiguous.⁹⁵

There are some obvious problems with Burke’s “mystical” ethic, especially since at this point it seems more a euphemism for throwing up one’s hands in a complex, relativistic situation and less the “skeptical grounding for our own certainties” that he claimed was his intention. Burke’s ego-altruistic merger may or may not have resolved any of the ethical dilemmas issuing from relativism, but he did anticipate and penetrate, with noteworthy clarity and brevity, the essential problematic that would soon concern philosophers of situation ethics.

Teleology and Mysticism: the return of “purpose” to theory

To our intuition, teleology, which is the purposeful location of a clear order in the universe, whether of medievalism or Protestantism seems temperamentally unlike mysticism, generally thought of as located in a radically personal, unsystematic experience. But by far the strangest portion of *Permanence and Change* is its move from

a discussion of a revised teleology into what we will call Burke's "liberal mysticism," for want of any better term.

When the "pathetic fallacy" invested nature with human intention in a pseudo-rational manner, as traditional teleology did, it was philosophically unsound; yet teleological purpose was also our "metabiological" poetry, congenital to the human personality. "Animism," what Burke called the impulse to find "our own moods in things outside us" and the corollary impulse to find "our own patterns of thought in the texture of events," was the creative propagation of meaning that defined the species. An inventor's use of one set of ideas in another realm, what Burke named "analogical extension," a poet or painter's creation of resonant symbols, or a scientist's patient observation of the paths of electrons or the antics of bacterium, all demonstrated this impulse to humanize experience.⁹⁶

If the positivist saw the world as completed, finished and merely waiting to be completely and clearly charted, Burke claimed it was active – "being created" – not in a linear causal chain, but in a situation where "all the chapters are merely different aspects of a single process."⁹⁷ Furthermore, evolutionary biology pictured the organism as distinct from, and even opposed to, its environment, "struggling for existence" against other species. In such a picture, the environment as an aggregate of all events in history, necessarily overwhelmed its members. Yet if an environment's meaning is defined by the demands a particular organism makes, one cannot absolutely separate the two. What constitutes the "environment" differs for the microbes in our blood and for ourselves, and we cannot be certain whether those microbes are part of us or not. All are "members of a

‘civic corporation’ called the organism;” all function within a grand economy.⁹⁸

This holistic continuity was Burke’s stabilized, “permanent” perspective. Burke found his poetic example in D. H. Lawrence’s vitalism, since it allowed Lawrence to author such teleological incongruities such as “growing crops make the sun shine.” Burke knew this was poor science, and he neither explored Lawrence’s antiintellectualism nor his attraction to British fascism, apparently unaware of them. What he found so appealing was that Lawrence stressed the productive or creative element in the biologic pattern, and “would have all else flow from it.”⁹⁹

Was there an unassailable authority who decreed that growing crops and sunlight were absolutely distinct events? Each partial event needed to be explained by the entire, or whole event: the universal situation. The heart, liver, and kidneys all functioned together; was any one the “cause” of any other, were they absolutely independent? “What we do find is a universal texture of some sort—and in it there are some events manifesting sufficient individuality from our point of view to be classed as separate organisms”¹⁰⁰

Though we might still characterize this a form of pantheistic idealism, reminiscent of Emerson’s, Burke insisted that his approach was philosophically *realistic*: “A point of view also must be considered as belonging to the universal texture, as *actually existing*. A grasshopper’s appetites and the perspective or system of values that goes with them are as *real* as any chemical.”¹⁰¹

In an interactive, holistic universe, Burke suggested humans might be better described as *participants*, than competitors. Since Burke had presented morality as a

continuum that an external judgment must delineate, he had to justify his preference:

Since war and action are both parts of a graded series, having cruelty and vengeance at one end and the highest manifestations of thought and sympathy at the other, I see no logical necessity for selecting the dyslogistic choice of the Nietzscheans as descriptive of the series' essence . . . Man lives by purpose—and purpose is basically *preference*. Hence when we have an even choice between conversion downwards and conversion upwards, who would feel logically obliged to select the direction which implied the destruction of human society? In choosing the Nietzschean interpretation, we should not be sufficiently *methodical* [obedient to the calling of our biology].

Citing “in all its nudity, . . . the Jamesian ‘will to believe,’” he chose “*action or participation,*” or “*cooperation and communication,*” both used in war as well as peace, to designate the “essence of the series [of human behaviors],” acknowledging that it amounted to the nonjustifiable assumption “that good, rather than evil lies at the roots of human purpose.” Yet it was a realistic not idealistic (verbal) faith precisely because “by no other fiction can men truly coöperate in historic processes, hence the fiction itself is universally grounded.” Though he had taken his reader on a very circuitous route to finally hinge his argument on a faith in mankind, what made this faith a real or rational one was its desperate necessity. “To acquiesce in the methods that preserve humanity is per se to concede that life is a good. . . . Life, activity, coöperation, communication—they are identical; and even the [pessimistic] Schopenhauerian philosopher inevitably proclaims their goodness by the zeal with which he frames his message.”¹⁰² At this point, his argument had reached its full circularity, justified by its conviction that his view properly took into account the human nature he claimed as his first premise.

Mysticism

Burke had begun his discussion with biological need and worked his way to something he called “mysticism.” This would be the spiritual ground that would replace the discarded earlier religious rationalization and its failing technological, scientific replacements. In his research of religious experience, William James observed that mystical states seemed to have four significant characteristics: Ineffability (incommunicability); a noetic quality (those who experienced them thought they were states of knowledge); transiency; and passivity.¹⁰³ Burke’s mysticism possesses none of these characteristics, and contradicts each one.

First, Burke’s mysticism was a product of communication, even perhaps his culture’s surfeit of communication, and came at the conclusion of a logical argument. The noetic quality James described were “states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect;” these were private.¹⁰⁴ Again, Burke’s mysticism was a product of his own discursive discussion, and in theory that of a “parliamentary” interaction with the perspectives of others. Skepticism, grounded in linguistic relativity, leads to this understanding of universal interconnectedness. As for “transience,” this mysticism, though not absolutely final, nothing in Burke’s view was, was yet intended as a stable metaphysical view on which to base a stable society.

Finally, Burke directly argues against the claim that mystical states are passive. Using contemporary research as referents, he maintained that an apparent disengagement might be a state of complete activity instead, though with the usual suppression and selectivity eliminated. To wit: all ordinary activity is partial activity; some portion of the

personality is suppressed by another portion in reference to an object of desire, or one's purpose for the moment. If we choose to travel, we suppress our stay-at-home impulse, or if to fast, the eating desire, and so on. Burke suggested that in the mystical experience all desires are internally equalized, unified, and the ordinary erotic, emotive hierarchy dissolves into a single pure impulse. So, Burke seems to have invented a new sort of mysticism.

Since he argued logically, whether one accepts his premises and/or conclusion, this is a rational philosophic argument. The end is not an abandonment of language or thinking in the face of complexity, though at moments it seems this way, especially with Burke's choice of Lawrence's vitalism as an example. It is thinking one's way into a complete holism. Instead of contemplative technique, he offered rational arguments about the amorphousness of nature and consciousness; and its flexible interpretive divisions. In any case, though Burke was undoubtedly intrigued by much of the mysticism of the twenties, (he mentions P. D. Uspenskii in "Auscultation"), unlike the more religious, or theosophical mysticism of Mme. Helena Blavatsky, Georges Gurdjieff, or Uspenskii, his own reasoning was even more naturalistic, secular, and coherent; though he mentioned the Tao, he stressed active rational thought rather than meditation.¹⁰⁵

"Correctives": sin and recalcitrance

One might have reasonably thought that Burke would conclude his argument with his realization of an ultimately perfect unity of nature incorporating the individual

consciousness. But the independent artist in him did not permit that: the artist was to be the skeptical prophet. Yet artists seemed a rather weak link since they were often rather troubled and tended to have singular visions. Eliot and the New Agrarians had argued for racial and cultural homogeneity as the base of social stability and health, and the socially concerned critics had called for ideal proletarian characters, intending to leave the bourgeoisie and their unwholesome individualistic concerns behind. And I. A. Richards had suggested the poet as ideally normal.¹⁰⁶ Burke defended “decadent” or “bourgeois” art by again noting that weakness and strength are themselves relative to our purposes and needs.¹⁰⁷

According to Burke, all cases of human creativity necessarily contained individuality, human “sin,” difference, neuroses, and other “social stigmata”; “*obsession*, *possession*, and *vision*” were also “callings.” Anticipating arguments for “symbolic action” he would develop in later essays, Burke here insisted that no matter what the universal purpose, human difference and guilt served as a stimulus, a motive for justification and a spur to social development (he did not observe that it might be a spur to the opposite as well). Thus apparent passivity, weakness, decadence, or “degeneracy” might actually be a source of social strength. “Communists and Fascists alike,” who had attempted a “sanitation” of art, in fact aimed to destroy the secret, symbolic tissues that made social change possible. Though in 1935 many others advocated an elimination of the different, the weak, or the eccentric, Burke persisted in arguing for the complex, sometimes frail individual as a major force in social development, a portion of his aesthetic he refused to abandon.¹⁰⁸

Finally, Burke insisted that his position was not subjectivist, nor solipsistic. He averred that it did not imply that the universe is merely the product of our interpretations. The interpretations themselves must be altered as the universe proved “recalcitrant” to them. An argument, a poem, an experiment, or life itself, proceeded and met any number of obstacles: e.g., those of material, circumstance, time, or audience. These forced a revision in emotional issues and in questions of appeal. Therefore tactics, form, and expression changed; they were amended by the world and then amended it again. This world was “real,” and while perceived through an act of creation, was also independent of the creation of any one historical actor. An actual “recalcitrance” was Burke’s evidence for his realism and served as a “corrective” to his mysticism.

Our perspectives were ethical and rooted in biology. This was precisely why rhetorical appeal existed in the first place. They were also a real part of the universe. “To live is to have a vocation, and to have a vocation is to have an ethics or scheme of values, and to have a scheme of values is to have a point of view . . . which will motivate and color our choice of means.” Burke admitted that “In this respect, my thesis might be called subjective or solipsistic.” Yet the “discoveries” devolving from the view were “nothing other than revisions made necessary by the world itself. *They thus have objective validity* [my emphasis].”¹⁰⁹ Since it cannot be bent entirely to human will, there is a world out there.

Burke concluded his book with a summary that is almost a prayer:

In these troublesome antics we may even find it wise on occasion to adopt incongruous perspectives for the dwarfing of our impatience. We in cities rightly grow shrewd at appraising man-made institutions—but beyond these

tiny concentration points of rhetoric and traffic, there lies the eternally unsolvable Enigma, the preposterous fact that both existence and nothingness are equally unthinkable. . . And in this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is 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.

For Burke, there was no state of nature prior to society; our prolix civilization was the expression of our natural state.¹¹⁰

Conclusion: Language and metabiology

Burke's attempt to conciliate past and present, the historical, and the ahistorical, the transitory and the unchanging, secular modernity and religious antiquity, naturalism with teleology, rested with the positing of the critical faculty at the base of consciousness. For him, consciousness in humans was linguistic and the development of the personality was a linguistic one. This was also a rhetorical development, since a sign of its successful process is the development of argument and persuasion to replace force and compulsion of one kind or another. According to Burke, the push and pull motivating such consciousness is again interest, seen through biology and linguistic talent – metabiology.¹¹¹

Summary of major points

Burke certainly did not originate the study of the principles of rhetorical appeal, which was an ancient art, though he helped resurrect interest in it, and many decades of psychological, ideological, and advertising practice have made his admonitions about

human psychological sensitivities pretty much common knowledge. His detailed analysis of “piety” as an inner symbolic directive toward social consistency shows how he uses Freudian and Marxian theories of the person as correctives to each other, deriving something more convincing than either. For he demonstrated that there is an internal motive (Freud) behind ordinary behavioral expression, but that this interest is ideological and social (Marx). This motive is neither an absolutely fixed set of preconscious impulses such as sex or aggression (Freud) nor determined entirely by social structures (Marx). The impulse to order is not merely the reflexive expression of external forces, but based on a human engagement with these forces; it is a personal adaptation reflecting an interest. Burke himself described it in his conclusion: “In the simplest summary, *we have been attempting to consider the many ramifications implicit in the statement that ‘our thoughts and acts are affected by our interests’*” (Burke’s emphasis).¹¹²

There are several big points made in Burke’s first speculative book.

Communication: Independent of Mead, it introduced the very twentieth century idea that a society and culture consists of its methods and symbols of communication, and offered an original synthesis of then new ideas in psychology, sociology, and history. It reintroduced rhetoric as a serious sociological and philosophical topic, offering highly sophisticated analyses during a period when though its techniques and influence flourished, its study languished.

Interest: It located (self) interest keyed to survival, at the source of choice and

discrimination, and discrimination at the source of thought, culture and human relations – the kernel of his famous theory of “symbolic action,” a partly pragmatic position.

Despite an engagement with Marxism and Freudianism, Burke’s thought demonstrates none of the discomfort with ego and interest of those approaches, nor that of Bentham, despite Burke’s advocacy of communism. Like Dewey, Burke suggested an “ego-altruistic merger”—a way of looking at human action that blurred the distinction between actions intended to benefit self or other.

Unity and identity: Burke’s psychology is characterized by a continuous argument that identity is fundamentally unified in its wholesome desire to survive and develop. Like the pragmatists, Burke hammered away at the divisions between mind and world and self and society that created so many problems for modern thinkers. Even positivism, especially logical positivism, also accepted that humans were duped by social structures and thus divided. As Freudianism had suggested that social norms as well as a pleasure principle separated the individual from reality, and Marxism suggested a false consciousness interfering with genuine class consciousness, positivism as a critical theory blamed confusion in our historical natural language and grammar for human ills and insisted on its own method to cleanse obscurity from our thinking.

Agency: Burke claimed that experience and consciousness arise from the linguistic interaction with a challenging environment. Burke, similar to the Reform Darwinists, focused on the adaptive aspect of Darwinian evolution, and did not allow his discussion

to end with a complete external determinism. Though interest itself is shared with all living things – as life and survival for Burke equals the interested, self-involved development of form and structure–humans are linguistic and symbolic. Not only do they revise their beliefs – many animals do as well – but also “interpret their interpretations.”

Metabiology: Though Burke was undoubtably begging the question in using a universal biology and universal linguistic ability to then derive a universal human nature, he did marshal a wide variety of evidence to make his starting premises seem reasonable, citing common sense experience or behaviorist experiments with animals and children. People demonstrate consistent interest to interact with the world in a way that promotes wholesome survival, which he called “metabiological”: the “meta” relating to our again consistent and exceptional use of symbol systems (of all sorts).

Thus, the efficacy of his system is based less on what it can immediately prove than how many things it can explain reasonably. He later simplified his metabiological principle to the dictum that we are “bodies that learn language,” language as any symbolic form. What is significant and original here is that the term “interest” indicates a discriminating rather than simple-minded factor: ambivalence and conflict is not only a social imposition that begins with property in the manner of Rousseau or Marx, it is found at the base of life.

In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke will maintain that identity is really “a unique combination of partially conflicting corporate ‘we’s’,” citing the socialist Harold Laski in

particular and moving closer to Marx and asserting a social construction of the self.¹¹³

That these two views are not entirely compatible will become clearer subsequently.

Language as hortatory: Burke's *Permanence and Change* again stressed the point about rhetoric he had made in *Counter-Statement*, here but credited to Bentham – that language is hortatory, value laden, and hardly neutral but bound up with power at its source. It seems neutral only when the speaker and listener have the same interest or disinterest in the matter. Thus, with Nietzsche, Burke maintains that language is less a representation of reality than constitutive of it, certainly of social reality and values; this is an early statement of a cornerstone of postmodern theory and significant if only for that.

Analogical reasoning: Roger Bacon distinguished between deduction and induction as the core of scientific thinking and the difference between mathematics and modern science. Kant distinguished between analytic and synthetic arguments: those that were tautological – the subject was contained in the predicate – and ones that could be disproved, or were “falsifiable.” While the logical positivist Karl Popper would soon argue that only falsifiable arguments were informative, making this a cornerstone of his epistemology, Burke asserted that there really were no such things. He also challenged the claims of science to be in any position of unique explanatory authority and demonstrated both the heuristic and paradigmatic nature of scientific research, decades prior to Thomas Kuhn's famous theory of paradigms.¹¹⁴ Burke's suggestion was that an honest writer had to be self-aware and help the reader to locate that writer's own

question begging, i.e., the underlying premises that had proceeded to give up the result. This was an early statement of critical “deconstruction.”¹¹⁵ Still, Burke’s defense of analogical thinking can too easily be seen as a mere relativistic attack on the naiveté of supposed objectivity. It’s intent is to support the universality of the analogical.

Mysticism: Burke moved into his mysticism via his “metabiology,” relativism, and teleology. It was his first stab at a total teleology, a single “situation” in which all humans and other creatures participate. This was both a definition of human nature and a characterization of the universe at one time, similar to other religious, or philosophical teleological schemes, though spare and problematic here. Similar to his previous forms of argumentation, he collected a number of arguments, some suggestive, some logical, to arrive at this portrait. The unrepentant relativism of multiple perspectives reducing all ethical acts to a pandemonium of possible judgments; this resulted in either a liberal “muddleheadedness” and/or a mysticism. His distinction between confusion and enlightenment seems to be that the mystical position accepts a whole that cannot be seen, but is inferred logically and felt in a positive way, actively, and not merely collapsed into.

Thus, in Burke’s early view, a sophisticated withdrawal from judgment develops from the complexity of any natural situation, clearly a problematic position for action. The *lex continuum* of linguistic ethical description that creates a successive shading of moral distinctions, and his explanation of the ego-altruistic merger, results in a shrewd discussion of the problems of skeptical liberal ethics, if not an entirely convincing one.

All this intellectual firepower was then lightly harnessed to a defense of the rather simple notion that we humans have similar biological necessities and interests, as is evidenced by our linguistic products, and that a universal politic that would recognize and make certain to provide for them would be just – and communism was the most reasonable option at the time.

Realism: Burke's argument for a common human nature had a political as well as epistemological concern: a political world is a real world capable of inflicting real injury. Adapting an argument from William James, Burke insisted early on that the difficulties of human creativity, which then require revisions of approach and self were sufficient evidence for an external universe.

Critique

Burke's claim in *Permanence and Change*, that there exists a common neurological structure between persons across space and time, was necessarily more asserted than proved, and it is circular to argue for a common human nature by first presuming a common biology from which consistent interests will be derived. Furthermore, a radical skeptic, empiricist, or solipsist would maintain that we do not really know that our neighbor even exists, much less that she feels as we do.

One might accuse Burke of running riot and collapsing some needed distinctions between mathematics and science, or science and art. And we might well ask: How similar is the structure of a sentimental fairy tale to a Euclidean proof? And have not the

methods of arguing for experimental science, since the Renaissance, always moved backwards from the conclusions of experiments to descriptions of them? There is no obvious way to perfectly chart the experience of intellectual discovery, thus it was not entirely unreasonable for Burke to suggest that a proof is like a “fiction” in ways, and a much more radical epistemological claim would be hard to find. Yet there remains an inaptness of comparison. Perhaps a more complex literary structure used as ideological argument, for example, Dostoyevsky’s *Possessed*, might serve as a better corollary to a complex mathematical proof. Also, there is nothing in Burke’s vision that can distinguish the virtues of great scientific proofs or literary arguments or explain their power, order, and coherence.

Burke showed that all symbolic expressions all share a key element: form, and that metaphor, analogy, and even contradiction, are our means of jumping across the immediate limitations of our worldviews. These elements combined are integral to successful rhetoric, yet if Burke’s intention was to prove the rhetorical or ethical similarity between a proof and a story, he did not succeed, since few would understand a proof only as a rhetorical device. Perhaps this was not his point, yet it appears Burke turned all experience into aesthetic experience to undermine the prejudice against the aesthetic held by the positivistic *Weltanschauung* of his period; one that relegated art to an hermetic amusement, or a practical tool.

Such a mode of argument also risks minimizing any distinctions between cultural orientations in different periods; as it suggests all demonstrations are determined by cultural interests, the implication is that no progressive accumulation of stable scientific

knowledge is really possible. Burke unintentionally turned Marx's "superstructure" on its head and read "form" into history, eliminating the freedom offered by contingency with another sort of static idealism, hardly his intention. Taken to its extreme, one consequence might be the collapsing of the historical epochs Burke needed as a premise for the political, change-oriented aspect of his own argument, not to mention undercutting the seriousness of all arguments generally, including his own. Sidney Hook, in frustration, called Burke's approach "a kind of home-baked objective relativism."¹⁶

As for his communism, in this work it is a specter. Marx as a thinker is a participant in the proceedings, and some of his central ideas received a trenchant reworking by the author. But not only did Burke remain explicitly critical, but much of his philosophy contradicted Marxism fundamentally: In it we can find no materialism; no class division; no chiliasm; no final historical resolution to the human condition, despite a certain optimism. Burke looked at technology with distrust, Marx looked at it with hope; Burke maintained the existence of a trans-historical, trans-class human center; here Marx was himself ambivalent, having a notion of a renaissance proletariat as his own ideal, appearing after material justice was established.

Burke was aware that people are competitive and combative, he is realistic about that, despite his advocacy of communism. Burke did not deny a difference between the actions of Thomas More and those of Napoleon, though he might legitimately be charged with making an overly abstract argument about a consequential world with real dangers and people of quite various character. But if we measure Veblen's binary analysis against Burke's critique, which allots to motive a range of ethical meaning within a

single act or impulse, we can see the subtlety of Burke's unifying view, despite its failed justification. He did succeed in showing that an act of work as usefulness, and work as aggrandizement are two sides of one coin. A society that emphasizes the things its members have in common will avoid certain sorts of conflicts, but it certainly will not avoid all and it may actually exacerbate some. Burke himself remarked in "Auscultation" that "We quarrel insofar as our ideologies are identical, insofar as you want to keep for yourself what I want to take from you."¹¹⁷ Thus, the amoral yet ethical act described by the ego-altruistic merger is a purely abstract construct. That the species has the ability and tendency to run up and down the moral scales while sharing similar motives is a reasonable position, and reappeared in all his discussions, including a central one on scapegoats that would be fully developed in later work.¹¹⁸ Of course, proving people are social creatures by nature, and proving self-interest is natural and impersonal does not prove that they are not dangerously selfish or mad, and given the 1935 context, was a position bound to exasperate some.

The characterization of mysticism as the expression of human inadequacy is consistent with its philosophical tradition, yet to make a sort of stupefied silence the intellectual ideal of a language centered existence seems a cruel if brilliant paradox, as it sends the garrulous species toward an ineffability of frustration. This is a silence that derives not from nature, nor even human limitation, but human talent.

Burke's argument for realism was also seen as naive.¹¹⁹ The fact that we experience the world as resisting our attempts to fit it to ourselves or describe it, is no logical proof of a reality beyond that experience, no matter how convinced we are. That

said, Burke's treatise remains an unequivocally brilliant and, at most points, astonishingly well-argued view – certainly one of the most original and suggestive in the American philosophic canon, one that explains his status among his peers. It also suggests a moderating influence on both the left and the right in American letters, since Burke debated and kept up correspondences with Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and then with Robert Penn Warren, all Agrarians as well as many on the left, like Cantwell, Wilson, and Cowley. His was an influence that not only predicted the movement that would appear in the seventies and eighties but who kept up a steady, sane challenge to the excesses of the earlier ones, and even to the postmodern movement he grandfathered.

Literary intellectuals may not have agreed with Burke, but they and sociologists read him. It is impossible to gauge influence: Edward Said has asked whether the fact that Burke is unknown to French theorists who discuss the same issues today that he did in the thirties, is the product of “ignorance, convenience, or deliberate ideological omission.” And Armin Paul Frank noted in the mid-sixties, moments before these issues caught fire with poststructuralists, how the reception to Burke there was more hostile than not, since he was so difficult to pigeon-hole. Whether we suspect ideological omission or not, one can agree with Hugh Dalziel Duncan that “if there is any modern thinker whose work has been pilfered shamelessly, it is Burke.”¹²⁰

One can see Burke's human being as essentially interested and selfish, guilty and ambitious – invariably critical – a model that blends an optimistic, secular liberalism with older religious categories. One cannot help but marvel at all the opinions Burke could simultaneously hold and still make sense.

This was Burke's early stab at using relativism to resolve itself dialectically within a larger "mysticism." Burke's energetic philosophic pluralism was central to his intellectual personality, honest and admirable, and what appears today to be an almost perfect critical understanding justified his use of any thinker he chose. Burke's aim to establish a "grounding for our own certainties," within a relativistic frame is as ambitious a project as Plato's attempt to merge pre-Socratic idealism and pre-Socratic relativism and materialism, and therefore it is hardly surprising that it was not entirely persuasive. Burke himself compared his *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History* to Plato's *Republic* and his *Laws*, not in terms of quality, but in terms of intention: one being the utopian, the other the practical view of the good polity.¹²¹ The construction of any sort of traditional communism, or any utopia on his skeptical rocks is almost impossible to conceive. Only someone with Burke's obstreperous moral imagination would try.

1. Charles I. Glicksberg, "Kenneth Burke: The Critic's Critic," reprinted in *Critical Responses*, 71.
2. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, xlvii.
3. Kenneth Burke, Letter to Malcolm Cowley, March 30, 1934, quoted in Don M. Burks, "Kenneth Burke: The Agro-Bohemian 'Marxoid,'" *Communications Studies* 42 (Fall 1991), 227.
4. For a description of the Deweyan concept of "interest" and its relation to the framers, see John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 215, 216, 296, 303.
5. "Cultural lag" was a term invented by the Columbia University sociologist William Osborn in 1922, describing the delay between technological production and values that would adequately accommodate the members of a society to it. See Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 191.
6. Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, 295-296.
7. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 171.
8. R. Jackson Wilson, *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press paperback, 1970), 29-30.
9. Leszek Kolakowski, *Maincurrents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992); see vols: 1, *The Founders*, 400; 2, *The Golden Age*, 384, 448; 3, *The Breakdown*, 153, 154.
10. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 73-77, 94-96, 114-117, 128-132, 126, 160-161, 200; Wilson, *In Quest of Community*, 58, 87-113; Goldman, *Rendezvous*, 73-76.
11. Charles Beard in, *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, Hans Meyeroff, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 147.
12. Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press paperback, 1980), 76, 77.
13. Eric. F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 74, 80, 87, 155-56, 240-241.
14. *Ibid.*, 89. The framers, who argued for self-interest as a central motive on which to structure a sound government hoped that this would serve to fragment power and avoid

overweening influence by “faction:” consolidated interest. Yet the tolerance of personal interest had allowed the development of an industrial and finance capitalism that trampled any such safeguards, creating centers of wealth and power that made earlier factions look quaintly personal.

