

Placing the Poetic Corrective: William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Burke, and the Poetic Imaginary

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To consider language as a means of *information* or *knowledge* is to consider it epistemologically, semantically, in terms of “science.” To consider it as a mode of *action* is to consider it in terms of “poetry.” For a poem is an act, the symbolic act of the poet who made it—an act of such a nature that, in surviving as a structure or object, it enables us as readers to re-enact it.

Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (447)¹

Kenneth Burke, in his major work *A Grammar of Motives*, offers an analysis of Keats's poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to demonstrate the potential of dramatistic criticism. The opening quote from that section of *Grammar of Motives* indicates a key distinction of the dramatist perspective from the scientific: scientific thought views language as representation of an act occurring elsewhere, while dramatism sees language as a particular kind of act, a member of the category “action” instead of action's weak second. This “symbolic action” is the centerpiece of Burke's theory not only of the human condition, but of rhetoric—the way we come together and pull apart in our relations with the world and with each other. The analysis is not important for its object, or for the particular critical insights, but vastly important for understanding Kenneth Burke's unique contribution to criticism across a number of different fields.

Kenneth Burke's output of work as a critic and theorist is massive. Grasping the scope and scale of the ideas he engaged would take (and has taken) many scholarly book-length treatments of his central ideas, such as the scapegoat process, identification/division, consubstantiality, the comic and tragic frames, and hierarchy.² I examine in this essay the oft-overlooked notion of the “poetic corrective,” which Burke leaves tantalizingly underdeveloped in his book *Permanence and Change*. In this book,

Burke argues that human history can be read as a system of allegiances to sets of terms—"terminologies"—that direct not only human affairs, but our conception of what human affairs are and should be. These allegiances he calls "orientations," and describes our current orientation as "scientific." Every orientation has limits on its explanatory power which are eventually encountered. He suggests that orientations are not self-correcting, but reveal what will be necessary to correct the orientation. These he calls correctives. The poetic corrective is to replace our scientific orientation, bringing us into a new "terministic" era of understanding.

In this essay, I attempt to sketch out what the poetic corrective might look like using Kenneth Burke's theory of the poetic, as well as William Carlos Williams's theory of the imagination. The underdeveloped nature of the poetic corrective leaves new places open for theorizing the relationship between rhetoric and the imaginary. Williams and Burke, as friends and correspondents for most of their lives, shared many ideas and perspectives, including many on the function of the imaginary. Due to this close correspondence, and close friendship based on the criticism and discussion of ideas, Williams's theory of the imagination can be seen as contributing toward Burke's notion of the poetic corrective.

The close ties between the ideas of these two men have not been examined by scholars very often. This essay seeks to bring their ideas together in criticism, as they were in life. First, I will explore Burke's sketch of the poetic corrective, then compare Burke and Williams as theorists with distinct views of the poetic and imaginary. Finally, I will use their views of the poetic and imaginary to point to a potential place in scholarship on American mid-century culture for the poetic corrective, against the backdrop of a contemporary scientific orientation.

Kenneth Burke's Theory of Orientation and Corrective

Kenneth Burke's theory of symbolic action is directly tied to the writing of poetry. Poetry takes on the characteristics of a special type of action, an action that we can re-enact through the structural by-product of doing poetry. Action leaves a result—in the case of Keats, verse—but the verse is not simply product or mere remainder. As symbolic action, the verse is the action and the product at the same time. For Burke, poetry as an act allows a paradigm for other action, rather than a paradigm of collection. This latter is the type of literary criticism that Burke would oppose—it's too scientific. Burkean poetics could be contrasted to a "bookish" anthropology or history focused on the question of "how things were," and aligned with historical re-enactment, a performance where one lives "as if" to answer the question "how did it feel to be here?" Both approaches are employed in order to understand the motives of the past. Burke wishes to blur any hard division between action and language use.

The other perspective here is that of seeing language without instrumentality. To see language as transmission is to see it as secondary to action. But Burke wants to formulate language's equivalence to action. Burke equates language with action by attributing a special kind of action to poetry. Symbolic action equates language use with action instead of theorizing action as separate from language. This is a theory that allows Burke to see human relations principally in terms of drama, instead of seeing drama as an effect of human relations. "The titular word for our own method is 'dramatism,' since it invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action" (*Grammar* xxii). The elimination of this distinction for Burke permits an investigation into the many ways that human motives can be accounted for, explained, and examined.

In *Permanence and Change*, where the poetic corrective is introduced, Burke offers an interpretive scheme for understanding changes in human rationalization on the macro level. Burke divides this shift into three major orders: magic, religion and science. "Magic was the schema which stressed mainly the control of natural forces, religion stressing the control of human forces, and science stressing the control of the third productive order, the technological" (59). The progression from one orientation to another occurs through the influence of correctives, or external changes in perspective and interest. He does not believe that changes in orientation come from within an orientation, but from without: "[T]he rationalization . . . was so totally consistent, and so well corroborated by 'practical successes,' that I do not see how it could possibly have lost prestige through disproof . . . the assumption that a counter-spell was at work served to keep the rationalization beyond attack" (*Permanence* 61). The magical orientation sought to mechanically control the impersonal and regular motion of nature. Burke theorizes that a new understanding of human cooperation as more central is responsible for a shift away from such coercion of natural forces to "propitiation" that is designed to "please an arbitrary power," making people's free will the inducement to the management of nature (*Permanence* 60-61).

