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**Abstract:**

Between August of 1939 and February of 1942 Kenneth Burke maintained a vigorous correspondence with John Crowe Ransom, the editor of the *Kenyon Review*. The conversation between the two men delved repeatedly into the intersections of rhetoric and epistemology, and took as its point of departure an influential essay written by Burke and published by Ransom: "Four Master Tropes." In this article, I contextualize "Four Master Tropes" against the author-editor conversation in order to clarify the Burkean relationship between rhetoric and knowledge. I argue that Burke understands rhetoric as a core epistemological practice operative in every discovery of "truth."

**Text of paper:**

In 1941 Kenneth Burke submitted an essay to John Crowe Ransom, editor of the *Kenyon Review*, one designed to serve as an "extension" of the thoughts he had published about metaphor in *Permanence and Change* (Burke to Ransom, March 24, 1941).<sup>i</sup> Within five days the essay was accepted for publication, and five months later Ransom wrote Burke with the news that his "fine essay" had gone to the printer "unabridged" (Ransom to Burke, August 8, 1941). That essay, "Four Master Tropes," explored the epistemic functions of four tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony<sup>ii</sup>—and was the subject of immediate critical attention. The re-publication of the essay in the appendix to *A Grammar of Motives* in 1945 popularized the essay and thereby insured that critical interest would continue.

It has. Herbert Simons has spoken for many by stating that "Four Master Tropes" is a "highly provocative essay" that demands the attention of rhetoricians. He describes the essay as an "eye-opener" capable of re-animating the inherited rhetorical tradition of the Greeks and Romans (6-7). As if following Simon's suggestion, scholars have repeatedly invoked Burke's "Four Master Tropes" to explain Burkean thought and/or to cast new light on issues of enduring rhetorical concern. Yet each invocation understands the essay differently. Some scholars, Robert Wess indicates, have assumed that the essay explains previous Burkean thought while others read it as a precursor to a later Burke ("Pentadic" 155). Even scholars who agree on the former, however, still cannot reach consensus. Stephen Bygrave, for example, believes the essay underscores the *Grammar* (93) while Lynn Worsham argues that the essay subverts the *Grammar* (74). The diverse and continued invocations of the essay testify to its significance; "Four Master Tropes" is, in Worsham's words, "essential to Burke's system" (76).<sup>iii</sup>

The diversity of invocations not only suggests the centrality of the essay, it also points to hermeneutic uncertainties. That one essay receives such diverse—and at times antithetical—treatments suggests that Simon's observation that "Four Master Tropes" "may be read in a variety of ways" is gross understatement (6). Moreover, that one essay might be used to support such purposes as social constructionism (Schiappa), argumentation (Fritch and Leeper), and rhetorical identification (Stuckey and Antczak) suggests that the essay is not only essential for understanding the Burkean system, it is also has potential to clarify Burke's vast contribution to rhetorical studies.

The variety of invocations should not, however, obscure the fact that most readings—especially recent ones—have drawn on the essay to elucidate a Burkean epistemology. Wess

has argued that "Four Master Tropes" offers the "best vantage point" from which to observe Burke's epistemological development (*Rhetoric* 117), and Schiappa uses the essay to enter the "unresolved debate over rhetoric's epistemic status" by demonstrating that "Burke's four master tropes are . . . inescapable to the process of making sense of 'reality'" (401-402). All this should not be surprising, for Burke himself begins the essay by announcing that the tropes will be considered, not in their figurative usage, but in "their role in the discovery and description of 'the truth'" (*Grammar* 503).<sup>iv</sup>

I approach "Four Master Tropes" from the perspective offered by the exchange of letters between Kenneth Burke and his original editor, John Crowe Ransom. In a vigorous correspondence between August of 1939 and February of 1942 the two men delved repeatedly into the intersections of epistemology, tropes in general, and "Four Master Tropes" in particular. Throughout the exchange of letters, Ransom distinguished between two incommensurable epistemologies: "scientific knowledge" and "poetic knowledge." Burke, for his part, refused to dichotomize knowing; he warned Ransom that the attempt to do so results only in a "big epistemological problem" (Burke to Ransom, December 3, 1941). When "Four Master Tropes" is contextualized against the author-editor conversation, Burke's solution to the problem emerges: he understands rhetoric as a core epistemological practice capable of subsuming Ransom's twin epistemologies. A Burkean epistemology, then, is a rhetorical epistemology—in other words, the "discovery . . . of the 'truth'" (Burke's term, which will be defined below) is possible only by way of rhetorical inducement. In short, rhetoric is an essential condition of knowledge.

### **Background: Kenneth Burke and John Crowe Ransom**

There can be no doubting the importance of the literary career of John Crowe Ransom. When he died in 1974 newspapers across the country memorialized his contributions to the academy and to literary criticism. For good reason he was heralded as "a major force in American literature," a "major American poet and critic," and "one of the most influential of modern critics." Robert Penn Warren, his friend and colleague, enshrined Ransom's writings as "a permanent treasure" (qtd. in Young, Gentleman 476-79).