15. For a clear statement of this dislocation, see Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* 110-114, 118, 121, 126-127.

16. Goldman, *Rendezvous*, 153.

17. *Ibid.*, 154-56, 240.

18. For examples of this cultural criticism, see Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age* (Mattituck: Amereon House, 1975), 17, 20, 23, 24, 36, 107, 110; Dewey *The Public and Its Problems*, see note 15 above; Krutch *The Modern Temper*, 130, 131. See also: Aaron, *Writers*, 9-10; 26; Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 141; Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 34.

19. See McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 197-198.

20. Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 154-155, 157; Aaron, *Writers*, 3, 8, 117, 167n; Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 20-21, 23-24, 71-72.

21. Burke, “Auscultation,” 61. Paul Jay suggests Burke is referring to Cowley, Josephson, Van Wyck Brooks, Granville Hicks, and Robert Cantwell; see Jay, “Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric,” 536.

22. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 170.

23. *Ibid.*

24. For a lucid treatment of related rhetorical issues here and in Burke's later work, again, see Jay, “Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric,” 544-545. The article is a discussion of Burke's conviction that his theories might synthesize Freudian and Marxist principles.

25. Cowley, *Books that Changed Our Minds*, 260. Cowley here repeated Burke's comments that the tendency of modern thinking has been to construct a synthesis based on the social sciences, and that what has been lacking “is a great systematic thinker, a Kant or a Thomas Aquinas of our own time.” This was clearly Burke's ambition.

26. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 206.

27. Robert M. Crunden. *Body and Soul*, xiii.

28. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 205.

29. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 264-264.
30. Ibid., 218.
31. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 117-118.
32. Kenneth Burke, Letter to Malcolm Cowley, June 4, 1933, Kenneth Burke Papers.
33. Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, 130.
34. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 98-103, 213-215, 262, *passim*. Had the thought of George Herbert Mead been well-known at the time, Burke would have found a kindred spirit working through some similar philosophical-sociological issues. Except for a few articles, Mead's ideas were not widely disseminated until after his death in 1931, when his students began organizing their lecture notes for publication. When Burke read and reviewed the three volume collection for *The New Republic* in 1939, after he had already completed *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*, he lamented that Mead's work had not been part of the public discussion during the early years of the Depression – the years when he conceived his books. The review is reprinted in Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 379-382.
35. For a general characterization of nineteenth century American positivism, see Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 207. For twentieth century logical positivism, see Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, 1, 8, 53-55.
36. Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 147, 186-187, 209; Southwell, *Kenneth Burke and Martin Heidegger*, 17, 29, 35, 66; Melia in *Legacy*, 58; Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 41, 132; Richard H. Thames, "Nature's Physician: The Metabiology of Kenneth Burke," in *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century*, ed. Bernard Brock (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 20-22.
37. Josephson quoted in Seltzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 132.
38. Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151, 152, 167, 227-232; Sylvia Berti, "The First Edition of the *Traite des trois imposteurs* and Its Debt to Spinoza's *Ethics*," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds., Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also, Christopher Norris, *Spinoza and the Origin of Modern Critical Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
39. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), 76.
40. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 214.

41. Ibid., 230, 232.

42. In later work, Burke would adopt the term *entelechy* from Aristotle, arguing for a natural, internal form of development within a natural creature. For a valuable, if problematic, discussion, see Stan Lindsay's *Implicit Rhetoric*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 18-19, 50, 51, 88-93, 171, 214-215, 222, *passim*.

43. In the original there are a few explicit references to communism. In the 1954 edition, chastened no doubt by his experience with the University of Washington, and with no faith left in communism, Burke excised or revised some of these, changing "communistic" to "cooperative," for example, so as not to lose his point with a reader who might "see red" perhaps at the other term. At the time of the original publication, Burke was clearly on the side of communism rather than its alternatives, though in 1935 the associations were very different than they would be a decade later. Burke continued to defend the study of Marx throughout the Cold War, despite his having always been a stern critic of key Marxian principles. As Robert Wess has said "he took Marx seriously without taking him as gospel." Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 59.

44. These changes are occasional and small and do not really affect the argument yet they do affect its tenor; the original has a much stronger sense of being of its period. Burke admitted his deletions in the Prologue, claiming they restored the text to its original meaning. An interested reader will have to make her own judgment. The arguments in *Permanence and Change* are clearly intended to transform the competitive ethos which will in turn affect structural change; though advocating an unspecified re-distribution of wealth is about as practical as Burke gets. See Schiappa and Keehner, "The 'Lost' Passages of *Permanence and Change*," 192-196.

45. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 87.

46. Ibid., 5.

47. As mentioned previously, scholars have commented on Burke's use of the term "orientation" rather than ideology. As he later described it, orientation was much more in keeping with his belief that people need to align themselves in reference to practical expectations. In a later retrospective comment, he said that he preferred the term as it was not tied to dialectical materialism, while yet lending itself to refinements such as "dis-orientation" and "re-orientation," Burke, *Permanence and Change* (3d edition), 304-305.

48. Ibid., 59-65.

49. Ibid., 6, 11-14.

50. Ibid., 30-31.

51. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 141.
52. For Gold's general approach, see Aaron, *Writers*, 88, 89, 90, 116, 163, 238-239; for Cowley's, *Ibid.*, 191, 267, 335-337.
53. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 6, 10.
54. Burke, "Curriculum Criticum," *Counter-Statement*, 216.
55. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 119.
56. Burke, *Ibid.*, 71. See George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, one-volume edition revised by the author in collaboration with Daniel Cory (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 258.
57. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 75.
58. *Ibid.*, 74-79.
59. *Ibid.*, 88, 89.
60. *Ibid.*, 117.
61. David Daiches on Richards in *Books that Changed Our Minds*, 168. See also, Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 251-253.
62. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 95, 104-105.
63. *Ibid.*, 104.
64. *Ibid.*, 98.
65. *Ibid.*, 106.
66. *Ibid.*, 98.
67. *Ibid.*, 98-99.
68. *Ibid.*, 99.
69. *Ibid.*, 101, 100.
70. *Ibid.*, 102.
71. *Ibid.*, 107.

72. Portions of this insight have now been recast so many times as to become truisms, yet Burke is one of the first American critics to argue, long before Thomas Kuhn's study of scientific paradigms, that all forms of research are guided and cornered by the original cultural values and premises of an orientation, and that argument by analogy is inevitable. Cliché or not, it is an issue still debated.

Also, in the last thirty years, the argument that cultural orientation determines the outcome of observation, and that the notion of "proof" or "reason" is a Western cultural artifact whose claim to universality has been used as a weapon in the struggle for power, especially against colonials, has become a respected one. Burke's critique was more contained. His interest was to show that while essentialism was part of thinking and unavoidable, no particular essentialized forms need be privileged.

73. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 126-129.

74. In a 1983 interview, Burke quipped that rather than rebounding from Marxism in *Permanence and Change*, he was instead secularizing Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science. Michael Feehan in his essay, "Kenneth Burke and Mary Baker Eddy," offers some suggestive parallels, yet offers no historical evidence for this secularizing of Eddy as the book's fundamental and intentional purpose, outside of that single remark. In Paul Jay's collection of correspondence between Burke and Cowley, there is no mention of Eddy, nor can she be found in the unpublished sections of letters to Cowley from the period when he was writing *Permanence and Change*. A further investigation of the correspondence may uncover something more substantive, but at present, Feehan's parallels are all we have. Still, it is likely that some of Burke's attitudes might very well stem from this source among the myriad others. "Kenneth Burke and Mary Baker Eddy," *Unending Conversations*, Greig Henderson and David Cratis Williams, eds., (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 206.

75. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 134 note; Burke here cites a case reported by the psychologist William Halse Rivers.

76. *Ibid.*, 149.

77. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 160.

78. The radical French poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observed in their 1972 Book, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 2, that the modern personality was no longer a neurotic, but a schizophrenic. There is a body of literature arguing that the modern sensibility, especially of the United States in the 20th century, is that of manic-depressive disorder. See Douglass, *Terrible Honesty*, 524-525, and 168-169, 172-174, 472.

79. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 129-131.

80. Ibid., 158.
81. Ibid., 163.
82. Ibid., 226. Burke cites John B. Watson (1878-1958) a well-known American behavioral psychologist who began his career in advertising.
83. Ibid., 228-230.
84. Ibid., 195.
85. Ibid., 195-196.
86. Ibid., 189-192
87. Ibid., 192-93.
88. Ibid., 199.
89. Dewey held a similar position, though arrived at it slightly differently. See Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, 215.
90. Ibid., 200-201, 201n.
91. Ibid., 201.
92. Ibid., 203.
93. Ibid., 211.
94. This is a key factor in Samuel Southwell's comparison of Burke to Heidegger, despite the many greater differences between the two.
95. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 203.
96. Ibid., 214, 215.
97. Ibid., 231-232.
98. Ibid., 233.
99. Ibid., 222.
100. Ibid., 233.
101. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid., 236.

103. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, with an introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Collier paperback, 1967), 299-301.

104. Ibid., 300.

105. On Blavatsky, see Crunden, *Body and Soul*, 284, 379-380; on Gurdjeiff see Crunden, 284, 344-345, 349, 405-407, 310, and Douglass, *Terrible Honesty*, 271, 441; on Uspenskii see Crunden, 343, 390.

106. See Chapter 2; 79, n77.

107. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 267-268.

108. Ibid., 157, 241-243, 245-246.

109. Ibid., 256-257.

110. Ibid., 272.

111. Burke's metabiological concept of interest bears resemblance in the history of modern philosophy to Spinoza's "conatus," which the philosopher described as a "desire to persevere in one's being." It also has connections with Scottish Enlightenment psychology, as well as principles of American politics as expressed by James Madison, for example, in *Federalist 10*. It relies as heavily on ideas advanced by *fin de siècle* European thinkers and poets, especially Nietzsche, and principles expressed by Bentham, Santayana, James, Dewey, Veblen and in lesser ways, numerous others. Burke's influences are legion. In 1935, for a utopian of any sort to stress interest was a somewhat unusual position, since theorists of the left and right from whom American writers were supposedly taking cues, were denigrating self-interest as a counter to the national common good, or exposing it in order to foster the construction of a class consciousness that would allow it to dissolve in solidarity.

Burke's approach to interest is naturalistic in the sense of accepting its inevitability and universality, and his claim that it is the foundation of mind places him here with the Pragmatists. Yet his undercutting of positivism once again separates him, explaining why post-modern pragmatists like Hayden White, Jameson and Lentricchia have found him a precursor. With his fierce defense of interpretation, poetry and the artistic model, Burke mitigates any biological or material reductionism and solipsism that might follow from the concept.

112. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 262.

113. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 264.
114. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 182. See Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.).
115. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 260.
116. Sidney Hook, "The Technique of Mystification," in *Critical Responses*, 91.
117. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 119. Still, Burke's thought is not utopian in an entirely unrealistic manner. In the companion work, *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke discusses attempts to eradicate evil or "channelize" it. Burke suggests that the latter approach is more "mature" though he attributes the rigid immaturity to earlier naive liberal apologetics and ignoring the totalizing, chiliastic ethic of Marxian Communism.
118. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 17. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see C. Allen Carter's *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).
119. Austin Warren in *Critical Responses*, 57-58.
120. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Armin Paul Frank in *Critical Responses*, 438-439, 441; Hugh Dalziel Duncan's introduction to *Permanence and Change*, xiii.
121. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 216.

CHAPTER 5

From Community to Society and Back Again: *Attitudes Toward History*

In dark accidents, the mind's sufficient grace.

Delmore Schwartz

Completing *Permanence and Change* left him, Burke said later, with “a corresponding uneasiness,” involving “the very perspectivalism which the book had advocated,” and consigning him to a “painfully obsessive sense of distance, as though everything he saw, or everyone he spoke to, were behind a pane of glass.”¹

Burke had hoped that relativism and fragmentation, would be the “change” that might ground new certainties. But this unfortunately existed within existing social division and inequity, and individualistic psychology intensified rather than resolved that issue. Furthermore, his naturalistic psychology, though useful in correcting clumsy Freudian or Marxist analyses, also suggested more biological determinism than a philosopher advocating social action and the possibility of social transformation might wish to claim.² Hence, Burke offered a sociology that would explain social change in a way that was different from Marx, yet not entirely inconsistent with it.

In “Auscultation,” Burke had rejected Marxian rhetoric and its implied sociology. Thus, he had also rejected its account of history as the interplay of binary oppositions throughout time – the aspect dependent on the Hegelian dialectic. In *Permanence and*

Change, he had explained historical change as occurring within an overall continuity. But he sensed that his mystical “resimplification,” intended to resolve the fissures between human beings and nature, and human beings and each other, remained radically incomplete. It needed to be tied to a general explanation of historical change and, if he wanted to be relevant to the left, to Western history in particular. The principle of unified community he had derived might give an philosophical base to some sort of communism, but that principle needed to be embodied in a new attitude that would replace the antithetical one. This would be the “comic” attitude.

Burke had explained permanence; now he had to work change into his mystical unity. How did persons use their critical linguistic natures to accommodate themselves to their nonmystical societies – how did these cohere and yet transform? Burke believed *Permanence and Change* had succeeded in putting psychoanalysis and economics together in ways that might lead to “the Marxist alignment of foes and friends.”³ In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke would try even harder to assimilate the outer, historical and material world represented by Marx and the inner, ahistorical, symbolic one represented by Freud; he offered an alternative to Spengler’s fusion of the cultural and the historical. What might be the precise relation between an action and the context in which it arose? *Attitudes Toward History* was to be a sociological philosophy of history and a philosophical sociology of history.

In *Attitudes*, Burke revealed the political and social attitudes expressed microscopically in the literary genres. He then offered a macroscopic “curve of history,” a sketch for a reading of the history of Western civilization and moved back and forth

between the microscopic individual and the macroscopic social trend. He had suggested in *Permanence and Change* that they should reflect each other (following Dewey and Plato), but his efforts to present the two perspectives simultaneously ensnared him in difficulties. If Nietzsche had suggested that private resentment of the strong by the weak was a central motive in public history, Burke instead suggested an everpresent and energetic “guilt” for that role. This guilt would stem from a psychological situation analogous to original sin: the sense that one’s impulse to live and one’s desire to develop transgressed on the social and natural environment. He closed with a “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” that elucidated the unusual expressions he used throughout, for example, “bureaucratization of the imaginative,” “neo-Mathusianism,” and “identification.”

Still, he worried about the philosophical character of his discussions. When he was almost finished, he wrote to Malcolm Cowley that once this project was complete, “I shall lay off ‘first principles’ for a while and go back to straight literary criticism, perhaps reviewing the modern scene in the light of my formulas to date. I guess Americans will not read philosophy as such—and since I want to be read, I must again bestir myself to find the rephrasing of my position that might ring the bell.”⁴ In fact, though his next collection, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, did address the critical scene, and did, therefore, receive more attention, its style was only slightly less speculative.

As he worked on these projects, the Depression lingered; the economy had begun to improve, but then in 1937, the same year *Attitudes Toward History* was published, it slid again. Roosevelt’s Second New Deal, though tepid by the standards of the more radical reformers, since it was designed to salvage capitalism, still met fierce resistance

from business and the Supreme Court. In 1937 the famous “court-packing” bill failed, and cost Roosevelt President his coalition, though it did soon bring the court to heel. Also in that year, trying to balance the budget in light of what seemed promising economic reports, the Administration cut the WPA in half. The action led to further demoralization. Eight years of political skirmishing within the system as it then stood, appeared to have resulted in practical failure. Surveying the scene, Burke believed he saw collapse and decay. He later admitted to being haunted by Spengler’s “bogeyman,” and that thinker’s gloomy prognostications regarding the inevitability of cultural disintegration. Burke’s frustration increased with each Court denial of New Deal legislation, he was even beginning to sympathize with Roosevelt, and he recalled later that his approach in *Attitudes* arose partly as a response to this institutional resistance.⁵

Frames of acceptance and rejection

Attitudes are weighted, ethical approaches to experience, and Burke’s title referred to how one “handles the significant factors of [one’s] time,” symbolically.⁶ Although we generally think of history as that which is past, Burke used “history” in its most general philosophical sense, denoting our times as they come toward us and then carry us off with them. So, an attitude toward history is actually one’s ethical approach to the present, future, and the past. Burke did not promote a “science” of history or recommend the experimental method as did the pragmatists John Dewey or Sidney Hook. Rather, when looking for a vocabulary of motivation that would promote “humility without humiliation,” for the modern world, he offered a specific form of poetic

approach – the “comic” or ironic attitude. This was an aesthetic approach that would avoid the extremes of sentimentality or cynicism.⁷ Burke’s ideas on propaganda were now developing into a theory of history. He was no longer instructing writers on what they should do, but rather describing what they did as representative cases of social participation. In 1955 he described *Attitudes*:

The book, then, deals with characteristic responses of people in their forming and reforming of congregations. You might call it “Attitudes Toward the Incessant Intermingling of Conservatism and Progress.” Or translating it into expressions now often encountered, we could entitle it “Statements of Policy on Problems of Organizational Behavior. . . . It operates on the miso-philanthropic assumption that getting along with people is one devil of a difficult task, but that in the last analysis, we should all want to get along with people (and do want to).⁸

Burke had recently read Harold Laski, the British political scientist and socialist, who had been effectively chased from Harvard during the Red Scare. Laski was the highly influential author of *Authority in the Modern State* (1919), a book that discussed the ways groups related to power, and *Democracy in Crisis* (1933), in which he claimed that individualistic liberalism had run its course, as well as *The State in Theory and Practice* (1932), where Laski indicated that reform without drastic economic change would only result in the further entrenchment of class interests. Laski offered detailed readings of historical events, especially the Reformation and the rise of capitalism, with a sophisticated Marxist view. Burke believed reading Laski had clarified his own concept of “symbol of authority.”⁹

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke had characterized “acceptance” as “openness” to the factors involved in a larger cultural orientation.¹⁰ The primary concept in *Attitudes* is

that of “acceptance frames,” cooperative systems of moral authority to which we assent in order to function. They comprise our good faith. Burke insisted that because we crave integration, which is healthy, we do not dissent unless we have to, and he sketched why one or the other of these cooperative systems command our assent and the techniques we use to give it.

Burke’s desire to “go light on my tendency to over-abstractionism,” may have been the reason he began with William James. James was not a manifestly political philosopher; nor was he particularly interested in theories of history. Yet his religio-ethical qualms regarding idealism, and his focus on the particular human subject who makes history dramatic, flagged the individualism that periodically reasserts itself in Burke’s “communistic” book.¹¹

Having already described human nature as social and linguistic per se, he now needed to place his character into real society and explain what happened. We all might agree that man was a social, speechifying animal, but in looking around at the Depression and the international scene, one saw social institutions as a rather mixed bag. Ours was a world where things seemingly went awry, and sooner or later we confronted the problem of “evil,” that is, that infinite chain of inhospitable and painful events that compose a large part of our experience.¹²

James had illuminated the fact that psychological issues of personal consent turned the onslaught of a theoretically neutral history into a moral problem. Observing that our minds “seesawed” between “accepting” or “protesting” against the universe “in a given case of evil,” James suggested that there was a moment when we decide to give, or

withhold, our consent to a bad situation. But since one only “protests” what cannot we cannot accept, there is no real choice, and our freedom is illusory.¹³

James was uncomfortable with so much necessity in human action. Modern thinking had supposedly released persons from a static environment; it could not now be allowed to return them as pawns of a mindless nature, their wills mere signatories. Burke described James ingeniously borrowing opportunity from the future to preserve free action in the present, suggesting a “meliorism,” a provisional acceptance of the “lesser evil,” with the intention of buying time to find a better alternative: it presented our compromising with history as an action rather than a passion, and avoided both fatalism and determinism by always thinking in terms of future possibilities.¹⁴ James’s meliorism left everything unfinished and stressed the comparative, the motion toward the better, since to arrive at the “best” would be stasis. According to Burke, for James, “Even God was on the make, not a Completed Best but a candidate for Better.”¹⁵

Whitman and Emerson illustrated other similar methods for deriving optimism from a chaos of good and evil. Emerson offered a dialectic of compensating polarities – an interlocked duality of good and bad. Present evils were offset by equal goods within a universe pledged to ethical equilibrium, with good decided to be the “essence” of the enterprise. At another point Burke remarked, “Emerson . . . was presumably responding to the emergence of technological enterprise (power) while still confronting the issue in terms of good and evil.”¹⁶ Similarly, Whitman displayed an enthusiastic pluralism that engulfed the negative within a swell of positive rhetorical energy, and seemed to worship energy itself, whatever direction it took. These were the optimistic philosophic attitudes

of acceptance that Americans used to equip themselves for action; they were all “mystical” and “transcendental” in the ways described.¹⁷

The genres

Burke claimed, “art is the dial on which fundamental psychological processes of all living are recorded.”¹⁸ Taking his cue from Spengler’s reading history through cultural products, Burke translated ethico-political attitudes into their representations in literary genres, as symbolic methods for coping within a political (social) economy, and managing anxieties over historical processes or developments. He classed these genres into those of “acceptance” and “rejection.”

According to Burke, the acceptance genres—the epic, the tragic, and the comic – are those in which the individual’s adjustment to his society’s mores and symbols is strongest. For example, the epic will justify hardship in a primitive society and provide the individual participant with heroic models. A complex society, like the ancient Greek, in which a conflict has begun between traditional cooperative religious values and individualistic ones concomitant with enterprise and imperialism, can develop tragedy. Tragedy provides an outlet for the growing conviction that human ambition entails human transgression.

The comic and the didactic

Comedy was an acceptance frame, and the attitude Burke proffered as the most active and appropriate acceptance form for the modern world. It reconciled us not only

to nature but to society. Comedy developed in diverse communities where particular groups feel morally alienated from the general orientation. A “cultural lag” occurs where they remain in a limbo of ethical dispossession; they are partially resigned, yet still have some unmet expectations and are willing to struggle so that the situation might be improved. That struggle is “comic.”¹⁹

“Like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime* to *stupidity*,” Shakespeare had villains, while Henry James had his fools to move plots. Unlike tragedy, comedy is more “complex” and naturalistic, since its events are caused by humans without any *deus ex machina*, or even the uncontrollable forces of literary Naturalism’s tragedies (e.g., those of Stephen Crane or Thomas Hardy). Burke claimed that it is therefore the most rational and humane, since its subject is the social person as opposed to the cosmic, ahistorical one. In its readings of motives, it corrects sentimental views that deny material interests, while still avoiding “the cynical brutality that comes when such sensitivity is outraged.”²⁰ And, according to Burke, the comic, was found in all sorts of writing: good psychoanalytic criticism, anthropological catalogues such as Frazer’s, and in “great formulators of economic psychoanalysis,” such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Voltaire, Bentham, Marx, and Veblen.²¹

Burke saw his ironic approach as ideal. He suggested that as perpetual students of human nature, we might “‘transcend’ occasions when [we have] been tricked or cheated,” instead placing “such discouragements in [our] ‘assets’ column, under the head of ‘experience.’” So, “by a mere trick of bookkeeping, like the accountants for big utility corporations,” and we might “make ‘assets’ out of ‘liabilities,’” since liabilities seemed

to be in good supply.

Burke explained:

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy.²²

During a period of high seriousness, Burke imagined a culture that would pattern its social behavior after comedy and ironic self-consciousness, its ideal figures not fierce but flexible, less unequivocal and more critical, possessed of a self-consciousness that only sophisticated social interaction provides. "In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be passiveness but *maximum consciousness*."²³ One might fairly wonder whether Burke's method for gaining equanimity did not require his actors to possess large stores of it already. Though comedies, by definition, have happy endings, it is impossible to say the same of history.

Both grotesque and didactic forms also arose in periods of upheaval. The grotesque, exemplified by the Surrealist art of the twenties and thirties, incorporated opposites, oxymoron or contradiction, in a mystical nonrational amalgam, and was committed to a free play of the subconscious, yet it also indicated a placid preference for private over public symbolism.

Burke, like Spengler, suggested that in history the aesthetic trends appeared prior to any analytic or critical statement of theory. But with the rise of science as organized

doubt, the critical or theoretical achieved a constancy and a prominence. The didactic or propagandistic, followed naturally as it tries to coax symbols in the direction of theory, or attempts to make people love an order of authority the author believes in, rather than the reverse. Such coaxing, or “coaching of an attitude,” Burke called “secular prayer”—the attempt to bring something into being by naming it or interpreting it. Even laws were secular prayers, though they are backed by force. Secular prayers are “character-building;” they offer blueprints for our ideals.²⁴

Burke also described a rather deformed approach that said “yes” to everything, Filippo Marinetti’s “futurism,” the aesthetic precursor to Italian fascism. Burke noted its radical acceptance of any and all aspects of modernity, technology and authority, no matter how chaotic. This attitude attempted to fly with change per se – the airplane was actually a potent symbol in Marinetti’s lore – he contrasted it with the mundane torpor of the earth as the “pit.” Though it was the attitude of fascism, therefore imagined as aggressive, “it was in essence the most passive of frames,” an “incomplete” frame at that, since it avoided all intellectual discrimination.²⁵ Ultimately, it violently rejected all skepticism, all nay-sayers on principle, immolating itself in yeses.

