

## **Burke and War: Rhetoricizing the Theory of Dramatism**

*While rhetoricians are familiar with Kenneth Burke's epigram Ad bellum purificandum, little attention has been paid to why the "purification of war" would be Burke's purpose in A Grammar of Motives. Yet the Grammar, with its theory of dramatism, was written throughout a conflict Burke called "the mightiest war the human race will ever experience." This article recovers Burke's wartime writings and explores the impact of World War II on his intellectual development. Arguing that Burke's dialectical project was conceived as a specific, hortatory response to the absolutism of total war, it recontextualizes Burkean themes of ambiguity, transcendence, dialectic, and action as it "rhetoricizes" dramatism, placing it within its original cultural/material conversational parlor.*

---

Debra Hawhee has recently noted that to reconcile the multiple Kenneth Burkes with his multiple rhetorical theories, "it would be incumbent upon Burke scholars to take seriously Burke's terms and turns and look into their conditions of emergence" (5).<sup>1</sup> One such condition is the impact of war on Burke's thinking—specifically the Second World War, which raged on during the years Burke wrote and rewrote what would become his theory of dramatism. Burke's struggles to effectively analyze human motivation, resulting in his 1945 publication of *A Grammar of Motives*, emphasized the dilemma for intellectuals ambiguous about responding to what Burke called "the mightiest war the human race will ever experience" ("When 'Now' Became 'Then'" 5). While the dramatism of the *Grammar*, analyzing human communication as action, is now standard in modern rhetorical theory, its implications are obscured when it remains separated from the wartime context from which it emerged.

The attack on US forces at Pearl Harbor did not end debate over the nation's engagement in World War II, but it did shift the metaphorical battle lines for both sides, as prewar ambivalence fell victim to patriotic certitude. Burke was among those caught in the shift when an article he had written just before December 7, 1941 was published just after—an article in which he had asked, sardonically,

whether “Hitler’s project of unification” might not be “true ‘progress’” compared to the disunity of old Europe (“Where Are We Now?” 5). The onset of war made his irony out of place, and after an agonizing back and forth with his editor, his February 1942 “apology” explained that “these notes were written when our country was still at peace; they are read when our country is at war. And no step could be wider than the step from peace to war” (“When ‘Now’ Became ‘Then’” 5). What could wordsmiths do when massive reliance on brute force now seemed both necessary and right? Burke wrote a number of political and literary essays during the war that would guide him toward an answer: dramatism. Dramatism encourages a poetic dialectic—the celebration of differing perspectives—and transcendence—the search for points of merger—in an effective parliamentary debate. It is the opposite of the stance mandated by total war: monolithic certainty in the rule of the strongman. The call for war’s purification in the epigram to the *Grammar* was more than idealism, therefore; it was Burke’s notice that the *Grammar* would in fact be a specific response to the real threat of totalitarianism, both militarily from Nazi Germany and politically from the US response to that militarism. Obscuring the war obscures the importance Burke placed on ambiguity; emphasizing the text as a response to war allows poetic dialectic and transcendence to play larger roles in the contemporary understanding of Burke’s rhetorical theory.

Examining Burke’s lesser-known articles and correspondence during the time that he was drafting *A Grammar of Motives* and using these documents to inform a contextualized close reading of the *Grammar*, I hope to shed light on dramatism as a specific, hortatory methodology to counter the supposed efficiencies of one-voiced unity with a more efficient multivoiced dialectic. Viewing the *Grammar* as a time-bound response to war as well as a timeless theory highlights the ways in which it is not only a description of the general human condition but also a call to a specific reaction to (fascistic) monologue. It is my larger contention that such scenic contextualizations—what I call “rhetoricizing”—will contribute to an examination of rhetorical theories as conversationally constructed entities, just as are the situations those theories define. As Peter Herman asks in regard to literary theory, why, when “the act of historicizing literature has become almost axiomatic in both scholarship and the classroom, has there been little sustained interest in historicizing *theory*?” (4). This article attempts to do just that.

### War in Europe: Unity in Diversity

Burke studied human motivation throughout the Second World War before publishing *A Grammar of Motives* in 1945. Indeed, seven years prior, he had written to Robert Penn Warren, editor of the *Southern Review*, that

the whole business of rounding out a position now takes form as a “critical trilogy,” comprising “Permanence and Change,” “Attitudes Toward History,” and a book “On Human Relations” for which I am now taking notes. It is to be mainly a discussion of “typical, recurrent situations” and the “strategies” evolved to meet them. (2/26/38, BP)<sup>2</sup>

He was circulating a draft of “On Human Relations” to publishers by spring 1942 without success, and as he continued drafting during the war, his attitude toward America’s involvement, his questions about the role of art, and his concerns for a postwar future all contributed to a drastic reshaping. The “typical, recurrent situations” became more specifically those that drove society toward war, while the “discussion” of “strategies” became a systematic, language-based methodology and exhortation to responsive, dialogic action.

