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UDC 82(091)  
<https://doi.org/10.22455/2541-7894-2020-9-60-80>

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## READING THE SIGNS WITH KENNETH BURKE (1897–1993)

**Abstract:** Always attuned to the dialectical relationship between literary productions and their sociohistorical contexts, the writings of Kenneth Burke refuse to essentialize literary discourse by making it a unique kind of language. This article maintains that Burke's theory of literature and language as symbolic action is capable of encompassing both these intrinsic and extrinsic aspects without being reducible to either of them. Dramatism is his name for the theory, and its strength derives from its recognition of the necessarily ambiguous transaction between the system of signs and the frame of reference. Nevertheless, there is an essentializing tendency in Burke's thought. Logology, a perspective on language that achieves fruition in *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), is symptomatic of this tendency. I argue that there is a perceptible discontinuity between the dramatistic idea that literature and language are to be considered as symbolic action and the logological idea that words about God bear a strong resemblance to words about words. Logology—words about words—discovers in theology—words about God—the perfectionism implicit in all discourse. I conclude, however, that despite his flirtation with linguistic essentialism, Burke never loses sight of the fact that words are first and foremost agents of power, that they are value-laden, ideologically motivated, and morally and emotionally weighted instruments of persuasion, performance, representation and purpose. As a form of symbolic action in the world, literature is inextricably linked to society and history—it is not a privileged form of language that exists in its own separate and autonomous sphere.

**Keywords:** dramatism, situation/strategy design, dream/prayer/chart triad, dramatistic pentad, grammar/rhetoric/symbolic/, the paradox of substance, terministic screens, hierarchic psychosis, entelechial motive, logology.

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## ИССЛЕДУЯ ЗНАКИ С КЕННЕТОМ БЕРКОМ (1897–1993)

**Аннотация:** Кеннет Берк, всегда чуткий к диалектическим отношениям между литературными произведениями и их социально-историческими контекстами, в своих сочинениях отказался от взгляда на литературный дискурс как некую готовую данность, увидев в ней особый тип языка. Основной тезис настоящей статьи заключается в том, что взгляд Берка на литературу и язык как символическое действие способен охватить как внутренне присущие им, так и внешние аспекты, не сводя суть дискурса ни к тем, ни к другим. Берк назвал свою теорию «драматизмом», и ее достоинство состоит в осознании неизбежной двойственности отношений между системой знаков и точкой зрения. И все же в мышлении Берка присутствует тенденция к эссенциализму. Эта тенденция проявляется в логологии – подходе к языку, который нашел наиболее полное отражение в «Риторике религии» (*The Rhetoric of Religion*, 1961). На мой взгляд, прослеживается явное противоречие между теорией драматизма, согласно которой литературу и язык надлежит рассматривать как символические действия, и тезисом логологии о том, что слова о Боге в значительной мере близки к словам о словах. Логология – слова о словах – видит в теологии – словах о Боге – совершенство, присущее дискурсу в целом. Однако я прихожу к выводу, что, несмотря на заигрывание Берка с лингвистическим эссенциализмом, он никогда не теряет из виду того факта, что слова являются в первую очередь орудиями власти, что они представляют собой наделенные некоторой ценностью, идеологически мотивированные и эмоционально нагруженные инструменты убеждения, действия, изображения и достижения цели. Литература, будучи формой символической деятельности в мире, неразрывно связана с обществом и историей: ее не стоит считать привилегированной формой языка, существующей в своем особом независимом пространстве.

**Ключевые слова:** драматизм, модель «ситуация – стратегия», триада «сон – молитва – план», пентада драматизма, грамматика/риторика/символика, парадокс субстанции, терминистические экраны, психоз иерархии, мотив энтелехии, логология.

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## Literature and Language as Symbolic Action

Anticipatory of the linguistic and rhetorical turn in the human sciences, the critical writings of Kenneth Burke, the first collection of which appeared in 1931, exemplify many of the significant trends in modern literary theory: reader-response criticism, new rhetoric, discourse theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, and so forth. Never an endorser of American formalism, Burke persistently argues against the New Critical tendency to conceive of the text as an autonomous object. Throughout his writings, he refuses to essentialize literary discourse by making it a unique kind of language, and he is always attuned to the dialectical relationship between literary productions and their sociohistorical contexts. “Whatever ‘free play’ there may be in esthetic enterprise,” he writes, “it is held down by the pull of historical necessities; the poetic forms are symbolic structures designed to equip us for confronting given historical and personal situations” [Burke ATH 1984: 57].

Rejecting that sterile and static opposition between formalist and sociohistorical approaches to literature, Burke maintains that “words are aspects of a much wider communicative context, most of which is not verbal at all. Yet words also have a nature peculiarly their own. And when discussing them as modes of action, we must consider *both* this nature as words in themselves *and* the nature they get from the nonverbal scenes that support their acts” [Burke PLF 1973: xvii]. What Burke constructs is a theory of literature and language capable of encompassing both these intrinsic and extrinsic aspects without being reducible to either of them. Dramatism is his name for the theory, and its strength derives from its recognition of the necessarily ambiguous transaction between the system of signs and the frame of reference. Occupying a middle ground between the extremes of unreflexive objectivism and self-debilitating nihilism, Burke develops a critique of language that aims to demystify but not to debunk, for even if representation cannot be ontologically anchored in some transcendental signified or external frame of reference, it has a causal efficacy of its own in its power to induce attitudes and actions. To expose the epistemological fraud that representation often perpetrates is not to defuse, negate, or neutralize the work of power that representation can and does do.