Literary historians agree that Ransom wielded significant literary influence throughout his adult life. While teaching in the Vanderbilt English department in the 1920s he "mentored" the group of poets and critics that would come to be known as the "Nashville Fugitives" (Conkin 4). Louis D. Rubin Jr. records that these early Fugitive meetings evolved into "one of the most influential movements in our literary history," for in the 1930s Ransom, along with his three most prominent students, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren, would transform this local group of Nashville poets into the nationally recognized Southern Agrarian Movement—an intellectual crusade rooted in the fear that traditional values could not be sustained in a culture committed to unchecked scientific progress and industrialization (3). As the "master" Agrarian (Scotchie 12), Ransom would pen the "Statement of Principles" that prefigured the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* as well as his own book, *God Without Thunder*—a large scale indictment of both science and religion that Richard Weaver has called "the profoundest of books to come out of the Agrarian movement" (592). Under the guidance of Ransom, Agrarianism, in turn, developed into the New Criticism—that school of literary scholarship that dominated the mid-century and championed the close reading of texts in order

to separate literary criticism from "extrinsic" concerns (Leitch 26). Throughout the 1940s, Vincent Leitch indicates, Ransom was at the heart of New Criticism (25); it is then not surprising that two of his texts, *The World's Body* and *The New Criticism*, have become accepted iterations of New Critical principles.<sup>v</sup>

From his early days as a Fugitive poet through his later New Critical years, Ransom never tired of distinguishing between "poetic knowledge" and "scientific knowledge." Mark Malvasi notes that, for Ransom, poetry stood in opposition to science and "constituted a new kind of truth"—a truth that was essentially religious (80). Paul Murphy underscores the sacred importance Ransom attached to poetic knowledge; he explains that, to Ransom's mind, the scientific temperament "is subtly corrosive of religion because it undercuts the humble submission to nature that is the essence of religion" (17). Rubin Jr. concurs; he argues that, for Ransom, only through the poetic "belief in a reality that is larger and greater than the demonstrable reality of science . . . can men regain the condition of wonder and dependence" required by orthodoxy (54). To Ransom's mind, scientific knowledge undermined "wonder and dependence" and thereby "disabused the modern world of precious myths that had historically provided a rich spiritual and aesthetic life" (Malvasi 34). Ransom's crusade for a distinctively poetic way of knowing would provide seemingly limitless fodder for his conversations with Burke.

Although Ransom did not come into direct contact with Burke until he assumed the editorship of the *Kenyon Review* in December of 1938, the two men were indirectly acquainted as early as the summer of 1932 when Tate forwarded to Ransom a letter from Burke which contained, for Tate, "the best analysis" of Ransom's *God Without Thunder* available (Selzer and

George n.p.). By 1933, Selzer and George indicate, Burke was "quite familiar" with the Agrarian enterprise and Ransom's contributions to *I'll Take My Stand* (n.p.). In 1935 both men contributed to the first issue of the newly-founded *Southern Review*; Ransom was a "central intellectual and spiritual contributor to the new magazine"—a periodical that would "increasingly connect with Burke personally, professionally, and intellectually" (Selzer and George n.p.).<sup>vi</sup> The publication of Burke's "Calling of the Tune" in the inaugural volume of Ransom's *Kenyon Review* finally brought the two men into direct contact. Thomas Daniel Young notes that during his editorship Ransom conducted an "unbelievable amount of correspondence" with contributors to the journal, including Burke, who placed over twenty pieces in the journal (Annotated xiii).<sup>vii</sup> The enduring correspondence between the two men (preserved in the Kenneth Burke Papers at The Pennsylvania State University and the John Crowe Ransom Papers at Kenyon College) started in 1938 and continued for over twenty years. It was a conversation marked by requests for book reviews, philosophic ponderings, responses to published articles, heated (but always cordial) debates, and personal confessions.

The letters testify to the mutual respect the two men had for each other. By 1941 Ransom had developed a deep admiration for Burke's criticism. He wrote, "Your criticisms are acute; more pointed than I've had yet from anybody. . . . I greatly admire your fertility" (Ransom to Burke, August 8, 1941). By November of the same year he proposed to Burke the idea of a joint book, an idea Burke heartily and immediately endorsed (Ransom to Burke, November 17, 1941; Burke to Ransom, December 3, 1941). Ransom's published reviews of Burke also speak to the esteem with which he considered his colleague: "Burke is one of the most intelligent of writers, and has graduated with honors out of so many schools of thought

that their testimonies do not tip him over" ("Address" 142). The respect was mutual; Burke's letters indicate that he considered Ransom an astute critic and trusted colleague. In January of 1942 Burke expressed an interest in uniting the prominent literary critics sympathetic to the anti-scientific enterprise and asked Ransom to join him in the effort. Indeed, Ransom so impacted Burke's thinking that he shows up twice in the title essay of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (29, 31).

In a letter dated March 17, 1941, Ransom requested that Burke submit a manuscript to the *Kenyon Review*. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of the same month Burke submitted "Four Master Tropes," and it was accepted for publication on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Following Burke's submission the two men continued to exchange letters at a wearisome pace; tropes and "Four Master Tropes" now provided ample fodder for conversation. Their correspondence had previously been periodically marked by tropical disagreement, but following the submission of "Four Master Tropes" the issue took center stage.<sup>viii</sup> Letters were now filled with discussions of tropes; all told, at least 17 letters over three years talked explicitly about tropes, "Four Master Tropes," or closely related issues.

### **"Four Master Tropes"**

Bryan Crable argues that dramatism rests on the assumption that language is not merely a "representation of an independently existing entity," but a constitutive action that "gives entities an identifiable character (or substance)" ("Dramatism" 329). At the very least, then, language for Burke is epistemic; it creates meaning. To explain how it does so is the task of Burke's four tropes. The lesson of metaphor is that knowledge is perspectival, the tutelage of

metonymy is that language demands such perspectivism, and the exhortation of synecdoche and irony is that knowledge is inescapably rhetorical. In what follows, I consider each trope in turn, pausing to explore the ways in which each trope was part of the larger correspondence between Burke and his editor.

### Metaphor

Metaphor is Burke's foundational trope. He defines metaphor as "a device for seeing something in terms of something else." It is an inventional device intended to provide new perspectives—and metonymy, synecdoche, and irony all operate by the invention of perspective. Burke consequently notes that understanding metaphor is essential for understanding the other tropes; "we shall carry the first pair (metaphor/perspective) with us as we proceed [to consider the other tropes]" (Grammar 503, 05).

