

## **'Dramatistic to the Core': Allen Tate and *A Grammar of Motives***

M. Elizabeth Weiser  
Ohio State University

During the 1930s, Kenneth Burke and Allen Tate were much alike: both saw themselves as critics and artists, both earned their living largely through freelance writing, and both were involved in political movements that condemned the values of monopoly capitalism. When Tate was on the faculty of Princeton in the early 1940s, the Tate family were frequent guests at the Burke family homestead in Andover. Their private correspondence reveals that the two men admired each other's minds—Tate telling Burke early in the decade that he was “the most philosophical of my friends. You are, my dear Sir, a constant source of pleasure to my reflections” (4/9/1931, ATP), and Burke excelling himself in witty puns and wordplays to keep his friend interested.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it was the intensity of their long-distance friendship that caused Tate the poet to care enough about Burke's philosophy to be among those most opposed to Burke's shift from literary to cultural critic in the 1930s. It was surely Tate the critic's continued argument with Burke's ideas throughout the early 1940s that influenced Burke's particular brand of cultural criticism—the rhetorical theory he termed dramatism. Without Burke's ongoing, sometimes rancorous, but always engaged dialogue with Tate and other New Critics, the specific methodology of dramatism may have remained the looser philosophy of symbolic action. It is a historical irony, therefore, that Tate's eventual support for *A Grammar of Motives* may well have contributed to the obliqueness of its hortatory message and the confused reception of its critics—a reception of which we still bear the legacy today. It is Tate's influence on this development of *A Grammar of Motives* that I wish to particularly explore in this article.

### **Symbolic War: Tate and Burke in the 1930s**

The “literary wars” that hit the US arts community in the early 1930s marked the delayed Americanization of a 50-year European Marxist debate over the role of literature in social movements and the role of form in social theory. Georg Lukács, for instance, in 1911 presaged Burke's later

struggles to make form political by noting that “the greatest errors of sociological analysis in relation to art are: in artistic creation it seeks and examines only contents, tracing a straight line between these and given economic relations. But in literature what is truly social is form. . . . It participates vivaciously in the life of the spirit” (qtd. in Moretti 10). Within ten years, however, Lukács would modify his Kantian sensibility into a view that “form” and “life” were separate, with the former a petrified version of the latter (Moretti 11). It is this dualistic sensibility that finally made it to America at the start of the Great Depression, as the proletarian aesthetic acquired a theoretical framework when letters from Marx and Engels on literature and propaganda appeared for the first time in translation in America in *International Literature*, the organ of the Soviet-based International Union of Revolutionary Writer. Their publication contributed to a shift from a modernist aesthetic that had been focused on experiments in epistemology and style to a proletarian aesthetic focused on economics—a shift from the literary to the working class. The heated debates that followed pitted aesthetic critics and writers, with their focus on the pure form of a text and the psychological motivations of characters, against Marxist critics and writers, with their focus on audience response and socioeconomic motivations. Did art exist “for art’s sake,” as the modernist aesthetes had it, or as “a class weapon,” as the Marxist John Reed Clubs proclaimed?

As Ann George and Jack Selzer have written of this time, Burke attempted to straddle the divide, “simultaneously authorizing and invalidating the work of the aesthetes by designating art and criticism as fundamental, even transcendent human activities that are nonetheless inseparable from particular political and rhetorical concerns” (90).<sup>2</sup> His 1931 publication of *Counter-Statement*, his novel *Towards a Better Life*, and his unpublished critical follow-up *Auscultation, Creation, Revision* were all attempts to broaden his 1920s aestheticism with a 1930s social awareness—and in doing so within himself, he saw a way for others to also wed, rather than divorce, aesthetics and politics.

Burke’s friend Tate had no such ambitions. Proclaiming himself “A Traditionalist [Who] Looks at Liberalism” (1937), he made it clear that the literary debate was for him not one of tactics or perspectives but of fundamental determinations of the place of humans in the world. As George and Selzer observe, in the face of a poetics increasingly concerned with explaining the world as it was in the particular historical moment, Tate grew correspondingly more convinced that poetry was necessarily universal, necessarily outside political arguments (94-96). Therefore, the “fence-straddling” of his philosophical friend Burke shocked him. “Why deny the utility of literature, in the face of the Areopagitica, or advertisements for Ivory Soap?” Burke asked him early in the decade.

"There is pure science and applied science—and similarly the equivalents: pure and applied literature. And in the 'pure' the 'applied' is latent. . . . Thus, there is no difference (in process) between poetry and propaganda" (6/5/32, ATP). Tate disagreed. "It is perfectly obvious that there are readers and writers, and it seems equally obvious that High Literature is not written for the specific purpose of moving anybody," he wrote a year later (8/30/1933, KBP). "What!" Burke responded in draft. "Does this lad not try to make his verse appealing? Has he not even *omitted* things which he considered significant but the significance of which he felt would not be apparent and moving to others?" (9/27/1933, KBP). The rhetorical situation, in other words, necessarily included an audience—even when the text was High Literature. Tate was neither convinced nor appeased, and his public response, "Poetry and Politics" (1933), encapsulated his anguish: "We do not care what truth in poetry is. We . . . care just as little for Mr. Kenneth Burke, who finds the spring water so full of bacteria that, bitterly, he distills the water off and, laughing a long mad laugh, devours the bacteria alone" (308-09).