According to Burke, “the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man's relation to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor” [Burke PC 1984: 263]. Dramatism, he writes, is a method of linguistic and conceptual analysis that treats language and thought primarily as modes

of action rather than means of conveying information. All verbal acts are to be considered as symbolic action, and dramatism is built about the systematic view of language and literature as species of symbolic action. In his 1941 book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke makes his first attempt to describe in detail the workings of symbolic action. For him, a work is composed of implicit or explicit equations (assumptions of what equals what). Along with what equals what (associative clusters), there are what versus what (dramatic alignments, agons, or oppositions) and what leads to what (narrative progressions, dialectical developments, or transformations).

Consider the famous opening paragraph of Socrates' *Apology*. The oppositions adduced by Socrates are falsehood versus truth, persuasion versus logic, the force of eloquence versus the force of truth, partial truth versus whole truth, set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases versus arguments which spontaneously occur, juvenile orator versus seventy-year old man, legal language versus the language of the marketplace, technical words versus common words, manner of words (style) versus matter of truth (substance), opinion versus knowledge, rhetoric versus dialectic. Socrates, of course, places himself on the "right" side of the dichotomy.

This opening paragraph alludes to a rich conceptual universe, and Plato's whole philosophical project is embodied in it. Two associative clusters emerge: on the one hand, there is deception, falsehood, persuasion, eloquence, partiality, rehearsed oratory, legal language, technical words, manner, style, opinion, and rhetoric; on the other, there is truth, logic, spontaneous argument, language of the marketplace, common words, matter, substance, knowledge, and dialectic.

Along with establishing the equations and oppositions that structure a work, we also need to analyze the relationship between linguistic strategies and extra-linguistic situations. "The situation-strategy design says in effect": The writer is not writing "in the middle of nowhere." Though his or her discourse "may be viewed purely within itself (in terms of its internal consistency), it is also the act of an agent in a non-literary scene," and, as time goes by, "it survives the particulars of the scene in which it is enacted" [Burke PLF 1973: ix].

In his initial musings, then, Burke links rhetoric and literature to situations, contending that "critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers; they are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers" [Burke PLF 1973: 1].

They are strategic and stylized answers because there are many different ways of responding to the question of, say, segregation—one could advocate gradualism, direct non-violent action, or violent action. That is to say, critical and imaginative works answer situation-based questions in a particular, distinctive way. All discourse should be considered “as the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations. These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them....The situations are real, the strategies for handling them have public content; and in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance” [Burke PLF 1973: 1]. Dr. Martin Luther King’s strategy of civil disobedience—direct, non-violent action—may be relevant to other political protests, protests that speak to us now.

As part of the situation/strategy design, Burke divides the verbal act into three components: dream, prayer, and chart. On the level of dream (“the unconscious or subconscious factors in a [text]” [Burke PLF 1973: 5]), symbolic action is symptomatic action and plays a compensatory or therapeutic role. It has an author-regarding element and is expressive, either directly or indirectly, of his or her psyche. The dream component involves the psychological and expressive elements embedded in a text. On the level of dream, an obsessive pattern of engrossments and avoidances expresses itself as a cluster of interrelated images, which in turn implies a structure of interrelated ideas. Images are thus supersaturated with ideas, and Burke suggests that we should take Freud’s key terms—condensation and displacement—as overall categories for the analysis of the text as dream. Events have a tendency to become metaphoric or metonymic representatives of other events. Condensation, the image as more than itself—a combining of several images or ideas into one—works along the metaphoric or vertical axis of meaning, whereas displacement, the image as other than itself, works along the metonymic or horizontal axis of meaning. For Burke the unconscious is structured like a language, and the critic is its cryptologist.

As waking dreams, texts express the obsessions and evasions of their authors, what engrosses or captivates them as well as what they are at pains to evade or avoid. Writers’ burdens are symbolic of their style, and their style is symbolic of their burdens. Jonathan Swift, for example, unveils an excremental vision, a revulsion toward materiality and the flesh. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, human beings are portrayed as Yahoos, filthy animals

who throw excrement at each other. With Nathaniel Hawthorne it is his ancestral guilt, his obsession with the sins of the father, with the racist persecution of Native Americans and the religious persecution of Quakers and witches. With Franz Kafka it is his paranoid vision of bureaucracy and authority, his fear of the father figure, his oedipal burden.