Conversely, the rejection genres—the plaint, elegy, satire and the burlesque, indicate societies in transition, with rising social friction. The plaint and elegy shrink the individual while magnifying a situation, offering a fatalistic response. Satire, rather than being the external attack it is usually imagined to be, is actually indirect self-flagellation; it senses an internal vulnerability, projects it onto a symbolic other and excoriates the projection. The ultimate vulnerability is the human one; thus satire expresses a disgust

with the body and its inevitable corruption by time and death, rejecting history itself. In discussing a novel by Wyndham Lewis, Burke pointed out that: "If the 'life within' equals the intestines [the excremental], and the 'life without' equals a deceptive projection of the skeleton [death], and the man's love of woman (the erotic) is secretly tied to both, maybe there is no way of making peace with the state of things."²⁶

The burlesque pictured human limitation in a one dimensional manner; it scapegoated the ludicrous, avoiding all psychological ambivalence. Burke claimed liberal apologetics that stressed rights and freedoms without assigning obligations and limits were also a burlesque, since they rejected a balancing ambivalence.²⁷

He further suggested that the political views of the Southern Agrarian literary movement were also a burlesque, since they argued that we could return to an idealized liberal "freedom," if property were made "inalienable." Burke drily observed that it was from the alienation of property, in liberating the serf from the soil and thus dispossessing him, that modern notions of freedom arose, implying that absolute property rights and freedom were logically and historically incompatible. Burke suggested that liberal freedom, the principle of inalienable rights, an opposition to external controls (what Isaiah Berlin would later call "negative liberty"), is "a truncated concept, an unintended *caricature* of human relations." It is an unrealistic atomism and an incoherent set of concepts, so "the liberal who rates social organisms by this test alone is vowed to disillusionment." Since freedom entailed dispossession, repossession would involve a reobligation.²⁸

Transcendence

The literary genres represented alternative postures toward history. Therefore even the formal modes of literary expression were, at their roots, political responses – historically conditioned though not caused. They also demonstrated an impulse to “transcend” those conditions and thus to accept them. When that was impossible, rejection followed. Again, while materialists or positivists considered transcendence as a supernatural fiction that interfered with clear thinking and rational action, Burke argued that transcendence is “basic to thought,” a natural mental mechanism comparable to the analogical thinking detailed in *Permanence and Change*, and he described it naturalistically. Transcendence is generalization and abstraction applied to the realm of emotion, action and ethics, and as Robert Wess has noted, Burke’s concept is *not* intended to move one out of history into an ahistorical realm.²⁹ He saw it as the decision to derive from ambiguity an essence of greater generality and greater moral clarity, by which the thinker finds a perspective to reconcile a conflict. Burke said: “One confronts contradictions. Insofar as they are resolvable contradictions he acts to resolve them. Insofar as they are not resolvable, he symbolically erects a ‘higher synthesis,’ in poetic and conceptual imagery, that helps him to ‘accept’ them.”³⁰ For example, class writers, noting good and bad in all characters, yet needing a dramatic point of view, resolved this technical problem with a “transcendent” class theory and an idealized proletariat, while Emerson noting good and evil, decided that good was the essential reality.³¹ Bourgeois writers had their own class theory, having earlier idealized commoners who triumphed over wicked nobles. If sincere, and not merely verbal manipulation, it signals a

“rebirth,” or new identity, and a new drawing of ethical borders. In any case, it asserts what Wess has called Burke’s “group realism” the assertion that a collectivity is a reality and not merely an aggregate of different particulars.³²

To explain this “transcendence,” Burke offered examples of writers’ personal moral biographies, explaining their development as artists as a function of their capacity for morally sustaining these abstract philosophic attitudes. These are attitudes of greater moral generality that manage to find methods for subsuming difficulty and difference under a broader aegis. Such an approach was opposed not only to more positivistic ones, that suspected abstraction and generality as holdovers from idealism revealing an avoidance of specificity, but also to those of conservatives like Allen Tate, who believed poetry should be understood without reference to biography or psychology. For example, Burke explained Hesiod’s atheism as an attempt to resolve problems with his brother by a “transcendent” attitude of greater moral abstraction intended to shrink his earlier resentment. The poet’s transcendence then collapsed into anger at his own idealism when the brother’s behavior did not change in kind. This was then expressed didactically in cynicism and atheistic debunking of the gods.³³

Burke approached T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* similarly, a daring move given that Eliot was alive and at the height of his fame and adulation. According to Burke’s ethical autopsy, Eliot had escaped the vulgarity of St. Louis for the “elegance” of England and by a marriage into the English gentry. As modern life in England proved a disappointment in terms of his ideal, and the world appeared a “wasteland,” Eliot turned to God, “the only symbol elegant enough.”³⁴ Yet a religiously scrupulous Eliot

realized that he must transcend his own supreme cultivation with “a new structure of humility,” in order to be consistent with his new faith, transcendently “negating” or replacing the earlier “God of elegance,” who had “negated” St. Louis; the poem serves to express a religious rebirth. The transformations of St. Thomas in the poem and the jump from poetry to critical prose and then back to poetry, indicate Eliot’s penitential moves back and forth from poetry to criticism.³⁵

Transcendence can succeed or not, and can only go on so long in most personalities or intellectual schemes; the more talent for genuine transcendence, the more complex or powerful the personality, or the “transcendental idea.” If recalcitrance or dissatisfaction is met at each “higher” level, sooner or later such high-mindedness will fail, as it did in Hesiod’s case. Emerson’s making the good the “essence” of the good-bad equilibrium, or materialism’s assertion that the contradictions of mind and matter are resolved in matter, are also forms of transcendence -- “upwards” and “downwards.”³⁶

The Curve of History: The Faustian moment

Burke’s “curve of history” gallops from “Christian Evangelism” (rising in the “decay” of Hellenism) through “Medieval Synthesis,” “Protestant Transition,” and “Naive Capitalism” to an “Emergent Collectivism” in under sixty pages. These ideological totalities Burke called “collective poems;” we might also understand the section as a history of persuasion and assent in the West, with a strong “economic” emphasis, and then a “comic corrective,” to any ideological rigidity. The overarching concept is that of “the bureaucratization of the imaginative,” and this history illustrates this process.³⁷

A sixty-page review of Western history (Burke called it a “book review of history”), depicted as a five-act drama, beginning with the fall of Rome and closing with socialism on the move, is inevitably a magnet for interpretive and factual shortcomings, especially by today’s far more cautious and precise historical standards. In his unregenerately essentialist summary, Burke attempts to chart the rise of capitalism and its transformation into socialism. In *Permanence and Change*, the three great rationalizations were magic, religion and science. Now he broke apart Western history into periods united under general ideological schemes. Burke failed to remind us that these schemes are only perceived as unities by one particular historically conditioned form of hindsight. The narrative is his tale of the tribulations of social cooperative structures at the point at which they transform or disintegrate; and its moral is a suggestion for combining political commitment and urbane patience in one perspective. We might also see it as a bildungsroman of acceptance in the West. Here also was where Burke justified his “comic” approach, but it remained more the description of a personal critical attitude than the definition of a method.

Though the analyses of the grand orientations are radically simplified they are, at times, astute, since they were the distillation of considerable reading. But the weakness of this analysis is its attempt at a synthetic history; Burke collapsed the material circumstances surrounding large ideological shifts far too much to be taken entirely seriously, especially when compared with Spengler’s detailed tome. To say that capitalism flourished in England because William the Conqueror imposed a feudal structure on the region that firmly disregarded local custom, as opposed to crediting

geography, demography, technology, personality, or any combination of multiple factors, is a mode of polemic using history, rather than the historical view of polemic that one finds elsewhere in *Attitudes*, and that Burke manages more successfully there.

Burke did avoid the even more extreme schematic sins of Hegel or Spengler, who believed history's imagination had somehow culminated in their interpretations. He allowed a rewriting of history that would have the "last act in one version [of the past] . . . become the first act of a later version," beginning his discussion with Prudentius, who saw the onset of Christianity within the Roman empire as the completion of history, right on the eve of the empire's collapse.³⁸ Unlike most polemicists, Burke laid his "cards face-up on the table," saying that he had "arranged" and "weighted" and "pointed" his material to bring the reader along. Echoing Brooks, he declared, "A history of the past is worthless except as a documented way of talking about the future."³⁹

Burke's quick reading of history is "economic"—to a limited extent materialistic.⁴⁰ In his narrative, Rome, following the Persian model, built its dynamic empire without entirely disrupting local customs. Despite introducing some "changes" to the regions it conquered, much remained relatively stable. The economic "bandwagon effect" — it was safer and more beneficial to ride with the current of Roman power than against it — saw local powers graciously acceding to Rome's demands for incorporation. Once all these differing cultures were brought together under this material pressure, an incorporating ideology was then required. Stoicism was the philosophy that was intended to unite these disparate elements in a "world citizenship," an "intellectual

counterpart to the vast practical network of communications perfected by the early emperors.”⁴¹ For instance, to maintain the network of roads, public buildings, and the costs of running an empire, the emperor seized individual property. This approach to property as “public” was interpreted by the Stoics as individual sacrifice to benefit the whole.

Stoicism was “a state philosophy”; it was humanistic and humane, in laying its main stress on *man in society* (rather than upon man in nature, or man as a future citizen of heaven).⁴² Its two major theorists, Aurelius and Epictetus, were an emperor and a slave, yet its rationale for self-sacrifice was abstract and superficial, a “cult of the state.” Stoicism was unable to craft an emotionally satisfying universal ideology: “It was an *official* philosophy, designed for broad administrative ends” – for the managerial classes. Since it was disconnected from the experience of physical toil, or from the needs of those who toiled, it lacked vitality; its sensibility of republican virtue did not appeal to soldiers or slaves, or the illiterate, or “passionate.”⁴³ Christianity with its *agape*, love festivals and its personal God emerged in response. Though keeping the universalist worldview of the pax Romana, it compensated for the punitive fixation of the status and location of workers, allowing a spiritual mobility to compensate for a material immobility.⁴⁴

The Christian agon allowed its members to explicitly address conflict by cultivating and resolving a double guilt (of fall and crucifixion) with personal effort, and therefore “own” the ideology instead of merely inheriting it or having it commanded. Any too strong an individualism was “sidetracked,” since the Church so comprehensively provided an earthly communal access to the perfection of God. In tandem with this,

Thomas Aquinas's organizational system placed individuals within the social hierarchy. The Church also relied on the family metaphor to enhance obedience to authority and custom. "Thomism, like all complete orthodox faiths, had developed the *compromises* required to fit a theory of spiritual perfection into a material "imperfect world," via an orderly graduated scheme and an accommodation of opposites: "a saving grace could be found for any policy."⁴⁵

Burke concluded that such ideological adaptability bodes an inevitable corruption, splintering, and collapse. As the ideas are bent more and more by the interpreters to incorporate reality with "casuistic stretching" – ways of justifying apparent contradictions – a number of things occur. If there is a salient feature of the frame that can be exploited, for example, obedience, a group will organize to do just that until "the 'Malthusian limits' of the opportunity are reached"; Malthusian limits are the point at which all attempts at mitigating the problems/contradictions inherent in economic or social habits only further multiply the consequences of its embarrassments. This is the position in which capitalism had presently found itself by 1937.⁴⁶

New material, inventions, and theories also endanger the frame. Eventually, it no longer serves the purpose of explaining reality, but "reality" now explains the frame, in one or another sort of "debunking" challenge. The perspective of the challenges derive in part from the frame itself. "Demoralization" sets in and people cast about for a heresy of some sort. The splintering or sectionalism that developed was at first incorporated by the Catholic frame – monastic orders that arose in response to historical conditions—had stressed one or another aspect of the orthodoxy. But in so doing, they contained incipient

heresies.⁴⁷

Furthermore, in the late medieval period, the opportunities for economic exploitation of both the orthodoxy and those of the sects had been “moved in on.” That is, material interests on both sides were now entrenched and disputes became those of clashing modes of life, with interest and survival making them quite personal. The ideological compromises of “casuistic stretching” could serve for only so long till the situation became chaotic. In such critical situations, people on all sides resorted to “prayer,” Burke’s sociological description of the attempts to call realities into being by verbalizing them with plea and invective and heightening the stress.⁴⁸

This led into the stage of “Protestant Transition.” Burke observed the operation of a powerful linguistic tendency. He explained that because of the sectarian separation from the church, the collapse of the old communal frame, a “*negativistic emphasis*” arose in thought and in economic method.⁴⁹ This is how Burke interprets the division of all the disciplines and endeavors: art, business, science, and the pressure to separate Church and State. The historical details as to who actually pressured whom for separation and when, and the connection to Protestantism are absent from Burke’s account. On the issue of capitalism, Burke uses Sombardt and Weber to explain the open incorporation of usury in Protestantism, and its ideological companions, the concepts of “Providence” and “vocation,” that now justified the desire for profit and ambition and interpreted wealth as the sign of God’s favor.⁵⁰

Burke, following Marx, argued that the liberation of the peasantry from the soil was a painful process. Mortmain and the feudal system connected rights with obligations

for all parties. The peasant was bound to the soil, but that gave him a de facto right to till it; his liberation left him with a mobility that was less an opportunity than an exaction. “Bourgeois ‘freedom’ was no greater a boon for many people at the start of its career than it appears to be at the finish.” Citing the Enclosure Acts and the transformation of England’s countryside from agricultural to the more profitable sheep raising, Burke describes people as trapped in the vortex of a changing economy; “freedom,” or “alienation” entailed mass starvation, and it was all rationalized by the secular accountancy of profit and loss.⁵¹

Like early Christianity, Protestantism also offered organic spiritual community, yet unlike the Church’s philosophy of tolerating difference, the sects stressed conformity. “Each time this uniformity was impaired, the sect itself tended to split, with a new uncompromising offshoot reaffirming the need for a homogeneous community, all members alike in status.” This homogenizing psychological tendency led to “the greatest heterogeneity of occupations the world has ever known.”⁵²

Capitalism thrived in England to a greater degree than on the Continent, because supposedly, William the Conqueror imposed feudalism directly, in one fell swoop, rather than having it grow incrementally and unevenly, minimizing the Anglo-Saxon resistance to the Norman legal and linguistic modes. Burke was trying to explain why, despite capitalism’s having begun in the Mediterranean, it was the English who became the most effective modern capitalists, until the Americans.⁵³

Burke continued to argue, as he had in his articles, that capitalism in America was ubiquitous; we “imposed a rationally perfect frame” because we exterminated the

Indians, rather than incorporating their “non-commercial collectivities.”⁵⁴ Abstract finance controlled “the destiny of the frontier by controlling the organizing resources of the political center,” and providing an abstract transcendent scheme that would reshape the varieties of immigrant cultures and the sectional differences.

The move from the medieval guild’s “just price” to Adam Smith’s mechanical Providence – the laws of the market, and the development of monopoly and oligopoly began: “Men had been members of a religious corporation, a civic corporation, and a vocational corporation. They now had a chance to become members of a financial corporation, that emerged from the proliferation of partnerships until many members were included . . . and you finally arrived at the ‘joint stock company.’” He continued to rail against corporate power, noting that those with small stakes protect the large stakeholders. But he also noted the interrelatedness of the system, observing that the government either taxed or borrowed, in each case risking the structure of credit and private wealth. In order to maintain the economy, consumers must have money, a Keynesian principle that might have pleased Burke, yet the notion that mutual dependence was for the sake of private acquisition clearly irked him.⁵⁵

So Burke had laid out his argument, organized so that “the emergence of collectivism becomes the logical content of Act V.”⁵⁶ This collectivism would develop surreptitiously through the expansion of the method of the “socialization of losses.” A “socialization of losses,” is the distribution of fiscal or social pain and responsibility to as large a number to reduce the impact. Then such insurance was generally the privilege of business who was periodically bailed out of difficulty by the federal or local

governments. Private insurance worked similarly. This “salvation” device was becoming “democratized,” and used by different sectors of the economy. Burke predicted that this principle would spread because the ballot would compel it. The nature of politics was such that even if contemporary culture would accept the “manic-depressive alterations of inflation and collapse” and eschew planning, each depression was going to increase demand for socialization of losses, or modern socialism, and, thus, “cyclical depressions bring capitalism progressively closer to socialism.”⁵⁷

Liberalism had denied the “servile” in asserting men were free and independent, but according to Burke, business reinstated it again as the “gospel of service.” This was the way the Faustian world of monetary ambition attempted to cope with the inevitable guilt rising from profit, a guilt Burke seemed to believe Protestantism was incapable of entirely eliminating. Burke noted that “even in a society where talk of freedom is being so steadily ‘cashed in on’ for apologetic purposes,” it was still the case that “the individual is a bondsman, who justifies himself by paying tribute to the norms of his society.” Burke believed that this altered the terms of the capitalist/anticapitalist debate. Since men were never absolutely free of guilt or responsibility, they would indenture themselves in some manner or another, “The issue then ceases to be a squabble over ‘freedom versus bondage.’” Instead “it becomes a weighing of various frames in which a *bondage-freedom ambivalence* can express itself.” Burke was convinced that all men were obligated by their guilt over their pursuit of personal interest in contrast to the commonweal, so different cultures arrived at various schemes for creating balance.⁵⁸

The bureaucratization of the imaginative

Burke's historical analysis illustrated the process of bureaucratization: collapse – then rebirth in allegiance to new forms of authority – and a new identification by the participants. Burke's ironic mouthful named the processes that occur when ideas are put into effect in what we call “the real world.” Burke's characterization of ideological decay is not quite as dismal as Max Weber's portrait of the inverse relation of revolutionary enthusiasm to the ability to govern, nor as deterministic as Spengler's cycles, where dynamic cultures mature toward civilized “decay” in a given absolute pattern, but neither is it as well thought out. At times it sounds like a compound of both, with Marx and Freud thrown in for good measure.⁵⁹

Though, like Spengler, Burke believed that social systems decayed as they lost their coherence and unifying power, he did not accept this as the end of the matter, or even that there were fixed inevitable stages; his vision of what went wrong was far more fluid, and rejected Spengler's fatalism for Marx's progressive reading of history. Combining Spengler and Marx, Burke arrived at a somewhat neutral sociological explanation, that looked a little like a drastically abridged Weberian reading of the history of ideas.

Burke explains bureaucratization as the child of potentiality and actuality—what we want and what we get:

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. . . . In bureaucratizing a possibility, we

necessarily come upon the necessity of compromise, since the human being is not a complete fit for *any* historic texture. A given order must, in stressing certain emphases neglect others.⁶⁰

Choice, rather than avoiding compromise, compels it at the very source of action: we sacrifice all possibilities except one in order to move in a chosen direction. In giving ideas life, our organizing behavior also consigns them to a historical context and therefore, to a beginning and an end. “Perhaps it [bureaucratization] merely names the process of dying,” Burke reflected.⁶¹

We can find more than a few puzzlements here, some will be discussed later. For now, we observe that Burke sometimes seems to suggest that a historic texture is given and society follows an stochastic yet inevitable process of decay; at other times, as in the discussion of acceptance and genres, history seems endlessly transforming as individuals are continually remaking, adjusting and renewing it. This inconsistency derives from his apparently accepting portions of Marx’s and Spengler’s versions of historical determinism and his own creation of an abstract of social decay, while simultaneously asserting human creative freedom and a gradual evolution of capitalism into socialism. We see Burke attempting to press a politics of material determinism and social conflict onto his portrait of individual creativity, which is biologically determined; that this is not a seamless fit is no wonder. History is portrayed as a portrait of death reflected in the failure of social systems but a “rebirth” in the endless ingenuity of humans individually and in groups. What follows is Burke’s description of how bureaucratization of the imaginative occurs: i.e., how social change occurs.

Human beings are social. Since life in nature is so cold, nasty, brutish, and short,

we create philosophic schemes or ideological rationales – the “frames of acceptance” – that allow us to put immediate self-interest aside in order to live and work together cooperatively. These frames provide us with material and psychic sustenance in ways that pure competition cannot. Each of these grand social ideas, the Hellenism of the Roman Empire, early Christianity, hegemony under the Church, what Burke calls the “medieval synthesis,” Protestantism, capitalism, or socialism are rationales for cooperation; they replace the war of all against all, or chaos. We want to accept our “history,” our social reality, and we find our identities with our fellows within one or another frame, adjusting our attitudes and expectations accordingly. The actual order of authority in a frame, the value system and its correspondent figures of authority is the “imaginative;” the actual practice of such a system – the “bureaucratization”⁶²

In order to live within the frame, we accept the compromises with reality dictated by the cooperative scheme. These compromises include the sundry other things involved in making it work. Just as we accept the need for sparkplugs and their manufacturers as facilitating our need to move and our passion for driving, each social scheme, whether parliamentary, capitalistic, religious, or ritualistic, requires multiple auxiliary forms. Each auxiliary form and its by-products require further subsidiary forms; finally we arrive at a complex system. Romantic love that leads to marriage with its attenuations might serve as an example of such bureaucratization. Since each “by-product” has its own logic and purpose – an ideology in miniature – as well as its accessory function as part of a larger ideology, it can obscure or work at cross purposes from the original frame, thus stifling rather than freeing participants.⁶³

Furthermore, people become involved with the production and maintenance of these auxiliary institutions and are often powerfully interested in their perpetuation. Burke takes Werner Sombart's example of double-entry bookkeeping arising within mercantile industry, which subsequently produced a system of finance that generated further bureaucratic necessities.⁶⁴ It seems that vitality and creativity push cultures toward destruction.

Such diversity and division of labor creates multiple hierarchies and multiple social identities for the members. These cooperative attitudes allow those in a position to exploit opportunities to "move in on" unguarded areas of the frame, that is, to exploit certain forms of naiveté, ignorance, or goodwill. Those in a position to benefit themselves, inevitably do, soon enough to excess. Here he uses examples of compelled obedience such as psychological blackmail against unions or virulent racism in the South. People are exploited till they are "driven into a corner," and forced to react.⁶⁵

The "by-products" that run counter to the philosophic principles or system of community underlying the frame, are ideologically linked to the original rationale with "casuistic stretching," by its "priests" or ideological handlers. Burke's example was the Church. It used the Crusades to accommodate belligerent impulses arising from economic tensions. This temporarily postponed the need for revision or "transcendence."

During the latter stages of a frame, the habits that have arisen from its character multiply until they reach their "Malthusian limits." Burke used the nineteenth century economist's name to capture the hysterical flavor of a social world proliferating with

auxiliary bureaucratic forms that allow one group to profit disproportionately at another group's expense. As these reproduce beyond the capacity for the frame to incorporate them ideologically and perhaps even physically, a disintegration begins. All attempts to correct the imbalance only create further imbalances due to the complex interdependence of the productive elements. Such developments obviously doom the future of the frame; Burke's description not only resembles Malthus's dire predictions regarding population growth and the food supply, but is analogous to Marxian principles of "pauperization" as well.⁶⁶

The desperate rationalizing eventually creates a "demoralization," as it becomes more and more difficult for many people to locate the original cooperative idea under the muddle of causistry. Soon the system no longer appears reasonable. The frame's symbols of authority no longer hold the same resonance, and individuals or groups now become "alienated" from the whole: they are dispossessed. Since human beings crave personal and social integration as their natural condition, they struggle to "repossess the world" and the first step is to find a new "rationale of history."⁶⁷

Ultimately, if no resolution is reached, participants need to transcend it by locating a new cooperative frame that redraws the boundaries and highlights different values. For example, Catholicism forbade usury and debt, though as modern economies began to develop, casuistic justifications grew for the monetary practices of churchmen. These justifications soon appeared arbitrary and corrupt, since they applied only to an elect. Calvinism then explicitly permitted the taking of interest, and the future-oriented approach of "Providence" paralleled the futurism of investment. The older frame no

longer appeared reasonable.

Demoralization, or a weakened frame, and attendant alienation is then resolved by sectarianism, which reconfigures the original ideology by stressing certain principles and deemphasizing others. Because interests and “ways of life” are now at stake, these “sects” will often be resisted by the frame’s educational and cultural institutions, which Burke calls the “forensic.”⁶⁸ If pressure forms against the sects, a potential for serious conflict develops with a new transcendent system arising, and once more the members are in a transitional period between one attitudinal frame and another. If a system of authority develops a set of expectations for the participants, and they are not met, or new material or technology arise that cannot be explained or accommodated by the system, sooner or later the group will organize another more satisfactory system again meeting resistance when attempting to put it into effect.

Guilt and creativity: “Freud” reenters

The rise of Protestantism was a central example for Burke, but all revolutions fit this description. If a new sect can claim itself as the true faith, by the “stealing back and forth of symbols,” which is really a contest over the meaning of terms, it remains relatively wholesome and its members are not conflicted by negativity or guilt since theoretically, it is not attacking the orthodoxy. Burke’s suggestion that the term “the people” be used in American propaganda was one example of such “stealing,” since it harked back to the *Declaration* and the *Constitution*. Protestant theologians returning to the Old Testament is another. That is, if a renovation of the ideology can claim it is a conservative reform, it is not problematic. Yet if it must deviate and bring into being

new political realities or forms, problems arise. Furthermore, since purity is now an essential credential, sects develop a tendency to splinter.⁶⁹

Members become involved with the complex psychology of rejection. Here Burke renovates certain Freudian notions. The ideological frame is connected overtly and subconsciously with social symbols of authority, and with individuals' personal symbols, such as family, generation, nation, and so forth. Rejection of authority causes guilt. In literature, we then find guilt over rejecting familiar authority expressed in themes of parricide, incest, and castration, and illustrated by symbols, trees, mountains, etc., that either have atavistic references or identifications with Satan. According to Burke, "The [literary] work is a ritual whereby the poet takes inventory with reference to the acceptance or rejection of this authority."⁷⁰ Acceptance of the new authority requires all manner of symbolic effort – logical and non-logical accommodations such as "casuistic stretching," "bridging devices," and rhetorical invocation – "secular prayer" – to accommodate the inevitable gaps between the ideal and the real. Critics should look for "clusters," associated symbols found frequently in tandem, that send clues to the author's internal relation to his work. While an artist might be confused over his ideological opinions, or alter them, he cannot misrepresent his artistry: the language and his favored mannerisms will expose his personal attitudes as well as his literary personality. This aesthetic stability is the consistent loyalty within the personality that will allow some ideological flexibility. For example, Dryden's politics changed, but his use of heroic couplets remained continuous. One presumes that he found themes for applying them in any number of historical and political circumstances, and that the couplets expressed a

repetition or consistency in his attitude.

