“As Usual I Fell on the Bias”: Kenneth Burke’s Situated Dialectic

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In a 1938 letter to his childhood friend Matthew Josephson, Kenneth Burke commented on the new world he had entered by agreeing to lecture in the University of Chicago’s Humanities College that summer: “The burning issue here is not between Stalinists and Trotskyites, but between Platonists and Aristotelians—and thence, to complicate the symmetry, between Aristotelians and the Social Sciences. As usual, I fell on the bias across the controversies” (8/5/1938, KBP, emphasis mine). As we know, this propensity to situate his arguments across seeming dichotomies marks Burke’s work. Pragmatists and idealists; Marxists and esthetes; urban radicals and agrarian conservatives; psychological and sociological theorists: Burke would continuously take a position that fell, as he put it, on the bias—not simply in the middle, not finding some common ground between them in a weak compromise, but cutting across their positions, envisioning an alternative that was parts of both as well as new, Burkean ideas.

Burke scholar Robert Wess has commented that he “would like to see more of ... an attempt to follow Burke’s practice of situating his thought (e.g., the ‘purification of war’ as an alternative to ‘fanaticism’ at one extreme and ‘dissipation’ at the other)—a “situating,” he added, that places Burke within the intellectual debates of his time (2005). Wess is of course referring here to Burke’s situational stance in A Grammar of Motives, his
dramatistic formula *ad bellum purificandum*. How does Burke's position across the philosophical debates of his time influence his conception of dramatism? Today we use the theory as a universal lens through which to examine any rhetorical situation—from Aristotle to jazz to the latest presidential debate—but in this article, I would like to explore how falling on the bias across fanaticism and dissipation, as Burke named his dramatistic situating during its development in World War II, shaped the concrete particularities of this universal theory. Situating Burke's dramatism within the conversational parlor of its contemporaneous debates sheds new light on just how Burke imagined that it would lead to the “purification of war.” Bryan Crable recently argued that there are two approaches to Burkean scholarship—the historical and the universal—and it is the latter, “scholarship that promotes the relevance of Burke’s texts for the study of contemporary rhetoric and social change,” that assumes that “Burkean scholarship matters, there is *something at stake* in our readings of Burke” (2003, 118, emphasis Crable’s). I believe that historical scholarship also has something at stake. Without the ability to converse with modern-day concerns, as Crable rightly notes, dramatism would be only a dated anachronism. However, without a fully engaged conversation—be it with Burke or any other theorist—it is difficult to avoid a fragmented appropriation of ideas that merely supports but does not expand our own perspectives. Dramatism historicized, or what I call in my book on this topic dramatism *rhetorized*, becomes a much more strongly felt call for engaged intellectual activism of a particularly ambiguous sort, a celebration of multiple perspectives of a kind that often makes the most engaged among us uncomfortable, as well as a celebration of action *now* in a way that makes the most intellectual equally uncomfortable. It is this particular response to war that falling on the bias facilitates—or demands—and thus exploring the historical circumstances of bias-falling dramatism serves as a model for the exploration of other theories’ origins.

Scholars have long noted Burke’s tendency to bridge debates as a rhetorical approach to oppositions. Wess, for instance, begins his examination of Burke’s place within constructionist theory by situating Burke’s “constitutionalizing” in the 1940s in opposition to the extremes of Enlightenment science and Romantic aesthetics, noting that in Burke, “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” (1996, 4). Paul Jay (*Contingency Blues*) likewise discusses Burke’s development in the 1930s of a poetic mode...
of critical writing. Burke, he says, bridged the practical criticism of the pragmatists with the aesthetic form of the modernists to achieve a rhetorical approach to aesthetics. His style, that is, served as symbolic inducement to the attitude necessary for action (1997, 109–41). Scholars have not noted, however, Burke’s repeated use of the phrase “falling on the bias” to describe his practice. As we will see, this phrase appears in particularly important places in *A Grammar of Motives* as Burke’s solution to the absolutist thinking increasingly prevalent in the 1930s and 40s.