Dream, then, is both thematic and tropological. Metaphor is the trope of condensation, and metonymy is the trope of displacement. Condensation involves a fusion of unconscious desires whereas displacement substitutes the socially acceptable for the socially unacceptable. Freud maintains that the manifest content of a dream or text has a smaller content than the latent dream or text. Condensation is brought about by fusing latent elements into a single composite image, an image with multiple meanings. Objectionable and unacceptable thoughts are thereby disguised. In legal decision making, for example, graphic descriptions of sexual deviancy allow judges to combine disgust and desire at the same time, thereby fusing the reprehensible with the titillating and allowing us voyeuristic and perhaps vicarious pleasure in learning about all the ways people may deviate from the supposed heterosexual norm of reciprocal, affectionate sexual behaviour. Displacement replaces a latent element not by a component part of itself but by something more remote. As Freud suggests in one of his case histories, the plucking of bright yellow flowers may disguise and equal the fantasy of deflowering a young girl given to wearing yellow outfits.

Burke's point is not to endorse uncritically Freudian psychology but merely to use it a frame of reference for his consideration of the text as dream. As he proposes in "Freud—And the Analysis of Poetry," the problem with psychoanalytic interpretation is that it deploys an essentializing rather than a proportional strategy, treating the nucleus of fantasy as an origin or essence at the centre of the text instead of seeing it as but one ingredient in the overall motivational recipe. In regarding language as symbolic action in the multi-levelled Burkean sense, one looks not for originary causes but for the proportion of grammatical, rhetorical, and symbolical ingredients. The text as dream—the symbolic—is simply one of these ingredients; it is not the essence of the literary act. Thus it would be as great an error to regard dream as the origin or centre of the literary act as it would be to disregard the rich suggestiveness of psychoanalytic interpretation.

Freud's insights, Burke maintains, can be arrived at by tropological analysis alone, and the question emerges as to whether the psychoanalytic

machinery is necessary. What language is rhetorically doing on the figurative level can undermine and subvert what it is referentially saying on the literal level. It is a commonplace of postmodern thought that there is often a gap between the referential and the rhetorical, between what language literally *says* and what language figuratively *does*. In the depths of their imagery, Burke avers, writers cannot lie. Where there is eloquence, there is emotional investment.

Burke posits a terminological compulsion in language that eludes the conscious control of speakers or writers. There is what our language says and implies, which is not necessarily what we intend to say or imply. Our discourse generates implications that go well beyond our conscious intentions. What we want to say is often overshadowed by what our language says. In the depths of our imagery and figurative language, we reveal ourselves. Strange as it may seem, rhetorical language is a more reliable indicator of truth than referential language precisely because what language does rhetorically is often at odds with what it says referentially. Where a person is eloquent, there reside his or her deepest interests, values, and passions.

Burke's deconstructive analysis of *De Rerum Natura* in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and *A Grammar of Motives* reveals the tension between Lucretius's literal and figurative motives, between what Lucretius wants to *say* philosophically and what his language *does* poetically. Lucretius talks about atoms and the void, saying everything happens because of the random collision of atoms and their contingent swerves, but his imagery evokes awe for the gods. He advocates atheism as a pain reliever but betrays an emotional stake in theism. Relief presupposes pain. Even though Lucretius is "wedded as a materialist...to the aim of analgesia," Burke points out that he "nonetheless builds up extremely emotional moments. For example, in trying to make us feel the great relief that would come to us from the abolition of the gods, Lucretius exposes himself to the full rigors of religious awe. He must make us realize *awe*, in the contemplation of heavenly distances and storms, in order to make us realize the full measure of the *relief* that would follow from the dissolution of this awe." Therefore, he becomes "somewhat an advocate against his own thesis. For in trying to build up a full realization of the awe, in order to build up a full realization of the freedom that would come from banishing the awe, he leaves us with an unforgettable image of the awe itself. We are left with the suspicion that he has never really freed himself from the awe, but that he has been fighting to repress it" [Burke PLF 1973: 152–53].

The referential and the rhetorical are thus “working at cross purposes,” for “something seems to have gone wrong with the *direction* of the poem, at least as regards to the philosophic ends of solace. The intention of showing that calamities are not acts of gods leads not to a *medical* treatment of symptoms, but to a *poetic* one, seeking to make the plague as vivid and picturesque as possible, and so building in one way the disturbing thoughts it is designed to remove in another” [Burke GM 1969: 162].

On the level of prayer (“the communicative functions of a [text]” [Burke PLF 1973: 5]), symbolic action has a rhetorical dimension or audience-regarding element, and induces attitudes and actions. Rhetoric deals with the arousal and fulfillment of expectations, and form, Burke argues, is “the psychology of the audience...the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” [Burke CS 1968: 31]. Whereas the expressionistic emphasis of dream reveals the ways in which the writer, with an attitude, embodies it in an appropriate gesture, the communicative emphasis of prayer deals with the choice of gesture for the inducement of corresponding attitudes.

Lastly, on the level of chart (“the realistic sizing-up of situations that is sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, in poetic strategies” [Burke PLF 1973: 6]), symbolic action has a reality-regarding element. “The Symbol is the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience” [Burke CS 1968: 152] and has realistic content insofar as it encompasses the situation it represents. The encompassment is necessarily imperfect because human beings have no nonsymbolic or non-linguistic access to the structure of reality.

