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“WHAT AM I BUT A WORD MAN?”¹:
KENNETH BURKE AND THE NEW CRITICS

Abstract: Most scholars of American theorist Kenneth Burke consider him a founder of the post-war New Rhetoric, a movement to shift rhetorical studies from a historic focus on persuasion to a more expansive understanding of language, dialogue, and communally constructed truths. However, Burke throughout the 1930s and 40s thought of himself primarily as a literary critic, albeit one who turned literary critical techniques to the social scene around him. Without his ongoing, often contentious dialogue with the literary scholars of the New Criticism, Burke’s rhetorical theories on the power of language to answer questions of human motivations may well have never materialized. New Criticism and New Rhetoric, therefore, forged each other in the crucible of the mid-century years of depression and war and the intellectual ferment they generated. It was Burke’s attempts to explain himself to these literary critics and exhort them to turn their critical lens to the world around them that provided the methodology for his action-analysis of the socio-political world. In this article I examine three of these contentious relationships—with Allen Tate prior to World War II, with John Crowe Ransom during the war, and with René Wellek following it. Their debates and congruences led Burke to formulate his purposely ambiguous understanding of hierarchies and norms that constitute what he termed the “wrangle” of parliamentary debate—a constitutive rhetoric that continues to drive international relations today.

Keywords: New Rhetoric, New Criticism, Kenneth Burke, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, René Wellek, Historiography.

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¹ “We rotated in the same orbit because our great single-minded preoccupation was working with words. (‘What am I but a *word man*?’ Kenneth Burke used to say...)” In Matthew Josephson’s *Life among the Surrealists*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962: 35.

М. Элизабет ВАЙЗЕР

«ЧЕМ Я ЗАНИМАЮСЬ, КАК НЕ СЛОВАМИ?»²: КЕННЕТ БЕРК И «НОВАЯ КРИТИКА»

Аннотация: Большинство специалистов по Кеннету Берку считают этого американского мыслителя основателем сложившейся в послевоенные годы «новой риторики» – школы, выступавшей за то, чтобы в изучении риторики перенести акцент с приемов убеждения, которые исторически занимали центральное место в данной дисциплине, на более многоплановый анализ языка, диалога и коллективно вырабатываемых представлений. Однако на протяжении 1930-х и 1940-х годов Берк считал себя прежде всего литературоведом, хотя и таким, который применял инструменты теории литературы к окружающим его социальным реалиям. Вполне вероятно, что без диалога – нередко переходящего в спор – со школой «новой критики» Берк так и не сформулировал бы свои риторические теории о возможности понять мотивы человеческих поступков через язык. Поэтому «новая критика» и «новая риторика» формировали друг друга в середине столетия в горниле кризиса и войны, которые послужили катализаторами для многих интеллектуальных течений. Пытаясь донести свою позицию до литературоведов и призывая их обратить критический взгляд на мир вокруг себя, Берк выработал свою методологию анализа действий в общественно-политической сфере. В статье анализируются три таких диалога-спора Кеннета Берка: с Алленом Тейтом до Второй мировой войны, с Джоном Кроу Рэнсомом во время войны и с Рене Уэллеком в послевоенные годы. Дискуссии и переклички с ними подтолкнули Берка сформулировать преднамеренно двойственное понимание иерархий и норм, составляющих то, что он называл парламентскими «прениями», риторическая структура которых и сегодня определяет международные отношения.

Ключевые слова: «новая риторика», «новая критика», Кеннет Берк, Аллен Тейт, Джон Кроу Рэнсом, Рене Уэллек, историография.

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² «Мы были на одной волне, потому что главным предметом нашего интереса была работа со словом. («Чем я занимаюсь, как не словами?» – говорил порой Кеннет Берк...). См. Josephson, M. *Life among the Surrealists*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962: 35.

“You are, my dear Sir, a constant source of pleasure to my reflections.”³ So wrote the literary critic Allen Tate to his friend Kenneth Burke at the beginning of the 1930s. Tate called Burke “the most philosophical of my friends,” and Burke excelled himself in witty puns and wordplays to keep his friend interested. Their correspondence is often a delight to read, as Ann George and Jack Selzer document in their *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*. Perhaps it was the intensity of their long-distance friendship, then, that caused Tate the poet to care enough about Burke’s philosophy that he was among those most opposed to Burke’s shift from literary to cultural critic in the 1930s. Without Burke’s friendship with Tate and other New Critics in the literary world, Burke may perhaps have turned his encyclopedic attention more purely toward economics, as did his friend Matthew Josephson; toward politics, as did his nemesis Granville Hicks; or toward the sort of professional life of his friend Malcolm Cowley. But without his sometimes rancorous but always engaged dialogue with the New Critics, Burke’s specific methodology of dramatism may have remained only the looser philosophy of symbolic action. It was Burke’s relationships with literary critics that provided the impetus for his critical action-analysis of the socio-political world.

Unlike most Burke scholars, who consider him the principle theorist of the New Rhetoric, Burke throughout the 1930s and 40s thought of himself primarily as a literary critic, albeit one who turned literary critical techniques to the social scene around him. He strove from the beginning to make his methods understandable to and adoptable by other literary critics. Indeed, even as he published—in a literary journal—his groundbreaking “The Study of Symbolic Action,” in which he categorized “poetry as action . . . science as *preparation* for action . . . rhetoric as *inducement* to action,”⁴ he wrote as a literary critic. His brief article “Questions for Critics” had put it bluntly: What is criticism for? “Is it intended simply to restate the imaginative in corresponding conceptual terms? . . . Or is it intended to make a contribution, to supply a mode of insight, that the works criticized cannot supply in themselves?”⁵ His friend Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote the following year, “I am afraid ‘rhetorician’ (or is it ‘rhetorician’?) is not what you prefer to be called. I could think of no one-word pin to fix you

³ Allen Tate Papers (ATP) (Correspondence Box 61, Folder 13). Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library (A. Tate letter copy to K. Burke, 9 September 1931).

⁴ Burke, K. “The Study of Symbolic Action.” *Chimera* 1:1 (1942): 7.

