

For Julie

Promotor      Prof. dr. Jurgen Pieters  
                    Vakgroep Letterkunde

Decaan          Prof. dr. Marc Boone  
Rector          Prof. dr. Anne De Paepe





Faculteit Letteren & Wijsbegeerte

Dries Vrijders

# *A Subtler Diplomacy*

*Kenneth Burke and the New Criticism*

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van  
Doctor in de letterkunde

2013



# Acknowledgements

*“even the best of writings are but a reminiscence of what we know” (Plato, Phaedrus)*

In the process that led to the completion of this volume, I’ve known a great deal of love, support and camaraderie from a great deal of people. One incurs many debts while writing, so many that it seems impossible to repay them all. These few paragraphs are just a start at what will probably take me many years.

First of all, I am deeply indebted to my promotor, Jürgen Pieters for encouraging me (which was the same as allowing me) to be the somewhat undisciplined, wide-ranging Burke researcher that I was, and for trusting in me before I had proven myself deserving. And even more than for helping me start this project, I want to thank him for enabling me to finish it, after I had been forced to abandon it for some time.

Second, I want to thank my colleagues, both distant and close, those who offered guidance and advice during this project, those with whom I worked and wrote, organized conferences, those with whom I travelled, and especially those whom I shared office 005 with. All of you became friends, some even close friends – especially you, Lise, mentor, dancing partner and companion in some of my darkest hours.

Burke would certainly concur that one is always deeply indebted to one’s family. My parents, especially, deserve to be mentioned here. Even though this project is a distant world for them, it is one that could not have been made without their support. And then there is the family we make ourselves: all those friends that provided hands, food and time – you most of all, Stefaan, best man.

Femke, you departed before I could properly thank you for all that you have meant to me, but my gratitude for those years we shared is in every page of this volume. But my final words of thanks are for you, Julie. Stay a while. We’ll have a good time.



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1      Setting the Scene: Burke Studies and Burke as Literary Critic .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1    “Under The Sign of the Quietus” .....	6
1.2    The First Stage: Burke’s Own Silence.....	12
1.3    The Second Stage: William Rueckert and Greig Henderson on ‘Dramatism’ and ‘Symbolic Action’ .....	17
1.4    The Third Stage: the ‘Strange’ Burke, the Return to History, and Rhetorical Hermeneutics .....	22
<b>Chapter 2      Methodology: Dramatic Language, Representative Anecdotes, and                     the Hermeneutic Conversation .....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.1    Burke and General Semantics .....	27
2.2    Semantic Observation vs. Poetic Drama.....	32
2.3    Metaphor, Metonymy and Synecdoche: “Representative Anecdotes” and the Problem of Deflection.....	36
2.4    Irony, Comedy and the Parlor Conversation .....	43
2.5    Reading Criticism as Rhetoric: some Reflections .....	47
<b>Chapter 3      Reading ‘Attitude:’ Burke and I.A. Richards.....</b>	<b>53</b>
3.1    I.A. Richards, Coleridge and the New Criticism.....	54
3.2 <i>The Meaning of Meaning, Counter-Statement</i> and Reader Psychology.....	59
3.3    Attitude as Contemplation .....	66
3.4    Attitude as Ideological Commitment .....	71
3.5    “Dream,” “Prayer,” “Chart” – ‘Attitude’ as a Method of Reading .....	80
<b>Chapter 4      The ‘Drama’ of the Text: Burke, Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks .....</b>	<b>89</b>
4.1    ‘New’ Critics and ‘Old’ Historians .....	90
4.2    The Case Against Romanticism.....	96
4.3    Brooks’ New History and the Text as Drama .....	101
4.4    The Irony of ‘Paradox’ and the Dialectics of ‘Substance’ .....	107
4.5    Pentadic and Paradoxical Drama.....	114
<b>Chapter 5      Finding ‘Identity’ – Burke and Empson.....</b>	<b>121</b>
5.1    An ‘Ambiguous’ Relation .....	123

5.2	Pastoral and the Rhetoric of Identification .....	129
5.3	Complex Words: Empsonian Rationality vs. Burkean Mysticism.....	135
5.4	<i>Othello</i> : Tragic Catharsis and the Satire of the Self .....	141
5.5	“Pure Persuasion” and the Possibility of a Beyond .....	147
<b>Conclusion: <i>Eye-Crossing</i> Burkean Criticism .....</b>		<b>153</b>
	“We should be philologists all:” Burke’s Critical Drama.....	155
	“Finding himself impelled to build a poem:” Burke’s Existential Drama .....	161
<b>Bibliography.....</b>		<b>185</b>



# Preface

Burke's relation with the main currents of scholarship has always been what I, in the title of this dissertation, have called a "subtle diplomacy." Burke himself was always wary of subscribing to one or other 'school' or 'movement' of thinking, preferring instead to snatch a few terms or concepts to use for his own purposes, publish a few papers or teach a few classes before disappearing again into the dense fog of his own thinking. Scholarship, in turn, adopted much the same relation to Burke, borrowing ideas or insightful fragments without bothering to identify itself as 'Burkean.' For a long time, this is how Burke existed, in fragments and footnotes, diplomatically acknowledged but subtly tucked away, his name a whisper but rarely a shout in those texts that shaped the common conscious of today's humanities.

The main reason for this remarkable diplomatic discretion, I believe, is that Burke's thinking is subtle in more than one way. On the one hand, having a marvelous eye for the many shades of meaning that one word can take, Burke's writing sometimes acquires such a subtle microscopic precision that is lost on all but the most patient and careful readers (and even then). On the other hand, as a voracious reader and the kind of thinker whose mind paints in broad strokes rather than fine points, Burke forces his reader to be subtle in the scope of his discernments as well. That Burke is often exceedingly precise does not make his texts exceedingly transparent; quite the contrary, Burke clearly wanted his readers to be active, engaged and willing to make explicit connections or implications he did not bother to pursue himself.

Yet now, with Burke over the last two decades having moved closer to the center of the academic stage, the subtleties of our diplomatic encounters only increase. Now that we can oversee the totality of Burke's intellectual production during his six-decade career and recognize the parallels between many of Burke's ideas and our own, building diplomatic ties with Burke seems – paradoxically – to become even harder. As increasingly more scholars set themselves to documenting, contextualizing, elucidating, appropriating and applying Burke's ideas, they often seem to become more subtle – more clever and intricate, but also more complex and opaque at the same time. Before I go on to my introduction in order to describe the subtle diplomatic ways in which this

dissertation seeks to inscribe itself into this rapidly expanding field of Burke studies, I want to briefly elucidate some of the editorial decisions I have made.

First, in light of the various monikers that have been given to Burke, and keeping in mind that (as Burke never tires of pointing out) naming something also entails an implicit program, my calling Burke a ‘critic’ deserves some comment. I have chosen this predicate because, not only is it the term which Burke uses most consistently to refer to himself and his work, I believe it best captures the style and purpose of much of his writing. Burke translates his dialectical reasoning into a speculative way of writing that is characterized by digression, disorderly paths of reasoning, and an absence of philosophical completeness that challenge both occasional and professional readers of Burke. Rather than seeing it as the source of exasperation it has been for some major Burke scholars, I believe that the vexing particularities of Burke’s style must be understood as part of a ‘critical’ attitude – that is, a deliberate attempt to maintain a ‘plural’ kind of thinking that operates through inclusion and distrusts finite modes of reading. ‘Critic’ is also the term that best describes the Burke I intend to study here – a reader in a community of readers – but is, at the same time, sufficiently open to include other intellectual concerns that border on Burke’s role as a reader.

Second, with regard to the references made in this volume, I have opted wherever possible to use readily available editions or collections of the books and essays that I discuss, rather than original editions or prints. Between keeping closely to the historicizing approach that this volume takes and the ambition it embodies to make my own dialogue with Burke’s thinking as open and accessible as possible, I have chosen the latter. I have maintained this principle also in the versions of Burke’s books that I use: as Burke’s major books remain available through (digital) reprints of the University of California Press editions, I’ve taken these readily accessible volumes as a reference. Third, I have adopted the (by now common) practice to refer to Burke’s major works by using the letter abbreviations that have by now become standard in most volumes that discuss Burke’s thinking. A list of these abbreviations can be found below, and these books will not be mentioned in the bibliography. Whenever I discuss individual essays or texts outside these main books, references follow the regular in-text pattern I maintain in this dissertation. These works can be found in the bibliography at the back.

## List of Abbreviations

CS	<i>Counter-Statement</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1986). Original edition by Harcourt, Brace & CO, NY (1931).
P&C	<i>Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1984). Original edition by The New Republic Dollar Series, NY (1935).
ATH	<i>Attitudes toward History</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1984). Original edition by The New Republic Dollar Series, NY (1937) - 2 vols.
PLF	<i>The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1984). Original edition by Louisiana State University Press, USA (1941).
GM	<i>A Grammar of Motives</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1945).
RM	<i>A Rhetoric of Motives</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1950).
RR	<i>The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1961).
LASA	<i>Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press (1966).



# Introduction

In the foreword to his 2007 *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives*, William Rueckert declares that his purpose in writing this book is “to reclaim a little of Burke for literary criticism” (xxi). Such reclamation efforts are necessary, Rueckert says, because

Burke has sort of been forgotten as a literary critic as scholars have become absorbed in working out dramatism or logology or Burke’s comic perspective or his rhetoric and his language theory and the place of all this in the whole movement toward explaining everything in terms of language that has prevailed in recent years. (2007, xx)

As Burke’s pupil and “dean of Burke studies,” (Rountree 2007) Rueckert’s voice is one to be reckoned with, especially when it makes such a sweeping and remarkable claim. After all, it is hard to believe that Burke – whose name longtime seemed glued to the epithet ‘literary critic’ – had been “sort of been forgotten” as one. This supposed forgetting seems all the more curious because recent decades have witnessed a surge of interest in Burke. Spurred in no small part by the effort of collecting and disclosing all of Burke’s materials that followed after his death in 1993, the last two decades have resulted in a flurry of publications that made his presence in the academy (and beyond) more imposing and more secure than it has ever been before.

As Bryan Crable noted in his 2003 article on Burke’s “continued relevance,” two major trends characterize this rekindled interest in Burke. One substantial branch of scholars has taken to the historical record, adding in various ways to a biographical portrait of Burke within the intellectual and cultural setting of his time. Important publications in this field include Rueckert’s *Encounters with Kenneth Burke* (1994), Jack Selzer’s books on Burke’s relations with modernism (1996) and (with Ann George) with the American left (2007), Elizabeth Weiser’s book on Burke’s thinking within the context of World War II (2008), and the various collections of Burke’s correspondence (e.g. Jay 1998, Rueckert 2003). Another group of scholars has taken the opposite direction, seeking to lift Burke beyond the confines of his own intellectual tradition and terms in order to “[promote] the relevance of Burke’s texts for the study of contemporary

rhetoric and social change” (Crible 2003, 118). Bernard L. Brock’s essays collections on Burke and contemporary European thought (1995) and on Burke’s relevance to the 21st century (1999) and Robert Wess’ *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism* (1996) are prime examples of this effort.

Though the recent historicist and expansionist turns have by now well established Burke’s name within the academic pedigree as a founder of the New Rhetoric, an ancestor to Ecocriticism and an important thinker in the fields of Sociology and Culture Studies, the importance of Burke’s achievements in the field of literary studies seems less securely established. Scanning the long list of publications about Burke which the last two decades of heightened interest in Burke’s work have yielded, books that deal specifically with Burke’s literary criticism are indeed, as Rueckert points out, conspicuously absent. Several volumes have been published that gather previously hard-to-find or unavailable critical materials, like Newstok’s collection of Burke’s writings on Shakespeare (2007), Rueckert’s reconstruction of *A Symbolic of Motives* (2007), or Rivers and Weber’s impressive edition of Burke’s literary reviews (2010); yet while all these books attest of Burke’s preoccupation with matters of literature and their continued centrality to his thinking, they serve only to increase, rather than alleviate, the need for a thorough reevaluation of Burke’s criticism that takes the recent turns of Burke scholarship into account.

My dissertation attempts to fill this hiatus by combining a thematic and conceptual of Burke’s literary theory – the subject of such studies as Rueckert’s *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (1982) and Greig Henderson’s *Kenneth Burke: Literature and Language as Symbolic Action* (1988) – with the historical (that is, the material, social and ideological) genetics of Burke’s thinking that has been reconstructed in such recent publications as Selzer (1996), George and Selzer (2007) and Weiser (2008). My objective is to offer a rhetoricized reading of Burke’s “dramatist” ideas on the purpose of literature, and the methods he develops for the practical analysis of literary texts, by tracing them in relation to the ideas and methods which, parallel to Burke, were expounded and developed by the New Critics. Performing such a ‘rhetoricized’ reading, I will argue, provides, first, a better understanding of how Burke’s thoughts on literature developed within a specific historical and intellectual setting. Second, by showing how Burke interacted with a foundational movement in the history of literary theory, I hope to make clear how Burke’s thinking might be ‘reclaimed’ for literary criticism. And third, by focusing specifically on how Burke shaped and altered the interpretive methodologies of his dramatist meta-method in light of New Critical readings of canonical literary texts, I hope to show what results such a reclamation of Burkean methodologies for the analysis of literature may yield.

The claim I make, then, is that a rhetorical history that considers how time-bound issues and their historical contexts determined Burke’s literary criticism may result in a more profound understanding of Burke’s concepts and methods – one that, I am

convinced, can not only resensitize us to the role of literary criticism in Burke's thinking, as Rueckert would want it to, but can also meet Crable's requirement of showing the continued relevance of Burke to contemporary scholarship. I will elaborate this claim in the first two chapters of this dissertation, using the first to situate my own project inside the field of Burke studies today. Discussing briefly how Burke himself and the existing record his work have tended to obscure the importance of literary criticism to Burke, I will show that, on the one hand, older thematic analyses of Burke's thinking tend to discourage historicizing, seeking to recover Burke's "system" from what they believe to be the problematic immediacy of its context. Vice versa, what historicist onsets towards a reevaluation of Burke's literary theories exist are often marred by the breadth of their scope and the compensatory limitations of their period focus, causing them to lose track of the continuities that mark the growth of Burke's mind. To maintain one of either foci, I will argue, results in a loss of depth vision that prevents a full awareness of the dimensionality of Burke's thinking on literature.

Having argued that an overly singular thematic or historicist vision causes us to be blind to, respectively, either the rhetorical power of Burke's ideas as part of time-bound and specific debates, or the structural and thematic continuities that characterizes his interventions, I will use the second chapter to stake out a methodology through which the limitations of either approach may be overcome. Exploring Burke's ideas on the role of language in representation and their influence on Burke's dramatist meta-method, I will try and establish a way of moving from the description of a historically grounded exchange between critics to a comparative study of the analytical models they apply to literary texts. Appropriating Burke's concepts of the "representative anecdote" and the "parlor conversation" to this end, I will detail the practical implications of framing literary theory as an ongoing dialogue. This, I will do by situating my methodology as a variant of what Steven Mailloux has called "rhetorical hermeneutics" – that is "[using] rhetoric to practice theory by doing history" (Mailloux 1989, ix).

Together, the first two chapters provide the contextual and methodological background to the thematic histories that I will work out in chapters 3, 4 and 5. These parallel histories are construed in parallel ways: building from a historical anecdote that forms part of a dialogue between Burke and a New Critic (or New Critics) – I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate, and William Empson – each chapter zooms in on an analytical concept ('Attitude,' 'Drama' and 'Identity,' respectively) that is shared between Burke and these New Critics. By showing how these concepts inform their respective theories of literature and structure the interpretive acts which these critics perform on literary texts, I will trace the convergences and divergences that exist between Burkean dramatism and the various types of New Critical formalism. Then, I will demonstrate how these convergences and divergences come together in the analyses of particular literary texts. This will not only allow me to demonstrate the practical applicability of Burke's ideas on such divergent works of literature as Samuel

Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and William Shakespeare's *Othello*; it will also enable me to show how these texts and their authors become absorbed or rejected in the service of the debates between Burke and the New Critics themselves, and/or in their confrontations with other schools of criticism.

My choice of these critics and texts is informed by both historical and practical considerations. Historically, the literary texts that I have focused on are the ones that René Wellek, in his history of modern American Criticism, identified as places of friction between Burke and the New Critics – something that I will discuss in more detail in the first chapter. As such places of friction, my hypothesis was that these would provide suitable loci to compare Burkean and New Critical readings. As for practical considerations, I have opted to select critics who allowed me to cover the three main actors in the reading process. Richards' preoccupation with readerly response, Brooks and Tate's claims for a nearly absolute textual autonomy, and Empson's concern with the role of the author within the semiconscious ideological processes of language provided me with coordinates against which Burke's own ideas about the role of reader, text and author can be determined.

My main period of focus is a relatively short one: the decade that passed between the publication of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), over the publication of *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) until *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950). Loosely adhering to a progressive chronology in order to trace Burke's altering methodologies for reading (the 'dream/prayer/chart'-triad in the *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 'pentadic analysis' in *A Grammar of Motives*, and 'socioanagogic' reading in *A Rhetoric of Motives*), I will tie each of these methodologies to a problem raised by one of Burke's critic-conversants. I am aware that taking this rather narrow focus forces me to exclude several decades of Burke's intellectual development. Burke's ideas from the 1930s will, however, be covered in some length in the chapter on Richards. As to Burke's "logological" phase that began with the publication of *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), I felt that leaving this wholly language-focused approach, where Burke becomes mainly concerned with "words about words" (RR vi), had less bearing on my goal of reclaiming Burke for literary criticism.

This goal, I will argue in the conclusive chapter of this dissertation, forces us to consider not just Burke's analytical methodology, but also his position toward criticism as an organized 'theoretical' pursuit and the purpose that Burke believes literary texts can serve in the life of man as a "symbol-using animal." Using one of Burke's late poems, I will try and address these issues while trying to assemble, from the various rhetorical positions taken in his conversation with the New Criticism, a summational vision on what Burke believes it means to be a literary critic.



# Chapter 1    Setting the Scene: Burke Studies and Burke as Literary Critic

*What could be a more spontaneous subject for the artist than the matter of his maladjustments? Is not every man concerned primarily with his 'problems'?*  
(Kenneth Burke)

In the autumn of 1957, the *Kenyon Review* published Kenneth Burke's *The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell*. Its author was a frequent contributor to the *Kenyon Review*: the literary periodical regularly carried book reviews by his hand, as well as essays on literature and social theory. *The Anaesthetic Revelation* was, however, the first ever piece of literary fiction that Burke published in the periodical. To the *Review*'s subscribers, who were accustomed to the critic and philosopher, this sudden appearance as a creative artist must have come as a surprise. A few of them may have recalled the author's youthful attempts to make a name for himself as a writer of fiction: at age twenty, and after two lacklustre stints at university (a semester at Ohio State, and a year at Columbia), Burke dropped out and settled in New York's Greenwich Village - a hotbed of modernist experiment - in 1917. He spent the 1920s earning an uncertain living as a translator, copywriter and editor while contributing poems and short stories to various little magazines of the American avant-garde. What modest acclaim he got for these early attempts at becoming recognized as a serious author of fiction, however, was soon eclipsed by the reputation which Burke's critical sensibilities were earning him. Following the success of *Counter-Statement* (1931), his first collection of critical essays on literature, and in light of the fact that his first complete novel *Towards a Better Life* (1932)

failed to produce a definite breakthrough, Burke became convinced that, in his mind, the “critical outweighs the creative” (letter to Malcom Cowley, in: Jay 1988, 6).<sup>1</sup>

After this, he turned his thoughts definitively toward critical theory, and his style toward analytical prose, a switch that proved to be a major success: by the time *The Anaesthetic Revelation* was published, Burke had become an established critic who could look back on a long career and an impressive number of publications. With six major books spanning a variety of topics, a back catalogue of essays in major publications and countless reviews to his name, Burke had grown, during the 1930s and ‘40s, to be a much-respected voice in American criticism. Establishing himself on his farm in rural New Jersey, he was able to sustain himself as a independent critic, a much sought-after lecturer and a teacher at various colleges, most notably at Bennington. But while he was known to write occasional poems (a collection of which, his *Book of Moments*, had come out in 1955), by 1957 his ambitions as an author of fiction seemed to have run dry for over a quarter of a century.

So why did the literary reappear so suddenly and forcefully as a pursuit of Burke’s? And why did this curious piece of fiction writing appear at this precise moment? As I will argue in this introductory chapter, which I will use to situate the approach and scope of my dissertation within the current field of Burke scholarship, the short story functions as a not-so-covered response to an attempt to disown Burke as a literary critic. Burke described *The Anaesthetic Revelation* “an autobiographical story detailing some experiences and thoughts born of a hospital” (1972, 15). However, as I read it, this self-reflective dimension is incorporated in a more encompassing and powerful defense of the literary as a mode of expression and an intellectual pursuit of Burke’s at a moment when his allegiance with literary criticism was being challenged by New Critics like Murray Krieger and René Wellek.

## 1.1 “Under The Sign of the Quietus”

On the face of it, what triggered Burke’s unexpected return to fiction was a minor biographic event that took place about a year before. While undergoing minor surgery to get a hernia fixed, the anaesthetic, administered to bring Burke into a state of complete sedation, failed. Strapped on the surgeon’s table, he remained conscious

---

<sup>1</sup> Burke would later write to Cowley that “[t]he inability of critics to see what was going on [in *Towards a Better Life*] was a godsend to me as a critic” (Letter to Malcolm Cowley, in: Jay 1988, 354)

throughout the entire procedure, able to catch snatches of what was going on around him but unable to indicate his distress by either moving or speaking. This same, less than enviable position, “lying with distended bowels, a loathsome tube inserted through one nostril into his stomach” (342) is where we find Herone Lidell, the protagonist of *The Anaesthetic Revelation*. The experience of having his mind reduced to a powerless bystander while his body yields to the doctor’s instruments leaves Herone in a profound state of shock. Struggling to come to terms with the helpless physicality of existence and with his own act of bodily surrender to the machinations of the medicinal profession, the writer and self-described “Word-man” Herone tries to share his thoughts with his fellow patients. These attempts at conversation are, however, met with indifference, or cut short by vitriolic remarks of the hospital staff who feel that “writers talk too much” (2005, 343). A disillusioned Herone is abandoned to his own thoughts: “now at a time when Herone felt a great desire to verbalize about the bewilderingments of anaesthesia, and would gladly have enlisted the whole hospital in the task of speculating about his symptoms in particular, and about the symptoms of the anaesthetized in general, he found himself abruptly put Under the Sign of the Quietus” (2005, 346).

But even though being put Under the Sign of the Quietus leaves the ‘Little Hero’ feeling uneasy and ashamed, it fails to put a stop to the flow of thoughts that Herone succumbs to: while the fog of anaesthesia obfuscates his immediate surroundings, the hidden meanings of the gestures and words with which he is surrounded come to stand out more clearly. What if, Herone starts to wonder, the composed manner in which his nurses and doctors treat him is not the mark of their professional authority and competence, but a way of shielding the profession from curious and unwanted inspectors? Does the Sign of the Quietus not serve the interest of the men of medicine rather than the patient who, as soon as he steps through the revolving doors of the hospital, “is unfolded in a Grand Mystique of Absoluteness, calling for silence and obedience, and readiness to pay” (2005, 357)? Beneath the many gestures, rules and suppositions that make up this Grand Mystique, Herone senses the operations of what Roland Barthes has called the ‘doxa,’ “the natural, of the obvious fact, of common sense, of the ‘goes without saying’” (qtd. and translated in: Herschberg-Pierrot 2002, 432). “The ideal patient,” the narrator observes, “was expected simply to believe in the Routines, and no questions asked, whereas nothing was normal with Herone until it was talked about, if even then” (2005, 346).

If the roots of the story in personal experience were not immediately clear, allusions like this would have left readers little doubt that the author of *The Anaesthetic Revelation* intended Herone to be a “thinly veiled autobiographic figure” (letter to Robert Kirschten and Donald Barshis, in: Booth 2001, 188). Like his fictional alter ego, Burke had earned a reputation as incessant but incisive talker who would often refuse to participate docilely in the Routines and would relentlessly pry the hidden meanings

behind the Grand Mystiques of society by transforming its silences into words. Transgressing the limits of what can properly be said comes, however, at a considerable price: as Herone's refusal to abandon his speculations and accommodate to the routine of silence earns him the wrath of the orderlies, so would Burke's refusal to follow the tracks of conventional reasoning, at times isolate him from the rest of the critical community.<sup>2</sup> But although he insisted on his own his private, often iconoclastic path of thinking, Burke – despite often being portrayed as an intellectual outlaw – was no loose cannon: as George Selzer's books on Burke's intellectual contexts have shown, he actively sought and established ties with any number of schools and movements.<sup>3</sup> However, Burke's technique of "planned incongruity" and his occasional predilection for a "tactics of controversy" (1972, 16) made whatever allegiances he forged often uneasy and short-lived. "I am not a joiner of societies," Burke famously wrote to his good friend Malcolm Cowley about his relations with the American left: "I am a literary man. I can only welcome Communism by converting it into my own vocabulary. I am, in the deepest sense, a translator" (in: Jay 1988, 202).

As a literary man, however, Burke did forge several enduring (if no less uneasy) intellectual relations, the most long-lasting being with the group of British and American formalist critics we now commonly call the New Critics. Burke's ties with them dated back to his Greenwich Village years, when Burke became acquainted with the modernist poet Allen Tate, who would grow to become a major New Critical causeur. But it was mostly during the 1930s and '40s, when Burke's ideas on literature and criticism matured and while the conservatives of the Southern Agrarian movement came to assert themselves as a major voice in the literary debates of the day, that these acquaintances expanded into what I will describe as a "critical conversation" in which interpretive vocabularies and methods would be translated back and forth, and both sides set out their respective opinions on the nature and purpose of the literary. What

---

<sup>2</sup> Burke lore contains many stories of his brushes with contemporary dogma – the most famous of which tells how at the communist-dominated First American Writers' Congress of 1935, Burke's proposition to replace the symbol of the 'worker' with the more inclusive word 'people' nearly sparked a riot among the left-wing radicals in attendance, leaving the speaker with recollections of having his name thrown at him as "a dirty word – 'Burke!'" (Yagoda 1980, 68) – see, for instance, Lenticchia (1983, 21-52) or George and Selzer (2007, 12-29). *The Anaesthetic Revelation* alludes to another instance of rejection: Burke's leftist leanings causing his name to be dropped in the race for an appointment at the University of Washington: "during recent years when, the country having swung to the far right politically for a spell, Herone found many of his earlier liberal attitudes and utterances in danger of being made to look absurdly suspect" (Burke 2005, 343). For more on this issue, cf. Malcolm Cowley's september 11, 1952 letter to Burke (in: Jay 1988, 309-310).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Selzer (1996), Selzer and George (2007) and Selzer and Wess (2008). As he argues in *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, "Burke's independence has been overstated, and it has been too easy to excuse him from membership in formative cultural groups that gave Burke his intellectual lifeblood – and that drew lifeblood from him" (1996, 17).

caused this exchange between Burke and the New Criticism to be so prolonged was, according to Vincent Leitch, the formalist streak of Burke's "complex machine for literary analysis." Although this machine includes "biography, psychology, sociology, philosophy, politics, aesthetics, ethics, religion and anthropology," he argues, "[a]t the heart of Burke's project was a formalist exegetical method" (1988, 41-43). Although my analyses of the protocols for reading that Burke would develop as part of his conversation with the New Critics will show him to be responsive to both the biographical drives of the author and the interpretive processes which readers project on a text, Burke believes that the critic must be foremost responsive to the language of the poem.

Burke, too, would therefore favor close reading of literary texts as a basis for critical analysis; but unlike his New Critical contemporaries, he would not stop at the limits of the text. "At its best," he said, detailed textual analysis

sustains the intense contemplation of an object to the point where one begins to see not only more deeply into the object but beyond it, in the directions of generalizations about the kinds of art and artistic excellence, and even the principles of human thought and experience universally. (1946, 279)

Focusing on the relation between the body and language, on the role of symbols in making and shaping our world, and on the ways individuals relate to sociopolitical structures of power, *The Anaesthetic Revelation* reflects these major themes of Burke's thinking; its third chapter – "Haunted by Ecology" – reads as a summary of Burke's ideas on what it means for linguistically capable organisms to live in complex socio-political communities. As I will show in the following chapter, language is a central factor in all of Burke's thinking. His belief that human beings are "symbol-using animals" who build their relations with each other and with the real will inform both the interpretive methodology Burke applies to literary texts and his beliefs about the nature and purpose of literary criticism as a field of study. As the critical conversations I will construct in the latter half of this dissertation will bear out, this conviction that the language of literature inevitably spills over into life would prove a continuous source of friction.

Yet now, it seemed, the New Critics were trying to put a stop to their frictive dialogue with Burke. Cleanth Brooks and W.K. Wimsatt's *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957) did not mention Burke's name, and in *The New Apologists for Poetry*, his 1956 codification of formalist criticism, Murray Krieger awarded Burke little more than a few passing mentions, before doing away with him altogether in a long footnote:

It should be mentioned that Kenneth Burke has very different assumptions from which to attempt the definition of poetry. Although he is popularly referred to as a new critic and his is an unusual attempt, one which has not been without its influence, he is not being treated in this essay by the very reasons of his different

assumptions. [...] The poem, for him, must be defined as a response to the needs of the spectator [...] and as a response to the neurosis of the author [...]. This framework leads to Burke's 'dramatistic' theory, which ends by denying any barrier between art and life. For all of life, like all of art, is conceived in dramatistic terms: every action is a 'strategy' called forth by a 'situation'; and the literary work, as 'symbolic action,' has the same function for the same reason. (Krieger 1956, 216)

To the purified definition of the New Criticism which Krieger sought to establish, the cultural poetics in which Burke came to embed his analyses of literary texts proved a continuous embarrassment. Collapsing art into life, Burke continuously pushed and subverted the limits that Krieger was trying to set. "Burke," he argued, "simply represents an extremely divergent approach, one that hardly bears on the apology for poetry" (1956, 216).

Did Burke sense that another 'Sign of the Quietus' was being put on him, this time one that would silence him as a literary thinker? Whatever the case, *The Anaesthetic Revelation* concludes with a final chapter that reads like a powerful defense of Burke's interest in the literary. Called "Watching young Keats Die," it takes the form of a letter by Herone to "a member of what Keats has called 'that most vulgar of all crowds, the literary'" (2005, 372), in which Herone reports on his convalescence by the seaside after the traumatic ordeal at the hospital. The largest section of the letter is, however, devoted to an account of his reading of Keats, to whose tragic fate Herone finds himself strangely drawn: "I'm not sure just why – but I have found this a fitting time in which to see re-enacted the poignant death of Keats. I have been reading his letters, particularly his last ones, with a mixture of professionalism and tearfulness. I have been watching young Keats die" (2005, 374). In the moribund poet, Herone finds a conversation partner to break his mental isolation, as well as a model to help put his life back together. As Keats transcends the physical ravages of tuberculosis by turning to the abstractions of the verbal, transforming 'fever' into 'favour' and mirroring imminent physical death with eternal spiritual love, so word-man Herone, tapping into the same poetic resources of allegory, synthesis, verbal doodling and the pun, redeems his experience of mental and bodily suffering through a poetic act. Composing playful, near-nonsensical verse that has "but fragments of meaning, like shells the sea has pounded into bits" (2005, 384), Herone comes to realize that the proper way to live under the Grand Mystique of Absoluteness and its many Signs of the Quietus is to "live by dodges" (2005, 384).

This final lesson, akin to the French proverb that the key to the good life lies in living discreetly may sound rather disheartening as a conclusion, but it is not a nihilist's motto. Although *The Anaesthetic Revelation* betrays the hand of someone whose confidence in his fellow man was shaken, its final chapter nonetheless attests to a firm belief that, even amidst the power play of language and society that turn our lives into allegories, a form of meaningful contact between minds is possible through the medium

of literature. Recounting Herone's healing by reading Keats in a form that is itself fictional and poetic, "Watching young Keats die" becomes itself a powerful example of this extraordinary potential of the literary which, Burke argues, can "'do something' for the poet and his readers" (PLF 89) which other kinds of language use cannot. Burke does not specify this "something" which literature can "do;" talking about literature he often prefers the polysemantic, affective power of metaphor over precise logic or definition. One of these is that literature serves as "equipment for living" (PLF 293): it provides verbal shorthands and linguistic tools by means of which we can gauge our individual situation and develop effective strategies for social action.

But Burke's most forceful metaphor for the literary - and the one most profoundly exemplified in *The Anaesthetic Revelation* - is therefore that of literature as "medicine." Literature provides a kind of comfort, either by serving as an antidote against existing social ills (as comedy may provide relief in the face of tragedy), or by inoculating us against future harm (as the stylized grief of complaints and elegies can protect their readers from the pangs of everyday life). It offers a verbal or symbolic solution to certain problems that cannot be worked out through direct physical action and, thereby, allows people to adapt psychologically to their situation. Uniting the roles of silent patient and critical word-man in his alter ego Herone, Burke is able to unburden himself in story of a tension he could not resolve in the real world of the hospital - a process mirrored in Herone's account of his identification with the dying Keats, using him as an expiatory vessel in order to regain his identity as a writer. Formally arranging the turmoil of events, emotions and thoughts that befell him during his hospital stay into the meaningful sequence of a story, *The Anaesthetic Revelation* is Burke's self-concocted remedy against the existential pains of a sixty year old Word-Man. But most of all, published in a magazine that leaned closely to the New Critics that were now trying to exclude him from their histories, it was a way for that sixty year old word man to attest to his continued preoccupation with literature and literary criticism.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ever since John Crowe Ransom's appointment at Kenyon College, Ohio in 1937, the *Kenyon Review* had become a central publication organ for the New Criticism. For more on New Critical publication venues, cf. Jancovich (1993, 67-76).

## 1.2 The First Stage: Burke's Own Silence

The New Critics, however, failed to be impressed by this forceful attestation of his continued interest in literature. In a 1961 article in the *Yale Review* on "The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism," René Wellek claims that Burke's work "in recent decades must [...] be described as aiming at a philosophy of meaning, human behavior, and action whose center is not in literature at all" (1961, 109). Burke may have started out as a literary critic, says Wellek, but he quickly abandoned this pursuit, throwing together a combination of "Marxism, psychoanalysis, and anthropology with semantics in order to devise a system of human behavior and motivation which uses literature only as a document or illustration" (1961, 109).<sup>5</sup> Burke's response was vehement: he sent the *Yale Review* a sixteen-page letter, complete with an elaborate list of his recent publications on literature. The response was, however, rejected by the *Review's* editors and, after a few angry private letters, the dust settled – at least for a while. It would be stirred up again in 1971, when Wellek wrote a long essay on Burke for the *Sewanee Review*, repeating his earlier claim that Burke had moved outside the realm of the literary proper. This move, according to Wellek "absolves the historian of literary criticism from discussing Burke's system [...] just as the historian of criticism has no obligation to discuss Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and Hegel's Logic as such" (1971, 172). Again, Burke retorted, this time with a lengthy article ("As I Was Saying," published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*) that called the "piecemeal, hit-and-run mode" of Wellek's argument into question and offers a new list of publications (among which *The Anaesthetic Revelation*) as proof of his ongoing concern with literary criticism (1972, 11).

Wellek, however, remained unfazed: in the chapter on Burke in Volume 6 of his monumental *A History of Modern Criticism*, he argues that "Burke is not primarily a literary critic at all but a philosopher who devised an all-embracing scheme of human motivation and linguistic action in books which contain well over five million words and cover every endeavor of mankind from physiology to religion" (1986, 253).<sup>6</sup> This all-embracing scheme, Wellek goes on to write, leads Burke to "equaliz[e] texts of the most diverse aesthetic value and historical provenience, flitting without a sense of distinction

---

<sup>5</sup> The attack did not come out of the blue: Wellek's 1949 *Theory of Literature* (co-authored with Austin Warren) demonstratively ignored Burke's latest books, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) and *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), citing only work from the 1920s and '30s.

<sup>6</sup> Wellek does refer to the row between Burke and himself, in a neatly tucked away paragraph in the bibliographical section of his *History of Modern Criticism*, offering a brief summary and sneering that "None of the quibbling arguments induced me to change the text here reprinted." (1986, 321n)



from Aeschylus to Odets, from Shakespeare to William Carlos Williams” (1986, 255) – taking an amount of critical license that caused him to spawn a school of critics that reads into these texts “almost anything which comes into their mind, drawing particularly on the concepts of sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, semantics, and linguistics” (1986, 255). The effects of all this, Wellek claimed, were disastrous. Burke’s analyses of Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Wellek claims, are “simply misread” (1986, 248), due to Burke’s psychoanalytic obsessions and the many historical inaccuracies that mark his slovenly way of reading. Similarly, Burke’s basic assumptions about Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* are “completely arbitrary” so that “there is [...] no shred of evidence for his conclusion” (1986, 250). And a similar thing is going on with Burke’s interpretation of Shakespeare pieces, which are, Wellek says “completely distorted to serve a ‘socioanagogic’ interpretation, the purpose of which remains obscure” (1986, 253).

Was Wellek’s rejection of Burke as a significant voice in literary criticism due to stubbornness on his side? No doubt, the lifelong animosity between both men played a part in Wellek’s continued negative appraisal of Burke’s contribution to literary criticism.<sup>7</sup> But it is hard to imagine that Wellek who (despite being somewhat conservative in his estimates) was an erudite and scrupulous scholar, would have upheld his point of view for such length of time in the face of massive or well-substantiated opposition. However, no such opposition materialized; in fact, as I will argue in this chapter, Burke scholarship has largely worked to reinforce the separation between Burke and the main currents of literary scholarship that Wellek initiated. The most resounding silence, however, was that of Burke himself. In fact, while he was writing angry letters to the editors of the *Yale Review* trying to prove his continued allegiance to literature, Burke was sitting on a manuscript that, when published, would have silenced all disbelievers like Wellek.

The manuscript was to become the final part of a trilogy based loosely in the medieval trivium of grammar, rhetoric and logic, the plans for which Burke laid out in the introduction to the first installment, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945). The second book, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, was published in 1951, and apparently by the time Burke entered the hospital for the hernia operation that would inspire *The Anaesthetic Revelation*, much of what was to become the third installment, *A Symbolic of Motives* was nearing completion. Barring some delay in the original publication schedule caused by the protracted writing process of the *Rhetoric*, things were going well: critical reception of the first two installments of the trilogy far surpassed previous critical response to his work, and – of

---

<sup>7</sup> Weiser argues that “though they had much in common, Burke and Wellek spent their lives mainly in miscommunication and misrepresentation” (2008, 155 n9).

crucial importance to someone whose income depended on academic interest but who generally shied institutional commitment – the books were instrumental in landing Burke a series of lecturing opportunities, talks and visiting professorships at various universities, and revived attention for his earlier publications.<sup>8</sup>

Many, then, were eagerly awaiting the culminative book of the trilogy. After Burke had explored the role of language in human cognition in the *Grammar* and the role of language in shaping social ties in the *Rhetoric*, he would focus on “the forms and methods of art” (GM xviii). But while his letters indicate that Burke kept writing and collecting materials for his “godam Symbolic” (Letter to Malcolm Cowley, in: Williams 2001, 13) all through this period, the book never materialized. Just what kept Burke from letting go of this material is uncertain: scholars speculatively cite a variety of personal, practical, editorial and compositional obstacles that may have stopped Burke short of taking this final step. Complex and largely conjectural, I will not summarize this debate here.<sup>9</sup> what is of interest to me are, rather, the consequences of Burke’s failure to produce this book that “would have completed and brought together Burke’s long involvement with literary criticism – more than thirty years of intense and systematic thinking about language and literature” and would have been instrumental in “bring[ing] his main concerns with language, literature, symbol-systems, and the drama of human relations together in such a way as to present literature (poetry) as a representative human action and anecdote” (Rueckert 1982, 234-235).

One immediate effect of Burke’s failure to let go of *A Symbolic of Motives* was a loss of public interest. If the *Grammar* and the *Rhetoric* had brought attention and academic acclaim, the long wait for the final installment caused many potential readers to lose patience. When Burke published *The Rhetoric of Religion* in 1961 and the essay collection *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966, response was lukewarm, and reviews were few and far between. Lacking the *Symbolic* as an intermediate piece many readers failed to catch on and, as a result, Burke’s voice in the intellectual debates of the time was largely

---

<sup>8</sup> Burke’s inability to secure a permanent post at a university or college has been cited as proof of academia’s unwillingness to accommodate his highly specific and controversial brand of criticism. Burke’s letters to Malcolm Cowley, however, show that it was Burke himself who turned down offers for the “check-bringing, papers-to-be-marked-bringing bureaucracy” of tenure. As he wrote about rumors that he had been suggested as a candidate for a permanent post at the university of Chicago: “What worries me is that there are tentative offers in the offing – so I may [...] have to face again the decision I failed so blithely twenty years ago, when I walked out of college into Agro-Bohemianism. [...] I am quite ennobled at the thought that I have been proposed [...]. [But] if I were a teacher by profession, my main ambition in life would be to hurry up and become 65. [...] what I want is something like this every once in a while, not regularly” (Letter to Malcolm Cowley, in: Jay 1988).

<sup>9</sup> For those interested in pursuing this debate further, see Williams (2001), Thames (2007) or Rueckert’s introduction to *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives* (2007).

silenced – a blow from which it took considerable time to recover (cf. Rueckert 1969, 297). In return, Burke himself disengaged from the intellectual climate of his day. Whereas Burke had previously tried to meet others on their own terms, he now increasingly set himself to proving the worth of his own vocabulary and ideas, styling himself as an outsider.<sup>10</sup> Insisting on his own idiosyncratic vocabularies and increasingly mysticist frames of reference, the Burke of *The Anaesthetic Revelation* began indeed to “live by dodges” and “almost seems to have become by choice his own living text and to have deliberately frustrated attempts to get at him” (Rueckert 1982, 229). This is not to say that Burke did not continue to seek recognition: Burke continued to write essays and reviews, give lectures and attend meetings, and gave interviews well beyond his 90th birthday. But whenever called out to defend himself by other critics, the late Burke often succumbed to the kind of angry squabbling over details with which he answered Wellek, rather than with powerful arguments or elaborate and systematic explications of his ideas.<sup>11</sup>

To what extent the late Burke’s increasing inward turn attributed to the forgetting of his work as a literary critic is hard to determine (an accurate estimate would require an update of Rueckert’s 1969 *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke*), but it seems safe to say that it did little stop accusations of self-centeredness like Wellek’s from being made. It also did not help to correct the marginal appearance which the published record of Burke’s work bestowed on his critical readings: while Burke’s habit of publishing these in separate volumes (or, in the *Grammar* and *Rhetoric*, in appendices) does underscore their singular importance to him, their unfortunately belated publications (*Counter-Statement*, with work dating back to Burke’s aesthete fase in the 1920s, was published after the Well Street Crash of 1929 had turned the minds of the public towards activist writing; *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, steeped in the agon between left and right during the 1930s was published months after the attack on Pearl Harbor established the need for national unity) made Burke’s thinking on literature seem out of date and out of touch with the rest of his work.

All of this created the possibility of using Burke’s name as a rallying point for those who found fault with the kind of literary scholarship that Wellek endorsed – a scholarship considered too segregated from life in its narrow preoccupation with textual interpretation, its one-sided focus on ‘High’ or canonical literature, and its

---

<sup>10</sup> As he wrote, with characteristic wry self-knowledge, in one of his poems, *Apostrophes Before Desisting*: “All my life [...] I’ve lived on the fringes / an Ist Among the Isms. / I’ve been my own disease.” (1968, 243).

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Burke’s response to Jameson’s 1978 “The Symbolic Inference; Or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis” (“Methodological Repression and/or Strategies of Containment”), or his detailed but vituperative response to Booth’s mildly sceptical but actually eulogistic 1974 “Kenneth Burke’s Way of Knowing” (“Dancing with Tears in My Eyes”).

obsession with linguistic detail. To Fredric Jameson, Burke's thinking constitutes "a critique of the more mindless forms of the fetishism of language" present in structuralist literary theory (1978, 508); for Wayne Booth, his criticism offers a reminder of the limitations of Chicago School formalism (1974, 13), while in Frank Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change*, Burke is summoned as the angelic counterpart to the demonic Paul de Man as the incarnation of a "passive" and "quietist" deconstruction (1983, , throughout). All these attempts locate Burke's value in a kind of resistance, an inability to be included in the lineage of contemporary literary criticism: the likes of Wellek, Lentricchia claims in "Reading history with Kenneth Burke," are simply unable to absorb the potent and multifarious Burke, whose activism and disregard for institutionalized disciplinary boundaries have led "contemporary theorists, critics, literary historians, philosophers, and other students of humanistic disciplines [...] to exclude Kenneth Burke" (1982, 119).

But while this guaranteed that Burke continued to garner scholarly attention outside the smallish circle of specialists that took to his work early on, these scholar's tendency to enlist Burke as a voice of protest ended up reinforcing Wellek's claim that Burke operates outside the field of literary criticism proper. Lentricchia's claiming Burke as a "critical structuralist" (Lentricchia 1982, 136), Booth's appropriation of Burke for his own brand of Chicago-style pragmatic pluralism (Booth 1979) and Jameson's description of him as a poststructuralist critic of ideology (Jameson 1978) lead Burke further away, rather than closer to, the kind of criticism that deals with the careful reading of literary texts. When Geoffrey Hartman utters praise for Burke in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, he does so to claim Burke in order to expand the canon of literary criticism (Hartman 1980, 86-115 and throughout); when J. Hillis Miller acknowledges Burke's "deep influence," he does so by calling Burke "the wisest and most intelligent Freudian and Marxist critic of his time" (Olsen 1994, 320) – but, tellingly, not a *literary* critic. Other recent attempts at understanding Burke in terms of sociology (Gusfield 1989), culture studies (Brummett 1991) and – importantly – rhetoric (Wess 1996, Wolin 2001), while deepening our understanding of Burke's use to a variety of scholarly programs, have continued this tendency. While few scholars who appropriate Burke to their own field fail to mention the importance of literature to Burke's thinking, most picture Burke outside the main frames of literary studies, and few look at the actual results that Burke's critical readings of literary texts produced.

### 1.3 The Second Stage: William Rueckert and Greig Henderson on 'Dramatism' and 'Symbolic Action'

It is certainly true, then, that Burke could have intervened more forcefully when scholars like Wellek threatened to drown out the literary in his work. Had he chosen the high road by finishing his *Symbolic*, a book of Burke's that, had it been published, "would certainly have been in a class with, and might well have had the same impact and influence as, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*" (Rueckert 1982, 231), instead of the menial way of the angry letter, there would likely have been no need to reclaim Burke for literary criticism. Still, as Richard H. Thames points out in his article on "Untangling the Motivorum," the ideas Burke intended to work out in his *Symbolic* were not unknown; much of the material that was to become part of the book was available in the form of articles, and Burke even distributed a manuscript version to students and colleagues. Whatever Burke's motives may have been for not publishing his culminative book on literary criticism and for responding to Wellek's allegations the way he did, Thames' suggests that more could have been done to preserve and propagate Burke as a literary critic. Had Burke scholars wished to reclaim Burke as an important voice in literary criticism, it would have been fairly easy for them to do so. Apart from a few pieces of the *Symbolic*, Thames says, "everything else was out there, though perhaps in such a way as to make neglecting the inconvenient easy. Perhaps the extent to which we did not really know him is the extent to which we did not really try" (Thames 2007).

The phenomenon Thames hints at is similar to the one Rueckert describes: a forgetting of Burke as a literary critic, the roots of which lie not with Burke or with Burke's opponents, but within the field of Burke studies itself. Unlike the gentle shift of interest which Rueckert's "forgetting" suggests, however, Thames' much starker "neglect" points accusatorially to a blind spot in the paradigm of Burke studies – a blind spot that is, furthermore, deliberately ("not really trying") maintained and has led to misrepresentation and a lack of understanding ("not really knowing") of Burke's project. With Thames, I believe that the forgetting of Burke as a literary critic which Rueckert describes is not a recent shift of emphasis but is, rather, rooted in the very ground which Rueckert, together with other dawn hour interpreters of Burke, has laid out for Burke studies. Indeed, Rueckert's attempts to reclaim Burke for literary studies are all the more remarkable as it was he who, in the foreword to his 1963 *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, stated that "Burke's whole development is characterized by the gradual expansion of a literary theory and method into the larger dramatistic system and methodology," a dramatistic system which "is essentially a systematic view of human relations rather than a theory of literature" (1982, xiv-xv).