And yet when Burke did review Marxist-influenced literature, he often wrote of issues of which Tate should have approved. Several years after Tate's first blast, for instance, when Burke was perhaps at his most "Marxist," his review of William Empson's *English Pastoral Poetry* noted approvingly the new Marxist influence on Empson's hitherto aesthetic theorizing, as Empson placed proletarian literature into the larger category of the "pastoral process." It was a "profoundly Marxist analysis of literature," Burke noted,--*but* one undertaken not to emphasize the differences between proletarian and other literatures but their similarities, and "for my own part, I much prefer Empson's way of . . . seeking the permanent forms that underlie changing historical emphases" ("Exceptional Improvisation"; "Exceptional Book" *PLF* 424-26). As Tate had asserted in "Poetry and Politics," after all, "The task of poetry . . . is the constant rediscovery of the permanent nature of man" (310).

The year after Tate's essay attacking Burke, Communist Party theorist Granville Hicks wrote a seven-part essay on "Revolution and the Novel" for the Party-affiliated *New Masses*—perhaps the definitive translation of European and Soviet theories of proletarian literature to an American setting. In his essay, Hicks laid out the aesthetic principles of proletarian literature, specifically that the proletarian novel would be concerned with the present (written by an author who "faces squarely and seeks to solve the problems of his generation") (26), with plots that were relevant to the lives of readers (35), with documented scenes that were authentic (55), and with characters who are well-rounded but "to a large extent determined by [their] economic situation" (46): "I grow tired," Hicks wrote, "at the frequency with which our critics point out that this

author or that would have written a better book if he had had a Marxist understanding of the events with which he dealt. Yet it is the sort of thing that one is compelled to say again and again" (58). Finally, the proletarian aesthetic would promote a "new way of looking at and feeling about life" (63)—a way that, he admitted, might often be "clumsy" in its newness, but one that led toward the future and life, not the past and death, as did so much bourgeois literature (65). Hicks called on literary critics, therefore, to measure the proletarian novel not just by its achievement of literary techniques, but by its aims: "No critic, in evaluating a work of art, can afford to disregard the possible significance for the future of what the author has tried to do unless he thinks his duty is merely to give out grades" (63).

Tate disagreed virulently. For him, bad writing was bad writing—and the newness not of the worldview but of the authors themselves meant that much proletarian literature was simply bad writing, its authors more intent on promoting their message than polishing their prose. Once they accepted Lukács's elevation of life over form, there could be only division, not synthesis, between the two. *New Masses* editor Mike Gold himself, as early as 1933, was lamenting that "no proletarian critic that I know has paid much attention to the difficult problem of style, of creative writing. They are historians and polemicists, a vital and necessary job at present. The young proletarian writer has little creative guidance." The following month, he quoted the Soviet writer Vsevolod Ivanov: "I should like to have our new organization of writers direct its attention also to questions of FORM. It is extremely important to strive after form" (qtd. in Murphy 122). Two months after that, Gold's entire column was devoted to the need for writers to learn technique.

Tate would have undoubtedly suggested that until they did, they stop publishing. It was not that he was apolitical; Tate was a leading member of the Southern Agrarians, a group which called for the embracing of traditional, supposedly more humane values and livelihoods. As George and Selzer argue, "the Agrarians were as radical in their own way as the leftists who gathered for the [First American] Writers' Congress—and as contemptuous of capitalism" (38). Tate co-edited the Southern Agrarian anthology *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, a document seeking to influence the 1936 presidential election with what he called "a genuine Conservative Revolution" (qtd. in Shapiro xvi). During the war, he would work for the government. However, Tate kept his politics well apart from his poetry. As he noted in the preface to his *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (also published in 1936): "But modern literary critics are reversing the procedure of the historian. They are using social theories to prove something about poetry. . . . We are trying to make an art respectable by showing that after all it is only a branch of politics" (xiv). For him, the place for explanation and politics belonged there, in the preface

or the essay, not within the poems themselves, for the problem of the proletarian aesthetic was more serious than mere clumsy writing—poetry itself was in danger. As he noted in the 1948 preface to his *On the Limits of Poetry*, Tate felt during the "uneasy period between the wars" that poetry was being asked to do too much and then dismissed as irrelevant for doing things badly: "I was talking most of the time about what poetry cannot be expected to do to save mankind from the disasters in which poetry itself must be involved" (xi). For Tate, a criticism that embraced in any manner a world-saving poetry was an unhelpful—perhaps a dangerous—criticism in that it made poetry seem a weak cousin to the real change that science or politics could accomplish with its more direct words.<sup>3</sup>