## Grammar and Rhetoric

In *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), Burke elaborates the dream/prayer/chart triad of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* into a more sophisticated scheme: grammar (which corresponds to chart), rhetoric (which corresponds to prayer), and symbolic (which corresponds to dream).

Burke has a grammar in the Aristotelian sense of a set of verbal terms or categories by means of which a discourse can be analyzed, or, for that matter, performed in the first place. His dramatistic grammar centres on observations of this sort: For there to be an *act*, there must be an *agent*. Similarly, there must be a *scene* in which the agent acts. To act in a scene, the agent must employ some means or *agency*, and there cannot be an act, in the full sense of the term, unless there is a *purpose*. These five



terms—act, agent, scene, agency, purpose—Burke labels the dramatic pentad. His aim in *A Grammar of Motives* is to show how the functions which they designate operate in the imputing of motives.

The grammatical is a series of blanks to be filled out when one imputes motive to action, and any statement of motives involves the dramatic pentad of act (what was done), agent (who did the act and under what subjective conditions), scene (the environment in which the act took place, the extrinsic factors that determined it), agency (how the act was done, what instruments were used), and purpose (why the act was done, its ultimate motive or final cause). The grammatical blanks offer opportunities for “*disposition and transposition*” [Burke GM 1969: 402], and dialectic explores the combinatory possibilities. Different philosophical systems emphasize different parts of the pentad: realism emphasizes act, idealism emphasizes agent, materialism emphasizes scene, pragmatism emphasizes agency, and mysticism emphasizes purpose. The combinatory possibilities, of course, are endless, but Burke's point is that any statement of motives must deal with the five terms he has isolated even if it would foreground one and background the others. That is, the grammatical resources are principles and the various philosophies are casuistries in that they seek to apply these principles in and to the case of some actual and given sociohistorical situation. Burke attempts an ingenious casuistry of his own, taking major philosophic systems as cases and developing their distinctive characters in terms of their variant stress upon one or another of the terms of his pentad.

What Burke was doing in 1945 has a decidedly structuralist ring, especially his view of the subject or agent as the function of a system. As a method of discourse analysis, *A Grammar of Motives* is protostructuralist to the extent that structure in all kinds of texts can be accounted for by the terms of the pentad, which in their combinations, substitutions, and transformations show forth the gamut of possibilities for verbal action. It is anti-structuralist, however, to the extent that Burke recognizes that every grammar of motives implies a rhetoric of motives. Since every dialectic transposes and disposes the terms of the dramatic pentad in a uniquely constitutive fashion and with a uniquely exhortative attitude, every dialectic implies a rhetoric of action. Though Marxists might see the historical and economic *scene* as determinative of the *acts* and attitudes that *agents* engage in, their “scenic” grammar implies a program of social change that urges the strategic deployment of linguistic and political *agency* for the *purpose* of revolution. “The dramatic view of language, in terms of

‘symbolic action,’” Burke writes, “is exercised about the necessarily *suasive* nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures” [Burke LASA 1966: 45].

Timothy Crusius points out that in contrast to seeing grammar’s function as the “exploration of verbal forms, Burke sees rhetoric’s function as the overcoming of estrangement. Human beings are alienated from each other by differences of ethnic and social background, level of education, race, gender, age, economic class, etc. When language is used to overcome these differences, to foster cooperation and establish community, we are in the realm of rhetoric—and since all language use to varying degrees involves this end, all language use has a rhetorical dimension” [Crusius 1986: 24]. Rhetoric, of course, may do exactly the opposite; it may exacerbate alienation by accentuating differences, fostering competition, and undermining community. There is an obvious sense in which every identification rhetoric induces implies a concomitant dissociation, and vice versa. What Burke calls hierarchic psychosis is endemic to every society, and every text reflects the embarrassments, tensions, and alienations of a given socio-political hierarchy.

To the classical notion of rhetoric as persuasion, then, Burke adds the dramatistic notion of rhetoric as identification, by which he means the inducement to identify one’s own substance with something larger and more comprehensive. He also adds unconscious factors of appeal, especially as they pertain to the subliminal and *suasive* function of imagery. For Burke, grammar and rhetoric “are counterparts because to identify is to share substance with something or someone, the study of substance (or motivational essence) being the affair of grammar and dialectic, the study of tactics for achieving identification (or consubstantiality) being the affair of rhetoric” [Ibid.: 31]. Although rhetoric involves the formation of identity and the establishment and maintenance of affiliation and community, it is predicated upon division and difference. If identification and consubstantiality were really possible, there would be no need to induce them.

The need for rhetoric as an agent of symbolic identification arises out of the real differences that plague any given social order. Social malaise and division, Burke argues, are grounded in property structure and in the differentiation of social role imposed upon individuals in a complex heterogeneous society. “In any order,” he 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” [Burke RM 1969: 279].