The philosophy behind Burke’s bias-falling position can be traced at least as far back as his initial reaction to the literary wars of the 1930s, which pitted aesthetes (with their focus on the form of a text and the psychological motivations of characters) against Marxists (with their focus on audience response and socioeconomic motivations). In his first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement* (1931), Burke’s audience-focused definition of form placed him squarely on the bias between rival camps as they debated the function of literature in a society undergoing economic crisis. As George and Selzer detail in *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s* (2007), this was a debate that enveloped a great number of Burke’s friends, and he felt keenly their impassioned divisions. His long-unpublished “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision, or the Rout of the Aesthetes” argued that aestheticism (which in its own way longed to nurture a new social vision in its audience) must align with a social conscience because the focus on craft and form rather than (politicized) content was the persuasive tool needed for the new age:

In poetry there is a prodding. … In a mere recital of calamities, in exposures, recommendations, and affidavits you have, in the end, but grounds for growing sick of recommendations and affidavits. The facts are not enough. … For if you are to maintain [the public’s] attention upon things which are at bottom disagreeable, and which people wish were different, you can do so only by making these things different—which is to say, by embedding them in literary happenings, making the story of corruption a graceful or fanciful or witty thing. (1993, 56)

In other words, Burke was attempting to demonstrate that Marxists and aesthetes needed each other to achieve their mutual goal to change their audience’s perspectives—and this felt need for both sides of a debate to recognize their mutual interdependence would continue to mark his work
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right through the development of dramatism as a means to “transcend war,” as we shall see.

How did falling on the bias work? The methodology behind Burke’s positioning can be gleaned from a 1943 review of a fellow critic’s work, in which he noted,

There is a place for Mr. Kazin’s book ... so long as he does not attempt to enforce upon criticism a method that would avoid the extremes ... mainly by being too superficial and haphazard to go very far into either. And rather than dismiss work of such obvious penetration ... one should seek to develop a perspective that makes it more available by bringing its many aspects into closer relationship with one another. (1943b, 47)

Burke’s method, that is, was not to find middle ground. As can be discerned from his term, falling on the bias was a more expansive positioning that incorporated the best of both (or many) sides of a dichotomy in an ambiguous kind of unity not necessarily acknowledged by any one side. It was a less conciliatory, more radical stance than mere compromise—as Wess put it more generally, Burke rewrote the extremes (1996, 25).

This was never an easy position. Both sides of a debate often saw the attempt as mere apologetics for the opposition. Burke, for instance, was assumed (and labeled in print) by some friends to be a Communist since he was not a pure aesthete, while his work was labeled by others as a mere front for the bourgeois status quo. As he attempted to explain to each side the value he saw in the other, many saw his position on the bias as an attempt to weaken their own. By not “avoiding the extremes,” Burke became at some level the enemy of all—or at least, as literary critic John Crowe Ransom termed him after one such exposure to Burke’s thought, the inexplicable “appeaser and reconciler” (Ransom to Allen Tate 4/22/1942, ATC).

Thus, by the time that Burke wrote to Josephson proclaiming himself to “fall on the bias,” he understood the potential cost of taking such a position. Yet he could not resist “putting in his oar” to the language debates at the University of Chicago, a hotbed of social and literary criticism when Burke spent his first academic term there in the summer of 1938. Neo-Aristotelians, those Chicago critics who analyzed the intrinsic features of a poem and its plot, countered Platonists, the older critics who focused more generally on extrinsic, historical qualities, and social scientists, who were moving away from the qualitative research of the
humanities college. The manner in which Burke fell on the bias across these debates models his philosophy as well as the working out of his incipient theory of dramatism as he moved his language theories into a bellicose world.

By 1938, Chicago had been implementing a “great books” general education curriculum for several years in its humanities college, in which generalist intellectuals led wide-ranging discussions of literature and life for students fulfilling liberal arts requirements. It was perhaps the perfect place for eclectic autodidact Burke to enter the academic conversation. As he wrote that summer in “Literature as Equipment for Living” about the codification process he was advocating for literary analysis, “these categories will lie on the bias across the categories of modern specialization. The new alignment will outrage in particular those persons who take the division of faculties in our universities to be an exact replica of the way in which God himself divided up the universe” (1938/1973a, 303; emphasis mine). In Chicago, with its general education experiment running alongside its regular “division of faculties,” Burke would find structural affirmation of his bias-falling philosophy. The ongoing debates with literary neo-Aristotelians like R. S. Crane, David Daiches, and Richard McKeon fed Burke’s development of symbolic analysis, and he later noted that he “haggled much” with the Chicago group “the summer I taught there. And I worked out my methodology in part under fire from them” (Burke to Tate 4/28/1942, ATC).