Not two years after Wellek banished Burke's name from the history of literary scholarship, William Rueckert, in his groundbreaking study of Burke's thought, was making a similar manoeuvre. Lacking the culminative *Symbolic*, and sensing that Burke had turned a new corner with the 'logological' principles he worked out in his recent *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Rueckert accedes to Wellek's claim that Burke had left literary criticism behind in favor of something else. Making a virtue out of what Wellek considers a vice, Rueckert praises Burke for "achiev[ing] a masterful synthesis of [...] literary, social, ethical, rhetorical, and linguistic theories," which combine into what is "essentially a systematic view of human relations rather than a theory of literature" (1982, xv). This synthesis, however, is not apparent from Burke's work as it is: his thought, Rueckert claims, cannot be properly accessed unless one "cut through the stylistic and terminological underbrush that began taking over Burke's ideas and methods in the late thirties in order to rid Burke of his own foibles and quandaries" (1982, 5). Triggering either Burke-sickness (a naïve, hysterical enthusiasm) or Burke-nausea (anger and rejection) these stylistic quirks are "an irritation, a distraction, the rank growth of a fecund mind" (1982, 5). Also, Rueckert believes, they are the prime cause of the absence of serious interest in Burke's thought. Transforming this stylistic jungle into an orderly garden would not only increase Burke's sales value on the academic market; it would also provide a better view of what lies hidden beneath the weeds of his idiomatic extravaganza: "when one has purified Burke to the extent of being able to apprehend the ideas and methods and, finally, the whole coherent system, one discovers a systematic view of man and the drama of human relations, and a methodology for its application, of great power, beauty, and persuasiveness" (Rueckert 1982, 5).

The ideal Burke scholar, then, is one who is able to achieve a perspective of distance. Only this way one will be able to see through Burke's opulent verbiage into the splendor of Burke's ideas; only then can one proceed to what Rueckert considers the prime task of Burke scholars: to purify Burke so as to lay bare the systematic nature of his thought. These efforts to "purify" Burke extended well beyond suppressing the irregularities of his critical idiom, which relies heavily on the poetic techniques of association, allegory, synthesis, and verbal doodling advocated in *The Anaesthetic Revelation*. The desire to defend Burke as a coherent and systematic thinker leads Rueckert to erase much of the formal and generic diversity that exists within Burke's oeuvre as a whole. Trying to mold Burke's many 'texts' into a single, seamless and undifferentiated 'text' whose parts can be compared and classified, whose rhetoric can be qualified and whose various terminologies can be situated and explained, Rueckert takes overwhelmingly to the longer, expository and systematic texts at the expense of Burke's fragmentary, experimental and occasional writings:

I have not discussed Burke as a music critic or the possible effect of this activity on his literary theory and critical practice; and I have not discussed Burke as a reviewer [...] or the importance, which is considerable, of the books he reviewed to his own thought and development. Burke's influence and reputation [...] have not been dealt with, nor has the problem of influences on Burke. And I have nowhere systematically evaluated Burke's literary theory, critical method, and applied criticism [...]. (1982, 3-4)

This does not, I hasten to add, discredit the groundbreaking work of Rueckert's early study, nor do I aim to correct what I believe to be a legitimate way of understanding Burke's thinking. As my reconstruction of Burke's critical conversations with the New Criticism will point out, there is indeed a coherence of vision and systematic way of thinking beneath Burke's rampant vocabulary, iconoclast thought and fractured publication record. Furthermore, as a defense against accusations like Wellek's Rueckert's reconstruction of this 'system' in terms of Burke's metaphor of the drama proved highly successful in rallying others in defense of Burke. If there is, today, a vibrant and multifaceted field of Burke scholarship, this is due in no small part to the productive uses that it has put Rueckert's insights to.

Nonetheless, as I see it, there are some significant problems related to Rueckert's claims that Burke's "real achievement consists in the monolithic dramatistic system he has developed" (1982, xiii). Rueckert shows that he is well aware of the limits of his way of reading Burke:

MY APPROACH to Burke is so purely intrinsic that some readers may suppose the book to have been written in a historical and theoretical vacuum. [...] Only occasionally have I related the works to the man, and only now and then have I attempted to relate the man and his works to the literary and cultural life of the times. (1982, 3)

All these negations, Rueckert says, "were deliberately imposed in order that the limited positive goal – the partial purification of Burke – might be achieved" (1982, 5) and in the hope to attain "the mythical ideal of so many modern writers of prose-fiction: anonymity of point of view and objectivity of presentation" (1982, 7). Relieved from the responsibilities of historical and biographical contextualization, Rueckert clears the room he needs to construct a coherent and systematic Burke.

However, while this enables him to refute one half of Wellek's accusation – that Burke is a sloppy thinker who is unable to produce successful readings of literary texts – Rueckert's a-contextual and a-historical argument does not allow him to reconnect Burke's to the history of literary criticism. If Rueckert is able to validate the internal coherence of the 'system' he finds in Burke, his intrinsic approach does not allow him to challenge the standards of value that support Wellek's claims. However, the main issue with Rueckert's 'monolithic' take on Burke's dramatism is that it collapses Burke's

theory into Burke's method. Prioritizing a static dramatist philosophy over its practical incarnations in Burke's readings of literary texts, Rueckert's book is oblivious to what I will show, in my reconstruction of the critical conversations between Burke and the New Critics, to be the flexible hermeneutic methodology that underlies Burke's dramatism. Far from a monological or monolithic philosophy that answers only to the intrinsic requirements of its own system, I will argue that Burke's dramatism is capable of answering to the changing rhetorical requirements that Burke's debate with the New Criticism places on it.

This take on dramatism is much closer to the one that of Greig Henderson in his 1988 *Kenneth Burke: Language and Literature as Symbolic Action*. In this second major publication on Burke's literary thinking, Henderson challenges Rueckert's a-contextual and intrinsic account by pointing to the differential relation between Burke's theory (dramatism) and the conceptual apparatus ('symbolic action') through which Burke applies this theory to literary texts. While the *object* of Burke's thinking – the 'drama' of life – remains more or less static, Henderson argues, the role Burke attributes to language ('symbolic action') changes dramatically. Thus, Henderson says, "I do not achieve [...] anything resembling that 'wonderful kind of simultaneity and coherence' Rueckerts speaks of, primarily because I do not believe it exists" (1988, 2). Instead, Henderson discerns

a perceptible and sometimes disturbing discontinuity between dramatism – the idea that literature and language are to be considered as symbolic action – and logology – the idea that words about God (theology) bear a strong resemblance to words about words (logology). (1988, 2)

As Burke's thinking develops, Henderson argues, the initial epistemological tension that exists between 'dramatism' and 'symbolic action' dissolves into a 'logological' ontology:

logology converts methodological priority – the heuristic method of treating communication as primary to all categories of experience and of adopting the poetic perspective of man as communicant, a dramatistic method first developed in *Permanence and Change*, into ontological priority – the logological view that language is the source and origin of all value, a view that finds its entelechial fulfillment in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. (1988, 122)

In the following chapter, I will elaborately discuss the role that language plays in Burke's thinking, its changing status from an epistemological means to an ontological condition, the way this shapes Burke's conception of literary criticism both as a practical enterprise and a communal pursuit, and its impact on my own account of Burke's critical project. For now, however, I want to focus on the way in which Henderson, by challenging Rueckert's monolithical account of Burke's dramatism and opening it up to the possibilities of rupture and change, is able to make a start at putting Burke's critical production back into its historical context. For, as Henderson argues,



what caused Burke to award language such a central role in his thinking is his ambition to overcome the distinction between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ kinds of literary criticism (cf. Henderson 1988, 7-42). Suspending Burke between “Russian Formalism, New Criticism and Structuralism” on the one hand and “Freudian, Marxist, sociological, historical, moral, phenomenological, mythological and archetypal criticism” on the other, Henderson argues that “[t]he uniqueness of Kenneth Burke’s approach resides in its ability to integrate intrinsic and extrinsic modes of criticism to the theory of symbolic action” (1988, 8/12).

My dissertation builds on this insight by focusing on the way Burke’s methodology of reading works against the limitations of a one-sided “intrinsic” approach which frames the text and/or the literary system in which it takes part in terms of a hermetic and tautological universe of discourse. My take on this problem, however, is historical and practical, a route that Henderson’s book does not take. Instead, the rupture he perceives in Burke’s intellectual development guides him to an approach that is “more synchronic than diachronic” (1988, 2):

it is not my intention to give an account of the intrinsic approach in its full complexity. I want merely to give an indication of the kind of vocabulary of critical terms such an approach has generated. (1988, 9)

Although Henderson makes a beginning at situating Burke’s literary criticism in the context of the debates between the different strands of formalism in the 1930s and ‘40s, his argument does not, in the end, take a historical turn. If it challenges the ‘systematic’ Burke of Rueckert’s *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, then, Henderson’s *Kenneth Burke: Literature and Language as Symbolic Action* does not abandon the ‘distant’ perspective which the former urged on Burke scholars.

For this, I will argue, we need more recent development in Burke studies. Before I turn to these, however, I want to quickly touch on a third major book on Burke’s literary thinking. Essentially a counterpart to Henderson’s book on dramatism, Robert Garlitz’s 2004 *Kenneth Burke’s Logology and Literary Criticism* explores Burke’s late *The Rhetoric of Religion*. Garlitz’ book occupies a middle ground between Rueckert’s “simultaneity and coherence” and Henderson’s “disturbing discontinuity:” even though he sees a clear reversal of roles in which “Logology takes precedence over Dramatism,” he nonetheless believes that “[t]here is a great deal in *The Rhetoric of Religion* that is continuous with Burke’s previous work” (2004, 9-10). Although there is a shift of focus from the study of human action and language of action (dramatism) to the study of language in and of itself (logology), “[l]anguage is still viewed as a species of symbolic action but now its form is studied as an act of ordering, a form discoverable in the tautological character of any set of terms used to order discourse” (2004, 9). Even though his subject changes, then, Burke’s framework of thought and procedures remain, essentially, unaltered: “while logology is ‘new’ it was also ‘inevitable’ to the extent that Burke committed

himself to working out systematically the implications of the terms with which he started – ‘symbolic action’” (2004, 9).

## 1.4 The Third Stage: the ‘Strange’ Burke, the Return to History, and Rhetorical Hermeneutics

Though Garlitz’ book falls strictly outside the second stage in the reception of Burke’s thinking about literature, I have nonetheless included it in my overview because it illustrates the tendency, prevalent in books that focus on the subject of Burke’s literary thinking, to prefer abstract and synchronic theory over concrete, rhetorical practice. Though they contest certain aspects of Rueckert’s maiden study, Henderson and Garlitz’s books largely follow the paradigm of a distant, a-historical reading that the “dean of Burke studies” established. Taking Burke out of his historical moment, and reducing the complexity of his vocabulary and record, Thames says, this dominant paradigm has longtime “endeavored to make [Burke] *familiar*” (Thames 2007). It allowed a formulaic, “nearly ritualized” (Newstok 2007, xxi) way of talking about Burke and fostered a series of popular myths, all of which served to single out the exceptionality of its subject. Portraying him as both prescient sage and tragic hero, the familiar rituals that Burke scholars use to introduce their subject portray Burke as alien to his times as well as to our own.<sup>12</sup> Suspended between his own day and today, Burke’s thought finally ends up belonging nowhere – feeding the need for the repetition of familiar myths to fill the historical vacuum that surrounds him, and furthering claims to Burke’s supposed self-styled intellectual insularity. Thus, fictionalized confessions like *The Anaesthetic Revelation*, undeniably rooted in the biography of their author and calling attention to the importance of literature to Burke are indeed what Thames calls “inconvenient.”

And yet, he argues, Burke criticism should go into these convenient places: “Burke should be less familiar and more strange” (Thames 2007). Thames’ voice is just one in a recent movement of scholars that have, from various angles, started to reflect on the ways in which Burke has longtime been represented, and have argued that Burke scholarship should move beyond its familiar paradigms. Scholars like Cary Nelson, Ross Wolin and Bernard Brock all have contested what they believe to be the conventional

---

<sup>12</sup> Thames provides a fairly exhaustive list of the familiar images used to represent Burke (Thames 2007), but Newstok (Newstok 2007, xxi-xxiii) and George and Selzer (2007, 1-3) also offer a good analysis of the ways Burke is conventionally introduced.

and uncritical way in which Burke's work is being talked about.<sup>13</sup> But the strongest impetus towards a revisionist approach has come from the gradual opening up (after his death in 1993) of Burke's immense archive. Making available a wealth of previously unpublished material and offering new insight into the genetics of Burke's publications, this disclosure has spurred a number of collections that gather previously unpublished or hard-to-find pieces, thus filling in some of the large gaps in Burke's publication record and calling attention to the extent of Burke's intellectual production.

At the same time, these archival discoveries have stimulated a series of efforts towards the compilation of an intellectual history of Burke's thought which, against Rueckert's a-historical system builder, projects a Burke who is social and historical, and deeply enmeshed in the artistic, political and economic life of his day. Jack Selzer has been very significant in this new movement towards a historicist and contextualist understanding of Burke's thought. His 1996 *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village* and 2007 *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s* (co-authored with Ann George), together with the 2008 essay collection *Kenneth Burke and his Circles* (co-edited with Robert Wess) are maiden studies of an almost unexplored repository of historical documents that link Burke to the intellectual, political and cultural life of his day. "Reading Burke carefully against the ideological conversations of the time," Selzer "creates a picture of Kenneth Burke as operating within the astounding mixture of writings, personalities, and cultural particulars" of his day (2007, 5). Instead of purifying Burke by stripping his thought of its verbal intricacies and contextual links, this approach aims to bring out the "particular material sites and intellectual circles whose presence can be measured and felt" (2007, 5) in Burke's work.

In order to transfer this "felt presence" of the historical context in Burke's writing, Selzer deviates from the linear, systematic and transparent expositions that marked previous books on Burke. Suggesting that a book about Burke "should probably be written in the form of a collage rather than as a formal academic essay" (1996, xvii) and interspersing his account with unpublished letters, photos and cartoons "so that our version of history does not come off as inappropriately smooth and uncomplicated" (2007, 5), Selzer takes "conversation" as his key metaphor. Using Burke's books, articles and written correspondence as his point of departure, he sets out to reconstruct the various discourses (academic and nonacademic) in which Burke participated and which helped shape his thinking. This approach is developed further by Elizabeth M. Weiser in

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Cary Nelson "Writing as the Accomplice of Language: Kenneth Burke and Poststructuralism" (1989); Wolin, Ross. *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke* (2001), and Bernard Brock "The Forum: Burke, Revisited and Reviewed" (1992).

her *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism* (2008). Here, too, Burke's thinking is framed against its historical background (the war discourses of the early 1940s).

The New Critics emerge from these books as a dominant voice in the various debates in which Burke participated and which gave his thinking on literature form. As the New Criticism began to take over the American academy by the late 1930s, their impact on Burke's thinking also increased significantly (cf. Selzer and George 2007, 193-197, Weiser 2008). As Weiser argues, Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* is largely an appeal to New Critical theories of literature (2008, 43-48); Burke's *Grammar of Motives*, too, answers in many ways to the limits of their brand of formalist criticism (2008, 94-104). Taking these insights further, I want to apply the "conversational" approach to Burke's specific analyses of literary texts, an area which these recent publications – focusing more on archival materials, written exchanges and essays and reviews – leave relatively untouched. Demonstrating how what Henderson identified as the main ambition of Burke's critical thinking – to effect a merger of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' criticism – is performed in Burke's practical analyses of literary texts, I will show how Burke shapes and reshapes his interpretive methodologies in order to remedy interpretive problems that New Critical readings tend to obscure or cannot address, I will argue that – contrary to Wellek's opinion – Burke was not philosophizing his way out, but rather criticizing his way into, the field of literary studies of his day.

If my goal is, as Rueckert demanded, "to reclaim some of Burke for literary criticism" by emphasizing how the questions he posed to literary texts were part of a specific literary debate that developed at a particular time and place, my method will consist of a mixture of historical and rhetorical strategies. I will use the next chapter to stake out this method, which takes its cue from the methodological model for criticism that Burke established as part of his dramatist philosophical framework. This model, I will show in the following chapter, is primarily linguistic and rhetorical, and sets itself off against both realist and idealist models of interpretation. Focusing on two concepts Burke uses to control the interpretive excesses of realist or idealist conceptions of scientific practice – "anecdote" and "conversation" – I will elaborate how these inform my own account of Burke's relation with New Critical theories of literature. Combining historical anecdotes to reconstruct rhetorical conversations that inform interpretive practices, I identify this account as a variant of the critical-theoretical practice that Steven Mailloux in *Rhetorical Power* (1989) and *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism and American Cultural Politics* (1998) had called "rhetorical hermeneutics," a practice he describes as "using rhetoric to practice theory by doing history" (1989, ix).

## Chapter 2 Methodology: Dramatic Language, Representative Anecdotes, and the Hermeneutic Conversation

*A man is necessarily talking error unless his words can claim membership in a collective body of thought.  
(Kenneth Burke)*

In July of 1939, the *Southern Review* published Kenneth Burke's "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" an extended version of lecture Burke had delivered a month before at the third American Writer's Congress – a speech that was well received.<sup>1</sup> Written right after the first unabridged translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* came out in February of 1939, with Japanese soldiers already on Chinese soil and mere months before Germany and Russia would invade Poland, Burke's essay performs an extensive close reading of Hitler's demagoguery in answer to what he considers the failure of "vandalistic reviewers" to go beyond simplistic condemnations of the book. Though Hitler's book triggers righteous indignation, it would be dangerous to simply reject it as bad writing (though Burke finds many examples of that in the text as well) or treat it as the passive reflection of a morally degraded or deranged mind. To resort to such easy qualifications, Burke believes, contributes "more to our gratification than to our enlightenment" (PLF 192).

Instead, Burke argues, Hitler's book should be read as a strategic response to a historical situation, written with the intent of persuading people of a certain point of view: *Mein Kampf* is a "nauseating" book but, Burke believes, this nausea has a "medicinal" function. Examining Hitler's symbolism of blood, sex, pollution and disease

---

<sup>1</sup> I have used Pauley Garth's article (2006) as well as George and Selzer's account of the context of Burke's essay (2007, 199-203) as background in this section.

and the rhetoric of identification and dissociation that it supports, Burke demonstrates that Hitler's book is deliberately construed to make its reader feel desperate, shattered and sick, building a need for redemption or relief that is subsequently offered in a "reborn" Germany under its unified Nazi leader and "medicine man." By tying his personal psychotic obsessions to an economic, social and moral malaise, by exploiting familiar religious, bodily and mythical topics and images, and by setting out patterns of identification and disidentification, Hitler construes an effective mechanism for persuading others to make themselves over in this imagery. That there is, ultimately, no ontological ground for Hitler's claims is irrelevant: their imaginative potential, political power and social effects are undoubtedly real (cf. Henderson 1988, 36-37, Weiser 2008, 61-64). The goal of criticism, Burke argues, must be to reveal patterns like these and make them understood, "so that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America" (PLF 191).

This conviction that critics must answer to the *poetic* – that is, the text as a dynamic and purposeful rhetorical exercise that, thereby, potentially socially powerful and rhetorically effective – rather than to *poetry* – the text as a static object or as a mute imaginative space apart from the real – is central to Burke's thinking (Lentricchia 1983, 25). As my confrontations between Burke's dramatism and various New Critical theories will bear out, Burke's belief that "[t]he words of the poet are not puppets, but acts. They are a function of him, and he is a function of them. They are a function of society, and he is a function of society" (ATH 3) will provide a constant throughout the various permutations of his methodology. In order to fully recover the nature of literary texts as symbolic acts – that is, as rhetorical instances of language that comprises personal, social and textual features – I will argue in the first part, Burke believes that critics must be fully aware of the poetic nature of language. As I will argue in this chapter, however, this idea affects not only Burke's ideas about *what* criticism should do, but also his ideas on *how* this should be done.

Indeed, if Burke believes that the words of the poet are symbolic acts, the words that a critic uses to elucidate these acts are, in turn, symbolic acts as well. Using Burke's refutation, in "Semantic and Poetic Meaning" (1938), of the claims of positivist semantics, I will show how Burke conceives of language and thought primarily as modes of action rather than means of conveying information (Blakesley 2002, 5). In the second half of this chapter, I will then use Burke's article on the "Four Master Tropes" to elaborate how seeing language as "primarily a species of attitudinizing, rather than an instrument of definition" (Burke 1967, 332) presents an interpreter with certain challenges. These challenges, I will show, have to do with the risk of "deflection," the danger of using interpretive vocabularies that lead to misrepresentation. With Hitler metaphorically vilifying Jewish people as devilish or diseased, Burke was all too aware of the potential threats that erroneous or maliciously manipulated vocabularies could

pose. He therefore insists that critics use “representative anecdotes” that answer to their object of scrutiny in the fullest way possible.

One of the main ways in which anecdotes can claim such representative status is that they exhibit what I will call “conversational irony.” More insidious even than the “nauseating” rhetoric shifts in *Mein Kampf*, Burke believes, are Hitler’s diatribes against the parliamentary system, of which Burke already discerns alarming parallels in the American newspaper editorials (PLF 201). “[T]he parliament,” Burke writes, is indeed far from ideal: “at its best, is a ‘babel’ of voices. There is the wrangle of men representing interests lying awkwardly on the bias across one another, sometimes opposing, sometimes vaguely divergent” (PLF 200). Framing this inherent discord of parliament as a problematic extension of a society in disarray, Hitler pretends that “the wrangle of the parliamentary is to be stilled by the giving of one voice to the whole people, this to be the ‘inner voice’ of Hitler” (PLF 207). To Hitler, parliamentary discord is a symptom of a social disease caused by the loss of an original wholesome unity. To Burke, on the other hand, the parliamentary wrangle is a sign of the health of society that is able to tolerate differences without falling apart:

Already, in many quarters of our country, we are “beyond” the stage where we are being saved from Nazism by our *virtues*. And fascist integration is being staved off, rather, by the *conflicts among our vices*. Our vices cannot get together in a grand united front of prejudices; and the result of this frustration, if or until they succeed in surmounting it, speaks, as the Bible might say, ‘in the name of democracy.’ (PLF 192)

In answer to political attempts to effect a “‘unified’ kind of criticism that simply seeks for conscious ways of making one’s position more ‘efficient,’ more thoroughly itself,” Burke was stressing the need for a criticism “in the ‘parliamentary’ sense of doubt, of hearkening to the opposition and attempting to mature a policy in the light of counter-policies” (PLF 211). Using Mailloux’ rhetorical hermeneutics as an instantiation of such a Burkean ‘parliamentary’ criticism by focusing specifically on the “therapeutic” role it claims to play with regard to the frustrations of contemporary literary theory, I will show how my own methodology of the “critical conversation” might work to reconnect Burke to the history of literary criticism.

## 2.1 Burke and General Semantics

Burke’s account of scientific enterprise has been used extensively and successfully as part of a broader debate on the epistemic status of language and rhetoric in methods of

research.<sup>2</sup> Still, there is always a certain risk involved in borrowing from Burke's ideas or methods to construe an account of scientific enterprise or its methods of inquiry. Burke was, after all, neither a philosopher nor a historian of science: his interest in scientific practice is (especially at the beginning of his career but also, as I will show in my conclusion, at its very end) that of an aesthete concerned with science as a rival discourse to poetry. Often, Burke uses 'science' as a synecdoche for rampant commercialism, industrialist massification, the collapse of the organic community, and feelings of alienation. Even when science is not forced to play the role of bogeyman of modern culture, Burke's idea of science seems synonymous with 'behaviorism' – hardly a typical exemplar of scientific activity – or with a mindless, mathematical 'positivism' that allows not a single fragment of epistemic doubt.

However, if Burke's idea about the nature of scientific enterprise are somewhat crude, his thinking about language and the role it plays in cognitive activity is extremely subtle. Since, Henderson points out, Burke's interests lie with literature, culture and thought – subjects that are by nature transient, vague or speculative, the only constant of Burkean method is "the interpretive attitude itself, and Burke's recourse is to make the communicative medium the object of study" (1988, 80-81). Burke was certainly not unique in bringing his thinking around to the problem of language and cognition. His thinking can most profitably be seen as part of a broader 'linguistic turn' (to borrow the title of Richard Rorty's famous anthology) in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophy. Burke's intellectual environment was saturated with thinkers who elaborated on the relation between words and things: Freudian psychoanalysis investigated the role of language in the way we conceptualize our world; in the field of anthropology Malinowsky's 1923 essay on "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" drew attention to the contextual, pragmatist function of language while – highly significant for the New Criticism, as my next chapter will demonstrate – I.A. Richards applied the theory of semiotics he worked out with C.K. Ogden in the 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning* to literary criticism.

Burke, in all this, sided decisively with those who took a sceptical take on the ability of language to give us access the world as it really is – a position that makes his thinking so accessible today, but one that put it directly at odds with the positivist pretenses of some of the early semanticists and the practice of science to which they appealed as an ultimate measure of truth. One of Burke's main targets was the 'general semantics' proposed by Alfred Korzybski. In *Science and Sanity* (1933), Korzybski had proclaimed language to be the source of certain delusional, psycho-pathological factors that persist

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gaonkar (1990, 1997), Schiappa (1993) and Crusius (1999) for the ways in which Burkeian rhetoric has or can been applied in the philosophy of science.



in society. Misunderstanding, dogma and fear spring from our need to identify with others through shared linguistic forms, some of which are outdated, prejudiced or simply wrong. Such unthinking identification with the language of others, Korzybski believes, “involves deeply rooted ‘principles’ which are invariably false to fact and so our orientations based on them cannot lead to adjustment and sanity” (1994, xc). Popularized through such books as Stuart Chase’s *The Tyranny of Words* (1938) and S.I. Hayakawa’s *Language in Action* (1941), the ideas of the Polish-American linguist and philosopher struck a sensitive chord amid the anxiety, ideological confusion and social tension that marked the New Deal era. A move away from emotional, moral or ideological identifications and toward a mathematical, scientific approach to language would be able to do away with many of its these false ambiguities presently exploited by advertisers and propagandists, and return communication to a more sane and precise order (cf. Selzer and George 2007, 191, Weiser 2008, 120-122).

In a 1938 article called “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” written with Chase’s *The Tyranny of Words* (which Burke reviewed for *The New Republic* earlier that year) in mind, Burke challenged Korzybski’s semantic approach and formulated his own ‘poetic’ alternative. Although he found himself in agreement with Korzybski on the fact that language abstracts from reality and thereby influences human experience of the world, Burke’s rejects Korzybski’s ideal of a neutral vocabulary. While sympathetic to Korzybski’s conviction that the study of ways of saying might benefit society, Burke does not believe that the attempt to “cut away, to abstract, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning” (PLF 148) is the answer to the challenge which the distortive capacities of language pose to cognition. Instead, his essay is “intended to give support [...] to the thesis that the ideal of a purely ‘neutral’ vocabulary, free of emotional weightings” (PLF 138) is both undesirable and unattainable because it “attempts to make a totality out of a fragment” (PLF 138) – an attempt which causes general semantics to display a diminished awareness of the impact of symbol-usage on human behavior in general, as well as on its own practice as a science.

To understand Burke’s position in this conversation with general semantics, it is necessary to trace it back to ideas developed in his first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement*. There, Burke discusses the “modes of experience” that arise from the interaction between an organism and its environment. As organisms use their senses to explore the world around them, their sense-impressions gradually differentiate into distinctive patterns of experience or habits. The acquisition of such habits is an important part of any organism’s development: their fixed, unthinking responses to sensations of hunger, fear, or sexual arousal are crucial to the successful survival of an organism (CS 152). All living organisms are thus able to make contact with their environment through sensation, and thus of forming patterns of behavior. In this sense,

Burke says, “all living things are critics” (P&C 4). However, Burke believes that language offers a heightened critical capacity that sets the human organism apart:

the experimental, speculative technique made available by speech would seem to single out the human species as the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of experience to a criticism of criticism. We not only interpret the character of events [...] - we may also interpret our interpretations. (P&C 6)

This ability to “interpret our interpretations” is, in essence, the ability to represent our own behavior to ourselves. This ability offers a distinct advantage over patterns of behavior that are tied exclusively to sensory experience. Because language allows us to hold our actions up to scrutiny, we can test our interpretations and measure their accuracy in a given situation without having to resort to experience. What is more, language allows us to share these interpretations with each other, testing them not just against our own good conscience but also against that of others.

But language also greatly complicates the relation between man and his world. On the one hand, its imaginative capacity softens the grip which the immediacies of stimulus and response exert on animal behavior: because humans can represent their behavior to themselves, they can decide between alternative courses without having to pass through experience. But even as the power of representation frees us from the bondage of sensory stimuli, the heightened critical ability to scrutinize our own behavior and that of others which it yields introduces dangers entirely its own: “No slight critical ability is required,” Burke sneers, “for one to hate as his deepest enemy a people thousands of miles away” (P&C 6). Burke locates the root of these dangers in a single property of language: “The essential distinction,” he says in a long, four-part essay called “A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language” (reprinted in *Language as Symbolic Action*) “*between the verbal and the nonverbal is in the fact that language adds the peculiar possibility of the Negative*” (LASA 453-454, Burke’s italics). Animal patterns of experience are tied exclusively to the positive, meaningless and amoral materiality of existence; man’s symbolic prowess, on the other hand, infuses the world with the possibility of negative acts (not running), states (not eating) and commands (not doing). A sign in the park that reads “DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS” is unlikely to keep a hungry chicken from racing to the crumbs of food it sees at the other end of the lawn. The hungry but symbol-savvy man or woman, however, might well interrupt their spontaneous act of walking and take the prescribed detour over the paved walkway that leads to the hotdog stand.

As this example makes clear, the introduction of a symbolic dimension into nature changes the way we act: “[M]en are not only in nature, says Burke: “the cultural accretions made possible by the language motive become a ‘second nature’ with them” (GM 33). Coating nature with a layer of moral prescriptions and property rights, waving

the laws and penalties designed to keep these prescriptions in place, and invoking corresponding feelings of transgression and guilt, the sign on the park lawn codes visitor's space, introduces rules of behavior, and reveals what is ostensibly communal and public to be run through with subtle relations of property. Unlike the primary world of sensation in which we are born, this symbolic second nature has to be acquired through language and education; its tests are social and cultural, rather than sensory and experiential. Nonetheless, we operate in this world of the symbolic much in the same way as we do in the world of the sensory: just as we develop habits – behavioral shortcuts toward the fulfillment of the biological needs of food, survival and reproduction – in the latter, so do we acquire and interiorize patterns of language – fixed images, ways of expression and conceptual vocabularies – that aid our actions in the realm of the symbolic.

Burke calls this linguistic equivalent to habits “terministic screens” (LASA 44-62). Using an analogy from visual culture, he compares the effect of these linguistic screens to the color filters on a camera lense. When we use various color filters to take photographs of the same object, this object will acquire a slightly altered hue, revealing distinctions in texture and form. In similar fashion, a given terministic screen will highlight certain aspects of our world while downplaying others: “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (LASA 45). The same phenomenon – a sudden drop in stockmarket prices, for instance – might be described using very different vocabularies – economic, political, psychological, etc. – each of them leading to a modified understanding of the ‘reality’ at hand. The word ‘crash’ (instead of ‘correction’ or ‘bursting bubble’) already carries a way of looking and a potential program of response within itself; even so apparently neutral a word as ‘slump’ projects the idea of a subsequent rise. As Burke says,

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of the possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms. (LASA 45-46)

To both Korzybski and Burke, the consequences of this ability of language to ‘screen’ the world from us in different ways is potentially problematic. Not only do the structural characteristics of language drive us to project simplistic categories of understanding on complex realities, these categories may sever all connections between our actions and the real, causing what Burke (adapting a notion by Thorstein Veblen) calls a “trained incapacity” (P&C 7). Human beings can so profoundly internalize certain patterns of experience that they may project them unto situations where they are not applicable.

This way “one’s very abilities can function as blindness” (P&C 7): our habits come to think for us and they lead us to project desired patterns onto unfit circumstances.

## 2.2 Semantic Observation vs. Poetic Drama

Burke appreciated these parallels between Korzybski’s thinking and his own. As he says in the *Grammar*:

Korzybski helps to show how the conveniences of linguistic classification can become drastic inconveniences, leading to such morbid ‘semantic reactions’ as race prejudice whereby many individuals greatly different from one another are lumped together as though their characters were substantially the same. (GM 248)

Korzybski, however, translates the insight that language creates patterns of meaning that need not have any basis in the real into the belief that the link between sign and referent might be restored:

we can learn to regulate these processes, which otherwise may become pathological, and to redirect the currents into constructive survival channels [...] through the elimination of identification, by training in order, in consciousness of abstracting, and similar disciplines, and thus eliminate the pathological semantic disturbances of confusion of orders of abstractions. (Korzybski 1994, 297)

Korzybski’s ideal, Burke says, is fundamentally nominalist and scientist: it holds that language is a conveyor of meaning which can be tuned into a neutral, one-to-one correspondence with the real. Burke takes care to point out that this ideal of a neutral vocabulary is not upheld by general semantics alone: in its purest form, it is a general scientific model that underlies both the philosophy of logical positivism (PLF 141), as well as the chemist’s formulas and the calculations of the physicist (PLF 150). Such sciences seek to ‘name’ events by ensuring a maximal degree of correspondence between the symbols they use and the realities they describe. These realities are what Burke elsewhere calls the world of motion – “the extrasymbolic or nonsymbolic operations of nature” (1968, 447). Though Burke is skeptical about our ability to avoid the ramifications of language even when we describe pure motion like the orbits of planets or interactions between chemicals, by themselves these planets and chemicals exist in a universe that operates wholly without language. Given the success of positivist sciences at making predictions about this symbol-empty world of motion “it is the hope of the semanticist to build a vocabulary for the discussion of human, or social, events after the same model” (PLF 151). This vocabulary, Burke says, “does not judge, but

describes or places, as the psychologists' terminology is designed simple to name how things are, regardless of what you want them to be" (PLF 151).

To get to such a purely descriptive vocabulary, Korzybski and Chase divide all statements into those which can empirically be shown to correspond to fact and which are, therefore, meaningful, and those in which such referential function is absent and which should therefore be unmasked as meaningless. By sanctioning the former and unmasking the latter, general semanticists hope to align meaning to experience. Making the sign transparent, they seek to lift the fog of symbols that hangs between the subject and his physical environment. However, Burke argues, not every meaningful statement corresponds to a referential object. In trying to restrict the meanings with which our symbolic prowess imbues the world to those that can be equated to fact, general semantics excludes a large section of human experience. Burke illustrates this with the statement "New York City is in Iowa." A Korzybskian semanticist would have little to say about this sentence, apart from the fact that it is blatantly false and must therefore be discarded as nonsensical. However, while "New York City is in Iowa" may not hold up to the test of fact, it may still correspond to meaningful experience:

Has one ever stood, for instance, in some little outlying town, on the edge of the wilderness, and watched a train gone by? Has one perhaps suddenly felt that the train, and its tracks, were a kind of arm of the city, reaching out across the continent [...] It is in such a sense that New York City can be found all over the country – and I submit that one would miss very important meanings, meanings that have much to do with the conduct of our inhabitants, were he to proceed here by the either-or kind of test. (PLF 144)

These meanings are not statements whose referent is the kind of 'truth' that can withstand strict semantic probing. Rather, Burke says, they are metaphors "weighted with emotional value, with attitudes" (PLF 143). While "New York City is in Iowa" is useless as a practical guideline to a lost driver looking to get to the city, it may nonetheless offer that driver valid insights about the impact of modern means of travel and communication on American life and the omnipresence of urban values and products as the ideal standard of living – insights that may even persuade him not to go to New York at all. Appealing to our hopes and fears, beliefs and convictions, metaphors may not be empirically verifiable, but their impact on our lives is measurable and real because they shape our orientations to the world and the way we act in it.

Instead of ruling out metaphorical language and its attitudinal meanings, a science of man must look for instances where such meanings are vividly present. But such a shift from statement to emotionally laden utterance, Burke argues, requires a corresponding shift in method. The test of attitudes "cannot be a formal one, as with the diagrams of testing a syllogism [...] [p]oetic characterizations do not categorically exclude each other in the either-true-or-false sense" (PLF 145). The claim that New York City is in Iowa does

not refute statements that ‘New York City is in Washington’ or ‘New York City is in Beijing;’ these merely single out different attitudes, stressing alternative aspects of meaning (the influence of a major economic and intellectual center on American politics, or its global impact, respectively). Rather than by abstraction or formulaic reasoning, “[t]he test of a metaphor’s validity is of a much more arduous sort, requiring nothing less than the filling-out, by concrete body, of the characterizations which one would test” (PLF 145). Such concrete embodiments would reveal which metaphor is able to “integrate wider areas of human relationship” – in other words, which metaphor would be able to encompass more situations, for which reason “it would be assigned a higher place [...] in a hierarchy of possible perspectives” (PLF 146).

Positivist semantics “fosters, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by implication, the notion that one may comprehensively discuss human and social events in a nonmoral vocabulary, and that perception itself is a nonmoral act” (PLF 164); it would “try to cut away, to abstract, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning” and “[stress] the role of the observer, whose observations it is hoped will define situations with sufficient realistic accuracy to prepare an adequate *chart* for action” (PLF 147/149). Burke’s alternative poetic semantics, on the other hand, foregrounds moral involvement, holding that “true knowledge can only be attained through the battle, stressing the role of the participant, who in the course of his participation, it is hoped, will define situations with sufficient realist accuracy to prepare an *image* for action” (PLF 149-150). The hierarchic structuring – pitting one metaphor against another to determine which is better suited to represent a given situation or set of situations – on which it depends cannot be a neutral activity: it entails an aspect of choice that cannot be informed by observation and description alone. Burke’s semanticist is not impartial; she is an interpreter whose involved response to the actions of others is itself, in turn, an act. This does not, however, mean that the ambition to transcend one’s individual perspective needs to be abandoned: a poetic semantics, too, aims to be “beyond good and evil” (PLF 149). But if positivism would reach this end through “the programmatic elimination of a weighted vocabulary at the start (the neutralization of names containing attitudes, emotional predisposition),” poetic interpretation

would attain the same end by exposure to the maximum profusion of weightings. The first would be aside from the battle, stressing the rôle of the observer, whose observations it is hoped will define situations with sufficiently realistic accuracy to prepare an adequate chart for action; the second would contend, by implication, that true knowledge can only be attained through the battle, stressing the rôle of the participant, who in the course of his participation, it is hoped, will define situations with sufficient realistic accuracy to prepare an image for action. (PLF 149 – 150)

Burke repeats a strain of thought he developed earlier, in *Permanence and Change*, where he had argued that science needed a corrective rationalization, one that would “move in the direction of the anthropomorphic or humanistic or poetic since this is the aspect of culture which the scientific criteria, with their emphasis upon dominance rather than upon inducement, have tended to minimize” (P&C 65). Inducement, Burke argues, is a central aspect of language:

speech in its essence is not neutral. Far from aiming at suspended judgment, the spontaneous speech of a people is loaded with judgment. It is intensely moral – its names for objects contain emotional overtones which give us the cues as to how we should act toward these objects. (P&C 176 – 177)

The semantic ideal of a neutral language desensitizes us to these moral and emotional overtones; the plain referential ‘is’ of positivist semantics blinds us to this rhetorical component of all speech – including that of its own. Its poetic corrective, on the other hand, would promote a way of seeing “in which the participant aspect of action attained to its maximum expression” (P&C 269 – 270). Or, as Burke alternatively phrases it in “Poetic and Semantic Meaning,” “[t]he semantic ideal envisions a vocabulary that avoids drama. The poetic ideal envisions a vocabulary that goes through drama” (PLF 149).

One of the ways through which criticism could effect such a poetic corrective is by means of what Burke calls “perspective by incongruity,” it is “a method for gauging situations by verbal ‘atom cracking.’ That is, a word belongs to a certain category – and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category” (ATH 308). Taking concepts out of their familiar, commonsense semantic environments and placing in a new setting, Burke writes, “would liquidate belief in the absolute truths of concepts by reminding us that the mixed dead metaphors of abstract thought are metaphors nonetheless” (ATH 229). This way, Burke argues,

‘perspective by incongruity’ makes for a *dramatic* vocabulary, with weighting and counter-weighting, in contrast with the liberal ideal of *neutral* naming in the characterization of processes. [...] The neutral ideal prompts one to forget that terms are *characters*, that an essay is an *attenuated* play. [...] Names are shorthand designations for certain fields and methods of action.” (ATH 311-312)

Throughout his writing, Burke would consistently challenge the semantic ideal of neutral naming, favoring instead both a vocabulary and approach that proceeds through weighting and counter-weighting. If the neutral vocabularies of science aim at the systematic elimination of all emotional, evaluative of partial aspects of language, Burke’s dramatism urges researchers to take these elements of verbal ‘battle’ as their central object of study.

Thus, Burke reorients the focus of scientific debate to dramatic rhetoric rather than to semantic truth. One of the ways in which this can be done, Burke says, is by looking at the ‘incongruous’ change and exchange of bits of vocabulary. By tracking the changes of meaning that occur within concepts as they are used by various people within a given debate, critics can identify the various symbolic actions performed and expose the full context of the rhetorical drama performed in a certain text, field of study or cultural moment. In my own project, I will focus on just such exchanges of interpretive vocabulary between Burke and the New Critics, noting how they generate ‘incongruous’ readings of specific literary texts. However, as Burke makes clear, such a topical concern with the role that interpretive concepts play in a dramatic exchange rather than with their ability to convey certain meaning-contents, forces researchers to keep the rhetorical nature of their own interpretive vocabularies and strategies under constant scrutiny.

## 2.3 Metaphor, Metonymy and Synecdoche: “Representative Anecdotes” and the Problem of Deflection

This rhetorical self-awareness is the topic of “Four Master Tropes,” an essay Burke submitted to the *Kenyon Review* in March 1941. Now widely regarded as a key piece in the development of his epistemology, Burke announced to the *Review*’s editor, John Crowe Ransom, that “Four Master Tropes” was intended as an “extension” of thoughts on the cognitive role of metaphor developed earlier in *Permanence and Change* (in: Tell 2004). In his chapter on “Perspective as Metaphor” in that book, Burke had already united science and poetry. As both are enterprises preoccupied with the discovery fresh ways of seeing, Burke argues that it would make sense to look for techniques that deal with the discovery, characterization and classifications of events that recur across the disciplinary borders of science and poetry (P&C 91-92). The poet’s technique is that of metaphor, the flash of insight that is caused by uniting two previously disconnected words. The scientist, on the other hand, takes the more patient and pedestrian route of “analogical extension, as when one makes a new machine by conceiving of some old process, such as the treadle, the shuttle, the wheel... etc., carried over into some set of facts to which none has previously felt that it belonged” (P&C 96). The effect of such analogical extensions is to break down accepted pieties: by connecting walking to the previously stationary act of making a phonecall, one creates the innovative idea of a mobile phone. Thus, Burke says, “[t]he heuristic value of scientific analogies is quite like the surprise of metaphor” (P&C 96) – as the poet welds bits of language together in



order to form a fresh image, so the scientist builds on previous inventions and concepts to construct new ones.

It is these heuristic abilities of metaphor on which Burke draws as the foundation of his “Four Master Tropes.” Here, too, Burke argues that metaphor is the primary device we have for “the discovery and description of ‘the truth’” because it allows “for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this” (GM 503). Objects do not come to us as raw aggregates of visual stimuli; rather, we use context – previous experiences or expectations about that object’s nature to make sense of what we observe. All seeing is a seeing as that is, to some extent, informed by a particular position or set of presuppositions (Cralle 2000, 323): we see a tree, for instance, as a hindrance (the motorist), as a source of fuel (the lumberjack), as a connection between earth and the heavens (the writer of the Edda) or as a micro-ecosystem (the biologist). Each of these metaphors, however, offers only one particular way of seeing: they offer selections, none of which exhausts the “infinity of events” that constitutes the actual tree. Burke had already made this point with aphoristic clarity in *Permanence and Change* when he argued that “[A] way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (P&C 49) – a fact clearly illustrated by the incommensurable points of view of those who see the tree as a source of fuel and those who see it as an ecosystem and argue in favor of its preservation.

And yet, even though we are often aware of the limits of the words we use, Burke argues that we cannot escape using them. “Even while guarding against the misguidance of metaphor on one level,” he says, “we are simply forcing the covert operation of metaphorical thought to a deeper level. [...] It is precisely through metaphor that our perspectives, or analogical extensions, are made – a world without metaphor would be a world without purpose” (PC 194). It is here, with Burke’s realization that metaphors allow us to see something by showing us certain aspects at the expense of others that we reach a significant textual crux in Burke’s written record. In *A Grammar of Motives* (1941), Burke argues that

Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality. (GM 59)

In “Terministic Screens,” part of the 1966 *Language as Symbolic Action* but published one year earlier in the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Burke argues that

If any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality. (LASA 45)

At first sight, there is little difference between this statement and its near-identical predecessor. But although both look similar enough, Bryan Crable points out that there is a “difference that makes all the difference” (2000, 322). In the *Grammar*, deflection is a liability raised “in certain circumstances;” in “Terministic Screens” it is an inevitability, because terminologies “must” be deflative. In other words, while the *Grammar* suggests that even though not every analytical vocabulary will prove adequate to the task of representation, some may achieve success; “Terministic Screens” holds that all terminologies, because they are words about a subject, inevitably steer us away from that subject itself (Crable 2000, 322).

According to Brock, we can make sense of these divergent positions only if we see them as products of different stages in Burke’s thinking: a first dialectic/realist, a second symbolic/idealist. In the former, which Brock situates in the early part of Burke’s career, “a separate reality is central to [Burke’s] program for criticism, because he casts communicative acts as distinct reactions to an external ‘reality’” (1993, 312). At this stage, Burke’s concern lies with epistemological issues, reflected in a dualist approach to the relation between symbol using and the real. From 1968 on, however, Burke abandons his dualistic, utilitarian way of thinking in favor of a conception of language as an autotelic system. In this new way of thinking, symbolicity forsakes its epistemological function to become an ontology; instead of being a tool in the acquisition of knowledge, it becomes the condition of human life itself.<sup>3</sup> Burke’s apparent change of mind about the problem of deflection matches this bifurcation to a tee: in the statement from the *Grammar*, deflection is an epistemological hazard that occurs when circumstance causes an interpretive vocabulary to fall short of its reflective ambitions. In “Terministic Screens,” on the other hand, deflection and circumstance merge, so that deflection itself becomes the ontological condition of all interpretive activity.

All this leads Brock to argue that “the evolution of Burke’s philosophy of rhetoric forces writers to identify which rhetorical system they are using” (1993, 326). With Chesebro, he sees Burke’s contrasting statements on the risk of interpretive deflection as a prefiguration of the “fundamental change in his conception of symbol-using” (Chesebro 1988, 180) that seemed to take place in Burke’s 1968 contribution of a lemma on ‘dramatism’ to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. In *A Grammar of Motives*, where the notion surfaced for the first time, Burke had proposed dramatism as a critical tool: based on the metaphor of man as participant in a drama, it serves as a

---

<sup>3</sup> Brock stresses that Burke stops short of pursuing the ultimate – monist – consequences of this position. While Burke does seem to claim, at some points, that language is all we know, this does not entail that language is all there is. Though they are unified in the human body, Burke still casts symbolic and nonsymbolic entities as distinct (1993, 319).

frame of explication for the ways in which individuals and groups use symbols to describe, create and regulate social interaction. In 1968, however, Burke rejects this metaphorical nature of dramatism. Instead, he argues that it offers a “literal” definition of the human being whose mental existence, because of its “special ability for ‘symbolic action’” is confined exclusively to the realm of words (1968, 448). This way, dramatism ceases to be a critical tool and becomes, instead, “a philosophy of language” that also serves as “a general conception of man and of human relations” (1968, 446).

Burke’s rival pronunciations on deflection seem indeed to mimic an evolution from a ‘realist’ to a ‘constructionist’ conception of how language influences knowledge. My tracking the changes in Burke’s dramatist methodology as it responds to Richards, Brooks and Tate, and Empson, will indeed reveal an increasing tendency on Burke’s part to stress the primacy of the symbolic or linguistic, an evolution that coincides with Burke’s growing interest in the communal and determined action of the tragic drama over the individual freedom of the lyric. However, I do not believe, as Brock does, that this forces us to choose between either one of Burke’s rhetorical ‘systems,’ embracing either one as an absolute or ultimate position of Burke’s.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I would argue that the ‘literal’ drama – the one where human actions play entirely within the prison-house of our linguistic nature – is a constant temptation of Burke’s rhetorical dramatism, but not one to which it finally concedes. Even if the symbolic devices of our own making reduces us to fighting ghost battles with each other and the real, there is always, in Burke, the possibility of fighting these battles without harming ourselves and, as I will argue in my final chapter, the hope that some freedom beyond them may be attained.