Because of such diversity and distance, categorical guilts are implicit in any given social order, and human societies cohere because of literal or symbolic victims which the individual members of the group share in common. Catharsis, a stylistic cleansing of an audience, is effected by the tragic imitation of such victimage. Thus, on the level of the body politic, catharsis is a way of purging and purifying the civic tensions that are endemic to any order, for tragedy (in its role as a civic ceremony) can *symbolically* transcend modes of civic conflict that, in the practical realm of social relations, are never *actually* resolved within the conditions of the given social order (and the conflicts ‘natural’ to it).

Division and difference create the need for identification and consubstantiality, giving rise to what Burke calls a rhetoric of courtship between individuals who occupy different rungs on the social ladder. “‘Hierarchy,’” he writes, “is the old, eulogistic word for ‘bureaucracy,’ with each stage employing a rhetoric of obeisance to the stage above it, and a rhetoric of charitable condescension to the stage beneath it, in sum, a rhetoric of courtship [Ibid.: 118].... By the ‘principle of courtship’ in rhetoric we mean the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement” [Ibid.: 208]. The hierarchic motive is all-pervasive, and “the vocabularies of social and sexual courtship are so readily interchangeable, not because one is a mere ‘substitute’ for the other, but because sexual courtship is intrinsically fused with the motives of social hierarchy” [Ibid.: 217]. The attempt to extricate motives of social hierarchy enigmatically concealed in literary representations Burke calls ‘socioanagogic’ interpretation, for “nature is a linguistically inspirited thing,” and “what we take as ‘nature’ is largely a social pageant in disguise” [Burke LASA 1966: 378].

The realm of the socioanagogic involves the ways in which things of the senses are secretly emblematic of motives in the social order. Socioanagogic criticism seeks a neutral approach midway between Marx's rage against mystification and Carlyle's adulation of mystery. Burke's elaboration of these ideas in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, his discussion of Marx and mystification, Carlyle and mystery, Diderot and pantomime, Castiglione and courtship, Empson and pastoral, Kafka and bureaucracy, and so forth are extremely suggestive. In an essay on Shakespeare's “Venus and Adonis,” for example, Burke shows how sexual and social courtship intermingle, the equation reading something like this: sexually mature goddess is to sexually immature mortal as noblewoman is to commoner.

The symbolic, which Burke associates with poetics *per se*, is grounded in the proposition that “a work is composed of implicit or explicit ‘equations’ (assumptions of ‘what equals what’), in any work considered as one particular structure of terms, or symbol system” [Burke PLF 1973: 8]. Along with identifications or equations (what equals what), as we have seen, there are also dissociations or agons (what versus what). And this apposition and opposition of terms unfolds in a certain way, making for dramatic resolution and dialectical transformation (what leads to what). The symbolic, then, should take at least three factors in account: associative clusters, dramatic alignments, and narrative progressions.

All told, then, there is symbolic action as designation (the grammatical), as communication (the rhetorical), and as expression (the symbolical). For Burke, however, the various levels of symbolic action are interdependent. “Since the work of art is a synthesis, summing up a myriad of social and personal factors at once, an analysis of it necessarily radiates in all directions at once” [Burke ATH 1984: 199]. This is why he admits that his “general approach to the [work] might be called ‘pragmatic’ in this sense: It assumes that a [work’s] structure is to be described most accurately by thinking always of the [work’s] function. It assumes that we can make the most relevant observations about its design by considering the [work] as the embodiment of this act” [Burke PLF 1973: 89–90]. For Burke, it is not a question of confusing what a text is with what a text does, but one of equating them. Form is function. What a text is is what a text does.

### **The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle**

A case in point is Burke’s 1939 essay “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” an essay in which he brings his critical arsenal to bear on *Mein Kampf*. Burke sees Nazism as the materialization and perversion of a religious pattern, particularly in regard to its projective device of the scapegoat (“the ‘curative’ unification by a fictitious devil-function” [Burke PLF 1973: 218]) and its ritual of rebirth (the compensatory doctrine of inborn superiority whereby Aryans are born again into the purity of their ancestral blood). He examines Hitler’s use of sexual symbolism, of the imagery of blood, pollution, and disease, and of the rhetoric of identification and dissociation, focusing on the dialectical relationship between the literary strategy and the extraliterary situation. Purity and impurity are at the core of Hitler’s program to cleanse Germany of all manner of contamination. Through the workings of symbolic action, Hitler is able to convert his own

psychotic dream into a secular prayer that successfully exhorts others to follow his chart for political action.

According to Hitler's twisted dream, Germany is a dehorned Siegfried; its masses are feminine and desire to be led by a dominating male; this male must overcome the rival Jewish male, a seducer who would poison Aryan blood by intermingling with the folk. An associative cluster emerges: blood poisoning, venereal disease, prostitution, incest, homosexuality, mental illness, bolshevism, and so on are equated materially with the infection of Jewish blood and spiritually with the infection of Jewish ideas. Burke's whole point in this essay is to show how imagery and ideation, rhetoric and grammar, sustain each other in Hitler's sinister and nightmarish text. Put all these ingredients together, and the result is a crude but devastatingly effective formula for repressive and barbaric political action. A demoralized and beaten nation now has inborn dignity, an identifiable enemy, a new sense of identity, and a coherent world view, all of which suggest that the political will to power of Aryan super-individualism is the only antidote to Jewish individualism.