Despite the fact that Burke admittedly devotes little space to metaphor, it would be a mistake to pass over the trope too quickly. The trope is, after all, foundational and it is at the heart of Ransom and Burke's sustained disagreement. Not surprisingly, what Ransom disliked was not Burke's suggestion of metaphoric perspective as such, but his insistence that scientists as well as poets depend on it. Burke argues, "Various kinds of scientific specialists now carry out the implications of one or another of such [metaphoric] perspective with much more perseverance than that with which a 17<sup>th</sup> Century poet might in one poem pursue the exploitation of a 'conceit'" (Grammar 504). This suggestion that poets and scientists share a common linguistic methodology evoked an immediate disagreement and an enduring controversy:



I read ["Four Master Tropes"] the other day with the same admiration as last spring, and – also – with the same misgiving; as follows: Can Burke really suppose that science is at the mercy of metaphorical confusion? I can't believe it.

Scientific perspective is very different from poetic metaphor. (Ransom to Burke, August 8, 1941; emphasis original<sup>ix</sup>)

In his letters to Burke, Ransom repeatedly underscored the gravity of this disagreement; he believed that the relative independence of poetry from science was the pivotal issue which separated his own theories from Burke's. In keeping with Tate and the other Agrarians, who equated science with the modernity they deplored, Ransom labored to keep the two realms separate—"I have always felt that poetry was in revulsion against science" (Ransom to Burke, January 26, 1941)—and felt that Burke's treatment of metaphor threatened their autonomy: "I don't agree with you that a scientist's perspectivist method is like a poet's metaphor. . . . I make poetry and prose a pair of opposites, same as poetry and science" (Ransom to Burke, January 4, 1941). In print Ransom wrote, "Art is radically not science . . . . The fact that Burke tends to confuse them . . . might be an evidence that art is not really so 'universal' a human activity as science" ("Address" 152). Ransom dedicated such effort to maintaining the autonomy of science and poetry that Thomas Daniel Young and John Hindle suggest that "no other literary critic of this century has devoted as much time and intellectual energy as John Crowe Ransom in attempting to distinguish between scientific prose and poetic discourse" (1).

To understand Ransom's untiring crusade for the autonomy of poetry from science, it is important to understand that, for Ransom, both poetry and science are epistemic, but they provide two incommensurable knowledges that differ in both form and function.<sup>x</sup> Young and

Hindle explain: science, for Ransom, provides only a limited or pragmatic knowledge because it "subtracts from the whole experience that which may serve some utilitarian purpose" (9).

Although partial in form, Ransom allowed a place for scientific knowledge because of its pragmatic and predictive function. Richard Rorty captured Ransom's position: "Great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of prediction and controlling what happens, just as poets . . . invent other descriptions for other purposes" (4). Although scientific subtraction allows for prediction, the same subtraction fails because "most of the experience is quite missing from it" (Young and Hindle 9). Examining only "one value at a time" (Ransom, Criticism 293), then, science "sees any single object in (scientifically) correct perspective when it sees the bearing of that object upon its own strictly defined and limited interest" (Ransom to Burke, August 8, 1941). Science, in other words, cannot comprehend what Ransom calls the "heterogeneity" of sensation. Modifying Kantian sublimity, Ransom reasons that "the natural object exhibits vast magnitude, like the mountain (the mathematically sublime), or stupendous force, like the storm (the dynamically sublime)" and thus resists disclosure by the reductive concepts of scientific reason ("Address" 153-54). In what would become his mantra, Ransom proclaimed: "No concept will cover the percept; that's my thesis. No rational understanding will grasp the relation between the red and round of an apple" (Ransom to Burke, November 17, 1941). Scientific knowledge, in other words, could never account for the "vast magnitude" of the natural object:

[A]ctual material is substantial in the complete sense, or has an infinite series of properties, and no operation can be safe which does not allow for the whole

activity of its material. We must believe therefore that any scientific process or prediction is only a piece of pragmatic knowledge. ("Address" 148)

Regarding the "vast magnitude" of the natural object, Burke agreed with Ransom; he argued that the actual object is an "infinity of events" (Philosophy 26). Indeed, it is in this sense that we should understand Burke's references to "truth"—"truth" refers to the sublimity of the object-in-the-world, the "vast magnitude" of the natural, what Ransom will call the "qualitative density" of the actual (Criticism 293).

Poetic or aesthetic knowledge was the only knowledge, Ransom believed, capable of appreciating the sublimity of "actual material." Mark Malvasi explains that, for Ransom, "poetic reality implied the boundless multiplicity and complexity of experience . . . as opposed to the finite quality of scientific calculation" (31). Ransom argued,

The world of art is the actual world which does not bear restriction; or at least is sufficiently defiant of the restrictiveness of science, and offers enough *fullness of content*, to give us the *sense of the actual objects*. A qualitative density, or value-density, such as is unknown to scientific understanding, marks the world of the actual objects. (Criticism 293; emphasis added)

Young and Hindle explain that since poetic knowledge offered "fullness of content" it provided, for Ransom, "the fullest image of the human experience" (15).

It is difficult to overstate the value Ransom accorded to poetic knowledge. He confided to Burke that the human desire "for a sense of what the world-stuff really is" is one of the "most powerful and essential biases we have" (Ransom to Burke, August 8, 1941). He believed that with the appreciation of sublimity came the humility and submissiveness requisite for

religious practice. With the ascendance of scientific knowledge, Ransom argues, societies "proved their collective omnipotence to entirely to their own satisfaction, and in so doing removed the ancient God from their sight" (God 153). By contrast, poetic knowledge "constrained men to admit the folly of their arrogance" (Malvasi 31) and thus Ransom believed that poetic knowledge was "submissive and religious fundamentally" (Ransom to Burke, November 17, 1941), and capable of preserving the sublime and mysterious nature of "God, or Nature, or the Universe—whatever term you prefer" (Ransom, God 30, 33). "Mystery," Ransom reasons, "impresses us ontologically; also religiously. And I think there's no status for art or religion unless we agree it's founded on allowing for [poetic knowledge] and its participation in reality" (Ransom to Burke, January 26, 1941).