Neo-Aristotelians, like Burke’s other literary friends the New Critics, focused on text rather than context in their generational break with Platonists, the old-school historical biographers. Although their focus was on plot more than New Critical diction or style, neo-Aristotelians paid exacting attention to the structural specifics of how a poem argued. They conducted, in the words of McKeon, Dean of the College of Humanities, which sponsored the general education curriculum, “an examination of poetry in itself, not in its relation to education, morals, statesmanship, nature, or being” (quoted in Trowbridge 1944, 539). Their close examination of the organic argument of a poem underscored for Burke his interest in the relation of text to context, as we’ll see. Neo-Aristotelians argued for a strictly “inductive” methodology, beginning with the close reading of individual poems and building only slowly from there up to any theoretical statements about “poetry” itself. Their approach was rather like the scientific method, and Burke, in his own bias-falling between neo-Aristotelians and New Critics (articulated in his 1943 article “The Problem of the Intrinsic [as Reflected in the Neo-Aristotelian School],”) argued that the questions raised by such a
methodology were “derived from the nature of the language or terminology which the critic employs” (1943/1969, 472). That is, it was impossible to study a poem just as it was, without preconceived, language-based criteria of what one was looking for (and at). It was not that the neo-Aristotelians were incorrect in their analyses, but Burke wished they would go further, would “give [their observations] the pointedness that would derive from an explicit recognition of the ‘dramatistic’ element in [their] vocabulary” (476).

This dramatistic element Burke saw partially provided by the more contextual analyses across the Chicago campus, in the work of sociologists such as *American Journal of Sociology* editors Louis Wirth and Ernest Burgess (who published two articles by Burke and later reviewed his *A Grammar of Motives*). This first major sociology department in the nation was closely tied to American pragmatism and social reform, and by the time Burke arrived on campus it was outside the mainstream “professionalization” efforts of the American Sociological Society (Calhoun and Duster 2005, B7–8). Thus, like its humanities counterparts, it was perhaps more open to the discipline-crossing thoughts of autodidact Burke. The ecological philosophy of Chicago sociologists argued for environmental causes (e.g., rapid growth and urbanization) for human problems (alcoholism, delinquency)—and Burke agreed that context was a key factor in human interaction and motivation. The methodology employed by these scientists included both ethnographic fieldwork and, increasingly, the collation and mapping of data from censuses, crime reports, and other official statistics—and here Burke took issue with what he saw as overempiricism.

For Burke, a better way to grasp the nature of social systems was to apply poetic categories, such as those used by the neo-Aristotelians, to the symbolic structures of society. As he would write to sociologist Lewis Dexter in 1940, his goal in courting the sociologists was “to prove that the perspective of sociologists cannot be thorough and accurate without being that of ‘dramatic criticism methodized.’ … Otherwise, sociology can have only the kind of organization one gets in a mail order catalogue” (9/2/1940, KBP). Indeed, three years before he published an article outlining his pentadic terms, and a year before his footnote in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* even mentioned them publicly, Burke recommended that Dexter’s own discussion of motives might be better presented in a dramatistic frame of act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose. That is, in place of the mail order catalogue, Burke was providing sociologists with his theory, dramatic criticism, worked out in part through his “haggles” with the neo-Aristotelians and
applied across the bias to his discussions of the social scene. His “Literature as Equipment for Living” had proposed that his approach was a “sociological criticism of literature” (and literature, of course, was equipment not just for reading but for living) that would “seek to codify the various strategies which artists have developed with relation to the naming of situations” (1938/1973a, 301). This dramatic criticism would enable all critics to analyze language use not only as acts resulting from particularities of scene, as did the sociologists, nor only as acts in themselves, as the neo-Aristotelians preferred, but as a new rewrite of both extremes. The dramatistic perspective, therefore, would fall on the bias across sociological and literary criticism.

The original methodology for this perspective, in turn, marked Burke’s attempt to fall across yet another bias during his Chicago sojourn. Publishing in the American Journal of Sociology in 1939, Burke compared his literary methodology with Freudian psychology in “Freud—and the Analysis of Poetry.” “Freud” contained Burke’s clearest description to date of cluster analysis—discovering the interrelationships between certain recurrent and striking images in a text and discerning what “weight” these images, in context, might hold for the author, much as did Freud’s analysis of dreams (and much as does this article with “falling on the bias”). Burke’s methodology included formal analysis, but, as he had since Counter-Statement, he tied form explicitly to audience by also invoking the Freudian optative—the expression of a wish in the indicative (in this case the wish of the author for a particular reaction from the audience), much as a dreamer dreams that the person whom they wish would leave them alone is walking out the door—with the caveat that the literary optative was more explicitly rhetorical than the Freudian, focused on achieving the wished-for state not in oneself but in the audience. Ellen Quandahl writes that “Freud’s topology of dreamwork is crucial for reading Burke” in that Burke uses an (arguably more environmental) understanding of dreamwork to ground his understanding of substance in A Grammar of Motives (2001, 634). Burke had already attempted, in Attitudes Toward History (1937), to fall on the bias across Freudian and Marxist worldviews—now he was falling across Freudian and neo-Aristotelian understandings of textual analysis, and doing so to an audience of sociologists.