By the late 1930s, allies around the world were united in what they considered an antifascist coalition, but it was in fact a coalition against particular strongman rule—Hitler, Mussolini, Hirohito. By the time America was embroiled in the war, Burke was one of the few insisting that the seeming inefficiencies of parliamentary debate were always preferable, even to the rule of benevolent strongmen like Roosevelt or Churchill, even in a crisis. Yet the impact of World War II on Burke’s work has been little discussed. Robert Ivie’s insightful analysis of the War on Terror, for instance, discusses of Burke’s wartime writings only his 1939 review of Hitler’s “Battle”; Robert Wess’s profound analyses of Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives* do not discuss the war; and, while David Blakesley’s excellent *The Elements of Dramatism* makes one of the few full references to World War II (22–23), it is by necessity brief in this introductory text. This limited attention is not surprising, as most of Burke’s overt commentary on the war appeared in short articles for *Direction*, the journal of the Marxist antifascist coalition the Popular Front.<sup>3</sup> Although Burke was a coeditor and frequent contributor to *Direction*, his political articles are uncollected, and the more familiar literary articles from this period contain only oblique political allusions. Thus the picture of his intense interest in the public policy debates of wartime America can easily be overlooked while interpreting Burke’s overall language theory.

To demonstrate how contextualizing the scene of Burke’s theory—rhetorizing—can lead to a more socialized perspective on his thought, let me begin with a brief rereading of a seemingly apolitical work from the very beginning of the war: Burke’s poem “Dialectician’s Hymn.” Read at the end of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, it is a poetic encomium to the power of language. Within its original context, however, both historically and within the trajectory of Burke’s work, its emphasis on the power of the dialectic as a response to dictatorship

is clearer. The poem was first published in the *University Review* in December 1939, within months of both the declaration of war in Europe (September 1939) and of Burke's analysis of Adolph Hitler's threat to parliamentary debate, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" (published in the *Southern Review*, summer 1939). In context, the dialectic—the competing diversity of voices whose combined perspectives can best achieve union—can be read not only as a generalized good for Burke but as an argument for Burke's methodology to overcome the human communication failure of World War II.

Hail to Thee, Logos, / Thou Vast Almighty Title, / In Whose name  
we conjure—

.....

May we be Thy delegates / In parliament assembled. / Parts of  
Thy wholeness. / And in our conflicts / Correcting one another.

.....

Thus may we help Thine objects / To say their say— / Not sup-  
pressing by dictatorial lie, / Not giving false reports / That misrep-  
resent their saying.

.....

May we compete with one another, / To speak for Thy Creation  
with more justice— / Cooperating in this competition / Until our  
naming / Gives voice correctly. / And how things are / And how we  
say things are / Are one.

.....

And may we have neither the mania of the One / Nor the delir-  
ium of the Many— / But both the Union and the Diversity—. ("Dia-  
lectician's Hymn" 133–35)

When "Dialectician's Hymn" is compared to "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" the dialectical project exalted in the poem stands in specific opposition to the propagandizing of Hitler. For example, while the dictator in "Hitler's Battle" launches an "attack upon the parliamentary" ("Battle" 7), the dialectician of the poem prays for representatives of the Logos "in parliament assembled"; while the dictator carries on his cult of irrationalism "under the slogan of 'Reason'" and his cult of war "in the name of humility, love, and peace" (6), the dialectician longs for the day when "how things are / And how we say things are / Are one." And where the dictator promotes a false unity that attacks any reflective thought (the group "turns against the diagnostician who states [internal division] as a fact" [11]), the dialectician aims for cooperation in the competition to give others their say. The dictator is the manic One, the dialectician channels the Many into

diverse Union. Burke's poetic dialectician, in other words, uses the power of multivoiced naming to counter tyranny. As Burke wrote that same fall in *Direction*, the real "enemy" for America was not Hitler alone but both the equivalent empires of Europe, the "aging British Empire" and the "young Nazi Empire" ("Embargo" 2). Even his friends disagreed with this assessment, but for Burke both empires suppressed the dialectic.

Burke tied this upholding of the parliamentary dialectic directly to his emerging concept of "dramatic criticism" that "should offer a *ground in common* . . . whereby the maximum amount of readjustment could be accomplished through the 'parliamentary' (discourse, discussion)" ("Twelve Propositions," PLF 313). The drive for a false, monologic unity was Burke's nemesis, to be countered with a unity of common ground attained not from strongman monologue but from discourse and discussion—the parliamentary babel, as Burke celebrated it in "Hitler's Battle." "The parliament, at its best, is a 'babel' of voices," he wrote, "[a] wrangle of men representing interests lying awkwardly on the bias across one another" (7). Not many besides Burke saw this awkward babel as diversity *at its best*. Hitler's false, monologic unity was seductive—it offered surety and, as Burke realized, it satisfied psychological needs not only in Germany but also in the US that had been unmet in the upheavals of the 1920s and 30s. The time between the two world wars was "a *decadent* kind of peace . . . without integral unifying drive," Burke wrote in "What to Do Until the Doctor Comes," a November 1940 article for *Direction*. "War here serves as the 'lift' out of a purely decadent, negative, haphazard and aimless kind of peace . . . This is the psychological appeal of 'total war'" (24).