⁵ Burke, K. “Questions for Critics.” *Direction* 2 (1939): 12–13.

with, and at first had ‘symbolic actionist,’ which was silly, so I took it out and put in ‘rhetorician’ at Ralph [Ellison]’s suggestion.”⁶ “Rhetoric” was not a fashionable field of study in the 1930s and 40s, but it was what Burke—even reluctantly—was undertaking, for while both rhetoric and poetry used language to stimulate audience attitudes, poetry stirred attitudes as an end in itself while rhetoric did so with the expectation that further immediate action would occur external to the text.⁷ It was, however, precisely this focus on words that stirred real-world action that put him so often in conflict with his literary friends, from Tate onward.

In the years surrounding the Second World War, Burke wrote regularly to Malcolm Cowley, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, R. P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, Austen Warren, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Richard McKeon, R. S. Crane, S. I. Hayakawa—people we would today call New Critics, neo-Aristotelians, and general semanticists. He engaged both in writing and in person with many others, including such towering figures as I.A. Richards, René Wellek, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, and W.K. Wimsatt. Burke and the literary critics had much in common. First, they agreed wholeheartedly on the importance of form, on how language was shaped to affect its readers. In “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer,” Tate cited the difference between the literary scholarship that was then taught in schools and the literary criticism he was advocating as the difference between seeing literature as dead or living. For literary criticism, language and structure were “‘how the moral intelligence gets into poetry’—not as moral abstractions but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these features.”⁸ Second, both Burke and the New Critics believed in the importance of linguistic ambiguity. Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* had detailed how, in poetry, “you have a broad impression of what it is all about, but there are various incidental impressions wandering about in your mind; these may not be part of the final meaning arrived at by the judgment, but tend to be fixed in it as part of its colour.”⁹ An article by Warren argued that reducing a poem

⁶ Kenneth Burke Papers (KBP). Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University. (S. Hyman letter to K. Burke, 24 September 1943).

⁷ Burke, K. “Study of Symbolic Action”: 9.

⁸ Tate, A. *Collected Essays*. Denver, CO: Swallow, 1959: 56.

⁹ Empson, W. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). New York: New Directions, 1966: 240.

to an illusory “pure” state would purge poetry from the world of ideas.¹⁰ Burke would likewise regularly argue against the impossibility of purity (see, for instance, “The Calling of the Tune”¹¹ in the first issue Ransom’s *Kenyon Review*), which he saw as impeding action, and the linguistic role of ambiguity, which was a key component of dramatism. Third, both Burke and the New Critics saw this poetic language as active communication with the audience—as Warren insisted, “This is another way of saying that a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge put it, make the reader into ‘an active creative being’” who could analyze not any isolated element of a poem but “the set of relationships, the structure, which we call the poem” as a whole.¹² This was for Burke the kind of attention to the constitutive nature of language (which I discuss later) and the psychology of the audience (see for instance “Psychology and Form”¹³) that made literature rhetorical.

Yet it was also in debate with these “word men” that Burke worked out what became his rhetorical theories. As he put it in a letter to Tate after publishing “Symbolic Action,” “I haggled much” with literary neo-Aristotelians like R. S. Crane, David Daiches, and Richard McKeon the summer he taught at the University of Chicago, “and I worked out my methodology in part under fire from them.”¹⁴ It would be Tate and the other New Critics’ own continued argument with Burke’s ideas throughout the early 1940s that influenced Burke’s particular brand of cultural criticism: the rhetorical theory he termed dramatism, his definitive turn to rhetoric.

Much has been written on these relations with the New Critics of the mid-20th century, including by me (see in particular my *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism*,¹⁵ which details these conversations as they developed into his *A Grammar of Motives* during the Second World War), so in this short essay I will simply demonstrate Burke’s ongoing engagements

¹⁰ Warren, R.P. “Pure and Impure Poetry.” (1943) *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities*, eds. W. Spurlin, and M. Fischer. New York: Garland, 1995: 38.

¹¹ Burke, K. “The Calling of the Tune.” *Kenyon Review* 1 (1939): 272–82. Reprinted in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973: 221–33.

¹² Warren, R.P. “Pure and Impure Poetry”: 38–39.

¹³ Burke, K. “Psychology and Form.” *Counter-Statement* (1931). 3rd rev. ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968: 29–44.

¹⁴ ATP (K. Burke letter to A. Tate, 28 April 1942).

¹⁵ Weiser, M.E. *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.

with literary critics by highlighting three relationships that helped shape Burke's thought: His pre-war debate with Allen Tate, the poet, essayist, and leader of the Southern Agrarians, over the book *Proletarian Literature in the United States*; his complex wartime relationship with John Crowe Ransom, editor of the powerful New Critical journal the *Kenyon Review*, during the publications leading to his *A Grammar of Motives*; and his post-war squabbles—and possible synchronicity—with René Wellek, critic and philologist, member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, over intrinsic/extrinsic criticism.

Burke and Tate: “Symbolic War”

The “literary wars” that hit the US arts community in the early 1930s marked the delayed Americanization of a 50-year Marxist debate in Europe over the role of literature in social movements and the role of form in social theory. The heated debates that followed pitted aesthetic critics and writers, with their focus on the pure form of a text and the psychological motivations of characters, against Marxist critics and writers, with their focus on audience response and socioeconomic motivations. Did art exist “for art’s sake,” as the modernist aesthetes had it, or as “a class weapon,” as the Marxist John Reed Clubs proclaimed?