Burke in those same years was developing what Tate feared would become a "world-saving" kind of poetic criticism. In his 1930s books *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke explored the techniques and attitudes—falling on the bias, translation, ambiguity and incongruity, and the comic corrective—that would eventually lead him first to posit language as symbolic action in the title piece to *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and then, in 1945, to methodize further his understanding of symbolic action into dramatistic criticism, using the insights of poetry to analyze the world. The Burke-Tate debate over this "world-saving" approach came to a head in 1936 over Granville Hicks's co-edited collection of fiction, poetry, drama, "reportage," and criticism entitled *Proletarian Literature in the United States*. Burke's "Symbolic War," a review-essay of the massive collection for *The Southern Review*, was openly lukewarm. As he noted at its end, "As one particularly interested in the processes of literary appeal, I have generally tended to consider the volume from this standpoint. I have been vague about 'absolute' tests of excellence" (147). Burke did praise a number of pieces, but his overall tone was that of a man going out of his way to demonstrate his generosity—as when, for instance, he described Don West's poem "Southern Lullaby" as one "which [*Southern Review* editor] Mr. Brooks had condemned for its sentimentality, an unfavorable diagnosis one could rephrase favorably, or part-favorably, by saying that the author undertakes the strategic feat of incongruously introducing politics into the least political of themes" (144). This patronizing tone, quite different from that of most of Burke's reviews, was mandated by his sense of the already-skeptical stance of his *Southern Review* audience—a mixture of aesthetes, conservatives like Tate, and other professional writers, critics, and academics.

His introduction to the book review, therefore—fully half the text—explained the importance of proletarian literature. All poetry, religion, and politics are grounded in "material necessities" and thus "economic factors," he wrote, which contain both universal, human contingencies and historical, particular ones. The misguided failure to accept that both sets of contingen-

cies operate to determine aesthetic interests had led to the literary wars. As Burke put it, “we [all] live by the goring of the ox . . . but it also makes a difference *whose* ox is gored” (136). The privileged can remove themselves from the business of ox-goring, but if they forget that it occurs, they fall victim to pride. Yes, proletarian literature was often grim and dogmatic, yes, “their characters are formed in haphazard fashion, for the specific partisan purpose at hand, like the distortions of a political cartoonist” (139). But “this literature is written *to* people, or *for* people. It is *addressed*” (140). If Hicks in “Revolution and the Novel” had called for literary critics reviewing proletarian literature to evaluate “the possible significance for the future of what the author has tried to do,” Burke in his review was attempting just that. He ended his critique of the Hicks-edited anthology by noting that it “does represent a way of life—and in this congregational feature lies the power and the promise of the ‘proletarian’ movement as a contribution to our culture” (147). Cultural historian Michael Denning has written that the year before this review was published, Burke had inadvertently become “the foremost rhetorical theorist of the Popular Front” (124), the Communist-affiliated coalition of anti-fascist individuals and groups that succeeded (among writers) the more hard-line John Reed Clubs. With his careful identification with the expected criticisms of the *Southern Review* readership, then, Burke was implicitly modeling the kind of enlightened openness to the intent of proletarian literature that he (and Hicks) hoped would take hold among literary aesthetes.

Tate was not at all taken in. His long piece for the *Review*'s next issue “outed” Burke as a card-carrying proletarian who had abandoned critical thought to ideology: “Mr. Burke alone of the extreme left-wing critics seems to me to possess the historical and philosophical learning necessary to the serious treatment of the literary problems of Marxism: before his ‘conversion’ to Communism he had subjected himself to a rigorous critical discipline” (“Mr. Burke” 363). After his “conversion,” however, Burke could not bring himself to dismiss literature that he knew was “almost worthless,” and so he had to develop a theory whereby the role of an artist was to “transcend” or “translate” the concrete particulars of historical experience (propaganda) into universals of human experience (imagination) (366–67). Tate attacked this theory aesthetically, historically, and even syntactically. Tate wanted Burke to demand of the proletarian writers “some fundamental aesthetic thinking that might eliminate altogether the need for compromise” (368)—but Burke did not.

As George and Selzer have shown, Tate’s public response to Burke’s rhetorical pragmatism was for Burke a bitter pill that pushed Burke toward *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*. I believe the differences with his friend pushed him even beyond these books and on into his work in the 1940s. While *Permanence* and *Attitudes* addressed

the need for engagement with the world, Burke's later works, particularly the title essay for *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and *A Grammar of Motives*, came to focus on the primacy of a real-world "act now," as he put it in a late 1930s essay. It was precisely this engaged action that he found so lacking in Tate's aesthetic worldview. "Mr. Tate disturbs me," Burke wrote in his review of Tate's *Reactionary Essays* in 1937. "What I feel the lack of, throughout both essays and poems, is *physicality*." His removed position made "him say 'Turn back' where he might have said 'Let's try to go on, and come out on the other side'" ("Tentative Proposal" 98, 100).

### **Among the "Word Men": Burke and Tate in the early 1940s**

While the later view of New Critics was that Burke was doing something quite different from their own textual analyses, in the early 1940s Burke, Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and others all saw Burke's work as a variation on a common new critical theme of viewing the text "as an autonomous organic whole" (Spurlin xvii) to be analyzed through close reading. Burke found among the New Critics an audience that shared his interest in the role of language to shape thought yet that was unwilling to translate its own insights about literature into engagement with the social world. Their skepticism of Burke's expansive approach led him to clarify its engaged methodology by first codifying his ideas about language into the theory of language as symbolic action (in his essay "The Philosophy of Literary Form"), and then by expanding that theory into dramatism in *A Grammar of Motives*.