Though all writers have their own specific symbolic relations derived from personal history – individual childhoods and circumstances, they apply these to public or “forensic” problems.⁷¹ We resolve our guilt toward our own frustration with authority by acting it out – projecting the crime and punishing it in various symbolic ways that Burke detailed. These meanings are revealed less by a study of a work’s content, than by an indirect analysis of its form. The meanings and connections emanate from the work in infinite patterns, that are neither logical or linear, since they have arisen from the “synthesis” of disparate elements. “Every act is a miracle, a ‘synthesis’ that can be reduced to an infinity of components.”⁷²

According to Burke, guilt may appear in satanic symbols and in those of parricide, and these are connected to themes of sacrifice and redemption. Burke goes as far as to suggest that Marx’s guilt was expressed in his portrait of a “suffering proletariat who must redeem the world by a blood-sacrifice,” a quasi-Freudian literary treatment of Marxian ideology that was likely to offend all sides. Thus, integrity is maintained within the unpredictable world of history by humanity’s aesthetic habits.⁷³ A savvy critic examining a politically conflicted author will be able to locate the symbolic deaths and “rebirths” that indicate a change in relation to self and social coordinates. Since the critic will inevitably select one or another emphasis; Burke instructed that he should decide this by taking measure of the state of the world, and selecting a focus most relevant to present concerns; thus he endorsed didactic criticism.⁷⁴

When ideas are “bureaucratized,” they begin a journey as a series of choices that

must be made within a succession of uncontrollable contexts. Because there is no other alternative for ideas than either to remain abstract or to suffer the deformities of living things, we are faced with a grim situation, unless we can stretch our concepts or transcend them with larger ones.⁷⁵ Societies begin by expressing their ideologies in each social detail and end by eventually contradicting it, because of the imperfection intrinsic to the establishment of any idea. Thus, Burke turned Marx's "inner contradictions," into one enormous, necessary contradiction embedded in the human situation. He did not explain why some persons raised in the same cooperative ideology will move in on opportunities to exploit their neighbors, while others will not; his psychology is very weak on explaining human differentiation, attributing it to both inborn talents and accidental personal history, as well as atavistic responses to symbols.

Bureaucratization was so constant and decay so inevitable, and yet so inherently connected to revision, that once again Burke returned to a mystical holism containing all change and fragmentation within an overarching constancy. Burke found many things in modern society so very troubling, and saw individuals – responding in particular ways due to their historical situations – as guilty, tragic, and struggling to justify themselves—he still considered himself a realist and not an idealist, if to be an idealist meant a thinker who would rest easy in the unity of all things.

Counter-Nature

A by-product of modern bureaucratization was scientific and materialistic technology. Like all by-products, technology now had a life and consequences of its

own. The despoiling of the earth by exploitation of resources and waste were the results of an accelerated alienation from the original productive plant. A quarter of a century before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* alerted the public to the consequences of industrial pollution, Burke also began his vocal worrying about the ecology, a part of the human economy on which we were dependent, and which could not be replaced, and he predicted we would soon be hearing more about it. Because our view of earth was utilitarian and impersonal, and technology so complex, we became further and further alienated from its use and effects. The unintended by-products of the impersonal technological attitude had begun to threaten our own original purpose: life. This alienated system was that of "Counter-Nature."⁷⁶

The "economic emphasis": Marxian or left-liberal?

Burke's "bureaucratization" theory is itself an example of creative transcendence. While on the one hand, Burke argued for a comic/ironic and transcendental/holistic view, he pushed in a contrary direction as well. Burke seemed determined to prove he was a serious Marxist, interested in defending socialist moves for economic change, as his defenses against Sidney Hook and Margaret Schlauch's very different critiques suggest.⁷⁷ Despite his arguments for the priority of thought over material conditions, he tried to pull more Marxian principles into his orbit.

Attitudes Toward History shows how incapable Burke was of truly assimilating the Marxist theory of history within his thought, for here he tried to salvage what he could. Two points Burke seemed to be able to rescue from the grand visions of Marx and Spengler were, first, the axiom that politics and art expressed historical realities and were

therefore not only dependent on individuals but at least to a great degree, on sociological processes. Second, was a description of the person as socially constructed, though as we have seen, Burke was equivocal on this as well.⁷⁸ Marx had seen a dialectical process operating in history, arising out of the character of productive forces: a dream of inevitable resolution and a reborn humankind. Spengler saw history's processes as resulting in western civilization's collapse: a nightmare of ineluctable decline.

Having previously dethroned materialism as a first cause, *Attitudes* reconsidered Marx's views, treating them more respectfully, working them back into his social schema as a correction to a sentimental, conservative, supernatural view. He explained, "When beginning this book, we tended to resist the purely 'economic' interpretation of history. We felt that the rise of great imperial integers could only be explained by reference to some 'spiritual' force. But as we proceeded we found the economic emphasis inescapable."⁷⁹

So, this time when he approached the question of which came first, ideology or interest, he arrived at a "bandwagon theory of history," that explained how interest *does* create ideology.⁸⁰ But the model Burke used for this "materialism," that power is accumulated and thought follows, was the psychology of the electoral processes in conventions or caucuses, as exemplified in the liberal society he wished to transform. In this view, a figure representing an idea gains support creating an interest – a potential for benefit or loss – and delegates "jump on the bandwagon," in order to profit. The bandwagon now has persons of multiple interests and viewpoints on it, and the ideology or political platform must be crafted to incorporate them all in a "transcendent"

consensus, to gain further support ensuring viability.⁸¹

In this way that material interests create ideology. Burke has described how personalities serve as occasions to activate interests, in turn creating compromise. In this odd portrait, ideology is that which comes before and after parliamentary negotiation, but throughout his book negotiation and compromise in the personal and public spheres seem to be where all the creative action occurs. This dialectical “transcendence,” this compromise, mental and social, does not resolve itself in history, as Hegel and Marx had both suggested, but appears to continue endlessly. Here Burke seems to be the pragmatist some have claimed him.⁸² Furthermore, in this picture, it appears that cooperation is actually alliance for the sake of self-interest. It is unclear whether ideology covers interest, represses it, transcends it, or does all three. Nor can people be psychoanalytically “cured,” of their tendency to identify with various sects, individuals, classes, styles, etc., since it is “normal,” and “a man who dies in battle as a result of a faulty identification is better off than a man who can identify himself with no corporate trend at all.” The psychiatrist’s cure “smuggles in” an alternative identification, it does not eliminate the need for one.⁸³

What Burke held here as compromise, a Marxist of his day would hold as “contradiction”—the eventual source of collapse and revolution. For Burke, compromise creates the ideological frame at the start and facilitation of compromise or cooperation is its purpose. What causes the dissolution of the ideological frame is bureaucratization; i.e., that humans are compelled to interact with history when they put their ideas to the test with action, and history is the villain—delivering its evils. Therefore, it is not so

surprising when, later in the book, Burke returns to the very nonmaterialistic “original sin,” as the foundational debit that serves as the motive for social self-justification.

When examining Burke’s “bureaucratization” as a dying by living, it is impossible not to return to the “sin” metaphor again. This certainly helps explain why a positivist and pragmatist such as Sidney Hook would have no patience with Burke’s bureaucratization concept, finding it “a truism or an absurdity,” even had it not been tied to sympathetic remarks about the Soviets.⁸⁴

Burke also argued for the direct acceptance of socialist principles in America. The “socialization of losses,” first accepted to allay capitalism’s failures, should be further democratized to serve as a principle of distributive justice, not merely the twentieth century’s form of business welfare. Burke observed, “One group after another draws on the collective credit of the government for support of its private fortunes, as when our federal treasury comes to the rescue of private banks.” Electoral pressure would lead to “concessions for the masses,” and a de facto socialism eventually, so why wait?⁸⁵ Since even the conservative Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation was a part of such a tendency, socialism was inevitable, “unless the cataclysms of war intervene to arrest it.”⁸⁶ Socialization of losses in finance capitalism was analogous to the movement of usury in the medieval system, from a church dispensation to a accepted public system. If socialism arrived, it would grow from capitalism, and generating its own conflicts:

There is no reason to believe that, given any form of socialism, the process of bureaucratization, involving the unforeseen and unforeseeable recalcitrance of “this imperfect world,” will avoid “unintended by-

products.” Marx carried his analysis of historical processes *up to* the establishment of Communism. But why should not one extend his “leads” into the abstract formulation of Communist history also? . . . Quite as there are collective elements in capitalism, there will be capitalist elements in Communism. Hence, the justification for an “extension” of Marxist sociology to consider also the *continuities* preserved despite a *discontinuity*.⁸⁷

The very large difference between Burke and Marx becomes obvious, since constellations of power are described by Burke as growing from natural interest and cooperation and conformity based on such interest, rather than actual economic coercion. When individual cases of actual coercion do exist, they do so as by-products. The structure of human need and nature is its own coercion, an individualistic relationship with harsh experience, which cooperative frames are meant to palliate. For Marx, compromise is collapse. Burke did follow Marx in suggesting that the division of labor caused alienation, though he also attributed alienation to the use of tools and, unlike Marx, believed technology was a curse rather than our salvation.

Thus, compromise can be viewed two ways: as either accepting a half a loaf or conceding one. Forms of ideological compromise seem to be at the center of social, political, and aesthetic creativity. And since this is a continuous process, Burke has no conceptual room for the breach of revolution, but presents a picture of continuous reform, that is, when it is not the grimmer one of continuous decay. “Perspectives by incongruity,” developed in *Permanence and Change* encouraged skepticism, and that, in turn, was to generate a sense of common situation and purpose, and a liberal mysticism. Here skepticism was represented by a “comic attitude” and a concomitant tolerance, and this approach would bring about reform and political fraternity, which Burke calls

“communism.” This attitude is also ironic and liberal since it sees us all as merely in error and favors persuasive methods over any form of force as the most effective method to convert us leading Frank Lentriccia to note that Burke had privileged the aesthetic, ironic perspective over the more radical critical Marxism Lentriccia advocates himself.⁸⁸

Burke’s pattern of guilt and redemption, his foregrounding symbols, literary form and ideas in general, led the Marxist critic Margaret Schlauch to observe that Burke was more than skirting an idealism at odds with his professed Marxism.⁸⁹ Burke explained his interpretation of a meaningful dialectical materialism as “economic conditions give form to the values; and these values, having arisen, form ‘objective material’ with which the artist works in constructing symbols that appeal.” And since no one is “a complete fit for any historical texture . . . to some degree, solutions of conflict must always be done in the purely symbolic realm (by ‘transcendence’).”⁹⁰

But whether due to the inflexibility of Marxism or to Burke’s own fundamental belief system, Burke’s political position was the liberal one Lentriccia has claimed it was, since he accepted the ballot would bring socialistic reforms and that this was beneficial, held that unity was the product of a universal human rather than class interest, and maintained that consensus (bandwagon effect and transcendence), was not externally compelled, but a result of a human need. Though one certainly would not suggest guilt as a *de jure* liberal principle, since the history of liberalism is the story of undercutting its traditional sources, we might still admit it as a *de facto* one, an inevitable result of the clash resulting from liberalism having only partially reconfigured the attitudes toward

human ambition and human sympathy, for example, by separating church and state. And certainly in Burke's day, the Freudian answer to guilt was generally considered a private bourgeois one.

It is easy to read the bemused skepticism over motives Burke recommended as Lentriccia has, that is, as at least a partial resignation to the status quo.⁹¹ The comic view seems a quintessentially philosophic view, its irony closer to a Socratic sort; for Burke, persuasive and open argument with all its attendant risks and invitations to offense is the ultimate comic method. There is nothing "quietist" about such an admittedly intellectual approach. Even Marx sought to explain the world before he tried to change it.

Freud, Marx, and Burke

Permanence and Change attempted very generally to reconcile Freud and Marx. In *Attitudes*, Burke tried again. The Freudian aspects of his analysis center on the specifics of symbolic ritual and creative adaptations, and are intended to repersonalize the material forces moving history.

Freud emphasized the permanence of biological and symbolic concerns and the possibility of transformation through individual reidentification and analysis; Marx emphasized the impact of material conditions on the individual and stressed his transformation via a new group identity, with social transformation via group action. One can see why Burke thought these ideal supplements to each other. Though one might wish to take Burke at his word, both Marx and Freud's theories can mislead us in unpacking Burke's reasoning, since it tends to collapse into illogic or inconsistency the more he tries to align his thought with theirs.⁹² Though Burke was facile with both

Freudian symbolism and Marxian materialism, and could mine each for critical insights, when he actually used these ideologies functionally, they became lead weights often rendering his arguments.

As Burke insisted in his defense against Margaret Schlauch's criticisms of *Attitudes*, "the objective materials utilized by an individual writer are largely the *moral and aesthetic values* themselves." Economic factors may have given rise to a transition in values, but Shakespeare created a kind of poetry to cope with this transition.⁹³ And Dryden remained faithful to his heroic couplets. Thus, the artist as an individual brings something personal to the encounter with history that is not of history. Burke suggested that these values might arise from personal experience, symbols from childhood associations, and a need to expiate guilt. This was an idea he developed more fully in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* in its concept of "burden."

Burke does not argue that simple biography can explain art; Freud's clumsy attempts to use his psychological categories to explain creativity demonstrate how risky a business this could be. Despite his enthusiasm for employing biographic detail to explain an artist, Burke never suggested such crude analyses himself, despite the occasional creative use of Freudian language. Freud abandoned "original sin"—Burke makes it the basis for explaining creativity. When he looks into a poet's biography, he is using his own categories, not Freud's.

As for the aspects of his discussion that are shared with Marx, we have discussed these already and seen that many of them are shared with Spengler. In any case, Burke either drastically revised Marx or reverted to liberal or aesthetic tendencies.

Determinism in *Attitudes*

Any naturalistic analysis of history will be at least partly deterministic, since it must account for social forces and mass society, while accepting an infinitude of events in history that are beyond any individual's control. Yet a philosophy of history that is anything other than a declaration of a mindless Darwinian Selection, or the play of force, must also argue for some sort of human agency. In arguing that social transformations were inevitable, Burke followed the mixed Marxian or Spenglerian determinism to an extent. But in demonstrating how a socialistic future might come to pass, he relied on an automatic human creativity, a human mind that was an admixture of activities. Burke had described the modern mind in *Permanence and Change*: its critical, creative character was driven by biological and linguistic "interest." In *Attitudes*, he observed interest appreciatively as creativity and more suspiciously as ambition, but in either case completely restive, and moving from the "poetic to the historical," analogous to Spengler's "culture" transforming into "civilization."⁹⁴ The human mind was subjective, partly irrational, and vulnerable to symbols, possessing a guilt that needed to be purged by socially directed action, whether aesthetic or of another sort. Yet it was also critical and capable of developing a "comic attitude" of "maximum consciousness," a voluntary, actively philosophic posture prepared to grapple with a historical world that by its sheer totality, its inclusion of a variety of creatures, institutions, and interests, can never suit any single individual perfectly.

Burke does not ever try to seamlessly blend these two parts of human character, he actually suggests that the central moment of engagement, and the moment that the

critic should pursue, is the moment when the individual attempts to transcend the conflicts within his own personality. This transcendence is a public act in the social world; individuals develop morally, through their own efforts.⁹⁵ This never quite matches up with the Marxian historical determinism it is intended to qualify, and therefore the book has visible seams. One critic observed there was no clear possibility of rational choice or judgment moving history in Burke's picture.⁹⁶ The comic attitude described a posture toward a human folly that in most aspects would never change. In his macroscopic approach, socialism was inevitable; democracy's "socialization of losses" would see to that, if nothing else. But all Burke's mechanisms relied heavily on individuals and on their interest, consciously or unconsciously driven.

Reception

Burke did not present *Attitudes Toward History* as a sustained systematic argument but, as usual, followed the natural direction of his concerns, trying to fill in all the blanks as he went along. He described beginning it as "putting a bottle out to sea," since "the gravitational pull of a specific terminus ad quem is missing."⁹⁷ *The New Republic* editors were quite eager to have it; Cowley suggested that Burke was on to something "new and quite important in the world of thought – something that might turn out to be a formulation on the order of Freud or Spengler." He also begged him to clarify his points in consideration for readers less familiar with the names and concepts, and warned him against his tendency to range too widely.⁹⁸

The difficulties in *Attitudes and Permanence and Change* did not deter historians

from appreciating it. After receiving a copy of *Attitudes Toward History* from Matthew Josephson, Charles Beard wrote Burke, "Being a historical pedant, I naturally expected to find Tacitus, Mommsen and Macaulay . . . and was a bit shocked to discover James, Emerson, Whitman. But of course you're within y[our] rights for you are talking about history as actuality—not written history."⁹⁹ The great historian paid the author a compliment, telling him that he had found "food for meditation and prayer," in his pages.¹⁰⁰ Historians seemed to intuitively respond to Burke's philosophic treatment of their subject; Crane Brinton, after describing Burke's Marxism as "so tolerant, so tentative, that he must find it a bit uncomfortable," said that "his two slender volumes of reflections on man's fate . . . are more solid and nourishing than many of the longer and more pretentious philosophies of history now in the market," and that *Attitudes* pointed up "very neatly the problem of the status of history at the present time."¹⁰¹ And the intellectual historian Henry Bamford Parkes noted, "By taking the emotional development of the individual as his subject of study, he [Burke] can show how politics and literature are connected with each other, and at the same time avoid the crudities of the 'all-art-is-propaganda' school of criticism."¹⁰²

Burke and Sidney Hook: Two Marxist philosophers

But not all reviews were so respectful. The timing of *Attitudes* was key in how Burke would be reviewed and politically placed by his peers. By now, Burke had seen the popular front make moderating moves in the direction of social unification and common cause with liberalism in pretty much the manner he had proposed. How could

he not read this as a positive sign? This apparent unity momentarily disguised a malign enforced conformity: a wide-ranging purge of “Trotskyists” in Moscow, and of Trotskyists, anarchists, and syndicalists fighting in Spain. Yet Burke, in discussing “opportunism” as rhetorical accusation, uses the debate between the Trotskyists and Stalinists over whether the popular front was permanent principle or part of fluctuating policy, and sided with the Stalinists.¹⁰³

By 1933, respected American Communist Party members had already begun challenging the leadership and defecting in groups; a riot at a Madison Square Garden rally the next year, apparently instigated by communists who physically attacked socialists, drew more criticism and withdrawals. Trotskyist intellectuals began uniting with other socialist parties, such as A. J. Muste’s American Workers, and producing their own distinctive radical journals, including *The Marxist Quarterly*, of which the young philosopher Sidney Hook was an editor.¹⁰⁴ All this had not gone unnoticed in Moscow, and by decree front policy tried to paper over the nasty factionalism between socialists and communists in the liberal countries. It partly succeeded, due to an earnest desire among many anti-fascists for unity, confronted as they were with the apparently unchecked rise of fascism, especially after Franco and Mola began their move against the frail new Spanish Republic. The Spanish Civil War was well-publicized, as was the capitalist democracies’ timid and futile nonintervention agreement with the German and Italian regimes, a shabby contrast to the Soviet Union’s apparent willingness to aid the Republic.

Then, in the summer of 1936 and the following winter, Moscow moved to crush

any possible opposition, holding public trials in which many highly respected revolutionary era Bolshevik leaders confessed to a Trotskyist conspiracy to murder Stalin. Almost all the “evidence” was improbable and much of it was impossible. These were not the first such trials, but they had the most celebrated defendants -- as well as international coverage -- a daring gambit by Stalin’s regime. The defendants were found guilty, and almost all were executed immediately.¹⁰⁵ Lev Trotsky, and his son, were tried and convicted in absentia. Trotsky, on the run and searching for asylum, still brilliantly articulate, described the Revolution’s betrayal and received a hearing from the increasingly factionalized literary intellectuals, especially those at the newly regrouped *Partisan Review*.

As Irving Howe later recalled, *The Nation* and *The New Republic* “printed solemn defenses of the frameups,” while Walter Duranty sent pro-Stalinist dispatches to *The New York Times*, where they were reproduced.¹⁰⁶ Cowley, Mike Gold, and Granville Hicks in *The New Masses*, had all found ways to defend the Soviet regime or call for unity on the left despite it.¹⁰⁷ The next year, George Orwell would report on Party atrocities against their socialist and anarchist allies in Spain in his eyewitness account, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), but he was ignored. The international brigades were a powerful symbol for the left at the time, and the Party’s contribution to the republic’s confusing failure received little other publicity. The literary talents of so many writers, from Hemingway to Dorothy Parker, as well some of the century’s great photographers, had invested the dismal Spanish war with the romance, esprit de corps, and sense of meaningful sacrifice their Depression-exhausted, and fascist-fearing audiences craved,

and this held sway. In the justifiable and immediate anxiety over fascism, Burke and others were so relieved at what appeared to be a common cause, that they understood neither the implications nor the extent of the suppression. They were momentarily willing to accept it unhappily as an internecine battle and a case of discipline under wartime conditions. Stalin's nonaggression pact with Hitler in 1939, effectively finished what was left of Party enthusiasm in the United States.¹⁰⁸

Burke was clearly not a man who admitted error with ease and, even then, he privately grumbled to Cowley that since the West was not anxious to aid the Soviets, Stalin had few options.¹⁰⁹ Burke was not a Party member, nor interested in its day to day activities. He had argued for rhetorical unity modeled after an ideal unity, and he remained aloof and momentarily untouched by what he imagined were "the most restricted kind of party politics."¹¹⁰ Though he sat on the Council of the League of American Writers, its members included a wide spectrum. His name was on the masthead of *Direction*, a glossy arts magazine, but its management remained independent of the front.¹¹¹ Preoccupied with his own philosophical interest in sectarianism as a psychological motive operating in history, and likely under the spell of his own optimism, Burke was late to recognize the local violent disintegration that was actually occurring around him.

Burke would not be left oblivious for long. The redoubtable philosopher, Sidney Hook, had already suggested his own way to join Marxism with American thinking. Previously, Hook offered two books melding Marxism with Pragmatism, and effecting something of a revival for the indigenous philosophy in a new political context.¹¹² Hook

linked the Marxian claim that the resolution of thought was in “praxis,” or revolutionary activity, with what he called the “epistemological activism” of William James and John Dewey, drawing a parallel in intellectual styles. For Hook empirical “experience” not only meant scientific reasoning, but an endorsement of active independent judgement. When Hook could not reconcile the open-ended experimentalism of Pragmatism which measured theory by empirical experience, with the deterministic eschatology of Marxism, he opted for Pragmatism. And when he would not rationalize Stalin’s brutal repression despite his earlier admiration for the socialist experiment, he turned first to Trotskyism and then to his own brand of socialism, willingly alienating the doctrinaire left.¹¹³ Hook subsequently became a formidable Cold Warrior. Jacobson reports that Hook and Edmund Wilson, even when they were committed Marxists, early expressed a determination to “take communism away from the communists.”¹¹⁴

As Burke was critical, perhaps at times seemingly dismissive of Pragmatism, and aesthetic rather than scientific, it was almost inevitable that these two powerful intelligences would find themselves at loggerheads at some point, despite the independence and Marxism they had in common. Hook’s philosophic personality was not as “ingratiating” and accommodating as Burke’s: he took a fierce line against metaphysics and for the necessities of scientific naturalism.

With *Attitudes*, Burke began his fractious relationship, or nonrelationship with *Partisan Review*, which more than any other journal, would make postwar intellectual reputations. The first issue of the newly revived magazine had Hook unloading both barrels at *Attitudes Toward History*.

The editors of *Partisan Review* were very conscious that they were engaged in a street fight with the Stalinists. That a savage review of *Attitudes* by Hook was chosen for the first new issue of the revived magazine, was a signal that they were taking no prisoners, even ones as independent, equivocally Marxist, and highly respected as Burke. Burke, in merging the sociological with the aesthetic, had used the term “bureaucratization” as a central concept (coupled with “imaginative”), apparently oblivious to its connotations.

Unfortunately, it was a term that figured in the factional debates within the left and, along with some other incautious remarks, including a footnote mentioning the Moscow trials, led Hook to portray *Attitudes Toward History* as a philosophic defense of Stalin’s regime.¹¹⁵ Hook also cited Burke’s earlier favorable review of Henri Barbusse’s hagiography of Stalin.¹¹⁶ Hook was a man who had asked the highly celebrated playwright Bertolt Brecht to leave a party at his home, when Brecht flippantly treated the guilt of the defendants as a foregone conclusion -- this was a topic on which he had no doubts.¹¹⁷

Though Burke was disengaged from the left’s factional disputes, two tendencies resulted in his being misunderstood, though he was not misunderstood entirely. His sympathies were with the regime over the Trotskyists for a long while. First, Burke had a tendency to use and cavalierly redefine the critical language of the day, as well as popular language occasionally. Thus, in taking up the terms of discourse surrounding him, he used ones that had explosive meanings to those involved in the debates, such as “bureaucratization.”¹¹⁸ Sociologists, who were more used to the term in other contexts,

did not find Burke's work as politically pointed as the literary critics did.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, he was discussing social change and the disintegration of orientations by social aggregates; he characterized these in terms of monastic orders and heretical movements. Such ironical, playful comparisons were unlikely to sit well with atheistic Marxists or positivists. When he discussed heresies, factionalism, and splintering – conspicuously occurring in the Party at the time he was writing -- it was those in the communities involved who were most likely to read his work and assume a negative reference to themselves. The mentions of communism and the footnote referring to the Moscow Trials, did indeed make it appear he meant it that way. And then the title of Burke's response to Sidney Hook's review, "Is Mr. Hook a Socialist?" would add fuel to this interpretation. Yet Burke's response to Hook's review is filled with such genuine shock and surprise, it is possible to believe that he was unaware of how he sounded. Hook hit him again with a published reply, "Is Mr. Burke Serious?" and its tone can be guessed.

In any case, though these political battles may or may not have been one of his imaginary referents, Burke was too ready to treat the Moscow Trials academically in reference only to his own concerns, without a full recognition of the many other lives that were at issue. The footnote disappeared from later editions.¹²⁰ In his 1955 Introduction, Burke asked that his reader, "comically inspirited" or charitably inclined, would "forgive the author those occasions when the author's efforts to transcend a local situation, tossed him back into the very midst of it," and confessed that "as you progress along a traffic-laden avenue, sometimes its easier to see down the side streets than up and down the avenue."¹²¹

An incensed Hook told *Partisan Review* readers that: “After some vague speculations on the nature of identity, he [Burke] writes, ‘such speculations on the nature of identity coupled with our speculations on allegiance to the symbols of authority, might add [sic!] plausibility to the accusations laid against the ‘Old Bolsheviks’ in the Moscow trials.’ He then attempts to show by the inevitable reference to Dostoyevsky that it was not psychologically impossible for the defendants to be guilty.” Hook fulminated: “As if the question of mere psychological *possibility* has any bearing on the questions of *evidence*. It is not psychologically impossible that Stalin should have framed his victims nor is it psychologically impossible that Burke should have plotted with them. What follows?”¹²²

Burke’s actual footnote in its entirety was:

These men were trained in the purely antithetical mode of thought. Their personalities were formed in times of intrigue against established symbols of authority. And as the situation changed, giving more exercise to attitudes of acceptance than to attitudes of rejection, they had a difficult choice between being “demoralized” and being “reborn.” The ways in which the concerted action of millions amplifies the poignancy of such a choice, “efficiently” making it harsher and blunter than in the scrupulous readjustments of intimate relationships, would correspondingly aggravate the tendencies to “be driven into a corner.” Those who have a plan for saving mankind may quite easily, if driven into a corner, adopt an alternative plan for blowing up the world (particularly if the latter plan can eventually be re-rationalized as a more transcendent way of saving mankind.).