Letters from Marx and Engels on literature and propagand a appeared for the first time in translation in America in 1933, in *International Literature*, the organ of the Soviet-based International Union of Revolutionary Writers. A year later, Communist Party theorist Granville Hicks wrote a seven-part essay on “Revolution and the Novel” for the Party-affiliated *New Masses*—perhaps the definitive translation of European and Soviet theories of proletarian literature to an American setting. In his essay, Hicks laid out the aesthetic principles of proletarian literature, specifically that the proletarian novel would be concerned with the present (written by an author who “faces squarely and seeks to solve the problems of his generation”),¹⁶ with plots that were relevant to the lives of readers,¹⁷ with documented scenes that were authentic¹⁸ and characters who are well-rounded but “to a large extent determined by [their] economic situ-

¹⁶ Hicks, G. *Granville Hicks in the “New Masses”*, ed. J. A. Robbins. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1974: 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 55.

ation”,¹⁹ and, finally, that the proletarian aesthetic would promote a “new way of looking at and feeling about life”²⁰—a way that, he admitted, might often be “clumsy” in its newness, but one that led toward the future and life, not the past and death, as did so much bourgeois literature.²¹ Hicks called on literary critics, therefore, to measure the proletarian novel not just by its achievement of literary techniques, but by its aims: “No critic, in evaluating a work of art, can afford to disregard the possible significance for the future of what the author has tried to do unless he thinks his duty is merely to give out grades.”²²

Tate disagreed virulently. To him, bad writing was bad writing, and until proletarian writers learned to write, they needed to stop publishing. Further, he grew increasingly convinced that poetry was *necessarily* universal, *necessarily* outside political arguments. As George and Selzer have written of this time, Burke attempted to straddle the divide, “simultaneously authorizing and invalidating the work of the aesthetes by designating art and criticism as fundamental, even transcendent human activities that are nonetheless inseparable from particular political and rhetorical concerns.”²³ As I document elsewhere,²⁴ he called this “falling on the bias” and in repeated debates over the course of decades took a position of not simply finding some common ground between arguments in a weak compromise but instead cutting across their positions, envisioning an alternative that was parts of both as well as new, Burkean ideas.

Tate, however, called this “fence-straddling,” and their private exchanges around the time of Hicks’ essay series makes their positions clear. “Why deny the utility of literature, in the face of the Areopagitica, or advertisements for Ivory Soap?” Burke wrote Tate. “There is pure science and applied science—and similarly the equivalents: pure and applied literature. And in the ‘pure’ the ‘applied’ is latent... Thus, there is no difference (in process) between poetry and propaganda.”²⁵ Tate disagreed. “It is perfectly obvious that there are readers and writers, and it seems equally

¹⁹ Ibid.: 46.

²⁰ Ibid.: 63.

²¹ Ibid.: 65.

²² Ibid.: 63.

²³ George, A., Selzer, J. *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007: 90.

²⁴ See Weiser, M.E. “‘As Usual I Fell on the Bias’: Kenneth Burke’s Situated Dialectic.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42:2 (2009): 134–153.

²⁵ ATP (K. Burke letter to A. Tate, 5 June 1932).

obvious that High Literature is not written for the specific purpose of moving anybody,” he wrote a year later.²⁶ “What!” Burke responded in draft. “Does this lad not try to make his verse appealing? Has he not even omitted things which he considered significant but the significance of which he felt would not be apparent and moving to others?”²⁷ The rhetorical situation, in other words, necessarily included an audience—even when the text was High Literature. Tate was neither convinced nor appeased, and he took their debate public in his 1933 article “Poetry and Politics”: “We do not care what truth in poetry is. We . . . care just as little for Mr. Kenneth Burke, who finds the spring water so full of bacteria that, bitterly, he distills the water off and, laughing a long mad laugh, devours the bacteria alone.”²⁸

Of course, neither Burke nor Tate were apolitical. As cultural historian Michael Denning has noted, in 1935 Burke had inadvertently become “the foremost rhetorical theorist of the Popular Front,”²⁹ the Communist-affiliated coalition of anti-fascist individuals and groups that succeeded (among writers) the more hard-line John Reed Clubs. And Tate was a leading member of the Southern Agrarians, a conservative group which called for embracing traditional, supposedly more humane values and livelihoods. As George and Selzer argue, “the Agrarians were as radical in their own way as the leftists who gathered for the Writers’ Congress [that formed the Popular Front]—and as contemptuous of capitalism.”³⁰ Tate also co-edited the Southern Agrarian anthology *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, a document seeking to influence the 1936 presidential election with what he called “a genuine Conservative Revolution.”³¹ But Tate kept his politics far away from his poetry—at least in his mind.

Their debate came to a head in 1936 over Granville Hicks’s co-edited collection of fiction, poetry, drama, “reportage,” and criticism entitled *Proletarian Literature in the United States*. Burke’s “Symbolic War,” a review-essay of the massive collection for the New Critical *The Southern Review*, was openly lukewarm. As he noted at its end, “As one

²⁶ KBP (A. Tate letter to K. Burke, 30 August 1933).

²⁷ KBP (K. Burke letter draft to A. Tate, 27 September 1933).

²⁸ Tate, A. “Poetry and Politics.” *New Republic* (2 August 1933): 308–09.

²⁹ Denning, M. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Verso, 1996: 124.

³⁰ George, A., Selzer, J. *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*: 38.

³¹ Shapiro, E. S. “Forward: A Forgotten American Classic.” *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, ed. H. Agar and A. Tate (1936). Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999: xvi.

particularly interested in the *processes* of literary appeal, I have generally tended to consider the volume from this standpoint. I have been vague about ‘absolute’ tests of excellence.”³² Burke did praise a number of pieces, but his overall tone was that of a man going out of his way to demonstrate his generosity—as when, for instance, he described Don West’s poem “Southern Lullaby” as one “which [*Southern Review* editor] Mr. Brooks had condemned for its sentimentality, an unfavorable diagnosis one could rephrase favorably, or part-favorably, by saying that the author undertakes the strategic feat of incongruously introducing politics into the least political of themes.”³³ This patronizing tone, quite different from that of most of Burke’s reviews, was mandated by his sense of the already-skeptical stance of his *Southern Review* audience—a mixture of aesthetes, Agrarians like Tate, and other professional writers, critics, and academics. His introduction to the review, therefore—fully half the text—explained the importance of proletarian literature. All poetry, religion, and politics are grounded in “material necessities” and thus “economic factors,” he wrote, which contain both universal, human contingencies and historical, particular ones. The misguided failure to accept that *both* sets of contingencies operate to determine aesthetic interests had led to the literary wars. As Burke put it, “we [all] live by the goading of the ox . . . but it also makes a difference *whose* ox is gored.”³⁴ The privileged can remove themselves from the business of ox-goading, but if they forget that it occurs, they fall victim to pride. Yes, proletarian literature was often grim and dogmatic, yes, “their characters are formed in haphazard fashion, for the specific partisan purpose at hand, like the distortions of a political cartoonist.”³⁵ But “this literature is written *to* people, or *for* people. It is *addressed*.”³⁶ If Hicks in “Revolution and the Novel” had called for literary critics reviewing proletarian literature to evaluate “the possible significance for the future of what the author has tried to do,” Burke in his review was attempting just that. He ended his critique of the Hicks-edited anthology by noting that it “does represent a way of life—and in this congregational feature lies the power and the promise of the ‘proletarian’ movement as a contribution to our culture.”³⁷ With his

³² Burke, K. “Symbolic War.” (Rev. of *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, ed. G. Hicks) *Southern Review* 2 (1936): 147.