The particular bias that cut across all these fields was language, and Burke’s understanding of language was influenced strongly by one final Chicago group, the general semanticists clustered at the Illinois Institute of Technology (indeed, the Institute of General Semantics was established the year Burke went to Chicago). Alfred Korzybski and S. I. Hayakawa
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led the effort there to apply theories from the hard sciences (physics and math) to the study of language, arguing that one could determine scientifically how words influenced human thought. Their goal was to enable ongoing awareness of the distinction between the abstractions inherent in naming reality and reality itself—“a map is not the territory,” in Korzybski’s oft-repeated maxim (1994, 750, emphasis his).

While Burke allied himself closely to this conceptualist group that would use the power of language to fall so clearly across a social/literary bias between scene and word, he also differentiated himself from the general semanticists, arguing in another Chicago-penned article, “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” that the kind of semantic naming employed by both sociologists and semanticists aimed for an impossibility: it sought to describe human actions neutrally but then had to add “as contraband, a kind of irrational weakness, or benign error,” any humanitarian gesture or “moral exhortation” (1939/1973c, 146–47). Semantic naming sought to solve the problem of entrenched or rigid perspectives by describing the world without attitude. For Burke, however, this “neutrality” was a refusal to deal with the language of everyday life, which was full of inducement or exhortation. Instead of trying to ignore or codify the moral force of language, Burke advocated poetic naming, the juxtaposition of incongruities as the inducement for change. Poetic naming sought to play up the ambiguities of the various attitudes attached to words by “heaping up all of these emotional factors, playing them off against one another” (148). It saw emotional poetic language not as irrational but as an inevitable part of the human experience—and the way poets saw it—as a heightened, focused version of everyday communication. Thus, Burke fell across yet another bias: he brought the best of a neo-Aristotelian/New Critical emphasis on the epideictic force of ambiguous poetic language together with a psychological sense of the underlying emotional motivators, then added a general semantic analysis of language systems as motivational influences and a sociological emphasis on social context to name scenes for these motivations. Yes, said Burke to each—and his nascent dramatic criticism would rewrite each of their extremes by arguing that human motivation could best be understood by looking closely at how people in interaction with each other named situations. As he had put it more poetically in *Attitudes Toward History* just before arriving at Chicago, rather than the sociological survey a better predictor of the future was to examine what people felt strongly enough about to respond to creatively—“what people can sing about” (1937/1984, 335). In the intellectual aftermath of Chicago, on
the bias across creative/social/psychological/linguistic schools, Burke was able to work out just what he meant by that assertion. He was able, in other words, to expand upon the consequences of the key bias-falling term of his Depression-era writings, perspective by incongruity.

In his first book of social criticism, *Permanence and Change* (1935), Burke had proposed a bias-falling method to explain the crisis of confidence common to all social activists: why did people not change their responses as situations changed, even if a changed response was shown to be more in keeping with their own self-interest? Burke—that year poised to become a leading figure in the Communist-founded Popular Front—knew that even strongly held and vociferously debated facts were not enough to convince people to change their orientation. People must be persuaded, and persuasion was the bias in the dichotomy between aesthete poetics and Marxist propaganda. Burke’s persuasive method, “perspective by incongruity,” recognized that the first step lay in convincing people that their own perspective—their way of naming the world—was not unique but one among many possibilities. Perspective by incongruity established a new viewpoint by “violating the ‘proprieties’ of [a] word in its previous linkages” as one transferred it to a new setting and thus encouraged new considerations, forging new alignments across the bias of seemingly permanent divisions (1935/1984, 90). In fact, he wrote, the “vast documentation of historical and psychological relativity” present in the modern world “prepares for the maximum of Perspective by Incongruity, inasmuch as a given classification cuts across other classifications on the bias, and each new mode of classification produces new alignments incongruous with the alignments flowing from other modes of classification” (102, emphasis mine). The modern world, with its constantly conflicting ways of naming its rapidly shifting scenes, mandated incongruous linkages between multiple perspectives.

It was not, of course, a new idea, and Burke credited Nietzsche’s perspectivalism for the original concept (see Hawhee’s comprehensive discussion, 1999)—the action of a “free intellect” which remembers that it is we who create our perceptions out of words, which “smashes [the columbarium of ideas] to pieces, throws it into confusion, and then puts it together ironically, forging the alien, separating the familiar” (Nietzsche 1992, 639). However, it was Burke’s falling-on-the-bias position that added a new layer to Nietzsche’s thought: perspective by incongruity was not only a way to free the individual intellect; it was the method by which social groups could be persuaded to change their ways of naming the world and recognize that the shifting world itself demanded such a response. And
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rather than any one bias-falling position, such as those advocated by Burke on the bias across sociology, psychology, semantics, and poetics, perspective by incongruity was itself the definition of bias-falling action at a verbal level. In perspective by incongruity, Burke’s natural tendency to fall on the bias across theories and philosophies was verbally instantiated, as the forging of alien word combinations provided “new way[s] of putting the characters of events together [to] attempt to convert people” to new orientations, new ways of seeing and thus responding to the world (1935/1984, 86). It was persuasion to change at the level of style. When combined with the later specific orientations of Burke’s Chicago ideas, perspective by incongruity provided the verbal attitude that would soon inform the development of dramatism in a rapidly changing world.