### War in America: Unity of Action

This, then, was Burke's dilemma—how to promote purpose and unity without devolving into totalitarianism. A number of Leftists had become disillusioned by the late 1930s with the ability of "the people" to make rational choices. *New Republic* editor Bruce Bliven, for instance, wrote that liberal intellectuals had come to realize "how profound is the role of the emotions and . . . subconscious impulse in determining men's actions" (qtd. in Pells, *Radical Visions* 322). The propaganda machine of the Nazis seemed so much more effective than Popular Front attempts to organize a mass movement via meetings and education. Some intellectuals gave up—Philip Rahv at the *Partisan Review*, for instance, argued that the compromised proletarian writer produced neither social change nor good art and should instead return to the role of critical observer separated from society (414, 419). Faced with war, the Popular Front platform would define unity as "maximum support of President Roosevelt's anti-fascist policies" ("Plans for the

3rd American Writers Congress,” 4/11/39, BP), and the *New Republic* would advocate giving Roosevelt “extraordinary powers” and curtailing Congressional oversight (Pells, *Liberal Mind* 13).

Against this defeatism, Burke insisted that in a war against monologic fascism, the proper response was not to pander to the popular comfort zone but counter it—to expand peoples’ tolerance for new conversations. The Left was increasingly entranced with the supposedly unifying purpose of one forceful voice, and Burke’s final comment on the decade pointed out the danger of this path. In “Plea of the People,” published in December 1939 in the *New Masses*, Burke echoed in verse his view of war as a falsification of the true unity of cooperation:

We have even told ourselves how by the wars / We might again be  
brought together, / By the helpfulness of slaughter. / The wars are  
fuller than the peace, / In fellowship. / There is within us a realm of  
loveliness, / A willingness of warmth and chuckling. / All that we are  
as men working together / Waits within us. (*Collected Poems* 59–60)

Two years later, his *Philosophy of Literary Form* included an article (“The Nature of Art Under Capitalism,” originally published in 1933) commenting that in contrast with the rampant competition of capitalism, war brings out cooperation and the moral qualities of “sacrifice, risk, companionship, the strong sense of being in a unifying enterprise” (PLF 319). It is, however, strictly the unity of “us” against “them.” From 1939 to 1945, Burke’s attention was fixed on how to promote a persuasive dialectic as an alternative.

Burke’s development of dramatism, then, began as a contrast to the drive for total obedience that accompanied war’s arrival. In a series of articles for *Direction*—“Embargo” (1939), “What to do Until the Doctor Comes” (1940), “Americanism” (1941), and “Where Are We Now?” (1941)—he repeatedly cautioned against American adaptations of fascist tendencies. Poets and critics must “equate *patriotism* and *Americanism* with an artistic and critical idiom much more penetrating than that which the business leader seems content with,” he urged (“Americanism” 3). In this light his post-Pearl Harbor “war editorial,” “When ‘Now’ Became ‘Then,’” can at first seem like a reversal:

We are now in what is surely to be the mightiest war the human race  
will ever experience . . . . And in this solemn situation, our first duty  
to our nation and to ourselves is to approach every problem, to con-  
ceive of every issue, in terms that will make for the maximum of  
national unity, and so for the maximum of effectiveness against our

Axis enemies . . . . Criticism, there still should be . . . . Admonition, there should certainly be . . . . But absolutely every utterance should be put forward and considered only in ways that contribute, most exactly, towards unity of action. (5)

However, Burke's "unity of action" plan was far different from the monologic unity that too closely mimicked the Nazis' efforts. While others began to produce war propaganda, Burke followed up with "The Study of Symbolic Action" (published in *Chimera* in 1942), in which he systemized his "'dramatistic' approach to poetry" (7) by outlining three categories of expression: "poetry as action . . . science as *preparation* for action . . . rhetoric as *inducement* to action" (9). His study of motivations—people's language-based actions in the drama of life—would not be scientific preparation for action, the efficient certainties of positivism, but instead would be rhetorical inducement to a unity of action springing from dialectic. As language+attitude, it was description *and* exhortation.

Later in 1942 Burke outlined the parameters of this rhetorical project in "War and Cultural Life" for *The American Journal of Sociology*. As a Popular Front theorist and veteran of the proletarian "literary wars," Burke knew that the best literary exhortations stirred their audience through a multiplicity of voices. He could conceive of a rhetorical/aesthetic project that would help the free world in its fight against both fascism abroad and commercialized patriotism, its manifestation at home:

[T]he attempt should be made to corrode the rigidities of the Nazi doctrines not by a head-on attack, but by a patient review of the human scene in all its fullness and complexity. Such a program . . . would demoralize in a way that is, in the profoundest sense of the word, a "remoralization." (410)

The remoralization programs might also be "broadcast over our domestic circuits. If there were less of [the 'rattletrap' Victory programs being aired] we might have had a sign that the victory of our culture is better deserved" (410). For Burke, the greatest danger to democracy always came from within.