³³ *Ibid.*: 144.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 136.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*: 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 147.

careful identification with the expected criticisms of the *Southern Review* readership, then, Burke was implicitly modeling the kind of enlightened openness to the *intent* of proletarian literature that he hoped would take hold among literary aesthetes.

Tate was not at all taken in. His long piece for the *Review*'s next issue "outed" Burke as a card-carrying proletarian who had abandoned critical thought to ideology: "Mr. Burke alone of the extreme left-wing critics seems to me to possess the historical and philosophical learning necessary to the serious treatment of the literary problems of Marxism: before his 'conversion' to Communism he had subjected himself to a rigorous critical discipline."³⁸ After his "conversion," however, Burke could not bring himself to dismiss literature that he knew was "almost worthless," and so he had to develop a theory whereby the role of an artist was to "transcend" or "translate" the concrete particulars of historical experience (propaganda) into universals of human experience (imagination).³⁹ Tate attacked this theory aesthetically, historically, and even syntactically. Tate wanted Burke to demand of the proletarian writers "some fundamental aesthetic thinking that might eliminate altogether the need for compromise"⁴⁰—but Burke did not.

Instead, Burke's work in the late 1930s and early 1940s, particularly the title essay for *The Philosophy of Literary Form* describing how literature is "equipment for living" and his development of dramatism in *A Grammar of Motives*, came to focus on the primacy of critical engagement with the world, a real-world "act now," as he put it in a late 1930s essay.⁴¹ It was engaged action that he found so lacking in Tate's aesthetic worldview. "Mr. Tate disturbs me," Burke wrote in his review of Tate's *Reactionary Essays*. "What I feel the lack of, throughout both essays and poems, is *physicality*." His removed position makes "him say 'Turn back' where he might have said 'Let's try to go on, and come out on the other side.'"⁴² It was in contrast to Tate's intransigence in increasingly conflicted times that Burke's own rhetorical project would continue to "go on."

³⁸ Tate, A. "Mr. Burke and the Historical Environment." *Southern Review* 3 (1936): 363.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 366–67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 368.

⁴¹ Burke, K. "Semantic and Poetic Meaning." *Southern Review* 4 (1939): 508. Reprinted in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973: 138–67.

⁴² Burke, K. "Tentative Proposal." (Rev. of *The Mediterranean, and Other Poems* and *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*, by Allen Tate) *Poetry* 50 (1937): 98–100.

Burke and Ransom: “At Every Point Where We Agree, there is a Margin of Difference”

In 1938, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* became, quite quickly, the definitive methodology for teaching what would become known as the New Criticism (the title of John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 book). Burke’s own methodology was similar but different, and he struggled throughout the early 1940s to define that difference in a way other critics—and students—could understand. With symbolic action, he thought he had the answer: His was a methodology asserting that all language was stylized and responded strategically to its situation, such that “poetry, or any verbal act, is to be considered as ‘symbolic action’”—not neutral exposition of reality but “the *dancing of an attitude*.”⁴³ As symbolic action, it stylistically embodied both exposition and the attitude necessary to read the exposition appropriately. On the one hand, symbolic action employed the close textual reading of New Criticism, paying attention to imagery and form as well as the new psychological emphasis on puns and slips of tongue. On the other hand, Burke’s method also employed a close reading of scene and author, such that, for instance, “the *Decameron* [would be] read, not as a series of hilarious stories, but as a series of hilarious stories *told during a plague*”⁴⁴ as the Marxists critics and sociologists might study it, or “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” would be read not as a “literary ballad” (as Brooks and Warren treated it in *Understanding Poetry*) but as a literary ballad *told by an unhappily married man with an opium addiction*,⁴⁵ as the older philological critics and the modern psychologists might well both discuss it. It was a methodology, as William Knickerbocker, editor of the *Sewanee Review*, would point out, that moved by a process of inclusion.⁴⁶

Yet Burke’s depiction of literary texts as stylized responses to specific situations left a nagging doubt, for it begged not one but two methodological questions: the internal question of how the stylized response worked—the New Critical question answered by textual and structural analysis—and the external, epistemological question of *what situation* the

⁴³ Burke, K. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press (1941), 3rd rev. ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973: 8–9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 71–73.

⁴⁶ Knickerbocker, W. “Wam for Maw.” (Review of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, by K. Burke, and *The New Criticism*, by J.C. Ransom) *Sewanee Review* 44 (1941): 521.

stylized response was pointing toward—the question of most concern to the proletarian writers. Though he might have focused in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* on the internal-textual question, Burke’s underlying philosophy of literature as symbolic action privileged the situational question, and it was this emphasis that continued to concern his critic friends. They could not see how his method could do the job of science, analyzing human relations, and still remain aesthetic.