Because of Hitler's resistance to a purely environmental account of socio-economic problems, his grammar of motives systematically elevates agent at the expense of scene. The super-agent is none other than Hitler himself, the living incarnation of Aryan will to power. Although it takes a great deal of sophisticated ingenuity to distinguish benign Aryan super-individualism from malign Jewish individualism, these are the only factors that really matter in Hitler's diagnosis of and remedy for Germany's woes. The extrinsic causal factors that have in reality shaped and determined the socio-economic scene are completely disregarded.

This truncated grammar of motives implies a concomitant rhetoric of motives: a rhetoric of identification—which induces the people to see themselves as consubstantial with their leader, and a rhetoric of dissociation—which induces the people to alienate themselves from the Jews and makes possible the brutal victimization. Hitler's psychotic dream, rife with its obsessive images and fanatical hatreds, is thereby converted into a grammar of the agent and a rhetoric of persecution. He spontaneously evolves his cure-all on the grammatical and rhetorical levels in response to inner necessities and compulsions on the symbolic level. The perverse genius of *Mein Kampf* resides in its provision of “a noneconomic interpretation of economic ills” [Burke PLF 1973: 204]. That Hitler's representations were ontologically unanchored and obscenely false did not matter at all; their consequences were invidiously real.

Rejecting both the formalism of an intrinsic approach, which regards literature as a self-enclosed universe of discourse, and the determinism of an extrinsic approach, which regards literature as reducible to some other frame of reference such as psychoanalysis or dialectical materialism, Burke demonstrates how the formal unfolding and internal coherence of a work are part of its rhetorical force. The intrinsic and extrinsic aspects are mutually dependent.

### **Antinomies of Definition and the Paradox of Substance**

Having presented a rather packed exposition of some of the aspects of Burke's dramatisitic project, I would now like to qualify, if not undermine, some of the generalizations I have been making. For all of this talk about the three levels of symbolic action and their systematic interrelationships, Burke is about as anti-systematic a systematiser and as unmethodical a methodologist as one can find. At the core of dramatism, there is an essential tension, a tension which may in fact be characteristic of Burke's entire philosophical project. On the one hand, dramatism seems protostructuralist in its method and theory of discourse analysis; on the other hand, it seems poststructuralist in its progressive self-dismantlement. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke's recurrent focus on the antinomies of definition and the paradox of substance infects his dialectical system with the virus of deconstruction from the very beginning. Endorsing Spinoza's claim that all determination is negation, Burke concludes that the concept of substance is thereby endowed with an irresolvable ambiguity. As he puts it in a key passage from *A Grammar of Motives*,

Dialectically considered (that is, 'dramatistically' considered) [people] are not only *in nature*. The cultural accretions made possible by language become a 'second nature' with them. Here again we confront the ambiguities of substance, since symbolic communication is not merely an external instrument, but also intrinsic to [people] as agents. Its motivational properties characterize both "the human situation" and what [people] are 'in themselves.' Whereas there is an implicit irony in other notions of substance, with dialectic substance the irony is explicit. For it derives its character from the systematic contemplation of the antinomies attendant upon the fact that we necessarily define a thing in terms of something else. [Burke GM 1969: 33]

For Burke this is “an *inevitable* paradox of definition.” “To *define*, or *determine* a thing,” he writes, “is to mark its boundaries, hence to use terms that possess, implicitly at least, contextual reference” [Burke GM 1969: 24]. Substance, Burke notes, is etymologically a scenic word. “Literally, a person's or a thing's sub-stance would be something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing.” The point is not to banish substance terms but to be aware of their equivocal and duplicitous nature. “Banishing the term ‘substance,’” he maintains, “doesn't banish its functions; it merely conceals them” [Ibid.: 21]. Moreover, the irresolvable ambiguity built into the concept of substance is precisely that which facilitates linguistic transformations and makes dialectic possible.

In one of the more famous or perhaps infamous passages from his *Grammar*, Burke further explores the issue of linguistic transformation and how it is embedded in the antinomies of definition.

Distinctions, we might say, arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged. They have been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they have congealed. Let one of these crusted distinctions return to its source, and in this alchemic center it may be remade, again becoming molten liquid, and may enter into new combinations, whereat it may be again thrown forth as a new crust, a different distinction. So that A may become non-A. But not merely by a leap from one state to another. Rather, we must take A back into the ground of its existence, that logical substance that is its causal ancestor, and on to a point where it is consubstantial with non-A; then we may return, this time emerging with non-A instead. [Burke GM 1969: xix]

Any demarcation of difference, then, is necessarily duplicitous, and this duplicitousness is only heightened by the recognition that the “logical substance” underlying A and non-A must itself dissolve into the antinomies of its own constitution. In this dissolving substance is grounded the very possibility of dialectic. “From the central moltenness, where all the elements are fused into one togetherness, there are thrown forth, in separate crusts, such distinctions as those between freedom and necessity, activity and passivity, cooperation and competition, cause and effect, mechanism and teleology” [Burke GM 1969: xix]. Because of this central antinomy of definition and the paradox of substance it embraces, one must invoke difference to constitute a meaning. In the Burkean system, as in the Derridean, meaning is disseminated: it retreats into the moltenness of the alembic centre and re-emerges as something else.