Certainly the scene was shifting daily for Burke’s world as Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia and Europeans traded belligerent threats throughout the summer of 1939. Increasing numbers of people on both the Right and the Left saw the absolutist propaganda of a strongman authority figure—be it Hitler or Roosevelt or Stalin—as the only effective way to induce popular change while keeping everything from falling apart. The Left in Europe saw its own disunity as one of the factors in the rise of Hitler. There had been too much criticism, too little positive action. Surely, if there were ever a time when ongoing dialogue was not the answer, it was the summer of 1939.

But Burke was concerned less about the fate of the world than about the fate of the internal politics of America—and America, he thought, was not so far from Hitler’s fascism as it thought. “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” one of Burke’s best-known essays, used a 1939 review of the English translation of Mein Kampf to detail just how fascism posed an ideological threat. Burke presented first a shortened version of the article in June at the Third American Writers’ Congress of artists connected to the antifascist coalition the Popular Front (see George and Selzer 2007, 199–203). Burke was involved in preparing the call for the Writers’ Congress and would have been familiar with what the Congress Committee called “points to be kept in mind,” including an emphasis on unity across all progressive forces in “maximum support for President Roosevelt’s anti-fascist policy” (“Plans for the 3rd American Writers’ Congress,” 4/11/1939, KBP). For Burke, it was the unquestioning character of this call for solidarity that was problematic. In reviewing Hitler’s “Battle,” Burke both analyzed how Hitler concocted his “medicine” and exhorted readers to “know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America” (1939/1973b, 191).
In the latter respect Burke found it “tremendously important” that Hitler was attacking the parliament (199). Hitler named the “wrangle of the parliament” a serious problem of internal division and proposed to replace it “by the giving of one voice to the whole people, this to be the ‘inner voice’ of Hitler” (207). This was not merely a diagnosis of Hitler’s medicine but a cautionary tale for America, because the parliament, for Burke, was the place of ultimate good. “[A]t its best,” he wrote, “[parliament] is a ‘babel’ of voices” (200). Not, as some would say, at its worst, but at its best. The parliamentary babel showed the conflicting interests of various groups. Much more than mere squabbling, the babel teased out various real, material interests, setting one against the other to come to some as-yet-undetermined plan of action: “There [in parliament] is the wrangle of men representing interests lying awkwardly on the bias across one another” (200, emphasis mine). Parliament, like Burke himself in his letter to Josephson, like his language clusters crossing academic disciplines, and like motivational strategies of poetic naming, crossed boundaries as its members argued with each other and determined new perspectives that led to action. It operated in the same manner as poetic naming, playing up the ambiguities of attitudes by “heaping up all of these emotional factors, playing them off against one another.”

This heaping babel was not pretty. Indeed, Burke, whose falling on the bias had been criticized for years and who was now addressing a Writers’ Congress with a mandate for a “sharpened emphasis on unity,” recognized that “people so dislike the idea of internal division that … their dislike can easily be turned against the man or group who would so much as name it, let alone proposing to act upon it” (206). So Burke held up Hitler’s “Battle” to make it clear that he saw the alternative to the babel not as efficient unity but as fascism, the very thing against which the Popular Front was united. Hitler’s was the “unified’ kind of criticism that simply seeks for conscious ways of making one’s position more ‘efficient,’ more thoroughly itself” (211). What was needed to counter monologic unity was true criticism “in the ‘parliamentary’ sense of doubt, of hearkening to the opposition and attempting to mature a policy in the light of counter-policies” (211). This healthy sense of doubt, of considering seemingly oppositional viewpoints in the search for a way to combine ideas—this was the attitudinal heart of falling on the bias, and it bucked the trend of the war years. As Richard Pells documents, many on the Left would grow increasingly comfortable with the Popular Front’s call to unite behind the president. The New Republic, for instance, called repeatedly during the war for the granting of extraordinary
powers to the president and the suppression of Congress, which it viewed as obstructionist. “Worst of all,” writes Pells ironically, “Congress had the temerity to represent ‘local districts or special interests’ while President Roosevelt was striving heroically to serve the ‘whole people’” (1989, 13). This was the voice of monologue rather than bias-falling dialectic. For Burke, it was the slippery slope to fanaticism.