It was Ransom, Tate’s former professor, who led the initial New Critical charge against Burke, contending in “An Address to Kenneth Burke,” his review of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, that Burke was “sophistical” and aligned himself with rational and scientific rather than aesthetic philosophy, between which there could be no bridge. Burke’s method might work for the dialectical poems in which he was interested, but, Ransom insisted, it would not work for lyric poetry, the “best poetry” because its “denser and freer” imagery was untied to the necessity of plot.⁴⁷ *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Ransom decided, merely demonstrated “that Burke does not have a philosophy of poetry.”⁴⁸ His purpose was too linked to the world. He was a positivist, which for Ransom meant an espouser of a focus on data from experience rather than the transcendental (or metaphysical) world described by poetry. “[Positivists] are little boys dedicated to scientific or analytical process” as Ransom wrote to Tate about Burke.⁴⁹ Ransom’s dismissal of Burke’s poetics delegitimized Burke and his project to a New Critical audience, for without a poetic philosophy Burke could not put forward a “poetic” understanding of the social world that those critics would accept.

In *Burke, War, Words* it is my contention, therefore, that Burke’s pentadic methodology—the act, agent, agency, scene, purpose analysis that moves the dramatism of *A Grammar of Motives* beyond the cluster criticism of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*—became a necessarily large addition to his theory because, in the conversations in his conversations with the New Critics, it became clear by 1942 that his ideas were not sufficiently understood. Without an explicit, literary methodology to translate to the world scene, it was not evident to critics like Ransom how a dramatisitic analysis could be anything other than warmed-over science.

⁴⁷ Ransom, J.C. “An Address to Kenneth Burke.” (Rev. of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, by K. Burke) *Kenyon Review* 4 (1942): 234–35.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 222.

⁴⁹ Ransom, J.C. *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, eds. T.D. Young and G. Core. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985: 282–83.

Yet while it was true that Burke was saying that one could use the sciences to gain insight into the drama, for him it was poetic insight that was more valuable: As he turned more and more toward the human drama of social relations, he conviction grew stronger that one needed the tools of poetic analysis to gain insight into real-life motivations.

If Burke saw aesthetic language as a counterbalance to scientism, though, Ransom saw it as an opposition: poetry was not action for Ransom; it was the atonement for action. “The true poetry” he wrote in *The World's Body*, “has no great interest in improving or idealizing the world, which does well enough. It only wants to realize the world, to see it better...Men become poets, or at least they read poets, in order to atone for having been hard practical men and hard theoretical scientists.”⁵⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising that Burke’s review of *The World's Body* for *Poetry* in 1939 was lukewarm.⁵¹ Ransom immediately wrote to Burke, “The first thing I find myself demanding of a poem is a certain *innocence*; it simply cannot be both didactic and innocent, and it does not become innocent by claiming that the moral is awfully important.”⁵² Burke welcomed this new literary contact and drafted an immediate reply, agreeing that they should try to meet, “for it seems that, at every point where we agree, there is a margin of difference that may make all the difference.” Like Ransom, he then went on to declare a key dissimilarity: “No thoroughgoing rationale for the categorical dissociation of aesthetic and didactic has been offered, [and] . . . the argument cannot be based upon tradition, since the tradition of the West is grounded in work embodying the integration of didactic and aesthetic principles. . . The misfortune here has been, to my mind, your doctrine of ‘innocence.’ That is, most poets have kept themselves ‘innocent’ of knowledge in the most effective way of all; by remaining stupid.”⁵³

His differences with Ransom went beyond his and Tate’s disagreements over proletarian literature. Both Burke and Ransom saw poetic language as less reductive than scientific language, but for Burke, the poem was a kind of telescope, bringing the vast world into greater focus, while for Ransom it was a microscope, magnifying the hidden inner world below the surface of the ordinary. Yet like Tate, Ransom also appeared to greatly

⁵⁰ Ransom, J.C. *The World's Body*. New York: Scribner, 1938: viii, x–xi.

⁵¹ See Burke, K. “On Poetry and Poetics.” (Rev. of *The World's Body*, by John Crowe Ransom) *Poetry* 55 (1939): 51–54.

⁵² KBP (J.C. Ransom letter to K. Burke, 31 October 1939).

⁵³ KBP (K. Burke letter copy to J.C. Ransom, 3 November 1939).

appreciate his philosophical friend, and the two of them engaged in long and serious correspondence over their critical overlaps and divergences. In 1941, when they both came out with key books (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* and *The New Criticism*) they sent them to each other for review. Ransom noted that his had been written to counter “two heresies”—one the positivist assertion that science was the only discourse, and the other “the heresy of ‘innocent’ and religious-minded and ‘superior’ persons” that poetry was the only discourse, with science a “naïve sort” of poetry. “And where is Burke in this brutal dichotomy?” he asked. “Not very positive but a little bit innocent?”⁵⁴ Of course, for Burke there was no dichotomy but a complementarity, one he was determined to fall on the bias across, transcending the best of both of them to forge something new—which for him was symbolic action.

Ransom could see as clearly as Burke that their ideas intersected—or almost intersected—at many points. Poetry was more true (Ransom) or it was more encompassing (Burke); it included illogical extra material to complicate the core values presented (Ransom), or it included an attitude along with its content and utilized ambiguities (Burke). Burke’s review of *The New Criticism* downplayed their differences and praised the book. As Ransom said, “We have started at opposite poles and are working towards the middle of the same axis; you are finding identities, and I am finding distinctions.”⁵⁵ He even suggested that the two of them might collaborate on a book “to present our mutual points of view, whether comparatively or in some useful complementary sense.”⁵⁶

And then two days later the war began for the United States, and three months after that Ransom’s strongly negative review of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* was published. Burke was indignant, but as he wrote Tate, he decided to “go on saying the things I want to say, and dealing with some of [Ransom’s] more extreme misinterpretations en passant, where the opportunity arises.”⁵⁷ As David Tell has also noted, the Burke-Ransom dialogue led Burke to define his epistemology as rhetorical inducement⁵⁸—a key step for Burke in falling on the bias of Ransom’s poetic/scientific

⁵⁴ KBP (J.C. Ransom letter to K. Burke, 19 August 1941).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ KBP (J.C. Ransom letters to K. Burke 17 November 1941; 5 December 1941).

⁵⁷ ATP (K. Burke letter to A. Tate, 28 April 1942).