One may persist, if he chooses, in refusing to grant the validity of the trials. But at least the accusations present no mystery as psychology. And the zeal for confession at the time of the trial, under the threat of certain death, would indicate a “rebirth” (the adoption of a new social identity) under the traumatic incentives of the trial itself. The men would be his when he faced the firing squad (following which he lived in the “death” of imprisonment to regain “life” during the “snow scene” in St. Petersburg). The collective nature of the confessions would serve to

transform those who, like Radek, might otherwise have tended to hold out.¹²³

This passage is a case of psychological insight derived from inaccurate data, one that in regard to whether there was a genuine, far-reaching, pro-fascist conspiracy against the U.S.S.R and Stalin, under Trotsky's directives is in no way in line with the facts. Another serious error is that Burke places this footnote within a discussion of the paradoxes inherent in a communist state, inherently peaceful yet preparing for war against Germany – a gross misassumption in 1937. Though some military modernization had begun in the early nineteen-thirties, Stalin infamously did not prepare for the invasion. He had drastically purged the military's upper echelons, making a non-aggression pact instead; the disastrous consequences are too well-known to bear repeating.¹²⁴

Yet the discussion of identity was not vague, it was just original and ahead of its time: Here Burke suggests that identity is not a private reality but to a great extent, socially constructed and that it is "normal" to identify with multiple external social manifestations. "The so-called 'I' is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting corporate 'we's.'"¹²⁵ Burke's later excision of the note is an indication that he found this lapse in political judgment embarrassing in the light of history. But his thoughts were serious enough to suggest a reconsideration of approach toward the actual situation. Since the facts are finally unequivocal, it might be useful to reconsider Burke's psychological focus now.

At issue for Burke was what could explain the turning of these "Old Bolsheviks"–

a problem that has plagued the history of the issue. Perhaps the answers are torture, promises of leniency, and/or brainwashing. Burke's point about the simplistic dialectic and culture of intrigue against authority is well taken and quite relevant. He suggests that as the state became a more traditional vessel of authority, the warriors were caught in a quandary whether to allow their old revolutionary identities to dissipate, or to renew those identities in a revived conspiracy and revolution. According to Burke, the confessions might be explained by this need to be publicly reborn in the fire of the trial itself and certain death, and a sort of group hysteria, though Burke is more kind, in the context of this new revolution, caught up even cool characters like Karl Radek.

Burke did not quite say the defendants were certainly guilty, nor did he say the trials were absolutely valid, as they hardly conformed to due process as we know it. Rather he speculated on how someone might find the accusations plausible, and why the defendants might feel guilt. Ironically, Burke, the expert on language, was unready to believe that such an intricate web of coercion and lies could arise from those who simultaneously spouted socialist rhetoric. The concept of terror was clearly alien to him. The world was soon to become terribly familiar with the techniques of such a methodic moral corruption, but it was not yet.

Hook, on the other hand, insisted the only concern should be evidence, which he claimed should be judged according to "scientific procedure;" Hook would end in the "happier" historical position of having judged more correctly. Yet, though evidence may be collected and analyzed, and investigations may proceed according to some sort of scientific procedure, one would be hard-pressed to claim that even legitimate juries

weigh evidence “scientifically,” unless we really stretch the term to mean any sort of deliberative thinking -- and we know that attorneys try to sway them emotionally with dramatic reconstructions. Testimony can be compared with actual records; for example, stated air flights to Oslo to meet with Trotsky that never took place. Of course, in the world of covert operations, with which now the average television viewer is painfully familiar, records too can be faked or go missing.¹²⁶

More significantly, what sort of trial is it if the defendants plead guilty to the charges? In fact, the Bolshevik’s confessions *were* the “evidence,” the rest of it was mere window-dressing. The confessions themselves were full of factual impossibilities, thus the evidence was worthless. Of course, there was no counter-evidence, since there was no presumption of, or even a claim to innocence. In an honest case, the state would likely not consider a confession alone sufficient, as there are people who confess under coercion or occasionally from an inner compulsion to admit to crimes they have nothing to do with, even in democracies. Despite courtroom melodramas that resolve their plots with spectacular witness box confessions, any confession in a courtroom is an anomalous, almost illogical event skirting an essential aspect of due process.

A trial that begins with a confession is hardly a trial and is automatically suspect. This was the “evidence” from which Hook judged, though there was very little “scientific” or inductive about his judgment. If anything, it might have been “deductive,” as it would question these trials by definition (definitions that were liberal, not Marxist). Hook most likely used a form of hard and fast psychological insight learned early by smart kids on rough Brooklyn streets; Burke’s more forgiving background, his cerebral

youth, may have left him less knowing about “frame-ups” and how to spot a crass lie at a distance. Josephson, describing Burke’s 1934 arrest on a picket line at a small publishing house, said: “the bookish, peace-loving Kenneth Burke, finding himself incarcerated for the first and only time in his life, behaved as a Chevalier Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*.”¹²⁷

Rather than making elaborate guesses about the motives behind the confessions, Hook felt Burke should have been helping to publicize the fraud to a gullible left, of which, he now decided, the author was a particularly egregious member. Hook, an empiricist and an anti-Stalinist, found Burke’s abstractions on such dramatic issues as the trials to be offensive and irresponsible. He used his interpretation of those remarks and several others sympathetic to the Soviet Union to read *Attitudes* out of court as a defense of Stalinist communism, and the critical references to “utopianism” as being directed at an alleged unrealistic idealism of those taking his position.¹²⁸

Attitudes discusses splintering as a result of inevitable “bureaucratization;” Burke, in keeping with a tendency to describe things in terms of continuum, indicated it was the result of a general sociological process without regard to specific occurrences or actions: i.e., it was not personal. The shortcomings of leadership were those of all humans in society in history. If one referred this to Russia, as Hook did, Burke’s suggestion that it was “utopian” to expect social reality and social ideals to match events, was a red flag in more ways than one. It appeared to characterize the anti-Stalinists – now fiercely arguing that Stalin was quite deliberate and malign, and not part of any natural process – as naive, petulant, and sectarian.

Burke's direct reference was not Russia. He intended to explain how Americans might switch their allegiances from capitalism to socialism naturally, how it might be part of a reaction against modernity, seen as an inhumane form of social complexity. Despite the fact that he did mention it as an example in the notorious footnote, and did suggest it was likely to continue after socialism was established, "bureaucratization" did not primarily refer to a process occurring in the U.S.S.R., but to one in the capitalist countries, mainly his own. Since his focus was capitalism in the United States, he was stupefied by Hook's reaction. Burke, like Marx himself, was entangled in general philosophic questions of how free individuals were controlled by history and how historical individuals might yet be free; that the specific local occurrences did not engage him and he missed their import for precisely those questions. After Hook's double punch, he didn't need to be told again.

Critique

As suggested above, the reader may find more than a few problems with *Attitudes Toward History*, the most salient of which are the philosophic discontinuities between the macroscopic and microscopic explanations.

Other interpretive problems develop when Burke chooses the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism and the relevant terminology as his exemplary case for explaining the rise of modernity. Difficulties arise from taking a specific historical example and making it a "type," even, or especially if, one is idealistically reading one's type—one form of ideological revolution – back into that history. This makes one

immediately suspect a corollary distortion of both the specifically historical and the psychologically general. Yet, in fact, to be fair, one can hardly avoid bringing templates of one form or another into the analysis of historical events and at least Burke does it blatantly.

Some scholars have suggested that Burke's historical section is weak and perhaps should be discounted.¹²⁹ The difficulty with asking the reader to do such discounting is that the terminology is given its airing and exemplification with these examples. Thus, if Burke's language fails to convincingly describe history here, it calls those concepts into question in this work and in subsequent ones. It is the fundamental nature of his project, one that is trying to straddle two realities, that puts Burke in the awkward position of wavering back and forth between a sociological approach that sees individuals as parts of social formations and an aesthetic one that considers them as discrete individuals.

We might gloss over the issue by saying that *Attitudes Toward History* shows Burke at his most conflicted over the questions of materialism and idealism. He certainly becomes more pointed when he switches emphasis from a central concern with Marx's hybrid materialism, itself still partly Romantic and idealistic, to which he has enduring sentimental loyalties, to one challenging empiricism or positivism, for which he has far fewer attachments. Thus he can be less equivocally critical – and develop a number of clarifying distinctions. But these sorts of issues do not go away: they never get refined out of existence, nor do they ever get left behind. What *Attitudes* created with its determination to use emotional guilt and philosophical transcendence to explain human history, was a further unresolved problematic, a pressure caused by serious study

of Spengler, Marx, and Freud. Burke was compelled to pursue the issue into his field of very special expertise – poetic analysis – in order to clarify the strange symbiosis of ideality and matter.

1. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, "Curriculum Criticum," 216.
2. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, Prologue, li; Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 84.
3. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 210.
4. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 209.
5. Burke, *Attitudes*, 345. See also, McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 297-299.
6. Burke, *Attitudes*, 34.
7. *Ibid.*, 41, 42, 93, 166-167.
8. Burke's 1955 Introduction to *Attitudes Toward History*, 3d edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), "i".
9. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 213. Paul Jay believes that it was Laski's *Authority in the Modern State* that Burke read, Jay, *Selected Correspondence*, 214n.
10. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 108.
11. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 212.
12. Burke, *Attitudes*, 3.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 12, 15.
16. Burke, "The Virtues and Limitations of Debunking," in *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 184n.
17. Burke, *Attitudes*, 5. These ethical schemes had something of the flavor of the deal-making of modern liberal politics; this functions on the premise that given sufficient time everyone gets a turn at winning and losing. It is also strangely analogous to the financial technique of the nineteenth century's Gilded Age, which had already figured ways to farm wealth by playing with time.
18. *Ibid.*, 202.
19. *Ibid.*, 41.
20. *Ibid.*, 170.

21. Ibid., 172.
22. Ibid., 41.
23. Ibid., 171.
24. Ibid., 322.
25. Ibid., 33.
26. Ibid., 52.
27. For a classic historical analysis of these pamphlets, see Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967).
28. Burke, *Attitudes*, 56.
29. Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 87.
30. Burke, *Attitudes*, 92.
31. Ibid., 80.
32. Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 90-91.
33. Burke, *Attitudes*, 80-83.
34. Ibid., 84.
35. Ibid., 83-86.
36. Ibid., 79-80.
37. Ibid., 111-175, 225-229.
38. Ibid., 111.
39. Ibid., 159.
40. Ibid., 115.
41. Ibid., 116.
42. Ibid., 119.
43. Ibid., 120-21.

44. Ibid., 123.
45. Ibid., 129-130.
46. Ibid., 132, 298-306.
47. Ibid., 133-134.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 135.
50. Ibid., 25.
51. Ibid., 138.
52. Ibid., 135-39.
53. Ibid., 149.
54. Ibid., 146.
55. Ibid., 155.
56. Ibid., 159.
57. Ibid., 161.
58. Ibid., 165.
59. Spengler's influence on Burke was clear. Though Burke cited Max Weber in his Afterword written years later, he did not mention him in the body of the text. He does mention Werner Sombardt. See *Attitudes*, 225.
60. Burke, *Attitudes*, 225-26.
61. Ibid., 225.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 226.
64. Ibid., 25.
65. Ibid., 132n.
66. Ibid., 140n.

67. Ibid., 315.

68. Ibid., 226, 254-255.

69. Ibid., 138-139.

70. Ibid., 209.

71. Ibid., 209-210.

72. Ibid., 200.

73. Ibid., 183n.

74. Ibid., 200.

75. "Bureaucratization" was a term figuring in the Stalinist-Trotskyist debates; Trotskyists used it to describe the institutionalization of particularly malign tendencies. Burke said he had used it generally, applying it to "every government . . . every business, church, conference, ball game, picnic, and ordered set of words on a page," *Attitudes*, 401. His use seemed to owe more to Max Weber than anyone else, combining Weber's analyses of bureaucracy with those of revolutions, though never mentions him. Burke's reading of Calvinism and capitalism appears to be a simplified summary of Weber's analysis.

76. Burke, *Attitudes*, 394-396, idem., *Permanence and Change*, 297. See also Star A. Muir's "Toward an Ecology of Language," in Brock, ed., *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century*, 35-69.

77. Kenneth Burke, "Is Mr. Hook a Socialist?" *Partisan Review* 4 (Jan 1938): 43. Margaret Schlauch's review is reprinted in *Critical Responses*, 105-109. For a reprint of Burke's response to Schlauch, see *Philosophy of Literary Form*, "Twelve Propositions on the Relation Between Economics and Psychology," 305-313.

78. Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 84-85. Wess claims that the tension in *Permanence and Change* between essentialism and constructionism "is resolved [in *Attitudes*] in favor of the constructionist." This chapter has argued to the contrary: that this tension is most exacerbated in *Attitudes*.

79. Burke, *Attitudes*, 115.

80. Burke's use of "materialism" here is confusing since it is hardly Marxist; in fact it seems another version of the "interest" he had described earlier as it operated in society, placing specific emphasis on economic and political concerns, and hardly more radical than the opinions of the framers of the American Constitution. His concern with

conformity explains in part why sociologists found his work so engaging.

81. Burke, *Attitudes*, 115.

82. See David Blakesley's "Kenneth Burke's Pragmatism – Old and New," in *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century*, 71-95. See also, Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 76, 78; and Lentriccia, *Criticism and Social Change*, 162.

83. Burke, *Attitudes*, 263.

84. Hook in *Critical Responses*, 95.

85. Burke, *Attitudes*, 96-98

86. Ibid., 98-99.

87. Ibid., 320.

88. Lentriccia, *Criticism and Social Change*, 62-63, 150.

89. Margaret Schlauch in *Critical Responses*, 107-109.

90. Burke, "Twelve Propositions," *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 309, 312.

91. Lentriccia, *Criticism and Social Change*, 66.

92. Jay, "Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric," 535-536, 537, 547, *passim*.

93. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 309.

94. Burke, *Attitudes*, 227.

95. Ibid., 182-83 note.

96. Henry Bamford Parkes, "Kenneth Burke," in *Critical Responses*, 114.

97. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 212-13.

98. Cowley, Ibid., 217.

99. *Attitudes Toward History* was published by *The New Republic*. It was not considered fair to review their own imprint, so Cowley as their book editor, decided to see if he might get around the house rule either by getting a magazine stalwart such as Charles Beard to write a piece on it or by *Selected Correspondence* excerpting a portion of the book within the magazine. Cowley, *Selected Correspondence*, 219.

100. Charles Beard, Letter to Kenneth Burke, dated 1937, Kenneth Burke Papers.
101. Crane Brinton, "What is History?" *The Saturday Review of Literature* 16 (August 14, 1937): 3.
102. Parkes in *Critical Responses*, 112.
103. Burke, *Attitudes*, 307.
104. Gilbert, *Writers*, 166-167.
105. Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 367-372, 394-409.
106. Howe, "Sad Events of Long Ago," 374.
107. Gilbert, *Writers*, 157; Aaron, 360, 380.
108. Wander, "At the Ideological Front," 209.
109. Burke, *Selected Correspondence*, 232.
110. Burke, "Is Mr. Hook a Socialist?," 42-43.
111. Denning, *Cultural Front*, 444.
112. Sidney Hook, *Towards an Understanding of Karl Marx* (New York: John Day, 1933); idem, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962).
113. Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 199.
114. Josephson, *Infidel*, 164.
115. Sidney Hook, in *Critical Responses*, 89-97, 97-101. For example, Burke suggested that Dostoyevky's idealized tsar-hero had become the people's hero, apotheosized in Stalin; Hook noted that Henri Barbusse's hagiography of Stalin contained obviously doctored photographs, 93. Burke's footnote had offered a rationale for why the Old Bolsheviks might feel guilty due to the inevitable difference between the ideals and practical exigencies of a modern, vulnerable state, finding themselves unexpectedly in opposition to a regime which required absolute loyalty. For Burke's later comments, see his 1983 "Afterword: In Retrospective Prospect," from *Attitudes*, (3d edition), 400-401.
116. I have searched for this review or any reference to it in a number of places, and can find no record of it anywhere. It is not listed in Armin Paul and Methchild Frank's careful bibliography of Burke's writings either, and seems to have been lost. The Franks'

list, which goes up to 1968, "The Writings of Kenneth Burke," is in *Critical Responses*, 495-512.

117. David Sidorsky, "Charting the Intellectual Career of Sidney Hook: Five Major Steps," (a keynote address given at Sidney Hook Reconsidered: A Centennial Celebration, at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Oct. 25-26, 2002.

118. Burke, *Attitudes*, 400-401.

119. For an example of sociologists' interest in Burke, see Louis Wirth's earlier "A Review of Permanence and Change," reprinted in *Critical Responses*, 102-105.

120. Denning suggests that Burke's experience with the University of Washington in 1953 changed his position, yet Burke's views on the Soviet regime and his past clearly changed more than a decade before this and there was no advocacy of communism after *Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941).

121. From *Attitudes Toward History*, 1959, 1984, Introduction "vi."

122. Hook, *Critical Responses*, 93-94.

123. *Attitudes*, 1937, 153-54.

124. Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, 279.

125. Burke, *Attitudes*, 1937 edition, 140; 1959 edition, 264.

126. Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, 395-96.

127. Josephson, *Infidel*, 357.

128. For various discussions of Hook and *Partisan's* well-known fight with the Stalinists, see Sidney Hook, *Out of Step* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987); MacDonald, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist: Essays in Political Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahup); Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left*; James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*; Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*.

129. William H. Rueckert, "A Field Guide to Kenneth Burke -1990" in *Extensions of the Burkean System*, ed. Chesebro, David Sidorsky, "Charting the Intellectual Career of Sidney Hook: Five Major Steps," from a Keynote Address, "Sidney Hook Reconsidered: A Centennial Celebration," The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Oct. 25, 2002. 5.

CHAPTER 6

History and Personality: Symbolic Action and *The Philosophy of Literary Form*

The future is really disclosed by finding out what people can sing about.

Kenneth Burke

The psychology of literary form

Attitudes's split-screen approach and its amalgam of Marx and Freud did not have the coherence to convince its few readers that concerns over the destiny of civilizations might yet be resolved. Europe soon presented its own fierce contest, and by the time the next book was published, the United States was supplying war material to Britain by the "lend-lease" program and defending the Navy against German submarines. By the end of that year, America had entered the Second World War. Nations unified or divided in belligerence, talk of social decay was left to a fascist enemy, and debates over technology took on a different color. Issues of social unity were more important than ever. In his analysis of *Mein Kampf*, "Hitler's Battle" (1939), Burke infiltrated Hitler's rhetoric to show that its effectiveness stemmed from a very legitimate need and desire for social unification and explicated how this human impulse was exploited in an antiliberal militarism.

In the essay, Burke explains Hitler's real method as the rejection of the chaos of the concept of the parliamentary, offering a false spiritual unity of hatred toward a racial

scapegoat instead. He further suggested that, as a symbol of intolerance, Hitler had made himself an appropriate scapegoat against which America could unify and overcome its own class and social divisions. As naive as that might seem, especially given America's own racial dilemmas, Burke's approach was not far from the propaganda policy that was used both against the Germans and then against racism in America.¹ Burke argued that despite a liberal society's fragmentary character, it might transcendently unify around parliamentarism and pluralism as principles.

By this time, Burke had simultaneously impressed, puzzled, and angered various elements on the literary left for any number of offenses. He was yet to fully engage the literary right. In several of *Philosophy of Literary Form's* essays, despite his own metaphysical interests, Burke would stake out his firm critical position against a particular idealistic trend that was surfacing in literary criticism, oddly matched by a reductive scientism that by now had established itself in the humanities. He saw both of these movements as critically ill-conceived, and though apparently quite different, connected by a nominalistic philosophical bias. Burke argued strenuously against these tendencies, and in so doing began to articulate further some of the principles that would appear in the subsequent book, *A Grammar of Motives*. The central principles of its sociophilosophical method, "Dramatism," received an early mention in one of Burke's long footnotes.² Burke's views still involved him in politics, yet this time it was the strange politics of the academy, the politics regarding the significance of the disciplines and their professionalization. Though a seemingly more decorous engagement, it would be just as intense.

On his old friend Richard McKeon's invitation, Burke spent the summer of 1938 at the University of Chicago, teaching two critical theory courses. In discussing the topics, McKeon revealed the academy's attitudes toward rhetoric and communication as subjects for literary studies and gave a hint as to why a rising theory, "The New Criticism" would succeed. He advised that appropriate subjects were those of literary and theoretical import, rather than the "practical" ones of propaganda, and he warned, "Needless to say, we don't want any of your later vein. An unobtrusive pink is a good color for the classroom, but any deeper tinge is considered flamboyant and in bad taste."³

There was some basis for concern. In 1935, the University's president, Robert Hutchins, had been called upon to defend his school against the widely publicized charges by drugstore magnate Charles Walgreen, that left-wing teachers were teaching subversion. An investigating committee was finally persuaded that no subversive communists were teaching at the school. Hutchins would again vocally protect the institution from Illinois's Broyles Commission during the McCarthy period.⁴ In fact, the general mission of the school, which was to bear the standard for classical university education, made it an unlikely climate for extreme radicalism, though certainly some very celebrated leftists could be found among the distinguished faculty throughout the years.⁵ At that point, McKeon likely reflected an institutional attitude made even more cautious by experience.

Burke wanted "very much to air my elucubrations [sic] for two whole months at your school," but he wasn't ready to allow the university or McKeon dictate his approach to literature. What McKeon had called "bits of literary wisdom on the matter of rhetorical decorum," would have not only hindered his necessary freedom of expression

in the classroom, but his thinking processes, if he had taken them seriously.⁶ He proposed a course called “The Psychology of Literary Form,” that would discuss “processes of appeal that underlie esthetic structures.” He reassured his friend that “Much stress would be placed upon the internal organization of literary works.”⁷

However, he would also “consider the extra-literary factors that operate in giving symbolic structures their effectiveness.” He continued, “I believe, in other words, that technical and sociological criticism can be shown to be all of one piece,” and he forecasted a central idea in his famous essay: the inner meaning and the rhetorical features, the “intrinsic” and the “extrinsic” in a work, were two sides of the same thing. He warned that he might “touch on propagandist works (such as Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*), since they illustrate the processes of appeal in their simplest and most salient form.” Not wanting to appear stubborn, he clarified that “The stress would be upon *how effects are got*, rather than upon *what effects should be got*. Ballistics, not politics. . . . I understand perfectly why you would not want me to be making stump speeches.”⁸

Burke also suggested a second course on Melville. This class would analyze *Moby Dick* in order to illustrate a theory of critical procedure aimed at revealing the author’s motives, and “what kind of medicine the poet is concocting as equipment for living, etc.” Burke suggested he would explore a central tension in the American writer between a dualistic ethic where “God is what you *don’t* want to do” and a monistic one where “God is what you *do* want to do.” The department preferred that he teach a course on Samuel Coleridge. So Burke examined these inner tensions, “character-recipes” as he called them, in the British poet rather than the American novelist, and developed them

more fully as part of the theory offered in *Philosophy of Literary Form*.⁹

Even during the quiet summer term, the atmosphere of the University of Chicago meant daily interaction with an audience, and teaching changed the path and style of his work. Having realized his blind foray into the Party fracas had done him more harm than good, he now observed that the debates at Chicago were “not between Stalinists &[sic] Trotskyists, but between Platonists and Aristotelians—and thence to complete the symmetry, between Aristotelians and the Social Sciences.” “As usual,” he wrote to Matthew Josephson, “I feel on the bias across controversies, hence shifting tables at the Faculty Club, stoutly defending sociology when I am at the Humanists’ table and v.v.”¹⁰

Burke had found a new route to navigate, another point to both critique and reclaim. In the university, the more overt kind of politics seemed quietly to take a back seat to the theoretical. Burke knew better than to take ivory tower claims at face value since he believed that poetry and politics were both part of life in a very ordinary sense: “equipment for living.” Though Burke had certainly argued with academics before, his new environment realigned debates and required greater scholarly precision. Burke would now defend his ideas at their philosophical roots.¹¹

The Philosophy of Literary Form contained some of the political essays on propaganda from his earlier period. Burke gradually moved away from Marxism after 1938, though he maintained in this title essay that material structures still affected the form or idiom of the “unending conversation” of intellectual history. He always remained a left-liberal personally, and defended Marx at times when the thinker was anathema, yet he was also highly sensitive to social mood and continued to be a

philosophical bellweather for significant attitudinal shifts. Burke's displeasure with big business and technology for profit never abated. Though, like others, he turned away from the heated forum of political writing, of which he had done in fact very little, to the apparently cooler partisanship of scholarly contention, his work always remained political due to the character of his argument.