Other interesting parallels could be drawn between dramatism and deconstruction, especially vis-à-vis Derrida's notions of *différance*, trace, margin, supplementarity, and so forth. In fact, there are many ways in which Burke's critical posture anticipates and resembles Derrida's. The major difference between the two, however, is that Burke's system attempts to avoid the progressive deconstruction *ad infinitum* that Derrida and others accept with the understanding that there will always be a remainder, a trace, a living on. Burke grounds his position in what David Cratis Williams aptly calls "the ontological loop." As Williams suggests, dramatism seeks to provide an ontological perspective: "it tells us who we *are* in a substantial, constitutive sense. We *are* the symbol-using animal." We inhabit, enact, and dramatize "the problematics of language, the duplicities of dialectic" [Williams 1989: 216]. The loop emerges from Burke's all-encompassing and self-authenticating definition of human beings as symbol-using animals. To possess dialectical substance, as symbol-using animals necessarily do, is to be at home, literally, in irony: it is to be irony. Living out the paradox of substance and its attendant ironies, we are what we are not, and we necessarily define ourselves in terms of something else. As human beings, we are bodies that learn language, and through the vagaries of identifications and the various subject positions they afford, we incorporate various ways of seeing and not seeing our reflections in the social mirror.

Dialectic substance is at the heart of dramatism. As Williams points out, such a perspective no doubt privileges the human actor, but it does not privilege truth or knowledge. It literally defines human beings as animals characterized by their special aptitude for symbolic action. But this grounding of the human subject in symbolicity is an ontological move only, not an epistemological one. Indeed, from Burke's standpoint, deconstructive prowess is one of the most sophisticated forms of symbol using and for that reason one of the more quintessentially human of human activities. Burke's ontological claim may be tautological and self-reflexive, but it does explain why he eventually comes to see dramatism as a literal rather than a metaphorical model.

The antinomies and paradoxes that pervade *A Grammar of Motives* also pervade *Language as Symbolic Action* and give rise to the same essential tension. In the latter book, Burke notes that terministic screens "direct the attention" [Burke LASA 1966: 45]. "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" [Ibid.] "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” [Ibid.: 1966: 46]. Behavior “isn't something you need but observe; even something so ‘objectively there’ as behavior must be observed through one or another kind of *terministic screen*, that directs the attention in keeping with its nature” [Ibid.: 1966: 46].

Composition and division are the two basic dialectical resources, there being but “two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart” [Burke LASA 1966: 49]. As Burke reflects, “we *must* use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principles of continuity and discontinuity” [Ibid.: 50]. Whereas many critical theorists wholeheartedly embrace discontinuity, Burke remains ambivalent.

The lurking danger, as he sees it, is relativism, for if empirical observations are reduced to terminological implications, then everything is relative to the terminology of the observer. “Must we merely resign ourselves,” Burke asks, “to an endless catalogue of terministic screens, each of which can be valued for the light it throws upon the human animal, yet none of which can be considered central? In one sense,” he answers, “yes” [Ibid.: 52]. For every human being is thrown into a unique set of circumstances—biological, physiological, existential, social, political, historical, etc.—and every human being undergoes a unique combination of experiences. In this sense, there are as many terministic screens as there are people. But whatever the differences between these screens, he writes, “they are all classifiable together in one critical respect: They all operate by the use of symbol systems” [Ibid.: 57]. The reflexivity of human symbolism entails that we may move from “the criticism of experience to the criticism of criticism. We not only interpret the character of events. . . we may also interpret our interpretations” [Burke PC 1984: 6]. This capacity for metalanguage is uniquely human. We can change the code as well as use it.

In an obvious sense, dramatism can only be a terministic screen, a screen that “involves a methodic tracking down of the implications in the idea of symbolic action, and of man as the kind of being that is particularly distinguished by an aptitude for such action” [Burke LASA 1966: 54]. Burke, however, is absolutely convinced that there is “more to be learned from a study of tropes than from a study of tropisms” [Burke PLF 1973: 114], and he is moved to assert that his perspectivism is not simply another perspective. Such salient inconsistency underscores the problem. The expression “terministic screen” can refer to either a particular scheme of interpretation within a general cultural framework or to the general cultural framework itself. If language itself does as it were think for us, a saying of Coleridge that Burke is fond of quoting, then, within the cultural scene, language may be the agent that acts through the agency of human beings for its own intrinsic purposes.

In my view, Burke's structural subversions of his own dramatisitic enterprise can neither be explained away nor domesticated into some kind of innocuous perspectivism. His self-reflexive and self-subverting cultivation of what he calls perspective by incongruity is essential rather than accidental. The problem revolves around whether one sees the symbol-using animal as an independent agent performing representative verbal acts or as a figure occupying the role of agency within the “unending conversation” of history into which he or she is thrown [Burke PLF 1973: 110], a conversation that has neither a discernible originary cause nor an ultimate teleological endpoint. At various times, Burke holds both positions.