Burke called on the government to undertake this "psychological warfare" project of humanizing war by countering hegemonic certitude (410). It was also, however, the project he laid out for himself: "What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" is how he would describe it on the first page of the *Grammar* three years later (GM xv). It was the project he expected the wartime government to act upon. As he wrote his friend Malcolm

Cowley, “one can always be sure at least that, if he can but get his book out, there will be somebody in officialdom to at least lay eyes upon it long enough to swipe from it” (1/27/42, qtd. in Jay 249). Burke’s expectation throughout the war was that he would be read by “officialdom,” and his project was an inducement to their action.<sup>4</sup>

### The War Years: Dramatistic Method

Wanting to contribute to the fight against fascism, Burke began publishing short articles in literary journals that laid out the ideas on motivation and symbolic action that he was developing into the *Grammar*. “Tactics of Motivation,” for instance, published in 1943 in *Chimera*, argued that neither science nor faith were adequate methodologies for measuring human motivation, and what was needed was a “god-term” that would adequately capture both measurable and immeasurable aspects of motivation (I, 28)—a linguistic term because language was the unique trait of human relations. Burke proposed “drama,” which since the late 1930s had symbolized for him the action of human interchange. He then pointed to the war/postwar as rationales for its importance. “I can imagine three distinct kinds of response to the situation after the war,” he wrote: bewilderment after the clear wartime purpose could turn to “dissipation,” desire for renewed clarity could turn to “fanaticism,” or “systematic contemplation of this problem [of motivation]” could lead to “liberalism,” a critical debate of a wide range of views (II, 37).

With “drama,” then, Burke countered the two major social poles of his day—the decadent debunking of the interwar years (dissipation) and the fascist hegemony that was its reaction (fanaticism). He combined drama with his perceived solution, the effective (“systematic”) babel of the parliament, where all views are critically examined with an eye toward action. Postwar action, Burke believed, should involve neither endless bickering nor the too-quick adoption of any one philosophy. Only a dramatistic methodology could avoid a narrowing of vision by forcing the critic to examine the interactions between *all* points of view without excluding even contradictory or distasteful impulses. Only drama allowed for the ambiguity and irony that was the province of contemporary poetics.

This dramatistic methodology involved his familiar “five master terms” of pentadic analysis, but though he had mentioned them for years, Burke did not detail them in print until an essay in *View* late in 1943:

Any rounded statement of motives . . . will say what is being done (the Act); under what circumstances or in what situation (Scene) the act takes place; what sort of person (Agent) does it; by what means (Agency) he does it, and for what end or Purpose. (“Five Master Terms” 50)



Burke clearly saw this article as key to the development of his theory. At least twice he urged it on his friend Allen Tate, noting that it marked a change from a “heuristic” to a “pedagogical” approach into dramatism: Instead of uncovering truths with the author, “in this method, everything starts, ‘There are five of these . . . there are three of those . . . there are ten of this, that, and the other . . . this chapter is constructed about the contrast between dumtweedle and deetwaddle, etc.’ Doctrinal, sir, doctrinal” (7/11/43, TC).<sup>5</sup> The pentad operationalized Burke’s belief that analyzing human relationships as drama would provide the best means for inducing effective action. With his pedagogical pentad, Burke thought he had a methodology sufficient to analyze the parliamentary babel and make sense of its underlying commonalities. He had found the means for his rhetorical inducement to action. His five terms focused debate on vocabulary because he believed there should be “less emphasis upon *questions and/or answers*—more emphasis upon *terms*” in critical discussions (“Character of Our Culture” 688), and the questioners should be “pliant,” able to examine all attitudes toward the key terms, “*the good, the bad, and the indifferent, all three.*” This was the “ironic or dialectic use of language” that became dramatic criticism (687). But again, this was a project in rhetoric, not pure science—its goal was persuasion for action, “for in an adequate terminology there are adequate exhortations and admonitions” (686). With the proper terms, people could more properly say “we must” (exhortation) and “we must not” (admonition)—and when war threatened to curtail such debate in favor of an enforced unity, the ability to properly exhort and admonish was a necessary act.

The push for uncritical unity came from all quarters. President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” 1941 inaugural address, for instance, signaled the suppression of democratic dissent in a “free” nation, noting:

A free nation has the right to expect full cooperation from all groups . . . .  
The best way of dealing with the few slackers or troublemakers in our midst is, first, to shame them by patriotic example, and, if that fails, to use the sovereignty of Government to save Government.

This was the unity of one voice, the “false cooperation” engendered by war, rather than the “true cooperation” of unity emerging from dialectic that Burke advocated.