Having challenged the Darwinians, positivists, Marxians, Freudians, and aesthetes, and taking much from each as well, he now faced their progeny: the logical positivists and the New Critics, an unlikely pair that had at least one philosophical root in common – nominalism. Burke had even less patience with these views now, seeing them as derivative and dogmatic in essence and not merely in effect. He also had some dry comments for academia generally, remarking in one essay that it was in the business of generating a “welter of minor investigations;” and he judged much academic research as little more than the “low-powered . . . stamp collections of an overly proliferating priesthood.”¹²

Realism

Burke had indicated his philosophic realism earlier, but it became a central issue in several of the important essays in *Philosophy of Literary Form*. At various points, Burke traced both the strategies of the New Critics and the logical positivists, whom he calls at times “the new semanticists,” to nominalist perspectives of one sort or another. Burke had already referred to nominalism in *Counter-Statement*.¹³ This was an approach to language that treated a group of any kind as an “*aggregate of individuals*,” that is, as a

collection of particulars, not a unity, class or whole. This he claimed was “in contrast with the realistic position . . . that treats *individuals as members of a group*,” and this conceptual grouping as having an actual referent.¹⁴ Burke insisted that his theory was a “realistic” one as opposed to a “nominalistic” one.¹⁵

In its most general sense, realism is the philosophical position that ideas and reality have some sort of reliable relation, and that language is to some degree trustworthy, even if not transparent. Naive realism suggests that the pictures in our heads are true images of reality. Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy are “realistic” in a somewhat different manner from naive realism. They maintain, in different ways, that classes of individuals and general ideas have real meaning and thus have an ontological status.¹⁶

Though portions of Burke’s arguments do rely on common sense, we can trace one aspect of his realism back to Plato, who so famously argued that in order to make sense of our experience at all and use language, we need general terms. Not only “justice,” “goodness,” and “beauty” are general terms, but so are “blue,” “plastic,” “circular,” “chair,” and any other word that is not a proper name. And even a proper name collects a number of attributes under a single general heading.

Another aspect of Burke’s realism is consistent with the partial realism of the pragmatists. Burke’s “recalcitrance” argument, his realism-by-default, was hardly more than a restatement of the pragmatist one. James had said that “Fact is determined noetically only by assuming the subjective form of ‘truth’; but its transsubjective status is constantly shown by its forcing truth to redetermine itself.”¹⁷ Like the pragmatists before

him, he had rejected a correspondence theory of truth in which the things of the world were literally represented by the human mind. The pragmatists had accepted provisional, probabilistic, functional, and results-oriented truth concepts: Did the hypothesis work in the context? Was it “proved” by experience? Though some pragmatists, Peirce most notably, believed that eventually such a correspondence might be attainable with sufficient expertise and effort, Burke had criticized the heuristic nature of experimentation far too thoroughly to believe that an unchanging truth would ever be discovered by cumulative experiment.¹⁸

Yet there was a reality that revealed itself in an infinitely complex and creative way. Though it might never be comprehended completely, it could be derived in an “adequate” manner from “a social body of thought.”¹⁹ Burke insisted perspectives and motives were “real,” their results public and empirically experienced. Our language was devised to operate within that reality, and he tempered his idealism in the way the earlier pragmatists had tempered their skepticism, by arguing that the experiment, or life, continually came up against material beyond its control. In a sense, for both the pragmatists and Burke, the problem in its various forms and the limits of human power established the world’s reality.²⁰ Since for Burke, life and creativity was the issue, epistemological skepticism seemed an abstract problem generated by philosophical choices made in reference to historical actualities, not a dramatic one.

The logical positivists and New Critics did not question the reality of the external world. On the contrary, logical positivism was rooted in an epistemology that saw sense data as the only genuine knowledge. It held a “correspondence” approach to truth

requiring that a word or statement must have a direct reference in sense experience.

Since statements of value and descriptions of the unseen world could not be tested by sense or experimentation, and were therefore neither verifiable nor falsifiable they were, as A. J. Ayer had suggested, in the final analysis “nonsense.”²¹ Consistent with the fierce spirit of clarification at the heart of this logical empiricism, the philosopher Rudolf Carnap, a member of the Vienna Circle, attempted the reduction of all concepts of the natural and social sciences to statements representing specific sense experience.

Customary expressions would be made more exact, “this is hot” would transform into “this object is giving off kinetic energy right now,” or discussions about molecular movement limited as narrowly as possible to situations and terms of least ambiguity.

Logical positivists did not speak univocally on what could be known and how to know it; they too struggled with the slippery nature of language and the dismissal of metaphysical principles. But as science was held an ideal, they attempted to bring language to the realm of the empirically verifiable datum.²² In this view, ethical or aesthetic statements were mere preferences, and metaphysical problems were “pseudo problems.” And since much linguistic utterance was of this unclear, meaningless sort, the positivists put forth a purification project similar to those of Bentham or Peirce, but as they were now a school, it was a great deal more systematic.²³ Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell had claimed in their *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13) that all mathematics could be reduced to certain few key principles of modern logic, and the next decades saw the development of these abstract if limited special languages, similar to and useful for the subsequent development of computer code.²⁴

Historians of philosophy can argue where the split between the moral and the intellectual began, but not only practitioners of science wished to disentangle ethics and action from thought in the hopes of gaining clarity. In a famous 1910 lecture, "The New Criticism," the critic Joel Spingarn, in following ideas of the philosopher and aesthetician, Benedetto Croce, had separated art from life or moral action. Spingarn proposed that it was "not the inherent function of poetry to further any moral or social cause, any more than it is the function of bridge-building to further the cause of Esperanto To say that poetry is moral or immoral is as meaningless as to say that an equilateral triangle is moral."²⁵ The New Critics centered their attentions solely on the world of the text, consciously disinterested in epistemological questions of the links between internal to external reality. Both positivists and New Critics had staked out their epistemological territory. The two schools held differing semantic ideals, yet they both proposed highly technical, almost arcane methods for locating meaning. Yet despite the idealism of New Criticism, which discovered thematic unities and separated texts from history, its aesthetic approach would claim to fasten on the unique poetic event or special particularity of the object it described, rejecting a messy generality. Thus, in both approaches, the individual object of sense perception, the object on which a test might be done, or about which a poem might be compose -- the experience of the specific case -- was at the center of knowledge.

The philosophical question remained: Were particulars the only reality or was the abstract, unseeable, the general real as well? His study and critiques of Marx had made Burke sensitive to questions of social units and social unity, those questions of "merger

and division,” that is, how people actually came together and cohered. He had argued in *Attitudes Toward History* that emotional conflicts and anxieties over authority were expressed in repetitive patterns that could be discerned in artistic genres and transcendent, that is, general slogans or principles. For Burke, the group was real and was organized under an idea that was also real; Burke still believed in community. Thus *The Philosophy of Literary Form* brought together questions of unity, social and conceptual, and tried to prove the political and social importance of the idea. It did this by examining its values and emotions as they functioned in poetic structures and produced empirically observable, sensory results. The theory of “symbolic action” set out to chart this.

As Burke had explained in *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*, we experience things as belonging to kinds or classes. Even unique individuals are described by general characteristics that relate them to other individuals. That is, whatever we perceive, we perceive as a something, with qualities that place it in relation to other qualities, even if that relationship is only that of being another, different thing. A blue table is not a red chair, and there is a potentially infinite network of further relations between two things and each thing and everything else, e.g., *A* is taller than *B*. So, though each individual object in nature is unique, its characteristics are general. But these are various, fluid, and sometimes conflicting. For Burke, general terms do not have a reality outside history, as a static idealism might have suggested; rather their historical situation insures their dynamic reality as part of an active “mystical” matrix.²⁶

Burke rather naively believed he had found a perfect solution for critics of

Platonic idealism when he suggested placing the universal terms in the mind; he imagined he had resolved the ancient critique in a modern way. In fact “conceptualists” had always said the universals were in the mind and mind-dependent; also “the human mind” was itself another general idea. He did not accept the more radical claims that all concepts were private, or that they designated nothing real but functioned only conventionally. According to Burke, general terms designated actual shared experiences evidenced by an endless set of proportional relationships, a discussion he began here and expanded in *A Grammar of Motives*.²⁷

Burke returned to the realist camp of Plato and Aristotle with his own arguments for a common linguistic human nature that necessarily used general terms. Since arguing for some extra-mental ontological status of universals, or even particulars outside the mind, was insufficiently skeptical for a thinker after Kant, Burke would rely on practical differences experienced between the mental and physical, or concrete, to maintain his argument against a total idealism that would reduce everything to language or metaphor alone. Later Burke remarked that the stress on “symbolicity” caused him to be interpreted “in the spirit *exactly contrary* to my notions of ‘reality’ . . . One cannot live by the word for bread alone.” And he continued, “There is a basic difference between metaphysical idealism and my concern with ‘the word,’ since to say we obey rules of language “is not identical with saying that our world is ‘nothing but’ the things we say about it.”²⁸

Since he had previously explained his animism as a result of infinitely interacting perspectives, whether human, animal, or bacterial, Burke believed his realism could still

function within the parameters of a modernist skepticism. Despite “absolute reality’s” remove, a few things were still evident. Clearly, there were still clear differences between building a house and writing a poem about building a house; “a poem about having children by marriage is not the same thing as having children by marriage,” and Burke had done it all.²⁹ Burke’s realism accompanied these kinds of ad hominem arguments that spoke to experience, for it was that “radical difference” that Burke found certain and public. And later, he would repeatedly observed that behavioral or empirical reductionism, e.g. that thought was merely responses or sensation subsequent to stimuli, was impossible to hold in reality without one’s actions directly contradicting one’s position.³⁰ So, while Burke would not have maintained that the universals would exist without any human minds whatsoever, he believed that they were public and independent of any one particular mind. This committed him to an essentialism that was not in keeping with his historicism or his modern relativism. It was similar to the structuralism of the mid-century, and he was still wrestling with the issues during the 1980’s, when theorists had again turned their attention in that direction.³¹

Nominalism

In contradistinction to the realist view is the nominalistic one; Burke considered this to be the ancestor of logical positivism. Though apparently so different in style, the positivists and the New Critics were philosophical bedfellows in that both were nominalistic.

The medieval nominalists, led most famously by William of Ockham (c.1285-

1349), known for his “principle of parsimony” or strict simplicity in explanation, “Ockham’s Razor,” developed their arguments in response to medieval scholastic realism. In contrast to the earlier neo-Platonists, and to the scholastic Aristotelians, medieval nominalists maintained that general terms were linguistic conveniences and that only particulars existed; that is, in reality, there were no classes or universals of any kind whatsoever, but merely hypostatizations from language. The movement reaffirmed an antiidealistic and democratic element in Christianity: a concern with the individual and the concrete within the context of dogma. Its political significance was that idealism mirrored hierarchical social relations beginning to be challenged, and also produced distorted readings of scripture: the monk Ockham would find himself fiercely at odds with the papacy over questions of monastic poverty.

Nominalism was a resurgence of epistemological skepticism and individualism, and a significant corrective to a tortured neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism, now attenuated by continued casuistic efforts to fit them to Church doctrine.³² As a theory about language use, nominalism might be judged to coincide with a reductive materialism, but it has even greater affinities to empiricism, the assertion that sense experience and abstractions from it are all we really know. Burke began explicitly targeting nominalism in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and *A Grammar of Motives* and was as profoundly antinominalist as he was antipositivistic. Burke had been critical of assigning rigid singular universals or generalities, such as political classes, to particular individuals, since people in fact had endless possibilities for identification at their disposal. Yet he also did not intend to suggest that class delineations were not

meaningful; on the contrary, these identifications moved history, but were fluid and overlapped each other “on the bias.”³³

From nominalism to logical positivism

Robert Wess, Samuel Southwell, and Grieg Henderson have all noted that Burke’s mature philosophy is conceived in part as an answer to the logical positivists – P.W. Bridgeman and the heavily scientific analytic philosophy of the twentieth century are Burke’s special targets in the *Grammar*. Though it appears ingenuous today, in the early part of the last century, positivists asserted that science either had greater access to truth than other modes, or that it was the only form of truth. As the founder of the positivist Vienna Circle, Moritz Schlick put it in 1918, “Since Science in principle can say all that can be said, there is no unanswerable question left.”³⁴ As late as 1986, a philosopher could write, “In the idealized long run, the completed science is a true description of reality: there is no other Truth and no other Reality.”³⁵ For Burke, this sort of philosophy had abandoned its responsibility for “counter-statement” rationalizing and justifying the hegemony of technology.³⁶

Burke described “the semantic ideal” of the logical positivists as trying “*to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe,*” so that the correct event might be located.³⁷ Positivism’s attempt to align one unequivocal meaning to each term had the avoidance of ambiguity as its rationale, and its purpose was to arrive at certainty. Yet as Burke reminded us, even the act of naming is always a generalization, since every word that designates a particular collects a variety of different

characteristics in a unity. Therefore, words invariably involve ambiguities.

The nominalists and their progeny, extreme behaviorists, operationalists, and positivists, rejected the existence of any whole more than the sum of parts. The whole and the name it received was provisional and might be serviceable, but had no fixed referent. There was no practical reason the whole had to be an actual unity, an entity by itself; the unified whole was merely an emotional reification. Yet Burke, and anyone else concerned at all with form or community, needed to argue otherwise. But why might an advocate of the parliamentary, the intersection of multiple individual voices, feel the need to reject nominalism and defend essentialism? It seems somehow counter-intuitive.

The historical context of an impending war and fascistic rhetoric certainly spurred the debate. Any thorough discussion of community, the subject of Burke's two previous books, would invariably lead one to further questions on the possibility of social unity, especially within a parliamentary and interest-driven context. If discrete individuals are to constitute a body politic, especially if they act in tandem, they must be organized by something held in common. This must be named and communicated in language. Political unity is premised on the possibility that there can be a social whole that is not a mere collection of atomistic parts, and that there can exist abstract principle with real effects on history. While the antiliberal theories of communism and fascism presumed that interest driven politics were absolutely incompatible with social unity, Burke had argued the contrary with his skeptical liberal mysticism, as well his "comic attitude," and his principle of "bandwagon" transcendence.

For any whole to be a “unity,” it must be perceived as more than a mere aggregate of particulars. And, as we are dealing with language, there must be a term. Burke called this an “ancestor” term, or sometimes a “tribal” term or “god-term,” that guides the ordering of the related conceptualization.³⁸ In speaking about this kind of trope, Burke chose “synecdoche” [a figure of speech using a part to stand in for a class or a whole. i.e., “counting heads”] as exemplifying the unifying or general principle.³⁹

The more I examine both the structure of poetry and the structure of human relations outside poetry, the more I become convinced that this is the ‘basic’ figure of speech and that it occurs in many modes besides that of the formal trope. I feel it to be no mere accident of language that we use the same word for sensory, artistic and political representation. Nor is there any ‘illusion’ here. In so far as we see correctly, and do not mistake something else for a tree, our perceptions *do really* represent the tree. Stress upon synecdochic representation is thus seen to be a necessary ingredient of a truly realistic philosophy.⁴⁰

This also meant that the particular in some way represented that whole. Its partness was not accidental or a matter of arbitrary convenience, but some genuine relation, though Burke was less specific about what that relation might be. He was not entirely naive about the problems inherent in this kind of essentialism, and he mentioned racism later explicitly as an example of “linguistic conveniences” that can become “drastic inconveniences.” But just as the idea of general terms having some reality creates all sorts of logical and practical embarrassments, so, of course, does the notion that they don’t.

The connections between nominalism and logical empiricism may be evident, as may be their opposition to realism, but how did nominalism also pertain to The New Criticism? The connection can be found in John Crowe Ransom’s early arguments with

his colleague Kenneth Burke.

New Criticism and nominalism

During the year in which Burke visited Chicago, an intriguing and important book arrived on the scene, Ransom's *The World's Body* (1938). Nine years older than Burke, Ransom had begun his career as a "Fugitive" poet, part of a Southern regionalist school of the early twenties that had rejected the genteel tradition and returned for material to the indigenous Southern background and environment. He then participated in the Agrarian movement of social and cultural criticism mentioned earlier, but by the late thirties had turned away from those interests.

The energetic founder and editor of the influential *Kenyon Review* for many years, Ransom also taught at Vanderbilt University and Kenyon College. Ransom was a sensitive and erudite critic, who together with Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsatt Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley, would create one of the twentieth century's most influential schools of literary criticism. In fact, one of Ransom's intentions was to further professionalize criticism and establish its academic importance, and he succeeded. Both Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* and Ransom's subsequent *The New Criticism* would appear in 1941, and as one contemporary review put it "they conspicuously mark discernible poles of literary opinion concerning the nature and purpose of poetry."⁴¹ Though it was Ransom's that became the dominant "school" throughout the forties, fifties, and early sixties. Burke had obviously studied *The World's Body*, addressing its ideas in the title essay of *Philosophy of Literary Form*. Though the New Critics were notably challenged in 1957 by Northrop Frye, Burke had actually

offered a more radical systematic attack earlier and he anticipated many of the directions later criticism would take in reaction to the New Critics' formalism.⁴²

Ransom had argued for a redefinition of the proper subjects and concerns of criticism in a chapter called aptly "Criticism, Inc." In a move to synthesize, but even more to professionalize his discipline, he ruled as wrong-headed and inapposite many of the then customary approaches to literary study. *The World's Body* cited the Aristotelian critic Ronald S. Crane then at Chicago, though later, Crane, another one of Burke's correspondents, would object to some work from the school he inspired.⁴³ Expanding on some comments by Crane, Ransom suggested that the actual historical study of literature had been overly stressed in English departments to the neglect of "the critical."⁴⁴

Ransom suggested that in order to professionalize literary criticism, first, the "unliterary" should be eliminated from technical study. This included the moralistic concerns of the New Humanists, as well as those of the "Proletarians."⁴⁵ But an even greater problem according to him, was that English Departments were actually behaving as if they were a "branch of the department of history, and not "autonomous." Autonomy was a key principle in Ransom's thinking as was a professional elitism: he suggested, "It is not anybody who can do criticism."⁴⁶

Crane rejected historical scholarship and Neo-Humanism; Ransom expanded the list. This collection of exclusions included personal or subjective impressions. Ransom suggested that "The first law to be prescribed to criticism . . . is that it shall be objective, shall cite the nature of the object rather than its effects upon the subject."⁴⁷ So, audience response, including emotional catharsis and physiological effects, were not the purview

of criticism. “Such concern seems to reflect the view that art comes into being because the artist, or the employer behind him, has designs upon the public, whether high moral designs or box office ones.”⁴⁸ The rhetorical, persuasive elements in a poetic work were not only inessential, they were inimical to what actually made it poetic, and must be eliminated from criticism. To focus on audience reaction was “odious,” since it denied “the autonomy of the artist as one who interests himself in the artistic object in his own right, and likewise the autonomy of the work as existing for its own sake,” and instead placed emphasis on the practical human purposes to which things were put.⁴⁹ For chemists, chemicals were not about cures, and engineers were not concerned with the pleasure taken by children or parents in toys; Ransom reacted to his generation’s pragmatist tendencies with a celebration of intellectual pursuit that was closer to the ideals of sport or classical notions of leisure – ideas in keeping with his earlier Southern Agrarianism.

Therefore, criticism should excise all but minimal synopsis and historical studies, including biography as well as the “autobiographical evidences in the work itself.” He would also eliminate etymology; and “any other special studies,” if used in any other reference than to discuss their literary assimilation. These were only “aids.” That is, the idea of meaning as something to be discovered by rational investigation, using clues external to the text was not the proper business of criticism.⁵⁰

What Ransom allowed were studies in technique: “metric [meter], inversions, solecisms, lapses from the prose norm of language, and from close prose logic; its tropes; its fictions or inventions,” since it was by these that poetry secured ““aesthetic distance””

and “removes itself from history.”⁵¹ Thus the artifactual and cultural aspect of literature, writing as a representative of something other than itself alone was dismissed. Those students who were interested in aesthetic and formal questions and less interested in politics, likely welcomed Ransom’s suggestions for a strict professionalization.

Ransom made another radical distinction – a position from which he would criticize Burke -- one between the logic of prose and the poetic, claiming that poetry used devices “which are, precisely, its means of escaping from prose.” The poet was trying to preserve that which “is continually being killed by prose,” and thus “the poet perpetuates in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is always crumbling beneath his touch.” The poem “celebrates the object which is real, individual and qualitatively infinite,” and, we might add, dying. Somehow this “must be put philosophically [the task of the critic].”⁵² The New Criticism argued that the critic must revere the independent integrity of each poetic work: Cleanth Brooks, another founder of the movement, posited an intrinsic/extrinsic distinction that absolutely differentiated the structure of the poem from the external environment, and Wimsatt and Beardsley later explicitly argued against an “affective fallacy,” that judged a poem by its effects on readers.⁵³

Burke was not opposed to the development of a formalist critical armature. Yet as a public intellectual, not a professional academic, he did not see any justification for such tight restrictions on method. Literature was “equipment for living,” and thus at least as practical as any other artifact.⁵⁴ It was not so precious, and should not be alien from any part of life; it represented the central material and spiritual reality of human existence. Burke placed little value on any propriety per se; in fact he was an advocate

of the importance of scatological metaphors and argued in “Philosophy of Literary Form” that a critic should use all critical devices available to illumine meaning in literature, since literature might represent life in all its turmoil.⁵⁵ To dismiss audience reaction, as Ransom intended, was to once again separate literature from rhetoric, the position against which Burke had argued so strongly.

The connection with nominalism was odd but apt. Ransom was looking for the mysterious *sine qua non* that made a piece of poetry not just a statement or a set of data. Philosophically, Ransom divided the prose object of the poem, its “logical” or “universal” dimension, from its essential poetic uniqueness, held in suspension by a set of particular “tissues,” “irrelevances,” or a “totality of connotation.” The business of criticism was to quarantine the aesthetic – the unique, particular, nonnarrative, and nonlogical aspect of the poem – from logical and prose meaning, which he suspected would otherwise dominate. What this implied, despite the concern for rules of technique, was that there was an irrational source in any poem that was its true importance.⁵⁶

Ransom’s theory of criticism seemed a better recipe for writing poetry than for explaining it, since it set the discursive and logical in opposition to the poetic. In trying to expunge the universal and general from the ideological center of his field of discourse, since it did not refer to actual sensory experience of a particular individual object, Ransom suggested that criticism and the object it criticized were epistemologically unlike. In any case, it was an odd suggestion for criticism, in principle explanatory and public, yet its pristine rigor proved quite attractive and convincing. And the more

impenetrable the source of meaning and the less susceptible to common rational analysis, the more specific and recondite the skill needed. New Criticism was exclusionary in several ways; not only was it frankly antihistorical, but also serenely antirational at its center.

On the other hand, logical positivism was severely rationalistic: its intention was to pursue the purely informative statement. Yet it operated similarly, having also created a new language for the use of experts, bereft of the clutter of historical reference. Both groups were concerned with the empirical specific – separating it from a history which had particulars grouped together as confusingly similar and dissimilar all at once – a nest of epistemological difficulties. Ransom finally turned to Christian principles of love and nature as the wellspring of the poetic, while Burke continued to search for a philosophical system that could incorporate everything and include anybody.⁵⁷

Dream, prayer, chart

The New Critics had banished rhetoric as an irrelevant if not dishonorable enterprise, and the logical positivists were anxiously trying to unload the implicative freight in language, what Burke called the “magical” connotative element involved in literary presentation. Positivists, though in a different way from the literary formalists and using different language, were equally concerned with carefully charting the internal relations between terms, free of contextual or personal clutter. Because he insisted all communication is symbolic and rhetorical, Burke described it as being intellectually accessible from three angles: dream; prayer; and chart.⁵⁸

For example, he noted that the problem of private economic freedom versus the commonweal could be discussed in the strategic terms of “planned economy” or “regimentation,” each calling forth a different spirit. Poetry operates similarly. In poetry, as in all writing, and in all purposeful speech, there is an aspect of importuning or inducement. Burke called this the subconscious or “dream” aspect of a poem correlating with the period of magic as understood by anthropologists; it embodies the wish for something to be a certain way and calls it into being by creating it in art.

There are also “prayer” or communicative functions of a poem, closely related to that of the dream, though less magical, more self-conscious, intentional, and in that sense “religious.” Here a separation is recognized between the desire and reality, bridged by intention. Prayer is social; it is both incantatory and confessional and is directed toward others. Dream and prayer elicit visceral responses. In this way the poet delivers himself of impulses and obligations.

Yet Burke was not an irrationalist, dismissive of accuracy and precision in language; despite his qualified approach, he believed it was the purpose of philosophy and ultimately the end of criticism. “Chart” is the plainly rational aspect of a poem that “realistically” depicts or analyzes a situation correctly, an accurate understanding of self or the world. “Chart” is the sanity, the realistic grounding of the poem, and connects it to the historical world of human limitation. Here we find the public reality intellectually understood by others; it is universal and general. And tucked away in a footnote, Burke offers his realistic coherence theory of truth:

An ideal philosophy . . . would seek to satisfy the requirements of a

perfect dictionary. It would be a calculus (matured by constant reference to the “collective revelation” that is got by a social *body* of thought) for charting the nature of events and for clarifying all important relationships. As it works out in practice, however, a philosophy is developed partially in opposition to other philosophies, so that tactics of refutation are involved, thus tending to give the philosopher’s calculus the stylistic form of a lawyer’s plea.

. . . The philosopher thus is often led to attempt “proving” his philosophy . . . in the abstract, whereas the only proof of a philosophy, considered as a calculus resides in showing, by concrete application, the scope, complexity, and accuracy of its coordinates for charting the nature of events. Thus, the name for “house” would not be primarily tested for “consistency” with the names for “tree” or “money.” One would reveal the value of the names by revealing their correspondence with some important thing, function, or relationship. This is what we mean by what we mean by saying that a philosophy, as a “chart,” is quite at home in contradictions.⁵⁹

He concludes, “What, in fact, is ‘rationality’ but the desire for an *accurate chart for naming* what is going on? Isn’t this what Spinoza had in mind when calling for a philosophy whose structure would parallel the structure of reality?”⁶⁰

Nonetheless, even the most realistic, factual sort of expression will have elements of “magical,” unstable, evocative ingredients as well. Ideally, magic would contribute to a description that fits the actual situation as closely as possible, yet “a *completely accurate chart* would dissolve magic, by making the structure of names identical with the structure named.” Burke owned that such a chart would “be possible only to an infinite, omniscient mind.”⁶¹ Here he aligned with melioristic Pragmatists such as James and even Peirce, who believed men could move toward truth without expecting absolute attainment.