In “Four Master Tropes,” this constant preoccupation of Burke’s to tune our symbolic machinery into more productive channels translates into an attempt to transcend the dichotomies between the scientific and the poetic ways of seeing by subsuming them into a more general theory of tropes. Taking ‘metaphor,’ the transaction between contexts, as the constitutive form of language and thought, Burke argues that metaphors build perspectives we can use to make sense of the real, turning its liquid chaos of impulses into a meaningful form by making selections among these impulses – a process which, Burke argues, “necessarily involves varying degrees of incongruity in that the two realms are never identical” (GM 504). Here, metaphor shades into a second trope: metonymy. By treating a subject (‘tree’) in terms of one another (‘fuel’ or ‘nature’), metaphorical selections allow for translations between different realms of meaning. Such associative extensions focus on a single aspect of a matter at hand; they offer a reduction of that subject. Burke argues that such reductions are a necessary part

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wess forecloses the need to choose between Burke’s realist and constructivist side by arguing convincingly that Burke’s writing displays realist and constructionist tendencies at the same time (1996, 3-5).

of all inquiry: a nonreductive approach to his own study of human motives, for instance, would require “no less than a universal history of human culture [...] every judgement, exhortation, or admonition, every view of natural or supernatural reality, every intention or expectation” (GM xxii, cf. Crable 2000, 324). Clearly, this is an impossible undertaking, so in its stead Burke aims to devise a perspective or “system of placement” that would be able “to ‘generate’ or ‘anticipate’ the various classes of motivational theory.” Therefore, he will “[reduce] the subject synoptically while still permitting us to appreciate its scope and complexity” (GM xxii – xxiii).

While perspective-taking is a necessary element of every inquisitive endeavor, this passage makes clear that Burke does not consider each perspective to be equally suited to the task of representation. While some perspectives manage to contract a subject to a manageable simplicity without losing its scope and complexity, others are distortive, leading to simplification (Crable 2000, 327):

Insofar as the vocabulary [in an inquiry] meets the needs of reflection, we can say that it has the necessary scope [...] Its scope and reduction become a deflection when a given terminology, or calculus, is not suited to the subject matter which it is designed to calculate. (GM 59)

In other words, while some perspectives may prove succesful at reflecting the subject at hand, others may fall short of that task, leading us away from the subject and causing deflection. One may, for instance, liken human interaction to the dance of chemicals, but since this comparision does not cover the linguistic aspect of people’s lives, it will prove inadequate when used as a perspective on social traffic (GM 59 – 60).

It is here, faced with the risk of deflection to which metonymic reductions may give rise, that Burke introduces the notion of the “representative anecdote.” Every form of inquiry needs to “[seek] for ‘controlled’ cases, as anecdotes in conformity with which to form one’s terminology,” (GM 78) but these controlled cases may prove to be simplifications rather than reductions to a manageable simplicity. Like the chemist’s claim that humans coexist as interconnected proteins, such simplifications are merely informative: they lop off crucial parts of what they are taken to represent and force their subjects into an inadequate terminology.<sup>5</sup> Informative cases only go one way, as the chemist would soon find out if he were to approach his fellow lab workers as if they were indeed proteins. However, Burke says, “one can avoid the bias of his instruments (that is, the bias of being too simplist) [...] if he chooses a representative example of an

---

<sup>5</sup> Burke distinguishes between ‘informative’ and ‘representative’ anecdotes in “Four Master Tropes,” but treats the two as synonyms elsewhere (GM 60). However, as the distinction between both types of anecdote is informative and – I believe with Crable (2000, 324) – also representative of what Burke is trying to say, I will maintain it here.

act” (GM 78). Like informative ones, representative anecdotes take control of their subject through selection and reduction, but unlike informative cases, representative reductions do not close themselves off from their referent. Representative anecdotes, then, are not just metonymical; they are marked by a third trope, synecdoche:

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, from quantity to quality; but [metonymical] reduction follows along this road in only one direction, from quality to quantity. (RM 509)

Synecdoche, then, is Burke’s response to the threat of metonymic excess he finds looming in the way scientists use anecdotes. Burke’s example is that of ‘shame.’ Both scientist and poet might use bodily metaphors – eye movement, blushing and timid bodily posture – as anecdotes from which to build their perspective on what shame ‘is’. All these anecdotes use metonymical extension to reduce what is a complex, immaterial experience to a simple, material expression. The scientist, however, will take these bodily effects as equivalents which, once all of them have been measured and described, together provide a complete knowledge of ‘shame.’ The poet, on the other hand, is aware “that they are but part of the idiom of expression involved in the act” (GM 507). Downcast eyes or reddened cheeks may signal shame, but by themselves these material expressions not cover the complex totality of ‘shame’ (which includes, among others, also mental states and social prescriptions). If scientific metonymy reduces the complex immaterial experience of shame to the material expression of ‘colored cheeks,’ poetic synecdoche restores the connection between reductive representation and original experience:

every art, in its nature as a medium, reduces a state of consciousness to a ‘corresponding’ sensory body (so material that 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’). (GM 509-510)

The difference between reductive and synecdochic metonymy allows Burke to reframe and refine rhetorically the distinction between ‘scientific’ and ‘poetic’ ways of seeing he made in his refutation of Korzybski’s positivist semantics. A scientific perspective, Burke argues, looks for ‘real’ or substantial reductions: it breaks down complex phenomena into their component parts because it is convinced that greater simplicity equals greater explanatory power. Known as ‘Occam’s razor,’ this principle is what leads general semantics to take the statement as its informative case of language. Korzybski,

Burke argues, shapes his terminology according to this principle, causing him to metonymically reduce ‘utterance’ to ‘statement.’

Though this reduction yields Korzybski an informative case (because statements are indeed utterances and can therefore tell us something about them), it is nonetheless found lacking as a representative anecdote for the analysis of meaning. Korzybski’s case is “a reduction in the restricted sense of the term” (GM 511) because it does not display the connectedness and reversibility which are requisites of representative anecdotes: though all statements are meaningful utterances, not every meaningful utterance is a statement. Burke’s ‘poetic’ drama on the other hand, does have synecdochic properties which its counterpart lacks: statements lie within the scope of what is generally understood to be dramatic, but so do the invocations, threats, exclamations – in short, all what Burke in “Semantic and Poetic Meaning” calls “stylized” expressions (PLF 146) that are part of everyday meaningful language but which the positivist semanticist would exclude. Burke’s metaphor of language as ‘poetic,’ then, is representative because it allows him to recover the full meaning of its original subject. Thus, Burke argues, “synecdochic representation is [...] seen to be a necessary ingredient of a *truly realistic* philosophy” (PLF 26).

As Tell has argued, the representational brand of ‘realistic’ knowledge which Burke’s ‘representative anecdotes’ create differs from platonic conceptions of representation in its stress on audience inducement. In Burke’s model, “language can still not represent shame by strict one-to-one correspondence, but it can induce the audience to understand shame” (Tell 2004). Language does not *reproduce* reality, as Korzybski believed it could when it could be coerced into dropping its emotional weightings: instead, it *constructs* reality through a process of selection, the success of which depends on whether or not it enables people to recover the original complexity of what it aims to represent. As Burke says in his *Rhetoric of Motives*, “wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric, and wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is ‘persuasion’” (RM 172). Equal to its being representational, then, language is inherently rhetorical:

Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols. (RM 43, original in italics)

Such Burkean rhetoric, Wess argues, has some decisive advantages over the differential model of Saussurean linguistics:

Burke’s synecdochic logic works by presupposing a reality larger than the scope of any anecdote. The premise, in other words, is that there is a containing reality in general as well as contained anecdotes in particular. By contrast, the Saussurean premise that language is a system of differences with no positive terms eliminates even the limited “reflection” that the synecdoche allows. [...] At bottom, the

differential model turns the relation between words and what is "out there" beyond words into a dualism in which one is "apart from" the other, analogous to the way that Descartes conceives mind as apart from matter. Burke's "a part of" synecdochic logic refuses such dualism, presupposing instead containing whole and contained part. (Wess 2004)

Though our selections are always partial, they are also 'part of' a greater whole that can act as a measure for their success and are, therefore, open to deliberation. The epistemological model that Burke puts forward in "Four Master Tropes" is doubly rhetorical. As Wess says, the term anecdote "insists on the situational positionality of the model on which any terminology is based. The selection of an anecdote, moreover, is itself an act in a situation [...] An act of selecting an anecdote is situated in historical processes. Terminologies have agendas" (1996, 118).

## 2.4 Irony, Comedy and the Parlor Conversation

I will discuss the use of "representative anecdotes" for my own methodological agenda in the next section of this chapter. Before I do so, however, I want to explain why Burke, after having rendered the distinction between poetry and science moot by subsuming the former under the latter, found it necessary to add the fourth trope, irony, to his tropology of symbolic action. The answer to this question, I will show, will lead us back to Burke's fear – expressed so powerfully in his essay on "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" – of the silencing of parliamentary debate. In her astute analysis of the essay, Weiser suggests that Burke's endorsement of parliamentary debate in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" addresses not just the dangers of fascist dictatorship abroad; writing with the League of American Writer's call for a united antifascist front behind president Roosevelt in mind, Burke was equally weary of the wartime call for a monological unity at home (2008, 61-70). To Korzybski's semantic ideal and its observational certainties, Burke had upheld his own poetic semantics which stressed complicity; here, in answer to political attempts to effect a "'unified' kind of criticism that simply seeks for conscious ways of making one's position more 'efficient,' more thoroughly itself," Burke was stressing the need for a criticism "in the 'parliamentary' sense of doubt, of hearkening to the opposition and attempting to mature a policy in the light of counter-policies" (PLF 211). As Weiser says, Burke believed that

[t]he world was fighting physically because it had given up on verbal, agonistic debate, in which each person 'puts in their oar,' as he had described it in PLF,

speaks their piece, aligns with some and against others – all in the realm of the verbal, and all for the sake of a transcending outcome” (2008, 65)

As I have argued above, Burke believed that anecdotes become representative by inducing people to ‘re-present’ the complex totality from which they were taken. But this requires that anecdotes reveal their nature as symbolizations, which means that they must show themselves as being ‘partial’ in a double sense. First, representative anecdotes must make clear that they are selections, allowing people to ponder their possible deflective workings and – potentially – recover the whole from which they are part. Second, anecdotes must be seen to be partial in that they are terminologies involved in a rhetorical programme for action that is never neutral: situated in a specific historical moment and used for specific purposes, anecdotes always have agendas. What differentiates the scientist/positivist and the critic/dramatist, then, is that the latter does not seek to hide the partial nature of her anecdotes or her own rhetorical purpose for them:

A human rôle (such as we get in drama) may be summed up in certain slogans, or formulae, or epigrams, or ‘ideas’ that characterize an agent’s situation or strategy. The rôle involves properties both intrinsic to the agent and developed with relation to the scene and to other agents. And the ‘summings-up’ (‘ideas’) similarly possess properties derived both from agent and from the various factors with which the agent is in relationship. *Where the ideas are in action, we have drama; where the agents are in ideation, we have dialectic.* (GM 511-512, italics mine)

The scientist, on the other hand, avoids the dramatic clash of ideas: focusing on the relation between sign and referent, she avoids going into the relations between signs themselves. At the same time, this also stalls the dialectical exchange between people that takes place through the drama of ideas. Scientists, Burke believes, are not interested in exchange: instead, they seek to develop more ‘efficient’ ways of speaking in order to discredit the ideas of others, stalling drama and fragmenting the dialectic. In this way, the scientific perspective is akin to the unified sort of criticism which Burke rejects in “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” as one-sided and needlessly polarizing (cf. *supra*). In a striking passage, Burke inverts the commonsensical understanding of ‘relativity.’ From a scientific perspective, Burke admits, “[i]t is certainly relativistic to state that any term (as per metaphor-perspective) can be seen from the point of view of any other term” (GM 513). Indeed, the test of dialectic or synecdochic reversal to which the representative anecdote must conform seems to leave the door open to accusations that the ambition to locate truth is abandoned altogether. According to Burke, however, it is rather the belief that every phenomenon can be reduced to a singular, simple truth that should be called relativist:



For relativism sees everything in but one set of terms – and since there are endless other terms in which things could be seen, the irony of the monologue that makes everything in its image would be in this ratio: the greater the absolutism of the statements, the subjectivity and relativity in the agent making the statements. (GM 512)

In order to be truly representative, then, anecdotes must withstand the temptation of absolutism by taking other possible perspectives on their subject into account:

It is customary to think that objective reality is dissolved by such relativity of terms as we get through the shifting of perspectives (the perception of one character in terms of many diverse characters). But on the contrary, it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character's reality. (GM 504)

Thus, the requirement that representative anecdotes display their double partiality leads to the need to incorporate other (equally partial) perspectives:

Burke finds in synecdoche enough connection between a representation and what it represents for it to qualify as a model for the representative anecdote, but a synecdochic representation does not qualify as the 'mirror of nature' that Rorty identifies as the model in classical epistemology. Synecdoches are representations that rhetorically qualify one another as they question and modify one another in a dramatic dialectic. Irony is the structure of such qualification. (Wess 1996, 118)

Not only must representative anecdotes display the dialectic sensibilities of synecdoche, they must incorporate a fourth trope, irony, into their construction: "irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms" (GM 512). This way, Burke hopes, representative anecdotes will produce, if not the absolute truths claimed by science, then "a 'resultant certainty' of a different quality, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but contributory" (GM 513). Instead of debunking rival ways of seeing, representative anecdotes treat them as contributory voices: "[t]rue 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" (GM 514).

Burke's addition of 'irony' as a fourth trope to his rhetorical correction on the positivist model of representation, Booth argues in *Critical Understanding*, "is a way of doing justice to the many critical voices without letting any of them achieve its destructive potential" (1979, 115). Thus, Burke's tropological/poetic model for intellectual exchange does not seek to discredit its semantic/scientific rival; instead, it absorbs it as a contributory voice, a synecdochic part to the complex whole of intellectual inquiry into our world. It is an ideal of scholarly exchange that finds its

most forceful expression in Burke's metaphor of the conversational parlor as the ideal of scholarly exchange in the title essay of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, 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. [...] 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 [...]. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (PLF 110-111)

Such a model of scientific enquiry, framed as a parlor of many voices that are locked in an ever ongoing exchange, is always at risk of collapsing in either an all-out fight (as had the world at the time Burke was writing his "Four Master Tropes") or of rigidifying in an uneasy peace, with locked positions or 'schools' that no longer absorb elements from each other (a clear foreboding of the Cold War that would come to be). Burke is certainly aware of the risk that this position entails: "relativism," he says, "is the constant temptation of either dialectic or drama" (GM 513).

What can stop this from happening is turning the virtue of ironic humility into what Burke calls the "comic perspective" on literature, criticism, and life. Such a comic perspective, Burke argues "considers human life as a project in 'composition,' where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, and also revision, hence offering maximum opportunity for the resources of *criticism*" (ATH 173). While always aiming for a perspective that transcends division, developing "representative" critical formulations that enable her to reconstruct the full complexity of the object under scrutiny, the comic critic must at the same time also stress the limitations of knowledge, the awareness that every terministic screen also distorts what it attempts to see. "Like tragedy," Burke says,

Comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime to stupidity*. [...] The progress of humane enlightenment can go not further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken* [i.e. in need of correction rather than destruction]. 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. The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of a play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony. (ATH 41)

## 2.5 Reading Criticism as Rhetoric: some Reflections

Burke's conviction that all cognitive activity is, ultimately or to a great extent, determined by the linguistic means through which we screen the world is the fundamental drive of his dramatist meta-theory. As I see it, Burke's dramatism is, in essence, epistemic rather than evaluative – that is, it is aimed more towards an understanding of the how the medium of language serves to generate knowledge than in the 'truth' or 'ground' of knowledge itself. Looking at these phenomena through the metaphor of drama, as if all symbolic exchanges between human beings are acts in a play, it urges critics to be both close readers of the discourses they study as well of their own interpretive schemata – thus forcing them to apply a double vision that, Burke believes, will make them attentive towards the dangers of metonymic reduction and will invite them to take an essentially ironic (or comic) take on human society.

Yet apart from these broad outlines, Burke does not offer a fixed definition of what constitutes 'dramatic' criticism: rather, it seems that Burke intended dramatism as a flexible heuristic, one that could be plied to match specific objects or fields of research. In the chapters below, I will use my own version of dramatist analysis to uncover the conceptual, thematic and methodological exchanges between Burke and the New Critics by using two of the Burkean concepts that I have just discussed – the "representative anecdote" and the "critical conversation." Together, these will help me identify Burke's methodologies of reading as synecdochic "part of" a broader debate on the role and purpose of literary criticism. But before I begin applying them, I want to spend some brief moments to reflect on both concepts as they have been used by other critics or in other fields of criticism. Thus, I will devote a somewhat longer section to Steven Mailloux' appropriation of the Burkean conversation in his version of "rhetorical hermeneutics," focusing mainly on its "therapeutic" critique of literary theory (cf. Mailloux 1989, ix). But first, I will turn briefly to the debate on the nature and scope of the "representative anecdote" as it has been defined by Barry Brummett and Arnie Madsen.

Subject of the debate has been the amount of leeway which the representative anecdote allows the critic. Roughly, this debate falls apart into two sides, with on the one hand interpreters like James Conrad and Madsen, who hold to Burke's dictum that critics "must be able to extract [an] interpretation by explicit quotation from the work itself" (Burke, PLF 69 / Madsen, 210) and those like Brummett, who defend the critic's right to impose an anecdote of her own making when scrutinizing a body of discourse:

The anecdote need not have been explicitly uttered in the discourse under analysis. Instead, the anecdote is a method used by the critic. The anecdote is a lens, filter, or template through which the critic studies and reconstructs the discourse by viewing it as if it follows a dramatic plot. (1984, 163)

Burke's own definition of the representative anecdote in *A Grammar of Motives* does, indeed, seem to allow such interpretive largesse. The anecdote, Burke says there, "is in a sense a summation, containing implicitly what the system that is developed from it contains explicitly" (GM 60). It "contains in nuce the terminological structure that is evolved in conformity with it. Such a terminology is a 'conclusion' that follows from the selection of a given anecdote" (GM 60). Taking to this "summational" quality, Brummett argues that the anecdote is to be taken in the dramatic sense of a story, or tale. "In contrast to the pentadic, cluster agon, or other more word-specific approaches, the anecdote is a macroscopic tool in the array of Burkean methods" (1984, 162). The critic in search of an anecdote must therefore exercise her powers of abstraction and look for an underlying dramatic form – a storyline of plot – immanent in the discourse and able to represent the discourse (1984, 161).

Arnie Madsen has pointed to the danger of misrepresentation that lurks in such anecdotal projections on the text as Brummett argues for: "given the lack of textual support, superimposed or theoretical anecdotes necessarily undermine the search for the constitutive anecdote which accurately represents the substance of the text's motivational complex" (1993, 211). Instead, he outlines three phases through which critics can arrive at representative anecdotes, the first being statistical analysis in order to uncover relevant textual indications, the second an examination into the representative quality of these indications, and the third the erection of a relevant framework through which the anecdotes can be applied (1993, 214). Only this way, he argues, can representative anecdotes live up to the three criteria that make them "representative," namely that they reflect the linguistic nature of human action, possess adequate scope and are able to represent the text in its entirety (1993, 213).

As I see it, there are few indications (Burke-sanctioned or other) that warrant the methodological stringency which Madsen would apply to the concept of the representative anecdote: the rule of conformity to which Burke subjects the vocabulary used in relation to the informative anecdote does not, in itself, imply that the vocabulary must be derived from that anecdote in a literal sense. Burke's own informative anecdote – drama – and its terminology – the pentad – are not explicitly present in the works to which they are applied. Burke's writings, furthermore, do little to assure us that rigid critical pieties, keeping close to the verbal material of the text itself, would forestall the potentially deflating effects of perspective-taking. As Burke's own fragmented and selective readings show, not every textual element has the potential to rise to a representative status. As I see it, the difference between Madsen's vantage point on the issue and that of Brummett to be quite so wide as the former imagines it to be. Rather, it seems that both are focusing on different "rules of thumb" for the analysis of literary texts which Burke develops around the same time as the representative anecdote. Whereas Madsen prioritizes the first of these rules – the "statistical" charting of the text's imagery in order to uncover its "dramatic alignments"

(PLF 69) – to insist on maintaining a close relation to the text itself, Brummett embraces the comparative interpretive largesse of Burke’s second rule of thumb – “to look for some underlying imagery (or groupings of imagery) through which the agonistic trial takes place” (PLF 83). Both, however, are equally concerned with getting to what Burke calls the “critical points” or “watershed moments” where “some new quality enters” (PLF 78) in a text or group of texts.

It seems better, therefore, to reframe Madsen’s argument with Brummett as a plea to distinguish between the resultant levels of certainty produced by a focus on, respectively, those patterns of coherence that are probably internal to the text, and those which are introduced by an interpreter. In my own approach, I have therefore tried to walk a middle road between these lenient (Brummett) and more strict (Madsen) approaches, using a mixture of narrative projection and textual citation. As I will use them, my anecdotes are both *historical*, *conceptual* and *literary*. As historical anecdotes, they consist of a specific, historical moment or events that bring Burke into contact a New Critic. Building from this historical anecdote, I will then use a conceptual anecdote – an piece in interpretive vocabulary shared by both thinkers – as my basis in order to explore the intellectual affinities and differences between their theories of literature. This, I will do by using literary anecdotes, setting Burke’s dramatist interpretation of a canonical literary text off against those of his New Critical adversary.

Thus combining historiography, rhetoric and literary theory, I will use a variant of the critical-theoretical practice that Steven Mailloux in *Rhetorical Power* (1989) and *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism and American Cultural Politics* (1998) had called “rhetorical hermeneutics,” a practice he describes as “using rhetoric to practice theory by doing history” (1989, ix). Part of the larger field of study in the rhetoric of science that has risen in the wake of Thomas Kuhn’s groundbreaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), rhetorical hermeneutics is a field of study that focuses on the way scientific texts are used, not as a means of conveying information or data, but as rhetorical instruments – that is, as a way of convincing others of the validity of a given theory, proposition or paradigm. As Alan Gross defines the discipline in *The Rhetoric of Science*:

Rhetorical hermeneutics is about a way of reading texts as rhetoric. Rhetoric is both a discipline and a perspective from which disciplines can be viewed. As a discipline, it has a hermeneutic task and generates knowledge; as a perspective, it has the task of generating new points of view. (1990, 111)

Embracing two possible meanings of rhetoric, ‘figurative language’ and ‘persuasive action,’ rhetorical hermeneutics takes the double aim of exploring, on the one hand, how texts construe themselves as meaningful by using certain figures, tropes or arguments and, on the other, how these figural processes of meaning-making are, in turn, embedded in broader scientific and/or social discursive practices. Rhetorical hermeneutics, then, sees ‘meaning’ not as some unaltered, stable presence in the text;

instead, meaning in texts is considered as something that is made through a series of historical and cultural articulations whereby the rhetorical, figurative language of the text is variously negotiated, appropriated and disowned in order to further the interest of certain groups – interest which are generally seen as rooted in social, cultural and material practices. Scientific texts, then, are held up as what Steve Fuller calls a “sustained focus of attention:”

[w]hereby various interest groups develop stakes in promoting particular interpretations of the text, which then allows those groups to contest their differences in a relatively systematic fashion. (1997, 289)

When Steven Mailloux describes his project as “a version of cultural rhetoric studies that focuses on the tropes, arguments, and narratives constituting the interpretations of texts at specific times and places” (2002, 99), then, it fits the more general aims and methods of rhetorical hermeneutics. What singles his project out and makes it suitable to my own concern with Burke’s dramatism as a methodology that answers to New Critical theories of reading – is that Mailloux not only applies his version of rhetorical hermeneutics specifically to literature and literary theory, but that his major interpretive metaphor – that of the “cultural conversation” – is developed as a comment and correction on Burke’s own ideal of critical practice as an “unending conversation.”

In Mailloux’ vision of culture as rhetorical exchange – a vision that is heavily influenced by Said’s reading of a Foucauldian analytics ideology – Burke’s peaceful ideal of intellectual exchange becomes a more fiercely rhetorical and complex kind of exchange, one that reflects deeper structures of power and physical force:

Burke’s fable ignores an important aspect of cultural discourse: its history is composed not of a single conversation but of many. At a particular historical moment, the cultural conversation consists of different threads, several ongoing debates each with a tradition that may or may not intersect with others at various points. [...] Thus cultural history proceeds as a complex network of conversations, a network always changing its rhetorical shape over time. (1989, 87)

Interpretations, then, are “attempts to convince others of the truth of explications and explanations” (1985, 630), but these attempts are not restricted, as Burke’s parlor image would suggest, to a synchronic perspective. In Mailloux’ rhetorical hermeneutics, they become part of a diachronic history of interpretations that, together, make up a critical debate that requires multiple levels of analysis to be understood:

Rhetorical hermeneutics argues that any explanatory attempt must embed the act of interpretation first in its most relevant critical debates (and there may be several); then the act and its participation in ongoing arguments must be situated in the rhetorical traditions within relevant institutional discourses; and then the interpretive act, its arguments, and its framing institutions must be placed within

the cultural conversations, rhetorical practices, and constraining material circumstances of its historical moment. (1989, 134)

Thus, rhetorical hermeneutics offers (sometimes separately, but often at the same time) a rhetorical analysis of specific acts of interpretation as grounded in historical and social circumstance and/or a more encompassing vision of interpretive practices as grounded in institutionalized discourses. Thus, rhetorical history opens up to the scrutiny of an entire discipline, enabling Mailloux to move from specific interpretations of literary texts to their ground in the institutional forces that determine the field of literary theory.

It is primarily in this latter sense that I am interested here, since my own approach will also shift between the institutional and theoretical “conversations” between critics and their analyses of literary texts. But what I find most appealing about Mailloux’ approach to these problems is that, by alerting theorists to the role of history opening interpretive methods up to rhetorical scrutiny, it tries to offer a “therapeutic” approach to the problems that mark literary theory and create a more neutral ground on which discussion about literary meaning and methodologies of interpretation can take place. The need for this transcendent or therapeutic approach, as Mailloux indicates in his *Rhetorical Power*, dictated by the realization that literary studies, despite decades of research, have failed to agree on even the most fundamental concepts and issues of its field. Neither existing realist, nor current idealist schools of thought – locating the meaning of a literary work, respectively, in the text itself or in the author or reader – have managed to develop a protocol for interpretation that has been able to generate broad consensus and is able to do justice to every aspect of a literary text (Mailloux 1989, 7-14). In light of this failure, rhetorical hermeneutics rejects the traditional goal of literary theory to find a singularly valid model for interpretation that would yield uniformly truthful interpretation of literary texts, and embraces an approach that holds metaliterary discourse up against a broader historical and social-institutional context:

Rhetorical hermeneutics begins by rejecting the project of Theory, defined in the attempt to construct a foundationalist account of reading in general, because such a project inevitably leads to the dead ends of textual realism and readerly idealism. [...] rhetorical hermeneutics proposes to set aside the problem of explaining interpretation in terms of the characteristics of readers and the elements of texts and to focus instead on the rhetorical dynamics among interpreters within specific cultural settings. (Mailloux 1989, 145)

This way, the rhetorical analysis of an interpretive act grounds a hermeneutics that no longer awards an autonomous position to theoretical reflections on texts, but frames this reflection as itself an act that participates in the discourse of an institution which, in turn, takes part in a community’s cultural conversation. This means, Mailloux claims, that there can be no end to the process of interpretation: as it can never encompass the

entire scope of the conversation (which is not just heterogenous but also interminable), every rhetorical hermeneutic is per definition anecdotal. On top of that, rhetorical hermeneutics creates its own variant of the hermeneutical circle: the description of a text's rhetorical history invites close scrutiny of the frames of interpretation which acts of reading bring to bear on it, which in turn provides materials for further rhetorical description. A rhetorical method of interpretation must be satisfied with describing specific controversies that surround the interpretation of a given text, abandoning the ideal of Theory – universally valid models that yield definitive truths (Mailloux 1989, 16-18).

Though not always invoked explicitly, Mailloux' rhetorical hermeneutic approach to textual interpretation and literary theory will inform the chapters below in several ways. First, it allows me to see Burke's thinking about literature as taking shape through a series of conversations. Though I have restricted my scope mainly to the "critical" exchanges that form part of Mailloux' broader institutional and cultural conversations, I will at regular points establish the link between Burke's literary critical preoccupations and the broader historical and cultural background against which they took shape. Second, it helped me see the canonical texts on which my chapters will focus as loci or commonplaces for debate that allow different critics to stake out the differences between their respective methodologies of reading. And finally, it helped me frame the the various transformations in Burke's thinking about literature and his ever altering methodologies for analyzing literary texts as part of a similar "therapeutic" attempt to overcome the differences between various groups or schools of criticism.



## Chapter 3     Reading ‘Attitude:’ Burke and I.A. Richards

*What a fine critic! What a pity he thought so hard about  
Poetry!*  
(I.A. Richards)

In April 1937, Kenneth Burke and Ivor Armstrong Richards met briefly in New York. “The other day I met I.A. Richards, who is passing through New York on his way to China” Burke wrote to Robert Penn Warren shortly after the meeting, “I don’t know what *he* thought of it - but *I* had three hours of sheer enjoyment, as we battled about the edges of his doctrines” (in: Weiser 2008, 17). Burke’s enthusiastic note tells something of the esteem in which American critics held Richards. John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* (1941) credits Richards as the man whom “[t]he new criticism very nearly began with” – and “began with [...] in the right way” (1941 [1979], 3). Though T.S. Eliot’s *The Sacred Wood* (1921) antedates Richards’ *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), the high modernist doctrines of the former, says Ransom, “did not excite some young writers who were looking for something in the way of large and bold ideas; to these Richards was coming with radical critical theories which they would be able to regard as a triumph in revolutionary thinking” (1941 [1979], 135). If the poet-critic Eliot gave the American formalists a (conservative) ideology and a (classicist-modernist) canon, the linguist-teacher Richards gave them a vocabulary and method: the micro-analytical methodology of close reading (present in nuce in his 1924 *The Principles of Literary Criticism* and developed in full in the 1929 *Practical Criticism*), the analytical concepts of “tension” and “ambiguity” and the dichotomy between poetic and scientific language (elaborated in the 1926 *Science and Poetry*) had all become New Critical staples.

The ‘battles’ that Burke and Richards fought during their meeting in New York, then, seem a representative anecdote with which to begin the critical conversations between Burke and the New Critics, especially since Burke, too, had been among the young writers that flocked to Richards’ “radical critical theories.” The leftist, socially engaged

Burke had little use for Eliot's elitist conceptions of criticism, or for his lofty and dogmatic claims about the nature of art, religion and society. But the plodding books on the relation between language, cognition and poetry of Eliot's counterpart did have a significant impact on Burke's ideas on the relation between literature and society during the 1930s – indeed, so much of what he wrote before 1940 looked like a gloss on ideas of the British critic that he at one point even felt obliged to defend the originality of his thought.<sup>1</sup> “Attitude,” the concept that will be my focus throughout this chapter, is one of the main sites where Burke and Richards' thought come together. It is a concept lies at the heart of both Richards' and Burke's ideas about literary experience: ‘Attitude,’ is used by both to describe the response of readers to the poem. However, as I shall argue, whereas Richards believes that this attitudinal response ideally culminates into a “balance of impulses” – a state of remove from the fray of action, Burke comes to define ‘attitudes’ as actional “strategies” that form a crucial part of the way people shape and articulate different subject positions in the ‘wrangle’ of life. I will illustrate these divergent conceptions of ‘attitude’ by showing how they inform Richards' and Burke's readings of Coleridge, tying the latter's analysis of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to the “dream / prayer / chart” method Burke develops in correspondence with it.

### 3.1 I.A. Richards, Coleridge and the New Criticism

Although we do not now what was being said in that April meeting, we can be sure that both men had plenty to talk about. A few years before, Richards had published his *Coleridge on Imagination* (1934), a condensed version of the courses on criticism and moral thought he delivered at Cambridge University between 1932 and 1934. *Coleridge on Imagination* eased some of the tension that had grown between Richards and his American followers in the South, who were growing increasingly more skeptical about what they saw as Richards' overly scientist preoccupation with literature's mental and emotional effects. While Ransom acknowledged Richards' contribution to the New Critical methodology and applauded Richards' concern with close reading and the inherent ethics of poetic understanding, he was extremely wary of Richards' tendency to take the language of poetry as indicative of some ulterior mentalist process. “To Richards,” Ransom said, “the object known in a poem [...] is preferably a mere stimulus that produces first a set of emotions, and presently a set of attitudes” (1941 [1979], 15).

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Malcolm Cowley (in: Jay 1988, 233).

Such a treatment in terms of effect could hardly form a solid basis for criticism; instead, his namesake volume on the New Criticism concludes with a ‘Wanted’ call that urges critics to treat literature as “a kind of knowledge which is radically and ontologically distinct” (1941 [1979], 281) from both its source in an authorial consciousness and the effect it may have on a reader.<sup>2</sup> According to the Southern New Critics, the poem existed as “an objective structure which is a separate world of meanings, which has its own mode of existence” (Krieger 1956, 125) – an existence that the tendency of Richards to “[subordinate] the cognitive element in the experience to the emotive, and the emotive to the conative” (Ransom 1941 [1979], 15) threatened to destroy. And the fact that Richards then went on to apply scientific principles to the analysis of these emotions made matters only worse. True, Richards’ had always subordinated these principles to the larger aim of salvaging literature from the onslaught of a scientism that tried to make itself into a metaphysics. But Richards’ behaviorism, his love for schemata in his books and his using poetry in practical experiments with reading did sit uneasily with Ransom and his crowd.

While never completely disowning Richards, then, most of the Southern New Critics’ conversations in the early half of the 1930s were edging away from Richards’ “scientist” preoccupation with the affective nature of poetic discourse.<sup>3</sup> *Coleridge on Imagination*, however, was hailed by the New Critics as a repudiation of Richards’ previous preoccupation with poetic affect: “the critical conscience that struggled in the early work against the limitations of a positivist education won out in the end,” Allen Tate stated in “The Present Function of Criticism.” Richards had made extensive use of Coleridge before, using the Romantic poet as one of his major interlocutors in *The Principles of Literary Criticism*. But in that book, the Romantic poet had been treated in a partial and scattered fashion, and Coleridge had been subjected to Richards’ quasi-empirical program. But “at last,” Tate rejoiced, “in *Coleridge on Imagination*, The Sisyphean effort to translate Coleridge into naturalistic terms broke down” (1940 [1959], 11-12). *Coleridge on Imagination* bears all the likeness of the conversion – not unlike Coleridge’s own experience upon reading Kant described in the first chapter of the book. Where Richards formerly insisted on a restricted and precise style of writing that

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on how this vision of the poem as an “object of knowledge” influence New Critical conceptions of description and analysis, see Murray Krieger’s *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956), or section four on “The Intrinsic Study of Literature” in Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature* (1949).

<sup>3</sup> Wimsatt’s chapter on the “affective fallacy” – treating the poem in terms of its emotional effects on beliefs or actions – applies the concept to Aristotelian *catharsis*, the Longinian *sublime* and Romantic introspection alike. Its main antagonist is, however, clearly Richards, whose ‘psuedo-statement’ is singled out as an especially destructive way of treating poetry in terms of its result (1954, 21-39). Krieger’s *The New Apologists for Poetry*, and especially the chapter on “The Transformation of Richards” offers a good overview on both the reasons for, and the mechanics of, the way the Southern New Critics both appropriated and disowned Richards.

rejected all “literary flavouring” (1924 [2001], ix), he now allows his words to occupy a far broader (if more unstable) semantic ground. But more importantly to Tate, the new-found literary flavouring of Richards’ style also seemed to bring a surrender to the primacy of the literary, and the doctrine that poetry is knowledge (Tate 1940 [1959], 14).

Richards had, of course, written extensively about the nature of literary discourse, the process of reading and the importance of the reflective processes that literary texts could induce before. But when he turned to the menialities of reading in books like *Science and Poetry*, *Principles of Literary Criticism* or *Practical Criticism*, his concerns were less with explicating the meaning of individual texts than with the way errors of interpretation could point to a general theory of communication, or with the role of the literary as an abstract cultural discourse.<sup>4</sup> This time, however, Richards’ main concern was with “the behavior of words in poetry” and with “the relation of Poetry to Life” (1934, xii). Discussing the different shades of Coleridge’s vocabulary with a diligence that approximates the kind of close textual analysis that Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren would popularize through books like *An Approach to Literature* (1936) and *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Richards appropriates Coleridge’s theory of Imagination to argue that we know our worlds largely through linguistic forms and that, of these forms, “[p]oetry is the completest mode of utterance” (Richards 1934, 163).<sup>5</sup> More free than the tied and sterile language of the sciences, which aims for control over nature, poetry offers “wisdom [...] yielding another Nature for us to live in – a Nature in which our hopes and fears and desires, by projection, can come to turn with one another” (1934, 169-170). A study of this other nature, Richards believed, would give us “new powers over our minds comparable to those which systematic physical inquiries are giving us over our environment” (1934, 232). Chiming in with Ransom’s desire to establish poetry as an independent field of cognition and with the New Critic’s ambition to put literary criticism on a more precise and systematic basis, Richards’ new equation of ‘poetry’ to ‘wisdom’ seemed to validate the new critical programme that his American heirs were developing. With *Coleridge on Imagination*, Ransom noted contentedly, “Coleridge assimilates Richards to himself, as the Chinese are said to assimilate their conquerors” (Ransom 1941 [1979], 74). Thus absorbed into the field of literature, the Southern New Critics seemed ready to reaccept Richards as one of their own.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting just how differently Burke responded to the book. Unlike Ransom and the other New Critics, Burke did not believe that Richards was merely ventriloquizing

---

<sup>4</sup> Richards’ concern with individual misreadings was, as he states in the preface to the second edition of *Interpretation in Teaching*, was with a “clinical study of the aberrations of average intelligence” (1938, 1).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Ransom’s “Criticism Inc.” (1937).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of the reception of *Coleridge on Imagination*, see Foster (1959).

Coleridge was speaking directly through Richards' mind; instead, Burke saw Richards appropriating Coleridge to his own programme.<sup>7</sup> In his two-page review in the 1935 October issue of *Poetry*, Burke praised Richards "translation," but while he saw Richards doing a good job at translating Coleridge's ideas to the contemporary scene, Burke was disappointed at Richards' failure to give "sufficient attention to the non-literary aspects of the poet's problems" (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 154). Moreover, while Richards promised to elucidate how poetry and criticism can become purposeful social acts, Burke found nothing in *Coleridge on Imagination* that would make clear why it could be useful to read the Romantic poet-critic today. In his introductory chapter, "The First Range of the Hills," Richards had claimed that the study of Coleridge's is worth while because, by turning his idealistic philosophy into a practical instrument for surveying the human mind, it can help us understand ourselves. But Richards, Burke says,

frequently talks about the ordering of the minds as though it were a wholly private act, politically vacant. All that he says seems extremely valuable – but while 'projecting' Coleridge's formulas into the contemporary scene, should he not also discuss their bearing upon our economic quandaries? (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 154).

Burke, who by 1934 had developed moderate but definite leftist sympathies, was pushing for a more partisan and engaged brand of criticism, one whose methods would address both poetic creation and reading as purposeful acts rooted in a material, historic scene.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Burke was so dissatisfied with the way Richards' "introspectionist" reading skirted these issues that he planned to write his own monograph on Coleridge in answer to *Coleridge on Imagination*.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, then, the two men had plenty to discuss during their three-hour conversation in New York. Burke's plans for a book on Coleridge had not yet materialized (he would eventually use his notes in the title essay of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), but he was awaiting the publication of a new book of his that would prominently feature "attitude" – one of Richards' main analytical terms – in its title. Appropriating what for Richards designates the "balance of impulses" that poetry can generate in a mind, Burke's *Attitudes Toward History*, which would come out in June of

---

<sup>7</sup> In this opinion, Burke mirrored the estimate of Richards' colleague and occasional travel companion F.R. Leavis- cf. Leavis (1935). Richards, in a later interview, admitted that "[w]hat got into *Coleridge on Imagination* was a sort of free reconstruction. I wasn't so much concerned to say what Coleridge had thought as to suggest what might be done with what he had said" (Brower 1973, 33).

<sup>8</sup> On Burke's difficult but profound relation with the American left, see Lentricchia (1983), Denning (1998) and George and Selzer (2007).

<sup>9</sup> For a more extended discussion of Burke's preoccupation with Coleridge at the time, cf. George and Selzer (2007, 196).

1937, uses the concept as the basis for an ambitious study of how men respond imaginatively to the structures of meaning and symbols of authority that surround them. With ‘attitude’ thus redeployed to mean something close to ‘ideology,’ Burke was ready to effect the material correction on the private mentalist theories of Richards that he called for in his review of *Coleridge on Imagination*.<sup>10</sup>

But even though it is likely that the feeling of enjoyment Burke reported to Warren was mutual (the three-hour length of the conversation suggests the same), Richards probably had many other things on his mind – indeed, it is likely that what kept him from giving us his own account of the conversation were the exigencies of travel. As Burke notes, he caught Richards passing through New York on his way to China, where Richards was going in order to further the local movement for Basic English. Developed by his friend and collaborator C.K. Ogden, “Basic” was a grammatically simplified and lexically condensed version of English that was developed as an international auxiliary language. Based on a language that was already well-established across the globe, and following what Ogden believed was “the tendency of the language itself to do without more and more of it” (in: Russo 1989, 398), Basic’s transparent grammatical rules and minimal set of words would guarantee ease of teachability while preserving the flexibility, range and cultural heritage of natural-language English. This, Ogden hoped, would give it an edge over other auxiliary languages like Esperanto and other artificially constructed languages, which had only limited success in becoming accepted as international means of communication.

Just as his ideas became the subject of a tug-of-war between the intrinsic criticism of the group around Ransom, and Burke’s urge for a more extrinsic, readerly-oriented criticism, Richards’ gaze was shifting away from America to China, and from debates about literature and criticism to a broader concern with language, teaching and cultural understanding. By 1937, Basic was rapidly becoming Richards’ ruling passion – a passion which, as several scholars have noted, also led to a qualitative change in Richards’ thinking. Schusterman, for instance, discerns a shift from the confident positivism of Richards’ earliest books to a “budding relativism” (1988, throughout) in *Coleridge on Imagination* and *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*: a growing interest in semantics, in meaning as a product of culture, and in “poetry as an instrument of research” rather than in criticism as an autonomous cultural pursuit.<sup>11</sup> What reviewers like Tate and Ransom took for a swerve back towards literature, then, turned out to be a revisionary effort, one that would end up taking Richards’ out of the parlor of criticism. In *The World’s Body*

---

<sup>10</sup> Denning suggests that Burke may have used ‘attitude’ because he wanted to avoid the more loaded term ‘ideology’ (1998, 439-440). See also George and Selzer (2007, 257 n3).

<sup>11</sup> Richards published two essays with this title – one in *Speculative Instruments* (1955), the other in *Poetries: Their Media and Ends* (1974)

(1938) Ransom again disowned Richards' scientism and the "wicked" transgressions it makes against what Ransom calls the fallacy of "personal registrations" – the declarations of the effect texts have on a reader (1938, 347-349). Burke, on the other hand, would build from Richards' attitudinal criticism a more encompassing account of what texts do and how they should be read.

### 3.2 *The Meaning of Meaning, Counter-Statement* and Reader Psychology

The 1937 meeting between Burke and Richards' in New York, then, serves as a representative anecdote because it allows me to bring together several smaller conversations into one parlor discussion about the role of the reader in criticism. At the same time, the moment allows me to measure just how far Burke had progressed from the high modernist, art-for-art paradigms that informed his earliest criticism. In fact, Burke's charge that Richards, in *Coleridge on Imagination*, failed to capture literature as a truly social act – an act originating in a problem of a historical author and able to appeal to the problems of a contemporary reader – seems almost ironic when we consider just how instrumental Richards' ideas had been in bringing Burke to a more socially responsive theory of art. If Burke described his first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement*, as an attempt to move from "an esthetic theory that viewed art as self-expression into an emphasis upon the communicative aspect of art" (Burke 1976, 62), it was Richards who had pointed Burke to see art as communication in the first place. Burke wrote of Richards' impact on this process in a letter to Malcolm Cowley:

that winter [i.e., 1924] I stayed at Andover, I wrote two essays, "Psychology and Form" and "The Poetic Process"; it was my intention to round these off with a third, "On the Sublime." I began it, then ran into *The Meaning of Meaning*, and was so knocked over that I was unable to write the third essay. And it was not until the "Philosophy of Literary Form" item, the monograph by the name of the forthcoming collection, that I was able to treat some of the material for that third

essay, though it is there in a much altered state, affected by all that has intervened. (in: Jay 1988, 233)<sup>12</sup>

The letter does not mention what aspects of *The Meaning of Meaning* stopped Burke in his tracks, but the essay he mentions writing make it likely that that his being knocked over had something to do with the theory of interpretation that Ogden and Richards developed.<sup>13</sup>

In “Psychology and Form” and “The Poetic Process,” Burke was groping beyond the monological aestheticism that informed essays like “Three Adepts of ‘Pure’ Literature,” a conflation of articles published in *The Dial* and 1924. With their reportorial but obviously sympathetic descriptions of Flaubert’s prose of avoidances (CS 9), Pater’s conscious artistic structures (CS 12) and De Gourmont’s “*L’art-pour-L’art*” (CS 16) these essays all kept well within the confines of the high modernist fascination with decadent individualism, moral detachment and aesthetic self-sufficiency. The model of literature that comes out of this essay is one that is radically separated from life. Produced by “[a]n author who lives most of his life in his head” and “[p]erforms] his transgressions on paper” (CS 24), literary texts function as a display of pure style. In both his critical and imaginative writings, Burke says of De Gourmont,

[h]is one imperative was to be venturesome. Since art, by becoming an end in itself, became a matter of the individual – or by becoming a matter of the individual, became an end in itself – he was theoretically without external obligations, at liberty to develop his medium as he preferred. (CS 17)

Unfettered by need or purpose and bound only by the willed creative urge of the individual, “Art was ‘justified’ because art was an appetite – in being desired it found ample reason for existence. Art did not require defense as an instrument of political or social reform. Art was purely and simply a privilege, to be prized as a cosmic exception” (CS 16-17). Such art can only be appreciated from a distance, as a dissociated intellectual pursuit; as a purposeless creation of desire, it requires the complete but disinterested

---

<sup>12</sup> Selzer argues that Burke’s decision to abandon the three-staged project was also partially motivated by editorial disappointment: Burke originally offered both “Psychology and Form” and “The Poetic Process” to *The Dial*, but the magazine refused the latter essay. (1996, 144-145).

<sup>13</sup> Burke briefly acknowledges the impact of *The Meaning of Meaning* in the “Counter-Gridlock” interviews in *On Human Nature* (Rueckert and Bonadonna 2003, 372-374). His statement that he owed most to the supplement by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski seems justified in light of Burke’s growing interest in the texture of language and social behavior in *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*. In the essays that follow “Psychology and Form” and “The Poetic Process,” however, this anthropological concern is not immediately apparent: here, as I will argue, Ogden and Richards’ theory of language and (poetic) communication seems more strongly present.



endeavour of critical intelligence that Eliot called for in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

“Psychology and Form” and “The Poetic Process” put important restrictions on this disinterested model of creation and reception. If Burke maintains the metaphor of art as an appetite in these essays, the appetite is no longer an abstract creative impulse in the mind of a socially unresponsive author; instead, Burke redefines art as a relationship between an author and a reader that takes place through the manipulation of formed language. His new definition that “[f]orm is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (CS 31) exchanges the static and private expressionism of “Three Adepts of ‘Pure’ Literature” for a more dynamic of literary exchange. This exchange, Burke argues in “The Poetic Process,” takes place through mental processes that are universal and trans-historical:

Throughout the permutations of history, art has always appealed, by the changing individuations of changing subject-matter, to certain potentialities of appreciation which would seem to be inherent in the very germ-plasm of man, and which, since they are constant, we might call the innate forms of the mind.  
(CS 46)

These innate mental forms make it possible to apprehend certain recurrent patterns in nature: “the accelerated motion of a falling body, the cycle of a storm, the procedure of the sexual act, the ripening of crops” (CS 45). Artists can use this mimetic capacity of the human mind to great effect: Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* achieves artistic formal unity through the description of the progression of a cholera epidemic, using the movement of a crescendo in nature to achieve a similar climactic effect in a work of art “because the human brain has a pronounced potentiality for being arrested, or entertained, by such an arrangement” (CS 45-46).