Burke was given the opportunity to publish his dramatistic approach to dialectical unity when Tate took over the *Sewanee Review* and asked for a “summary of your dramatism, or an application to two or three poems; say

about 5000 words” (2/22/44, BP). Burke insisted that the piece he sent—some 60,000 words, the draft of Chapter 1 of the *Grammar*—was extremely pertinent:

Its most severe moment, sir, is but part of a *Comedy*. A Comedy that will probably have for its slogan: Towards the purifying of war—which I am trying to decide whether to monumentalize still further as *Ad Bellum Purificandum* or as *Ad Purificationem Belli*. You will read here of an Original Sin grounded in the very nature of human utterance. And the 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. (3/23/44, TC)

Burke’s project would transcend physical war with verbal “combat and pacification” (3/23/44), turning the tragic absolute of war into the comic potentiality of alternate perspectives.

### **Translating War: Ambiguity and the Possibility of Change**

The scene of war, then, made for two linked emphases in the *Grammar of Motives*: attention to comic ambiguity and the corresponding potential for transcending action. Burke articulated these two emphases from the first chapter of Part I, and—keeping in mind his “pedagogical” approach—he grounded them in the pentad. First, his dramatic ratios—the interplay among scene/act/agent/agency/purpose, in which qualities in one element call forth qualities in another—while potentially so mathematical, were in fact not open to precise measurement but instead were inherently ambiguous, he wrote, the interplay never complete: “We are capable of but partial acts, acts that but partially represent us and that produce but partial transformations” (GM 19). Dramatic analysis was not concerned with eliminating this ambiguity of real human life but instead with highlighting it, with finding “terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise” (xviii). Because conditions of war suppress ambiguity on all fronts, Burke’s response highlighted it in the celebration of partial acts and multiple perspectives.

The emphasis on ambiguity also explains Burke’s choice of “substance” as the “over-all category” for a study of human motivation (33).<sup>6</sup> Substance is inherently ambiguous—etymologically extrinsic (“standing under”—the extrinsic push of social/material context) and functionally intrinsic (“interior essence”—the pull of the psyche) (23). “The Problem of the Intrinsic” in 1943 had already

discussed this overlap in the context of a poem as both timebound (extrinsic-contextual) and timeless (intrinsic-textual)—an object enacted by a poet in a particular scene as well as one read by the ages (“Intrinsic,” GM 482). “Substance” thus demonstrated for Burke the inherent ambiguity of verbal action, and dramatism—the only criticism to examine the ambiguous overlap between context and text—was the only complete critical approach.<sup>7</sup>

This theoretical discussion Burke again grounded in war, noting that overlooking the ambiguity of “substance,” one equated “the intrinsic with the unique,” defining a thing only as it differed from others while ignoring its “many similarities” (GM 48). Thus society came dangerously close to adopting motivators favored by its opponent: “The ambiguity of external and internal motivation has recently plagued some enemies of Fascism who saw that an effective war against the Fascist nations would require many ‘Fascist’ measures on the part of the Anti-Fascists” (34). From Burke’s perspective, “wartime measures” suppressing ambiguity ignored how the us/them interplay could shape both the (intrinsic) American psyche and the (extrinsic) American social scene.

Further, after six years of war, Burke worried that denying ambiguity denied the possibility for change. When one viewed actions as determined by either psyche or scene, refuting calls for change meant simply appealing to the opposing motivator, such that a person demanding change because the current political climate invokes war (extrinsic motivation) could be refuted by critics discussing the “innate ‘combative instinct’ or ‘natural urge to kill’” (49). Acknowledging the ambiguous interplay of human motivation counteracted the otherwise seemingly inevitable lurch from war to war. Attention to change likewise sheds light on Burke’s lengthy exploration of the Act of Creation as the prototypical “‘pure act’ or ‘pure drama’” (61), a section Burke added to his 1945 revision of “Tactics of Motivation” for this part of the book. Creation became important because God’s act of creating the world demonstrated “substantially” to Burke the ability of something new to appear out of nothingness, leading him to argue that of the five pentadic terms, only Act allowed for novelty. That is, motivation for action could come from the act itself, “as ‘one thing leads to another’ in an order that would not have occurred had we not acted” (67). Humans could do more than respond to the current scene—by taking action, they could choose proactively to create something new—something approaching peace.

### **Translating War II: Exhortation to Action**

The motivation to enact a new global scene led Burke inevitably toward greater exhortation for action, and his rewriting of “Tactics of Motivation” as “Scope and Reduction” in the *Grammar* traces this transition. “Tactics”

described humans seeking “for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality” by developing “vocabularies that are *selections* of reality” that sometimes “function as a *deflection* of reality” (“Tactics” I, 27); “Scope and Reduction” added the action component that selecting one vocabulary rather than another *already* reduces reality from all possibilities to the particulars described by those language selections. Any vocabulary, therefore, was already a reductive action affecting future (re)actions. Burke insisted that there was no stepping back to determine the “actual reality” before acting, nor was there the excuse of being so swept along that one could not act. One was always already acting.