By upholding the parliamentary dialectic as a specific means of addressing issues through purposeful debate rather than through either fragmented chaos or monologic absolutism, Burke ran counter to the drive for unquestioning unity of his war-ridden times, and he tied this dialectic directly to his emerging concept of dramatic criticism. As early as 1938, he specifically titled dramatism a “parliamentary” alternative to war: “[Dramatic criticism] should offer a ground in common between propagandizer and propagandized, whereby the maximum amount of readjustment could be accomplished through the ‘parliamentary’ (discourse, discussion)” (1938/1973b, 313). Dramatic criticism, Burke would increasingly argue, provided a means by which the language used to name perspectives could be analyzed for just those commonalities that unexpectedly fell across hardened oppositions. Those arguing for unity behind the president were right that war was not the moment for ineffectual wrangling, but the proper response to fascist unity behind Hitler was not antifascist unity behind Roosevelt but a more efficient parliamentary conversation.

For fascistic fanaticism was only one side of the situation. Its opposite, as Wess pointed out, was dissipation, a rejection of the purported relativism of multiple perspectives by choosing none of them, “a kind of lapse into ‘isolationism,’” as Burke described it when he first wrote about the fanaticism/dissipation divide in “Tactics of Motivation” (1943). “I can imagine three distinct kinds of response to the situation after the war,” he wrote: bewilderment after the clear purpose of the war could turn to dissipation; desire for renewed clarity could turn to fanaticism; or “systematic contemplation of [the] problem [of motivation]” could lead to “liberalism,” in the pedagogic sense of a respectful analysis of a wide range of views (1943c, 2:37). While both fanaticism and dissipation see multiple perspectives as wrong—either dangerous or disabling—liberalism celebrates the wrangle of diverse ideas, the parliamentary babel that leads not to relativism but to choosing the best possible option.6

In “Four Master Tropes” (1941), written soon after President Roosevelt was elected to an unprecedented third term in office by a nation nervously facing global war, Burke explained that, as a bias-falling option, the parliamentary
debate over diverse ideas was not the same thing as the relativistic acceptance of all ideas. Acceptance—tolerance—was the first step toward liberal discourse, but it was not the endpoint—that would be the bewildered response of dissipation. Instead, liberal, parliamentary debate, which fell linguistically on the bias across the extremes of both dissipation and fanaticism, was equally conjoined with fanaticism’s “clarity”—the ability to choose among the perspectives and act upon that choice:

People usually confuse the dialectic with the relativistic. Noting that the dialectic (or dramatic) explicitly attempts to establish a distinct set of characters, all of which protest variously at odds or on the bias with one another, they think no further. . . . But insofar as terms are thus encouraged to participate in an orderly parliamentary development, the dialectic of this participation produces … a “resultant certainty” of a different quality, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but contributory. (1941/1969, 512–13, emphasis mine)

In other words, in order to attain a bias-falling parliamentary dialectic that both celebrated diversity and insisted upon action, what was needed was an attitude that recognized the incongruous nature of all perspectives joined with an ability to talk about the diverse perspectives in a universal, ironically unified manner—and this “talk about” became the pentadic terminology of dramatism. As he had insisted to the sociologists, such a language-based analysis, focusing on those areas about which people were most passionate, was the best way to understand what was going on and to act upon that knowledge. Only a dramatistic methodology would avoid the narrowing of vision brought about by either choosing one predetermined right way (fanaticism) or isolating oneself from needed action by choosing no way at all (dissipation). Dramatism forced the critic to examine the interactions among philosophies to arrive at an ironic certainty that allowed for flexible action.