Burke and the New Critics held a number of beliefs in common. First, they agreed wholeheartedly on the importance of form. In "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer," a 1940 paper delivered to the English Club of Princeton University, Tate cited the difference between the literary scholarship that was then being taught in schools and the literary criticism he was advocating as the difference between seeing literature as *dead* or *living*. Literary scholarship relied on external documents and "History" because it did not know how to discuss the objective qualities of the literary work. For literary criticism, on the other hand, language and structure were "how the moral intelligence gets into poetry"—not as moral abstractions but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these features" ("Miss Emily" 56). It was precisely their attention to how language was shaped to affect readers that brought Burke over and over into dialogue with the New Critics. Indeed, Tate's belief that the language of literary scholarship was unduly influenced by the prevailing language of science had already been argued forcefully by Burke in *Attitudes*. Both men believed that critics needed to use instead the poetic language unique to their field—only Burke believed that this language gave insight into both poetry *and* life.

Both Burke and the New Critics also believed in the ambiguity of poetic language. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) had detailed how, in poetry, "you have a broad impression of what it is all about, but there are various incidental impressions wandering about in your mind; these may not be part of the final meaning arrived at by the judgment, but tend to be fixed in it as part of its colour" (240). A 1943 article by Robert Penn Warren argued that reducing a poem to an illusory "pure" state would purge poetry from the world of ideas: "nothing that is available in human experience is to be legislated out of poetry" (38). Burke would likewise regularly argue against the possibility of purity, which he saw as impeding action (see, for instance, his 1939 "The Calling of the Tune"), and in favor of ambiguity, a key component of dramatism that he saw as central to the human condition.

Further, both Burke and the New Critics saw poetic language as active communication with the audience—as Warren insisted, "This is another way of saying that a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge put it, make the reader into 'an active creative being'" (39) who could analyze not any isolated element of a poem but "the set of relationships, the structure, which we call the poem" as a whole (38). This was for Burke the kind of attention to the psychology of the audience that made literature rhetorical.

Yet as we have seen with Tate, the New Critics viewed Burke's rhetorical approach with suspicion. Tate's contention that a rhetorical imperative for poetry polluted its literary purpose echoed Ransom's view that art must be purified from the taint of the technological world, as well as Warren's and Brooks's view that a poem was never an artifact of culture (compare this to Burke's famous definition in "The Philosophy of Literary Form," that "critical and imaginative works are answers posed by the situation in which they arose" (1)). The New Critics, that is, liked Burke's insights but distrusted Burke's purpose, in part because they misunderstood Burke's method.

While the New Critics themselves debated for years exactly what they should be doing at the higher levels of literary analysis, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* became, quite quickly, the definitive methodology for the average teacher or student. Published in 1938, adopted within several years by colleges around the nation, *Understanding Poetry* explained a methodology of closely reading whole texts that would influence generations. Burke's methodology was similar but different, and he struggled throughout the early 1940s to define that difference in a way other critics—and students—could understand. "I have often wished you would write up your method. One can glean it from your books, of course. But there it appears as demonstrated rather than as precepts of exploration. I have wished this because everybody, in my experience, finds you so useful

that the earlier they can appropriate some of your tools the better," wrote Leonard Brown, a professor at Syracuse University, to his friend Burke (8/9/39, KBP). With *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, and particularly its title essay, Burke thought he had the answer to *Understanding Poetry*. His was a methodology of language, asserting that all language was stylized and responded strategically to its situation, such that "poetry, or any verbal act, is to be considered as 'symbolic action'"—not neutral exposition of reality but "the *dancing of an attitude*" (PLF 8-9). As symbolic action, it stylistically embodied both exposition and the attitude necessary to read the exposition appropriately.

On the one hand, Burke's method employed the close textual reading of New Criticism, paying attention to imagery and form as well as the new psychological emphasis on puns and slips of tongue (words as sounds as well as images). On the other hand, Burke's method also employed a close reading of scene and author, such that, for instance, "the *Decameron* [would be] read, not as a series of hilarious stories, but as a series of hilarious stories *told during a plague*" (63) as the Marxists critics and sociologists might study it, or "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" would be read not as a "literary ballad" (as Brooks and Warren treated it in *Understanding Poetry*) but as a literary ballad *told by an unhappily married man with an opium addiction* (71-73), as the older, philological critics and the modern psychologists might well both discuss it. It was a methodology, as William Knickerbocker, editor of the *Sewanee Review*, would point out, that moved by a process of inclusion.

This inclusive method intrigued Burke's critic friends, and so in "The Philosophy of Literary Form" (1941), Burke spoke to them, carefully privileging not the social but the internal, textual, literary results of his methodology. His pages are filled with literary examples and descriptions of how puns and clusters make meaning within and across the key structural moments in a text, and how an understanding of author and scene sheds light on the text. A New Critic reading his description could not help but appreciate it—or so he hoped. Indeed, their initial response was encouraging. Warren and Brooks asked to publish excerpts in the *Southern Review*. Tate wrote to offer his novel *The Fathers* (published in 1938) for just such an analysis: "I have been studying your long essay, P. of L. F., and am excited by it. . . . I'd be very much interested in seeing your methodology applied" (6/6/41, KBP). Burke wrote back immediately to say that he would be "delighted indeed to receive the novel," and in fact he proposed analyzing the novel, several essays, and Tate's *Selected Poems* all together (6/9/41, ATP). The New Critics, he was sure, were understanding him at last.