Burke’s academic friends—New Critics, Chicago School sociologists and neo-Aristotelians, general semanticists—had been studying the social scene without seeing themselves as actors in it; his friends in the Popular Front had decided that the scene made social action untenable. Both sides were being swept along by the overwhelming purpose of war, and Burke was exhorting them instead to act, to see their language as already involving them in the promotion—or suppression—of social change. Robert Wess has written that Burke’s linguistic realism—his understanding of language acts as events as real as those in the physical realm—is a key to understanding Burke’s goal in the *Grammar*. I would add that Burke’s political responses to sweeping exigencies of the war influenced the adoption of this linguistic realism. The imperative was clear: To ignore these linguistic actions was to deemphasize change and give over power to the already powerful (GM 113).

With linguistic action as an imperative, even Burke’s lengthy discussion of the philosophic schools in Part II of the *Grammar* takes on a hortatory tinge. Examining the two available sections that Burke recommended to Allen Tate for advance publication in the *Sewanee Review* (4/25/45, TC) shows that that he was highlighting the danger of ignoring ambiguity and its interlocking role with action-oriented change. In both sections Burke demonstrated that any attempt to purify ambiguities led only to inaction. That is, eliminating the babel of competing voices did not lead to the efficient action promised by univocal totalitarianism (or univocal science or mysticism)—purifying ambiguity removed the need for rhetorical inducement, and thus for purposeful action.

Burke first recommended to Tate “‘Incipient’ and ‘Delayed’ Action” as “methinks one of the best spots in the book” (4/25/45). In this section he compared dramatism with a school to which it was frequently equated, the general semantics of Alfred Korzybski at the Illinois Institute of Technology (indeed, the original dust jacket of the *Grammar* proclaimed it “Semantics with a Difference”). The “difference” for Burke was that semantics sought to scientifically transcend ambiguity, turning into knowledge what Burke sought to rhetorically emphasize as action (GM 242). Korzybski sought to purify the “attitude” of language—attitude that Burke saw as key to action rather than its delay. Semanticists

advocating “delayed” action because of the ambiguities inherent in language misunderstood that even their decision to delay was already evincing an attitude, thus taking the first step toward an action (239). The semanticists, Burke thought, in good scientific fashion would study communication *ad infinitum*, as preparation for action, searching for an illusory purity of *language* that was not the required action stance for the real world—which required a purification of *war*.

Burke took the same approach to the elevation of purity over ambiguity in the other section he recommended to Tate, “Modifications of Purpose.” Burke here equated the overemphasis on mystic purpose with a too-narrow focus on means and ends resulting in a desire to achieve “pure” ends only by “pure” means. This Burke rejected. “All means are necessarily ‘impure,’” he wrote, serving both the end and their own intrinsic purposes (309). Just as with semantics, the desire for “purity” meant falsely erasing inherent ambiguities and, by highlighting agency (the means to an end), downplayed act, the one self-motivating term in the pentad. An overemphasis on pure purpose, then, led once again to inaction, a particularly bad stance in a situation of war. Burke specifically cited Aldous Huxley’s defense of pacifism as an example of purpose overemphasized:

Huxley . . . [holds] that only by peaceful means can we get peace. The logical conclusion of this doctrine would seem to be that peace as an end is either impossible or unnecessary. For if we could get peace by peaceful means we’d have peace already; and if we couldn’t get it by means somewhat short of peace, then there would be no use in our attempting to get it at all. (309)

The proper response to total war was not total peace—a pure cessation of all violence as the only end in itself. Like the purity of general semantics, that was too rigid. Instead, Burke’s call was “to perfect and simplify the ways of admonition” so that humanity’s warlike tendencies might be channeled into competition instead of killing, and

human thought may be directed towards “the purification of war,” not perhaps in the hope that war can be eliminated from any organism that, like man, has the motives of combat in his very essence, but in the sense that war can be refined to the point where it would be much more peaceful than the conditions we would now call peace. (305)

A broader understanding of ambiguous motivations, with liquid analytical treatment of all five terms, was not only the proper way to view human relations but also, it seemed, the way to transcend war.

### Victory and Beyond: Transcending War

Transcendence—that grounding place in which points of merger as well as division can be comprehended—is the cornerstone of the end of the *Grammar*, “On Dialectic.” Dialectic, the conversation that argues the various perspectives on any situation, produces conclusions that are ironic rather than pure, requiring “that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but contributory” to the end idea, as Burke had argued in 1941’s “Four Master Tropes” (513). This dialectic was less oppositional than Hegel’s; it was closer to the “poetic synthesis” that critic Cleanth Brooks had described as a poem holding within itself, ironically, its complementarities (opposites and discords) resolved and reconciled (571). Poetic transcendence, rather than the scientific transcendence of opposites that perpetuated certainties, was the special contribution of a poetic worldview that Burke, as a literary critic, could make to the discussion of motives. Incorporating subcertainties and alternate perspectives, this poetic transcendence returned participants ambiguously “to the division, now seeing it as pervaded by the spirit of the ‘One’” (GM 440).