Abstract and universal as they are, however, mental forms like ‘crescendo’ fail to arouse the appetites of auditors; they must be made concrete in order to move an audience: “[t]o arouse the human potentiality for being moved by the crescendo, I must produce some particular experience embodying a crescendo, a story, say, about A and B, where A becomes more and more involved in difficulties with B and finally shoots him” (CS 45-46). Literature, then, is driven by the dialectic between permanent, ahistorical form and its local, specific subject matter: the creative process involves the author in “the translation of his original mood into a symbol” (CS 56), replacing the original “emotional form” with a “technical form” that lends logical consistency to what initially had but private emotional coherence. “The artist begins with his emotion,” Burke says, but subsequently “translates this emotion into a mechanism for arousing emotion in others, and thus his interest in his own emotion transcends into his interest in the treatment” (CS 54-55). In order to produce an effect on her reader, the writer must transform her original mood into a structure of words – a process which, Burke says,

necessarily involves a compromise between the original emotional appetite and the wish to communicate meanings:

A technical theme of itself calls up a counter-theme; a certain significant moment must be prepared for. The artist will add some new detail of execution because other details of his mechanism have created the need for it; hence while the originating emotion is still in ferment, the artist is concerned with impersonal mechanical processes. (CS 54)

When this compromise between emotional expression and technical skill is successfully executed, “the mood [has] become something else, no longer occupying the whole of the artist’s attention, but serving rather as a mere indicator of direction, a principle of ferment” (CS 56). Thus, in being turned into a symbol, the original “uttering of emotion” becomes an “evocation of emotion” (CS 53) capable of inducing similar emotional responses in the reader.

In the essays that follow “Three Adepts of ‘Pure’ Literature,” Burke’s concern with the structural demands of the textual medium and with the emotional and formal expectations of an audience as factors in the creative process cause him to place far greater stress on the communicative aspects of art. However, Selzer warns that “Psychology and Form” and “The Poetic Process” should not be taken as too radical a break with the aestheticism of “Three Adepts of ‘Pure’ Literature” (Selzer 1996, 143-147). Though the shift from an exceptional and privileged appetite in an author to the arousal and satisfaction of an appetite in the mind of an auditor reframed literature from an expressive gesture to a rhetorical exchange, the transfer of meaning is still pictured as a process that occurs both natural and spontaneous: meaning is the appreciation, through innate categories of the mind, of universal patterns embodied in local subject matter. Moreover, the colloquial ‘we’ used in the essays suggests that the psychology of the audience that Burke imagines

becomes really the trained and coherent psychology of individual experts from relatively homogeneous backgrounds who are sensitive and accomplished and experienced enough to perceive the subtleties of form and the distinction between art and mere information. (Selzer 1996, 151)

“The Psychology of Form,” then, is still the psychology of a rather passive, elitist and individual reader; “The Poetic Process” involves a relatively unproblematic translation of emotion into a technical form whose continued readability is guaranteed by innate and transhistorical patterns of meaning.

By contrast, Ogden and Richards’ account of communication in *The Meaning of Meaning* is that of a problematic enterprise fraught by misunderstanding and error: the transfer of meaning is a “difficult” and “treacherous” exchange between minds that are but crudely adapted to the purpose and are prone to disorientation, misunderstanding

and deceit.<sup>14</sup> Much of the cause for this lies with the imperfections of the medium of language itself. Unlike other species of signs, words or symbols have not inherent relation with what they represent: while a heightened body temperature has a direct relation to the infection it signals, but nothing in the sound of the word ‘fever’ or in its visual image as a group of letters suggests a similar connection. Only in use – that is, when put in context, does they gain significance: “[w]ords, as everyone now knows, ‘mean’ nothing by themselves [...] It is only when a thinker makes use of them that they stand for anything” (1923 [1943], 10). Still, many people cling to what Richards calls “verbal superstitions” (1923 [1943], 29), the belief that words “are in some way part of things or always imply things corresponding to them” (1923 [1943], 14). The roots of this superstition lie in the “word magic” that informs the communal and religious rites of tribal societies, but Richards believes that the assumption that words can offer “a duplicate, a shadow-soul, of the whole structure of reality” (1923 [1943], 31) is still very much present: “the persistence of the primitive linguistic outlook not only through the whole religious world, but in the work of the profoundest thinkers, is indeed one of the most curious features of modern thought” (1923 [1943], 29).

It is this superstition that words are able to ‘mean’ by themselves which Ogden and Richards hold accountable for much of the problems they associate with communication: “[w]ords, whenever they cannot directly ally themselves with and support themselves upon gesture, are at present a very imperfect means of communication” (1923 [1943], 12). We may believe that our verbal utterances convey information in a transparent and accurate way, but there really is only a very limited amount of meaning we can control. Ogden and Richards acknowledge the achievements of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique generale* (1916): Saussure, too, had argued that signs have no intrinsic meaning, acquiring this only through its difference from other signs within the sign-system. Ogden and Richards, however, object to the dichotomy between ‘langue’ (the abstract system of language) and ‘parole’ (the individual speech act), as it requires Saussure to invent verbal entities “outside the range of possible investigation” (1923 [1943], 5). A theory that cannot account for the way parole – situated language – generates meaning is at best a stunted account of how language works, and cannot withstand practical testing: “this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification” (1923 [1943], 6).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, their discussion of “the dangers of loose verbiage” and “the tyranny of language” in the opening chapter on “Thoughts, Words and Things” (1923 [1943], 1-23).

<sup>15</sup> For more on Ogden and Richards’ anti-Saussurean argument in *The Meaning of Meaning*, cf. Schusterman (1988, 49-53)

In a move that prefigures Burke's later repudiation of positivist semantics (cf. *supra*), Ogden and Richards reject the Saussurean differential between signifier and signified in favor of a tripartite conception of the sign that includes its referential function. In what is essentially a modulation of Peircean semiotics, Richards and Ogden argue that verbal signs or symbols are able to represent because of a mediating idea, called the "interpretant." Their triadic sign is a situated use of language – it is language in 'context,' which Ogden and Richards claim does not just include the verbal surroundings of the word in the sentence or the situation in which it is spoken, but the entire field of experience that resonates through a word. Context includes other personal encounters with a word, as well as its historically accumulated deposits of significance. Meaning, then, is created through a series of compromises between a word's local instance, its emotional resonance to speaker and interpreter, and the sum of contexts in which the word has been used previously. The central thesis of *The Meaning of Meaning* is that words are not 'empty sign' awaiting its interpreter; rather, the triadic sign – separating reference and referent through the interpretant – already incorporates interpretation within itself. Unmediated access to reality is impossible, as is any system that would purport direct access to the sign: as the repetitive title of their book indicates, Ogden and Richards believe that looking for 'meaning' in language" implies that we must interpret our interpretations.

Ann E. Berthoff has elaborated the profound ways in which the Peircean conception of semiosis has affected the nature of Richards' thinking in general (Berthoff 1990). For brevity's sake, I will here limit myself to those consequences that most affected Richards' conceptualization of literature and criticism, namely Richards' 'scientism.' This scientism has its roots in the radical linguistic skepticism of *The Meaning of Meaning*. Focusing on 'parole,' laying bare the meanings of language in use, Ogden and Richards would counter the potential inaccuracies of more speculative semantics like Saussure's. At the same time, as Richard Foster argues, the book also turns against other breeds of speculative or metaphysical language. Focusing on actual, embodied meaning, *The Meaning of Meaning* attempts "to reduce by analytical semantics the traditionally impressionistic or religious language [...] of most philosophy and aesthetics to its simple meanings" (1959, 92). Consequently, Foster says, Richards has a deep disdain for 'theory' in the sense of philosophical speculation and generalization:

In the *Principles* he maintained that "no special ethical or metaphysical ideas need be introduced to explain value." In *Science and Poetry* he was impatient with the longstanding speculative contention over the relative epistemological status of science and poetry. And in *Practical Criticism* he tried to discourage quests for a 'theory' of poetry that would account definitively for the phenomenon, in the reader, of the moment of poetic assent. What place he here was willing to allow theory was secondary, dependent – perhaps only rhetorical. (1959, 92-93)

Instead, Richards' devises a criticism that takes 'science' – that is, a dedication to empirical procedures and practical purposes – as its guiding principle.

As Selzer has shown, in the essays that follow "Psychology and Form" and "The Poetic Process," Burke makes a similar empirical and purposive turn, shifting from his initial art-for-art's-sake position toward a more socially and morally engaged view on art (Selzer 1996, 152-153). In "Lexicon Rhetoricae" Burke abandons the 'perfect' reader he imagined in "The Psychology of Form:" "the actual reader," Burke says, "is obviously an indeterminate and fluctuant mixture of [the 'hysteric' and the 'connoisseur']" (CS 180). Readers are culturally and ideologically situated individuals, whose experience of a text varies according to their geographic and temporal situation: "Othello's conduct would hardly seem 'syllogistic' in polyandrous Tibet" (CS 146). Most marked is, however, Burke's shift towards a more overtly utilitarian conception of poetic experience – indeed, the penultimate paragraph of "Lexicon" contains a phrase that foreshadows his aphorism that literature is "equipment for living:" art, Burke argues in this early essay is "an equipment, like any vocabulary, for handling the complexities of living" (CS 183). Writing in 1931, these complexities of living had increased significantly: as the 1929 stock crash and the ensuing Great Depression wreaked havoc on the social and economic fabric of society, Burke began to feel that artists must address "the miseries of a [technocratic and economic] system which [...] has caused so many psychological needs to be perverted in so many people" (CS 119). To achieve this, Burke pairs aestheticism with a committed position for the artist and art, arguing that art may serve as a counterdiscourse to the rhetoric of profit and efficiency that rules the corporate-industrialist outlook on life. Like the dole acts as a counter-principle to this dominant paradigm in which one's identity is largely defined by one's economic role, art may be instrumental in giving people space for reflection and creating new possibilities for social life:

society might well be benefited by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibility of ready hierarchies, which concerns itself with the problematical, the experimental, and thus by implication corrosively upon those expansionist certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms. (CS 105)

If not truly a change in kind (for his idea of art as allied with "inefficiency" is still very much in tune with his original aestheticism), then, Burke's revised theory of literature "as effecting an adjustment to one particular cluster of conditions, at this particular time in history [...] for this gloomy reader's present ill-starred hour" (CS 121-122) did produce substantially different results in his readings of specific literary texts. In an essay on "Mann and Gide" (published originally in *The Bookman* in June of 1930, and the final chapter added to *Counter-Statement*) Burke once again focuses on a high modernist literature of decadence, but at this stage, he reads Mann and Gide's obsession with

outsiders, themes of sickness and sexual vagary no longer as expressions of a felt and consciously celebrated alienation in their authors, but as ironic sketches whose immorality entices the reader to moral reflection: “I should take the specific events in Gide as hardly more than symbols: their parallel in life would not be the enacting of similar events, but the exercising of the complex state of mind which arises from the contemplation of such events with sympathy” (CS 104).

### 3.3 Attitude as Contemplation

This final statement shows just how much of Richards that Burke, by 1930, had absorbed. As I have argued, Burke heeded not only Richards’ call for a practical, purpose-directed criticism, but also his conviction that the value of art lies in their ability to induce emotional experiences in readers. In fact, Burke’s claim that a sympathetic reading Gide’s decadent disdain for modern society might induce a “complex state of mind” would suggest that Burke also copied what Richards believed to be the ideal end of such emotional inducement: the creation of an ‘attitude,’ a “co-ordination of a great number of impulses” that results in “imaginal” or “incipient” forms of action (1924 [2001], 99-101).

Though it became prominent in *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Science and Poetry*, ‘attitude’ surfaced in *The Meaning of Meaning* as part of Ogden and Richards’ account of the functions of language:

“In ordinary everyday speech each phrase has not one but a number of functions. We shall in our final chapter classify these under five headings; but here a twofold division is more convenient, the division between the *symbolic* use of words and the *emotive* use. The symbolic use of words is *statement*; the recording, the support, the organization and the communication of references. The emotive use of words is a more simple matter, it is the use of words to express or excite feelings and attitudes. It is probably more primitive. If we say, “The height of the Eiffel Tower is 900 feet” we are making a statement, we are using symbols in order to record or communicate a reference, and our symbol is true or false in a strict sense and is theoretically verifiable. But if we say ‘Hurrah!’ or ‘Poetry is a spirit’ or ‘Man is a worm’ we may not be making false statements; we are most probably using words merely to evoke certain attitudes. (1923 [1943], 149)<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the lexical and intellectual origins of Richards’ use of ‘attitude,’ cf. Russo (1989, 184-189)

Ogden and Richards, then, assume two basic psychological relationships that may be assumed by a speaker or a hearer toward the language that passes between them: words may be used either symbolically in order to communicate references, or emotionally in order to evoke attitudes.

This difference between the referential language of statement and the emotional language of attitude became paramount in the heuristic of culture that Richards developed in the years after *The Meaning of Meaning*. Modern society, Richards believes, is split between the rival ideologies of science and poetry, the former of which is now clearly the dominant voice. This issue was already prevalent in *The Meaning of Meaning*, where the crisis of verbal understanding that Ogden and Richards addressed was said to originate from “a widening of the gulf between the public and the scientific thought of the age” that opens itself to “the exploitation, for political and commercial purposes, of the printing press by the dissemination and reiteration of clichés” (1923 [1943], 29). True, Richards continues this line of thinking in *Science and Poetry* (1926), scientific thought is valuable when it brings an end to obsolete principles of conduct and superstitions like “nationalism” or “the religious opposition to birth control.” But when science moves from factual observation or pragmatic application to become a metaphysical hypothesis, things go wrong. Science offers no alternative metaphysical fabric in which people can clothe their emotional and spiritual needs. Science can tell us how things behave, but it “can tell us nothing about the nature of things in any ultimate sense” (1926, 63). Autonomous, indifferent and “emotionally neutral,” science “cannot tell us what we are or what this world is; not because these are in any sense insoluble questions, but because they are not questions at all. And if science cannot answer these pseudo-questions no more can philosophy or religion” (1926, 63). As Richards says:

In the past, Tradition, a kind of Treaty of Versailles assigning frontiers and spheres of influence to the different interests, and based chiefly upon conquest, ordered our lives in a moderately satisfactory manner. But tradition is weakening. Moral authorities are not as well backed by beliefs as they were; their sanctions are declining in force. We are in need of something to take the place of the old order. Not in need of a new balance of power, a new arrangement of conquests, but a League of Nations for the moral ordering of the impulses; a new order based on conciliation, not on attempted suppression.

Only the rarest individuals hitherto have achieved this new order, and never yet perhaps completely. But many have achieved it for a brief while, for a particular phase of experience, and many recorded it for these phases. Of these records poetry consists. (1926, 64)

The quote is worth rendering in full because it illustrates the extent of Richards’ hopes for literature, as well as the political and cultural background against which these hopes were formulated. Writing shortly after the First World War, it seems Richards already envisioned the disastrous consequences of the continuation of power politics during the

interbellum. Literature, he hoped, would provide the mental equivalent of the parliamentary counterweight to such destructive use of force: as an archive of successfully (if momentuous) ordered experiences, it would provide examples of how a new harmonious arrangement of mind and life could be achieved.

As I have shown in my description of his dialogue with postivist semantics, Burke, too, was filtering modern culture largely through the science/poetry dichotomy – in fact, as George and Selzer have shown, both Richards and Burke’s ideas on this issue can most profitably be seen as rooted in the genre of the “cultural history.” Such cultural histories, they argue in *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*, were preoccupied with stating a diagnosis for a perceived illness of society, as well as offering an antedote to the symptoms of the malaise they discerned (2007, 133-137). Like Richards, Burke argues that society’s occupational psychosis needed an aesthetic reorientation and, again like Richards, Burke believed that the end of this reorientation

would be a society in which the participant aspect of action attained its maximum expression. By its emphasis on the communicative, it would emphasize certain important civic qualities” that the current scientific, “industrialist-economist” orientation lacks. (P&C 269-271)

Such concerns were present as early as in “Psychology and Form,” where Burke argues that the aesthetic “psychology of form” – the intuitive understanding of transhistorical meaning – is being rivaled as the dominant paradigm of understanding by a scientific “psychology of information.” The literary expression of this crave can be found in the growing popularity of books of surprise and suspense which rely on the interest of the facts itself, rather than on their function within the totality of the work of art: “suspense,” Burke says, “is the concern over the possible outcome of some specific detail of plot rather than for general qualities” (CS 38). Like poetry, science caters to an inborn emotional appetite: it stills an intellectual hunger for novelty and factual discovery. But these cravings not stand on a par with the vastly more complex emotional demands and satisfactions of aesthetic discourse. Preserving form only for effect, without an organic need that grows from the material itself, such literature dulls the senses to the intricacies of complex formal development, retaining only its lowest species: “suspense is the least complex kind of anticipation, as surprise is the least complex kind of fulfilment” (CS 36n). Such stylistically impoverished art, Burke argues, frustrates more complex ways of thinking:

prone to the temptations of pure information, [it] cannot so much bear repetition since the aesthetic value of information is lost once that information is imparted. If one returns to such a work again it is purely because, in the chaos of modern life, he has been able to forget it.” (CS 34)



Designed for singular gratification, informational art cannot serve as a cultural repository for shared meanings or experiences in the way that great classical drama can. A modern melodrama like Capek's R.U.R. may have all the technical bearings of a Shakespearean comedy, says Burke, but because it focuses on plot rather than on formal development, it leaves the spectator "wring his hands at the absence of that aesthetic mould which produced the overslung 'speeches' of Romeo and Juliet" (CS 38).<sup>17</sup>

This same idea that art somehow elicits a different mental response than informational statements is key to the 'theory' of aesthetic communication that Richards develops in *Principles of Literary Criticism*. Relying on a mixture of behaviorism and Gestalt psychology, Richards argues that the repeated experience of a stimulus creates a fixed neurological path (an *engram*) in the brain. This engram determines subsequent responses to similar stimuli and, because a stimulus can be associated with a particular word, eventually words obtain the power to activate the neural response:

when a context has affected us in the past, the recurrence of merely a part of the context will cause us to re-enact in the way in which we re-acted before. A sign is always a stimulus similar to some part of an original stimulus and sufficient to call up the engram formed by that stimulus. (1923 [1943], 53)

This process of mental and behavioral adaptation to stimuli goes on as long as an organism lives: man, says Richards, "reaches maturity in the form of a vast assemblage of major and minor interests, partly a chaos, partly a system, with some tracts of his personality fully developed and free to respond, others tangled and jammed in all kinds of accidental ways" (1926, 27). "Every interpretation," Richards writes in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, "is motivated by some interest, and the idea that appears is the sign of those interests as unseen masters" (1924 [2001], 29). Both science and poetry appeal to this half-chaos of interests by trying to effect some kind of order so that meaning can be generated. Yet they do so in fundamentally different ways. Scientific statements cause our interests to undergo a process of elimination: when such a statement enters the assemblage of interest in the mind, it selects one of these and subordinates the others, eliminating context and exchanging ambiguity for identity. When faced with the threat of imbalance, scientific statements respond by resolving impulses in the plance of action.

---

<sup>17</sup> Written in 1920 by the Czech author Karel Capek, R.U.R. was a worldwide theatrical success and is notable for introducing the word 'robot' into language. Burke's mention of the play is interesting as one of the first instances where his gaze shifts from high modernist literature to popular, 'lowbrow' instances of cultural production. Though Burke still looks at R.U.R. with the eyes of an aesthete, his mixed (but certainly not one-sidedly negative) appreciation of the play illustrates the lessening dogmatism of Burke's thought.

However, when an impulse is matched by a contrary impulse of equal strength (Richards' example is that of a stifled laugh in church), the mind cannot draw up such a Versailles treaty that advances the dominant impulse from among its competitors. Instead, it maintains opposite impulses in a state of tension that "resolves" into attitudes, imaginative and incipient preparations for action: "[a]ttitudes are the impulses towards one kind of behavior or another which are set ready by the response" (Richards 1926, 28):

We must picture the stream of the poetic experience as the swinging back into equilibrium of these disturbed interests. We are reading the poem in the first place only because we are in some way interested in doing so, only because some interest is attempting to regain its poise thereby. (1926, 27-28)

Poetic statements steer the physical energy that would otherwise be invested in acting out an impulse towards reflection. By thus preventing one impulse from gaining the upper hand, attitudes foster the growth of more delicate and inclusive thoughts:

The primitive and in a sense natural outcome of a stimulus is action; the more simple the situation with which the mind is engaged, the closer is the connection between the stimulus and some overt response in action, and in general the less rich and full is the consciousness attendant. (1924 [2001], 100)

Richards' example is that of a walker who suddenly finds himself on dangerously uneven ground. If this person would simply continue to act on his desire to move forward, he might lose his footing and hurt himself. An intelligent walker, on the other hand, senses the danger, halts and considers his options. "This, when accompanied by emotion, is called a 'realization' of his situation," Richards says: "the adjustment to one another of varied impulses – to go forward carefully, to lie down and grasp something with the hands, to go back, and so forth – and their coordination into useful behavior alters the whole character of his experience" (1924 [2001], 100). Thus, Richards believes that the growth of intelligence in an individual equals an increase in attitudinal, rather than actional reactions: "[t]he difference between the intelligent or refined, and the stupid or crass person is a difference in the extent to which overt action can be replaced by incipient and imaginal action" (Richards 1924 [2001], 100-102).

Art is supremely suited to foster such reflective, attitudinal states because – by virtue of its lack of immediate, practical use – it frustrates our primitive drive to act, forcing us to add thought to the experience. Looking at a picture of a tree may trigger previous "tree-impulses," though these "have to adjust themselves to their new setting of other impulses due to our awareness that it is a picture we are looking at. Thus an opportunity arises for those impulses to define themselves in a way in which they ordinarily do not" (Richards 1924 [2001], 101). Works of art hypostatize action, allowing us to scrutinize our response and adjust them where needed, thus deepening our awareness and

experience of a situation. Richards insists, however, that this capacity does not depend on art's mimetic accuracy:

What gives an image efficacy is less its vividness as an image than its character as a mental event peculiarly connected with sensation. It is, in a way which no one yet knows how to explain, a relict of sensation and our intellectual and emotional response to it depends far more upon its being, through this fact, a representative of sensation, than upon its sensory resemblance to one. (1924 [2001], 109)

What Richards suggest that truthfulness to life need not guarantee aesthetic success; rather, a picture that merely doubles the real may prove less effective at producing the kind of break with ordinary action that causes reflective experience: "It is not the intensity of the conscious experience, its thrill, its pleasure or its poignancy which gives it value, but the organization of impulses for freedom and fullness of life" (1924 [2001], 121).

This idea that art's remove from the real helps induce the reflexive state of mind which keeps a similar distance was highly congenial to the Burke: attitudes, he notes approvingly in his review of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, "make life suddenly 'simple' for us by fusing logical opposites into a single emotional unity;" by adding emotion to reflective understanding art "contributes moral standards in that manner which seems most penetrative: by unaware absorption" (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 198). Especially valuable in this regard was the parliamentary model which Richards' attitudinal model of aesthetic appreciation was promoting. Faced with the failure of the belief that individuals acting out of selfish motives will somehow work for the benefit of all, Burke, in the early 1930s began to look for a different model for human action, one in which cooperation would take a central place, and this he found in Richards' contextualist approach. "If criticism were discussion," Burke says in his review of *Mencius on the Mind*, "intellectual cooperation in a search for understanding, based upon the morality of listening instead of the morality of combat, how different our scene might become!" (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 201).

### 3.4 Attitude as Ideological Commitment

Discussion of Richards' *Principles* would indeed change the scene of criticism, as the New Critics tried to distance themselves from what they considered Richards' problematic reliance on psychological models. Burke, as well, would gradually become more critical of Richards' reliance on poetry's psychological effects in the reader; indeed, if the 1920s aesthete Burke would absorb much of Richards' thinking, the more militant and

committed Burke of the 1930s would come up with his own contrastive definition of 'attitude.' In the companion volumes *Permanence and Change* (1935) and *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), Burke would use the concept in a new fashion – one that abandons his (and Richards') previous understanding of attitude as a contemplative, balanced remove from action to one that has to do with attitudes as strategies for dealing with situations, as ways of dealing with conflict and of positioning oneself with regard to the forces of history. As Robert Wess argues, this altered understanding of 'attitude' "exhibits in emergent form [...] differences between the high road to the New Criticism that Richards helped to pave and the different path that Burke cleared in the 1930s and 1940s" (1996, 70). Indeed, what led Burke to fall out with Richards was a sense of dissatisfaction with the latter's distinction between scientific 'statements' and poetic 'pseudo-statements' – a contentuous distinction of Richards' which the group around Ransom also found objectionable, if for wholly different reasons.

As I shown above, Richards' concept of 'attitude' depends on the distinction he and Ogden made between referential and emotive statements, a distinction Richards continued in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*:

[a] statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language. (1924 [2001], 250)

Our everyday language habitually combines both functions, and both are generally present in the language of poetry. When we read Wordsworth's sonnet *Upon Westminster Bridge*, for instance, we experience two different streams: first, there is an intellectual stream which consists of the words in their symbolic, reflective capacities. In poetry, argues Richards, these symbols are only of secondary importance to the meaning of the poem. Though *Upon Westminster Bridge* is in its most basic sense a description of a morning in London, the reference value of its symbols cannot be measured by their success at collapsing into the referent. Wordsworth does not intend to state facts. Rather, the "minor" stream of referential images matters "only as a means:" the main branch is the second, active and emotional stream which it "directs and excites" (1926, 21-22):

Some people who read verse [...] are so constituted that very little more happens than this intellectual stream of thoughts. It is perhaps superfluous that they miss the real poem. [...] The active branch is what really matters; for from it all the energy of the whole agitation comes. [...] Every experience is essentially some interest or group of interests swinging back to rest. (1926, 23)

Only a reading which takes this active, experiential branch into account will be "a reading responsive to the 'imagined sound and body'" (1926, 20-21) – the rhythm,

sounds and emotional effect that complement the poem's referential contents. Such a reading will realize that Wordsworth does not deal in the kind of referential statements whose truth can be measured against their correspondence to a referent; rather, in wanting to lay bare the city's very being beyond its appearance, the poets addresses issues of morality and spirituality, addressing those questions Richards calls "pseudo-questions."

Following this logic, Richards argues that language can be divided into statements and pseudo-statements:

A statement [...] is justified by its truth, i.e. its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points. [...] A pseudo-statement, as I use the term, is not necessarily false in any sense. It is merely a form of words whose scientific truth or falsity is irrelevant to the purpose at hand." (1926, 65)

Neither quality of statement or pseudo-statement is intrinsic to the utterance itself: the test lies entirely in its effect on the reader, who responds by either checking the references for their truth, or by testing their capacity for evoking emotional assent:

For scientific language a difference in the references is itself a failure: the end has not been attained. But for emotive language the widest differences in reference are of no importance if the further effect in attitude and emotion are of the required kind. Further, in the scientific use of language not only must the references be correct for success, but the connections and relations of references to one another must be of the kind which we call logical. [...] But for emotive purposes logical arrangement is not necessary. It may be and often is an obstacle. For what matters is that the series of attitudes due to the references should have their proper organization, their own emotional interconnection, and this often has no dependence upon the logical relations of such references as may be concerned in bringing the attitudes into being. (1924 [2001], 250-251)

This notorious separation of language into statement and pseudostatement earned Richards both praise and criticism from the American New Critics. On the one hand, the distinction between a scientific and poetic use of language – anchored itself in a familiar Kantian/Romantic tradition – held a definite appeal to the New Critics: when Brooks and Warren, in *Understanding Poetry* (1938), argue the existence of "two sorts of communication" – one scientific, which seeks to "stabilize" its terms, and one poetic, in which the dictionary definitions of words are continuously violated (1938 [1976], 8), they clearly echo Richards distinction between logical and emotional language. At the hands of his American followers, however, what to Richards was mainly a psychological distinction hardened into a substantive, linguistically anchored one. To Richards, the emotional and referential use of language co-exist in a continuum that stretches from mathematics, over everyday language, to poetry; the role of the reader is to discern whether an author intends his discourse to be taken as statement or nonstatement, and

give priority to an intellectual or emotional response accordingly: “Pseudo-statements to which we attach no belief and statements proper such as science provides cannot conflict. It is only when we introduce illicit beliefs into poetry that danger arises” (1926, 72).

To New Critics like Tate, the waters of the major and minor streams which Richards found running through Wordsworth’s *Upon Westminster Bridge* never mixed: the role of the critic, as Tate saw it, was not to further more refined or sensitive protocols of distinction in the reader but rather to “[d]emonstrate the special, unique, and complete knowledge which the great forms of literature afford us. And I mean quite simply knowledge, not historical documentation and information” (1940 [1959], 8). Brooks’ reading of the poem in the influential opening chapter on “The Language of Paradox” in *The Well-Wrought Urn* would measure *Upon Westminster Bridge* completely in the capacity of its language to sever itself from referential discourse. “There are next to no realistic touches,” argues Brooks: “Wordsworth [...] was consciously attempting to show his audience that the common was really uncommon, the prosaic was really poetic” (1948 [1975], 5-7). It is out of these contradictory juxtapositions that the language of poetry arises. Brooks pays homage to Richards’ insight that language works through metaphor, but in his reading these pertain exclusively to the language of poetry and not, as Richards had suggested, to the whole of language: the scientists,’ Brooks argues, is a language of denotations, whereas “the poet does not use a notation at all – as the scientist may be said to do so. The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes” (1948 [1975], 8-9).

Even though they were in agreement with Richards’ anti-referential conception of poetic discourse, the New Critics leveled substantial criticism at what they believed to be the lowly status to which the prefix ‘pseudo’ seemed to relegate poetic knowledge. The disparaging associations called up by the prefix “pseudo” could indeed be interpreted as if Richards believed poetic utterances to be somehow inferior in quality, deceptive or false in comparison to the factual knowledge that scientific statements had to offer. Richards skepticism with regard to the capacity of language to mean by itself, his belief in the empirical value of measuring and the practical purpose role he attributed to poetic discourse were regarded with suspicion: to hardliners like Tate, such caution was an outcrop a mistaken trust in science. Richards’ vocabulary of “impulses” and “stimuli” and his elaborate use of charts came too close to advocating a laboratory model for criticism for Tate to be comfortable with (1940 [1959], 11). Considered especially detrimental in this regard was Richards reliance on behavioristic

models to measure the psychological impact of its pseudo-statements.<sup>18</sup> As it undercuts the idea that poetry equals a knowledge which is itself valuable, Tate objects to this “doctrine of relevance:” “there cannot be a value in any ‘interest’ theory of value whatever” (1941 [1959], 33). Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “affective fallacy” would bar any such theory which would read literature in terms of its practical effect in satisfying “interests” and “organizing” our minds: such fallacy, they argue, is a special case of “epistemological skepticism” that begins by searching out emotive effects as a standard for poetry and “ends in impressionism and relativism” (1954, 66-67).

Burke, too, was troubled by Richards’ concept of the “pseudo-statement” as poetry’s means of expression. However, in contrast to the New Critical critique of Richards’ refusal to attribute knowledge-content to poetic pseudo-statements, Burke’s anxieties were not due to the lack of knowledge-content which Richards seemed to attribute to poetic pseudo-statements. In his review of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Burke noted approvingly how Richards’ distinction between scientific statement and poetic pseudo-statement rendered simple knowledge theories invalid:

His [Richards’] careful distinction between scientific knowledge and [...] emotional knowledge might be very profitably read by the Arrow Collar Mystics who are arising in our midst, and who are constantly mistaking the comfort of Belief for actual insight into some specific object of belief. (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 199)<sup>19</sup>

Rather, Burke was troubled because, in maintaining a rigid distinction between the verifiable truths of science and the attitudinal acceptances of poetry, Richards (and with him the New Critics who accepted his distinction) seemed to give in to the scientific metaphysics of knowledge. In arguing, as he had done in *Science and Poetry*, that “it is not the poet’s business to make true statements” (1926, 64), Richards had tried to safeguard poetry by imposing a fundamental distinction between poetry and science. Claiming moral authority for pseudo-statements, Richards defended the continued necessity for

---

<sup>18</sup> “A pseudo – statement is a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes [...]” (1926, 60)

<sup>19</sup> The Arrow Collar Mystics were a circle of poets and critics around Waldo Frank. Other prominent names in the group were Hart Crane and Gorham Munson, with whom Burke had worked on the short-lived literary review *Secession* (1922 – 1924). Part of the infighting and position-taking among the Greenwich Village avant-garde, we should be careful to transpose Burke’s charge against the transcendental kind of knowledge which the Arrow Collar Mystics claimed was present in literature to the New Critics’ conviction that literary texts are able to capture experiential learning. Still, this early attack on the kind of theory that would value the cognitive aspects of a text over its emotional effect is telling both of what insights Burke borrowed from Richards and of how he applied these to his own theory of literature. For more on Burke’s relation to this group, and on Burke’s relation to the strong mysticist current in modernist poetics, cf. Debra Hawhee (2009, 30-54).

poetry in the modern age by arguing its usefulness in the evocation and organization of imaginative attitudes. But by so doing, Richards relinquished true saying power to science, unwittingly conforming to the ideology which he hopes to counter. Though Burke found much to like in the idea that poetry promotes reflective attitudes, unlike Richards he was not content to see the shaping of such attitudes as mere “mental prophylactics” (P&C 251 – 252), the upkeep and refinement of sentimental sensibilities. Burke’s hope that literature might act as “an equipment [...] for handling the complexities of living” (CS 183) called for a more forceful defense of the poetic. But unlike the New Critics, whose response to Richards division between science and poetry was to valorize it by arguing an ontological division between the scientific and the poetic and by anchoring this division deeper into the foundations of language itself, Burke tried to do away with the dichotomy between statement and pseudo-statement by attacking the grounds on which it rests.

Burke builds his attack on Richards around D.H. Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious*.<sup>20</sup> In *Science and Poetry*, Richards had objected to this book on the grounds that it mixes attitude with belief. “Pseudo-statements to which we attach no belief and statements proper such as science provides cannot conflict,” he argues: “[i]t is only when we introduce illicit beliefs into poetry that danger arises” (1926, 72-73). The problem with many pseudo-statements is that, on the surface, they appear to make the kind of truth claims which properly belong to scientific statement, inviting the reader to give them the same kind of unqualified acceptance. Most schools of criticism, in fact, introduce some kind of factual (biographic, historical, etc.) check into their interpretations of poems. But to Richards, this hunger to find a basis in belief distracts from the beneficial attitudinal effect which the poem may have: “the long-established and much-encouraged habit of giving to emotive utterances [...] the kind of assent which we give to established facts, has for most people debilitated a wide range of their responses” (1926, 74-75). It is dangerous, furthermore, because whatever attachment we build to the poem through belief may become undone when these beliefs falter: a lover of Shakespeare’s sonnet 18 (“Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?”) might be repulsed upon learning that the poem was written for a man and thereby miss out on the wholesome attitudes about love and relationships that might come with it.

Lawrence’s fault, according to Richards, originates in what by itself is an admirable enterprise: an attempt to counter the stale conventions and dogmas of society. But instead of using pseudo-statements that might evoke emotional assent and give rise to new attitudes toward these issues, Lawrence sought to replace existing doctrinal

---

<sup>20</sup> One half of a diptych, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) adds an alternative cosmology to Lawrence’s adaptation of Freudian psychoanalysis in the 1921 *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*.



statements with new ones, claiming for instance that “Instead of life being drawn from the sun, it is the emanation from life itself, that is, from all the living plants and creatures which nourish the sun” (1922 [2008], 10). This, to Richards, constitutes an undue return to primitive word-magic, the hope that one can make one’s world by verbalizing it: what Lawrence does is merely parading statements in the guise of pseudo-statement. Rising in qualified defense of Lawrence, Burke counters Richards’ objections by arguing that the distinction between statement and pseudo-statement relies on the supposition that there exists, in fact, a language of statement whose relation with the real is privileged because it is one of inherent objectivity. Richards, we remember, had rejected the belief that language can somehow be made to represent the world transparently in *The Meaning of Meaning*. However, by solidifying the dichotomy between statement and pseudo-statement, he had allowed the idea that some types of language may indeed collapse into their referents, paradoxically ending up affirming language’s capacity to do what he had previously denied.

Burke hammers on this inconsistency by showing that the moral, emotive pseudo-statements that Richards believes exclusive to poetry are, in fact, present in most language. “Any assertion of a moral attitude towards a man contains an element of pseudo-statement,” Burke points out; “we make a ‘pseudo-statement’ each time we treat an acquaintance as friend or enemy – for in thus automatically asserting a moral position, we necessarily leave the laboratory method of scientific judgement far in arrears” (P&C 254). Richards had shown how poetry can create a mental space removed from the impulse toward action, fostering the creation of attitudes; Burke, in return, would now show how attitudes can be applied back to life:

Life itself is a poem in the sense that, in the course of living, we gradually erect a structure of relationships about us in conformity with our interests [...] Thus, it is hard to see why the encouragements of pseudo-statement either should or could be confined to formal art; they must extend to those informal arts we usually call life, experience or action. (P&C 254)

From this perspective, Lawrence’s claim that the sun shines because plants grow can not be discarded on the basis of an a priori distinction between truths and untruths. At most, one could argue that the claim is a pseudo-statement that has yet to pass the test of experience, what Burke calls “recalcitrance:”

A statement is a completed pseudostatement – which is to say that *a statement is an attitude rephrased in accordance with the strategy of revision made necessary by the recalcitrance of the materials employed for embodying this attitude*. ‘I can safely jump from this high place’ may be a pseudo-statement. ‘I can safely jump from this high place with the aide of a parachute’ might be the statement as revised after one had taken the recalcitrance of his material adequately into account. But both might spring from the same attitude. (P&C 255-256)

Here, attitude is no longer a passive mood or balanced state of mind that leads away from action; rather, attitude both actively determines how a certain action is performed and provokes this action in the first place. It is a way of looking at action that, at the same time, determines action. Thus, Burke argues, Lawrence claims could be objected to, not on the basis of their truthfulness to fact, but rather because

they have not yet undergone the scope of revision require by the recalcitrance of the material which would be disclosed were we to extend them into all walks of investigation. They have not been socialized, as the coöperation of an entire historic movement might have caused them to be in the past or might again cause them to be in the future. (P&C 256)

What Richards calls ‘statements,’ or what a positivist would call ‘facts,’ are often those pseudo-statements that have become so thoroughly socialized, so often investigated and adopted throughout history, that they have acquired a sense of self-evidence: these petrified pseudo-statements embody attitudes toward the world which have become so engrained that we think of them as ‘natural’ or ‘neutral.’ Still, this should not distract from the fact that these statements still embody certain interests:

our interests (in the widest sense, our vocations) are essential in shaping the nature of our discoveries, tentative, and revisions. And our interests are ethical. The grasshopper will find a universe that is different from ours because the vocation or ethics of a grasshopper is different. Man and grasshopper have different ‘work patterns,’ which will be reflected in different systems of values. Each approaches the universe from a different ‘point of view,’ and the difference in point of view will reveal a corresponding difference in the discovery of relevant ‘facts.’ (P&C 256)

Burke stresses that this need not imply a subjectivist, or solipsist point of view: the recalcitrant nature of our world (Burke thinks firstly of the biological demands of the body) will set limits to whatever systems of value we can put into practice, thus lending an ‘objective’ validity to the different possible ways in which we can see the world: “our ‘opportunistic’ shifts of strategy, as shaped to take [...] recalcitrance into account, are objective. The underlying process, however, is inescapably ethical – and what is usually termed disinterestedness is merely a different order of interests” (P&C 257).

Rephrasing his account of the poetic process in *Counter-Statement*, Burke argues that poetry is valuable because it may serve as an incubation chamber for new ways of seeing: “we might expect the point of view to express itself first in fancy, metaphor, hypothesis, ‘vision’” (P&C 258). Here, in this free-floating, visionary stage, ideas encounter only the recalcitrance of their internal order; there, Burke argues, is where we should situate Lawrence’s cosmology. But as the poet or thinker devotes herself to the communication of her ideas, Burke argues, new forms of recalcitrance arise: shaping ideas to fit a certain medium and conform to the expectations of an intended audience

requires the making of certain compromises. In return, however, her ideas gain rhetorical appeal. Having converted her private patterns of experience into their symbolic equivalents, the writer is using a public form that allows readers to identify, absorb and alter her original, private mood:

At this stage his message is taken up and variously reworked by many different kinds of men – and by the time they have fitted it to the recalcitrance of social relationships, political exigencies, economic procedures, etc., transferring it from the private architecture of a poem into the public architecture of a social order, those who dealt with it in its incipient or emergent stages could hardly recognize it as having stemmed from them. But by now, surely, it would be so firmly established in our habits of thought that we could everywhere find it corroborated in “hard fact,” particularly since the instruments of precision and thought by which we made our examinations were themselves shaped by this same point of view. (P&C258)

Given such possible exchanges between the ideal realm of fiction and the domains of practical realization, Burke argues that it would be absurd to suppose – as Richards and the New Critics did – an absolute qualitative difference between both. Lawrence may claim that growing crops make the sun shine; the positivist may argue the opposite. But, Burke points out, “[e]ither statement is at best a partial one. The positivist would himself admit that his own statement is abbreviated, a figure of synecdoche, as if we meant ten men and said ten noses” (P&C 159). Soil, climate and market demand are but some of the other factors that put or do not put lettuce on our plates, but all of these are left out of the positivists’ selection of ‘facts.’

At rock bottom, Burke says in a way that anticipates his essay on the “Four Master Tropes” (cf. *supra*), there is no difference between the strategies of Lawrence and his imagined positivist antagonists: both use reductive metaphors (synecdoches), seeing the sun as driven by crop growth or seeing crop growth as driven by the sun, respectively. Richards errs, then, by supposing that such analogizing can be left aside in the scientific language of statement: “all abstract general notions are, indeed, nothing but marks of analogies between a given fact and all the other facts belonging to the same class: they may [at best] mark rather closer analogies than those brought out by an ordinary metaphor” (P&C 95). Even so self-evident a statement as “all trees have leaves” can only be made by generalizing between a maple leaf and a pine needle, or by brushing aside that some trees are bald in winter. The point is not to weigh the value of individual metaphors, but to identify the analogies that make them possible (Wess 1996, 71-72).

### 3.5 “Dream,” “Prayer,” “Chart” – ‘Attitude’ as a Method of Reading

If Richards had been instrumental in pushing Burke beyond the narrow art-for-art's sake-poetic of his earliest criticism, by the time of *Attitudes toward History*, Burke the time of their meeting in 1937 Burke had arrived at a much expanded conception of ‘attitude.’ As Burke deploys the notion in *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*, it broadens from Richards’ reflective emotional state that is the passive resultant of reading, into an active – or better, actional – orientation that describes the ideological patterns through which we see our world. As such, ‘attitude’ becomes a flexible notion that is able to capture both private fantasies as well as broader patterns of orientation with regard to ‘history’ – by which Burke designates “the realities of 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” (ATH 225). In this expanded sense, attitude can describe both the ways in which writers ‘imagine’ themselves in works of art as the way readers respond to these imaginings and create worlds of their own: Burke’s qualified defence of Lawrence’s *Fantasia* illustrates the way that such attitudinal imaginings can, by means of the symbolic act of writing (an act that involves various types of recalcitrance), become socialized and, thereby, accessible as a public structure of meaning.

The challenge that Burke faced, then, was come up with a theory of literature that could accommodate both the private ‘attitudes’ of the author, the symbolic acts by means of which they are turned into a public structure, as well as the reader’s response – the attitudes generated by the text. Such a theory should not only cover the technical aspects of writing (the overall form of the text, its symbols and clusters of meaning) but also its rhetorical nature (its structures of appeal) and the ethical aspects of literary creation (the purpose of the text to author and reader). This, I will argue, is the main motivation behind the “Dream / Prayer / Chart” methodology – “to be called either ‘dialectical criticism’ or ‘dramatic criticism methodized” (PLF xx) – that Burke works out in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941). As George and Selzer have shown, the essay participates in many critical conversations – Burke cites the Chicago Aristotelians, the Art for Art’s Sake school, as well as psychoanalytic critics as schools of reading that might benefit from his ‘dialectic’ or ‘dramatic’ methodology – a methodology that, worked out through a detailed discussion of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* “was itself

completely in tune with New Critics who were fascinated by Coleridge” (Selzer and George 2007, 195).<sup>21</sup>

But Burke’s main conversant – explicitly mentioned in the crucial opening pages, but present throughout the essay – is I.A. Richards. In fact, Burke speaks directly to Richards’ mentalist conception of ‘attitude’ when, on the opening page of “The Philosophy of Literary Form,” he likens works of literature to a “dancing of an attitude:”

The symbolic act is the *dancing of an attitude* (a point that Richards has brought out, though I should want to revise his position to the extent of noting that in Richards’ doctrines the attitude is pictures as too sparse in realistic content). In this attitudinizing of the poem, the whole body may finally become involved. (PLF 9)

Burke’s metaphor of the poem as dance is deliberately chosen to counter Richards’ mentalist theories of balanced attitudes. “Critical and imaginative works” Burke says, are “answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are *strategic answers, stylized answers*” (PLF 1).

In Richards’ psychologist understanding of criticism, such strategic, rhetorical elements are wholly absent. This absence would only be strengthened in *Coleridge on Imagination*. If the book was indeed “the dethroning of the scientist icon with its attendant statistical and instrumental imageries” in favor of “a modern romantic version of the humanistic icon: Man – sensitive, intuitive, complex, free and creative in his interminable quest to realize the splendor, and perhaps the tragedy, of his own nature” (Foster 1959, 98), Richards did not anchor his revised theory of literature in a situational or strategic model of literature. While the book did constitute a major turn in Richards’ thinking (as Schiller (1969), Berthoff (1982) and Shusterman (1988) have argued) *Coleridge on Imagination*, if anything, formulated an even more densely mentalist theory of poetry and criticism. Rather, “wrenching Coleridge’s discourse loose from its transcendentalist foundations, Richards converted Coleridge’s metaphysical organicism into a psychology of poetic coherence. As I have argued in, the New Critics applauded this new-found epistemological concern, which they interpreted as a radical break with mechanism and psychologism. Burke, on the other hand, was far less convinced that Richards had undergone a significant conversion; indeed, beneath the softer

---

<sup>21</sup> George and Selzer give a more encompassing account of how Burke’s essay was embedded in a broader turn towards Coleridge’s work, citing Ransom’s comments on Coleridge in *The New Criticism* and Robert Penn Warren’s interpretation of Coleridge’s mystery poems (acknowledged as an influence by Burke in the “Foreword” to the 1966 second edition of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (xiii). For more on the New Critic’s relationship with Coleridge, see the first chapter of Krieger’s *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956), Wimsatt and Brooks’s *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1964), or Richard Foster’s *The New Romantics: A Reappraisal of the New Criticism* (1962).

phenomenological vocabulary of *Coleridge on Imagination*, Burke discerns the same behaviorist semantics, psychology of poetic coherence and insistence on mental balance that had come to frustrate him.

Roughly summarized (because Richards' argument is both lengthy and complex) Richards' theory of poetry in *Coleridge on Imagination* is that we know the world through Imaginal "facts of mind." Arguing (as he had done in *The Meaning of Meaning*) that words cannot mean by themselves, Richards holds that the facts of mind that words come to represent should be conceived of as a "scale – between words taken as bare signs and words into which some part or the whole of their meaning is projected" (1934, 109). The latter, Richards argues, having "too many possible meanings," (1934, 110) are poetic and require what he calls "Imaginative projection," the supplying of context for "only while we supply its context does [the word] retain its poetic effect" (1934, 102). Commenting on a phrase from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Richards demonstrate how the multiple meanings of the words cause "the reader's mind [to find] cross-connexion after cross-connexion between them," and

in becoming more aware of them, to be discovering not only Shakespeare's meaning, but something which he, the reader is himself making. His understanding of Shakespeare is sanctioned by his own activity in it. As Coleridge says, 'you feel him to be a poet, inasmuch as for a time he has made you one – an active creative being. (1934, 83-84)

This growing awareness, according to Richards, constitutes the organic growth of the mind: as readers respond to the plurisignification of words in poetry, supplying context and order them into meaning, they also order their own minds. Interpretation, then, becomes a circular process, on that is representative of what Coleridge calls the "*all in each of human nature*" (1934, 97). Reading imaginative poetry, Richards argues that "there is no mere collocation of some aspects of one thing [...] with some aspects of another:" such collocations are the property of what Richards believes to be a baser kind of fanciful poetry that is written towards some extraneous purpose. Rather,

[w]e are invited to stretch our minds, and no one can flatter himself that he has ever finished the process of understanding such things. [...] We may not be able then to make any analysis, but the felt recession, roominess and richness of the meaning, in great instances, are not to be mistaken. (1934, 93-94)

Burke's conviction that poetic acts are purposeful and strategic meant that he could not suffice with "recession, roominess and richness" as attitudinal effects of poems, nor could he agree with Richards' belief that the meaning of poetry requires only Imaginative understanding to be recovered. While Burke did believe that poetry originates in the free-floating metaphorical space of the unconscious as a vague desire or vision in a private individual: but this initial "Dream" stage of the poem meets with

various orders of recalcitrance. A poet wishing to communicate his vision must take matters of form into account, weighing which might be best suited to convey his particular message. This, Burke calls “Prayer.” At the same time, this formal appeal is usually accompanied by a choice of subject matter that will help people grasp the original idea: this, Burke says, is “chart” – “the factor that Richards and the psychoanalysts have slighted” (PLF 6).