And yet. Burke's depiction of literary texts as stylized responses to specific situations left a nagging doubt, for it begged not one but two methodological questions: the internal question of *how* the stylized response

worked—the question answered by textual and structural analysis—and the external, epistemological question of *what situation* the stylized response was pointing toward. Though he might have focused in his titular essay on the pragmatic, internal-textual question, Burke's underlying philosophy of literature as symbolic action privileged the epistemological, situational question. It is this real-world focus that would continue to concern Burke's critic friends.

It is my contention that Burke's pentadic methodology—the act, agent, agency, scene, purpose analysis that moves the dramatism of *A Grammar of Motives* beyond the cluster analysis of "A Philosophy of Literary Form"—became a necessarily large addition to his theory because, in the conversation in which he was engaged with the New Critics, it became clear by 1942 that his ideas were not sufficiently understood. The critics could not see how his method could do the job of science, analyzing human relations, and still remain poetry. As Burke moved to transfer his poetic analysis more squarely into the sphere of human motivations, then, he needed to make clearer for the literary critical scholars precisely how his dramatic analysis would work beyond the text.

It was Tate's former professor John Crowe Ransom who led the initial New Critical charge against Burke, contending in "An Address to Kenneth Burke," his review of *Philosophy of Literary Form*, that Burke was "sophistical" and aligned himself with rational and scientific rather than aesthetic philosophy, between which there could be no alignment. Burke's method might work for the dialectical poems in which he was interested (here again was the shadow of proletarian literature), but, Ransom insisted, it would not work for lyric poetry, the "best poetry" because its "denser and freer" imagery was untied to the necessity of plot (234-35). *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Ransom decided, merely demonstrated "that Burke does not have a philosophy of poetry" (222). His purpose was too linked to the world. He was a positivist, which for Ransom meant an espouser of a focus on data from experience rather than the transcendental (or metaphysical) world described by poetry. "[Positivists] are little boys dedicated to scientific or analytical process" Ransom wrote to Tate about Burke (5/23/41, in *Selected Letters* 282-83). Ransom's dismissal of Burke's poetics delegitimized Burke and his project to a New Critical audience, for without a poetic philosophy Burke could not put forward a "poetic" understanding of the social world that those critics would accept.

As David Tell has noted, the Burke-Ransom dialogue led Burke to define his epistemology as rhetorical inducement (34)—but it was to Tate that Burke wrote out his initial response. "I am extremely puzzled to explain the tremendous difference btw. the letters [Ransom] wrote me privately about *Litry Form* and *Counter-Statement*, and the tone of his *Address*," Burke wrote Tate. "What, then might have happened in the

interim?" (4/28/42, ATP). He decided in that letter to "go on saying the things I want to say, and dealing with some of [Ransom's] more extreme misinterpretations en passant, where the opportunity arises" (4/28/42, ATP). A year later, Tate would help to explain the criticism to Burke by asking if all rational discussion wasn't disguised positivism, which, he said, was the point Ransom was trying to raise.

Burke had written Tate before the "Address" that he had finished the "main body" of his "Grammar," and it consisted of what probably became Chapter 3 of the finished text ("Scope and Reduction"), some discussion of the philosophic schools in reduced form ("Seven Primary Philosophies" and "Psychology of Action"), a section on Constitutions ("Beginnings, Constitutions, Judgments"), and a conclusion that discussed dramatism ("Dramatic and Non-Dramatic") (3/17/42, ATP). But he did not yet have a clear enough methodology, and without the explicit, literary methodology to translate to the world scene, it was not evident to critics like Ransom how a dramatistic analysis could be anything other than warmed-over science. Indeed, at the same time Burke wrote Tate to ask why Ransom was so critical, Tate himself was undergoing a similar attack in the pages of *Poetry*, where Chicago semanticist S. I. Hayakawa reviewed Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* together with Tate's own 1941 collection, *Reason in Madness*, which bundled previously published essays into an indictment of positivism, "the confident use of the scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm"—the very thing of which Ransom was accusing Burke. The cure, Tate said, should be a criticism which functions "to demonstrate the special, unique, and complete knowledge which the great forms of literature afford us. And I mean quite simply *knowledge* . . . that unique and formed intelligence of the world of which man alone is capable" ("The Present Function" 9, 19). How did literature provide such knowledge? Tate cited I. A. Richards's 1936 contribution, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, in which he argued that words were not a weak substitute for experience or thought, but were "the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together" (qtd. in "Literature as Knowledge" 55). Richards hinted at the transcendence by "imagination" of the world as perceived by the senses and as a creation of our own emotional states, and Tate expanded, saying that poetry was complete in a mythic way. Criticism may need to be rational, but poetry did not—its knowledge went beyond the rational.