The third part of the *Grammar*, then, culminates Burke’s celebration of ambiguity. If Part I outlines the methodology of dramatism and Part II proves its universal nature as an analytical tool, Part III demonstrates its consequences: Embracing ambiguities is the alternative to war because it allows diverse perspectives to be analyzed and transcended into a unity that merges without erasing divisions. Poetically transcendent unity incorporates the irony of ambiguous subperspectives rather than negating them for some illusory “pure” certainty, as does science or mysticism. It upholds the babel of the parliament against the false unity of the dictator because its methodology allows the parliament to maintain multiple perspectives while seeing itself as (ironically) pervaded by the spirit of the One.

Burke had begun his study of motivations six years earlier “thoroughly involved in some theorizing on the nature of constitutions” (Burke to Brooks, 12/1/39, BP). He ended it in 1945 seeing “constitution” as the representative anecdote for the purification of war. In “constitution” Burke employed another ambiguous term whose meaning encompasses both “Constitution”—the fundamental principles by which an organized group is established and governed—and “constitution”—the action of making or establishing. That is, “constitution” is both agency and act, and in its overarching role in civic life, as with the US Constitution, it is also scene.

The US Constitution purifies war in two ways, Burke argued. First, in its intrinsic, timeless status as agency, the Constitution, like the *Grammar* itself, is a call to action in the guise of a description, embedding the attitude needed for

desired change. As Burke put it, “men induce themselves and others to act by devices that deduce ‘let us’ from ‘we must’ or ‘we should.’ And ‘we must’ and ‘we should’ they deduce in turn from ‘it *is*’—for only by assertions as to how things *are* can we finally substantiate a judgment” (336-37). Thus, when the Constitution is used to declare what “We the People” will “ordain and establish,” it is expressing the Constitutional wish for these actions (“let us form a more perfect Union”) deduced from the hortatory “we should have a more perfect Union,” while its inscription describes the action as already occurring (“the U.S. as so ordained *is* a more perfect Union”).

Second, in its extrinsic, time-bound status as act, the Constitution as a living document *constitutes* the unending dialogue of the parliament, in which participants continue to struggle via Supreme Court decisions, amendments, and general policy debates over competing responses to their changing situations, generating competing wishes that the Constitution prioritizes. Burke’s example was the 1940 debate over whether the “unlimited emergency” declared by President Roosevelt would mean the cancellation of Congressional elections. Constitutional scholars asserted that “the Constitution means what the high justices say it means,” and the Supreme Court might well uphold one principle (the general welfare) over another (regular elections) in the specific scene of wartime (381). This continually reordered prioritizing of Constitutional wishes made explicit for Burke the contingent nature of society’s ambiguous choices. The Constitution, then, purifies war and transcends difference not through pure monologue but through the dialectic babel of explicitly competing wishes that lead to new, ironically ambiguous forms of action.

In sum, Burke’s response to the “total war” surrounding him in the 1940s was to produce a methodology for effective action within the one arena that war strove hardest to eliminate: the parliamentary babel of diverse perspectives. Dramatism would lead toward the purification of war because it enabled a way to talk about differences as linguistic entities and consider together their essential points of unity. Like a Constitution, it allowed the components of diverse perspectives to be continually reordered in new ways that better responded to current scenes. Like a poem, it remained aware that any notion arising out of the dialectic incorporated other possibilities that might well need greater emphasis as the scene changed. Like symbolic action in general, it recognized that all such linguistic description was already the beginning of real-world action.

Leaving aside the wartime context of Burke’s development of dramatism, rhetoricians today are at a disadvantage in the use of its critical lens, underutilizing ambiguity and feeling less the hortatory call to action implicit in its methodology for negotiating between the narrow stance of absolute certainty and the non-stance of relativism. While the polishing of the critical lens is an ongoing

intellectual act, the ability to turn the lens on today's situation of war—to offer a tool to purify war, to transcend divisions rather than perpetuate them—makes it only more critical. Rhetoricizing theories such as dramatism, then, can not only shed new historical light on these theories but also allow them to shed new light on those contemporary situations to which they are applied.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sincere thanks are due most especially to Ann George, as well as Nan Johnson, Brian Fehler, and *RR* peer reviewers Barry Brummett and Shane Borrowman, for their helpful critical feedback on this article.

<sup>2</sup>Sources labeled “BP” are from the Kenneth Burke Papers at The Pennsylvania State University.

<sup>3</sup>Burke's role at the start of the Popular Front is well known—his speech to the First American Writer's Congress in 1935 is an apocryphal Burke story recently well explicated by George and Selzer. What is less well known is the impact of Burke's thought on the Front, yet cultural historian Michael Denning calls Burke “the major cultural theorist of the Popular Front” (445).