As I have argued in my introductory chapter, Burke believes that poems are often produced and consumed for medicinal purposes, in order to relieve an author or reader from a burden. Such burdens may be various in nature, but Burke argues that, on the whole, they relate to any of three clusters of situations: the biological situation of the writer, the social texture in which he or she wrote, and “the nature of the human mind itself,” by which Burke means primarily its linguistic ability to abstract meaning from experience (3). Each of these clusters will affect both the dream, prayer and chart dimensions of the poem, a process for which Coleridge provides an ideal test case because the main problem lies out in the open:

In the case of Coleridge’s enslavement to his drug [...] you get an observable simplification, a burden the manifestations of which can be trailed through his work – yet at the same time you have him left in all his complexity, and so may observe the complex ways in which this burden becomes interwoven with his many other concerns. (PLF 22)

Coleridge’s addiction provides Burke with a representative anecdote, not just because it enables him to tie into complex meanings of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but also because it provides a way for Burke to demonstrate how the poetic ‘attitude’ answers to life. Reading by means of the synecdoche of Coleridge’s opium abuse opens the private structures of meaning up to public recuperation:

private goads stimulate the artist, yet we may respond to imagery of guilt from totally different private goads of our own. We do not have to be drug addicts to respond to the guilt of a drug addict. The addiction is private, the guilt public. It is in such ways that the private and public act at once overlap and diverge. (PLF 23)

In order to recover the way Coleridge’s guilt is turned into a public strategy by symbolic means, Burke argues that one can apply “statistical methods.” Reversing the original act of creation, the reader can turn first to the poem as the chart of a situation. “the work of every writer,” Burke argues, “contains a set of implicit equations. He uses ‘associational clusters.’ And you may, by examining his work, find ‘what goes with what’ in these clusters” (PLF 20). As a rule of thumb, then, his methodology begins with a consideration of matters intrinsic to the text: “[t]he first step [...] requires us to get our equations inductively, by tracing down the interrelationships as revealed by the objective structure of the book itself” (PLF 70). This involves statistical methods: using a

combination of “objective citation” and “scissor work,” the critic looks for striking images or recurrent clusters of meaning. This way, Burke argues, it is perfectly possible to read Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* without taking recourse to elements outside the text:

I am not saying we need know of Coleridge’s marital troubles and suffering from drug addiction in order to appreciate *The Ancient Mariner*. I am saying that, in trying to understand the psychology of the poetic act, we may introduce such knowledge, where it is available. (PLF 74).

One of the main reasons to introduce such extrinsic knowledge is when statistical analysis discloses an image or associational cluster that seemingly does not fit the text. Thus, Burke notes the frequent recurrence of marriage imagery in the *Rime*, as well as the seemingly out-of-place mention of water-snakes (PLF 73). Finding such patterns or unexplainable events, Burke argues we may next turn to prayer to elucidate their presence: “every document bequeathed to us by history must be treated as a strategy for encompassing a situation [...] we shall automatically be warned not to consider it in isolation, but as the answer or rejoinder to assertions in the situation in which it arose” (PLF 109). A purely intrinsic analysis does not do justice to this fact, as it will not be able to account for the peculiarities of Coleridge’s choice of metaphor. Thus, the critic must take recourse to external evidence to account for their presence: this means, first of all, scrutinizing other known poems by the same author, but when the critic so chooses he can draw in other materials as well, attending to Coleridge’s individual subconscious burdening, like his drug addiction (symbolized in the Albatross) or his unhappy marriage after the collapse of his Pantisocracy project.

How different Burke’s reading was from the “organic” reading that Robert Penn Warren constructs in “A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading (1945-46)” (1946 [1958]).<sup>22</sup> In the opening passages of the essay, Warren discredits both historical source-hunting studies, as well as those which would read the poem as pure poetry, as a morally vacuous exercise of good writing – as if, as Warren says, the notion that the poem should not “mean” but only “be” implies “that the be-ing of a poem does not mean” (1946 [1958], 199). To counter these, Warren will – first – argue that the poem has a “theme” (which he defines as “some significant relation to the world” or “relevance to life” (1946 [1958], 199)); – second – that this significant relation has to do with a “very central and crucial issue of [Coleridge’s] period: the problem of truth and

---

<sup>22</sup> The essay was published first in the *Kenyon Review* in 1946; the *Selected Essays* version from which I am citing here offers a revised and expanded version of the original, with notes answering various criticisms. I have opted to take this latter version because it makes the principles and methodology at work beneath Warren’s analysis stand out more clearly.



poetry” of which the poem is a “document”(1946 [1958], 201); - thirdly – that Coleridge “intends” the ‘theme’ which the poem documents; and finally, that this intension is “embodied” formally and structurally in the poem (1946 [1958], 207).

Warren had clearly absorbed much of Richards’ *Coleridge on Imagination*, as his discussion of poetic intention makes clear: “does Coleridge imply that the poet in composing his poem acts according to a fully developed and objectively statable plan, that he has a blueprint of intention in such an absolute sense?” (1946 [1958], 207-208). No, Warren argues: the poem is structured by “motives,” but these are largely unconscious:

Perhaps the answer could be found in an application of Coleridge’s discussion of the Self, Will, and Motive. The common idea of will, he says, is the power to respond to a motive conceived of as acting upon it from the outside. But what is motive? Not a thing, but the thought of a thing. But all thoughts are not motives. Therefore motive is a determining thought. But what is a thought? A thing or an individual? Where does it begin or end? [...] ‘a motive is neither more or less than the act of an intelligent being determining itself [...]’ But will ‘is an abiding faculty or habit or fixed disposition to certain objects’ and rather than motive originating will, it itself is originated in terms of that predisposition of permanent will. (1946 [1958], 208)

“It seems clear,” says Warren, “that the secondary imagination does operate as a function of that permanent will, but the particular plan or intention for a particular poem may be actually developed in the course of composition in terms of ‘unconscious activity’ [...] and may result from a long process of trial and error” (1946 [1958], 208). Warren’s image for that long and mostly unconscious process of trial and error is Coleridge’s image of the organic, natural growth of an organism: “the organic form is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form” (1946 [1958], 209).

There is, Warren argues citing Burke’s *Philosophy of Literary Form*, another, more “personal” way of looking at the poem as well. The personal theme results from the idea “that the poem is ‘an involuntary but inevitable projection into imagery’ of [Coleridge’s] own inner discord” – a type of reading that Burke analysis of the *Rime* in terms of “the sexual and opium motives” appears to subscribe to. However, Warren says, Burke’s interest in the “psychology of the poetic act” is far too sensible to confuse such personal themes and motives with the real materials of the poem: “the poem, even regarded in this light, is not an attempt merely to present the personal problem but an attempt to transcend the personal problem, to objectify and universalize it” (1946 [1958], 215). Burke’s analysis of the poem in terms of its nature as a purgative-redemptive act does, indeed, make such a reading possible: as a symbolic act, Burke believes, the poem is a kind of public confession through which Coleridge unburdens himself of his “guilt-laden substance.” Using the public idiom of language, Coleridge is able to expiate some private

unspeakable “sin” (his drug abuse, his lack of love for his wife, his transgressions against his own ideals and against God) by using symbols (the albatross, the snakes) to enact (or ‘dance’) an attitude of redemption. “we find the whole work shaped into a strategy for the redemption of crime” (PLF 82) Burke writes, so that we may be admonished “to look for some underlying imagery (or groupings of imagery) through which the agonistic trial takes place, such as: ice, fire, rot, labyrinth, maze, hell, abyss, mountains and valleys, exile, migration, lostness, submergence, silence” (PLF 83).

Thus objectified, the poem becomes a public document that transcends private guilt. The statistical tracking of equations that Burke argues must be the beginning of any informed process of interpretation, he warns, must not lead back to biographical source-hunting: “we should always, in thus classifying, remember to introduce matters of differentia when particularizing our description of a poet’s strategy” as “such distinctions also lead us quickly back into ingredients of social texture operating in the situation behind the writer’s strategy” (PLF 83-84). Though the poem serves as “a private-enterprise mass” (PLF 287) through which Coleridge expiates his guilt, and though the symbols he uses are in part private, as an act – a public structure – the poem has indeed, as Warren claims, a ‘universal’ appeal. But to Burke, this appeal consists as a constant drive to re-interpret, recontextualize and rehistoricize the complex symbolic actions performed in the poem. It seems, then, that Warren needs to import a much impoverished understanding of Burke’s notion of ‘motive’ than is implied in the *Philosophy of Literary Form*, as well as a gross reduction of Burke’s synecdochic dream/prayer/chart methodology to one that is closer in accord with Warren’s own metaphorical one.

As I have argued above, to Richards organic form is not simply the metaphor for the poem but also the structure of mind, of world, of life. Similarly, for Warren, the organic form of the *Rime* mirrors some process in the author’s mind. But we can assume this without taking recourse to these private mental processes; instead, we can focus on what Warren calls the ‘objective’ theme in a poem which, he assumes, lead the divergent strands of meaning present in the poem toward some kind of unity that absolves the critic from resorting to extrinsic, contextual information. Thus, as Homer Brown argues, Warren’s method proceeds through opposition: “in the essay itself, between the poem conceived of as an organic totality and the critic-reader, between critical system and what Warren calls ‘divisive, vindictive internecine voices’ and also between the integral self and self-division” (1979, 245). Ultimately, however, these oppositions harmonize in a unified meaning, one that the critic needs to preserve at all time:

And here, as I have suggested earlier, the criterion is that of internal consistency. If the elements of a poem operate together toward one end, we are entitled to interpret the poem according to that end. Even if the poem should rise to contradict us, we could reply that the words of the poem speak louder than his

actions. But the application of the criterion of internal consistency cannot be made in a vacuum. All sorts of considerations impinge upon the process. And these considerations force on the critic the criterion of external consistency. First, in regard to the intellectual, the spiritual climate of the age, in which the poem was composed. Second, in regard to the over-all pattern of other artistic work by the author in question. Third, in regard to the thought of the author as available from non-artistic sources. Fourth, in regard to the facts of the author's life. (Warren 1946 [1958], 269-270)

This seems to mimic Burke's claim that the critic should use everything there is to use, but it does so with a difference. The historical, textual and personal concerns that "impinge" on the process of creation and "force" the critic to look outside the work are considered a threat to the integrity of the text. The relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives is one of coercion. Warren's metaphorical conception of textual 'context' cannot accommodate the causal links between text and environment; such contradiction must be eliminated by the critic, whose purpose must always be to protect and confirm the wholeness of the text. Burke, on the other hand, had embraced difference as part of his method. Burke's charting of the symbolic act looks for a "proportional" motivation (PLF 92), an interaction of dream, prayer and chart that allows the critic to see how external 'burdens' generate frictions inside the text that require the critic to move outside the poetic integer: "polar otherness unites things that are *opposite* to one another; synecdochic otherness unites things that are simply *different* from one another" (PLF 78). Thus, Burke's statistical methods would not "by the charting of equations, avoid reduction to one 'cause' (PLF 101).

Warren's coercive reading, however, must by necessity subsume certain elements that do not fit the unity it imposes on the text. As Brown argues, "In the Warren-Coleridgean dialectic there is always something left over. I want to avoid the temptation of saying, though I cannot fully, that what is left over is what is specifically literary" (1979, 250). As he argues, Warren

cannot explain the Mariner's continued alienation after it within the terms of the poem. He has to acknowledge that 'alienation,' which is in fact his word, but has to resort to another level of discourse for explanation – the 'peculiar paradoxical situation' of the Mariner is the situation of the poet in Coleridge's age and ours [...]  
One could say in this regard that what is left over is the historical and contingent. (Brown 1979, 250)

Warren also cannot deal with what Browns calls the poem's "excessiveness:" the disproportionate punishment for the futile crime, the supernatural elements, the redundancy of ambiguously redemptive moments (1979, 250). But Brown objects most to Warren's attempt to force rigid contradictions on the text in order to preserve the economy of unified oppositions he maintains throughout his reading (Brown 1979, 250).

All of these problems, Burke's dream/prayer/chart method can avoid but, most importantly (and unlike Warren), it can explain why readers would keep returning to canonical literary texts:

In the poet we might say, the poeticizing existed as a physiological function. The poem is its corresponding anatomic structure. And the reader, in participating in the poem, breathes into this anatomic structure a new physiological vitality that resembles, though with a difference, the act of its maker, the resemblance being in the writer's and reader's situation, the difference in the fact that these two situations are far from identical. (PLF 90)

It is this center, the "anatomic structure" of the text, and the possibility it offered for "participation," that Burke would turn to next.

## Chapter 4 The ‘Drama’ of the Text: Burke, Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks

*It's more complicated than that.*  
(Kenneth Burke)

In the summer of 1943, two literary scholars were – unbeknownst to each other – writing essays on Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Kenneth Burke’s “Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats” appeared first, in the autumn edition of *Accent*; Cleanth Brooks published his “History without Footnotes: An Account of Keats’ Urn” just a few months later in the *Sewanee Review*. Obviously embarrassed by the peculiar concurrence, Brooks added a note to his essay, in which he admits having come upon Burke’s some months after having completed his own. Yet despite the many similarities between both essays, Brooks says, he had resisted the urge to make alterations. Instead, he writes,

I am happy to find that two critics with methods and purposes so different should agree so thoroughly as we do on the poem. I am pleased, for my part, therefore, to acknowledge the amount of duplication which exists between the two essays, counting it as rather important corroboration of a view of the poem which will probably seem to some critics overingenious. (1948 [1975], 151)

Coming across a footnote that disrupts the usual confident tone and wholeness of execution that characterise Brooks’ writing is a notable occasion in itself, but its appearance in an essay whose title condemns the practice of adding them is striking enough to warrant closer scrutiny.

In this chapter, I will take Brooks’ footnote as an anecdote that points to a critical conversation between the New Critics and Burke on the one hand, and among the New Critics themselves on the other. This double aim seems warranted by the cryptical footnote itself, as the question it begs is as to why critics “with methods and purposes so different” would find themselves working on the exact same poem at the same time. Chance occurrences are, of course, bound to take place in a field where a group of

people is working on a fairly limited canon of poems, but the coincidence of vision Brooks notes between both essays, as well as the somewhat mysterious prediction that they might be received by “some critics” as “overingenious” suggest factors beyond mere chance. Expanding on these indications, I will show that Brooks’ appropriation of Burke was part of a twofold debate about the role that the historical genetics of a text should play in interpretation, and on the historical status of the literary text itself.

I will first set out the background to Brooks’ analysis of Keats’ *Ode*, rooting it in the context of the debate between New Critics and ‘traditional’ historians. This will allow me to show that Brooks’ essay addresses both sides of this debate, rejecting the methods of traditional ‘bibliographical’ criticism while trying to expand the narrow canon of the New Criticism. I will then argue that the potential controversial nature of the ‘dramatic’ method of reading Brooks forwards to this end prompted him to seek Burke’s allegiance, but that, at the same time, the extrinsic aspects that Burke allows in to his pentadic way of reading the poem forced Brooks to quarantine it in the safety of the footnote.

## 4.1 ‘New’ Critics and ‘Old’ Historians

Can Brooks’ footnote really serve as synecdochic anecdote, as a part of all this? After all, it seems little more than an apparent offhand nod to Burke’s essay on Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. However, on closer inspection, the footnote reveals its nature as a heavily laden rhetorical gesture, singing Burke’s praise while effectively burying him. As Antony Grafton points out, footnotes are not only used to document sources or acknowledge other writers. Besides their more obvious role as mediators between the historian’s account and the archival or scholarly evidence that supports it, footnotes often serve as a way of professing one’s allegiance to one particular guild of scholars rather than another. Every historiographic act entails a battle of inclusion and omission that is waged - more vehemently still than in the main textual body - at the edges of the page, where the space (or absence thereof) devoted to other scholars or sources signals one’s accordance to a given set of intellectual or methodological principles rather than another (1998, 9). Footnotes, then, are rhetorical more than textual tools, a fact that is only highlighted by Brooks’ argument that the literary critic need not be concerned with the margins of the page. If the pedestrian historian needs footnotes to serve as forensic evidence of whatever truths he purports to tell, “History without Footnotes” upholds that literary criticism moves on different - and ultimately more truthful - grounds of legitimacy. Stripped of their authoritative weight and exposed as mere

attempts to uphold some illusory idea of truthfulness, Brooks devaluates footnotes into gathering places for critical debris, references or digressions that do not permeate the main body of the text. In its staunch depreciation of all historical and philological devices that claim to summon the material and referential dimensions of the text, "History without Footnotes" has persuaded generations of critics that literary and critical texts can be engaged without taking recourse to such marginal, secondary levels of discourse.

Brooks' thrust at the apparatus of the historian researcher in "History without Footnotes" was not a remarkable event: the New Critics routinely took aim at institutionalized methods of literary analysis. In the early 1940s, however, tensions between Southern formalists and historian scholars were rapidly increasing as the gradual absorption of the New Criticism into universities and colleges – longtime strongholds of archival brands of historiography and philology – brought the two groups into direct conflict. Symptomatic of this growing debate on the relation between literary studies and history was a lecture by Allen Tate, delivered at Princeton University in 1940 and published in that year's autumn edition of *American Scholar* as "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer." In his speech, Tate accuses the "bibliographer" (a hypernym for the various philological and historicist approaches of the 19<sup>th</sup> century type) of being even more delusional than the protagonist of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, a deranged spinster who continues to sleep with the body of the lover she poisoned to prevent him from leaving. Both Emily and the scholar, Tate sneers, cannot bear to face their object of desire as a living, breathing entity. Whereas mad Emily's morbid longing at least draws her lovingly back to her dead beau every night, however, the scholar's methodical autopsies consistently move away from the text as a living entity. Scrutinizing its material incarnations in order to uncover its biographical or socio\_historical origins, the bibliographer dissects the textual body into an assemblage of tangible historical sources which he believes to offer access to the past. His eyes crusted with archival dust, the literary historian "cannot discern the objectivity of the forms of literature, he can only apply to literature certain abstractions which he derives, two stages removed, from the natural sciences; that is to say he gets these abstractions from the historians who get them from the scientists" (1940, 451).

Tate eyes this *approchement* between literature, history and science with great suspicion. Following a (what should by now be familiar) trope of modernist anti-scientism, Tate claims that art is able to offer a kind of experience that transcends the practical realm with which science is involved. Drawing from an influential (if tangled) line of thought that mixes classical with neo-Kantian aesthetics and Modernist dogma, he argues that literature is significant because it pairs a particular experience of the

physical world to the expression of a realm of spiritual knowledge that is unique to man and vital to the life of the community.<sup>1</sup> “The high forms of literature,” Tate says, “offer us the only complete, and thus the most responsible, versions of our experience” (1940 [1959], 4). As an account of human action, literature is therefore superior to science, which offers only abstract insight into the mechanics of the real. But science does not recognize these limits; instead, it routinely assumes that every phenomenon can be broken down to physical causes, “reduc[ing] the spiritual realm to irresponsible emotion, to what the positivists of our time see as irrelevant feeling; it is irrelevant because it cannot be reduced to the terms of positivist procedure” (1940 [1959], 4). By aligning itself to these reductive positivist procedures, Tate argues, the bibliographer cannot but take apart and destroy the unique integration of intellect and feeling that happens in good poetry: “[i]n our time the historical approach to criticism, in so far as it has attempted to be a scientific method, has undermined the significance of the material which it proposes to investigate” (1940 [1959], 4).

The historian’s turn to data, statistics and facts is not just a scientific error: to critics like Tate, it is symptomatic of a broader crisis in the human sciences and, indeed, in society as a whole: “historicism, scientism, psychologism, biologism, in general the confident use of scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm,” Tate claims, “has created or at any rate is the expression of a spiritual disorder” (1940 [1959], 3-4). Peddling utopian visions of endless progress and human perfectibility, science had disrupted religious beliefs, destroyed organic ways of living, and paved the way for a contemporary industrialized society that turned man into a rootless, godless and alienated creature.<sup>2</sup> With fellow Agrarians like John Crowe Ransom, Tate protested this disenchantment, at the hands of science, of what once was a wholesome tradition set in a perfectly ordered world (whose model they found in the myth of the Old South).<sup>3</sup> The wholesome, particular and morally responsive knowledge offered by literature, it was hoped, would prove a vestige against the encroachment of scientific abstraction and objectivism: according to John Crowe Ransom, “[i]n all human history the dualism between science and art widens continually by reason of the aggression of science. As science more and more reduces the world to its types and forms, art, replying, must invest it again with body” (1938, 198n).

---

<sup>1</sup> For a good overview of the complex intellectual pedigree of Tate’s – and, by extension, the New Critic’s – ideas about the relation between art and science, see Anthony Lombardy’s “Allen Tate and the Metaphysics of Metaphor” (2005, 62-80).

<sup>2</sup> For more on Tate’s antiscientific stance, cf. Wellek (1986, 152).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wellek (1986, 152). For Tate’s own exploration of the myth of the Old South and its particular mode of the Historical Imagination, see the afterword to his Tate’s *Collected Essays*, “A Southern Mode of the Imagination” (1959, 554-568).



One major part of the New Critic's attempt to counter the dominance of science was to discount the dominant breed of positivist historicism that dominated the academic field of literary studies. The major problem of the positivist historiography, Tate argues in "Literature as Knowledge," is that it eliminates the role of cognition in interpretation. Mirroring the logical positivist's attempts to coax language into taking on a one-to-one relationship with the real, the bibliographer believes that the words of the poem serve exclusively as vehicles for the archival facts or philosophical truths to which they presumably point: "the subject-matter of a literary work must not be isolated in terms of form; it must be tested (on an analogy to scientific techniques) by observation of the world it 'represents'" (1940 [1959], 11). Once the text has been reduced to its bare referential functions, the historian is able to bypass the complicated and potentially embarrassing questions of form and value; instead, she introduces objective *methods* to ensure the validity of her interpretive operations. Yet while these models supposedly guarantee the objectivity of the account, in reality they create an ontological barrier between the historian (subject) and the past she studies (object). Dissociated from lived experience, historiographic criticism becomes an abstract and aimless exercise that is indifferent to the values of a work of art.<sup>4</sup>

The domesticated Rankean paradigm that dominates the fields of history and philology imposes a conceptual epistemological framework that is not just wholly alien to the intuitive knowledge the literary text embodies and requires – it is alien to historical understanding itself.<sup>5</sup> Our knowledge of the past, Tate argues emphatically, is idiomatic, brought into being through the imaginative labour of selecting and arranging historical particulars into narrative sequences. The historical method, however, denies this primary dialectic at the basis of historical experience by interjecting a set of autotelic procedural models between the historian and his materials. These models, Tate argues (in a way that reminds starkly of Burke's ideas on the deflective nature of interpretive paradigms) can only generate the kind of knowledge that is already contained in them: "[o]n principle the sociological and historical scholar must not permit himself to see in the arts meanings that his method does not assume" (1940 [1959], 4). These procrustean tendencies of 'method,' Tate contends, must be overcome through the 'Historical Imagination,' which stresses the narrative character of historiography and restores man to the position of a conscious agent exercising a process of selection and evaluation. Through the use of the Historical Imagination, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. William J. Handy, *Kant and the Southern New Critics* (1963).

<sup>5</sup> Grafton points out that Ranke, while supposedly fathering source-criticism and establishing the footnote at the heart of the modern historical apparatus, actually disliked having to add footnotes – the practice of routinely adding them only became prevalent among his many disciples. See Grafton (1998, 62-93 and 228-29).

historian's vantage point in the present merges with the past, a process that results in an organic re-appropriation of the knowledge contained in it:<sup>6</sup>

We must judge the past and keep it alive by being alive ourselves; and that is to say that we must judge the past not with a method or abstract hierarchy but with the present, or with as much of the present as our poets have succeeded in elevating to the objectivity of form. For it is through the formed, objective experience of our own time that we must approach the past; and then by means of critical mastery of our own experience we may test the presence and the value of form in works of the past. (Tate 1940, 452)<sup>7</sup>

Apart from its clear dependence on Richards' Coleridgean organicism (cf. *supra*), T.S. Eliot's ideas on the fundamental continuity of a unified sensibility beneath the processes of historical change clearly resonate throughout this passage: like Eliot's 'Tradition,' Tate's *Historical Imagination* manifests itself as a deep-felt, continuous and synchronic presence that crystallizes in the concrete linguistic form of the poem and acts as a moral and aesthetic guide for literary judgement. Suspending traditional literary history – the chronology of genres and works that serves as the backbone of nineteenth-century historicist criticism and philology – the *Historical Imagination* shifts the object of literary studies from the poem's singular historical content to its general, transhistorical form.

Tate's provocative speech generated such uproar in academic circles that kindred critics were prompted to mount a defense of his position, which came in the form of *Literature and the Professors*, a five-part symposium cosponsored by the *Southern Review* and the *Kenyon Review* in order to define a common stance on the relation between history and literature.<sup>8</sup> Together with John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks was in charge of dividing contributors over both publications, and with Tate (who contributed

---

<sup>6</sup> See Robert S. Dupree, *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (1983, 118-119).

<sup>7</sup> In the "Preface" to his *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*, Tate argues that "the poet [...] is aware of the present, any present, now or past or future. For by experiencing the past along with the present he makes present the past, and masters it; and he is the center of the experience out of which the future must come (1936, xvi).

<sup>8</sup> Jancovich calls the impact of Tate's speech 'dramatic;' George Core claims somewhat more prosaically, that "the audience could not have been more surprised and shocked had Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe bombed and strafed those sacred precincts." See Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (1993, 97) and George Core, "Two Critics" (1989). Tate himself wrote to Brooks: "I read to the English Club here [at Princeton] a paper on historical scholarship that infuriated the Department. (Incidentally, it has probably killed my chances for a permanent appointment at Princeton). I read the same paper at Yale, with even more disastrous results" (in: Vinh 1998, 63). Whether the infuriated response was due to Tate's comparing historians to necrophiliacs or to his debilitatingly caricatural image of historical scholarship as blind followers of positivist dogma – likely, it was a combination of the two.

“The Present Function of Criticism”) was one of the prominent contributors to the symposium. Brooks’s “Literary History vs. Criticism,” which sets Tate’s “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer” off against Edwin Greenlaw’s *Province of Literary History*, eagerly falls in line with the main points of Tate’s provocative essay. Though he tunes down the ideological and moral overtones of the latter’s critique somewhat (Brooks frames the inability of the literary historian to deal with poetry as an epistemological – rather than a moral – incapacity and locates the opposition between historicist-scholarly and formalist-critical approaches primarily on differences in the appreciation of poetic language, rather than on ideological grounds), Brooks, too, challenges positivist criticisms factual bias, which leads to “a cheerful sacrifice of imagination to objectivity, and a fond over-confidence in the virtues of method” (1940, 411).<sup>9</sup> The uncritical pursuit of facts and penchant for data renders the historian unable to recognize poetry as being qualitatively different from that of referential language; because he considers the distorted referentiality of literary texts to be problematic with regard to the criteria of empirical verifiability he has embraced, those aspects that grant the text its specifically *literary* character are habitually brushed aside. In order to reorient literary criticism to the literary side of its subject, Brooks says,

[i]t is my considered opinion that the English department will have to forego the pleasures of being ‘scientific.’ [...] There is no substitute for the imagination (tainted with subjectivity though it may be); and there is no substitute for the incalculable of the discipline of reading (a discipline that involves active critical judgement). (1940, 411-412)

Like his Agrarian friend and mentor Tate, Brooks feels that the reason for historicism’s inadequacy in the field of literature is, ultimately, ontological. Poetry, he argues, contains a species of knowledge that belongs to a different order of being, one which the nomothetic bias of the historian prevents him from seeing. The wealth of contextual information, statistical data or biographical conjectures which the historian’s methods help summon may create what Barthes has called *l’effet de réel*, but in fact they are but spells meant to ward off the realization that the language of poetry simply does not fit its referential mould. Shored against the ruins of a failing method, to Brooks the footnote embodies both the historian’s penchant for piling up trivia, as well as the cumbersome and often hermetic apparatus through which this information is elevated to the status of meaning. The footnote is not the index of critical discipline, but the hallmark of historicist pedantry.

---

<sup>9</sup> Tate’s essay was published in the *Southern Review* (no. 6, autumn 1940, pp. 236-246), Brooks published his piece in the *Kenyon Review* (vol 2, no4, pp. 403-412).

## 4.2 The Case Against Romanticism

But if all this explains Brooks's enmity towards the footnote, it does not readily account for Brooks' attempt to claim Burke's analysis of Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* as a kindred reading in "History without Footnotes." For this, I need to turn to Brooks' somewhat mysterious prediction that "some critics" might see his reading of the poem as "overingenious." This statement may appear to be directed at the historicist scholars that are Brooks' target in the essay; however, it might also address the critical programme embedded in Tate's *Historical Imagination*. Although the notion served a polemic goal as an alternative to positivist method, its primary purpose to Tate is that of a litmus test to determine the worth of literary texts. If its spatial, a-historical and particular conceptualization of the *Historical Imagination* could replace the bibliographer's temporal, factual and generalizing scientist approach, the poem as a historical artefact might once again be opened up to questions of aesthetic appreciation and value. As I will show in this section, the lyric poetry of the Romantics did not fare well in this evaluative undertaking; indeed, in Tate's eye, it was the overt emotionalism and individualism of Romantic poetry that should be held accountable for inspiring the kind of bibliographical criticism that he attacked in "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer."

To understand the connection Tate makes between Romantic poetry and historicist scholarship, I need to consider the dynamic of *tension* which is the organizing center of Tate's poetics. Balancing the extensive (logical or denotative) intensive (ideational or connotative) meanings present in the language of the individual poem, "tension" unites propositional statement and suggestive image so that "the varieties of ambiguity and contradiction possible beneath the logical surface are endless" (Tate 1941 [1959], 84) Tate offers the example of the gold conceit in Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidden Mourning*:

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
Though I must goe, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to aiery thinnesse beat

Comparing the common soul that binds the parting lovers with a solid piece of gold, the conceit rests on the apparent discord between the tangible, spatial piece of gold hammered into a thin plate and the abstract, infinite souls of the lovers: "[t]he finite image of the gold, in extension, logically contradicts the intensive meaning (infinity) which it conveys" (1959, 84). Yet despite the rational atonality between the images Donne applies, our emotional experience of the stanza is harmonious: the strain that exists between the extensional meanings of the piece of gold and the soul is resolved

through the intensional image of 'expansion.' Welding rationally discordant signifiers together, Donne creates a single, intellectually and emotionally unified meaning.

However, Tate believes that this meaningful tension on which the metaphysical conceit depended gradually disappeared from poetry. Again, his indebtedness to Eliot on this point stands out clearly as he links the undoing of the tensional apparatus to the gradual "dissociation of sensibility" that took place around the time of Milton and Dryden.<sup>10</sup> Early writers like Dante, Eliot had claimed, were able to presuppose agreement about beliefs in the society in which they wrote, and therefore had no need to assert these beliefs explicitly in their poetry (Eliot 1921 [1951]). But as the pressures of scientific expansion eroded the organic societies of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the harmonious unity of emotion and idea of which the Metaphysical conceit is the final remnant, disappeared. Intellect and intuition, which previously reinforced each other, became separate categories of understanding. From then on, meaningful tension dissipated as a poetic device, and was replaced first by a poetry of pure intellect (as in the high linguistic refinement of classicist poetry), and then by one of pure emotion, a tendency that reached its high water mark in the radical and eclectic individualism of Romantic poetry.

Relying exclusively on the expression of personal emotions, the nineteenth-century Romantic writer fails to connect private intension to the communal and time-tested categories of extensive meaning. Instead, he yields to the siren call of positivist statement in an attempt to regain expressive force, turning Nineteenth-century English verse into a poetry of *communication* used "to convey ideas and feelings that [...] could be better conveyed by science" (1941 [1959], 84). The weakness of Romanticism, Tate writes,

is that it gave us a poetry of 'poetical' (or poetized) objects, pre-digested perceptions; and in case there should be any misunderstanding about the poetical nature of these objects, we also got 'truths' attached to them – truths that in modern jargon are instructions to the reader to 'respond' in a certain way to the poetical object, which is the 'stimulus.' And in the great body of nineteenth-century lyrical poetry – whose worst ancestor was verse like Shelley's 'I arise from dreams of thee' – the poet's personal emotions became the 'poetic stimulus. (1940 [1959], 121)

Flattening the dynamic of tension and stifling the communal "creative spirit" that Tate believes are crucial to the Historical Imagination, the Romantic poetics is based on the domineering presence of the authorial will. The result is a dangerous historical relativism that celebrates the experiential and particularist character of historical

---

<sup>10</sup> For more on the link between Eliot's "unified sensibility" and Tate's "tension," cf. Wellek (1986, 177).

events over their translation into general, formal essence: “[t]he poem as a formal object to be looked at, to be studied, to be construed [...] dissolved into biography and history” (1940 [1959], 116).

According to Tate, then, Romantic poetry was intimately bound up with the positivist breed of criticism he challenged in “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer.” Not only did the Romantic poet, in failing to integrate meaning and experience into a poetry of tension, perfect the separation between language and subject matter that would allow the bibliographer a way into the body of the poem; moreover, the Romantic retreat into the past, nature or the self offered no position from which this positivist recuperation could be challenged; instead, it disconnects the poet from the living forces of community and culture. But the Romantic poet’s greatest transgression against Tate’s poetics was his overt presence in his poetry. Filling his poems with the emotive expression of a private personality, Tate argues, “taught the reader to look for inherently poetical objects, and to respond to them ‘emotionally’ in certain prescribed ways, these ways being indicated by the ‘truths’ interjected at intervals among the poetical objects” (1940 [1959], 117).

In an essay called “Three Types of Poetry” that was published in the *New Republic* in 1934, Tate had already protested the attempts of the Romantic “poetry of the will” to apply literature to life, with the lines “Life like a dome of many-colored glass / Stains the white radiance of eternity” from Shelley’s *Adonais* singled out as an especially harmful example. “We must understand that [these] lines, Tate says about Shelley’s elegy for Keats, “are not poetry; they express the frustrated individual will trying to compete with science.” Shelley purports to lay bare one of life’s deep spiritual essences, but

Shelley’s simile is imposed upon the material from above; it does not grow out of the material. It exists as an explanation external to the subject: it is an explanation of ‘life’ that seems laden with portent and high significance, but as *explanation* it necessarily looks towards possible action, and it is there that we know that the statement is meaningless. Practical experimental knowledge can fit means to ends. (1959, 92)

True poetry, Tate argues, “proves nothing; it creates the totality of experience in its quality, and it has no useful relation to the ordinary forms of action” (1959, 113).

Interestingly, Tate’s attack on the utilitarian poetic vision of the Romantics coincided with a brief but intense epistolary debate between Burke and Tate on the relation between literature and life. As George and Selzer’s reconstruction of this conversation shows, the cause for the exchange was another example of Tate’s signature vituperative remarks (Selzer and George 2007, 97-99). In a 1933 essay on “Poetry and Politics,” Tate had grouped Burke with Richards as critics infatuated with an aesthetics of practicality. As I have shown, Richards believed that poetry might be instrumental in ordering the

minds of men by channelling social energy towards behavioral refinement. For Tate, this merely amounts to a new version of the Romantic poet's sentimental escapism:

Mr. Richards, like the Romantic poet of the age of Byron and Shelley, sees that science has contrived a superior instrument of the will; again like them, he tries to rescue poetry by attributing to it functions of practical volition, functions that he cannot define but which, in the 'true' liberal tradition, he asserts in some realm of private hope against the 'truths' of science. (1959, 109)

By equating poetic meanings to 'pseudo-statements' whose test lies in their emotive effects, Richards had tried to draw poetry out of the reach of empirical verifiability. But this strategy, Tate believed, merely gave in to the positivist equation of poetry with irrelevant feeling, a position which Richards' choice of the prefix 'pseudo' seemed to concede. It would be better, Tate suggests, to preserve the term 'semi-statement' for the claims of science, which need some extraneous, wordly penchant or referent in order to be 'true:' "the statements in a genuine work of art are neither 'certified' nor 'pseudo-'; the creative intention removes them from the realm of practicality" (1934 [1959], 111).<sup>11</sup>

In the eyes of Tate, Burke (who had just brought out *Permanence and Change*) was equally guilty of polluting the pure waters of literature with the muddle of life. Thus, he haughtily declares "we do not care what truth in poetry is. We care very little about Mr. I.A. Richards, and we care just as little for Mr. Kenneth Burke, who finds the spring water so full of bacteria that, bitterly, he distils the water off and, laughing a long mad laugh, devours the bacteria alone" (in: Selzer and George 2007, 97). Clearly bruised by these words, Burke responded with a long letter in which he tried to bridge the differences between his own theories of literary communication and Tate's ardent poetic autonomism. But Tate refused to respond to Burke's peace offer in kind; instead, his next letter maintained that Burke's preoccupation with the effects of poetic language on readers missed the mark. While Tate was willing to concede that even high literary texts might generate a mental or affective response in a reader, arousing such response should not be the writer's preoccupation, nor should chasing them be part of the critic's enterprise. While individual readers may introduce ideological elements into their reading, art as a whole must exist in a neutral space.

Burke responded by attacking Tate's concept of the "poetry of the will," asking him after the grounds of his distinction between the Romantic poetry of effect and the

---

<sup>11</sup> As I have indicated in the introduction to the chapter on Richards, Tate would applaud Richards' eventual equation, in *Coleridge on Imagination*, of literature and myth. In that book, Tate says in "The Present Function of Criticism," "Mr. Richards takes the view that poetry, far from being a desperate remedy, is an independent form of knowledge, a kind of cognition, equal to the knowledge of the sciences at least, perhaps superior" (1940 [1959], 11).

Metaphysical poetry of tension Tate favoured. Burke was highly sceptical about the existence of a truly purposeless literature: "I grant that I worried over the same matter," Burke writes mockingly, "until I suddenly (perhaps through mental breakdown) came to the conclusion that there was no other kind [than a poetry of the will]" (in: Selzer and George 2007, 98-99). Even so ostensibly autonomous a piece of literature as James Joyce's stream of consciousness, Burke argues, might be read as literature *willed* to turn away from socio-political issues. Not only was he doubtful about the existence of the kind of autonomous literature that Tate was putting forward, then, Burke was even more sceptical about the ability of the critic to mirror this supposed poetic autonomy into an equally unbiased, value-free language of explication:

If I am a fat burgher travelling on the highway, and Robin Hood takes my purse, I know that Robin Hood is a thief. If I am humble and starving, and Robin Hood gives me money, I know that he is a benefactor. But as for what Robin Hood *an-sich* is – I am a little uneasy. (in: Selzer and George 2007, 99)

If Tate would admit that even such 'genuine' poetry like Shakespeare's did contain incidental impurities, Burke therefore gleefully replied: "Yes, indeedee, but the trouble is that English is one of the 'incidental impurities' of Shakespeare" (in: Selzer and George 2007, 99).<sup>12</sup>

The tone of gentle mockery of these replies masks Burke's clear understanding of the paradoxical wedding of an anti-mimetic poetics and aesthete humanism at the heart of Tate's formalism. On the one hand, Tate denied the idea that poetry and life informed each other in any meaningful way. As he writes in the "Preface" to his *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*:

poetry does not explain our experience. If we begin by thinking that it ought to 'explain' the human predicament, we shall quickly see that it does not, and we shall end up thinking that therefore it has no meaning at all. [...] Poetry is at once more modest and, in the great poets, more profound. It is the art of apprehending and concentrating our experience in the mysterious limitations of form. (1936, xv)

Such concentrated, formed poetic experience, Tate believes, bears no relation to the chaotic and partial ways in which we otherwise apprehend the world. "*Literature is the completest mode of utterance,*" he approvingly cites Richards' organicist doctrine from *Coleridge on Imagination*; "it is neither in the world of verifiable science nor a projection of ourselves; yet it is *complete*." Literature is a pure category of experience, which is

---

<sup>12</sup> "Genuine poetry has been written in most ages," Tate said, "but it is a sort of poetry that was written most completely by Shakespeare. It is the sort of poetry that our 'capitalist' and 'communist' allegorists have forgotten how to read" (1959, 113).



neither mimetic nor affective; it “is not of the experimental order, but of the experienced order: in short, of the mythical order” (1941 [1959], 47):

[if], as in the great seventeenth-century poets, you find that exhaustive analysis applied to the texture of image and metaphor fails to turn up any inconsistency, and at the same time fails to get all the meaning of the poem into a logical statement, you are participating in a poetic experience. And both intellect and emotion become meaningless in discussing it. (1940 [1959], 124-125)

Yet despite the ontological distinction he claims there is between poetry and life, Tate still assigns a vital function to this disinterested and pure poetic experience. As he continues in the preface to his *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*: “the poet [...] is aware of the present, any present, now or past or future. For by experiencing the past along with the present he makes present the past, and masters it; and he is the center of the experience out of which the future must come (1936, xvi). Instrumental in bringing about a poetic experience, Tate believes that literature may revive the Historical Imagination whose totalizing hermeneutic might revert the modern disintegration of man.

Burke’s remarks about the role of language expose this uneasy marriage between autonomist criticism and political activism (note, in the preceding quotations, Tate’s uneasy use of the word ‘experience’), exposing Tate’s rejection of utilitarianism as itself a utilitarian gesture. Tate’s conservative, elitist social and moral vision, rooted in his admiration for the organic, hierarchic societies of the imaginary ‘Old South’ that he and the other Agrarians envisioned, clearly informs his taste for complex Metaphysical poetry, his desire to align past and present through the Historical Imagination, and his concept of ‘tension’ that rests on the idea of a unified sensibility (cf. Graff 1987, 148-150). Taking Tate to task for ignoring the ideological and political subtexts present in his own criticism, Burke points out that Tate fails to make clear why readers would seek disinterested knowledge in the first place and, if neither intellect nor emotion participate in its making, how a “poetic experience” can contribute to its formation.

### 4.3 Brooks’ New History and the Text as Drama

In his playful challenge to Tate’s peculiar combination of a high aesthete humanism with a dogmatically anti-referential poetics, Burke prefigures the objections that many later scholars writing on the New Critics have uttered. Gerald Graff, for instance, argues that

the formalist poetics that Ransom, Tate and others oppose to the definitions of reality prescribed by positivist science, atheist government and industrialist economics must ultimately belie their broad cultural ambitions:

The autonomous poem, which ‘says’ nothing and does not represent any reality outside its self-sufficient coherence, somehow embodies a humanistic consciousness that can rescue us from science, dissociated sensibility, and disorder. In order to combat the fragmentation, dissociation and overspecialization of a presumably hyperrational society, literature is opposed to rational and referential discourse [...] literature is to serve as the exemplary basis of a new psychic harmony reconciling the psychic and social dissonance of the modern world [...] yet it is to do all this without making any truth-claims or claiming any understanding of the world. (1979, 147-148)

However, such generalizing statements always threaten to reduce the fundamentally dialectical form of the New Critic’s argument to a flat anti-historicism. As Douglas Mao has it, the intervention of Tate and the other Agrarians in the debate on the relation between poetry and its historical matrix is inspired “not by some axiomatic desire to protect a quasi-religious, ontological sanctuary from all secularising discourses that would situate literature in history, [...] but rather by anxieties provoked by history itself, where history seems a tale of the ever-expanding reach of science” (1996, 234). The sense of anxiety and crisis associated with these beliefs did not result in an irrational flight from history; on the contrary, these anxieties generated an intense intellectual effort to redraw the boundaries of its study and its relation towards the literary texts it produces.<sup>13</sup>

This need to recover the complex dialectic that apodictic generalizations of New Critical anti-historicism tend to cover up is true for Tate’s Historical Imagination, but seems especially pressing in the case of Cleanth Brooks. A somewhat atypical New Critic, Brooks was not a poet but a scholar. In fact, by siding with Tate’s challenge of the paradigms of traditional historicism, Brooks was writing against a tradition of scholarship in which he matured intellectually and in which he remained actively engaged throughout his life.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the same year that Brooks brought out “History without Footnotes,” he also published the first volume of *The Percy Letters* (co-edited

---

<sup>13</sup> Most scholars do mollify their accounts of the New Critical anti-scientism or anti-historicism. Terry Eagleton’s, for instance, claims that the New Critical program of “rescuing the text from author and reader went hand in hand with disentangling it from any social or historical context,” but modifies this extreme position, stressing that the New Criticism “stopped short of a full-blooded formalism” – cf. Eagleton (1983, 47-48).

<sup>14</sup> For more on Brooks’ university education and his work on *The Percy Letters*, see Mark Royden Winchell’s *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (1996, 58-77).

with David Nichol Smith), a carefully annotated and supremely scholarly edition of the correspondence between the bishop, antiquarian and translator Thomas Percy and the Shakespeare scholar Richard Farmer. Brooks, then, was supremely aware of the limits and possibilities of both literary scholarship and literary criticism, as he was of the different kinds of histories that ran through literary texts. “We know there are cultural lags,” he says in “Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism,” “that one region of the world differs from another, and that one class of society differs from another, for that matter. Historical periods (in the sense in which they color and mold sensibility) run horizontally as well as vertically” (1948 [1975], 232).

Brooks’ point is not that these differences do not matter, but rather that either one provides too shaky a basis for historical vision. Moving along the shifting axes of history merely leads to critical relativism, which turns teachers and critics into “merely cultural historians” (1948 [1975], 235). So instead, Brooks proposes a “new history” which

will, of course, not be final: but it ought to be more nearly so than the histories that it supersedes. (That it will have to face the charge that it is merely our own interpretation of past events should be beneficial in so far as this begets a proper humility in the historians. If the charge can, in truth, be leveled against any possible history stemming from our times, then relativism will have forced us to give up, not only literature, but history as well. We shall have to content ourselves with literary chronicles, masses of uninterpreted facts, mere bibliographies). (1948 [1975], 237-238)

Such a new history would not just counter the reductive histories of traditional literary scholarship; it would also surpass the antithetical divisions on which Tate’s *Historical Imagination* found its basis.

Tate’s solution to the conflict between poetry and science, and between history and criticism, was far from ideal. First, his vision of history required him to disown several centuries of English literary history – indeed, despite the fact that he is not mentioned explicitly in “History without Footnotes,” it is likely his good friend Tate that Brooks had in mind when he wrote that “some critics” might believe his interpretation of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* “overingenious.” In Tate’s eye, the inward-focused emotionalism and forced claims of the lyric poetry that Romantics produced would hardly repay Brooks’ lavish attention, nor could such a Romantic poetry of the will provide a basis from which to restore the *Historical Imagination* as a means of understanding poetic meaning. Second, his insistence that poetry is somehow in the world but not of it rendered him vulnerable to critique from the likes of Burke who were pushing the social value of literature. It required Tate to stumble along with a very problematic notion of ‘experience,’ one that held that, though poetry did originate in an author and is at some point read by a reader, the experiences of these people somehow never interact with the text.

Brooks would remedy both defects, not by subverting Tate's dichotomies, but by subsuming them in a new kind of history. Not only would such a history make it possible for the critic and the scholar to coexist (even within the same person), but it would also be able to accommodate the kind of Romantic poetry that Thomas Percy helped found with his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). His new history would achieve this by drawing the conflicts between science and poetry, between history and criticism and between statement and value within the textual integer. Brooks had already explored this line of thinking in *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939).<sup>15</sup> In the latter, for instance, Brooks argues:

The poet does not have the relatively simple task (as the more naive adherents of the doctrine of communication imply) of noting down a certain state of mind. The experience which he 'communicates' is itself created by the organization of the symbols which he uses. The total poem is therefore the communication, and indistinguishable from it. (1939, 59)

Tate, we will remember, had argued that valuable poetry exhibits 'tension.' Stressing that meaning in poetry is continuously delayed by the oscillation between extension (its syntagmatic, metonymic axis) and intension (its metaphorical, paradigmatic axis), Tate believed that the poem communicates only itself and is, therefore, impervious to any attempt to reduce it to bare-bones utilitarian statements or, conversely, mere emotional expression.

Brooks agrees, though with a difference: his metaphor for the poet is that of a lens which, excluding the mimetic and expressive, shifts our gaze to the interior world of the poem:

Hobbes reduced the poet from the status of maker to that of copyist by making the imagination merely the file-clerk of the memory. He would have the poet take literally the phrase "to hold the mirror up to nature." A mirror can reflect the poetic object placed before it. But if we are to use the term mirror at all, it is rather a distortion mirror which the poet carries, or better still, a lens with which he gives focus to experience. At all events, the emphasis must be placed on the poet's making. (1939, 11-12)

As Frank Lentricchia has argued, Brooks' intermediate step in his shift from mirror to lens – the poem as a "distortion mirror" – for a brief moment threatens to give in to the positivist mimeticism he is trying to refute. Had he settled on the 'distortion mirror' metaphor, Brooks would have implicitly admitted that the poet merely channels values and meanings that have an independent and operative status outside the poem.

---

<sup>15</sup> The latter book was dedicated to Tate.