When Burke suggests in "Four Master Tropes," then, that "human motivation may, with varying degrees of relevance and reward, be considered in terms of conditioned reflexes, or chemicals, or the class struggles, or the love of God, or neurosis, or pilgrimage, or power, or movements of the planets, or geography, or sun spots, etc." (Grammar 504), Ransom reads this suggestion as a Burkean promotion of a scientific epistemology that would preclude the possibility of religion. To Ransom's mind, understanding human motivation in terms of chemicals, or anything else, cannot account for dimensions of human motivation not chemically explicable and thus Burke's metaphorical (perspectival) theory of knowledge ignores the sublimity of perception and sacrifices a poetic and religious appreciation of "actual material" for a knowledge that can only examine "only one value at a time."

Burke's brief meditation on metaphor, then, is important because it brings to the fore the central point of contestation between the two men. Ransom insisted on the

incommensurability of poetic and scientific knowledge and he mistakenly believed that Burke's penchant for metaphoric perspective precluded him from seeing the "qualitative density" of "actual objects." Ransom, for the record, was appalled; he thought his colleague in the crusade against positivism had surrendered. Burke, it seemed, was ignoring the "actual material" of reality and in so doing abandoning the poetic possibility of religion. Thus, upon reading "Four Master Tropes," Ransom indicted Burke: "I'm afraid that you let yourself imagine that there may be a *concept* which will actually cover the heterogeneity of the natural situation [*percept*]" (Ransom to Burke, November 17, 1941).

Burke, however, had not surrendered. He too distinguished between poetic and scientific knowledge; indeed, in "Four Master Tropes" he argued that only "poetic realism"—rather than "scientific realism"—could account for substantiality. "[T]here can be no 'science' of substance," Burke wrote, for he too recognized that science was too reductive to speak meaningfully of "substance" or "truth" (Grammar 505-6). Burke and Ransom's disagreement, then, turns not on the acceptance or rejection of science per se—both agreed it could not account for the "truth"—but on the fact that Burke lumped<sup>xi</sup> scientists and poets together as users of metaphor. In a relatively late letter, Ransom articulated the essence of the disagreement: "[Y]ou are finding identities, and I am finding distinctions" (Ransom to Burke, August 8, 1941). The identifications that Burke found by transcending Ransom's epistemic binary are further developed in his meditation on metonymy.

### Metonymy

With Ransom's critiques of Burke's metaphor as scenic background, it is possible to understand Burke's conception of metonymy as a lesson for Ransom on the limits of language.

In short, the lesson of metonymy is that language is always already metaphorical and thus poets and scientists can be placed in the same metaphoric bin. If metaphor established a Burkean epistemology (perspectival knowledge), metonymy establishes language as the foundation of that epistemology.

Burke defines metonymy as the conveyance of "some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible." He is again quick to point out that this metonymical process is a device used by both poets and scientists. Both parties, he reasons, could talk about the immaterial experience of "shame" with such material descriptors as the "movement of the eye, a color of the cheek, [or] a certain quality of voice and set of the muscles" (Grammar 506-07).

Yet this is not simply a repetition of the lesson of metaphor. Burke's point is not simply that eye movements or cheek colorations can provide metaphoric perspective on shame; his point is that the nature of language itself demands such a perspective:

Language develops by metaphorical extension, in borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible; then in the course of time, the original corporeal reference is forgotten, and only the incorporeal, metaphorical extension survives." (Grammar 506)

Since both poets and scientists operate by means of language, it is no surprise that Burke suggests that both operate metonymically. And since both operate metonymically Burke believes his terminological approach can transcend Ransom's science/concept vs. poetry/percept binary by placing both in the same terminological camp. He wrote, "I think your formula, 'no concept will cover the percept,' is an excellent way of characterizing your

distinction between the poetic and positivistic. But . . . my terministic or methodological bias promptly goads me to want to convert these words for substance into words for methods" (Burke to Ransom, December 3, 1941). And since both poets and scientists employ the same metaphoric method, Burke urges Ransom to examine his "poetry-positivism pair" from this terministic perspective to see if it doesn't "ease up the strain . . . you must begin with by your approach" (Burke to Ransom, December 3, 1941).

Although Burke's approach linguistically transcended the poetry vs. science binary, it did not equate the two types of knowledge. Burke carefully distinguishes between poetic and scientific metonymy, reasoning that poetic metonymy provides a "*terminological* reduction whereas the scientific behaviorist offers his reduction as a 'real' reduction" (Grammar 507). Burke's distinction, then, was not in the *content* of the reduction (both poets and scientists can 'reduce' shame to cheek coloration), but in the *knowledge* of the reducer: It is the poet who "*knows . . . that these bodily equivalents are but part of the idiom of expression involved in the act*" (Grammar 507; emphasis changed).

Ransom, however, was not satisfied with Burke's distinction. In his letters, he conceded that both poets and scientists proceed metonymically, but he fervently maintained the distinction between the two realms as well as the incommensurability of the "two knowledges":

I do feel that the kind of reduction offered by the poet is distinguished from the kind of reduction offered by the scientist precisely because the poet's elected part is sort of [an] aspect, it's the most vivid part or the most surprising part (the

part least 'germane' at least), whereas the part offered by the reductionist is the business part, the commonplace part. (Ransom to Burke, January 26, 1941)

Unlike Burke, then, Ransom's distinction between poetic metonymy and scientific metonymy is a distinction of *content*. The poet's "part" is substantively different from the scientist's "part." Building on this substantive distinction, Ransom argues that the two knowledges are functionally incommensurable; poetic knowledge cannot provide "reason, logic, mathematics, all much the same thing," scientific knowledge cannot provide the "contingent" or "mysterious" and thus fails to produce religious humility (Ransom to Burke, January 26, 1941).