When comparing Burke to Tate and Ransom, then, the consistency of the message of the latter two is striking: anti-positivism, scorn for the historicists, a belief in poetry's ability to present an experience of the complete (by which Tate and Ransom meant both the physical and the spiritual) world, the quantifiable and unquantifiable. Placing Burke alongside them, several things become clear. First, Burke *does* seem like a positivist—one who, in incorporating historical and social scientific processes into liter-

ary criticism, focuses more on the science and forgets what makes a poem poetic. If a poem is “a response to a situation” or “a symptom of something or other,” as Burke insisted, then to Ransom and Tate the poem for Burke surely must be more superfluous than the actual “situation” or the “something or other”—that is, he must surely agree with the Marxist sensibility that form is the petrification of life. That Burke did not view himself as a positivist or literature as a superfluity meant, therefore, that he took great pains to distinguish his inclusive approach of symbolic action from positivism. Yes, he was saying that one could use the sciences to gain insight into the drama. But as he turned more and more toward the human drama of social relations, he conviction grew stronger that one needed the poetic, and the tools of poetic analysis, to gain insight into real-life motivations. Ironically, as his conversations with the New Critics drew him closer toward the unique insights of poetic analysis, his attempts to explain himself to them made them only more convinced of his lack of poetic understanding. Tate saw Burke as wanting to use history to judge a poem, when in fact Burke was more interested in using the poem to judge (or explain) history.

**“Doctrinal, sir, doctrinal”:**

**Tate and Burke at the End of the War**

Burke’s focus on a literary audience was apparent as early as March 1941 when he wrote his friend Malcolm Cowley that he had generally finished his “monograph on motives” but had no idea what to do with it. “I correspond on and off with various college teachers, and may send a copy around to them, for possible use in some academic publication. I seem to be shifting my linguistic analysis from a rhetoric to a grammar” (3/8/41, in *Selected Correspondence* 243)—that is, from an emphasis on the persuasive use of language, such as political activists would find interesting, to an emphasis on the ordinary use of language, the province of linguists and language theorists. For the remainder of the war years, Burke complained that he continued to work on the manuscript, taking notes, rearranging the sections, trying to make his position clearer to the literary community of which he saw himself a part. If his audience did not understand the significance of symbolic analysis for literature (as Ransom’s review and Tate’s ongoing concerns had demonstrated), then they would not yet understand this analysis applied to human motivation. Thus, in essay after essay in the early war years, Burke responded to his critics with articles that grounded his terms in literary analysis.

In 1943, he wove the ambiguities of aesthetics against a pure and all-encompassing belief in science into “Tactics of Motivation,” published in the new literary journal *Chimera* as a two-part essay. Tate wrote after reading the first installment to tell him it was “the best statement of how your dramatism gets around positivism; and I await impatiently

the concluding installment" (6/17/43, KBP). In "Tactics"—which would become "Scope and Reduction" in the first part of *A Grammar of Motives*—Burke argued that neither science nor faith could by themselves adequately measure human motivation, and what was needed was a "representative anecdote" that would adequately capture all aspects of human motivation, both measurable and immeasurable, a "god-term" that would sum up all the other terms employed (I.28)—a linguistic term because language is the unique trait of human relations. Burke proposed "drama" as his motivational god-term, a term that since the late 1930s had symbolized for him the action of human interchange (I.29). It was explicitly *not* positivistic. Positivism, Burke said, sought to make language unambiguous, a perfect correspondence between reality and word, while dramatism embraced the ambiguities and ironies involved in naming both reality and attitude simultaneously (II.42). Dramatism therefore stressed *action* (linguistic, symbolic action) rather than *motion* (behavioralist, biological, operationalist motion).

Later in 1943 in "The Five Master Terms," an article for *View*, Burke spelled out of what his dramatism would consist (the now-familiar interactions between agent, act, agency, scene, purpose). In substantially revised form, the "Master Terms" became the Introduction to the *Grammar*, and Burke's correspondence makes it clear that, for him, writing out the terms so concretely was a watershed moment. At least twice he urged Tate to read the article (finally he enclosed a copy in a letter), noting that it marked a change from a "heuristic" to a "pedagogical" approach into dramatism. The *Grammar's* original organization was "heuristic" in that it "started out gropingly, and gradually pulled things together" as he became clearer and clearer in his own mind exactly what it was about (Burke to Tate, 7/11/43, ATP). It was the approach he had described to Cleanth Brooks many years before as "beginning . . . in the way a dog scratches his flees [sic]" (1/6/36, KBP). He professed to enjoy better the style of a book wherein "we watch the author developing, and develop along with him," but he also realized that it alienated most readers. Hence, he told Tate, "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, ATP). He had finally explained his methodology.

Others thought so as well. William Carlos Williams wrote him the next day to say he "enjoyed the coolness of your developments in the *VIEW* piece" and that his own essay that he was sending Burke to critique was informed by it (7/12/43, KBP). Ransom wrote to say, "I quite respect the importance of the studies which you are making, and which become more and more demanding in their sequence as you go on with them,"

and he promised that they would “presently” want more of Burke’s essays (9/24/43, KBP). As for Tate, he pronounced himself “dramatistic to the core” (11/30/43, KBP).