Moreover, it would have relegated the poet to the inferior position of a distorter of meaning, appealing to pleasure rather than truth (1970, 241). Such reduction of the poet to a medium, channeling some pre-existent piece of knowledge-content was the constant threat of Tate's intension/extension divide: splitting poetic language between referential and emotional meanings seemed to suggest that there was some intentional force that controlled these meanings, or that, at least, caused their inception in the poem. Brooks' lense-metaphor is able to surpass such problems because it frames meaning as being *made within* the poem. As Gerald Graff summarizes this position:

It was not a question of purging moral and social significance from literature, but of showing how that significance became a function of the formal texture of the work itself rather than something external or superadded. The morality and politics of literature would thus be recognized in a way that would not entail crudely reducing poems and novels to their instrumental or doctrinal content. (1987, 117)

In order to reinforce anti-intentionalism, Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Poetry* appropriated Richards' concepts of 'tone' and 'speaker,' introduced in *Practical Criticism* to identify the controlling presence within a poem and subsequently broadened in *Coleridge on Imagination*, where Richards asserts that "all poetry (as all utterance) can of course be looked upon as dramatic" (1934, 78). For Brooks and Warren "every poem implies a speaker of a poem, either the poet writing in his own person or someone into whose mouth the poems is put and [...] the poem represents the reaction of such a person to a situation, a scene or an idea." Thus, "all poetry" involves "dramatic organization," and, therefore, "every poem can be – and in fact must be – regarded as a little drama" (1938, 23).

By seeing the text as a drama, Brooks believed, one could avoid the science-poetry entithesis and the bothersome dichotomies that marked interpretive vocabularies like Tate's intension/extension divide or Ransom's distinction between 'structure' and 'texture.' Such dichotomies rendered their theories of poetry vulnerable to such challenges as Burke's, who insisted that poetry (like the interpretive language of the critic) does contain regular-language meanings and should, thereby, should open up to more generalist kinds of scrutiny:

most of us are less inclined to force the concept of 'statement' on drama than on a lyric poem; for the very nature of drama is that of something 'acted out' – something which arrives at its conclusion through conflict – something which builds conflict into its very being. The dynamic nature of drama, in short, allows us to regard it as *an action* rather than as a formula for action or as a statement for action. (Brooks and Warren 1938 [1976], 186-187)

I will return to this statement and its obvious echoes of (and differences to) Burke's dramatism shortly. Before I do so, however, I want to argue that it is this conceptual

innovation of the drama that allows Brooks to bridge the interval between Jacobean art and Symbolist poetry – “the interval between Donne and Yeats” when there was “a shrinkage in the range and depth of Western man’s experience.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it seems no coincidence that ‘drama’ appears in the context of Brooks’ refutation of Eliot and Tate’s primitive canonical rule. In his essay on “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” Eliot had argued that, within the ideal order of the impersonal tradition, “the drama is perhaps the most permanent, is capable of greater variation and of expressing more varied types of society than any other” (1922, 62). The Elizabethan Age, Eliot says, “was able to absorb a great quantity of new thoughts and images, almost dispensing with tradition, because it had this great form of its own which imposed itself on everything that came to it” (1922, 62). What frees authors like Shakespeare from the burdens of depersonalization and subjection was the gift of this dramatic form, which proved so capable and versatile that the poet happily surrenders his personality: “we should see how little each poet had to do; only so much as would make a play his, only what was really essential to make it different from anyone else’s” (1922, 64).

If such a dramatic form could be turned into a general theory of interpretation, Brooks believed, critics could do away with the bother of arguing poetry in terms of experience, belief or truth; one could also waive the question of whether or not the poem under scrutiny belongs to “the main stream of the tradition” (1948 [1975], 192). What is more, such a ‘dramatic’ technique of analysis could be applied to any kind of poem. Whereas Tate argued that criticism, in order to do justice to the unique dynamic between both in each individual poem, is necessarily and deliberately anti-methodological, Brooks could transfer his lens to scrutinize multiple poems. To Tate, both literature’s elusive play of meaning and the essential subjective nature of the historical imagination foreclose the application of fixed standards for interpretation; to Brooks, however, the ironic structures that operate in literary texts open up at least the possibility of a unified hermeneutic. Brooks summarizes this position in “The Heresy of Paraphrase:”

It is not enough for the poet to analyse his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem, if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality – in this sense, at least, it is an ‘imitation’ – being an experience rather than a mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience. [...] the poet, then, must perforce dramatize the oneness of the experience, even though paying tribute to its diversity [...] [He

---

<sup>16</sup> Brooks’ canonical salvage job is embodied clearly in *The Well Wrought Urn*, which frames readings of Shakespeare, Milton, Gray and others between Donne’s *Canonization* and Yeats’s *Among School Children*.

gives] us an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which, at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern. (Brooks 1948 [1975], 212-214)

It is not a coincidence, then, that the text in which this new dramatic methodology of reading is exemplified in *The Well Wrought Urn* – “The Language of Paradox” offers a reading of Donne’s *The Canonization*. Brooks does not explicitly pursue the pun in the title of his object, but its implications are clear. No longer the orthodoxy of Eliot’s Tradition, nor Tate’s Historical Imagination, but dramatic propriety, whose test consist in reading the poem as a simulacrum in which the apparent contradictions of experience are played out and resolved wholly within the language of the poem, becomes the principle of measurement for poetic value. That poetic language, Brooks argues, is not transparent or emotional. Like scientific statement, it is “intellectual” and “hard.” But this “hardness” is not acquired by stripping language to its conceptual bedrock; instead, what prevents poetry from becoming opaque is a kind of permanent semantic confusion: “[p]aradox,” Brooks says turning against the positivists, “is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox” (Brooks 1948 [1975], 3).

#### 4.4 The Irony of ‘Paradox’ and the Dialectics of ‘Substance’

As I have argued in my chapters on Burke’s critical conversation with Korzybskian semantics and in my comparison between his reading of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Richardsian organicism, Burke, too, defended the inherent complexity of ‘poetic’ language against both scientist and psychologist metonymical reductions. But unlike Brooks, Burke did not believe that the poetic complexities that give symbols their inherent dramatic quality are exclusive to poetic language, nor did Burke believe that these dramatic qualities need make language ‘hard’ or ‘illusory.’ Instead, as we have seen, Burke’s methodology stressed the fluidity of the symbolic actions in the poem, which his three-tiered “statistical” hermeneutic is meant to reveal. If Brooks’ argued that “[t]he dynamic nature of drama [in a poem] allows us to regard it as *an action* rather than as a formula for action or as a statement for action” (cf. *supra*), Burke’s conception of the poem as both dream, prayer and chart *would* see the it as both statement and formula. By incorporating the personal and the rhetorical, Burke had argued in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, critics are not only able to offer a more comprehensive

account of the action that goes on in a poem, they could also derive attitudinal meanings that might be beneficial as “equipment” for their own lives.

And yet, as Burke saw the dramatic metaphor he endorsed pop up in other methodologies of reading, it was used almost inevitably to underscore a kind of reading that cut the poem off from its roots in the lived experience of the poet or the conceptual capacities of ordinary language, and claimed to treat it as a self-sufficient object. So, in an essay on “The Problem of the Intrinsic (as Reflected in the Neo-Aristotelian School),” published in the 1943 winter issue of *Accent*, Burke set his own rhetorical dramatist methodology apart from these “inductive” dramatic approaches. The essay responds specifically to the Chicago school of literary criticism (in this case R.S. Crane, Norman Maclean, and Elder Olson), its argument is equally applicable to Brooks’s version of “dramatic” reading.<sup>17</sup> Briefly summarized, the essay translates the claims of Burke’s essay on the “Four Master Tropes” to a language familiar to literary critics. The claim of neo-Aristotelian criticism, Burke says, is that by close reading individual poems, literary criticism might inductively work its way up to making claims about “poetry” itself. Deriving its conclusions wholly from observation (quite as the scientist would arrive at a general hypothesis through the observation of discrete phenomena), it claims to treat poetry wholly ‘in itself.’

Burke, too, had argued that inductive analysis should be the point of departure for the analysis of a text; he agreed, therefore, with many of the observations that the neo-Aristotelians made: “the ‘dramatist’ nature of the Aristotelian vocabulary could be expected to provide the observer with very rich modes [of observation] indeed” (GM 472). But by claiming to treat poetry wholly as “intrinsic” – what Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* defined as “the implicit or explicit ‘equations’ [...] in any work considered as one particular structure of terms, or symbol system,” critics turned a blind eye to the impact of their own interpretive procedures and terminology:

a given vocabulary coaches us to look for certain kinds of things rather than others – and this coaching of observations is a deductive process, insofar as one approaches the poem with a well-formed analytic terminology prior to the given analysis and derives observations from the nature of his terminology. (GM 472)

Critics may claim to produce purely ‘intrinsic’ readings of texts, but

If you consider philosophic or critical terminologies as languages, however (languages from which we derive kinds of observation in accordance with the nature of the terms featured in the given philosophic idiom), you find reason to

---

<sup>17</sup> Burke had taught a summer course at the University of Chicago in 1938. For more on Burke’s Chicago connection, cf. George and Selzer (2007, 46-48).



question his claim in advance. For the critic does not by any means begin his observations 'from scratch,' but has a more or less systematically organized set of terms by which to distinguish and characterize the elements of the poem he would observe. In this sense, one's observations will not be purely 'inductive,' even though they derive important modifications from the observing of the given poem. They will also in part (and in particular as to their grammar, or form) be deduced or derived from the nature of the language or terminology which the critic employs. (GM 471 – 472)

It is not that Burke "would have these authors ply their trade under the trade-name of 'dramatism' rather than 'Aristotle'" (GM 481-482). But their (willful?) ignoring of the implications of the metaphor of the drama through which they structure their interpretive terminologies causes the intrinsic critic's analyses to lack "the pointedness that would derive from an explicit recognition of the 'dramatistic' element in his vocabulary" (GM 476). A criticism that fails to do this, Burke argues, "becomes merely a disguised variant of impressionism, a kind of improvisation wherein the critic simply translates the unique imaginative sequence of the poem into a correspondingly unique conceptual equivalent" (GM 473). If Crane and his Chicago fellows would hold their interpretive vocabularies up to scrutiny and acknowledge their impact on the way they read texts, Burke argues, they would see that their supposedly 'inductive' methodologies are, in fact, informed by preset principles and motivated by certain historic desires (in this case, the will to trump Coleridgean or 'deductive' methods of reading).

Thus conceived, Burke argues, the debate between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' methods of reading is rendered moot: "[w]hen considered in a linguistic, or terministic, perspective (the perspective in which we would consider 'dramatism'), the apparent distinctiveness between 'inductive' and 'deductive' modes of observation here ceases to exist" (GM 473). The dramatistic perspective, as Burke conceives it, "points equally towards a concern with 'internal structure' and towards a concern with 'act-scene relationships'" (GM 482), transcending the agon between these two modes in favor of a concern with the way language is used by poet's and critics alike to create meaning. "The question as to what a thing is 'in itself,'" Burke says, "is not a scientific question at all (in the purely empiricist sense of the term science), but a philosophical or metaphysical one" (GM 469) – and such questions, Burke believes, always deal in some form with human motivation, and lead one to the question of substance (GM 466 – 468). The paradox of substance, Burke says, is one that one inevitably encounters when trying to maintain an intrinsic approach to a given problem because, though

used to designate properties within a thing, etymologically the word means that which supports or grounds a thing (in brief, not something inside it but something outside it). And when the most 'intrinsic' statement we can make about a thing is a statement not about it in itself but about its place as part of the whole of the

world, have we not just about reversed the meanings of the words ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’? (GM 468)

Substance, or “sub-stance,” refers to “something that stands beneath or supports the person or the thing” and is thus outside or extrinsic to it (GM 21-22). If the comic frame of reference Burke had developed in the 1930s sought to incorporate multiple perspectives (cf. *supra*), his new interest in the way people represent conflicting points of view – an interest that would become the guiding principle of both the *Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* would steer Burke to formulate a dramatic interpretive framework for understanding human motives in terms of this inherent opposition of substance. The means through which this framework operate is that of the dialectic, since dialectic is inherently oppositional, always viewing “something in terms of some other” (GM 33). Thus, as both Crusius and Zappen argue, dialectic substance is the overarching category for Burke’s exploration of human motives and their inherent oppositions as dramatic action: “‘Dialectic substance’ would thus be the over-all category of dramatism, which treats of human motives in the terms of verbal action” – not verbal action alone, Burke insists, but “the subject of verbal action (in thought, speech, and document)” (GM 33) (Crusius 1986, 24-28, Zappen 2009, 284).

Dramatism, as Burke develops it in *A Grammar of Motives*, advocates a metalinguistic approach to the exploration of human action. To do so, critics must investigate the roles and uses of the five rhetorical elements Burke believes are common to all descriptions of human action:

In a rounded statement about motive, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instrument he [or she] used (*agency*) and the *purpose*. (xv)

Dramatism, Burke argues in the introduction to his *Grammar of Motives*, must explore its subject from these five elements, and to this end Burke develops a method of “pentadic analysis” that would see human motivation as informed by the dialectical relations between these perspectives. As far as human action is concerned, Burke argues, the primary ratio between these elements is that between agents and scenes: “there is implicit in the quality of the scene the quality of the action that is to take place within it.” People (agents) “synecdochically share in” the qualities of the scene in which they are placed (GM 8). [...]. At the same time certain actions by agents call forth certain modifications to the quality of their scenes. Thus, agents affect scenes; scenes affect acts; the scene-act and scene-agent ratios work in both directions (GM 9).

These concerns were not far apart from those of the New Critics. As Weiser has shown, Burke’s dramatist methodology was developed in close correspondence with Tate, whose *Sewanee Review* published many of the pieces that were eventually included

in Burke's *Grammar of Motives* (2008, 109-115). That Burke explicitly distinguished the dialectic 'upward' direction of his pentadic methodology from the deterministic and reductive causational theories of science seemed to make it congenial to the staunch antisocialism of Tate, Ransom and Brooks. That Burke, following what he had written in "Semantic and Poetic Meaning" and "Four Master Tropes," was arguing that the most important scene for human agents was language, their capacity to act in symbols, and that critics should therefore focus primarily on language seemed to chime in with the New Critic's concern with poetic form. But perhaps most to the New Critic's liking was Burke's insistence that his pentadic methodology, tracking the dialectical relations that ground human motivations through the rhetorical categories of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose, involves the critic in a search for terms that embody "potentialities for ambiguity and transformation" (GM 127). It was exactly such semantic confusions that Brooks, too, urged readers to attend to when taking paradox as the epitome of poetic language. Whereas science's tendency is to stabilize terms, the poet's terms are "continuously modifying each other." Like the scientist, the poet must work by analogies, "but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions" (Brooks 1948 [1975], 9-10). If Burke argued that the antinomies of substance that are involved in symbolic acts forced critics to adopt a methodology attuned to the taking of multiple perspectives, Brooks, too, argued that his methodology of paradox he put forward followed naturally from language itself.

For Burke, however, the inherent ambiguities of descriptive vocabularies meant that critics needed to attend to their methodological screens and, more importantly, that this would force them to face the impossibility of maintaining a purely 'intrinsic' approach to the text. In practice, this meant that reading a poem involved leaping back and forth between the intrinsic and extrinsic, between literary and sociological or historical analysis. The poem considered as an act, Burke says,

Would not, by any means, require us to slight the nature of the poem as object. For a poem is a constitutive act – and after the act of its composition by a poet who had acted in a particular temporal scene, it survives as an objective structure, capable of being examined in itself, in temporal scenes quite different from the scene of its composition, and by agents quite different from the agent who originally enacted it. The enactment thus remaining as a constitution, we can inquire into the principles by which this constitution is organized. The poem, as an object, is considered in terms of its nature as 'finished.' That is, it is to be considered in terms of its 'perfection,' as per stressing of part-whole relationships. (GM 482)

But this concern with the 'finished' nature of the poem considered in terms of its perfection, Burke argues, dialectically forces the critic to consider to move outside the poetic integer: "one does not place a form in isolation. The placement of a given form

involves the corresponding placement of other forms” (GM 478). Such a widening of interpretive scope, Burke says, seems particularly required by lyrics which are often “stages or stations of a more comprehensive act” (GM 483).

The result of all this would be a more encompassing kind of knowledge of both the symbolic action going on in a given poem, as well as of the actions that critics perform as they engage the text. This way, Burke hoped, a dramatist approach to literature, using the dialectic principles of his pentadic methodology would not only be able to offer an account of the motivational strategies that poets use, but it would also provide a way to transcend the conflict between various methods of interpretation. As he expressed this hope in the final chapter of *A Grammar of Motives*, dramatism would become synonymous with the undending conversation of the rhetorical parlor he had envisioned in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, making critics aware of the fact that their interpretations “may be thought of as voices in dialogue or roles in a play, with each voice or role in its partiality contributing to the development of the whole (GM 403). His analysis of Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (to which Burke hints several times in “The Problem of the Intrinsic”) was meant to demonstrate this continuous exchange between the self-motivating nature of the linguistic elements in the poem and its grounding in the multiple forms of social reality.

For Brooks, on the other hand, the paradoxes of language do not urge the critic to face questions of substance in either the poet’s language or his own, nor do they culminate in the kind of peaceful resolve between intrinsic and extrinsic that Burke envisioned. Rather, as his reading of Donne’s *The Canonization* is meant to demonstrate, paradox forces the reader to choose definitively between these two kinds of reading:

The basic metaphor which underlies the poem (and which is reflected in the title) involves a sort of paradox. For the poet daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love. The canonization is not that of a pair of holy anchorites who have renounced the world and the flesh. The hermitage of each is the other’s body; but they do renounce the world, and so their title to sainthood is cunningly argued. The poem then is a parody of Christian sainthood, but it is an intensely serious parody of a sort that modern man, habituated as he is to an easy yes or no, can hardly understand. (1948 [1975], 11)

The opening conflict of the poem is indeed that between the sacred and the profane, and its argument will revolve around working this distinction out. But the major paradox, as Brooks sees it, is not so much the contradiction that the poem is about to dramatize, but the inability of “modern man” to understand the harmony that is already implied between those two apparently conflicting terms. The real paradox is not an intellectual dilemma of Donne’s or an inconsistency in the poem’s argument, but our own inability to read within the metaphor of the poem itself. In order to do that, Brooks

argues, we must suspend our usual 'modern' habits and preconceived judgements; if not, the poem will become indeed little more than a parody of scientific reasoning.

It is a strategy that can most clearly be observed in what Brooks takes to be the central paradox of the poem, which turns upon the notion of "world" that Donne's lovers see reflected in each other's eyes. This world, Brooks says, is of the same "Countries,' 'Townes,' and 'Courtes' which they renounced in the first stanza of the poem "the lovers becoming hermits, find that they have not lost the world, but have gained the world in each other, now a more intense, more meaningful world." Thus, "the unworldly lovers thus become the most 'wordly' of all" (1948 [1975], 15). The quotation marks around 'wordly' in the final sentence are all-important: the world that the true lovers discover is not a 'true' world, at least not by the parodical standards of truth that modern readers might be expected to uphold. It is not, says Brooks, a world that comes to them passively, but "something which they actively achieve. They are like the saint, God's athlete" (1948 [1975], 15).

Thus, Brooks believes, like the lovers achieve the deeper world of sainthood by actively renouncing the world, so must the reader abstain from applying external worldly knowledge on the poem: "deprived of the character of paradox with its twin concomitants of irony and wonder, the matter of Donne's poem unravels into 'facts,' biological, sociological and economic." Applied to the parodical perspectives of factual judgement, "the two lovers become Mr. Adous Huxley's animals, 'quietly sweating palm to palm'" (1948 [1975], 18). Like the lover's unworldly love acquires depth and creates a space of value, so does a kind of reading that is prepared to accept "the paradox of the imagination" create a spiritual realm that is able to escape the realms of crude fact in exchange for a more profound spiritual union:

The poem is an instance of the doctrine which it asserts; it is both the assertion and the realization of that assertion. The poet has actually before our eyes built within the song the "pretty room" with which he says the lovers can be content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which can hold the lover's ashes and which will not suffer in comparison with the prince's 'half-acre tomb' (Brooks 1948 [1975], 17)

What Brooks asserts here by saying that the poem is a "well-wrought urn" is not just that the poem is an object or artefact – that, he points out, is the prince's monument as well – but rather that the poem, as the urn, is absolved from the world of power and dominance to which the prince's "half-acre tomb" belongs. Just as the lovers are able to love because they renunciate this world of power, so too can a poem mean only when the reader acknowledges the poem as a site of value.

## 4.5 Pentadic and Paradoxical Drama

Through the dramatic method of exegesis that Brooks proposed in “The Language of Paradox,” then, Brooks was able to resolve at the level of imaginative language the epistemological problem of ‘tension’ that plagued Tate’s intension/extension division. Manipulating the ambiguity of the urn as a cointainer figure, the poem’s paradoxes place the world outside the poem at the same moment that the poem is said to be outside the world. By further attributing the action to a dramatic speaker, the poem-made-urn is cut off entirely from any attempt at historical recuperation. As Brooks concludes the essay with a clear note to the teachers of poetry (then still largely the philologists that Tate had railed against in “Miss Emily”): “the urns [which Brooks by now can comfortably use as synonyms for ‘the poems’] are not meant for memorial purposes only, though that often seems to be their chief significance to the professors of literature” (1948 [1975], 21).

At the same time, Brooks dramatic/paradoxical approach transformed Tate’s Historical Imagination into a seemingly open and pluralist method, while its Protestant ideological overtones (a firm belief in the power of the individual, emphasis on close textual scrutiny, and the promise of aesthetic knowledge as a form of grace) guaranteed its successful absorption into the curriculum of Ivy league universities. If literary studies habitually looked across the Atlantic for guidance (be it to Germany for examples of historical scholarship or to Britain for critical axioms), Brooks could now offer a confident, pragmatic and thoroughly Americanised criticism that would quickly rise to prominence as the G.I. Bill flooded colleges with young men that lacked previous education in the arts. Brooks’ brand of close reading offered both immediate and practical applicability: it could be performed by any able reader, regardless of previous education or inauguration in instrumental fineries of philology and did not require the availability of scholarly libraries and manuscripts. Still, in 1943, Brooks eagerly welcomed all those who would corroborate his dramatic methodology - controversial not just for its deliberate vulgarisation of poetry to include any linguistic entity with irony as an organising principle, but also because it downplayed the agon between science and poetry that is vital to Tate’s ‘historical imagination’ in favour of a more unified literary hermeneutic and a more confident conception of literature’s power as historian.

The near simultaneous publication of Burke’s essay on Keats, then, must indeed have been a bracing occasion – especially since Burke announces his own ‘dramatistic’ reading to focus on the *Ode*’s emblematic but contested closing statement that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ - that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ Applying the argument he had prepared in “The Problem of The Intrinsic,” Burke sees the dramatic situation of the poem in terms of a dialectic opposition: the opening lines, he

claims, stage an opposition between practical (scientific) and the aesthetic (poetic) ideals, an opposition which is reflected in – and ultimately transcended through – the verbal action of the poem. Like Brooks, then, Burke believes that the primary concern of the critic “is to follow the transformations of the poem itself” (GM 451). These, Burke summarizes as follows:

the poem begins with an ambiguous fever which in the course of the further development is ‘separated out,’ splitting into a bodily fever and a spiritual counterpart. The bodily aspect is the malign aspect of the fever, the mental action its bening aspect. In the course of the development, the malign passion is transcended and the benign active partner, the intellectual exhilaration, takes over. At the beginning, where the two aspects were ambiguously one, the bodily passion would be the ‘scene’ of the mental action [...] But as the two become separated out, the mental action transcends the bodily passion. It becomes an act in its own right, making discoveries and assertions not grounded in the bodily passion. And thus the quality of action, in transcending the merely physical symptoms of the fever, would thus require a different ground or scene, one more suited to the quality of the transcendent act. (RM 461-462)

That scene, Burke says, is the urn-poem: “with the urn as viaticum (or rather, with the poem as viaticum, and in the name of the Urn), having symbolically enacted a kind of act that transcends mortality, we round out the process by coming to dwell upon the transcendental ground of this act” (GM 457).

It is the kind of analysis that matches Brooks’ reading almost to a tee as the latter stresses, stanza per stanza, the paradoxes between life and death, stillness and movement and the seen and the unseen, how the poem culminates in the image of the “silent form.” This critical move is best exemplified by Brooks’ comments on the image of the ‘little town’ that is summoned in the fourth stanza of the *Ode*, which is apparently not depicted on the urn itself, but merely suggested by the people coming to the sacrifice. Yet despite its being beyond sensual apprehension, Brooks points out, the poet is able to infer some of the essential qualities of the town: it is small, bucolic and quiet, its streets having been emptied by a joyous procession. This knowledge, Brooks suggests, is not gratuitous fancy: the poet has obtained it by pursuing the logic of his own imagery. Even if there was an actual vase or series of antique freezes on which Keats modelled his poem, the imaginative *trouvaille* of the little town demonstrates that the poet can provide a truth that differs from the factual accuracy desired by positivist historicism. Harold Bloom, discussing the passage, has argued that “[t]he green altar and the little town exist not on the urn but in the past and future that are phenomenological implications of the poem’s existence” (1971, 418-419). To Brooks, this is what is essential to the urn’s characterisation as a ‘sylvan historian’: it delivers an imaginative truth that supersedes the historian’s accounts of the contingent:

mere accumulations of facts [...] are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty, but insight into essential truth. It's 'history,' in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth – not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality. (1948 [1975], 164)

Brooks' equation between literary form and 'true' history on the one hand and history and myth on the other, can be compared to the notion of 'figural causation' that Auerbach develops in *Mimesis*. As a mode of historicism, Hayden White argues, figural causation differs from ancient teleological notions of history as well as modern, mechanistic historicism in the kind of relation it supposes between historical events. What Auerbach suggests is "a history conceived as a sequence of figure-fulfilment relationships" in which

[t]he later events are not 'caused' by earlier ones, certainly not 'determined' by them. Nor are the later events predictable on any grounds of teleology as realizations of earlier potentialities. They are related in the way that a rhetorical figure, such as a pun or metaphor, appearing in an early passage of a text, might be related to another figure, such as a catachresis or irony, appearing in a later passage [...]. (1996, 128)

As a series of tropological connections, history as both process and practice folds into the literary: the claims that positivist historians make with regard to the representation of the past are merely one species of literary rhetoric taking part in the metahistory of mimetic desire that underlies Auerbach's work. In quite similar fashion, the structures of irony that Brooks finds operating on the level of the image find their fulfilment in the poem as an organic whole, which in turn appears as a synecdoche of the broader horizon of the transcendental literary 'Imagination' that is the foundation for all non-discursive historical knowledge.

Both Auerbach and Brooks espouse a formalist conception of history, but whereas the concept of figural causation enables Auerbach to relate literature and context by seeing the text as a 'figuration' of its historical milieu, in Brooks' criticism, the synecdochic relations between irony, history and imagination merge into an opaque, organic whole, a 'silent form' that is impervious to attempts of chronological separation or paraphrase. Auerbach's indexical formalism enables critics to access into the realm of the historically real; Brooks aesthetic alternative allows only a vision of poetic universals.<sup>18</sup> If Tate's critique of literary historicism was rooted in a Manichean antithesis between poetic value and scientific truth, Brooks' aesthetic historicism no longer projects

---

<sup>18</sup> I'm employing the useful distinction between "indexal" and "aesthetic" formalism made by Richard Strier in "How Formalism Became a Dirty Word, and Why We Can't Do without It" (2002, 210).



science as an outside: by ‘teas[ing] us out of thought,’ the poem-as-myth offers a knowledge supersedes all other, fragmentary discourses that inform it. To be sure, Brooks acknowledges that poetry has socio-historical or psycho-biographical origins, nor does he deny that the bibliographer might contribute to our understanding: in its nature as myth, however, poetry simply ceases to be a medium through which these dimensions can be mediated or engaged. If we recall the ongoing dualism in Brooks’ own practice as a student of literature, this way of solving the problem of the extrinsic is hardly surprising: if contingent history yields to poetic myth, advocating a formalist, a-contextual strand of criticism while devoting a significant part of one’s career to footnote-laden philological labour of editing the letters of the eighteenth-century bishop and literary antiquarian Thomas Percy ceases to be a schizophrenic position: the sublime discourse of poetry already ‘contains’ both within itself. Provided that the structural hierarchy in which intrinsic analysis precedes extrinsic speculation is preserved, they may each yield their own kind of hermeneutic satisfactions.<sup>19</sup>

Each poem, then, is like the ‘peaceful citadel’ in the *Ode*, a paradox which “involves a clash between the ideas of war and peace and resolves it in the sense of stability and independence without imperialistic ambition – the sense of stable repose” (1948 [1975], 165). The corresponding attitude is one of disinterested contemplation: Brooks urges the reader not to be overwhelmed by the initial, fragmentary strangeness of the poetic material, but to look for imaginative unity (Brooks 1948 [1975], 154-155). Like Wallace Stevens’ voices at Key West, dramatic readings confer the idea of order and subdues the shiver of history a reader may experience when confronted with the historicity of the poem. Personal interests or desires, then, are merely the hysteria of a Southern spinster, an affective fallacy committed silently at the edge of the community of righteous readers; mimicking the formal perfection of their object of study on both the levels of form and content, Brooks’ essays offer themselves to the reader as just such peaceful citadels of knowledge.

But why would Brooks choose this roundabout way to acknowledge Burke? After all Burke’s reading does seem highly convergent with Brooks’ principle of dramatic propriety. When we insist that language – the symbolic – is man’s ultimate ontological horizon, the psycho-biographical and cultural-historic dimensions of the poem cease to be forces of opposition against the kind of free-floating formalism that Brooks established. Burke, as I have argued when I discussed the risks inherent to the use of “terministic screens,” himself expressed a continuous awareness of the relativistic tendencies inherent in his dramatism<sup>20</sup> Such reductionist operations signal the

---

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the epilogue to Cleanth Brooks, *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (1991).

<sup>20</sup> See the essay on the “Four Master Tropes” (cf. *supra*).

crystallisation of dynamic interrelations into teleological structures of power - Brooks' emphasis on the acquisition of mythical knowledge being a case in point. The knowledge of essentials that his dramatic reading promises to bring demands a complete suspension of disbelief on the part of its spectator, a complete surrender of the critical faculties to the poem's unified structural movement. Brooks' drama, then, appropriates the full weight of classical tragedy. Ironically, what started out as a project against the normative truths of Enlightenment modernity and the neutral objectivism of positivist science is exchanged for a similar ideal of distance.

It is this ideal of distance that the dramatism of "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats" negates, giving it a decidedly Brechtian quality. If it is true that the poem's nature as a *symbolic act* is what grants it the ability to transcend its personal and historical moment of composition, but Burke reminds us that, as a *symbolic act*, the poem forces us to reply with an act of reading that is, like the original act of writing, historically determined. Thus, Burke begins his analysis by proclaiming that "[A] poem is an act, the symbolic act of the poet who made it - an act of such a nature that, in surviving as a structure or object, it enables us as readers to re-enact it" (GM 447). Poetry can give us knowledge about the real - both contemporary and historical - yet we must be aware that such knowledge is always momentaneous, specific and inevitably blindsided by the limits of the perspective from which we engage it. Although Burke's analyses of symbolic structures are steeped in the awareness that non-linguistic access to historical reality is impossible, history remains as the material and temporal substratum in which every interpretive act is ground. Thus, Burke's drama does not gain the monolithical, tragic qualities of Brooks's: eagerly intertextual, flaunting several footnotes and using a pentadic interpretive vocabulary, "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats" embodies the comic attitude that underlies Burke's dramatism, which constantly bears witness to its awareness of its own discursive limitations.

As Burke sees it - every poem begins as a motivated act, an attempt by a poet to 'unburden' himself of some intellectual, moral or physical problem. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, he approached this issue by pointing out how the elements of dream, prayer and chart became interwoven in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Now, using his newly minted set of pentadic categories, Burke was able to perform an even more detailed analysis of the motivational structures underlying the poem's symbolic act. As an act, Burke argues, the poem is set against a number of scenes - bodily (Keats' illness), social (Keats' love for Fanny Brawne) and cultural-historical (Romanticism), all of which find their way into the verbal equations of the poem. Therefore, reading the poem as a motivated act, Burke readily uses the kind of information one would expect to appear in traditional biographical criticism: a significant part of "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats" is devoted to the tubercular fever that plagued the poet, its impact being traced in other poems (*On Seeing the Elgin Marbles*, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*) and fragments of the letters to Fanny Brawne are cited as indications of its

presence in the mind of the poet. As a general principle, Burke urges readers to “use whatever knowledge is available” (GM 451) in order to resist the intellectual limitations of a factional opposition between approaches where “semantic meaning, that may be considered as a partial aspect of poetic meaning, tends to become instead the opposite of poetic meaning, so that a mere graded series, comprising a more-than and less-than, changes instead to a blunt battle between poetry and anti-poetry, ‘Poetry vs. Science’” (PLF 139). Faced with the opposition between science and art at the particular historical instance which he inhabited, Keats responded by proclaiming that art is the be all and end all of human knowledge. What makes the *Ode* so effective, however, is not just the imaginative power of this idea, but the fact that the poem, as a symbolic artefact that turns over against its nonsymbolic origins, unites both subject matter and procedure. Its symbolicity is what enables the *Ode* to address us beyond the confines of its age, yet this ability for historical survival also closes it off from straightforward historicist recuperation. Instead, Burke argues, as an ‘attitude’ (not coincidentally, Burke believes, a word Keats uses to describe the urn), an “intense linguistic activity” it forces us always to face the problem of substance and, thereby, of the need to combine both intrinsic and extrinsic modes of analysis.

The footnote, the index of a differential whose visually disjunctive presence on the page bears witness to the interaction of a historical reader with the text and summons the possibility of other, extra-poetical levels of textuality, serves as a reminder of this need. However, by claiming for poetry a transcendent, mythic totality that includes every difference within itself, Brooks manages to clear a space where the corrosive potential of the scholarly apparatus can be absorbed. Jerome McGann has remarked that Brooks’ footnotes “are all decidedly unscholastic: leisurely, self-referential, or digressive discussions or brief cross-references” (1988, 51). As I have tried to demonstrate, however, when pressured by deliberately historicizing, some of these casual gestures can be revealed to mask a definite rhetorical content in the form of a careful strategy of recuperation and containment. The seemingly cordial reference to Burke enlists his reading of the *Ode* as an ally against potentially averse reactions on the part of critics like Tate, while at the same time Burke is displaced to a medium whose contribution to the overall meaning of the text is – Brooks makes abundantly clear – at best secondary.

Perhaps, then, the footnote that served as the representative anecdote of this essay illustrates not just the striking differences in both method and purpose stored under the heading of ‘formalism,’ but also the power of the Romantic lyric in shaping these different critical approaches. If Brooks sought to recuperate the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* for literary studies because it showed how the individual could transform historical particulars into non-discursive and essential truth, to Burke the *Ode* epitomises the ever shifting dynamics between the demands of personal expression, contextual information and imaginative demand at play within all poetry. Against Brooks’ classical, monolithic drama, Burke’s literary criticism runs along this ‘negative capability’ (to borrow Keats’

expression) of the textual and the historical reflected in both content and form of the lyric. Insisting that every interpretation is an act that inevitably entails an affective – or, as Burke would say, terministic – fallacy, it is this self-reflexive, lyrical awareness of his criticism that differentiates his formalism from that of his New Critical contemporaries, causing him to be buried in the silence of Brooks' footnote.

## Chapter 5 Finding ‘Identity’ – Burke and Empson

*Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.*  
(Kenneth Burke)

In the summer of 1950, the British literary critic William Empson travelled to Ohio in order to teach at the summer session of the Kenyon School of English.<sup>1</sup> It was his second time at what, with the funds of the Rockefeller Foundation backing the school, was a well-paid gig. The session therefore drew in a veritable who’s who of critics: during Empson’s previous 1948 June-to-August stint he shared the dinner table with John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Richard Chase, F.O. Matthiessen, Austin Warren and Allen Tate. And the 1950s lineup for this second summer session was looking no less impressive: present beside the inevitable Ransom were (among others) Robert Lowell, Arthur Mizener, Delmore Schwarz, and Kenneth Burke. The Kenyon summer school, then, was certainly an event that any critic would love to attend, and yet Empson could not help feel somewhat isolated. In the Ohio summer heat, the conservative atmosphere among the crowd of Kenyon critics felt stifling to the leftist, internationalist Empson. But mostly, his isolation was due to the dismay he felt at seeing his techniques of verbal analysis refracted through the right-wing ideology of the Southern New Critics: “most of the other lecturers (Tate, Warren, Brooks) are Southerners, much more pro-Empson than Matthiessen, I mean pro-ambiguity stuff, but have mixed it up with being pro-South, anti-Machine Age, and anti-Negro” (in: Haffenden 2006, 126).

---

<sup>1</sup> For background in this section, I have drawn from John Haffenden’s excellent two-volume biography of Empson (Haffenden 2005, Haffenden 2006) and Frank Day’s overview of Empson’s publications (Day 1984).

Empson was pleased, therefore, to find a like mind in Kenneth Burke, whose leftist sympathies, magnanimous character and bold manners made him, in Empson's judgement, "king of the show" at Kenyon (in: Haffenden 2006, 204).<sup>2</sup> Both robust drinkers, the two men hit it off well socially; but there was also occasion for intellectual exchange. Burke had brought his newest book, *A Rhetoric of Motives* to Kenyon: printed just a few months before, it was to form the basis for his summer class, and contained a chapter on Empson's *Some Version of Pastoral* (1935 [1974]), which Burke reframed in the light of the dramatist theory he had developed in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and *A Grammar of Motives*. Empson, on the other hand, was using materials from his soon-to-appear *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) in Kenyon, a book that tied in in many ways with Burke's concern with the textures of language.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, when they found out that, due to timetable constraints, students could not attend Burke's course on symbolic action and Empson's lectures on complex words, both men agreed to hold a joint lecture-seminar. "We had our classes at the same time," Burke recalls:

we discovered that we were both going to give a talk on Coriolanus. So we made an agreement we'd toss up as to who went first – and we'd never change a word or refer to the other's talk at all. It was funny, because in one way students feel inclined to show their attitudes in these matters. (in: Rueckert and Bonadonna 2003, 374)

In this chapter, I will try and reconstruct the contents of this (jokingly non-conversational) conversation between Empson and Burke at the Kenyon summer school. Starting from a brief discussion of how Empson's understanding of 'ambiguity' as a loose term for any kind of multiple meaning differed from the 'ambiguity-stuff' he found at Kenyon, I will trace the lines of convergence between Empson and Burke's thinking. I will do so by showing how both, by the 1950s, had arrived at a theory of literature that considered literary texts as sites where the social unconscious, the ideological structures and struggles of society, are performed and portrayed. However, as I will argue subsequently, by the time of *A Rhetoric of Motives* and *The Structures of Complex Words*, these convergences began to fall apart. Empson, concerned about the influence of neo-orthodox Christian thought on literary criticism, came to privilege the author as the site of textual meaning and put forward a methodology of reading that emphasized

---

<sup>2</sup> Burke's recollections of his time at Kenyon with Empson are gathered in the 'Counter-Gridlock' interviews in *On Human Nature* (Rueckert and Bonadonna 2003, 357-358).

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to John Hayward, Empson wrote of the exchanges he had with Burke at Kenyon "talking to Kenneth Burke here does make me feel that my bombshell [Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words*, which would appear in 1951, over three years after he had submitted the finished manuscript] like the atom bomb itself is more narrow in impact than the strategists would like to claim" (in: Haffenden 2006, 205).

rational understanding and celebrated historical difference. Burke, on the other hand, building on the linguistic theory of human motivation he had developed in *A Grammar of Motives*, was more skeptical than Empson about the ability of language to be brought under conscious control. His *A Rhetoric of Motives* will absorb Empson's thinking as part of a theory that sees human action as greatly determined by its symbolic medium.

Thus, though both critics were dissatisfied with the New Critical notion of the poem as a 'silent urn,' a structure of inwrought rhetorical figures whose meaning remained impervious to prose summary, historical recuperation or rational critique, the alternatives they formulated to this type of formalist reading differed substantially from each other. By showing how these differences come to a head in their respective analyses of Shakespeare's *Othello*, I will argue that Empson's decidedly liberal and secular-humanist way of reading will make him oblivious to the play as a tragic form and read it, instead, as the site of a historically grounded semantic struggle. Burke's methodology, by contrast, will emphasize the play's tragic qualities, reading them as the extrapolation of a 'tragic' impulse inherent in man as a linguistically determined creature. Whereas Empson focuses largely on horizontal, narrative structure as an analogy to the decision process of the author, the "socio-anagogic" criticism Burke develops is geared towards the vertical logic of literary symbolism, a logic that takes language, not the historical individual, as the privileged site of meaning.

## 5.1 An 'Ambiguous' Relation

To many critics, it would have come as no surprise that Empson and Burke would have found each other at the 1950 summer school in Kenyon. Even before their actual meeting, it seemed clear that both critics were somehow involved in a conversation. Marshall McLuhan, for instance, had called Burke "an able rhetorical exegesis in the Empson line" (1944, 269) in a damning assessment of both critics; Stanley Edgar Hyman made the opposite conclusion in *The Armed Vision*, where he framed their relationship as "either indebtedness of Empson to Burke or great coincidence with him; appreciative reception and some utilization by Burke" (1947, 267). Burke, indeed, had been giving regular nods of appreciation to Empson: he favorably reviewed both the English and American editions of *Some Versions of Pastoral*, reprinting both reviews as appendices to *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, and devoting a substantial section to the book in *Attitudes toward History*, where he listed it along "the most important contributions to literary

criticism in contemporary England.”<sup>4</sup> Empson, on the other hand, kept more of a distance: as he wrote I.A. Richards after the Summer School, “I never thought [Burke] first class ‘till I settled down to the new book [*A Rhetoric of Motives*]” (in: Haffenden 2006, 205).

To the Empson of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930 [1966]), the Burke of the 1930s must indeed have appeared somewhat unchecked in his wide-ranging interests with language, and society. Where Burke’s theory of form worked to expand Richards’ mentalist ‘attitude’ into a visionary concept that could cover both bodily responses and mental orientations, Empson took a route deeper into the minutiae of poetic language, to problems of sound and meaning. In this, he closely followed his mentor I.A. Richards, whose *Practical Criticism* (1929) elevated ambiguity from the occasional poetic device it had been in *The Meaning of Meaning* and *Principles of Literary Criticism* to a “systematic” principle of poetic language. Ambiguity, in *Practical Criticism*, is put forward as both impediment and means towards an accurate response to poetic language. “Certain conjunctions of words,” Richards says,

through their history partly and through the collocations of emotional influences that by *their very ambiguity* they affect – have a power over our minds that nothing else can exert or perpetuate. It is easy to be mysterious about these powers, to speak of the ‘inexplicable’ magic of words and to indulge in Romantic reveries about their semantic histories and their immemorial past. But it is better to realize that these powers can be studied, and that what criticism most needs is less poeticizing and more detailed analysis and investigation. (Richards 1929, 364)

As Richards’ experiments with practical reading had shown, his students generally tended to resolve multiple indeterminate meanings by resorting to biography or history. However, when this interpretive strategy is frustrated by stripping texts from their identity markers, ambiguity – rather than turning students away from the text – commanded a heightened attention to its structural relations. Reduced to its bare-bones textual occurrence, ambiguity prolongs interpretive attention and forestalls the premature arrest of mental action. Thus, Richards believes, ambiguity contributes to the wholesome development of the balanced mind:

The mind that can shift its view-point and still keep his orientation, that can carry over into quite a new set of definitions the results gained through past experience

---

<sup>4</sup> Burke reviewed the English edition, *Some Versions of Pastoral* as “Exceptional Improvisation” in *Poetry* (March 1937) and the American, *English Pastoral Poetry* as “Exceptional Book” in *The New Republic* (May 1938). Paul H. Fry suggests that Burke’s reviews of Empson’s *Pastoral* indicate that Burke merely read the first chapter of the book (1991, 147). However, given the extensive chapter Burke devoted to the book in his *Rhetoric*, this claim seems questionable.



in other frameworks, the mind that can rapidly and without strain perform the systematic transformations required by such a shift, is the mind of the future. (1929, 343)

It should be easy to see how, thus defined and applied in a critical method of close reading, ambiguity translated smoothly into Allen Tate's *tension* or Brooks and Wimsatt's *wit* and a *paradox*. When Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* called ambiguity "an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and [...] the indispensable means of most of our important utterances – especially in Poetry and Religion" (1936, 40) the notion had obtained the full expressive force that it would acquire in American New Criticism.

As Richards' student during the preparatory years for *Practical Criticism*, Empson was greatly indebted to his Cambridge supervisor and, it would turn out, lifelong mentor.<sup>5</sup> Empson's definition of 'ambiguity' as a species of language that "adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose" (1930 [1966], 1) keeps close to Richards' understanding of the term. Moreover, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is closely responsive to Richards' concerns, in *Science and Poetry* and *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, with close verbal analysis as a social pursuit: "[t]he object of life," Empson states in recognizably Richardsian terms, "is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can" (1930 [1966], 247). Nonetheless, the young Empson was also impatient with his tutor's insistence that this lived equilibrium required a mirror in the language of poetry. In the second edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, he altered his definition of 'ambiguity' to "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room to alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (1).<sup>6</sup> Not only did this revised definition suggest that no qualitative line could be drawn between poetic discourse and other species of language use, it also runs counter to Richards' doctrines – geared, as we have seen, toward the resolution of the different impulses offered by the poem into a state of harmonious balance. Any poem of value, Richards believed, ultimately led to a "coherent systematization" (Richards 1929, 42) of the emotion, whose state of balance would contribute to human intelligence and social wellbeing. Empson, on the other hand, believed that

human life is so much a matter of juggling with contradictory impulses (Christian-worldly, sociable-independent, and such like) that one is accustomed to thinking

---

<sup>5</sup> Whether Empson actually attended the 1927-28 course on which Richards based *Practical Criticism* is uncertain (Haffenden 2005, 180-181). For very different accounts of the lifelong relation between both men, see their respective intellectual biographies by Russo (1989) and Haffenden (2005, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Empson decided to alter the first, more Richardsian definition "because it stretches the term 'ambiguity' so far that it becomes almost meaningless" (1, n1).

people are probably sensible if they follow first one, then the other, of two such courses; any inconsistency that it seems possible to act upon shows that they are in possession of the right number of principles, and have a fair title to humanity. (1930 [1966], 127)

As David Fuller argues Empson is really “concerned with semantic and syntactic phenomena that reflect things deep-seated about the poet, the reader, and the world” (2006, 153). The insight that permeates *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and that drives its ascending scale of differential languages, is that the scientific desire for a unified verbal meaning, the New Critical longing for a unified sensibility, and Richards’ stress on reconciliation and balance all belie the fundamental truth that language, like life, is complex and heterogeneous.

With its stress on rational control and increased understanding (through repeated reading), *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is designed to accommodate this complexity and mutability of language. The taxonomy Empson uses to classify different types of ambiguity is intended as an aid for clarity of thought rather than a rigid classification: many of the seven types overlap, with the author at various points admitting that his examples may just as well be classified under another of his headings.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the three “scales” or “dimensions” Empson uses to break down the ambiguities of language (“the degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned” (1930 [1966], 48)) are flexible instruments rather than fixed scales of measurement. Still, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is not a chaotic book: despite his emphasis on the interdependence and overlap between scales and types of ambiguity, Empson does structure the book according to an ascending scale of psychological complexity.

Culminating in the seventh type, which “occurs when two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer’s mind” (1930 [1966], 192), Empson builds towards a degree of linguistic complexity that cannot be resolved by using the text alone. Rather, invoking Freud’s concept of “condensation” in the analysis of dream imagery, Empson argues that such instances of conflicting meanings, where “what you want involves the notion that you must not take it” (1930 [1966], 193) point to an irreconcilable opposition that exists outside the poem. The result of some unspoken tension in society or of a semi-conscious conflict in the author, such “condensed” poems or passages point to meanings that stretch or even subvert

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Empson’s elaborate and complicated revaluation of the categories: “In a sense the sixth class is included within the fourth [...] Thus the last example of my fourth chapter belongs by rights either to the fifth or the sixth” (1930 [1966], 190-191)

conceptual powers or moral frame of vision. These, Empson believes, offer the most rewarding subject for a critic, because they express psychological or social forces beyond the author's control and may, thereby, indicate points of resistance against the dominant forces of history and/or prove revelatory of deeper principles of the human mind.