At this point, Burke and Ransom's disagreement becomes particularly instructive. Ransom believed that it was the content of the reduction that mattered. The poet reduces by selecting the "most vivid part" and it is precisely the vividness of the part that provides for meaning; knowing "truth" depends on the object selected, or, otherwise put, knowledge is objective. Burke, for his part, refused to consider *only* the distinction between the reduction of the poet and the reduction of the scientist. For him it was also important to note that insofar as both use language both proceed metaphorically; for in metonymy, "'poetry' and 'behaviorism' meet" (Grammar 506). This suggests that meaning springs not only from the divergent particularities of scientific reduction versus poetic reduction, but also from the shared practice of reduction ingredient in language itself.<sup>xii</sup>

It is possible, then, to read Burke's exposition of metonymy in "Four Master Tropes" as an expression of transcendent possibilities of his terminological perspective and an exposition of a linguistic, in addition to an objective, knowledge. Metonymy, for Burke, illustrates the limits of language—since language functions via "metaphorical extension" it must always



reduce, always treat the ineffable in terms of the effable. Considered linguistically, then, poets and scientists were lumped in the same bin; both were confined to the metaphoric limits of metonymical expression. By thus privileging terminology, Burke transcended Ransom's distinction between poets and scientists and suggested that their shared metaphoric approach was just as meaningful as their divergent metaphors. He made this explicit in an undated letter to Ransom:

In brief: scientific symbols, being languages, cannot be expected to lie outside the laws of language and the laws of the relation between the linguistic and the non-linguistic (a relation which, by my interpretation, centers in the fact that the world is a riddle, hence cannot be discussed in a terminology free of inconsistency, a consistent language being possible only to one who was capable of making the world, and thus would doubtless not need a language). (Burke to Ransom, undated)

For Ransom, the complexity of the world demonstrated the necessity for a distinct poetic knowledge. For Burke, the complexity of the world ("the world is a riddle") invited the unifying lens of a terminological perspective—a perspective that could join together the seemingly autonomous knowledges of science and poetry.

### Synecdoche

Synecdoche, Burke told Ransom, is "Trope No. 1," and it seems that Ransom understood, for although he confessed misunderstanding metaphor he professed mastery of Burkean synecdoche (Ransom to Burke, January 4, 1941). Yet it is precisely synecdoche where Burke and Ransom most profoundly split paths. For although Burke argues that synecdoche is

the condition *sin qua non* of Ransom's cherished poetic knowledge, Ransom insists that synecdoche merely distracts from knowledge.

Although Burke's conventional definition of synecdoche (a part for the whole) sounds strikingly similar to metonymy, it functions for him as a corrective to metonymical excess. If metonymy is the reduction from the immaterial experience of shame to the material experience of colored cheeks, synecdoche is the "conversion upwards" by which the poet understands that colored cheeks represent shame.<sup>xiii</sup> Burke writes,

True, every art, in its nature as a medium, reduces a state of consciousness to a 'corresponding' sensory body (so material it can be reproduced, bought, and sold). But the aim of such embodiment is to produce in the observer a corresponding state of consciousness (that is, the artist proceeds from 'mind' to 'body' that his representative reduction may *induce* the audience to proceed from 'body' to 'mind'). (Grammar 509-10; emphasis changed)

This passage indicates why Burkean synecdoche is so important: It is synecdochic conversion upwards that "induces" the audience to overcome the limitations of language. Metonymy limited language by restricting it to "metaphorical extension"; synecdoche overcomes this limitation by inducement. Language still cannot represent shame by strict one-to-one correspondence, but it can induce the audience to understand shame. This is why Burke argues that "synecdochic representation is thus seen to be a necessary ingredient of a *truly realistic* philosophy" (Philosophy 26; emphasis added).

The implication here is that knowledge of "truth," for Burke, is fundamentally rhetorical. Recalling Burke's famous definition of rhetoric—"the use of words by human agents to form

attitudes or to *induce* actions [or attitudes<sup>xiv</sup>] in other human agents"—it becomes clear that rhetoric is synecdochal; it induces audiences (Rhetoric 41; emphasis added). Moreover, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* Burke provides further evidence of synecdoche's alliance with rhetoric by equating synecdoche with symbolism (25), for rhetoric, like synecdoche, is "a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Rhetoric 43). "Four Master Tropes," then, might well be understood as an implicit iteration of what Burke later made explicit: namely, that rhetoric "is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic" (Rhetoric 42). Rhetoric, in other words, is rooted in synecdoche.

For Burke, then, insofar as rhetoric synecdochally induces audiences it is precisely rhetoric that provides the possibility of knowing "truth" and it is rhetoric that allows Burke to answer Ransom's objections. Recalling Ransom's accusation that Burke mistakenly thought metaphoric perspective could represent the "qualitative density" of actual objects, Burke could now respond: "Only because of rhetoric." In other words, metonymy led Burke to agree with Ransom's insistence that "no concept will cover the percept," but synecdoche allowed him to move beyond Ransom's mantra to the realization that although no concept will cover the percept, concepts plus symbolic inducement (rhetoric) could communicate percepts. There is, then, a realm of knowledge not based on platonic representation, but on audience inducement.

In a passage seemingly written specifically for the benefit of Ransom, Burke illustrates the synecdochal ability to account for the heterogeneity of perception:

A tree, for instance, is an infinity of events—and among these our senses abstract certain recordings which 'represent' the tree. 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. (Philosophy 26)

Although this passage from *The Philosophy of Literary Form* doesn't make it clear, "Four Master Tropes" is explicit in its assertion that it is *inducement* which allows synecdoche to "really represent" the tree. These "recordings," abstracted by sensation, are obviously a reduction of the tree-in-the-world, but the poet—in stark contrast with the scientist—cannot confine herself to representation in this "metonymic, one-direction sense" (Grammar 509). It is the poet who understands that the relationship between the recordings and the tree is bilateral: "We might say that representation (synecdoche) stresses a *relationship or connectedness* between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either direction" (Grammar 509). Thus, just as the scientist metonymically reduces trees to recordings, the poet synecdochally induces trees from recordings. For Burke, then, "truly realistic philosophies" and accurate representations of trees depend not on a representation of "what the world-stuff really is" (as for Ransom), but on audience inducement (rhetoric). It is here that Burke is finally willing to distinguish poet from scientist: insofar as the poet is willing to reverse the metonymical currents of the scientist by inducing the whole from the part, the poet is set apart from the scientist by an appreciation of inducement—of rhetoric. Until now, Burke has refused to let Ransom distinguish scientists from poets, for the metonymic nature of language constrains both parties. At this point, however, Burke recognizes that the poet has a rhetorical aptitude that compensates for metonymical reduction with rhetorical inducement.