It was exactly this apparent acceptance of his work on dramatism that led Burke to present it in the form in which we now have it, and this has both good and bad consequences for our understanding of his overall purpose. Throughout World War II, Burke strove to clarify how to better analyze a multiplicity of viewpoints in order to transcend them into action—how to find a better way to “talk about their talk-about,” as he would put it in the *Grammar* (56). In 1935, Burke had written that “[man] must not *surrender* to the environment that oppresses him; he must *change* it. This attitude amounted to a simple declaration of war. . . . Seen in this light, war, capitalism, positive science, . . . the parliamentary battles of democracy, . . . atheism . . . and progress all seem to be . . . a superstructure of certainties” (PC 172-73). Burke’s personal manifesto celebrated ambiguity in the face of this superstructural certainty—a need that had only grown stronger as the world slid into war. As I argue in *Burke, War, Words*, this celebration of dialectical ambiguity and action in response to fascist monologue and war was his overarching historical purpose in developing dramatism. The *Grammar* was his fully embodied culmination of what semanticist Hayakawa, in his review with Tate’s book, had identified as Burke’s “battle plan” for poets and critics (91). Yet we do not usually give the *Grammar* this kind of hortatory power, or see Burke’s dramatism as a tool for transcending as well as identifying differences. It is part of our toolkit of rhetorical analysis more than our arsenal of rhetoric. Though a number of factors shape our current reception of *A Grammar of Motives*—Burke’s convoluted writing style making it difficult to see the “action” component of dramatism, the dawn of the Nuclear Age and the Cold War into which Burke released the book meaning the world did not have the time for reflection that Burke’s work demanded, the *Grammar*’s several decades of limited critical attention further divorcing it from its original scene—it was the reaction of the New Critics to the developing project that heavily impacted both the form of the final book and its initial reception.

Burke had his first opportunity to present the *Grammar* when Tate took over the editorship of the *Sewanee Review* in the fall of 1944. Tate predictably positioned the *Sewanee* as a literary bulwark against anti-literary totalitarianism, concerned not only with the “predictable depths of confusion and vulgarity” to which literature had sunk during the war (“State of Letters” 609) but even more so with the future of a literate society. Tate believed that the possibilities envisioned in imaginative literature would help to offset this monolithic worldview; Burke added the methodology by which literature could do so. By 1944, however, Burke had spent almost too

much time with his manuscript. When Tate wrote to request a 5000-word summary of dramatism and its application (2/22/44, KBP), Burke instead sent 60,000 words of his unedited manuscript, from which he "dared hope that [Tate] might . . . note some pages which, just as they are, or framed with introductory, transitional, or concluding remarks, could be printed in your I am sure highly honored gazette" (3/23/44, ATP). The tone of Burke's exchanges with his friend Tate shows his eagerness to get something into print. In the letters, while always playful, he is laughing a little too much, pushing a little too hard—as he puts it, he is "eager with anticipashe, and wavering with trepidashe" to hear Tate's response (3/23/44, ATP). Tate was the member of the New Critical circle to whom Burke was closest, Tate had expressed the most interest in dramatism as Burke developed it, and Tate was now the editor of one of the only major literary journals (the other being Ransom's *Kenyon Review*) that could publish as long a piece as Burke envisioned to reach the audience he sought. It was critical to Burke that Tate respond favorably. Indeed, when Tate implied that the manuscript was circular and difficult ("not unlike circumambient motion with reference to Prickly Pear" (4/15/44, KBP)), Burke immediately seized on this, such that Tate had to write a reassuring letter back—no, no, the manuscript was not circular, it was "cumulative" (5/2/44, KBP). He agreed to print the first twenty pages, if Burke would add an introduction. The resulting article, "Container and Thing Contained," is virtually identical to the first chapter of the *Grammar*, and in both pieces it is preceded by a short introduction to "The Five Key Terms of Dramatism." Then, as now, the five key terms got glowing praise from readers, and—then as now—their simplicity in light of the complexity that follows meant that the pentad overshadowed the full theory and its more far-reaching purpose, which Burke described to Tate as "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, ATP).

The fate of the larger hortatory purpose of the *Grammar* was sealed by two other articles Burke published just as the book was being released. They were his attempt to telescope to his anticipated audience just what the book would deal with, and they were both printed in New Critical journals and thus were heavily literary. (Burke's attempt to reach a more political audience seems to have been thwarted by the *New Republic's* response to his submission: "We have decided against using parts of your book only after prolonged discussion. We feel that the articles are much too profound for our readers" (Heinz Eulau to Burke, 10/17/45, KBP)). Burke's first article, therefore, went again to Tate's *Sewanee Review*, and again suffered from Burke's eagerness to print and unwillingness to edit. He sent Tate 258 pages of "The Philosophic Schools," and then the entire last section of his book, "Dialectic in General," which he finished in spring 1945. Tate chose