Since Burke had argued in previous books that the mind was directed by rational desires, even when behaving apparently irrationally or neurotically, he insisted that “even

the most arbitrary of Nazis can be shown to possess it [rationality]; for no matter how inadequate his chart of meaning may be . . . he at least *wants* it to tell him accurately *what is going on* in his world and in the world at large.”⁶² Thus by Burke’s generous definition, the desire to understand was a sign of rationality even if the system derived was insane. Charts were not a direct correspondence, but functioning systems of meaning, “collective revelation[s]” that even when superstitious or ritualistic were not “right or wrong,” but “relative *approximations* to the truth.” They functioned to perpetuate the race, and if it survived, the chart was right enough.⁶³ The revelations following the Second World war would make such an elastic judgment useless. In any case, according to Burke, even the aspects of the poem not strictly logical might be charted in a number of ways, since they might represent real and not irrational connections, i.e., “New York City is in Iowa” might make perfect sense poetically, or for advertising, though not literally.⁶⁴

The three subdivisions for analysis of an “act” of poetry are thus dream, prayer, and chart. The subconscious factors of “dream” had been slighted by the “Aristotelians”; the communicative aspects of prayer neglected by the individualistic, personalistic art-for-art’s-sake school (two aspects of the neo-Croceans); and the realistic aspects of chart neglected by the psychoanalytic school, who presumed that a cigar was *never*, ever a cigar.⁶⁵

Since communication is not absolute correspondent truth, it is invariably weighted and approximates accuracy, that is, it is melioristic. Since human knowledge is always limited and rarely even adequate, any language act will contain a certain absence

of accuracy. This is the space filled in by magical incantation of one form or another and in one direction or another and so all charting also engages dream and prayer. The dissolution of “magic” would be the death of the poetic, the creative, the aesthetic. Burke rooted form in the human situation and ambiguity, but he did so without religious explanation, while still respecting and understanding religious terminology.⁶⁶

Since poetry is incantation, supplication, and analysis in response to events cognitively combined by the observer into a situation, it is an action -- a “symbolic action.” For Burke, the labor involved in selection implies action. Symbolic action, creativity, is haunted by mystery, by the fact that experience is never entirely intelligible. The attempt to make it intelligible is action.

Symbolic action as transformation

Consistent with his conciliatory, synthesizing tendencies, Burke also tried to adapt the “intrinsic” interpretation of internal structures so that it was consistent with his own theory. He suggested that though a writer’s language bears internal logical or suggestive relations of terms one to the other, the organization of these relationships throws the author’s strategy into relief. The writer’s purpose, what meaning he has assigned, is part of an intrinsic analysis that has extrinsic referents and is therefore “active,” since tied to a worldly situation to which he is connected. The author’s selection of these relationships might have the effect that “by manipulating the possibilities of emphasis in one way rather than another, [he] was able to symbolically to enroll himself in one social alliance, with its peculiar set of expectancies, rather than

another. Here we should see what participation in a Cause caused his work, by what Movement it was motivated, on what sub-stance it made its stand."⁶⁷

In "The Study of Symbolic Action," he clarified his point about the poem, writing, "Studying it as an object, we trace the steps of its internal development, from what, through what, to what. Studying it as an act, we may reach out to borrow from all the lore available in our accumulated philosophies of action and motive."⁶⁸ In *Permanence and Change and Attitudes Toward History*, Burke concluded that a creative piece of literature not only effects a conversion, transcendence, and rebirth in the reader, but expresses an actual conversion of similar sort in the writer and is articulated by the movement of his language. Thus, every literary work describes a process of transformation, "from what, through what, to what."⁶⁹ And as transformation, it takes place in time and is limited by human character and history.

Burke said that his principle of symbolic action rested in "equivalencies." The metabiologist who had argued that language found its source in physiological need, was adamant that the literary was a physiological as well as a mental experience, though at this point, Burke's sympathy with any behaviorism was waning rapidly and his emphasis on metabiology lessening.⁷⁰ Burke did believe that both the historical and the empirical, and ordinary experience justified any overarching scheme. Perhaps he believed his readers would have more trouble denying ordinarily physiological similarities, since so much of science as well as daily experience presumed them.

Burke's unusual vision of mind-body identity maintained that every part of the individual and his product is identical with itself and with that individual. Any portion

will always represent the collective “proportional” relations that identify the individual and separate him from the rest of nature.⁷¹ In this way, rather extraordinarily, each part represents the whole, synechdochally but also implies every other part, just as a complete DNA portrait can theoretically be taken from any bodily fragment.⁷² Burke uses word clusters – the reappearance of linked terms within the poem, and sometimes in a poet’s other writings, to give a powerful symbolic clue to the poet’s fundamental moral motivations – as well as other public behavior as his evidence for moral and psychic transitions.⁷³ The distinction between the word “moon,” used by two different poets, can be found in the other terms with which they are *grouped*, and to which they are related. Because poetry, like music, takes place in time, requiring the body and movement, yet is delineated by separate terms, the process of identity must incorporate that movement and transformation – Burke refers to the arpeggio – moving “from,” “through,” and “to.” This movement and not the plot, is the “action” of the poem. This transcendent action, its eloquence, would in turn be mirrored by the plot, the sounds of the language, and the symbols.⁷⁴

Burke’s approach to interpretation was to find the central conflicts or tensions animating a writer’s gestures, poetic, personal, or political, and thus the transcendent unifying principles within the literary personality. This was not a single, monolithic unity; it was precisely because he experienced tensions between values that stimulated the author creation’s in the first place. Burke argued that pursuing these motives would actually reveal the poem’s structure, since they were identical. “In the poet, we might say, the poetizing existed as a physiological function. The poem is its corresponding

anatomical structure. And the reader, in participating in the poem, breathes into this anatomic structure a new physiological vitality.”⁷⁵ The reader could do so because her situation, practical and moral, was in some respects similar to the author’s.

The New Critics argued to the contrary: structure was intrinsic; personal biographical motivation of the writer or the reader, extrinsic. Poetry was unique and enclosed; prose and criticism, general and public. They admitted formal relations in the poem, though these were internal and static. Burke’s theory was dynamic and “dialectical” emphasizing “the act.”⁷⁶

Poetry as strategy and the strategy for poetic analysis: “dialectical realism.”

Therefore, the poem was a strategy for expressing or accommodating inner tensions, usually generated by an interaction with the world itself. Typical of Burke’s theories, “symbolic action” was a conglomeration of ideas, or as Ransom himself put it, “a whole arsenal of strategies,” captured under one rubric. First, it was a literary theory that involved “using all there is to use,” that is, any type of method or approach as long as it did not shut out others. Subsequently, Burke explained that he had presented three distinct forms of comment regarding a poem: things a critic could discern from the poem alone, looking at its own development; things that could be observed if one looked at a body of that poet’s work and his or her development; and finally judgments one could make if one had biographical information that would inform not only the “poems in particular,” as individual literary entities, but also read them as “instances of ‘symbolic action in general.’”⁷⁷

The theory argued that meaning was derived from an examination of movement within the poem and within an oeuvre. Related to this, it also attempted to offer a way to interpret empirical data, word clusters, sounds, or rhythm as having particular symbolic referents. With this came a picture of the mind-body relationship, and a metaphysical argument for realism. Burke would try to locate the anatomical relations between context and individual, mind and body, and self and society with his theory, arguing that each expressed the other. Burke suggested an actual mind-body parallelism or identity, while retaining a conceptual distinction.⁷⁸ Burke had already suggested a mind-body identity with his “metabiological” concept. If Burke was to argue for any kind of realism, the reality of the world and of words in the world, he also needed to maintain a sure connection, a nondeceptive one between mind and body. This would be a pragmatic, functional one.⁷⁹

According to Burke, since all utterance has a contingent as well as an abstract nature, one cannot understand what someone means by “yes,” unless one knows both the question and the situation. According to Burke, criticism and poetry are strategic, stylized answers.⁸⁰ For critical analysis, he suggested that poetry be looked at as “the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations.” Poems answered the sort of questions that proverbs did in their abbreviated form. Since “men now have the same neural and muscular structure as men who have left their records from past ages,” situations overlapped and even social life bore similarities from age to age. “Situations greatly different in their particularities may be felt to belong in the same class (to have a common substance or essence).” Proverbs show that typical situations exist cross-

culturally and through time. Burke observed, “Think of how much modern psychology, for instance, might be placed as a highly alembicated way of *seeing through to the end* the formulation now become proverbial: ‘The wish is the father to the thought.’ Or think of how much in the Hegelian dialectic might be summed up, as an over-all title, in the idealist Coleridge’s favorite proverb, ‘Extremes meet.’”⁸¹

The fundamental psychological and social transitions Burke had located in *Attitudes* were all to be found in poetry. Since a work of art develops and transforms “*from something, through something, to something*,” we would invariably also find “secularized variants of transubstantiation, conversion, rebirth;” descriptions that a naturalistic culture’s discourse suppressed.⁸² According to Burke, these transitional situations are “real,” since they take place in history and “the strategies for handling them have public content.” They were real because of the movement from one idea to another within the poem, the experiential differences and the emotional alterations that could be detected by the reader in himself and inferred to the author. A poem was a witness to a historical, temporal reality. Also, “in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance.”⁸³ So these situations were empirical, yet general and abstract as well.

A poem was therefore the practical “enactment” of a set of internal strategies that could be examined from any number of perspectives. Since this enactment could also be observed in bodily behaviors and reflect physiological needs as well as psychological ones, ordinary personal history very often presented information aiding a significant

reading. For example, Burke saw no logical reason other than a misplaced tact, actually a “vandalism” to leave out Coleridge’s failed utopianism, addiction, or even his preference for composing while walking on uneven ground, from an analysis of *The Ancient Mariner*, a major example in the essay.⁸⁴ Burke used this technique to observe changes and symbols operating in Robert Penn Warren’s *Night Rider*, Clifford Odets’ *Golden Boy*, Shakespeare’s plays, and Richard Wright’s novels, among others.⁸⁵

In describing an exchange with the painter Henry Billings about a particular series of his paintings, Burke noted that though he, the viewer, came at the subject -- an arrest--from the way it got him to identify with both the painted spectators and painted suspect, the painter exploited the content differently. It provided him a way to formally organize his composition around a central focal point using a group of figures. Burke showed the synthetic efficacy of his theory: “[A]s seen from the standpoint of symbolic action, we do not have to choose between the artist’s mode of consideration and my own. He was concerned with a unifying act and so was I,” though Burke was concerned mainly with content, and the painter, with form.⁸⁶ Thus, “when you begin to consider the situation behind the tactics of expression, you will find tactics that organize a work technically *because* they organize it emotionally. The two aspects, we might say Spinozistically, are but modes of the same substance. Hence, if you look for a man’s *burden*, you will find the principle that reveals the structure of his unburdening; . . . [the artist’s] answer gets its form by relations to the questions he is answering.”⁸⁷ Conceiving a coherent order in the midst of chaos was the instinctive purpose of both artist and interpreter.

Coleridge

Burke illustrated his method with an analysis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). He concentrated on the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, yet his discussion is less an analysis of this poem than a psychological and philosophical exploration of how the poet used language to *act*, that is, to grapple with his persistent demons. Burke was “more concerned with the *general problems* of internal structure and act-scene relationships,” and thus the references to specific works were merely “illustrative;” he did not offer a sustained analyses of any poems, only an approach.⁸⁸

There are five major moral or biographical issues Burke located as pivotal. In the case of Coleridge, the first is the *political*: Coleridge’s failed pantisocracy project, conceived with Robert Southey as a utopia on the banks of the American Susquehanna River, which was a major disappointment for his political radicalism. The next was the *marital sexual*: his hasty marriage to Sara Fricker, sister of Southey’s fiancée, a misalliance conceived in the midst of his utopian enthusiasm, and his subsequent unhappy passion for Sara Hutchinson, Mary Wordsworth’s sister. The *aesthetic* issues were those of his formal, technical concerns as a poet; Coleridge was a supreme craftsman of large intellectual ambition. The *drug*, and his addiction, from which he only escaped late in life, was another, and given an impressive place in Burke’s analysis. Finally, related to all of these was the *metaphysical* – Coleridge’s conflicts over Christianity as a dualistic ethos, and his pursuit of a monistic resolution, are also of major importance.

Burke observes that each of these biographical elements involved internal

conflicts and related to the others in equivalent, or compensatory ways. They repeated or reconfigured continuously in the poet's life all the way down to physical movement – Coleridge's strange manner of walking, from side to side on a path, and his preference for uneven ground might indicate a personality not adverse to moral risk. We see the structure of a set of tensions repeated in all possible individual expressions; Burke was already reading everything as a text; he had also stated in previous books that societies, cultures, rationalizations reiterated the patterns of their creativity similarly.

In interpreting Coleridge and his poetic transitions, a critic would need to return to the observed conflicts that reappeared in different forms, which were traceable back to those five pivotal issues. The various styles of emphasis Burke called “proportionalizing.”⁸⁹ Thus, a Freudian might stress the sexual element as it appeared in the poem, which could have arisen from Coleridge's frustrated love for Sara Hutchinson, or from a suppressed passion for Southey or Wordsworth, or from a neurotic pattern of conceiving passions for the prospective sisters-in-law of his closest male friends, or even something having nothing to do with these – his mother, for example. Yet the Freudian would not have the flexibility of Burke's overall method; he would have only one possible theoretical avenue for interpretation, and though a variety was still possible, it would likely present an imbalanced account, limited in its explanatory range.⁹⁰

What appeared in any one of Coleridge's dilemmas, or any combination of them, was a fundamental conflict of the dualistic versus monistic ethic. This idea, which had confronted Burke in his reflections about Melville, was probably developed more fully when he was asked to teach Coleridge instead. Burke located the central conflict in

Coleridge as the “metaphysical” one: that between the dualistic ethic of Christianity, connected to and stimulating his guilt about his wife and family, and his depressions – and the monistic, utopian, benign, integrative mania finding its starkest embodiment in his opium addiction, but present earlier in his enthusiasm for radical politics.

In Burke’s convincing analysis of the poet we see a premonition of some serious ideological questions about liberty that would worry twentieth century thinkers after the Second World War and that Burke suggested were already intuited in the late eighteenth century by Coleridge. Burke’s willingness and ability to work the physiological realities of drug dependency into the core of his analysis without prudery or prurience, defending it as a simplification that did not mar Coleridge’s intellectual complexity, contributed something else original and timely. According to Burke, this was not a simple dualistic case of good versus evil; on the contrary, it was the tragic dilemma of goods that might, from another view, also be evils that created pressures forging Coleridge’s art.

Burke defends his theory as useful in all studies: “if we had but this one poem by Coleridge, and knew not one other thing about him, we could not get an insight into its structure until we began with an awareness of its function as a symbolic redemptive process.”⁹¹ And it is no surprise that in the analysis of Coleridge one can also find a key to Burke’s own monistic ethical project, since it was the way Burke “encompassed” his dilemmas.⁹²

In this same essay, Burke offers another hypothetical example of an alcoholic writer who does his wittiest work immediately prior to going on his binges. The writer’s friends believe that if he just concentrates on writing, he can overcome his tendencies.

Burke rejects this possibility, pointing out that there is no absolute dichotomy between creativity and living: the witty “squibs” are psychic preparation for his binging; the binging part and parcel of them.⁹³ Burke suggested that such a person might escape this painful pattern only if he began to write in an entirely different vein. Coleridge’s engagement with his addiction was a continuous battle and surrender: How could it not be at the center of the experience from which he would draw his art?

Symbolic action vs. “motion”

Another important distinction that makes its appearance in the collection, and that may help to clarify the theory of symbolic action is the one between “motion” and “action,” more fully developed in later work. Burke’s distinction was probably influenced by Spinoza and later reinforced by Mead’s similar perspective, and Reform Darwinists had also drawn this distinction.⁹⁴ Both preserving and limiting the behavioral scientist’s role in interpreting human action, Burke meant to differentiate between “motion,” those behaviors that were involuntary movements of the body, or passive non-interpretive sense experience, and “action,” those behaviors that had some linguistic or intentional aspect to them. Action was interested, intentional; motion was not. Motion included that which might be measured solely by physics or chemistry: biological processes, reflexes, purely physical needs, and chemical changes. Humans seen from this perspective, were passive, though even these objective physical processes were colored by the fact that the human is a symbol user.

Though he continued to argue the distinction, in fact the realm of the purely

spastic motion of the physical body would actually shrink almost to invisibility, since nothing short of falling off a cliff can be imagined as pure motion. Even then the animal body in such a situation may not be passive. Only in death is the human body not engaged with conscious intention in some manner or other.

Mind-body identity

Burke's metabiology in *Permanence and Change* had asserted a mind/body identity, but not demonstrated it. In this essay he had attempted to provide the evidence. Burke calls symbolic action the "encompassing of a situation," the coping with a "burden" by the creative portion of the personality, which for Burke finally *is* the personality: "Necessity and will are one."⁹⁵ Thus, situation, motive and structure are in a sense identical. The clues are to be found in the "set of implicit equations," equivalences, transitions and transformations: the movements from what to what. They are like spasmodic tics that occur signaling a symbolic significance.⁹⁶ Structurally, within the literary work, we find these equivalencies exemplified in word clusters. These terms may equal each other, or bear a compensatory or "dialectical" relationship.⁹⁷ Burke claimed of the poet, "The interrelationships themselves *are* his motives. For they are his *situation*; and situation is but another word for *motives*."⁹⁸ So as motivation was structure, structure was also motivation, as Burke said, two aspects of one thing. Ransom, had warned that the writer was "play-acting" and thus not literally symbolizing his personal problems. Yet Burke suggested that there might be a trend or repetition in the roles this actor selected to play-act and this selection was symbolic of personal,

though not private, concerns.⁹⁹

By now, Burke had thoroughly complicated the concepts of both “form” and “interest” that he had developed in *Counter-Statement* and *Permanence and Change*. The following works explored concepts of “burden,” guilt, conversion, justification, sacrifice, and rebirth and the formal structures that reflected them. Interest driven by human needs interacted with a particular personal and historical situation producing empirically observable structures.

For Burke, “The symbolic act is the *dancing of an attitude*,” a total expression in which the “whole body may finally become involved, in ways suggested by the doctrines of behaviorism,” e.g., salivation, gesture, and sound.¹⁰⁰ In *Attitudes*, Burke had referred to the linguistic researches of Sir Richard Paget who had investigated the sounds of letters and their supposed universal identifications: for example, *m*, a gripping, sucking sound, for mother, *p* and *f*, spitting, aggressive sounds. He investigated this again in *Philosophy of Literary Form*. According to Burke, it was conceivable that a highly sensitive sound-track, of the sort common today, could permit aural distinctions between the use of the same sound: *f* conveying softness, as in “flower,” and *f* conveying aggressivity as in “frenzy” or “fanatic.”¹⁰¹ Whether sounds have the universal connotations Burke claimed, is not as important for his argument as the fact that poetry is composed of sounds that are apprehended through the senses, and that therefore it has an empirical element. It also placed the behavioral and empirical in symbiotic rather than causal relation to the mental, and at the service of critical endeavor rather than in opposition to it.

Psychogenic illness and our modern psychiatric chemistry is more evidence for Burke's claim that the body literally expresses, or "*dances*," a state of mind. In addition, Burke also emphasized gesture as an ordinary example of both the physical and the mental and that was evident to the senses. For example, saliva thickens in a nervous dental patient; taxi drivers have stomach ulcers; temperatures rise in a theater under influence of the drama; and guffaws can be measured on a "laugh-meter" for the benefit of radio and television advertisers.¹⁰² As far as Burke is concerned, these show that attitudes can be measured scientifically, behaviorally.

Motion and action: a ground for a metaphysic

In his review, Harry Slochower suggested that "Seen as a whole, Burke's standpoint is an answer to two extremist camps of our time: the pure substance thinkers (formalists, symbolists, logical positivists), and the pure process thinkers (pragmatists, relativists, actionists.)"¹⁰³ While Burke used empirical realities to establish the corresponding reality of attitudes, he also insisted that the limits of this sort of scientific assessment were that it could only measure "motion." Human behavior was not reducible only to such "motions" but was symbolic and intentional: this was "action." All of which is not news to us today, and though acknowledged, has not yet resolved any of the traditional mind-body issues.

"The Philosophy of Literary Form" served several ends. One was to defend the notion that a critic should employ all critical options at his disposal and not adhere to the constrictions of the New Criticism, a view not yet common, but with a potential power

Burke immediately sensed. The second was to begin to establish a mind-body identity as an aspect of a complex realism that could replace the nominalistic naturalism taking hold in philosophy. If he could root language not only in history but in the physical world, Burke could show people were actually in that common situation – the one so aptly described by proverbs. This universal situation was “dramatic,” charged by history and made meaningful and moral by thought. In giving his poetics a naturalistic, biological, or historical base, Burke’s ultimate purpose was to move toward the social unity he had advocated throughout his career thus far – a community based on principles of philosophic flexibility and commonality.

Burke wished to combat the inordinate influence of the positivistic attitude that stressed the material, the scientific, and its concomitant psychology, behaviorism, which eliminated motive and symbol from its calculations while yet finding a place for their insights. He felt this approach had led to the defensive one of The New Critics. Burke was anxious that poetry’s concrete aspect be recognized as also sharing the observable attributes of other physical behaviors, and as representing mental attitudes. His intention was not a desire to denigrate science, but to place it within a larger moral order that reinstated the human interests it excluded. His assault on the sort of naturalism that produced positivism and logical positivism became more direct immediately after this work in the “Tactics of Motivation,” where he defended the metaphysical from charges of obscurantism by Sidney Hook, Thomas Nagel, and John Dewey.¹⁰⁴

Burke’s purpose in arguing for the priority of the poetic, the emotional and attitudinal, derived from his sensitivity to rhetoric and its political significance. He had

observed that the swells and ebbs of political life, often carrying the sciences and other disciplines along with them, were human dramas rooted in emotion. He did not argue from any intention to raise his enterprise's status as a specialized discipline. Because democratic mass society was so dependent and vulnerable to forms of expression, critics could hardly afford to be so removed.

Dialectic

In the Foreword to the first edition, Burke said that “The quickest way to sloganize this theory [symbolic action] is to say that it is got by treating the terms ‘dramatic’ and ‘dialectical’ as synonymous.” It soon becomes clear to a reader that he does not mean the dialectic of grand historical oppositions as in “dialectical materialism,” but the dialectical drama of Platonic dialogue where various philosophical positions are examined in conversation and where people are brought together by their desire to discuss, dispute, and discover.¹⁰⁵ But it was the difference, the friction brought forth by social interchange that produced the conflict that made action both possible and consequential.¹⁰⁶

Burke's most frequently quoted lines are those regarding “the unending conversation,” in “The Philosophy of Literary Form” – his image of intellectual history. The “dialectic” of history is really a “dramatic” process, it is a dialogue for infinite voices speaking from distinct situations. Though today we can hardly imagine a time when it was not commonly acknowledged, Burke observed early that historical documents such as the Constitution were practical answers to historical situations. He

asks:

Where does the drama get its materials? From the “unending conversation” that is going on at the point in history when we are born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, the others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion has already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late you must depart. And you do depart with the discussion still vigorously in progress.¹⁰⁷

All participants in the discussion are situated and anxious to solve some problem or answer some pressing question given them by their time; it is in this sense “pragmatic.”¹⁰⁸ Though Burke allowed that economic “class” and other contingent categories were identifications that would influence action, still, the root of the conversation was the human person as speaker: “*homo loquax*.”

The critic Harry Slochower explained, “For Burke, the dialectic is a logic of passion which aims to disclose the cooperative elements within clashing attitudes. Hence, he can use it to show the persuasive ingredients in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* which *explain* the Hitler following. Likewise, it places him in a position to demonstrate the unifying constants in the fields of psychology and economics. Finally, he can show that identification with a group (implied in the notion of dramatic interplay) is the only *active* mode of identification.”¹⁰⁹

It is “in this ‘unending conversation’ that the assertions of any given philosopher

are grounded.” Though the philosopher may choose a “rock-bottom fact,” this fact too derives its grounding from the “current state of the conversation, and assumes quite a different place in the ‘hierarchy of facts’ when the locus of discussion has shifted.”¹¹⁰ As Ransom noted in his own pointed review of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke’s “dialectic” appeared closer to that of Plato’s dialogues or prose drama than to the sparkling epiphany offered by the lyric.¹¹¹

In his lengthy, erudite and witty essay, Ransom first accused Burke of taking the position the Sophists had in Athens, with their debunking practical, political, and social challenges.¹¹² With some inconsistency, Ransom then charged Burke as being too great a Pythagorean, Eleatic, or Platonist: “someone who builds up “some specially tidy or ‘ideal’ society, and suits the citizen to the society; then, instead of giving them the common goods as we know them, suits the goods to the citizens.”¹¹³ Ransom, like Hook, may have been thinking of Burke’s willingness to trust Stalin for so long. Ten years earlier, Burke had been labeled too aesthetic to be truly utopian; now he was too utopian to be truly aesthetic. Ransom challenged Burke’s view by claiming that his form of rationalistic dialectic neglected the specificity of nature and beauty, exemplified in lyric poetry: that is, he turned Burke’s Platonic realism against him claiming Burke could not abandon his own rationalistic orientation for “the temperament which is capable of taking its art straight.”¹¹⁴ In his own extended footnote, Ransom put his position politically: “If there had been time I think I would have proposed two exciting terms taken from politics: *Leftist*, for the logico-mathematical or Platonic or idealistic philosophy, involving the ontology and the religion which the term connotes; and

Rightist, for the substantial or aesthetic ontology, religion, ethics, and politics.”¹¹⁵ We are too ready to assume today that a realistic position is an essentialist position and that is a conservative one. But as we can see, in 1941, the lines were drawn differently.

Burke’s work has been described as an ontology, a philosophy of Being, without an underlying metaphysics, yet his era was one where the possibility of a workable metaphysics was still contested.¹¹⁶ Burke dismissed no intellectual traditions and was not as shy of metaphysics as philosophers today. Not subject to the same pressures as an academic philosopher, perhaps he could afford a more flexible attitude.

Still, Burke came to his own metaphysics with a modern’s extreme caution, and his independent readings resulted from the idiosyncratic approach of an autodidact. He now presented his own theory of criticism in keeping with the principles he had formed in his earlier books. The title essay, and more than a few of the other essays, engage a number of philosophical and even metaphysical issues, but do not offer a full grounding for his positions. In the “motivorum” corpus – *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, and *A Rhetoric of Religion*, with the never completed “Symbolic of Motives” – Burke faced that he would need to offer a modern metaphysics to support Dramatism, and layer by layer attempted to provide one.