Empson's final chapter contains many examples of different degrees of this "condensed" ambiguity, but it is only in the two culminating analyses - one of Gerard Manley Hopkins's *The Wind-Hover*, the other of George Herbert's *The Sacrifice* - that the full complexity of Empson's seventh type is played out. Not coincidentally, Empson builds on an analysis of Richards' in order to make his own contrastive case: in a 1926 article in *The Dial* on *The Wind-Hover*, Richards paused to muse about the possible meanings of the phrase "My heart in hiding" that separates the two halves of the poem:

I should say that the poet's heart is in hiding from Life, has chosen a safer way, and that the greater danger is the greater exposure to temptation and error that a more adventurous, less sheltered course (sheltered by Faith?) brings with it. Another, equally plausible reading would be this: renouncing the glamour of the outer life of adventure the poet transfers its qualities of audacity to the inner life ('here' is the bosom, the inner consciousness.) The greater danger is that to which the moral hero is exposed. Both readings may be combined, but pages of prose would be required for a paraphrase of the result. (1926, 198-199)<sup>8</sup>

To Richards, the difficulty in reconciling both plausible readings in a manner that does not surpass the poem in length was highly problematic (it would have sat easier with the New Critics, but ran counter to Richards' preoccupation with harmony and balance): it made *The Wind-Hover* into a poem of "unappeased discontent" (1926, 199). But to Empson, interpretation cannot stop at such an apparent impasse of understanding that is forced on us by the language of the poem. Unlike Richards, Empson did not believe that poetic language somehow hypostatizes our regular resources of sense-making or contains these somehow within the limits of the 'verbal icon;' for him, the unappeasable discontent of the poem is a critical problem that forces the interpreting critic to look for ulterior sources of meaning.

Reading the poem against the background of Hopkins' entry into the Jesuit order, Empson finds the unresolved oppositions in *The Wind-Hover* both in the theme of the poem (between the physical beauty of the falcon and the spiritual calling of the speaker) and in its wording (where 'buckle' can be taken to mean 'military belt' or 'bent wheel,'

---

<sup>8</sup> For more on Richards' reading of the poem and its impact on the early reception of Hopkins, cf. Peter Whiteford "A note on Hopkins' Plough in the Wind-Hover" (2001); on its relation to contemporary criticism, cf. Denis Donoghue "The Bird as Symbol: Hopkins's Windhover" (1955).

either stressing heroic action or the inability to move) as an instance of the Freudian use of opposites:

Where two things thought of as incompatible, but desired intensely by different systems of judgements, are spoken of simultaneously by words applying to both; both desires are thus given a transient and exhausting satisfaction, and the two systems of judgement are forced into open conflict before the reader. Such a process, one could imagine, could pierce to regions that underlie the whole structure of our thought; could tap the energies of the very depths of the mind. (1930 [1966], 226)

This statement seems kindred to Tate's beliefs that poetic tension might ultimately open up some hidden imaginative resource of the mind, but the implications of Empson's claim differ substantially. First, unlike Tate, Empson does not believe that the systems of judgement that are operative in the poem are in any way different from the systems of judgement we deploy in everyday life. Rather, as his mention of Freud indicates, to Empson they are psychological structures of meaning-giving that occur in poetic symbols just as they do in dream images as well as in ordinary language. Second, if the Historical Imagination Tate believed crucial to the creation of tension in a poem rejected all bibliographical information, Empson does not hesitate to introduce such data into his reading. To him, the ambiguities of *The Wind-Hover* translate readily into the agony of a divided mind that Hopkins (who, Empson reminds the reader, had just become a Jesuit and had burnt his poems upon entering the order) felt when confronted with the opposition between the physical beauty of world and a life of spiritual renunciation (1930 [1966], 224-226).

If, as Paul H. Fry points out, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* still depends on an Eliot-influenced principle of poetic complexity, and largely complies to Eliot's views on literary history and predilection towards the metaphysical conceit (Fry 1991, 71), then, ambiguity as Empson defines it bears only superficial resemblances to the New Critic's interest in irony, paradox and tension. Empson is interested in the ambiguities of textual detail rather because he sees the multiple meanings that arose from them as probable indicators of a logical conflict beyond the text. When Ransom called Empson "one of the closest living readers of poetry" (1938-1939, 332) and Brooks applauded his "attempt to deal with what the poem 'means' in terms of its structure as a poem" (1944, 209), their praise is always qualified by severe apprehensions. The problem with Empson's way of reading poetry, Ransom believes, is that he takes poetry rather too seriously, that is, he loads it with all the responsibilities of truth-telling prose. Ransom challenged not only Empson's preoccupation with poetry's social effects and the militantly secularism of his writing, but also what he believed to be the latter's dependence on Richardsian psychologism. As Ransom saw it, Empson's preoccupation

with ambiguity leaned on the psychological, noncognitive effects that Richards' pseudo-statement.

I have the notion that Mr. Richards and Mr. Empson confuse the kinds of psychological effect when they admire all possible complications, all muddles, indiscriminately. The really impressive effect comes, I should think, when the complications support and enforce a central meaning and do not diffuse it or dissolve it. (Ransom 1941 [1979], 43)

Only in this free-floating, inconsequential poetry of pseudo-statement could meaning not lead to some form of cognitive resolution; to maintain that value could exist in doubt, Ransom argued, would be absurd.

## 5.2 Pastoral and the Rhetoric of Identification

And yet, Empson, in the final chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, was making a case for a kind of reading that placed value in doubt by reading the ambiguous language of the poem as a reflection of a psychological conflict in the author and, further, of alterations in the social order out of which the author was writing. This, as Norris points out, provides the bridge that runs between *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Version of Pastoral*:

The sense of background 'circumstance', the pressure of social occasion, was a call to transform and supplement the resources of 'verbal' criticism. The distance between the surface categories and the genuine reach of *Ambiguity* – insights unobtainable on its own original terms – became the motives and the generic basis of *Pastoral*." (1978, 75)

This desire to read beyond the surface of the text into its deep structure was one that Empson shared with the Burke of *Attitudes toward History*. Indeed, Empson seems to fall into direct agreement with Burke's idea of literature as an embodied ideological attitude when he writes, in opening chapter of *Pastoral*, that "literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored" (1935 [1974], 19). Burke, we will recall, had evolved from a doctrinaire aestheticism towards a more socially responsible theory of art by framing it as a writer or reader's attempt to resolve a conflict through aesthetic formulation. Such aesthetic formulations have a content that is private and contingent, but take on a form that is both public and trans-historical. Thus, Burke argued that literary forms would be studied as 'categories' – recurrent structures of mental organization: "[e]ach of the

great poetic forms, Burke says, “stresses its own way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time” (ATH 34).

It is just such a poetic form – the specific cluster of interests surrounding bucolic poetry – that Empson is concerned with in *Some Versions of Pastoral*. Pastoral, to Empson, is the mechanism used within a class society by means of which the upper classes resign themselves to the existence of a lower repressed class: patronizing a simple, bucolic lifestyle in fictional form, it allows the ruling class to vicariously build a relation with its peasant subjects: putting noble words in the mouth of simple shepherds, or imagining them as ‘rulers of sheep’ and thereby stressing the similarities between them and the ruling classes, pastoral conventions, Empson argues, allow for a polite and safely formalized pretense of harmony, thus repressing the sense of class difference and social injustice. Tracing this formal mechanism in a series of essays that cover a wide array of texts and periods (ranging from the Shakespearean sonnet to Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories), Empson sets out to trace the many variants of the pastoral myth: “the same trick of thought, taking very different forms, is followed through a historical series” (1935 [1974], 23). Thus, pastoral becomes one of those deep regions or structures of the mind that are part of the baseline of history. In Empson’s reading, it is less a literary mode than a Burkean ‘attitude’ – a habit, often unconscious, of social perception.

One of the main devices through which pastoral operates is that of the “double plot,” which derives from the comic interludes of miracle plays and is developed in English Renaissance drama by Shakespeare, Greene and others. Double plots unite, in one text or on one stage, characters and situations that belong to different social spheres. In the pastoral ‘sub-plot,’ lowly commoners incongruously replicate the heroic actions of an aristocratic ‘main’ plot. Even when these plots are apparently unrelated, as in Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungary*, they “form a unity by being juxtaposed” (1935 [1974], 34). Empson illustrates the technique using Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* which, set in Troy, begins with Troilus and Cressida swearing fidelity to each other during a nightly meeting arranged by Cressida’s uncle Pandarus. Next comes Cressida’s abduction from the city to the Greek camp where she breaks her vow to Troilus and takes Diomedes for a lover. This sexual disloyalty runs parallel to political disruption in the Greek camp, where petty jealousies between Achilles and Ajax threaten the Greek hold on the city.

This complex relation between love and war, between personal and state loyalties and between the private sphere and the public, Empson claims, adds significantly to the play: “[t]he political theorizing in *Troilus* (chiefly about loyalty whether to a mistress or the state) becomes more interesting if you take it as a conscious development by Shakespeare of the ideas inherent in the double-plot convention” (1935 [1974], 34). The dynamic interrelationships between the contradictory elements of love and war create a “power of suggestion” that creates parallels between Cressida’s broken vow and the eventual downfall of Troy:

The two parts make a mutual comparison that illuminates both parties ('love and war are alike') and their large-scale indefinite juxtaposition seems to encourage primitive ways of thought ('Cressida will bring Troy bad luck because she is bad'). This power of suggestion is the strength of the double plot; once you take two parts to correspond, any character may take on mana because he seems to cause what he corresponds to or be Logos of what he symbolizes. (1935 [1974], 34)

Thus, the interaction between two lines of plot present in a given literary text can create, through mutual interaction, possibilities of meaning that are not part of its manifest content. A double plot, Empson says, "does not depend on being noticed for its operation, so it is neither an easy nor an obviously useful thing to notice." As a device, it enables a dramatist to "make a mutual comparison that illuminates both parties" and "fill out a play, and has an obvious effect of making you feel that the play deals with life as a whole, with any one who comes on to the street" (1935 [1974], 27).

Burke, in *Attitudes toward History*, homed in on the suggestive power of the power of the double plot. As he read it, Empson's study of pastoral would fit right in his study of poetic categories as transhistorical forms: "William Empson proposes a definition of 'pastoral' that would seem to fall on the bias across our categories of humor and elegy, with important ingredients of the heroic" – a combination that generated an effect of "ironic humility" (ATH 46-48). Focusing on the way apparently dissimilar and discontinuous parts enter in a mutually reinforcing relation of conditioning elements, Empson builds an analytical framework that is not only able to grasp the underlying movements of the pastoral motif in literature, but its equally deceptive analogy in the actual world of class struggle. Burke applauded these understated but clear socialist sympathies of the book, praising its social interest and historicist approach.<sup>9</sup>

I much prefer Empson's way of considering the matter, by seeking permanent forms that underlie changing historical emphases. Indeed, I should contend that one could not properly define the qualities of specifically proletarian works until he had first placed them in such genus as Empson here proposes. (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 262)

Empson's break from the linguistic confines of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* pleased Burke, all the more because it seemed to bring Empson's 'ambiguity' closer to his own interest in ambiguity as part of his 'Motives'-project.

This interest, I have argued in the previous chapter, derived largely from Burke's focus on "substance" as a way of merging 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' theories of reading.

---

<sup>9</sup> In a later review of Empson's *Milton's God*, Burke added that he liked the "imaginatively Marxist twist" of the book, noting the difference with orthodox Marxist viewpoints (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 423).

Noting how positivist sociology deals with these matters by seeking to “evolve terms free of ambiguity and inconsistency (as with the terministic ideals of symbolic logic and logical positivism)” (GM xviii), Burke – true to his claim that synecdochic representation requires dialogical irony, founds his project on a wholly different premise: “[w]e take it for granted that, insofar as men cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something essentially enigmatic about the problem of motives, and that this underlying enigma will manifest itself in inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies among the terms for motives” (GM xviii). Accordingly, “what we want is not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise” (GM xviii). Occasionally, Burke says, you “encounter a writer who seems to get great exaltation out of proving, with an air of much relentlessness, that some philosophic term or other has been used to cover a variety of meanings, and who would smash and abolish this idol. As a general rule, when a term is singled out for such harsh treatment, if you look closer you will find that it happens to be associated with some cultural or political trend from which the writer would dissociate himself” (GM xviii). Hence, Burke says, in what reads as a combined summary of what Empson had been doing in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Version of Pastoral*: “instead of considering it our task to ‘dispose of’ any ambiguity by merely disclosing the fact that it is an ambiguity, we rather consider it our task to study and clarify the resources of ambiguity” (GM xix).

As I have demonstrated in my comparative analysis of Burke’s and Brooks’s reading of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Burke’s dramatist method emphasized the multiteity of the poetic act by switching between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ interpretive resources, thus forestalling the reduction of a poem’s motivational complexity to a single historical ‘cause’ or to the intricacies of verbal construction. In this sense, the debate between Brooks and Burke resembled the one between Empson and the American Renaissance scholar Rosemond Tuve in the pages of the *Kenyon Review*, Empson was making a similar case in favor of recovering the differential identifications in poetic language. It is not clear who began the discussion: though Empson’s review of Tuve’s *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth-Century Critics* was published first (as “Donne and the Rhetorical Tradition”), Richard Strier’s analysis of the debate shows that Tuve wrote her challenge to Empson’s analysis of Herbert’s *The Sacrifice* (published in the next issue of the *Kenyon Review*) independently and at about the same time.<sup>10</sup> Focus of the debate were what Tuve believed to be the “illegal critical practices” that

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Strier (1995, 16-17). Tuve’s essay was accompanied by a note from the *Kenyon Review*’s editors, declaring that it had reached them before they printed Empson’s essay. Tuve later expanded her essay into the first chapter of *A Reading of George Herbert* (1952).



Empson performed on Herbert's *The Sacrifice* in the penultimate chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*." The crowning example of his seventh type of ambiguity, Empson framed Herbert's rendition of Christ's death on the cross in terms of a central contradiction between submission and aggression. Though Herbert's poem seemingly portrays a meek Christ, Empson argues that, "a memory of the revengeful power of Jehova gives resonance to the voice of the merciful power of Jesus" (1930 [1966], 229). In order to recover this memory, Empson sets about to uncover the ambiguities of *The Sacrifice*. An especially powerful and representative example is his reading of the poem's final stanza:

But now I die; Now, all is finished.  
My woe, man's wheal; and now I bow my head:  
Only let others say, when I am dead,  
Never was grief like mine.

One may take the final sentence as an expression of the wish that Christ's sacrifice would never be repeated, but one may also, Empson suggests, take the Christ-personae of the poem to be using an *oratio obliqua*, taking 'mine' as a quotation from the 'others.' Read in this way, the stanza expresses a wish for vengeance: "only let there be a retribution, only let my torturers say never was grief like theirs, in the day when my agony shall be exceeded" (1930 [1966], 228-229). Empson anticipates the objections that such a reading might provoke: not only does it run counter to the received lore of scripture, Empson admits, also "you may say the pious Herbert could not have intended such a contradiction, because he would have thought it blasphemous, and because he took a 'sunny' view of his religion." But such 'pious' historical and intentionalist readings of the poem, he argues, might suppress hidden but relevant meanings that do not match their tradition: "it is true George Herbert is a cricket in the sunshine, but one is accustomed to be shocked on discovering the habits of such creatures; they are more savage than they seem" (1930 [1966], 229).

Arguing in defense of "traditional" ways of reading and voicing frustration at the Freudian/Fraserian overtones in Empson's analysis, Tuve's lengthy revocation of Empson's "singleminded" reading is based on the argument that Empson's deliberate search for a point of view outside the received ways of seeing the text leads him to miss evident meanings in the poem.

Why, Caesar is their only King, not I:  
He clave the stony rock, when they were drie;  
But surely not their hearts, as I well trie.  
Was ever grief like mine?

Empson sees this stanza in terms of the contrast between Caesar and Moses – the earthly powers of conqueror and Pharisees – on the one hand and the "profounder mercy of the Christ and to the profounder searchings of the heart that he causes" on the

other. But, Tuve responds, “it is next to impossible to think of it thus if one is conscious of the liturgical and patristic identification of Moses with Christ.” Surely, she says,

[n]o cleric of the 17th century, as liturgically literate as George Herbert, and brought up on typology, could mention this act of Moses [the cleaving of the rock] without thinking both of the water from the side of Christ, the living rock [...] and the mystical regenerative power of water. (1950, 55)

Had Empson known typology, Tuve snorts, surely he would not have come up with such grossly far-fetched readings as he did.

Empson’s reply to Tuve’s challenge, in the autumn issue of the *Kenyon Review*, is both brilliant and informative about his critical purposes with regard to the tradition of scholarship that Tuve was speaking from. Tuve might be right, Empson said, if she argues that ‘tradition’ does not allow the ironic identification of Caesar with Moses in the stanza, “[b]ut surely Herbert did not feel himself shackled by tradition to this extreme degree; and if the scholar is allowed to cut down the meaning of every poem to that of a previous poem there will be a considerable change in the literary scene” (1950, 736). Empson’s dry wit masks what is really a significant challenge to the authority of the historical tradition from which Tuve claims to speak. Such traditional histories, Empson says, cut both the complex heterogeneity of the past it studies and the ambiguous, internally conflicted language of the poetry it reads through it down to a stable, harmonious form. In what reads like a proto-new historicist statement, Empson defends both the historical plausibility of his own reading while challenging Tuve’s method of pairing historical knowledge to textual information. Tuve’s ‘tradition,’ which would supposedly guarantee that interpretation is embedded in fact, merely serves to exclude rebellious interpretations or possibilities of meaning and sanction ideologically ‘right’ ones.

Tuve’s call on ‘tradition’ as a way of refuting historical difference presented Empson with yet another instance of what he had come to see as the corrupting strain of neo-orthodox Christian thought among modern critics. Fueling a vogue for ‘pious’ readings of Christian texts and for revisionist readings aimed at suppressing differential opinions, this doctrinaire religiosity threatened to drown the dissenting voices of rationality and secular humanism that Empson found in apparently doctrinal texts like Herbert’s. But more importantly, they moved against Empson’s own decidedly liberal, secular-humanist values. Spending a substantial part of his critical career abroad, teaching in China and travelling to Russia and Japan in order to promote his mentor Richards’ program for Basic English, Empson became convinced of the values of cultural openness and rational communication. As his exchange with Tuve makes clear, Empson envisioned that instances of ambiguity in poetic language would alert readers to the measures of resistance embedded in literary texts, resistances which he believed were the result of a poet’s attempt to work out problems or discrepancies within his system

of beliefs into a decently intelligible poetic form. As he hoped, the study of ambiguity would alert readers to the hidden conflicts and possible meanings that the power-narratives of tradition and academic piety would suppress. As such, it would urge a return to history, and lead to a better grasp of the choices, motives, the problems and decisions that go into the process of creation of a literary text.

However, when he came to Kenyon college in 1948 to teach his first summer class there, Empson found that 'ambiguity' had become absorbed into a wholesale doctrine of poetical paradox that was closely interwoven with a dogmatic religiosity. At the hands of Ransom, Tate and others, ambiguity had turned into a high formalist orthodoxy that treated poetry as a realm quite apart from the pragmatic, humanist interests that Empson envisioned for it. As the Southern New Critics used the concept, ambiguity served to underwrite a criticism that radically separates literature from plain-prose reason, which refused to entertain matters of biography, history, or authorial intention, and which took account of 'difference' or 'resistance' only in so far as that idea could be reduced to immanent or textualist terms, that is, as a force-field of tensions (ambiguity, paradox, irony etc.), and which relied on a questionable mixture of hermeneutic expertise and mystical understanding on the critic's part (Norris 1993, 89). The result of all this, Empson believed, was to shut down the workings of intellectual conscience and imaginative sympathy alike. If literature no longer answered to life, it could give license to even the most outrageous claims of aesthetic autonomism: "[t]he idea that the theorist is not part of the world he examines is one of the deepest sources of error, and crops up all over the place" (1951, 445).

### 5.3 Complex Words: Empsonian Rationality vs. Burkean Mysticism

So in order to rectify this source of error, and in answer to this disconcerting tendency to reduce poetic statements to a kind of nonconsequential or mystical language, Empson linked his earliest concern with 'ambiguity' to the social program underlying *Some Version of Pastoral*. In the opening chapters of *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) - not coincidentally written during Empson's 1948 summer residence at Kenyon - he turned to Richards' reading of Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to drive this point home. Quoting Richards' defense, in *Mencius on the Mind*, of the last lines of Keats' *Ode* ("Urns indicate states of mind in their beholders; they do not enunciate philosophical positions - not in this kind of poetry") Empson answers stating that "I do not think Keats would have liked

to be told that he was writing ‘this kind of poetry’” (1951, 6). Of course, Empson says, Keats did not intend the conclusion of this great poem to do nothing more than incite emotion. Nor is it an aesthetic world of make-belief, a consciously entertained fiction ruled by a dehistoricized dramatic speaker, as Brooks would have it. Both Richards’ belief that poetic language is wholly emotive and Brooks’ dramatic insistence that it is wholly aesthetic avoid a large section of the real meanings which the author embodied in his poem and that matter to an audience: “there should be no complacent acceptance either of ‘some indefensible sense’ or of a mere emotive stimulus; the thought of the reader needs somehow to be in movement” (1951, 371). Empson’s own interpretation of the final lines of the *Ode* attempts to capture this oscillation between feeling and cognition:

It seems clear that we have to imagine what went on in the mind of Keats, as he wondered what the pot can have meant – we, it is understood, being those who have lost our innocence by reading the contradictory babble of the critics. Nor need this be done with a tacit contempt, as for a man puzzling over questions which are soluble; and here I think the comparison to a drama is relevant; if Keats’ life were an imaginary one in a play, and these phrases were put into his mouth, nobody would complain about the aphorism or find it anything but an impressive tragic detail. (1951, 371)

Paul Fry reminds of the brilliance of these lines, showing how they rescue the poem from both the claims of traditional philologist readings as well as from formalist attempts to supplant these (1991, 129). Verbal criticism, psychology and biographical technique combine into a pluralist approach on the text that emphasizes the complexity of intrinsic and extrinsic elements in the movement of thought – willed by individual authors, recognized as such by individual readers – present in the poem:

the essential dramatic process is that by feeling the beauty of the pot Keats is led to make reflections on human life; in the same way the metaphors which are Emotive when merely applied to the pot, in the first lines of the poem, become Cognitive when applied to the real theme. The beauty of the pot presumably tells truth so far as it is a sound guide to the poet, and what it tells them is how to digest his sufferings and turn them into beauty. Thus there is a movement of thought in the reader [...] which corresponds to what happened in the mind of the poet; the poem has gone through the process which the identity is meant to sum up, so that Keats felt he had the right to assert it at the end. (1951, 372)

This, as I have shown in my previous chapter on Burke and Brooks' respective readings of Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, is also Burke's basic position.<sup>11</sup> Burke, too, had argued that the dramatic structure of the poem opened it up to both historical and affective understanding; Burke, too, had argued that these affective and cognitive responses could be translated back to its author. And, like Empson, Burke too believed that great texts continue to be visited by readers because, as poetic acts, they provide a generative source for future actions.

When Empson focused his new book on "key words" in literary texts, then, he was doing something that closely resembled what Burke (in his 'statistical' reading of the image clusters in the *Rime of The Ancient Mariner* and his 'pentadic' analysis of the transformations in Keats' *Ode*) had been doing for some time. Still, Empson's take on the problem of key words is somewhat different in that, unlike Burke, they serve less as a way of explicating that structural analogies within a text, than as a way of framing the text as a site in which a societal conflict is played out. Empson looks at key words (whose high statistical prevalence in the text demands attention, or which occur at highly charged moments in the text) because he believes them to carry embedded "semantic equations." As they develop through history, words accumulate different strata of meaning. But these strata are generally hidden from sight custom: words like 'honest,' 'fool,' or 'wit' do not generally command extensive into the way they help us make our world because, at the surface, their meaning seems clear. "Language," Empson says, "is essentially a social product and much concerned with social relations, but we tend to hide it this in our forms of speech so as to appear to utter impersonal truths" (1951, 18). And yet, these apparent impersonal truths hide deep structural meanings: "a man tends finally to make up his mind, in a practical question of human relations, much more in terms of [...] vague rich intimate words than in the clear words of his official language" (1951, 158). The task that Empson sets before himself in *The Structure of Complex Words* is to reveal the historical processes of ideology-formation that operate beneath the commonsense appearance of these "vague rich intimate words." Literature is extremely suitable to this enterprise because, as Empson believes, authors are most sensible to changes or discrepancies in the semantic register; as his close readings of words like 'honest' (in Shakespeare's *Othello*), 'fool' (in *Lear*) or 'wit' (in Pope's *Essay on Criticism*) are made to demonstrate, poets actively exploit these changes to generate poetic effect.

---

<sup>11</sup> It is, indeed, remarkable that Empson does not mention Burke's reading of the *Ode*. Did he not know of it? That seems unlikely, given that he knew Brooks's (with the notorious footnote). Maybe this a case where Empson's prejudice against Burke as a second-class author got the better of him, and prevented him from discovering a kindred reading of the poem.

Though this enterprise, as Durant and MacCabe argue, brings *The Structure of Complex Words* close to making a case for linguistic skepticism, Empson does not believe that we see the world wholly through the structures that commonsense language urges on us. Though his detailed expositions of how the ideological substrata of complex words force certain ideologically laden ways of seeing on us, Empson's readings generally show an author who is able to successfully manipulate these ideological subtexts and turn them into specific, purposive meaning. Between the individual mind and the social discourse, Empson's sympathies clearly lie with the former: "although Empson claims it does not matter how many meanings for a word are conscious, he has a habit of writing as though the poet is consciously choosing all the meanings" (Durant and MacCabe 1993, 191). While words steer perception into certain predetermined paths, they can also be turned to expose their ideological content:

Considering differences of perception and understanding in particular, Empson seems committed to an idea of shared human rationality, which underpins even what may turn out to be conflicting interpretations; he constantly distances himself from the idea of [...] regimes of meaning which are beyond the horizons of any individual speaker or writer's understanding or intervention. (Durant and MacCabe 1993, 193)

Here, I believe, is where the parallels between Empson and Burke's line of thinking come to an end. Faced with a dogmatic, neo-Christian formalism that turned into a kind of ersatz-theology, Empson, in *The Structure of Complex Words* and beyond, fell back on the historical author as a conscious and deliberate source of the meanings contained in poetic language. Empson insists that individuals can both master and manipulate the complex meanings that they encounter in language. "According to Empson," Norris says, "there is no reason to suppose that rhetoric goes 'all the way down'" (1993, 100).

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, on the other hand, Burke was developing a very different account, one that put rhetoric forward as a pervasive principle in the drama of human relations and questioned the ability of individuals to master the full complexity in which language engulfs them. As an individual participates in society, Burke argues, her allegiances will be claimed by various habits, customs and laws, calling on her to make herself over in their shape or structure their lives according to their principles. This process, Burke says, is inherently rhetorical, as it inevitably involves choice: "[t]he individual person, striving to form himself in accordance with the communicative ways of his society, is by the same token concerned with the rhetoric of identification" (39). In this sense, rhetoric is a socializing and a "moralizing process," a process of building social communities (RM 39). It is "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (RM 43). "Traditionally," Burke says, "the key term for rhetoric is not 'identification' but 'persuasion'" (RM xiv). Persuasion, however, insists too much on conscious and deliberate processes of appeal;

shifting attention to processes of identification, Burke “[seeks] to develop our subject beyond the traditional bounds of rhetoric. There is an intermediate area of expression that is not wholly deliberate, yet not wholly unconscious” (RM xiii).

As identification, rhetoric encompasses all of the means by which one person can identify with another: “[y]ou persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your way with his (RM 55). In its simplest form, it effects identification between speaker and audience. Thus, a politician addressing an audience of farmers might try to win them over by stating “I was a farm boy myself” (RM xiii). But the rhetoric of identification, Burke argues, is a process that cuts both ways. On the one hand, when we identify with another person, idea, or group, we gain ‘identity.’ But in that same gesture, we also encounter ‘division,’ as we divide ourselves from some other group or someone else. Only utopian societies would achieve total unity; in existing social relations, however “individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another” (RM 22). In *Attitudes toward History*, Burke had already argued that “the so-called ‘I’ is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting ‘corporate we’s’” (ATH 264); in a *Rhetoric of Motives*, this inherent division, and the “compensatory” rhetorical drive (RM 22) become the dominant paradigm through which Burke comes to read the drama of the literary and the social.

The (conscious or unconscious) awareness of division, Burke argues, creates feelings of tension or division in an individual: a state that inspires an urge to redeem oneself, to make oneself over into a new unity – a ‘killing’ of an old self and the birth of a new. This is the underlying principle of Empson’s pastoral motive: by making themselves over into the lowly classes they repress, aristocrats are able to effect a new unity. But Empson’s reading of pastoral identification, Burke argues, remains stuck at the level of ideology: the reconciliation of class that plays out in Empson’s discussion of the double plot is still too much focused on a technical, epideictic kind of rhetoric that belongs to the persuasion-type which Burke seeks to replace. Empson’s belief that the reconciliatory attitudes of ‘ironic humility’ that pastoral works of literature inspire could be approached through the binaries of a double plot was, in Burke’s eye, a fair attempt at getting to the underlying structure of this particular genre. But his insistence that this structure could be revealed by braking the double plot down through simple, rational analysis of verbal technique fell short of exposing the deeper, transhistorical principles that operate in it. Empson’s method of reading, Burke argues, is overly one-directional in its move from an apparent verbal simplicity into a historical or biographical complexity.

To Burke, the courtship of classes in pastoral works and the need for identification from which it stems, exemplify a deeper order of division, what Burke calls “a rhetoric of courtship” (RM 118) between different classes, an attempt to overcome social estrangement that is pervaded by what Burke calls the “hierarchic motive.”

the impulse behind such compromises is not merely an underling's fear of a superior, but rather the magic of the hierarchic order itself, which imposes itself upon superior and inferior both, and leads them both to aim at a dialectic transcending their discordancy of status. (RM 124)

As Burke argues, this hierarchic motive is rooted in economic divisions, but its deepest roots lie in language itself:

Ideology cannot be deduced from economic considerations alone. It also derives from man's nature as a 'symbol-using animal.' And since the 'original economic plant' is the human body, with the divisive centrality of its particular nervous system, the theologian's concern with Eden and the 'fall' come close to the heart of the rhetorical problem. For, behind the theology, there is the perception of generic divisiveness which, being common to all men, is a universal fact about them, prior to any divisiveness caused by social classes. Here is the basis of rhetoric. Out of this emerge the motives for linguistic persuasion. Then, secondarily, we get the motives peculiar to particular economic situations. (RM 146)

All subjects, then, are divided ideological constructs because they are born in language. "In any order," Burke writes, "there will be mysteries of hierarchy, since such a principle is grounded in the very nature of language and reinforced by the resultant diversity of occupational classes [...] Language makes for transcendence, and transcendence imposes distance" (RM 279).

Thus, as Empson came to argue that critics should aim to understand texts by means of the rational reconstruction of the author's motivating interests, Burke argues that such reconstruction must move beyond the author as a source of meaning towards language's inherent turn to rhetoric. Both critical purposes require paying close attention to the words of the story; yet whereas for Empson these words open up to historically grounded sequences of humanly intelligible choices and decisions, to Burke the symbolic actions of a work of literature also open to the underlying rhetorical nature of language, its roots in the guilt of individuals, and its preoccupation with mystical patterns of identification. If Empson became increasingly preoccupied with finding, in literature, secular and rational loci of resistance against the morality of Christianity and the unifying and reductive neo-Christian patterns of reading, Burke began to reshape his dramatist methodology of reading so that it could be applied to recover the rhetorical problem – the patterns of identification and division, the working of guilt, the desire for transformation and the (symbolic or actual) killing needed to effect it – from literary texts.

The basic assumption of this socioanagogic criticism, Rueckert says:

[i]s that hierarchy, and particularly the socio-political hierarchy which man creates because he is the language-using animal, is the most immediate of all



man's concerns, and that the presentation of socio-political or hierarchic themes or conflicts is the actual end toward which most works tend. The socio-political hierarchy is the anagoge; or, more accurately, the 'order-cluster,' and the drama of human relations implicit in it, is the anagogue, the 'analogical matrix'; all other images [...] are but symbols of some part of the total anagoge. A socioanagogic approach reduces all problems, finally, to social rather than, say, sexual or religious causes. (1982, 203)

As Burke sees it, works of literature will always portray two kinds of motives: first, there is the "categorical guilt" that the social order, grounded as it is in a rhetoric of identity, will impose on an author. Authors will always, in some way or other, incorporate themes of estrangement, dissociation and tension. Second, there is the hierarchic motive, the tendency to overcome or transcend these divisions, a tendency that is inherent to language itself. Together, Burke believes, these motives underlie the drama that any text will (fully or partially) play out: they make up a universal and timeless structure that is continuously re-embodied in specific historical periods, particular societies and by particular authors (Rueckert 1982, 203).

## 5.4 *Othello*: Tragic Catharsis and the Satire of the Self

A *Rhetoric of Motives* contains a number of essays in which Burke offers a socioanagogical reading of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Castiglione's *The Courtier* and Kafka's *The Castle*. Castiglione, Burke demonstrates the close relations between the hierarchic motive and property relations which, in Kafka's *The Castle* – the theme of which he says is "bureaucracy, communication between higher and lower orders" (RM 234) are then grotesquely fused with sexual symbolism to create a tale in which the personal, familial, sexual, natural and vocational are brought almost to the point of destruction by the hierarchic psychosis. Subsequently, Burke reads *Venus and Adonis* as a "social allegory" in which the relations between Venus (the upper classes), Adonis (the middle classes) and the Boar (the lower classes) are "a variant of revolutionary challenge" (RM 217). While ostensibly an erotic poem, the "topsy-turvy world of love" can also be made to represent a "[demeaning of] the old order, saying remotely, in sexual imagery, what no courtly poet could have wanted to say, or even have thought of saying, in social or political terms" (RM 217).

All this must have sounded congenial to Empson at Kenyon, for in many ways Burke's socioanagogic approach was pushing the same agenda as *The Structure of Complex Words*. Burke, too, would tap into the ambiguous potential of poetic language to mean more than what is ostensibly said. And Burke, too, was arguing for a greater deal of

interpretive freedom than what tradition or methodological discipline would allow. In fact, as Burke argues, socioanagogic criticism worked on the assumption that

one must first reject all speculations in keeping with the typical empiricist question: 'What do I see when I look at this object?' A poetic observation involves no naked relation between an observed object and an observer's eye. The topics that the poet uses are 'charismatic.' They glow. (RM 219)

What they glow with, Burke believed, was the hidden mysteries of the social hierarchy:

the veil of Maya is woven of the strands of hierarchy – and the poet's topics glow through that mist. By 'socioanagogic' interpretation we mean the search for such implicit identifications. Though admitting that one can go far wrong in the particular here, we would insist that such analysis demanded 'in principle.' The poet's symbol is enigmatic, and its enigma does derive from its bearing upon 'mystery,' which in turn is hierarchic experience [...]. (RM 219)

These mysteries, Burke believed, "by combining Marx and Carlyle with hints from Empson" (RM 219) could be disclosed by the critic. Yet what exactly this odd combination accounts to he does not make clear; instead, what the practical readings in *A Rhetoric of Motives* bear out is an instantiation of Burke's perennial dictum that critics should use whatever there is to use. His socioanagogic approach would be "the new equivalent of 'moral' or 'tropological' criticism" and "would probably be found in a concern with the poem as a ritual that does things for the writer and the reader: reforming, stabilizing, heartening, purifying, socializing, and the like" (RM 220). In practice, the focus on this single theme allows the critic to turn into many different directions: sometimes it is a matter of tracking the development of a single symbol, sometimes it is a matter of showing how ideas on social relations, sexual relations and relations with God become interwoven or interchangeable, sometimes it means tracking the whole drama of hierarchy and guilt in a work.

This is an amount of interpretive leeway that, I believe, Empson would have balked at. If he insisted on the inherent ambiguity of the historical text and, hence, on the interpretive space that critics could fill between a word and its traditionally sanctioned meanings, he always did so in defense of what he believed to be the inherent possibility to find rational, historically and textually sanctioned alternative ways of reading. If Empson challenged Tuve's reading of Herbert's *The Sacrifice*, he did so because he felt that the latter settled down too leisurely on some supposedly profound historical and theological 'truth' that ignored potential difference. Empson, Norris says, was always impatient with what he considered "the modernist fashion for 'symbolist' readings which ignored this essential narrative dimension in their quest for some timeless, transcendent order of meaning and truth indifferent to details of plot, circumstance and background history" (Norris 1993, 10).

The differences between both ways of reading can be clearly grasped by contrasting Burke and Empson's readings of Shakespeare's *Othello* – Empson's in a pivotal chapter on the word 'honest' in *The Structure of Complex Words*, Burke's in an essay entitled "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method" that was published in *The Hudson Review* in the summer of 1951. Empson, in line with his preoccupation with 'key words,' focuses on the fifty-two uses of *honest* and *honesty* in the play, which he believes marks a crucial historical evolution of the word, standing midway between an earlier code of honour and trust and a subsequent discovery of the Independent Self, verging on a potentially destructive cult of egotism and selfishness, something like being honest first and foremost about one's own impulses and desires. "The word," as Empson says, "was in the middle of a rather complicated process of change, and that what emerged from it was a sort of jovial cult of independence" (1951, 218). Shakespeare, Empson argued, was responsive to this change, which he could observe among the lowly and raffish people in his audience:

At some stage of the development (whether by the date of *Othello* or not) the word came to have in it a covert assertion that the man who accepts the natural desires, who does not live by principle, will be fit for such warm uses of *honest* as imply 'generous' and 'faithful to friends', and to believe this is to disbelieve the Fall of Man. Thus the word, apart from being complicated, also came to raise larger issues, and it is not I think a wild fancy to suppose that Shakespeare could feel the way it was going. (1951, 218)

Empson subsequently reads *Othello* as a "critique on an unconscious pun," an attempt by Shakespeare to disown a growing tendency to conceive of individualism in terms of personal doubt, uncertainty and the subsequent assertion of a self.

Burke's reading, too, locates the origins of the play in a historic setting – the growing societal concern with property, a tendency exemplified by the enclosure acts that came into effect around Shakespeare's time. *Othello*, Burke says, exploits this tension to achieve a dramatic effect. But this dramatic effect is heightened, Burke argues socioanagogically, by the fact that Shakespeare embodies the concern with property in several ways throughout the play: its tension manifests itself in *Othello* as "the disequilibrium of monogamistic love" or, as Burke variously describes it in his essay, "property of human affections," "sexual love as property and ennoblement"; "the analogue, in the realm of human affinity," to "the enclosure acts, whereby the common lands were made private"; "an act of spiritual enclosure," whereby "love, universal love," is "made private"; and sexual and spiritual ownership, as they are fused in romantic love and marriage (Burke 1951 [2007], 66-73). Thus, Burke says, in *Othello* Shakespeare imitates the "perfect essence" of the 'possession' or 'ownership' tension. By this, Rueckert points out, Burke means two things: that every tension has a particular character or personality which constitutes its essential nature; and that there exists in every tension the entelechial possibility of perfect actualization. "Tragedy, then,

imitates not just the essence of a tension, but the perfect essence, which is Burke's way of saying that tragedy deals with 'excessive engrossment,' the conditions under which the potential completely actualizes itself" (1982, 212).

As Both Rueckert and Henderson point out, this ability of tragedy to "imitate," "excessively engross" and thereby "perfect" certain tensions makes it the paradigmatic form of Burke's late, socioanagogic outlook on dramatist criticism (Henderson 1988, 62, Rueckert 1982, 210). Working out a certain tension to its dissolution through the formal progression of a plot, tragedies offer their viewers a more complete form of insight into the interweaving of the social and verbal structures that determine their actions. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke had equated this tragic progressive form with the dialectical process which, he says, is

[e]mbodied in tragedy, where the agent's action involves a corresponding passion, and from the sufferance of the passion there arises an understanding of the act. The act, in being an assertion, has called forth a counter-assertion in the elements that compose its context. And when the agent is able to see in terms of this counter-assertion, he has transcended the state that characterized him at the start. In this final state of tragic vision, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are merged. That is, although purely circumstantial factors participate in his tragic destiny, these are not felt as exclusively external, or scenic, for they bring about a representative kind of accident that belongs with the agent's particular kind of character. (GM 63)

This ability of Othello to offer a "transcendent" insight into a situation is what Empson, focused as he is on complex words that indicate changes in the social texture, also admires in the play. The translation of the tension into narrative terms gives the imitation its 'rational' structure or form; but, Burke says, all tragedies have a double structure: aside from the rational structure which presents "the natural development in terms of probability and necessity," there is a mystic or ritual structure which follows the form of a cathartic journey:

The analysis of the form does not cover all the important fields of investigation, even as regards the succession of acts [...]. There is a kind of ritualistic form lurking behind a drama, perhaps not wholly analyzable in terms of the intrigue. That is, the drama [...] may be treated formally as a kind of 'initiation to a mystery' – and when approached exclusively in such terms, the analysis of the intrigue alone is not quite adequate. The mythic or ritual pattern (with the work as a viaticum for guiding us through a dark and dangerous passage) lurks behind the 'rational' intrigue; and to some degree it requires a different kind of analysis, though ideally the course of the rational intrigue coincides with the work, considered as viaticum. (Burke 1951 [2007], 74)

The mythic or ritual pattern is as much a part of the imitation as the rational intrigue for both are ways of translating the tension into progressive form; both resources at the disposal of the playwright, they generate and guide the “cathartic journey” that Burke believes is the purpose of tragedy. By playing on individual and collective tensions in the audience, engrossing and perfecting them through imitation, Burke believes that the tragic playwright aims at purgation – the release of tension. Making plot and mythic structures coincide, a tragic play merges bodily, personal, familial, religious and social relationships, showing how guilt and disorder spread, like a contagious disease, until it affects not just the protagonist, but also the other characters and the audience as well (Rueckert 1982, 220-221). Thus, in tragedy, everyone is in his “very essence persecuted”; it is a

ritual of riddance. It is a requiem in which we participate at the ceremonious death of a portion of ourselves. And whatever the discomforts we may have experienced under the sway of this tension in life itself, as thus ‘imitated’ in art it permits us the great privilege of being present at our own funeral. For though we be lowly and humiliated, we can tell ourselves at least that, as a corpse, if the usual rituals are abided by, we are assured of an ultimate dignity, that all men must pay us tribute insofar as they act properly, and that a sermon doing the best possible by us is in order. (Burke 1951 [2007], 77)

All of this is, of course, hardly new or unusual – but Burke’s emphasis on the cathartic function of *Othello* is striking in light of its absence in Empson’s analysis of the play. As Empson interprets Iago in light of the genesis of a new, more rugged kind of individualism that emerges and displaces Othello’s traditional and communal ‘honesty,’ what Burke interprets as an essential persecution becomes a deliberate *double-entendre* between playwright and audience. In Empson’s words, “the whole symbolic background becomes unimportant, and the puns on honest take the stage” (1951, 240). Indeed, as Norris points out, the semantic analyses of ‘dog’ in *Timon of Athens*, ‘fool’ in *King Lear* or ‘Honest’ in *Othello* that Empson performs in *The Structure of Complex Words* amount to nothing less than the dismantling of tragic catharsis as part of the play’s effect:

Words like ‘fool’ or ‘honest’ have a down-to-earth quality of healthy scepticism which, Empson argues, permits their users to build up a trust in human nature based on a shared knowledge of its needs and attendant weaknesses. ‘Dog’ is the most cynical of the family, a rock-bottom term of mutual disillusion, yet at the same time a ‘hearty’ recognition of mankind’s common predicament. There is not much room in this outlook for anything in the nature of a ‘tragic’ philosophy of values. (Norris 1978, 86)

Where Burke’s analysis focuses on excessive jealousy and egotism as “katharma,” something to be cleansed, and on Othello as “pharmakos,” the ritual victim through which this cleansing is effectuated, Empson’s reading backgrounds the play’s

protagonist in order to focus on Iago. As Gary Wihl argues, to Empson Iago becomes something of a new standard for life, the embodiment of a new individualism that gives us “new forms of social intimacy and mastery between our much more spontaneous, unpredictable, natural selves” (1993, 129). With this goal before him, Empson turns the play into a kind of melodrama, a “debunking of Othello’s not-so-tragic honour” (1993, 123) that plays on the popular irritation that contemporary Elizabethan audiences must have felt with complacent cuckolds (Empson 1951, 219-222). For Empson, then, the Othello-Iago relation serves to make something understood, something emergent in the concept of the individual self as it asserts itself against the background of fluctuant meanings and word-patterns. This drama requires the “lowly, evil, demonic” Iago as an antithesis to Othello’s high principles: as an outsider to Othello’s, Iago drives the dramatic action of the play.

According to Burke’s socioanagogic interpretation, however, much of the play’s power comes from the exact opposite of this, from the fact that destruction is internally caused. With or without Iago, the continuous achieved perfection of romantic love – the end to the rhetorical drive to end difference and establish complete identity – is impossible. Given the tragic protagonist’s excessive engrossment in monogamistic love – in this particular case an attempt at absolute or perfect possession – the destructive motives (suspicion, threat of loss, estrangement) arise from within and are but externalized or symbolized in Iago. to make a play, a poet must do more than translate the tension into progressive form (plot and mythic structure); he must also translate the tension into the ‘equivalent terms of personality’ by ‘dramatic tension into interrelated roles.’ The ‘tragic trinity of ownership,’ particularized in *Othello* in terms of ‘the disequilibrium of monogamistic love’ requires at least three principal interrelated characters to symbolize the possessor (including the act of possession), what is possessed, and estrangement. The three parts of the ‘triune tension’ or psychosis are represented in the play by the following mayor “character recipes: Othello, Desdemona, and Iago:

add the privacy of Desdemona’s treasure, as vicariously owned by Othello in manly miserliness (Iago represents the threat implicit in such cherishing), and you have a tragic trinity of ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property in human affections, as fetishistically localized in the object of possession, while the possessor is himself possessed by this very engrossment (Iago being the result, the apprehension that attains its dramatic culmination in the thought of an agent acting to provoke the apprehension. The single ‘mine-own-ness’ is thus dramatically split into the three principles of possession, possessor, and estrangement (threat of loss). (1951 [2007], 67-68)

For Empson, characters give birth to individuals; for Burke, they are but functions of the rational and the mythic plot. In drama, at least, the poet is “intent on making a play, not

people.” Drama requires characters as embodiments of the tension that the playwright exploits; they function rather than are. Iago, for instance, functions to push the plot forward, “for the audience’s villainous entertainment and filthy purgation” (Burke 1951 [2007], 69), but also acts as the estranged part of the “ownership” tension dramatized in the play. Thirdly, as one of the three victims of the tragic *katharma*, his role is that of the scapegoat on which the audience – persecuted as it is by the tragic rhythm of the play – loads its own tensions and burdens, to be disposed of by the sacrificial cleansing that ends any tragic play.

## 5.5 “Pure Persuasion” and the Possibility of a Beyond

“This essay is not complete,” (Burke 1951 [2007], 97) says about his “Othello – an Essay to Illustrate a Method.” And indeed, readers looking for the method that the title promises will be sorely disappointed. Although Burke’s complex, wide-ranging analysis does give a few pointers as to what to look for in terms of imagery and where to look for in terms of significant plot developments, the essay remains stuck at the level of illustration. As such, it advances little beyond the socioanagogic readings that Burke offered in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. As Burke concludes his essay on *Othello*:

Here is the area of speculation where ‘all the returns are not yet in.’ The purpose would be to go beyond the terminological integration of a single play, in search of an over-all motivational scheme that might account for the shifts from one work to another. I admit that here all tends to grow nebulous. I use the word deliberately, thinking of great gaseous masses out of which solid bodies presumably emerge. But we should keep peering into these depths, too, the farthest reaches of our subject. For here must lie the ultimate secrets of man, as the symbol-using animal. (1951 [2007], 100)

For Empson, peering into the depths of a work would lead to a vision of the author and history. In his book of “Milton’s God” – a relentless and (given Empson’s usual predilection for a somewhat nebulous style) vicious indictment of the neo-Christian doctrine that Empson found dominating the field of literary criticism, Empson used the combination of verbal and historical criticism he had developed in *The Structure of Complex Words* to discount readings that straightforwardly embraced Milton’s ‘official’ religious creed, turning *Paradise Lost* into an endorsement for what Empson considers the most barbarous of Christian vices: doctrines like original sin, predestination, and the idea scapegoat mechanism in which the sadistic sacrifice of a single individual ensures the redemption of an elect few. Turning against the preconceived moralities and ‘false

identities' (1961, 244-245) that such Christian doctrines and their attendant translations into literary criticism established, Empson's reading of Milton emphasizes the possibilities of finding historical points of difference and resistance in the author as a conscious and rational manipulator of meaning:

At bottom, you are trying to imagine the mind of the author at the moment of composition, but this may be too hard taken alone, so you need to remember that he was intensely concerned at that moment with whether the words he had found 'expressed' what he was trying to say, that is, whether they would have the effect he wanted without understanding how it was done, so that their 'unconsciousness' needs to be put into the definition; but as a rule this only concerns matters which they could understand if the switched their attention. (1961, 28-29)

Ignoring the author as such a purposive origin of historically grounded and ascertainable meanings, Empson believed, the modernist fashion for symbolist reading replaced understanding with a quest to find some timeless, transcendent order of meaning and truth indifferent to details of plot, circumstance, or background history (Norris 1993, 10).