Despite Ransom's crusade to maintain the relative independence of poetry and science he could not accept Burke's distinction. Ignoring the epistemic problems of relaying percepts

unmediated and retaining a New Critical suspicion of anything associated with rhetoric, he wrote to Burke, "I hate the vulgarity of rhetoric . . . . People are entitled to the plain truth, the plainer the better" (Ransom to Burke, January 26, 1941). Ransom believed that rhetoric was simply ornamentation, and since he subscribed to the objectivity of knowledge—knowledge depends on the quality (vividness, etc.) of the part chosen—it is not surprising that he feared the distraction of ornamentation. Burke, however, held that rhetoric does not hinder knowledge; it is, rather, the very condition of knowledge. Thus he insists that if Ransom does away with rhetoric, he also must give up his beloved poetic knowledge. He writes,

But when you wrote in your letter, anent your dislike of rhetoric, that 'the people are entitled to the plain truth, the plainer the better,' I would think that you are here calling for the kind of statement that we get on an envelope, or in accurate mathematical figures announcing the losses in a combat. I should take this as an instance of the 'semantic' ideal; and as you consider it anti-rhetorical, I should agree with you, only pointing out that, but the same token, it is anti-poetic. (Burke to Ransom, February 7, 1942)

Burke is here arguing that poetry and rhetoric are united in the crusade against the "semantic-scientific-mathematical" alliance (Burke to Ransom, February 7, 1942). Without the synecdochal inducement of rhetoric, Ransom's poetic knowledge would be of a piece with scientific knowledge: inherently constrained to metonymic reduction and unable to account for the "qualitative density" of natural objects.

### Irony

The significance of synecdoche is evident. Burke claimed "to see synecdoches everywhere" and confided to Ransom that it was "Trope No. 1" (Burke to Ransom, August 29, 1939). Moreover, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* he suggests that synecdoche is "the 'basic' figure of speech, and that it occurs in many modes besides that of the formal trope" (26). These repeated assertions of synecdochal prominence beg the question: "Why yet another trope?"

The answer is to be found in the search for a "representative anecdote." Recall that although synecdoche does provide for knowledge of "truth," it does so only by inducing the audience to convert a "representative reduction" upwards to knowledge of "actual material." Burke refers to this reduction as the "anecdote." It is essential that the anecdote be "representative," for although any anecdote provides knowledge of reality (via rhetorical inducement), it "*reveals only such reality as is capable of being revealed by this particular kind of terminology*" (Grammar 313). The representational capacity of the anecdote is thus critical: "A terminology of conceptual analysis, if it is not to lead to misrepresentation, must be constructed in conformity with a *representative anecdote* (Grammar 510; emphasis changed). Crable underscores the importance of representation; without it, he writes, "we have simplified our subject, forced it to fit an inadequate terminology—and, in the process, left out vital aspects of our subject that do not fit into our anecdote" ("Perspective" 325). The problem, Burke wrote Ransom, is that no anecdote can be completely representative, no terminology adequate: "[T]he world is a riddle, hence cannot be discussed in a terminology free of inconsistency." Similarly, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* he writes,

Now, I don't see how you can possibly explain the complex in terms of the simple without having your very success used as a charge against you. When you

get through, all that your opponent need say is: 'But you have explained the complex in terms of the simple—and the simple is precisely what the complex is not.'" (262)

Burke has reached an impasse. Knowledge depends on rhetorical inducement from representative anecdotes, but every anecdote is insufficient, "every simplification is an oversimplification" (*Philosophy* 262). It is the fourth trope, irony, which leads Burke beyond the impasse.

"Irony arises," Burke claims, "when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a *development* which uses all the terms." This "interaction of terms upon one another" produces a "resultant certainty" by at once considering "all voices, or personalities, or positions" and their interaction. Burke posits irony against relativism; relativism understands everything "in but one set of terms" while irony understands everything by all available sets of terms, from all available anecdotes.<sup>xv</sup> Thus, by way of dialectical irony one can achieve a "resultant certainty . . . that requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but *contributory*." Irony then, for Burke, is the "perspective of perspectives" in that it provides "certainty" by holding conflicting perspectives in productive tension (Burke, *Grammar* 512-13).

The most representative anecdote, then, will be the "reduction that recognizes itself as a symbolization" (Crabbe, "Perspective" 327). It will, in other words, be the anecdote that is conspicuously anecdotal, partial, and incomplete—the anecdote that is conspicuously rhetorical, that recognizes itself as inducement. The anecdote itself, then, is rhetorical. Crabbe hints at this when he suggests that the representative anecdote is "but a *story* one tells about a

subject matter" ("Perspective" 327). Burke himself suggests this when he argues that the representative anecdote "must have a strongly linguistic bias" (Grammar 59). Burke's epistemology is thus twice rhetorical; knowledge of "truth" depends on rhetorical inducement from a rhetorical anecdote. As such, the anecdote prompts the audience not only to induce knowledge from a reduction, but also to seek further reductions from which they might induce further knowledge.