It was the “master terms” of dramatistic analysis—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—that would provide the methodology for this analysis. These five master terms were inherent in any “rounded statement of motives,” with different terms dominant in different situations but all terms overlapping and merging “like the fingers on a hand” (1943a, 50–52). Burke’s introduction of the master terms in 1943 noted that “whatever term or terms a given philosophy might favor, the other terms are always in the offing, … so that each [philosophy], in its plenitude, will lie somewhat on the
bias across the logic of the five terms as presented in their initial simplicity” (52, emphasis mine). The pentad, then, would clarify not any one philosophy but the bias-falling interactions between all. Burke believed this interaction would produce a type of transcendence that sprang from the commonalities discovered as one first analyzed one’s own perspective in terms of its component parts (the fingers) and then looked across perspectives for points of merger (the hand). While his terms dialectic and transcendence borrow from Hegel, transcendence for Burke was a poetic recognition of ambiguity in which both sides were not in opposition but contributory. Both sides could work together at some level to produce a transcendent perspective falling on the bias across dichotomies, with the pentadic master terms designed to help critics find that point of interaction cutting across the old perspectives, uniting them in a new linguistic merger. “Encountering some division,” Burke explained, “we retreat to a level of terms that allow for some kind of merger (as ‘near’ and ‘far’ are merged in the concept of ‘distance’); then we ‘return’ to the division, now seeing it as pervaded by the spirit of the ‘One’ we had found in our retreat” (1945/1969, 440). This “One” responded to the “One” of fanaticism with the ironic certainty of the Many, while responding to the “Many” of dissipation with the ironic certainty of the One. A transcendent, ironic “oneness” was Burke’s response to war. As he wrote Allen Tate, his “entire project—Grammar, Rhetoric, and Symbolic—is designed not to eliminate war but to translate war to a higher level. And to the naked eye, this ‘higher level’ of war might even look like peace”—the peace of oppositions eristically debated and ironically unified (3/23/1944, ATC, emphasis Burke’s).7

Sharon Crowley in Toward a Civil Discourse has pointed out recently that America is largely afraid to have eristic debates, and that this fear stems in part from a sense that such debates are pointless—we cannot persuade each other. Entrenched opponents do not understand that stasis, agreement on the terms of the argument, can be reached so views can be exchanged. “Equally likely, though, people do not enter into argument because they do not wish to risk having their minds changed,” she writes (2006, 30). Burke saw the possibility of a solution to this dilemma in a bias-falling exchange that demands not abandoning the old views but reorganizing the best of them in light of the best of their oppositional extremes. In the specific ongoing act of interpreting the Constitution that grounds the U.S. legal and legislative system, Burke saw a systematic contemplation of multiple perspectives, a verbal prioritizing of competing wishes—in other words, an organized wrangle that allows the ironic “One” to emerge.
Burke began the project that became *A Grammar of Motives* with a study of the Constitution, and he ended the eventual book some half dozen years later with a dialectical analysis of the Constitution as a representative anecdote for human relations (see Wess 1996). The Constitution as act—the ongoing interpretation of competing values—is a falling on the bias in an ordered way. As Burke wrote, debates over the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution have historically swung between strict textual and broader contextual interpretations,

but we might make a distinction between the “essentializing” and the “proportional” that would *cut across this on the bias*. The essentializing strategy would be that of selecting some one clause or other in the Constitution, and judging a measure by reference to it. The proportional strategy would require a more complex procedure, as the Court would test the measure by reference to *all* the wishes in the Constitution.... The proportional method would also require explicit reference to a *hierarchy* among the disjunct wishes. (1945/1969, 380)

While all wishes (rights) inscribed in the Constitution are proposed equally, they are often competing rather than complementary. Therefore, “as applied to practical cases” and “at one time in history,” certain wishes must always take priority over others, with the priorities changing as the scene changes (380). What falls on the bias, then, is not any particular cut itself, any particular ordering of perspectives that would be established unilaterally and for all time. Instead it is the explicit reference to the cut, the *acknowledgement* that the choices one necessarily makes in prioritizing values are ironic, incongruous, and composed of many subcertainties—each of which, even the most seemingly antagonistic, is constituted by language and contributes something to the “certainty” of the action chosen. Dramatism, then, becomes the analytical tool—the grounding—to measure the various language options that go into each individual hierarchy of action choices.

This constitutionalized bias-falling, both as methodology and as philosophic stance, is where the historical analysis of dramatism can also meet Crable’s test of making Burkian scholarship matter today. Burkan bias-falling, applied not in opposition to competing ideas but across them, incongruously, is still not the standard approach to conflict, but bias-falling between fanaticism and dissipation is needed as the United States struggles today with its role as the superpower in a global community embroiled in
an ongoing war. For instance, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has
promoted a cooperation among nation-states that extends his work on the
discourse of the public sphere into a Burkean bias-falling option. Habermas
sees four models of international relations currently in operation, and these
can be placed on a rough continuum between Burke’s spheres of fanaticism
and dissipation, so that at one end is the nationalism of what Habermas
labels “neo-fascist” and “hegemonic liberal” philosophies, promoting the
unity of the One that can fall into fanaticism, while at the other end is
the globalism of “neo-liberal” and “post-Marxist” philosophies that exclude
the Many as political agents, leaving them only consumerist dissipation.
Habermas places the post-9/11 U.S. attempt to spread democracy through
unilateral action in the “hegemonic liberal” camp, and while he sees no prob-
lem with its goal—peaceful democracy—he is concerned about its means,
which favor unilateralism over dialogue: “the peace would be secured not by
law but by imperial power, and the world society would be integrated, not
through the political relations among world citizens, but through systemic,
and ultimately market, relations” (2006, 183–84). Habermas, like Burke,
believes in international, “cosmopolitan” interactions that achieve action
through dialogue, and his neo-Kantian, bias-falling alternative across the
four models calls for a “constitutional” collaboration in which the enforce-
ment of two global values—peace and human rights—at the supranational
level is combined with the laws, treaties, contracts, etc., that define working
relations at the transnational level.