At the same time, he had said that the modern world was one of perspectives, disciplinary as well as individual and cultural; thus there were specialized angles of view that provided complex partial insights. The disciplines and their further micro-specialization provided room for strands to develop, yet Burke felt they needed to be reconnected by some sort of comprehensive, philosophical approach to humankind and

its motives. Though there was one nature, one history, one reality, human experience was fractured. But without this rupture in continuity, a painful rupture, a “discomfort” for which the poem is “medicine,” in which Burke yet discovered form and order, there would be merely the passage of events, or undifferentiated history: no drama, no consciousness, no poetry. Difference and struggle were central to art and he admitted, “Threat is the basis of beauty.”¹¹⁷

For Burke, mind was neither a substance alien from the body nor a epiphenomenon of that body. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke described *interest* as the psychological force that organizes the self and focuses the mind. In that book, the personality was unified by a universal metabiology. In “Philosophy of Literary Form,” he portrayed individual personality as less biologically and more psychologically centered in a personal moral burden or philosophical problematic, incorporating greater differentiation within this universality. The personality is always unified by a core problem – desire, pain, or conflict, and this description increased its complexity with each book. Complex human dilemmas provided the center of poems and the structure of meaning behind all human artifacts, even grand political ones. Though in later work he would warn us about language, and of its natural tendency to separate people and then permit them to rationalize violence and hatred, at this point Burke suggested that it was life’s shared difficulties that generated all creative possibilities for human understanding, communication, and community.

Was Burke actually a philosopher, perhaps incomplete and remaining puzzled by some issues until he died? Would it be better to remember him as a preeminent literary

critic of inexplicable insight and a sometime writer of strange modernist personal intellectual stories and poems? But how many literary critics have engaged and influenced thinkers in such various disciplines? Burke's unequivocal brilliance might certainly have allowed him to swim in any number of ponds. In choosing to pursue the theoretical underpinnings of his art, and then to examine the philosophic meaning of his theory and justify it rationally, Burke cast his lot with the most serious thinkers of the twentieth century, continuing to write and argue throughout that century. For how to describe the philosophic temperament, if not as the rare and unexpected, enthusiastic willingness to find oneself the smallest fish swimming in the biggest ocean?

1. Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" reprinted in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 191-220.
2. Burke, *Philosophy*, 106 note.
3. Richard P. McKeon, Letter to Kenneth Burke, November 26, 1937. Kenneth Burke Papers.
4. Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 70, 113.
5. The economist Edward W. Bemis had not been so fortunate in 1895. After not heeding warnings from the university's president, he was fired for vocally supporting nationalization of the railroads and utilities. See Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 16.
6. McKeon to Burke, November 26, 1937.
7. Burke, Letter to Richard McKeon, December 3, 1937. Kenneth Burke Papers.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. All emphases are Burke's.
10. Kenneth Burke, Letter to Matthew Josephson, August 5, 1938, quoted in Don M. Burk's "Kenneth Burke: The Agro-Bohemian 'Marxoid,'" *Communications Studies* 42 (Fall 1991): 21.
11. Burke, *Philosophy*, 61
12. Burke, "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," reprinted in *Philosophy*, 163-64.
13. Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 47-48.
14. Burke, "The Calling of the Tune," reprinted in *Philosophy*, 226.
15. Ibid. Robert Wess has called this, "group realism: man in society," *Kenneth Burke*, 96.
16. R. J. Hirst, "Realism" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1972 ed.).
17. William James, Letter to Warner File, quoted in Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James, as Revealed in Unpublished Correspondence and Notes, Together with His Unpublished Writings*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little Brown, 1935), 392.

18. William James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays*, 23, 25, 28, 31, 88, 89, 107, 108, 111, *passim*; John Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," 242, 243, and "The Pattern of Inquiry," 223-239, in McDermott, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey*.
19. Burke, *Philosophy*, 113n.
20. For a recent and brief discussion of pragmatic realism, see, Karen Hanson, "Pragmatism in Situ: Philosophical Accuracy and Historical Context," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 24 (2002), 103-104.
21. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1946; New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 44, 45.
22. Norman M. Martin, "Carnap, Rudolf" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed.; Rudolf Carnap, "On the Character of Philosophic Problems," and "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology," both reprinted in *The Linguistic Turn*, ed. Richard M. Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 54-62, 72-84; A. J. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1963), 80-84, 111-112, 273-274. It should be noted that Carnap's views changed over time to accommodate the problems he encountered, and Ayer challenged Carnap throughout *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*.
23. *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 101-102, 106, 108; Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, 81-83.
24. Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, 11, 12.
25. Joel Spingarn quoted in Seltzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, 242, 7n.
26. Plato believed these general terms, or universals, which he called "Forms" must have some ahistorical, permanent, and stable ontological reality of their own, or thinking and communication would collapse. A philosopher who wrote in dialogue form would naturally stress the communicative aspects of thought and language. Plato anticipated many of the challenges to his theory and the *Parmenides* gives the dialectical account of these difficulties, with Plato maintaining a steady line of defense.
27. He was not alone in this position; the structuralists Ferdinand de Saussure, who examined linguistic structure, and Claude Levi-Strauss who examined myths particularly, argued in analogous fashion from an anthropological perspective with the intention of developing a *systematic* science of signs – semiotics.
28. Burke, *Philosophy*, xvi.
29. *Ibid.*, 9.

30. Burke: *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969), 59; "Dramatism" (under "Interaction") in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), 7: 448; "(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action, in *Critical Inquiry*, IV (Summer 1978), 809-838: 837.
31. Burke, *Attitudes*, 423.
32. Burke, *Philosophy*, 125-126.
33. Burke, *Philosophy*, 125.
34. Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, 1.
35. Patricia S. Churchland's *Neurophilosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) quoted in Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, 1.
36. Crusius, *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation after Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 113; Star A. Muir, "Toward an Ecology of Language," in Brock, ed., *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century*, 53, 59, 65.
37. Burke, *Philosophy*, 141.
38. In the next book, Burke examines the "god-term" using "money" as the example. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 91-117; see also, idem., *Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 33, 175, 272.
39. Burke, *Philosophy*, 26-30, 60, 77-78, 280.
40. Ibid., 26.
41. William S. Knickerbocker, "Wam for Maw: Dogma versus Discursiveness in Criticism," reprinted in an edited version in *Critical Responses*, 123.
42. Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* shared some influences with Burke, including those of Frazer, Spengler, Freud and Jung. He reintroduced the notions of archetypal symbols, myths and a larger perspective on the poem as a whole, though he would also maintain that literature was an autonomous discipline with its own structure. See *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 6, 10, 72, 108-109, 111, 148, 160, 343, 192n., 193, 214, 353.
43. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1352, 1442.
44. John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press paperback, 1968), 330.
45. Ibid., 334.

46. *Ibid.*, 336.

47. *Ibid.*, 342.

48. *Ibid.*, 343.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 344-345.

51. For discussions of the development of professionalization in literary criticism in the context of T.S. Eliot's career, see Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context*, Chapter 5, "Literature and Professionalism," 97-132. For a related discussion of demographic and structural causes of the humanities move into the academy after the Second World War, and thus the professionalization of critics, see: Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987).

52. Ransom, *World's Body*, 347-348.

53. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947). For Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Affective Fallacy, see *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1387-1403.

54. Burke, *Philosophy*, 61.

55. *Ibid.*, 23.

56. Ransom, *World's Body*, 348.

57. John Crowe Ransom, "An Address to Kenneth Burke," reprinted in *Critical Responses*, 149.

58. Burke, *Philosophy*, 4-6.

59. Burke, *Philosophy*, 113n.

60. *Ibid.*, 113-114n.

61. *Ibid.*, 7.

62. *Ibid.*, 114n.

63. *Ibid.*, 108.

64. *Ibid.*, 144.

65. Ibid., 42, 48-49, 51-52, 56, 58.
66. Ibid., 4-8, 336.
67. Ibid., Foreword, xviii-xix.
68. Kenneth Burke, "The Study of Symbolic Action," *Chimera* 1 (Spring 1942), 16.
69. Ibid., 16.
70. Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 110.
71. Burke, *Philosophy*, 92, 232.
72. Though some expert readers of this dissertation have questioned the use of the term "synecdoche" as opposed to "metonymy," this is Burke's reference and he also explicitly contrasts it with metonymy in *A Grammar of Motives*, 325, 326, 503, 506-507.
73. Burke, *Philosophy*, 20, 22, 25, 27, 30, 32, 71, 73.
74. Ibid., xiv, 59, 71, 75, 99, 104n., 119-123.
75. Burke, *Philosophy*, 91.
76. Ibid., xx, 76, 109; see also "On Dialectic," 443-444; and "Dialectician's Hymn," 447-448, both reprinted in *Philosophy*.
77. Burke, *Philosophy*, x.
78. Ibid., 8-9, 12, 16, 17-18, 19-20.
79. Ibid., 89-90.
80. Ibid., 1.
81. Ibid., 3.
82. Burke, "The Study of Symbolic Action," 15.
83. Burke, *Philosophy*, 1.
84. Ibid., 23.
85. Though it is not entirely explained in the essay or even in the sum of essays in the book, or perhaps even in all of Burke's oeuvre, the theory of symbolic action is at the center of "Philosophy of Literary Form." An essay he wrote shortly after, "The Study of

Symbolic Action” explained some of its principles, though once again, undoubtedly to the frustration of those trying to follow him, shifting emphasis. He stated those principles in terms of rhetoric more generally and abstractly, though now in the context of the war. Here he opposed, though “not antithetically,” poetry as action rather than knowledge.

86. Burke, *Philosophy*, 90-91.

87. *Ibid.*, 92.

88. *Ibid.*, xvii.

89. *Ibid.*, 92.

90. *Ibid.*, 284 in “Freud – and the Analysis of Poetry.”

91. *Ibid.*, 289.

92. For a helpful discussion of the issues of merger and division, as well as Burke and Coleridge on “unity and multeity,” see Jane Blankenship, “‘Magic’ and ‘Mystery’ in the Works of Kenneth Burke” in *Legacy*: 137-138.

93. Burke, *Philosophy*, 119-124. Burke might have been thinking of the wit James Thurber, who died on one such binge.

94. Burke, *Philosophy*, xv-xvi. This issue was approached obliquely in this work, though was highlighted in the next book, where it is discussed with reference to George Herbert Mead. See Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 237, 242. Like Burke, Lester Frank Ward had earlier distinguished between physical evolution that had no purpose, “genetic phenomena,” versus mental evolution, “telic phenomena,” that had been occasioned by purposive action. See Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 68.

95. Burke, *Philosophy*, 18, 93.

96. *Ibid.*, 20.

97. *Ibid.*, 75-77.

98. *Ibid.*, 20.

99. *Ibid.*, 19-20.

100. *Ibid.*, 9.

101. *Ibid.*, 12-15.

102. *Ibid.*, 11, 15.

103. Harry Slochower, "Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Symbolic Action," reprinted in *Critical Responses*, 131.

104. See Sidney Hook, "The New Failure of Nerve," John Dewey, "Anti-Naturalism in Extremis," and Ernest Nagel, "Malicious Philosophies of Science," in "The New Failure of Nerve" edition of *Partisan Review* 10 (January/February 1943):1-23, 24-39, 40-55. This volume was an attack on the rising new irrationalist and religious philosophies of history; Reinhold Niebuhr was one target. See also Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 250.

105. Burke, *Philosophy*, xx.

106. It should be mentioned that Burke was not alone in this approach and represented an undercurrent. The British "ordinary-language" philosopher J. L. Austin (1911-1960), held similar opinions about the dramatic, active function of language. As an "ordinary language" philosopher in the nineteen-fifties, Austin rejected logical positivism's fixation on the declarative statement as the prototype of language and the notion of a reference theory of meaning, the denotation of an object, for a more varied conception of "speech acts." Austin also defended the use of proverbs and clichés as clarifying experience. What Burke and Mead called "dramatic," the actual function of expression in the social arena, Austin called "performative;" words did not merely denote, greetings, apologies, imperatives, and pleas do things. See Stroll, *Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, 170; Keith Graham, *J. L. Austin: A Critique of Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1977) 54-56, 58-60.

107. Burke, *Philosophy*, 110-111 .

108. *Ibid.*, 89.

109. Harry Slochower in *Critical Responses*, 134.

110. Burke, *Philosophy*, 111, note 27.

111. Ransom in *Critical Responses*, 143-44.

112. *Ibid.*, 145.

113. *Ibid.*, 146.

114. *Ibid.*, 154-155.

115. *Ibid.*, 155, note.

116. Crusius, *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation after Philosophy*, 92, 93, 97, 101.

117. Burke, *Philosophy*, 61.

CONCLUSION

It is odd to conclude the discussion here, since this study has been merely an overture to Burke's major philosophical corpus. Burke developed Dramatism in the years immediately following our period. But our study does present themes and the principles that will tie together Burke's later writings. In the decade between 1931 and 1941, Burke changed his life, as his novel *Towards a Better Life* predicted he would. He divorced and remarried, and transformed from a fiction writer and critic into a serious critical theorist, pressed in part by his own and fellow writers' responses to the Depression. The end of that decade presented new cataclysms and Burke approached those with his signature conciliatory originality. By that point, Burke had experimented and found the basic principles of his philosophy.

Recapitulation

While defending the new abstract aesthetic movements, Burke had simultaneously argued for the historical and social significance of artistic expression. *Towards a Better Life* explored rhetorical forms operating in the context of the modernist dissolution of narrative. In *Counter-Statement*, he explained the social presence of form, how it was charged by audiences and how it "functioned" in the "real" historical world. He argued that literature had its own dialectical (as dialogical) tradition of response to cultural transformations. Art also had as much practical human importance as science. Burke refuted the art-for-art's-sake decadents, pointing out that despite any alienation,

artists were implicated in history. Yet he also adopted the aesthetic and psychoanalytic concern with symbolism in order to suggest a conceptual flexibility in his approach to language.

With the advent of the Great Depression, Burke's move to the "social emphasis," to rhetoric and propaganda in the next years was therefore a natural progression. Yet Burke said that when taking a "last look around" after his literary generation, the bohemian aesthetes had "cleared out," he discovered "lying about unclaimed, A Philosophy of History, A Psychology, an Apologia for Art, a Methodology of Art, a Theory of Criticism." These he brought to bear on the contemporary political scene.¹ He repositioned the locus of purpose in the hortatory: the more accurate and real, the more sensitively observed a piece of writing, the more it served to transform a reader's intelligence and alter the social landscape individually, naturally, and permanently. Yet since the method was loyalty to an aesthetic purpose, this created a tension. Literary form had its own controlling ethic, and Burke had an almost naive faith in aesthetic excellence as contagious reform. Despite doctrine, art naturally militated against absolute social disjunctions. These judgements were the source of Burke's sensitivity to the language of ideology. Even prior to the popular front's about-face, he argued for using language and symbols that were familiar and tied to the American rhetorical traditions, identity, and national pride, while still maintaining a critical distance toward that tradition.

Permanence and Change had attempted to establish the basis for a comprehensive "philosophy of being." Burke now reestablished metaphysics as a

psychological tendency, one that might be made self-conscious. In keeping with modern understanding, he withdrew human purpose (teleology) from natural history and placed it within psychology, representing it not as neurosis or false consciousness, but as a driving principle of consciousness. In so doing, he managed to avoid not only the religious supernaturalistic readings of history, but also Hegel or Marx's historical determinism, as well as their eschatologies, and still avoid a too extreme naturalism, also deterministic.

This original examination of teleology was the start of an idiosyncratic argument for the possibility of human freedom in a natural world in which humans were implicated. Interest, at the heart of teleology, was the link between humans and the world. Not something that could be avoided or expunged, it was actually the source of rationality and clarity. This position set him apart from traditional Marxists, Freudians, and logicians, placing him closer to the pragmatists. Yet pragmatism tended to take a far more restricted, less aesthetic view of how humans approached their dilemmas. Most pragmatists, James and Mead notable exceptions, were less concerned with the effects of emotions and symbols on action than that of an instrumental "intelligence."

Since we were linguistic creatures, Burke believed that our Babel might be a good thing. Burke turned the "problem" of modernity's variety of perspectives into an advantage; he pressed for creating a value system of maximum inclusion and participation, basing it on a somewhat circular argument for a shared human interest and situation in history – what Timothy Crusius has termed "a philosophical anthropology," and what Burke called a "metabiology."² Yet we must allow that this circular argument encompassed a great deal within its orbit. According to Burke, language, a defining

characteristic of the species, only existed because we were all more or less the same type of creature who aimed for a similar “good life,” despite differences in our histories or cultures. The cacophony of possible views was the source for a parliamentary kind of mystical moral unity. And Burke suggested social renovation could spring from this quasi-mystical consciousness that was grounded in actual, unavoidable need.

From such pluralistic idealism Burke moved to consider the vicissitudes of “acceptance”—the unifying motive—in actual societies. According to Burke, even error and social inequities derive from human need and the inevitable processes of social development. History as actuality, to use Charles Beard’s term, had no discernible progressive form. Here the Darwinists were correct, it was an “unanswerable opponent,” though Burke showed in *Permanence and Change* how they immediately replaced one philosophy of purpose with another.³ Cultural history followed patterns having to do with human forms of merger and division. We were not entirely overwhelmed by our environment, we engaged and accepted it by creative transcendental adaptations and compromises illustrated by the genres.

Yet one could read *Attitudes Toward History* as reducing social life to an irrational history, with societies developing beyond their participants’ intentions to the point where their technologies ran counter to human survival, a twist on Marx’s “alienation.” Burke seemed of two minds, since simultaneously, in his micro portrait, the individual’s potential to both renew his or her origins and adapt to fate with “transcendence,” simultaneously boded both well and ill for social structures. While Burke did not imagine history as inevitably progressive, he did leave room for societies

to transform without violence.

Burke believed that cultures arose out of need for community that became attenuated and problematic, yet human creativity might disentangle what it compulsively produced. Examining literary forms and their complex ways of expressing author's attitudes and invoking those of the audiences, he decided that creativity was tied to guilt and the need for self-justification, a partial explanation of relentless technological ambition. Analogous to his pluralistic liberal mysticism, he suggested we accept and exploit human frailty to arrive at an ironic "comic attitude," one that would accept the self and encourage a sophisticated form of charity.

Finally, Burke attempted to apply his various conclusions about transcendence, mind-body relations, and history, to his own literary theory: that of symbolic action. All expression and ultimately all gesture, which Burke implied could be infinitely minute, as well as all thought is imprinted with our widely ranging linguistic characters, and thus poetry, as both spontaneous and rational, was Burke's chosen model for explication. Poetry is a site where transitions are displayed, illustrating events of transformation and transcendence. Also, the study of poetic forms, methods, and sounds revealed a mind-body identity that was not a causal sequential relation but an expressive one operating in two directions. Burke used this mind-body identity to justify an ecumenical theoretical method. Rather than separating the "extrinsic" emotional, historical issues, the artist's "burden," from the "intrinsic" formal ones that displayed technique, Burke's "symbolic action" aimed to move back and forth demonstrating how moral interests and physical gesture and language must all reflect each other.

With the theory of symbolic action, Burke began to emphasize his metaphysical realism. This realism was not a rejection of his earlier radical politics and his historical approach, but its conclusion. Burke's realism was an epistemology or metaphysics in service to an ethic. Ransom was correct, Burke was politically utopian and this was tied to his Platonic realism, though he was melioristic, progressive, and liberal as well. Burke did not believe men might be entirely remade by new values, but he also did not believe they were hopelessly aggressive requiring continuous control. He felt he had discovered what they were: symbol-using animals. The identification of mind and body at the heart of symbolic action, argued further for human commonality and for realism, which for him, was the empirical reality of ideas in lived time. If considered politically, it implied that changing minds changed action and altered history. Burke had argued similarly throughout the previous decade. The political drama of the period turned Burke into even more of a public intellectual than he was already, though his arguments were directed to writers and generally not the public at large.

Though contemporary thinkers have decided to abandon metaphysics, much of modern criticism is certainly philosophical. It is argued that "metaphysics" traditionally implies an unseen but substantive grounding, a formal order, or god, of some sort directing and guaranteeing our language. It seems we would be less free if such grounding existed and it is impossible in any case.. Logical positivists, thirties Marxists, and today's postmodernists would disagree on almost everything but in allowing the term "metaphysics" to represent whatever went wrong in the history of philosophy they speak in unison. Moreover, modern philosophy and criticism often circumscribe the term

“ontology,” to a study of “Being” implying that the references of these terms can be divorced from the traditional ones. Conservative or religious thinkers are also often suspicious of any metaphysics that does not openly serve an orthodoxy holding familiar unquestioned values, since these are believed to be the only effective social glue.

Burke’s independence and his undisputed originality, are almost always ultimately attributed to his prescient relativism and not his realism.⁴ But this is to neglect what this dissertation has explained as the heart of Burke’s project, which used methods we call critical or deconstructionist with the very firm intention to construct his own unifying perspective. The fundamental moral change that Darwinism, secularism, and individualism had effected was the loss of a universally accepted principle of human purpose. This seemed the emotional center of modernism. Burke would serve as a bridge to postmodernism, in that he would see relativism as an opportunity not to be missed. During this decade, Burke audaciously, cheerfully, took it upon himself to provide a secular, metacritical, and metaphysical grounding for the moderns, one that explored the various expressions of self and self-interest. At the same time, Burke used this complex concept as a base for tolerance and social justice. In the tradition of previous philosophers, and using modern intellectual terminology, Burke tried to explain why all of humanity shared one fundamental interest; expressed in part by his early concern with ecology. In all these discussions his concern was humanistic and ethical, human-centered.

Burke’s was an idiosyncratic stance at a time when scientific rationalism dismissed all metaphysics as obscurantism and conservatives distrusted rational

secularism. Today the universalistic ideals of Enlightenment rationality have again come under fierce attack as deceptive and oppressive univocalism in a pluralistic, relativistic world. This is not new; nineteenth century thinkers as diverse in intention as Herder, Maistre, and Dostoyevsky critiqued what they saw as the naiveté of much of universalism. But it is hard to see how the plurality of voices, no matter how rich and fascinating each might be, can be brought into any harmony without some shared ideal or how any coherent, dependable policies can be formulated without some stable notion of the good and a rationale for its pursuit.

An antiformalist learned in the modernist principles of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Veblen, Eliot, and Spengler, Burke took an historical view of ideas. Yet Burke was a gentle historicist; that theories were born of a time and place did not discredit or debunk them. Burke searched and argued for a secular metaphysical ground since he was developing a concept of a consistent human essence that informed shifting behaviors.

The articles immediately following the *Philosophy of Literary Form*, especially “The Tactics of Motivation,” his response to Dewey, Nagel and Hook’s “The New Failure of Nerve,” defended this metaphysical approach to motives by offering the principles of Dramatism within the same secular, intellectual context in which the positivists operated. Dramatism was to develop a grand metacritical method whose mercurial subject, human motive, necessarily involved ontological questions. Always beginning his discussions from the very modern perspective of rhetorical construction, Burke was not afraid to explore the precise issues many of his colleagues had dismissed as irrelevant or nonsensical.

Burke also respectfully observed teleology and theology from a secular, linguistic view that saw them as more than intellectual detritus or anthropological curiosities. At the same time, Burke's politics and personal opinions were too tolerant, liberal, and pluralistic, his years on the left too long and without apology to ever make him a darling of conservative thinkers. Burke presumed the individual mind as an authentic and competent judge of itself and the world. Thus, Burke belongs not only to American thought but also to the Enlightenment.

Burke situated himself within the American philosophical tradition in a number of ways. He shared opinions with Mead, Dewey, and James, all classed as pragmatists; he was steeped in American and European social thought. James returned to religion from psychology, justifying it on pragmatic grounds: it worked for people, sort of, sometimes. James remained in a permanent state of puzzlement when he looked to justify his own beliefs. We may identify with James's attitude, admiring its honesty, but his solutions were ultimately unsatisfying when pressed by political realities. Dewey tried to manage without a metaphysics, but found it difficult to find any coherent justification for either his logic or his political values, as Burke was quick to observe. Dewey's Pragmatism and his liberalism were dependent on a progressive future ensured by science and its method, an expectation that Burke suggested was hardly guaranteed, and one that Dewey lived to see questioned by events.

A thinker such as Burke is assumed to have influence only when his thought is considered apart from its metaphysical assertions. Those assertions, it is suggested, doom his appeal. A recent, otherwise excellent book on Burke insists he is a

“postPhilosopher,” a “praxis philosopher,” and that he discusses “Being without Metaphysics,” all despite the fact that Burke himself has no problem with metaphysics or Plato, and insists his work is concerned with the first and adopts views of the second.⁵ This is because philosophy, like the novel, is supposedly dead according to the pathologists. But these rumors are greatly exaggerated.

Influence is impossible to quantify; if one is a critic’s critic or a thinker’s thinker it is who listens that matters, because they may have their own listeners. Williams, Munson, Cowley, Josephson, Tate, Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Talcott Parsons, Duncan, Clifford Geertz, C. Wright Mills, and Erving Goffman, Harold Bloom, Jameson, White, Lentriccia, Stanley Hyman who wrote the *The New Yorker*’s literary criticism in the fifties, sixties, and seventies; Ellison who used and cited Burke frequently, all come from different disciplines, generations, and political views, yet all credited Burke as an important figure or influence. Maybe we have not gotten by without philosophy, but rather we have had philosophy, from disputatious public intellectuals and serious thinkers in sociology and criticism, and gotten by.

Burke, took on the fundamental philosophic question: What is this human creature? He didn’t answer it as a scientist, a novelist, a historian, or even a critic, if a critic would answer it, but as a philosopher. Burke began writing in a period where grand narratives and analyses of Western Civilization were more commonplace than in ours, and his work may therefore seem alien even when it is prescient. Given that he is such a digressive, hyperkinetic read, an odd duck, why should we bother? Because Burke’s is a singularly humane critical voice within his period, which is almost the entire

previous century. It is because he labored to persuade us to look at our assumptions at their roots that we find Burke difficult. As he addressed many of us who are embroiled in the concerns of various disciplines, he is also wide-ranging and complex. And, since he attempted to convince us to be patient with ourselves and others, giving us many good arguments for such patience, he is eminently worth our effort.

1. Burke, "Auscultation," 61.
2. Crusius, *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation after Philosophy*, 230.
3. The "unanswerable opponent" is in Burke, *Philosophy*, 444.
4. Notable exceptions are Robert Heath's *Realism and Relativism: A Perspective on Kenneth Burke* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), and Stan A. Lindsay's *Implicit Rhetoric*, cited earlier.
5. Timothy W. Crusius, *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation after Philosophy*, 23, 24, 63, 93, 94, 230.

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