It is not surprising then that the section on irony is the only section that does not distinguish between "poetic realism" and "scientific realism." The distinction is now moot; knowledge rhetorically induced from a representative anecdote will ironically contain both of Ransom's two knowledges. Burke thus writes to Ransom, "Maybe there are not two kinds of knowledge" (Burke to Ransom, February 7, 1941). For knowledge, Burke has demonstrated, is rhetorically capable of understanding the qualitative density of Ransom's poetic knowledge, but only insofar as it accounts for all reductions: poetic, scientific, etc., ad infinitum. There is, in other words, no such thing as Ransom's strictly poetic knowledge; knowledge of "truth" springs from the simultaneous appreciation of both poetic and scientific knowledges. To accentuate the point, Burke concludes "Four Master Tropes" by demonstrating that knowledge rhetorically induced from an ironic anecdote functions both as Ransom's poetic and scientific knowledge. Like his poetic knowledge it requires humility; like his scientific knowledge it enables prediction.

Wess notes that irony's "resultant certainty" is not Rorty's "mirror of nature" —Burke's certainty makes no claims to Platonic representation. Ironic "certainty" is constantly "qualified" by competing perspectives (Rhetoric 118). Wayne Booth points out that this constant qualification prevents any single metaphor from claiming a privileged (non-dialectical)



perspective. Irony "is a way of doing justice to many critical voices without letting any of them achieve its destructive potential" (115). The realization that one's own perspective cannot claim privileged authority points to the humility that must always attend rhetorical knowledge induced from an ironic anecdote. Burke's meditation on irony, then, demonstrates that his rhetorical knowledge, like Ransom's poetic knowledge, provides for humility, albeit via a different path. It is not Ransom's "ontological humility"—the humility that results from the sublimity of natural object and the inability of the concept to cover the percept; it is what we might call "pluralistic humility"—the submissive recognition of limitless perceptions. Burke writes that the ironist can "*never be superior*" to even the most foolish of characters, for "he must realize that he also *needs this particular foolish character as one of the necessary modifiers*" (Grammar 515). Moreover, at one point Burke explicitly equates irony with humility:

True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him. (Grammar 514)

Could there be a more humbling realization than that one is consubstantial with one's enemy, or that one is indebted to one's enemy? Burke's ironically qualified rhetorical knowledge thus functions similarly to Ransom's poetic knowledge. It is fundamentally submissive and thereby preserves the sense of mystery that Ransom held to be at the root of religion.

It seems that Burke too recognized the religious value of ironic humility. He reasoned that, insofar as the ironist can never disregard "foolish characters," irony provides "a kind of 'technical equivalent for the doctrine of original sin'" (Grammar 115). Fair enough. Yet it also

seems that irony, for Burke, furnishes the "technical equivalent" for the doctrine of grace. The humility of one ironist, Sir Isaac Newton, provides an example. Burke writes:

With Newton . . . there was no 'superiority' in his exclamation as he observed the criminal. He did not mean that that man was a criminal but he, Newton, thank God, was not; he meant that *he too was a criminal, but that the other man was going to prison for him*. Here was the true irony-and-humility, since Newton was simultaneously both outside the criminal and within him. (Grammar 515)

Is not Newton the archetypal Christian sinner "saved" by the punishment of another?

The religious humility here is obvious. The Burkean irony is that Newton was both guilty and free, criminal and innocent. And the point is that Burke's rhetorical knowledge is just as capable of providing for religion as Ransom's poetic knowledge.

Irony, however, not only acts poetically (in Ransom's sense, inducing humility and religion), it also acts scientifically (it has predictive ability). Burke writes, "There is a level of generalization at which predictions about 'inevitable' developments in history are quite justified." It is irony that enables such predictions, for insofar as irony demands a "fundamental kinship with the enemy," it enables a unique knowledge of the other. The other quite literally becomes equated with the self; Burke writes that one does not merely stand outside the other "as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him." Since irony employs such a fundamental kinship with ones opposite (in a sense literal enough that Newton *is* the criminal), Burke reasons that irony allows one to predict that "developments that led to the rise will . . . 'inevitably' lead to the fall"—for the self and the other, the rise and the fall, are, for Burke, consubstantial (Grammar 517). Crable explains; since rhetorical knowledge begins with

an anecdote suited to reveal a particular perspective on reality, the knowledge provided will always be "predetermined" by the anecdote chosen (321). Burke writes, "Thus the anecdote is in a sense a *summation*, containing implicitly what the system that it is developed from contains explicitly" (Grammar 60). Burke's rhetorical knowledge then, in a manner not dissimilar to Ransom's scientific knowledge, provides for prediction.

Ransom's persistence notwithstanding, there was no longer reason to consider poetry a unique kind of knowledge; irony demonstrated that knowledge rhetorically induced from an ironic anecdote could simultaneously account for the unique contributions of Ransom's poetic and scientific knowledges.

### Conclusion

In *A Grammar of Motives* Burke concludes that the New Critical defense of poetry as a unique kind of knowledge was but "a lame attempt to pit art against science as a 'truer kind of truth'" (226). In this passage, Wess claims, Burke is directing our attention toward "the reality of rhetoric" (Rhetoric 115). Indeed, it is the lesson of "Four Master Tropes" that knowledge of the "truth" is itself unattainable without rhetoric, for Burke teaches us that rhetoric is, in part, an inducement to knowledge. Returning to Burke's arboreal example: he argues that our reductive representations "*do really* represent the tree" (Philosophy 26). In other words, we can indeed think truthfully about the qualitative density that is the tree-in-the-world, but we can do so only insofar as we think rhetorically. For Burkean synecdoche suggests that "truth" is rhetorically induced from metonymic reductions, and Burkean irony suggests that these reductions must themselves be recognized as rhetorical. When these two conditions are met

we have, in rhetoric, a "truly realistic philosophy" capable of attaining "truth." We have then, with Burke, an epistemology that takes rhetoric seriously, that holds rhetoric as an essential condition of knowledge. This rhetorical knowledge is not, Wess points out, the "dream at the heart of philosophy," a phrase Wess borrows from Rorty to emphasize that Burke's rhetorical knowledge is not, in Rorty's words, a knowledge that is "intrinsically and self-evidently final" (qtd. in *Rhetoric* 119). Burke's knowledge is just the opposite; to the extent that it approaches "truth," it is intrinsically and self-evidently fragmentary, partial, and incomplete. As Booth explains, the Burkean road to certainty involves "deliberate interference with perfection by enforcing on every terministic screen an ironic reminder of other truths according to which it should be discounted" (114). The conspicuous incompleteness, however, always induces further perspectives and thus ensures that Burke's rhetorical knowledge is never static, but always approaching "truth" from divergent and ever-increasing perspectives.