⁵⁸ Tell, D. “Burke’s Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in ‘Four Master Tropes.’” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34:4 (2004): 34.

dichotomy, but a step that Ransom would never fully comprehend. His "The Study of Symbolic Action" later that year, the article with his tripartite "poetry as action...science as preparation for action...rhetoric as inducement to action,"⁵⁹ was his first real opportunity to respond to Ransom's negative review of his project, and also his first opportunity to write about it from within the new, changed scene of war. Within such a portentous scene, he wrote that the project of symbolic action was not an object to be studied—it was not the science Ransom saw it as, because science was not a true response to war. Symbolic action, as language + attitude, was description *and* exhortation.

As historian Richard Pells has noted,⁶⁰ in a situation of total war intellectuals faced a dilemma: how could their specialized skills be useful? A month into the war, Ransom wrote Tate to ask his advice, for "I am feeling pretty patriotic (I'm a great sucker in a crisis), and I have the uneasy sense of having in my writings recently identified myself with an anti-topical kind of literature to a degree that doesn't represent me. . . . I can scarcely endure to think of my having no part in the war, nor my Review's having no part. A Frenchman of the noble tradition wouldn't allow such a thing to happen; Eliot wouldn't."⁶¹ Burke, with his understanding of art as an aesthetic lens and criticism as rhetorical inducement to see the world in a different light, was offering a third way between isolationist separation and propagandistic involvement, but as with all of Burke's third ways, Ransom could not see it. For Burke true antifascism had always meant the multifaceted democratic perspective, the non-dogmatic dialectic, and the aesthetics of ambiguity. Burke's method would therefore be different from the kind of patriotic stylizing that was embodied by the recruiting films, posters, and articles springing from the minds of artists who flocked to the plentiful government jobs in the Office of War Information. Burke's continuing involvement with the New Critics, who were more inclined to separate art from politics, testified to the importance Burke placed on aesthetics. Symbolic action, language + action, invoked neither a retreat from the world into art nor an embrace of monologic propaganda.

Throughout the war years, then, both Burke and the New Critics struggled on parallel tracks with their ability to respond to the world situa-

⁵⁹ Burke, K. "The Study of Symbolic Action." *Chimera* 1:1 (1942): 7.

⁶⁰ Pells, R. *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

⁶¹ ATP (J.C. Ransom letter to A. Tate, 5 January 1942).

tion, or as Burke put it in the draft of a letter to Ransom at war's end, "You write: 'For several years now I've been trying to get behind the *formal* analysis of aestheticism into the problems of the human economy.' Salute, old pal, so have I."⁶² For Burke this meant in part highlighting the ongoing importance of not only literary analysis but also literature to understand human motivations in *A Grammar of Motives*— his definitive move into rhetorical analysis of human communicative interactions.

Burke and Wellek: "The Problem of the Intrinsic"

In 1961, in an article on "The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism" for the *Yale Review*, the literary critic René Wellek wrote that after Burke's early literary criticism, "his work in recent decades must rather be described as aiming at a philosophy of meaning, human behavior, and action whose center is not in literature at all."⁶³ For Wellek, as it was for Ransom two decades earlier, this was a critique, a questioning of Burke's loyalty to New Criticism. Burke saw it as yet another misunderstanding of his life's work, and as with Ransom and Tate, Burke cared that Wellek portray him accurately to Wellek's audience of literary critics.

The two men had met a dozen years earlier, as Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* was nearing publication. Burke was asked informally to come to Princeton University and help during Wellek's guest lectures on the German literary critics. Burke, who read German well enough to be a regular translator of Thomas Mann, was considered to be the most knowledgeable scholar around on Wellek's specialty, the history of Continental literary criticism. The prior year, the two of them presented papers at the New England regional meeting of the College English Association, in what was originally to have been a joint panel.⁶⁴ While Wellek discussed the need to define which documents were literature and which were not in order to more critically compose a "literary history," Burke discussed the possibility of defining literature as "symbolic action."⁶⁵ Both men, in other words, were positing a revised definition of literature in order to expand literary theory, and both were convinced that what Wellek called "formalistic, organistic, symbolistic aesthetics" tied to "a closer collaboration with linguistics and

⁶² KBP (K. Burke letter copy to J.C. Ransom, 10 March 1946).

⁶³ Wellek, R. "The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism." *Yale Review* 51:1 (1961): 109.

⁶⁴ KBP (M. Goldberg letters to K. Burke, 1 March 1949, 17 Mar. 1949).

⁶⁵ "New England Meeting." *CEA Critic* 11:6 (1949): 6–7.

stylistics”⁶⁶—in simple terms, a focus on words—was the true path for the literary critic. Burke, however, would always add that the *purpose* for this analysis was a clearer understanding not only of literature but of the world.

Wellek, then, should have been at least among Burke’s copious correspondents, if not his friend. And yet, he was not. Burke did not engage with Wellek’s work, and Wellek, the few times he addressed Burke’s work, was superficial or openly negative. In his piece for the *Yale Review*, he wrote that Burke was a New Critic who combined “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” and whose method was “a baffling phantasmagoria of bloodless categories.”⁶⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this generated a vigorous 16-page response from Burke to the editor of the journal. Wellek replied to him privately, labelling Burke a philosopher and adding, “Nor do I contradict myself if I deplore the lack of collaboration between the New Critics and modern linguistics and still refuse to accept your specific philosophy of language.”⁶⁸ Burke’s initial draft of a reply drips with indignation at being misunderstood:

When critics start attacking one another along [the] lines [of being too abstract], it’s a good time to recall the proverb of the pot and the kettle.... My slogan is: Better read one book ten times than ten books once. But while I am stumbling through one book once, your chosen task must require you to have raced competently through at least half a hundred.... Under such conditions, as you indicate, sixteen pages of ‘painful’ minutiae may be needed to correct the false impressions which your efficient generalizing method can pack into one short paragraph.⁶⁹

It seems probable that this Christmas Eve response was never sent. Instead, two days later, Burke sent a short note commenting that he had decided not to add to his original 16-page response, since he seemed unlikely to change Wellek’s mind, and instead hoped only that when Wellek wrote of him again, he would contact Burke, who would be happy to help with his “bafflement,” as he “dared tell” himself that their problem was simply one

⁶⁶ Wellek, R. “The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism”: 118.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 109.