How different Empson's project had become from Burke's can clearly be seen by the scathing review tBurke published of *Milton's God*, calling Empson to order about his selective manner of quotation and willfully crude paraphrasing, saying that "[b]y his stress upon 'torture' rather than upon the sacrificial principle in general, Empson picturesquely deflects attention from the central relationship between religion and the social order" (in: Rivers and Weber 2010, 426). Haffenden (2006, 216) suggests that Burke's sarcastic remarks were inspired by the same "sentimental" disgust about Empson's focus on the unsavory elements in *Paradise Lost*, but the remainder of the review suggests that Burke's reserves had more to do with what he believed to be Empson's unthinking anti-religiosity:

But above all, Empson commits what is surely the unpardonable sin as regards his concern with language: for he almost willfully fails to develop a mature, terministic or 'logical' analysis of Milton's theological and poetic problems. [...] though my own approach to the terminology of any and all theologies is secular, I have the uneasy feeling that something of the old Puritan fury shows through Empson's rabid brand of secularism. (in: Rivers and Weber 427)

What Empson's rabid secularism caused him to overlook, Burke believed, was the ability to adopt and transform religious structures of reasoning and make them serviceable to the study of language. This secular use of theological language would become the primary technique used in Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*, where he transformed the empirical humanism of dramatism by grounding it even more deeply in the structures



of language. But perhaps more importantly, Empson's antithesis between "neo-Christian" and his own militantly secular way of reading prevents a possibility of merging both approaches into a more unified, mythical way of seeing in which the antithesis ceased to be.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, Burke's dramatism, while always aiming to correct the tendency to overemphasize either reader, text or author in different New Critical ways of reading, at the same time also tries to overcome the differences that exist between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' ways of reading. One major way of doing this, I have argued, was by persuading critics that they all participate in an ongoing "conversation," a dialectical exchange of ideas that brackets the criterion of transhistorical 'truth' in favor of a historically grounded rhetorical exchange. It should be no surprise then, that the Burkean conversation reappears in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, a book preoccupied with the way we shape our identities by, and in conformity with, the hierarchic motives and processes of guilt and redemption that are inherent in the human capacity to use symbols. As I have argued, Burke stresses the practical need for rhetoric as a consequence of an inevitable state of division in which human beings find themselves and which, as I have argued in the previous section, Burke finds most "perfectly" embodied in tragic drama. Rhetoric, therefore, is always partial and partisan, informed by individual advantage and conflicting interests. This, then, would seem to be the state that Burke leaves criticism in when he depicts it as an ever ongoing conversation between ever changing participants.

And yet, as Burke turns to the possibility of "pure persuasion" in the final section on "Order" in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, he seems to suggest that there might be an 'ultimate' possibility of overcoming the division of parliamentary conflict:

The difference between a merely 'dialectical' confronting of parliamentary conflict and an 'ultimate' treatment of it would reside in this: The 'dialectical' order would leave the competing voices in a jangling relation with one another (a conflict solved *faute de mieux* by horse-trading); but the ultimate order would place these competing voices themselves in a hierarchy, or sequence, or evaluative series, so that, in some way, we went by a fixed and reasoned progression from one of these to another, the members of the entire group being arranged developmentally with relation to one another. The 'ultimate' order of terms would thus differ essentially from the 'dialectical' [...] in that there would be a 'guiding idea' or 'unitary principle' behind the diversity of voices. The voices would not confront one another as somewhat disrelated competitors that can work together only by the 'mild demoralization' of sheer compromise; rather, they would be the successive moments in a single process. (RM 187)

Whereas dialectic leaves competing voices in conflict – in "parliamentary wrangle" of "partisan interests" – ultimate order sees these interest as a series of steps in which each step is "both the fulfillment of the previous order and the transcending of it" (RM

189). As illustrated by the Platonic dialogues, it is ‘not merely the step from sensory terms to ideas, but also a hierarchic ordering of steps’ (RM 188). This hierarchic sequencing “transforms the dialectical into an ‘ultimate’ order’ (RM 188-189).

In the Platonic dialogues, the process proceeds thus: “First, the setting up of several voices, each representing a different ‘ideology’ and each aiming rhetorically to unmask the opponents; next, Socrates’ dialectical attempt to build a set of generalizations that transcends the bias of the competing rhetorical partisans; next, his vision of the ideal end in such a project, and finally, his rounding out the purely intellectual abstractions by a myth” (RM 200). This process evidently requires a rhetor in the form of a socratic midwife who helps to give birth to new ideas and poetic myths (Zappen 2009, 292). But, more importantly, it also requires a linguistic transformation to the level of poetic myth:

“insofar as the Platonic dialogue lived up to its pretensions, the bias of this concluding myth would be quite different from the bias of the rhetorical partisans with which the discussion began. For the myth should not have emerged until such rhetorical or dialectical bias had been transcended in the realm of pure ideas” (RM 200).

As Burke envisions it, then, in this “ultimate order,” dialectic exchange merges with rhetoric to become transformed into a poetic myth (RM 197-203). But this process also requires a linguistic transformation at the level of poetic myth: the myth itself, however, would not be pure idea but “a reduction of the ‘pure idea’ to terms of image and fable” – a linguistic transformation that captures a motive and movement “towards a real and ultimate universal ground” (RM 200 / 202-203). In the Platonic myth, then, dialectic and rhetoric merge into a “pure persuasion,” which is an absolute communication, beseechment for itself alone, praise and blame so universalized as to have no assignable physical object” (RM 275). These acts of pure persuasion are devoid of partisan advantage-seeking but also devoid of persuasive purpose: it is the use of appeal for appeal’s sake:

It is what Eliot might call the ‘dead center’ of motives. It is the condition of Santayana’s transcendental skepticism, where the pendulum is at rest, not hanging, but poised above the fulcrum. It is the change of direction, from systole to diastole, made permanent. Psychologically it is related to a conflict of opposite impulses. Philosophically, it suggests the plight of Buridian’s extremely rational ass, starving to death because placed between two exactly equidistant bales of hay. It is the moment of motionlessness, when the axe has been raised to its full height and is just about to fall. It is uncomfortable like suspended animation. (RM 294)

Such acts “transcend the use of persuasion for local advantage” (RM 274). They should therefore be intensely purposive, but they exhibit “a kind of purpose which, as judged

by the rhetoric of advantage, is no purpose at all, or which might often look like sheer frustration of purpose” (RM 270). As such, they might not even exist: “no material world could run on such a motive, not even a world genuinely supernatural in its theory of motives” (RM 294).

Still, the abstractive and transformative power of language makes such utopian states, in which division is – if only momentarily and imaginatively – overcome at least thinkable; in fact, as Barbara A. Biesecker argues, this underlying motive of dialectic-rhetorical transcendence is the fundamental human aptitude towards sociality, a desire – prelinguistic and prehistoric – “to break out of the imprisonment of individuality and merge with the other” (1997, 47). Wess similarly observes the promise implicit in pure persuasion to pursue community interest rather than personal advantage but claims that “this promise is routinely honored in the breach” and so is “a utopian vision rather than a historical plausibility,” a vision dependent upon not only “being free to speak” but also “being powerful enough to be heard” (1996, 215-216). These are themes that, as I have argued in my introduction to this dissertation, Burke grappled with in *The Anaesthetic Revelation* and, I suggested, found a solution for in the dictum that one should “live by dodges” (cf. *supra*). But what exactly is this ‘dodging’ that Burke urges us to do? Is it the retreat from society in a quiet place by the seaside? Or is it a retreat into a realm where pure persuasion – disinterested rhetorical ingenuity – might be pursued?



## Conclusion: *Eye-Crossing* Burkean Criticism

(And that bings us to critics-who-write-writiques-of-  
critical-criticism.)  
(Kenneth Burke)

On June 2, 1969, *The Nation* published a long poem by Burke entitled *Eye Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan*. It was composed in the previous year in the apartment hotel in Brooklyn Heights, where Burke had brought his wife Libby after a stroke in September 1968 had made a move to the city “advisable” (letter to Malcolm Cowley, in: Jay 1988, 364). When a progressive failure of the muscle system left Libby nearly completely paralyzed, Burke spent the winter and spring of 1969 caring for her day and night in a room with a window that allowed ‘eye crossings’ over the East River to Manhattan, until Libby “left in her sleep” in May (letter to Malcolm Cowley, in: Jay 1988, 368). Away from home and forced to helplessly witness the gradual undoing of the woman that had been his love, keeper and editor for decades, Burke again sought medicine in fiction, committing to paper his despair at being “caught in the midst of being nearly over” (308) in a city whose size, pace of living and anonymity offered little comfort.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, *Eye Crossing* reminds of *The Anaesthetic Revelation* – indeed, in a long gloss titled “After-Words” that he added later to the poem, Burke points out the similarities between both late pieces of fiction himself.<sup>2</sup> Confined to the bedside of his

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Rueckert’s “Kenneth Burke’s Encounters with Walt Whitman” (1994, 185-221) for both biographical and critical background to this section.

<sup>2</sup> The original 1969 publication of the poem lacks the prose introductions, glosses and afterwords of the later (1973) version that I am using. That version, the one listed in the bibliography, appeared in the 2003 *Burke, On Human Nature*, with the title “*Eye Crossing From Brooklyn to Manhattan: An Eye Poem for the Ear (With Prose Introduction, Glosses, and After-Words)*,” where Rueckert adds a brief introduction (305-07). This version is essentially similar to the 1973 version that Burke published in *Literary Criticism: Contemporary Approaches to Literature*, ed. Stanley Weintraub and Philip Young (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1973), 228-51. Burke described this volume as a festschrift for his friend Henry Sams, chair of English at Penn State, who had used the poem in a

dying wife, Burke experienced a mixture of physical and spiritual paralysis that resembled his ‘anaesthetic’ condition in the hospital, a condition that, as in *The Anaesthetic Revelation*, Burke again sought to resolve by turning to words. Again, Burke hides the autobiographical generosity of the poem behind a literary persona (the ‘little hero’ this time becoming an anonymous ‘I’). And again, like *The Anaesthetic Revelation* addressed Keats, *Eye Crossing*, is a critical dialogue with some of Burke’s literary predecessors, this time Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. But the most consistent link, Burke points out, is that both pieces, despite their heterogeneous contents, rambling length and the mixture of styles that mark both *The Anaesthetic Revelation* and *Eye Crossing*, are lyrics.

In a *Grammar of Motives*, Burke had called the lyric attitude a “region of ambiguous possibilities” (GM 242): sitting halfway between bodies and words, they are “the area of thought wherein actual conflicts can be transcended, with results sometimes fatal, sometimes felicitous” (GM 234). This way, Burke believes, lyric attitudes provide the drama of our lives with both beginnings and ends: they give us both the principles that goad us into action and the wisdom (if any) we gain from it. Lyrics, Burke says returning to the central concept of his critical conversation with I.A. Richards, “[strike] an attitude” (2003, 331 his italics). Each of the five elements of the pentad he developed to examine human motivations can be used to describe the rhetorical focus of a species of literature: drama focuses rhetorically on the act, novels on the agent, epics on purpose, historical novels and science fiction focus on scene and agency, respectively. But lyrics, Burke says, have a kind of “unifying force” that defies reduction to any single one of these five elements. Though it “may be, on its face, but a list of descriptive details specifying a scene [...] these images are all manifestations of a single *attitude*” towards “some kind of situation” (2003, 332). This way, the lyric sets itself over against the dramatic, motivated acts that the pentad is designed to help describe. If drama is fueled by the motives of “the self in quest,” the various actions through which people shape their identities by making contact with various externals of nature and society (cf. Rueckert 1982, 44), the lyric is “the self in rest:” it describes moods or “sentiments” that – if only for a short while – delay the ongoing rhetorical process of action and provide room for contemplation.

---

graduate course and sent Burke his students’ responses; Burke told William H. Rueckert that he added the prose commentary to the poem published in *The Nation* to “fit the pattern” of that book (*Letters* 180; see also 145). With the ‘full’ version’s prose comments adding not just biographical background but also a running commentary that links the poem to Burke’s criticism and theory, I find it more congenial to my current purposes.

## “We should be philologists all:” Burke’s Critical Drama

To answer the latter questions, I will return to *Eye Crossing*, but before I take on to these – broader – issues, I want to turn to a final anecdote in Burke’s conversation with the New Criticism: the essay on “Formalist Criticism: Its Principles and Limits.” Published in the summer edition of the 1966 *Texas Review*, it was written originally for a symposium on formalist criticism at the University of Texas and was included as the final essay in *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966). The essay is interesting for several reasons: not only does it show Burke’s continued preoccupation with formalist criticism and literary theory, it also provides a final, outspoken and exhaustive account of what Burke believed were the likenesses and differences between his dramatist method and the New Critical type of formalism. Most interesting of all, however, is that Burke makes every effort to identify himself with formalist criticism. Indeed, the conversation that Burke has with Brooks and Wellek in the essay reads less as an attempt to disown New Critical formalism as limited, but as an attempt to expand its principles along the lines of Burke’s dramatist methodology.

In the critical conversations between Burke and the New Critics that I have taken as representative anecdotes in the development of Burke’s dramatist methodology, I have argued that, throughout its various incarnations, dramatism sought ways to overcome some of the structural difficulties or problems related to New Critical analytic readings. Describing how Burke’s methodology of reading counters the reductive anecdotes of I.A. Richards’ affective ‘attitudes,’ Cleanth Brooks’ ironic, textualist ‘drama’ and William Empson’s authorial ‘identity,’ I have argued that Burke’s ‘dramatism’ is best understood as a flexible heuristic designed to uncover the ways that literature both results from, and gives rise to, experience. Burke, from the beginning of his career to the end, sees literature as, primarily, “a way of experiencing” — a transformative, rhetorical encounter. As he abandoned the expressive poetics of his earliest writing and began to think of literature in terms of communication, as an “arousing and fulfillment of desires” (CS 124) that involves the “creation and gratification of needs” (CS 138), Burke develops a philosophy that conceives of literary texts as a conversation between an author and her readers. As he puts it in “Poetics, Dramatistically Considered,” “the word, ‘poetry,’ is essentially an action word, coming from a word meaning ‘to make.’ [...] The “word ‘aesthetic,’” he continues, “comes from a word meaning ‘to perceive,’ thus being a knowledge word” (Burke 2001, 36). What is made can be perceived, what is perceived can be known, and when that knowledge is communicated (which Burke believes is the underlying impulse of aesthetic production), it can be used as a basis for new makings, new actions (cf. Clark 2006).

What makes this experiential exchange, this making and re-making possible is ‘form,’ which Burke (following Richards) frames initially in terms of an audience psychology

based on certain universals of psycho-physical experience, but gradually comes to see in terms of “symbolic action” that translates individual desires into the “public form of grammar,” the “bodies of material” that language affords to poets to verbalize their experience. Texts, then, have properties of both permanence and change: they translate what is historical and particular into the more fixed and public forms of language (cf. Rueckert 1982, 173). However, Burke believes, since all men share innate biological and neurological properties, have certain universals of experience in common, and encounter similar types of situations, the general principles that underlie a text remain the same regardless of the way texts are re-individuated into historically situated human projects. If texts enable their author to transform and transcend herself through formed language, this formed language will allow readers to undergo a similar medicinal process of transformation that takes them from the private self to the public.

Because formed language, the permanent incarnation of textual experience, is what allows readers to access and re-enact the poetic act, Burke always takes this as a point of departure. Throughout the various modifications of his dramatist methodology – the ‘statistical’ dream/prayer/chart he applies to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the ‘pentadic’ reading of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or the ‘socio-anagogic’ interpretation of catharsis in Shakespeare’s *Othello* – Burke emphasizes that a critic must begin his interpretive procedures by pretending that neither author nor historical context of the text under scrutiny are known. Every poetic act, Burke believes, must first be analyzed in terms of its phonetic, terminological and imagistic materials. By “indexing” these materials, paying close attention to the formal progression and highly laden moments of the text, a critic is able to extract the “substance-clusters” and structural relations that operate in the text which, in turn, can be used as factual evidence for the critic to work his way up to the ‘title’ – the ultimate underlying principle or the ‘essence’ that a work embodies (cf. Rueckert 1982, 173-176).

Therefore, it is wholly without irony that Burke, in “Formalist Criticism: Its Principles and Limits” subscribes to the formalist “Credo” that Cleanth Brooks had set out in a 1951 essay on “The Formalist Critics.” art of a Symposium that ran over three issues of the *Kenyon Review*. Under the header “My Credo,” the symposium asked prominent critics from various schools or movements to state the principles underlying their methodologies. Speaking for “the formalist critics,” Brooks lists ten:

1. That literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object
2. That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity – or the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole
3. That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.
4. That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated
5. That form is meaning



6. That literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic
7. That the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular
8. That literature is not a surrogate for religion
9. That, as Allen Tate says, 'specific moral problems' are the subject matter of literature, but that the purpose of literature is not to point to a moral.
10. That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out the criticism

Burke agrees with nearly all of these principles, but adds important reservations to 5, 6 and 10. Number 5, "form is meaning," Burke rejects as too vague. Even in factual statements, form and meaning often work together. Brooks' "form is meaning," Burke believes, would require the addition of "purpose" in order to be able to function as a principle of formalist criticism:

We can say that the poetic 'form' is fully equitable with 'meaning' when the 'form' (with its 'matter') serves some specific poetic 'purpose.' But such a solution would require the addition of a clause such as is wholly missing from Mr. Brooks's list of Formalistic tenets; namely: that the work be viewed as aiming at some kind of effect (not necessarily the effect of 'catharsis' which Aristotle associates with Greek tragedy, but an effect of some sort, with all the resources of the work being shaped to this end). (LASA 488)

Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy' had barred critics from assuming that works of literature were means to an end. However, Burke argues, indexing, clustering and entitling the formal properties of a text, critics will almost inevitably discover some kind of *telos* in the work. On the horizontal, temporal line, a plot will work its way to an end, while on the vertical level of symbols and images, clusters will appear that not only guide the critic to the 'essence' of a work, but also point beyond the verbal body of the single text. As the factual labor of close reading reveals certain gaps or breaks in the text, lay bare certain transformations that puzzle or surprise, the critic can, in a second step, bring in the author to resolve what is unclear in the text. In fact, Burke argues, bringing in the author may be worth while even when the temporal and imagistic *telos* seems perfectly consistent and clear:

If you can place its authorship, and you have other poems written by the same author, examine these on the assumption that the recurrence of the same terms elsewhere may throw additional light upon their nature as a special nomenclature (the meaning of a given term in a 'Keats dictionary' as distinct from its meaning in a 'Shelley dictionary') (LASA 494).

Therefore, Burke opposes his understanding of "literature as a form of symbolic action" to Brooks' sixth principle – "literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic" (LASA 488). Metaphor, bringing together incongruous terms "rates high among the sources of

stylistic appeal,” but to Burke the specifics of a work do not constitute its totality. As he modifies Brooks’ seventh principle: “by reducing a work to the most general statements of its plot or development possible, one is enabled to see all the more sharply how the processes of poetic individuation figure” (LASA 488-489). As I have shown, Empson, too, had argued that the poet could be brought in as a counter to the kind of formalist criticism that would hypostatize textual ambiguity (symbols, metaphor, irony) into the organic, iconic ‘body’ of the text. To Empson, as to Burke, textual complexities require a turn to a broader context, rather than a criticism that moves deeper into the text. Empson, then, would agree with the third step of Burke’s critical methodology:

Finally, in an attempt *wholly* outside the realm of Poetics proper to study the ways of symbolic action in general, introduce any kind of available evidence (such as letters, diaries, notebooks, biographical data) that might indicate how the terms *within* the poem link up with problematical situations (personal or social) *outside* the poem. (LASA 496)

However, as I have argued above, Burke does not share Empson’s conviction that the multiple meanings of a work can be controlled by appealing to a rational origin that is able to regulate the play of signifiers in a work. Works of literature are, in part, the result of the unique personality of an author. But as pieces of ‘formed experience,’ they also answer to certain principles beyond the author’s control – the impersonal grammatical and phonetic resources it of language it exploits, as well as the inherent psychic makeup of symbol-using animals to know their words through that language.

Nor, for that matter, does he believe that rational procedures can control the reception of the poem: Burke’s most outspoken objection to Brooks’ formalist credo is with its tenth and final principle, “that the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out the criticism.” Such a criticism that separates its methods from its objects, I have argued that Burke believes, can never hope to yield representative anecdotes. Instead, he says:

I proceed on the assumption that if man is the typical symbol-using animal, and his love of symbolicity for its own sake is grounded in his human nature, then the *method* of ‘description and evaluation’ (if we may revert to clause one) is, or should be, *implied in this definition*. (LASA 496)

With a sly rhetorical move, Burke returns the accusations made by the New Critics like Blackmur and Wellek that his methodology fails to stay focused on the form of the text and that, therefore, it falls outside literary criticism proper. Rather, Burke says, his methodology is the one that takes form seriously, not just by pursuing it beyond the verbal forms of poetic integer into the formal realms of language and life, but also by promoting a continuous awareness of its own formal projections – the “terministic screens” and “representative anecdotes” – on the text. “[E]ven in the realm of Poetics,

when dealing with one particular text,” Burke says, “I have often at the same time stressed matters concerning questions of method involved in the analysis (in this sense, perhaps, taking a ‘Formalistic’ view of criticism itself)” (LASA 495). Rehearsing a line from his early *Counter-Statement*, Burke argues that Wellek is right when accusing him of using an “analysis of language and human motives [which] at some points overlaps upon literary criticism in the strict sense of the term [and] at many other points [...] leads into inquiries not central to literary criticism” (LASA 494). But, so Burke argues, no species of criticism that focuses on ‘form’ any profound way will ever be able to stay true to the text itself: “it’s a simple Formalistic fact that the nature of [Brooks’] project would not permit him to stay within the bounds of Formalistic criticism” (LASA 490). The ‘silent form’ in Keats’ *Ode* will always ‘tease us out of thought’ and into broader considerations about the author, the reader and the language through which they share their experience.

This, then, is what Burke believes is the main difference between his dramatist formalism and the reductive breed of textualism that the New Critics are practicing. Answering Brooks’ rhetorical question in “The Heresy of Paraphrase:” (“Where is the dictionary which contains the terms of a poem? Is it a truism that the poet is continually forced to remake language”), Burke argues that

*I take this just observation to imply that a poet is naturally closer to his own particular idiom than his readers can ever hope to be but that by comparing all available contexts (both poetic and extrapoetic) in which the poet employs a given term, we can get deeper glimpses than were otherwise possible into the functioning of his particular nomenclature. And these possibilities seem to me worth trying to disclose with regard to the nature of symbolic action in general, though many of such speculations may not contribute to Poetics in particular. There is a good civilized sense in which we should be philologists all, when looking at the utterances of one another (and thereby, poignantly roundabout, philologists even of ourselves).* (496, italics mine)

Not only does the form of the text require us to take its whole context – its nature as a purposive structure and a symbolic act – into account, but Burke believes that formal considerations will also force the critic to turn back and scrutinize her own interpretive projections. As I have argued in my chapter on Burke’s conversation with Korzybsian semantics, this variant of the hermeneutic circle pervades the whole of Burke’s critical methodology.

If Burke argued that “[t]he main ideal of criticism, as I conceive it, is to use all there is to use” (PLF 23), he did not just urge critics to apply any means available in order to uncover the full complexity of the symbolic act, but to acknowledge the informed nature of their own interpretive projections on the text. Acts of interpretation, as Burke sees them, are epistemological encounters between the projections of an interpreter and the structure of the objects they claim to elucidate. Methodologies for textual

interpretation do not stand apart from the situations they uncover in texts. Critics are, in the first place, readers whose response to the symbolic act that is the text is itself, in turn, a symbolic act. For Burke, then, it makes no sense to reduce literary form to emotional pseudo-statements, paradoxical artifacts or rational gestures of resistance, nor does it seem wise to locate the ultimate instance of 'meaning' in either reader, text or author. Instead, seeing works of literature through the representative anecdote of the drama, Burke is able to subsume such reductive New Critical metonymies into a synecdochic framework that sees reader, text and author as involved in, and taking "part of," a complex symbolic exchange. The text is not a static object but a dynamic system of relations that comprises both intrinsic (the internal relations of words within the textual integer and its intertextual connections within the system of literature and, beyond, with language as a whole) and extrinsic (the text as a strategic, 'formed' response to a situation) elements.

If it aims to reflect this complexity that Burke finds in its textual subject, then, critical theory and its attendant interpretive practice must be fully responsive to both the intrinsic and extrinsic levels of meaning present in the text. For Burke, therefore, "a theory of poetry is likewise a theory of reality, a psychology, and an ethics" (1935, 52). As I have argued throughout my comparative readings of Coleridge, Keats and Shakespeare, Burke variously modulates his dramatist methodology of reading to foreground either one of the four elements of symbolic action. On the grammatical level of the chart, dramatist readings seek to unveil the 'situation' which the poem represents by indexing and clustering the referential, logical and semantic equations that operate in the text. Countering the naïve referentialism of positivist semantics and criticism, Burke's chart sees the text as an actional structure through which the poet tries to 'reflect' a situation or idea. Second, on the rhetorical level of prayer, Burke tracks the ways in which a text communicates these situations or ideas in order to induce attitudes or actions in a reader. Highlighting the strategies that are used in order to address, persuade or petition an audience, dramatist criticism focuses on the 'socioanagogic' ways through which the poet tries to overcome the inherent divisions between the self, society, and nature. Thirdly, on the level of ethics, Burke's hermeneutic points out the ways in which a poem helps to build an identity by engaging the moral proscriptions of language (the negative) and the social order (mystery). Thus, on this level, Burke looks at what image of the self and society a work projects. Finally, in the realm of the symbolic, Burkean methodology looks at the therapeutic role of the work of literature. On the one hand, this involves a turn to the author, as it sees the text as expressing psychological preoccupations, patterns of identification and dissociation, and expiations of guilt and alienation. On the other hand, the symbolic element also looks at the way in which a text, through the narrative unfolding of plot and the structural (titular) patterns of associative clusters, embodies and entelechial drive inherent to any symbol system to attain 'perfection.' With its ability to integrate all four levels – accurate

charting, prayerful rhetoric, ethical dreaming and symbolic consistency – in a single textual analysis, I have argued that Burke’s dramatist methodology is able to offer subtle, sophisticated and persuasive interpretations of literary texts.

## “Finding himself impelled to build a poem:” Burke’s Existential Drama

However, as Henderson points out, the success of dramatism in effecting a merger of extrinsic and intrinsic kinds of criticism and providing a more comprehensive theory of literature and language must not blind us to the fact that dramatist theorizing is itself a kind of symbolic action that has both intrinsic, textualist and extrinsic, contextualist aims:

one can easily get carried away and overstress the systematic nature of dramatism, but what gets lost in the process is the fact that dramatism is fundamentally an ethical and existential attitude, a charitable yet realistic frame of ironic and comic acceptance. (1988, 187)

By treating language and thought in terms of poetic action rather than in terms of semantic truth, Burke had pointed to the constructionist nature of our worlds. Observing the real through terministic screens and tropological categories, he argues, the social and even much of the natural realms of our experience are based on rhetorical processes rather than on factual certainties. As I have argued in my discussion of Burke’s conversation with rhetorical semantics, the fundamentally ‘poetic’ nature of the real brings with it attendant tragic dangers of metonymic reduction and misrepresentation. However, Burke believes that an ‘ironic’ awareness of the fact that out social relations are dramatic constructions may induce people to take on a ‘comic’ stance. If much of our world is our own making and we are indeed “philologists all,” this also means that we can variously shape and alter our circumstances to better shape our needs. For Burke,

Comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime* to *stupidity* [...]. The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as *mistaken* [i.e. in need of correction rather than destruction]. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations where 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. The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters

of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony. (ATH 41)

However, in *Eye Crossing*, this optimistic and charitable comic attitude is overtaken by a far more uncertain and pessimistic one. The spirit in which the poem addresses Whitman and Crane is distinctly less amiable and compassionate than *The Anaesthetic Revelation's* exchange with Keats. If Keats acted as companion and example to help Burke overcome the trauma of his botched hernia operation and subsequent treatment in the hospital, Whitman and Crane prove now powerless in the face of Burke's predicament.

It is a change that cannot be reduced to Burke's dire biographical circumstances in 1969 alone. Even before (roughly from *A Rhetoric Motives* on), Burke's thinking and writing had become more uncertain and pessimistic. As James Chesebro points out, in the late stage of Burke's career, "his comic posture was replaced by a far more serious mood and tone" (Chesebro 1988, 179). Although the nature of his mind had always been essentially ironic, Burke generally preferred to see human inadequacy as comic mistake rather than tragic default, promoting a pluralist, reconciliatory attitude toward ideological difference and sporting an optimistic mode of writing to match. In the latter stages of his career, however, comedy, which holds up the possibility of redemption – or at least temporary release – from the state of division in which men find themselves in this world, is replaced by the bleaker and ironic satire as a dominant mode of emplotment.

The altered tone and mood can clearly be felt in *Eye Crossing*. Living on the same street where Crane composed *The Bridge* and looking out over the river that provided Whitman with the inspiration for *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Burke finds that the glowing optimism of these poems no longer speaks to him. Adding wry comments to Crane and Whitman's lyrical exaltations of city life and modern technology, Burke finds that "things have moved on since the days of Walt / and Hart is tunnel-conscious" the speaker of *Eye-Crossing* declares Whitman "Blandly blind to the promotion racket stirring already all / about him, / he 'bathed in the waters' without reference to their imminent defiling" (326) while Crane's unifying journey among the crowds over Brooklyn Bridge runs to a halt in one of *Eye-Crossing's* endless traffic jams (329). The Manhattan which Burke sees across the river is not the beating heart of a flowering nation, but a grim cemetery:

A jumble of towering tombstones  
hollowed, not hallowed,  
and in the night incandescent  
striving ever to outstretch one another  
like stalks of weeds dried brittle in the fall

Seeing his wife succumb to what medical jargon insists is a 'progressive' illness, Burke grew convinced that all that man calls 'progress,' when left to rage unchecked, would

cause society to perish. It is an idea that Burke entertained before in some of the late pieces in his *Collected Poems 1915-1967* – published earlier in 1968 and dedicated to Libby. *Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership: A Diaristic Fragment*, written during a scenic car drive Burke undertook with Libby in 1966-67, offers a similar ironic treatment of Whitman. In a powerful dialogue with the latter's *Song of the Open Road*, the first four of five sections from the poem spell a tale of technology, imperialism, traffic and pollution that is a clear foreboding of that in *Eye-Crossing*. If the open road now runs along the carcasses of abandoned industrial buildings, and if the great Niagara Falls glisten with the same pollution that Americans and Russians are now exporting to the moon, what, the speaker wonders, is the new message he can take west now that Whitman's is defunct?

Still, even in the light of these similarities, Rueckert argues that *Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership* offers a wholly different kind of encounter with Whitman than *Eye Crossing* (Rueckert 1994, 200). Although the first four sections of the former are painted the same dark hue as *Eye Crossing*, the fifth section begins with a clear 'No.' that turns itself against the pessimism of what comes before. In an account of a nightly walk that breaks with the mechanical car-journey, a different voice enters the poem, one that asserts selfhood and the experience of nature as possible grounds for opposition and renewal. Although *Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership* displaces Whitman's optimistic journey over an open road with the image of a poet and a nation tossed around in a historical storm (Vietnam is mentioned prominently) and on the brink of sinking, its fifth and final section is thoroughly Whitmanesque in its assertion of "the self's experiences of both nature and itself, the self's awareness that it is part of a larger whole that is perhaps beyond sinkership, the possibility of new beginnings and the diurnal reaffirmation of sunsets, sunrises, and the pleasures of sensory experience" (Rueckert 1994, 199).

*Eye Crossing*, on the other hand, offers no such consolatory redemption: no attempt is made to transcend its rejection of Whitman and Crane; instead, the poem's closing vista from the "room high on Brooklyn Heights" (310) is one of pollution, alienation and chaos in which the "city of light" becomes the bearer of "thoughts of empire, war, and imminent decay" (335), bearing out his loss of confidence in the ultimate solubility of the problems and threats of technology, pollution, unecological ways of living, loneliness and death. If Whitman's poetry characteristically conveys an attitude of optimistic identification with his fellow man and with nature, then, the counter-attitude that *Eye Crossing* proposes is one of "apprehension." As our modern obsessions with technology and consumption destroy the nature and the traditional patterns of sociality that we share and sees them replaced by environments of our own (symbolic) making, meaningful identification between human beings becomes increasingly more difficult.

What is more, this tendency towards alienation and solipsism seems embedded in language itself. Because "language referring to the realm of the nonverbal is necessary talk about things in terms of what they are not," (LASA 5), language inevitably separates us from each other and the world. This problem, which is essentially that of relativism

and nihilism, is an issue that Burke continuously faced during the development of his intellectual career. Defending the need for irony, perspectivism, incongruent ways of seeing and ambiguous, indeterminate poetic terms, Burke's comic dramatism always balanced on the brink of collapsing into a more tragic account of human life, one in which our nature as symbol-using animals turns back on ourselves:

If *action* is to be our key term, then *drama*; for drama is the culminative form of action (this is a variant of the 'perfection' principle discussed in the previous chapter). But if *drama*, then *conflict*. And if *conflict*, then *victimage*. Dramatism is always on the edge of this vexing problem, that comes to culmination in tragedy, the song of the scapegoat (Burke 1965, 54-55)

However, Burke argues, there is always the possibility of a happier route. "Whatever may be the ground of all possibility," he writes,

The proper study of mankind is man's tendency to misjudge reality as inspirited by the troublous genius of symbolism. But if we were trained, for generation after generation, from our first emergence out of infancy, and in ways ranging from the simplest to the most complex, depending on our stage of development, to collaborate in spying upon ourselves with pious yet sportive fearfulness, and thus helping to free one another of the false ambitions that symbolism so readily encourages, we might yet contrive to keep from wholly ruining this handsome planet and its plenitude. (1958, 162)

Even if our inherent linguistic nature will always leave us as a "self in quest," there is, as Rueckert points out, always the hope of "by and through language" to move "beyond language" (1982, 162), to a clearer vision of the structures of thought and the ways of action which it inspires. What persisted, then, even as Burke's mood darkened and his criticism turned on itself, was that same critical impulse of the "Word-Man" that I have located throughout his conversations with the New Criticism: the need to verbalize, even in the face of opposition, the complex faith of man as it is played out in the great texts of literature, and to re-enact their symbolic acts as an "aging literary man who, knowing / that words see but within / yet finding himself impelled to build a poem" (xiii).



# Bibliography

- Berthoff, Ann E. "I.A. Richards and the Audit of Meaning." *New Literary History* 14 (1) (1982): 63-79.
- Berthoff, Ann E. "The World, the Text, and the Reader: I.A. Richards' Hermeneutics." *Modern Philology* 88 (2) (1990): 166-173.
- Biesecker, Barbara. *Addressing Postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric and a Theory of Social Change*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997.
- Blakesley, David. *The Elements of Dramatism*. New York: Longman, 2002.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Booth, Wayne. "Kenneth Burke's Way of Knowing." *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1) (1974): 1-22.
- Booth, Wayne. *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Many Voices of Kenneth Burke, Theologian and Prophet, as Revealed in His Letters to Me*. In: D. C. W. Greig E. Henderson, "Unending Conversations: New Writings by and About Kenneth Burke" Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.
- Brock, Bernard L. "The Forum: Burke, Revisited and Reviewed." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 347-348.
- Brock, Bernard L. *The Evolution of Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Rhetoric: Dialectic between Epistemology and Ontology*. In: J. W. Chesebro, "Extensions of the Burkeian System" Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "Literary History vs. Criticism." *Kenyon Review* 2 (1940): 403 - 412.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "Empson's Criticism." *Accent* 4 (1944): 208-216.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948 [1975].
- Brooks, Cleanth. *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991.
- Brooks, Cleanth and Warren, Robert Penn. *Understanding Poetry*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938 [1976].
- Brooks, Cleanth and Wimsatt, William Kurtz. *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.
- Brower, Reuben. *Beginnings and Transitions: I.A. Richards interviewed by Reuben Brower*. In: R. Brower, H. Vendler and J. Hollander, "I.A. Richards, essays in his honor" New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Brown, Homer Obed. "The Art of Theology and the Theology of Art: Robert Penn Warren's Reading of Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." *Boundary 2* 8 (1) (1979): 237-260.

Brummett, Barry. "Burke's Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984): 161-176.

Brummett, Barry. *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*. Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1991.

Burke, Kenneth. "Coleridge Rephrased." *Poetry* (1935): 52-53.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. In: "The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action" USA: 1941.

Burke, Kenneth. "Kinds of Criticism." *Poetry* 68 (5) (1946): 278-279.

Burke, Kenneth. 'Othello': An Essay to Illustrate a Method. In: S. L. Newstok, "Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare" West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 1951 [2007].

Burke, Kenneth. "The Poetic Motive." *The Hudson Review* 11 (1) (1958): 54-63.

Burke, Kenneth. *Terministic Screens*. In: "Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method" Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965.

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

Burke, Kenneth. *Dramatism*. In: L. Thayer, "Communication: Concepts and Perspectives" DC: Spartan Books, 1967.

Burke, Kenneth. *Collected Poems* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.

Burke, Kenneth. "As I was Saying." *Michigan Quarterly Review* IX (1) (1972): 9-27.

Burke, Kenneth. "The Party Line." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 62-68.

Burke, Kenneth. "Watchful of Hermetics to Be Strong in Hermeneutics": Selections from "Poetics, Dramatistically Considered." In: G. H. Henderson and D. C. Williams, "Unending Conversations: New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke." Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2001.

Burke, Kenneth. *Eye-Crossing - From Brooklyn to Manhattan: An Eye-Poem for the Ear*, 1973. In: W. Rueckert and A. Bonadonna, "On Human Nature: A Gathering While Everything flows, 1967-1984" Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell*. In: "Here and Elsewhere: The Collected Fiction of Kenneth Burke" Jaffrey, New Hampshire: Black Sparrow Books, 2005.

Chesebro, James W. "Epistemology and ontology as dialectical modes in the writings of Kenneth Burke." *Communication Quarterly* 36 (3) (1988): 175-191.

Clark, Gregory. "'Sinkership' and 'Eye-Crossing': Apprehensive in the American Landscape." *KB Journal* 2 (2) (2006):

Core, George. "Two Critics." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 65 (1) (1989): 156-161.

Crable, Bryan. "Burke's Perspective on Perspectives: Grounding Dramatism in the Representative Anecdote." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 318-333.

Crable, Bryan. "Kenneth Burke's Continued Relevance: Arguments Toward a Better Life." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 40 (2) (2003): 118-123.

Crusius, Timothy W. "A Case for Kenneth Burke's dialectic and rhetoric." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 19 (1986): 23-37.

Crusius, Timothy W. *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation after Philosophy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

Day, Frank. *Sir William Empson: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1984.

Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London: Verso, 1998.

Donoghue, Denis. "The Bird as Symbol: Hopkin's Windhover." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 44 (175) (1955): 291-299.

Dupree, Robert S. *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983.

- Durant, Alan and MacCabe, Colin. *Compacted Doctrines: Empson and the Meanings of Words*. In: C. C. Norris and N. Mapp, "William Empson: The Critical Achievement" Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: an Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
- Eliot, T.S. *The Metaphysical Poets*. In: "Selected Essays" London: Faber and Faber, 1921 [1951].
- Eliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen & Co, Ltd., 1922.
- Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New York: New Directions, 1930 [1966].
- Empson, William. *Some Version of Pastoral*. New York: New Directions, 1935 [1974].
- Empson, William. "George Herbert and Miss Tuve." *Kenyon Review* 12 (1950): 735-738.
- Empson, William. *The Structure of Complex Words*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1951.
- Empson, William. *Milton's God*. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions Books, 1961.
- Foster, Richard. "The Romanticism of I.A. Richards." *English Literary History* 26 (1) (1959): 91-101.
- Foster, Richard. *The New Romantics: A Reappraisal of the New Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.
- Fry, Paul. *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Fuller, David. *William Empson: from Verbal Analysis to Cultural Criticism*. In: "Literary Theory And Criticism: An Oxford Guide" Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Fuller, Steve. "Rhetoric of Science": Double the Trouble? In: A. G. Gross and W. M. Keith, "Rhetorical hermeneutics: invention and interpretation in the age of science" Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parmeshwar. "Rhetoric and Its Double: Reflections on the Rhetorical Turn in the Human Sciences." In: H. Simons, "The Rhetorical Turn" Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parmeshwar. *The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science*. In: A. G. Gross and W. M. Keith, "Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science" Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.
- Garlitz, Robert. *Kenneth Burke's Logology and Literary Criticism*. USA: Xlibris, 2004.
- Garth, Pauley. "Criticism in Context: Kenneth Burke's 'The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'''" *Kenneth Burke Society*. 13/09/2012,
- Graff, Gerald. *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Grafton, Anthony. *The Footnote: a curious history*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Gusfield, Joseph R. *Introduction to "Kenneth Burke on Symbols and Society"*. In: Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Haffenden, John. *William Empson. Vol 1: Among the Mandarins*. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Haffenden, John. *William Empson. Vol2: Against the Christians*. Vol é. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Handy, William J. *Kant and the Southern New Critics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Hawhee, Debra. *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
- Henderson, Greig H. *Kenneth Burke: Literature and Language as Symbolic Action*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988.
- Herschberg-Pierrot. "Barthes and Doxa." *Poetics Today* 23 (3) (2002): 427-442.

Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1947.

Jameson, Fredric. "The Symbolic Inference; Or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis." *Critical Inquiry* 4 (3) (1978): 507 - 523.

Jancovich, Mark. *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* Institute of General Semantics, 1994.

Krieger, Murray. *The New Apologists for Poetry*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1956.

Lawrence, D.H. *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. Rockville: Serenity Publishers, 1922 [2008].

Leavis, F.R. "Dr. Richards, Bentham, and Coleridge." *Scrutiny* 3 (1935): 382-401.

Leitch, Vincent B. *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Lentricchia, Frank. "The Place of Cleanth Brooks." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29 (2) (1970): 235-251.

Lentricchia, Frank. *Reading History with Kenneth Burke*. In: H. White and M. Brose, "Representing Kenneth Burke" Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

Lentricchia, Frank. *Criticism and Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Lombardy, Anthony. "Allen Tate and the Metaphysics of Metaphor." *Southern Literary Journal* 37 (2) (2005): 62-80.

Madsen, Arnie. *Burke's Representative Anecdote as a Critical Method*. In: J. W. Chesebro, "Extensions of the Burkeian System" Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993.

Mailloux, Steven. "Rhetorical Hermeneutics." *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1985): 620-641.

Mailloux, Steven. *Rhetorical Power*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Mailloux, Steven. "Re-Marking Slave Bodies: Rhetoric as Production and Reception." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35 (2) (2002): 96-119.

Mao, Douglas. "The New Critics and the Text-Object." *English Literary History* 63 (1) (1996): 227 - 254.

McGann, Jerome. *Social Values and Poetic Acts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

McLuhan, Marshall. "Poetic vs. Historical Exegesis: The Case for Leavis Against Richards and Empson." *Sewanee Review* 52 (1944): 266-276.

Nelson, Cary. *Writing as the Accomplice of Language: Kenneth Burke* In: H. Simons and T. Melia, "The Legacy of Kenneth Burke" USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Norris, Christopher C. *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. London: The Athlone Press, 1978.

Norris, Christopher C. *Introduction: Empson as literary theorist: from Ambiguity to Complex Words and beyond*. In: C. C. Norris and N. Mapp, "William Empson: The Critical Achievement" Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Ogden, C.K. and Richards, I.A. *The Meaning of Meaning*. London: Kegan Paul, 1923 [1943].

Olsen, Gary A. "Rhetoric, Cultural Studies, and the Future of Critical Theory: A Conversation with J. Hillis Miller." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 14 (1994): 317-345.

Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism, Inc." *Virginia Quarterly Review* autumn (1937): 586-602.

Ransom, John Crowe. *The World's Body*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938.

Ransom, John Crowe. "Mr. Empson's Muddles." *Southern Review* 4 (1938-1939): 322-339.

Ransom, John Crowe. *The New Criticism*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1941 [1979].

Richards, I.A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1924 [2001].

Richards, I.A. "Gerard Hopkins." *The Dial* 81 (1926): 195-203.

Richards, I.A. *Science and Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1926.

- Richards, I.A. *Practical Criticism*. London: Kegan Paul, 1929.
- Richards, I.A. *Coleridge on Imagination*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Tubner & Co, 1934.
- Richards, I.A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1936.
- Richards, I.A. *Interpretation in Teaching*. London: Kegan Paul, 1938.
- Richards, I.A. *Speculative Instruments*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- Richards, I.A. *Poetries: Their Media and Ends*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974.
- Rountree, Clarke. "Burke by the Numbers" *Kenneth Burke Society*. August 4, 2013, <http://www.kbjournal.org/book/export/html/177>
- Rueckert, William. *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke: 1924-1966*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.
- Rueckert, William. *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- Rueckert, William. *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Rueckert, William and Bonadonna, Angelo. *Counter-Gridlock: An Interview with Kenneth Burke 1980-81*. In: W. Rueckert, "On Human Nature: A Gathering While Everything Flows" Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Russo, John Paul. *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Schiappa, Edward. "Burkean Tropes and Kuhnian Science: A Social Constructionist Perspective on Language and Reality." August 13, 2013, <http://findpdf.net/reader/Burkean-Tropes-and-Kuhnian-Science-A-Social-JAC-Online.html>
- Schiller, Jerome P. *I.A. Richards' Theory of Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.
- Selzer, Jack. *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village. Conversing with the Moderns 1915 - 1931*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- Selzer, Jack and George, Ann. *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.
- Strier, Richard. *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Strier, Richard. *How Formalism Became a Dirty Word, and Why We Can't Do Without It*. In: M. Rasmussen, "Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements" Basingstoke: Palgrave Press, 2002.
- Tate, Allen. *Three Types of Poetry*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1934 [1959].
- Tate, Allen. *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*. London: C. Scribner's sons, 1936.
- Tate, Allen. "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer." *American Scholar* 9 (1940): 449-460.
- Tate, Allen. *The Present Function of Criticism*. In: "Collected Essays" London: Alan Swallow, 1940 [1959].
- Tate, Allen. *Understanding Modern Poetry*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1940 [1959].
- Tate, Allen. *Literature as Knowledge*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1941 [1959].
- Tate, Allen. *Tension in Poetry*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1941 [1959].
- Tate, Allen. *A Southern Mode of the Imagination*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959.
- Tate, Allen. *Tension in Poetry*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959.
- Tate, Allen. *Three Types of Poetry*. In: "Collected Essays" Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959.
- Tell, David. "Burke's Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in "Four Master Tropes"." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34 (4) (2004): 33-54.
- Thames, Richard H. "The Gordian Knot: Untangling the Motivorum" *Kenneth Burke Society*. August 10, 2013,
- Tuve, Rosemond. "On Herbert's 'Sacrifice'." *Kenyon Review* 12 (1950): 52-75.
- Tuve, Rosemond. *A Reading of George Herbert* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.

- Warren, Austin and Wellek, René. *Theory of Literature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949.
- Warren, Robert Penn. *A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading (1945-46)*. In: "Selected Essays" New York: Random House, 1946 [1958].
- Weiser, M. Elizabeth *Burke, War, Words - Rhetorizing Dramatism*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008.
- Wellek, René. "The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism." *Yale Review* 51 (1) (1961): 102-118.
- Wellek, René. "Kenneth Burke and Literary Criticism." *Sewanee Review* 79 (1971): 171-188.
- Wellek, René. *American Criticism, 1900-1950*. R. Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750 - 1950* 6. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Wess, Robert. *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Wess, Robert. "Representative Anecdotes in General, with Notes toward a Representative Anecdote for Burkean Ecocriticism in Particular." *KB Journal* 1 (1) (2004):
- White, Hayden V. *Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism*. In: S. Lerer, "Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach" Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Whiteford, Peter. "A Note on Hopkins' Plough in 'The Windhover'" *Victorian Poetry* 39 (4) (2001): 617-620.
- Wihl, Gary. *Empsonian Honesty and the Beginnings of Individualism*. In: C. C. Norris and N. Mapp, "William Empson: The Critical Achievement" (121-143). Cambridge: 1993.
- Williams, David Cratis. *Toward Rounding Out the Motivorum Trilogy: A Textual Introduction*. In: G. H. Henderson and D. C. Williams, "Unending Conversations: New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke" Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.
- Wimsatt, William Kurtz and Beardsley, Monroe. *The Verbal Icon*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1954.
- Wimsatt, William Kurtz and Brooks, Cleanth. *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964.
- Winchell, Mark Royden. *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Wolin, Ross. *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
- Yagoda, Ben. "Kenneth Burke: The Greatest Literary Critic since Coleridge?" *Horizon* (1980): 66-69.
- Zappen, James P. "Kenneth Burke on Dialectic-Rhetorical Transcendence." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42 (3) (2009): 279-301.