This collaboration is a “constitutional” project for Habermas for the
same reason that Burke’s constitution was a representative anecdote—not
because of any particular set of normative values but because of the action
of determining the norms. The key condition for Habermas’s constitutional
alternative, drawn directly from his language theories, is “indirect ‘backing’
from the kinds of democratic processes of opinion- and will-formation that
can only be fully institutionalized within constitutional states” (141). That is,
a constitutional project in international relations needs backing from mem-
bers of the world community of opinion communicating together to find
common ground. Like Burke’s Constitution, this world community deter-
mines its identity through hierarchizing norms and values as its members
fall “awkwardly on the bias across one another.” Habermas believes that
this project of ongoing, action-oriented debate legitimizes global decisions.
Burke’s dramatism provides the methodology by which differing norms and
values can be analyzed and transcended into action, while his falling on the
bias provides the attitude necessary for such eristic debate to occur. Thus
Burke's constitutional project can help provide the means for Habermas's constitutional project by overcoming the antagonism to necessary debate identified by Crowley. As Burke predicted over sixty years ago, 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” (1943c, 2:39).

Bias-falling dramatism can be for us, as it was for Burke, both a specific methodological undertaking toward a historical opposition and a general verbal perspective toward any set of dichotomous positions seemingly deadlocked into inaction. That is, to borrow a concept of Burke's from his response to the neo-Aristotelians, falling on the bias across dichotomies can be “a constitutive act,” created in the midst of “a particular temporal scene” but also surviving “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” (1943/1969, 482). As a way of responding to the continually new historical realities of a world perpetually at war, falling on the bias can allow for equally shifting responses, ever-updated in content but always ongoing in attitude. Such an examination of both the timeless and the timebound aspects of dramatism can indeed make a historical study matter to the rhetorical corpus.

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NOTES

1. Sources labeled “KBP” are from the Kenneth Burke Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University. Sources labeled “ATC” are from the Allen Tate Collection (Correspondence Box 61, Folder 13), Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Sincere thanks are due to librarians at both those university archives, as well as to the Burke Trust for permission to use Burke's letters.

2. I thank Nan Johnson, Ann George, and the four anonymous readers from Philosophy and Rhetoric for their always insightful comments on drafts of this article.

3. I discuss rhetoricizing dramatism more fully in Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism (2008).

4. See, for instance, Allen Tate’s response to Burke’s moderately favorable review of Proletarian Literature in the United States: “Before his ‘conversion’ to Communism [Burke] had subjected himself to a rigorous critical discipline,” while afterwards he could not dismiss
“as usual i fell on the bias”

literature he knew was “almost worthless” (1936, 363). Meanwhile, the volume’s editor, Granville Hicks, had already decided that Burke was an aesthete in progressive clothing: “Burke’s theory is really one more attempt to separate literature from life” (1974, 10).

5. For a fascinating look at Burke’s continued influence on the University of Chicago curriculum, see James Beasley (2007).

6. The concern with relativistic dissipation is illustrated by two incongruously negative descriptions of falling on the bias that appear in Burke’s titular essay for The Philosophy of Literary Form. Written just after Europe officially broke apart into warring factions, his essay describes bias-falling as relativism induced by competing perspectives. In the first instance, Burke questioned whether science and poetry had both replaced what Francois Lyotard would later call the grand metanarrative with many little works that “fall across one another on the bias … each work pulling us in a different direction and these directions tending to cancel off one another, as with the conflicting interests of a parliament” (1941/1973, 8, emphasis mine). In the second, Burke notes that unlike a traditional symphony, a modern tone poem “sought to bewitch us” and our only responses were triviality or “infection by … a general clutter of spells, so falling across one another on the bias, that in their confusion they somewhat neutralized the effects of one another” (1941/1973, 119, emphasis mine). Perhaps what we see in “The Philosophy of Literary Form” is Burke’s own momentary lapse into the overwhelming push for fanatic unity that was sweeping the nation in the face of global conflagration.

7. For a more focused look at dramatism as a response to war, see my “Burke and War: Rhetoricizing the Theory of Dramatism” (2007).

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“as usual i fell on the bias”