⁶⁸ KBP (R. Wellek letter to K. Burke, 14 December 1961).

⁶⁹ KBP (K. Burke letter draft to R. Wellek, 24 December 1961).

of misunderstanding⁷⁰—in essence, the same tack he took with his earlier disagreements with Tate and Ransom. This time, however, rapprochement would not be the result. Ten years later, Wellek wrote another long “baffled” essay on Burke for the *Sewanee Review* and Burke responded with a long piece on Wellek in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*.⁷¹ Both men wondered whether the other’s method was at all valid and could yield any true insights. Perhaps, as Burke wrote in that never-sent 1961 letter, “Our interests are so unlike, I do not dare hope to win your approval.”⁷²

But I believe their interests were not so dissimilar; that in fact Wellek and Burke were pursuing in many ways a similar project—the marriage of formal literary criticism with linguistics, the aesthetics of the New Criticism with the scientific understanding of general semantics, modern linguistics, and for Burke even the terministic orientations of the social sciences.

These similarities were perhaps most evident early in their respective careers, in Wellek’s first article published in an American journal, the *Southern Review*, in 1942, and which I believe may have unconsciously influenced Burke at a critical juncture in his development of the dramatism of *A Grammar of Motives*. In “The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art,” Wellek took on the prevailing dichotomies of the literary critics of his day: the New Critical focus on the intrinsic (and therefore timeless) nature of a poem as opposed to both the biographical focus on earlier literary scholars and the contextual/message driven focus of Marxist critics. Both scholars and Marxists, in other words, were focused on the extrinsic, or time bound, nature of the poem. Wellek argued for a third way, a Burkean “falling on the bias” approach that transcended the two seemingly dichotomous perspectives. “A real poem,” wrote Wellek, “must be conceived as a system of norms” which it was the reader’s (and critic’s) job to “extract” from each poem, such that all the norms together would make up not one but a system of norms, or values, “realized only partially in the actual experience of its many readers.”⁷³ What, Wellek asks, is the “actual mode of existence” of a poem? Between the “Charybdis of Platonism and

⁷⁰ KBP (K. Burke letter copy to R. Wellek, 26 December 1961).

⁷¹ See Wellek, R. “Kenneth Burke and Literary Criticism.” *Sewanee Review* 79 (1971): 171–188; Burke, K. “As I Was Saying.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 11 (1972): 9–27.

⁷² KBP (K. Burke letter draft to R. Wellek, 24 December 1961).

⁷³ Wellek, R. “The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art.” *Southern Review* 7 (1942): 745–46.

the Scylla of extreme nominalism” there is a work which is neither “an empirical fact...of any individual or group,” nor “an ideal changeless object.” It is “accessible only through individual experience, but it is not identical with any experience.”⁷⁴ It is historical: “It was created at a certain point in time and...is subject to change and even complete destruction.”⁷⁵ Literature was *not* timeless, as the New Critics asserted, nor was it entirely bound to the time and place of its authorship, as the literary scholars would have it. Each work was instead “a system of [implicit] norms... which have to be extracted from every individual experience of a work of art and together make up the genuine work of art as a whole.”⁷⁶ Thus, a poem was both “time-bound”—created at a particular moment and made concrete each time it was read/enacted—and “timeless”—endowed with “some fundamental structure of identity since its creation,” such that, for all its changes through the centuries, we still call the *Odyssey*, *Odyssey*.⁷⁷ As a scholar of literary history, Wellek necessarily believed that literature does have a history. As he had put it in a book chapter the year before, it is not eternally, simultaneously present, even if “there is a distinction between that which is historical and past and that which is historical and still somehow present...To speak of ‘eternity’ is merely an expression of the fact that the process of interpretation, criticism, and appreciation [the subjects of literary history] has never been completely interrupted and is likely to continue indefinitely.”⁷⁸

Burke, who read and published in the *Southern Review* and corresponded with Brooks and Warren, its editors, surely would have read and agreed with Wellek’s points. Literature was timelessly historical, on the bias between Marxist context and aesthetic form—and here was this new European critic agreeing with him, stating it in a new way. Although Wellek is uncredited, Burke seems to have picked up Wellek’s argument the following year in an article in *Accent* entitled “The Problem of the ‘Intrinsic,’” in which he noted that his new methodology—what would become dramatism—examined a poem’s extrinsic qualities as an object created by an author in a particular historical scene, as well as its intrinsic

⁷⁴ Ibid.: 752.

⁷⁵ Ibid.: 751.

⁷⁶ Ibid.: 745–46.

⁷⁷ Ibid.: 752.

⁷⁸ Wellek, R. “Literary History.” *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*, ed. N. Foerster. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1941: 120.

qualities as a timeless statement. Neo-Aristotelian critics like R. S. Crane, he said, give critics the choice of poem as exemplar or poem as object. But what if poem were considered as *act*? This would not

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.⁷⁹

By considering the poem as an act, not an artifact, a kind of living record, Burke's dramatism would enable the examination of a poem's intrinsic and extrinsic features, its eternal and temporal elements. A poem was not a timeless entity that one could study inductively, as R.S. Crane wanted, "apart from any *a priori* assumptions about the nature of poetry in general"⁸⁰ because the "inductions" one came to in such a study were necessarily deduced from the nature of the language or terminology employed.

Both Burke and Wellek believed that, in Wellek's terms, a "system of language" was not a fiction but a real thing, even if empirically immeasurable.⁸¹ For Burke, the reality of words meant that their study could extend far beyond the understanding of poem. As Robert Wess notes, his "rhetorical realism" meant that, just as sociologists might study human social interactions to determine motivation, wordsmiths must study human verbal interactions.⁸² If they "measured" the words used against certain norms, as did literary critics like Wellek, then they would better understand human motivations. The measurement apparatus would have to be as ambiguous and linguistic as the words themselves—hence his dramatisitic methodology, "a synoptic way [for humans] to talk about their talk-about."⁸³

The focus on a symbolic action interacting with history—what Burke would call the act/scene ratio—would become the central tenet of

⁷⁹ Burke, K. "The Problem of the Intrinsic." *Accent* 3 (1943): 80–94. Reprinted in *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969: 165–84.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 86.