On the one hand, he believes that rational and explanatory taxonomies of human motives are possible and necessary, and that the dramatisitic project has a chance, however remote, of being communicatively reliable, interpretively precise, and socially curative. On the other hand, he believes or at least suggests or maybe even fears that language pursues its own logological agendas and transformational games no matter what hermeneutic precautions we take. In a very basic sense, then, we cannot write or speak except as an agent of the very verbal structures we may want to expose and criticize. We must, after all, use and be used by terministic screens. “Do we simply use words,” Burke asks, “or do they not also use us?” The next step, of course, is to recognize that what we are as humans is uniquely identified with this semiotically constructed world, that we are, as Burke himself asserts, “symbol-made animal[s]” [Burke LASA 1966: 63]. At this point, Burke is very close to structuralism's view of humanity as a construct of social codes. Burke goes even further and notes that “so

far as sheerly empirical development is concerned, it might be more accurate to say that language and the negative ‘invented’ man” [Burke LASA 1966: 9]. He also notes that “there is a kind of ‘unconscious’ that is sheerly a reflection of whatever terminology one happens to be using” [Ibid.: 71]. This unconscious, then, possesses the resources to complete a terminology, for what Burke calls the entelechial motive drives a terminology towards such formal consummation. Human beings and human terminologies, Burke wryly observes, are rotten with perfection; they are impelled to take things to the end of the line.

It seems to me that the fertile incongruities in Burke's corpus derive from his recognizing both the motivational thoroughness of particular terminologies and the structural similarities between all terminologies. Just as all terminologies embody the hierarchic psychosis of the social pyramid, all languages function by hierarchizing sets of terms, by idealizing or essentializing some categories and by debunking or marginalizing others. Every terminology has its victims and scapegoats.

In one sense, then, Burke's work is radically decentered. The pentad was never meant to be a fixed taxonomic system, and those who read and use it as such are insensitive to the perversely anti-systematic nature of dramatism's systematizing. The agent, as I have suggested, need not be a person. At a conference three decades ago in Indiana, Burke speculated that in today's post-industrial scene, it may be a question of the agent of artificial intelligence using the agency of human beings to perform its technological acts for the purpose of self-perpetuation. Yet in spite of his insistence on the flexibility and liquidity of the pentad's terms, Burke remains a system-builder and is able to resist everything, it would seem, except the temptation to seal the system off, to protect it from its own self-subversion.

Logology, a perspective on language that achieves fruition in *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), is symptomatic of the essentializing tendency in his thought. Though Burke himself sees dramatism as subsumed under the more inclusive category of logology, there is, I think, a perceptible discontinuity between the dramatic idea that literature and language are to be considered as symbolic action and the logological idea that words about God bear a strong resemblance to words about words and that “the close study of theology and its forms will provide us with a good insight into language itself as a motive” [Burke RR 1970: vi]. Logology—words about words—discovers in theology—words about God—the perfectionism implicit in all discourse. The movement in language toward higher and

higher levels of abstraction Burke calls the entelechial motive, entelechy being Aristotle's term for the force that impels an entity to strive toward the kind of perfection appropriate to the kind of thing that it is. Theology strives toward God; language, toward god-terms.

It seems to me that logology converts methodological priority—the heuristic method of treating communication as primary to all categories of experience and of adopting the dramatic perspective of human beings as communicants and actors—into ontological priority—the constitutive method of treating the dramatic model as literal rather than metaphoric and of inflating this model into an extraperspectival metalanguage. The complicated relationship between dramatism and logology resists summary, but even in his most logological moments, Burke is far too canny an ironist not to be aware that perspectivism itself is just another perspective. In Burke's writings, there is a productive tension between a progressive movement toward an ultimate order—a wholly ample dialectic—and a regressive lapse into unstable irony—an inevitable capitulation to the forces of aporia that perpetually frustrate what Wittgenstein calls the deplorable craving for unity that besets the human mind. Burke's mind is beset by a deep-seated logological yearning, but his honesty as a critic keeps him from ever imposing a premature closure on the dialectical process.

Despite his flirtation with linguistic essentialism, Burke never loses sight of the fact that words are first and foremost agents of power; they are value-laden, ideologically motivated, and morally and emotionally weighted instruments of persuasion, performance, representation and purpose. As a form of symbolic action in the world, literature is inextricably linked to society and history—it is not a privileged form of language that exists in its own separate and autonomous sphere. This view, Burke's lifelong *sine qua non*, became a commonplace of twentieth-century critical theory. An interdisciplinary maverick caught up in a world of professional specialists, Burke was for the greater part of his career relegated to the margins of the academy. Nevertheless, in today's decentered pluriverse of discourses, the seemingly marginal has an uncanny way of becoming the pivotally important. Burke's dramatic theory of literature and language, the bulk of which was developed from the 1930's to the 1960's, still has contemporary resonance and pertains to a wide range of disciplines.

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Received: 15 Sept. 2020

Date of publication: 30 Nov. 2020