<sup>4</sup>Burke had unsuccessfully submitted his name for a job to Archibald MacLeish, Director of the Office of Facts and Figures, in late 1941 (1/9/42, BP), and to Harold Lasswell of the Library of Congress's Experimental Division for the Study of Wartime Communications in 1942 (1/6/43, BP).

<sup>5</sup>Sources labeled “TC” are from the Allen Tate Collection at Princeton University Library.

<sup>6</sup>Wess explains the sudden focus on substance as a practical way to speak of the grounding of the pentad in general (“Burke's Dialectic” 16); I believe that the intrinsic/extrinsic nature of “substance” made it a particularly appealing choice.

<sup>7</sup>I am suggesting in this article that rhetorical theory be read in a similar intrinsic/extrinsic fashion.

### Works Cited

- Allen Tate Collection [TC] (Correspondence Box 61, Folder 13), Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
- Blakesley, David. *The Elements of Dramatism*. New York: Longman, 2002.
- Brooks, Cleanth. “Metaphysical Poetry and the Ivory Tower.” *Southern Review* 1 (1935): 568–81.
- Burke, Kenneth. “Americanism.” *Direction* 4 (Feb. 1941): 2–3.
- . *Attitudes Toward History*. 1937. 3rd rev. ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- . *Collected Poems, 1915–1967*. U of California P, 1968.
- . “Character of Our Culture.” *Southern Review* 6 (1941): 675–94.
- . “Dialectician's Hymn.” *University Review* 6 (Dec. 1939): 133–35.
- . “Embargo.” *Direction* 2 (Nov. 1939): 2.
- . “The Five Master Terms: Their Place in a ‘Dramatistic’ Grammar of Motives.” *View* 3.2 (1943): 50–52.
- . “Four Master Tropes.” *Kenyon Review* 3 (1941): 421–38.
- . *A Grammar of Motives*. 1945. California ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969.
- . “The Nature of Art Under Capitalism.” *Nation* 137 (Dec. 1933): 675–77. Rpt. in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. 314–22.
- . *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. 1941. 3rd rev. ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973.



- . “The Problem of the Intrinsic.” *Accent* 3 (1942-43): 80–94. Rpt. in *A Grammar of Motives*. 465–84.
- . “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle.’” Rev. of *Mein Kampf*, by Adolf Hitler. *Southern Review* 5 (1939): 1–21.
- . “The Study of Symbolic Action.” *Chimera* 1.1 (1942): 7–16.
- . “The Tactics of Motivation.” *Chimera* 1.4 (1943): 21–33; 2.1 (1943): 37–53.
- . “Twelve Propositions by Kenneth Burke on the Relation Between Economics and Psychology,” *Science and Society* 2 (1938): 242-53. Rpt. in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. 305–13.
- . “War and Cultural Life.” *American Journal of Sociology* 48 (1942): 404–10.
- . “What to do Until the Doctor Comes.” *Direction* 3 (Nov. 1940): 7, 24.
- . “When ‘Now’ Became ‘Then.’” *Direction* 5 (Feb.-Mar. 1942): 5.
- . “Where Are We Now?” *Direction* 4 (Dec. 1941): 3–5.
- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- George, Ann, and Jack Selzer. “What Happened at the First American Writers’ Congress? Kenneth Burke’s ‘Revolutionary Symbolism in America.’” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 33.2 (2003): 47–68.
- Hawhee, Debra. “Burke on Drugs.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34.1 (2004): 5–28.
- Herman, Peter C., ed. *Historicizing Theory*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2004.
- Ivie, Robert. “The Rhetoric of Bush’s ‘War’ on Evil.” *KB Journal* 1.1 (2004). 14 Mar. 2006 <<http://kbjournal.org/node/53>>.
- Jay, Paul, ed. *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, 1915–1981*. New York: Viking, 1988.
- Kenneth Burke Papers [BP], Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University.
- Pells, Richard H. *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s*. 2nd ed. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1989.
- . *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- Rahv, Philip. “The Cult of Experience in American Writing.” *Partisan Review* 7 (1940): 412–24.
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. “The ‘Four Freedoms’ Speech (Annual Message to Congress).” 6 Jan. 1941. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. 9 Sept. 2005. <[www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/4free.html](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/4free.html)>.
- Wess, Robert. “Burke’s Dialectic of Constitutions.” *PRE/TEXT* 12.1–2 (1991): 10–30.
- . “Pentadic Terms and Master Tropes: Ontology of the Act and Epistemology of the Trope in *A Grammar of Motives*.” *Unending Conversations: New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke*. Ed. Greig Henderson and David Cratis Williams. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2001. 154–75.



M. Elizabeth Weiser is an assistant professor in the English department of The Ohio State University, where her research interests include historiography, modern rhetorical theory, and style pedagogy. Her book manuscript, “Word Man at War: Rhetoricizing Kenneth Burke’s Dramatism,” is currently under review.