I wish, then, to modify Wess's suggestion that "Four Master Tropes" provides the "best vantage point" to view Burke's epistemological development by suggesting that the essay reveals Burke's epistemological commitments most clearly when it is contextualized against Burke's correspondence with Ransom. So understood, the intersections of rhetoric and epistemology are illuminated so that it is possible to see, with greater clarity, Burke's contribution to rhetorical studies. The seventeen letters exchanged between the two men, and their enduring conversation about tropes, knowledge, and rhetoric provide a central vantage point by which we may see the significance of each trope and thereby better understand Burke's rhetorical epistemology and his ever-rereadable essay, "Four Master Tropes."

In this particular rereading, metaphor discloses the perspectivism at the heart of a Burkean epistemology, metonymy establishes its linguistic foundations, and synecdoche and irony rhetoricize knowledge. A Burkean epistemology, then, is constrained by the limits of language, but empowered by the symbolism of rhetoric. This grammatical arrival at rhetoric might well explain why Burke republished the essay at the end of his *Grammar*—insofar as Burke starts with grammar (tropes) and ends with rhetoric, the essay provides an appendicized segue from *A Grammar of Motives* to *A Rhetoric of Motives*.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> In a letter to Cleanth Brooks Burke suggests that "Four Master Tropes" "completes the speculations on metaphor in P&C" (Burke to Brooks, December 21, 1939).

<sup>ii</sup> Daniel Chandler argues that although Giambattista Vico (1668-1774) is usually credited as the first to identify metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony as "the four basic tropes," the distinction is evident earlier in the *Rhetorica* of Peter Ramus (1515-1572) (n.p.).

<sup>iii</sup> Diverse readings of "Four Master Tropes" abound. Mary E. Stuckey and Frederick J. Antczak explain Burkean "identification" with recourse to "Four Master Tropes." John E. Fritch and Karla K. Leeper use "Four Master Tropes" as a foundation for their theory of argumentation. Cary Nelson uses it to explain poststructural thought, Edward Schiappa employs it as an argument for social constructionism, Bryan Crable uses it to ground the pentad ("Perspective"), and Robert Wess explores epistemology and ontology through the lens of "Four Master Tropes" ("Pentadic").

<sup>iv</sup> If scholars needed further justification for their epistemic readings of Burke, one would only have to point to the continuing debate among Burkean scholars regarding the place of epistemology in Burke's work. Bryan Crable records that a conversation at the 1982 convention of the Eastern Communication Association involving Burke, Bernard Brock, Herbert Simons, and Parke G. Burgess started a discussion about Burkean epistemology that has not yet subsided. Crable's 2000 article in *Communication Quarterly* is the latest contribution to this remarkably enduring debate. Moreover, besides the scholars mentioned in my text, Lynn Worsham, Joseph R. Gusfield, and John Fritch and Karla K. Leeper also read "Four Master Tropes" as an epistemic statement.

<sup>v</sup> The definitive biography of Ransom is written by Thomas Daniel Young. Mark Malvasi provides a thorough critical reading of Ransom's work from the twenties through the forties. For the complete story of Ransom's role in the transformation of the Fugitives to the Agrarians, see Conkin 1-31.

<sup>vi</sup> The first issue of the *Southern Review* contained Ransom's "The Tense of Poetry" and Burke's "Antony in Behalf of the Play."

<sup>vii</sup> Ransom held the editorship of the *Kenyon Review* for twenty years. Besides being a primary vehicle for the dispersion of New Critical principles, the *Kenyon Review* published some of Burke's most important essays

including "Four Master Tropes," "Calling of the Tune," "The Temporizing of Essence," and "On Catharsis, or Resolution, with a Postscript."

<sup>viii</sup> As early as August 29, 1939 Burke tells Ransom about synecdoche "which I have come to believe is Trope No. 1. And once I had decided that there are many aspects of synecdoche not usually so called, with Platonizing efficiency I began to see synecdoches everywhere."

<sup>ix</sup> In their correspondence Burke and Ransom frequently use underlining and italics to emphasize certain points. Unless noted in the text, all emphasis hereafter is original.

<sup>x</sup> Ransom confided to Burke: "We have two knowledges and they can never be squared with each other" (Ransom to Burke, November 17, 1941).

<sup>xi</sup> "Lumping" is Wayne Booth's term for Kenneth Burke's intellectual habit of transcending binaries (68-73).

<sup>xii</sup> Burke is decidedly not arguing that the particularities of the reduction do not matter at all, but he is emphasizing that the shared practice of reduction as such also matters. See Bryan Crable's "Perspective on Perspectives" for an excellent account of why the particularities of reduction matter. See also Kenneth Burke's meditations on the "representative anecdote" (Grammar 59-61, 510-517) and "Recalitrance" (Permanence 255- 261).

<sup>xiii</sup> For Burke's meditations on "conversion upwards," see *Permanence and Change* 133-147 and *The Rhetoric of Religion* 8-9.

<sup>xiv</sup> Burke later explicitly clarifies that rhetoric functions not simply as an inducement to action, but also an inducement to an attitude (*Rhetoric* 42).

<sup>xv</sup> Schiappa insightfully notes that this is an inversion of the standard definition of "relativism."

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