⁸¹ Wellek, R. "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art": 751.

⁸² Wess, R. "Situating Burke's Thought." *Conversations, KB Journal* 1:1 (2005). Online at <https://kbjournal.org/node/79>

⁸³ Burke, K. *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945: 56.

his emerging dramatistic theory over the remainder of the war years and beyond. It was a more rhetorical, more pragmatic understanding of the act/scene interaction than the other literary critics were willing to accept—language as a constitutive act that, as Wess says, developed between the extremes of Enlightenment science and Romantic aesthetics:

In the old paradigm, subject and object interact, the interaction produces a discourse, and enlightenment or romantic criteria determine whether to place trust in the discourse. In the new, trust is placed in the interaction among discourses more than in single discourses, the basis of the trust being neither enlightenment certainty nor romantic authenticity but rhetorical sayability.⁸⁴

This focus on the interaction among discourses, the ongoing debate, was what Burke saw as the necessary response to the monologue of authoritarian fascism. Rather than the certainty of the single voice speaking for all, he celebrated the “wrangle of the parliament,” where the conflicting interests of various groups were set one against the other to come to some as-yet-undetermined plan of action.⁸⁵ In such a “wrangle,” it would be easy to envision the abandonment of norms for the free-for-all of relativism, as all interests debated equally—but here again Wellek’s insistence on the non-universal but still normative “system” of literature may have helped Burke to concretize his ideas of a non-relativistic celebration of multiple perspectives. “The system of norms is growing and changing and will remain, in some sense, always incompletely and imperfectly realized,” Wellek wrote.⁸⁶ But this did not mean that all readings were equal. “A hierarchy of viewpoints, a criticism of the grasp of norms is implied in the concept of the adequacy of interpretation. All relativism is ultimately defeated by the recognition that the Absolute is in the relative, though not finally and fully in it.”⁸⁷ The hierarchy of interacting viewpoints was to become Burke’s climactic anecdote in *A Grammar of Motives*, the summing up of his ideas as he turned his literary analysis most fully toward human motivations.

⁸⁴ Wess, R. *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 4.

⁸⁵ Burke, K. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*: 200.

⁸⁶ Wellek, R. “The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art”: 753.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion: Burke's Constitutive Rhetoric

Burke's sense of the sheer power of language, then, combined with his lifelong attention to the social scene around him, made it inevitable that he would move beyond the literary analysis of his academician friends. At the end of the *Grammar*, he turned his lens on the U.S. Constitution as a constitutive act—a document that as written is normative, intrinsic, eternally timeless, even as it is also historicized through continual extrinsic reinterpretation in both policy and law. He wrote that debates over the interpretation of the Constitution have historically swung between strict textual (intrinsic) and broader contextual (extrinsic) interpretations, but to “cut across this on the bias...would require a more complex procedure, as the Court would test [a newly desired] measure by reference to *all* the wishes in the Constitution...[with] explicit reference to a *hierarchy* among the disjunct wishes.”⁸⁸ The norms of the Constitution remain constant, but their relative importance shifts depending upon the historical moment, while this resultant new hierarchy of actions is simultaneously always judged against the eternal norms of the body as a whole by those who recognize that “the Absolute is in the relative, though not finally and fully in it.” The choices one necessarily makes in prioritizing Constitutional “wishes” are ironic, incongruous, and composed of many sub-certainties—each of which, even the most seemingly antagonistic, is constituted by language and contributes something to the ambiguous certainty of the action chosen.

Such an ambiguous understanding of hierarchies and norms, forged in literary analysis, could in turn be applied to the “wrangle” of parliamentary debate of any kind. For instance, Jürgen Habermas's project of international relations requires dialogue rather than unilateralism to produce action, and his project calls for a “constitutional” collaboration in which the enforcement of two global values (or norms)—peace and human rights—at the supranational level is combined with the laws, treaties, contracts, etc., that define working relations at the transnational level. The key condition for Habermas's “constitutional” alternative, drawn directly from his language theories, is that such a constitutionalized system needs “‘indirect ‘backing’ from the kinds of democratic processes of opinion- and will-formation that can only be fully institutionalized within constitutional states.”⁸⁹ That is, a constitutional project in international relations needs backing from the

⁸⁸ Burke, K. *A Grammar of Motives*: 380.

⁸⁹ Habermas, J. *The Divided West*, ed. and trans. C. Cronin. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005: 141.

world community of opinion communicating together in the struggle to find common ground by hierarchizing norms and values in what Burke would see as the “wrangle of the parliament.” Habermas believed that this project of ongoing, action-oriented debate legitimizes global decisions, while Burke’s dramatism provides the methodology and his falling on the bias stance (and comic corrective)⁹⁰ provide the attitude necessary for such eristic debate to occur. As Burke predicted back in 1943, in yet another literary journal, in a postwar era that “still further intensifies the degree of interchange among the various cultures and subcultures of the world, this mediating attitude of mind will be all the more necessary.”⁹¹

Burke’s rhetoric, then, his call to look critically at the world around us and work to understand human motivations through an analysis of verbal exchanges, was based in his own verbal exchanges with the broad swath of literary critics who upended criticism in the mid-20th century. Indeed, his influence continued into the next generation of critics as well: the postcolonial critic Edward Said was among those who noted that in Burke’s “huge output, many of the issues and methods currently engaging the French were first discussed.”⁹² His attempts to be understood by his friends, correspondents, and even nemeses make for what often seem to students of rhetoric today as long and confusing sidetracks from his social analyses. But for Burke it was the conversations around these literary texts that led him to continually expand upon the very theories for which he is known. For this reason, it seems fair to say that without New Criticism there would be no New Rhetoric, while without the insights of New Rhetoric, critical analysis in general—of texts or of the world—would look quite different.

⁹⁰ See George, A. *Kenneth Burke’s Permanence and Change*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2018.

⁹¹ Burke, K. “The Tactics of Motivation.” *Chimera* 2:1 (1943): 39.

⁹² Said, E. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983: 143.

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