an excerpt from that section, “The Socratic Transcendence,” which ran in the *Sewanee* that fall. In a footnote, Tate and Burke attempted to place the piece within the context of Burke’s overall project: “This is part of a longer essay. . . . The earlier portions of the essay considered in some detail the two basic dialectical devices of ‘merger’ and ‘division’. . . . We discussed the ironic situation whereby . . . both ways are ambiguously present at the same time. Implicit in such ways there is a transcendence” (“Socratic Transcendence” 630). Within the context of the *Grammar*, that is, Socrates’s scapegoating and death is a demonstration of the danger arising when ambiguities of merger are ignored and divided positions hardened—a powerful warning for a world which had spent years hardening its positions between Axis and Allies, and whose Allies were about to split and harden into East and West. Out of context, however, as a stand-alone journal article and in spite of the footnote, Burke appeared to have written only a lengthy treatise on a classical text. The same thing happened with “The Temporizing of Essence,” which Ransom published in the *Kenyon Review* that same fall with no attempt at contextualization. In the context of the *Grammar*, it is one final example of the ambiguity inherent in language, the manner in which human communication shifts the ground beneath its terms. This grounding can either emphasize division or it can retreat to the level at which the merger of the two terms leads to transcendent understanding. Out of context, however, the article is an interesting study of the manner in which narrative (Burke’s major example is *Peer Gynt*) must by its nature historicize occurrences which happen not temporally but ontologically. Without their full context, neither piece seemed to be saying much at all about “human relations in all their fullness and complexity,” as Burke had promised of his *Grammar*.

Both Ransom and Tate seem to have perused the *Grammar* (Ransom had at least the final section, while Tate saw drafts of the entire manuscript), searching for those moments of fine literary elucidation that could stand alone in their journals. This was a natural outcome of their roles as literary editors, and Burke himself did not assist them with his wholesale dumping of pages onto their desks. However, the consequence of their literary culling was that excerpts published to introduce the book to the world downplayed any of its social implications.

It is ironic, then, that Tate at the end of the war was writing on precisely Burke’s topic: the impact of a literary philosophy on social affairs. In “The New Provincialism,” published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, he attempted to define a postwar role for America that would keep it from imperialism as it assumed a global stance. America, he argued, must return to the precepts of the Southern Agrarians and recognize the unique regional history of each locale it attempted to aid. “When the regional man, in his ignorance . . . of the world, extends his own immediate necessities into the world, and assumes that the present moment is unique, he becomes the

provincial man. He cuts himself off from the past . . . and begin[s] every day as if there had been no yesterday," Tate argued (286, 289). Thus the provincial man repeats the mistakes of his own past in ever new locales. A globalism that simplistically believed it could export particular attributes to other places was mere provincialism, yet this was precisely what America was attempting in its desire to play a key role in the postwar global village. "It is all very well to meet at Dumbarton Oaks or on the Black Sea to arrange the world," Tate wrote (287), but without benefit of reflection on the unique past of each culture or place, such attempts were doomed not only to failure but to destruction of any regional good. The "new regional" reflection that would prevent this disaster was to be found in regional literature, which, with typical Tate gloom, he saw disappearing from the postwar landscape. What Tate argued was essentially Burke's own argument about the need to acknowledge the perspectives of those one wished to persuade, and his method for doing so was also Burke's—literature, an understanding of human motivations through literary insights. However, by focusing on the content of literature (regional writing) rather than the form (poetic ambiguity), he missed Burke's hope that *all* literature could provide the proper attitude.

At this critical juncture, as the "hot" war ended and the Cold War began, Tate and Burke seemed to have switched roles from their Depression-era debates: Tate was now the political philosopher arguing for the didactic benefit of proper literary content, and Burke was the pure critic arguing for a closer appreciation of literary form. Certainly this is how cultural historian Michael Denning judges Burke's work on motives. The *Grammar*, argues Denning, is a "turning away from the Marxist and modernist stance of the earlier books. The flexible strategy/situation model [of *PLF*] . . . is replaced by the rigid model of 'dramatism' . . . [which] became a cautious marker in Burke's move from his idiosyncratic communist politics to a politics of 'Neo-Stoic resignation' in the face of the Cold War" (438–39). It is (or pretends to be) "salvation through semantics," as Donald Stauffer put it in his review of the book—a review printed in the same *Virginia Quarterly* that had earlier that year published Tate's "New Provincialism." For both men, Burke-the-literary-critic was overplaying his cards, overstating the role of language and literature to resolve world affairs.

This is not how we tend to read the *Motivorium* today. Indeed, with hindsight we argue that Burke was moving increasingly away from the vestiges of his earlier literary theory into social critique, into rhetoric. But the contingencies of Burke's 1945 publications, including his treatment by Tate, contributed to the possibility of such a literary interpretation. When he needed it the least, when the world was looking for ways to deal with the dawning new age of global complexities and Burke had a method for doing so, Burke became, momentarily, a literary critic. And Tate, by helping

his friend to publicize that part of the theory of dramatism in which he—and his literary audience—was most interested, abetted that unfortunate transformation. Perhaps without Tate's continual questions and quibbles, *A Grammar of Motives* might not have taken form—and that would indeed be a loss to the field of rhetoric. But perhaps without his encouragement, the book's social implication—its hortatory call to action—might also be a bit clearer to a generation facing once again the overcertainties and monologues of ongoing war.

### Notes

1. References to the Allen Tate Papers are abbreviated as ATP; those to the Kenneth Burke Papers are abbreviated as KBP; and references to *The Philosophy of Literary Form* are abbreviated as PLF.
2. I explore Burke's "straddling" further in my "As Usual I Fell on the Bias."
3. George and Selzer also make this point.

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