The shift to the religious orientation from the magic orientation was precipitated by a central inconsistency that gave rise to the philosophical corrective, which became the scientific rationalization. The reason that one orientation shifts into another set of terms is because a gap or inconsistency arises that cannot be worked out by the orientation's vocabulary. Philosophy, for Burke, rose as a way of providing consistency from without for a system that was based upon inducing cooperation among fundamentally inconsistent beings. To do this, the scientific corrective drew partially on the old rationalization of magic: "The philosophic point of view manifested itself

by an interest in mechanical invention" (*Permanence* 62). The appearance of a corrective is not an interruption or aberration; on the contrary, it is an expected condition, a predictable move, once a rationalization reaches a critical mass of acceptance:

But as a point of view approaches the condition of almost complete embodiment, it may naturally be expected to reveal more clearly and call forth the kind of correctives which it in turn requires. Those who look upon science as the final culmination of man's [sic] rationalizing enterprise may be neglecting an important aspect of human response. (*Permanence* 62)

Here Burke is making the observation that once a corrective becomes an orientation and continues to manifest itself to the exclusion of its opposition, what was lost from the previous orientation is noticed. For example, the religious orientation gained the humanistic focus of cooperation, and at the same time it lost the comfort provided by the mechanistic regularity of natural rhythm characteristic of the magical orientation. It is a far different endeavor to try to induce people to act than to rely on seasons to provide the desired effect. The scientific corrective pointed out what the religious orientation could not accomplish and offered an alternative. Burke anticipates that the corrective to the scientific rationality will follow the same path: "Any point of reference by which a philosophic corrective of the scientific rationalization would be guided must almost necessarily show some superficial affinity with the religious rationalization" (*Permanence* 63). So in order to replace an orientation, a corrective must backtrack and mine some of the previous orientation's abilities. But this is not a simple reversal or return to the "good old days." The corrective works within the vocabulary of the dominant orientation, providing fixes.

It is important to note that Burke's conception of the corrective is a product of the limitations of the orientation. These limitations are only apparent when the orientation has reached a nearly complete symmetry between its ontology and its axiology. At this point, breakdown becomes a risk. Issues arise that cannot be explained conveniently using the vocabulary of the orientation. The scientific orientation is still dealing with the productive and social environs of the religious orientation. Because of this political lag between the acceptance of the orientation and its political embodiment across the culture, those who attempt to push the orientation to its logical ends are dismissed through argumentative appeals to the very orientation itself. "The 'mystics' are condemned for failing to abide by the established canons of positivistic science, quite as though science had never put itself forward as a deliberate and untiring questioner of any and all established canons" (*Permanence* 63). These "mystics" are simply those who return to

older vocabularies to provide explanation of situations that are handled in an unsatisfying manner by the dominant orientation. The point of tension is when the vocabulary of the past is criticized for being too “out there,” while the scientific orientation had from its beginnings held as a founding principle the questioning of all established beliefs. Though still viewed as incomplete, the scientific orientation is bringing all elements of society in line with its principles. In such an environment, the forthcoming corrective will not be apparent.

Burke suggests that the corrective to our scientific orientation is the poetic corrective. It “must certainly move in the direction of the anthropomorphic or humanistic or poetic, since this is the aspect of culture which the scientific criteria, with their emphasis upon dominance rather than upon inducement, have tended to eliminate or minimalize” (*Permanence* 65). Although he has established that correctives must do a bit of “looking back” in order to point out what the dominant rationality has excluded from its worldview, Burke is quite clear that a return to religion will not provide a suitable corrective:

The deference to poetry rather than to religion seems necessary for many reasons. Perhaps foremost of all is the fact that poetry, though never having been institutionalized, does not stand about as the Church does, like a big deserted building, with broken windows and littered doorways. And the charge of “reversion” or “backsliding” cannot so easily be laid against the poetic emphasis as against the specifically religious one. (*Permanence* 65)

The charge of “backsliding” might be best understood in terms of our own century’s debate over intelligent design. Attempts to argue for a designer in place of traditional arguments for creationism are dismissed as a slip into a ridiculous worldview, as parodies such as the “flying spaghetti monster” attempt to prove:

Intelligent design holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause rather than an undirected process such as natural selection. Adherents stress the search for evidence of design in nature and downplay their nearly universal belief that the intelligent designer in question is God as worshipped by Christians. Henderson, owner of a physics degree from Oregon State University, says that as long as there’s room for intelligent design in science curricula, then there’s room for some meatballs and marinara sauce, too. “It was He

(Flying Spaghetti Monster) who created all that we see and all that we feel,” Henderson wrote. “We feel strongly that the overwhelming scientific evidence pointing towards evolutionary processes is nothing but a coincidence, put in place by Him.” (Foyston)

The “flying spaghetti monster” is a good example of the “backsliding” claim deployed against intelligent design advocates, who perhaps mined too much from the previous orientation in the construction of their new vocabulary. Henderson’s backsliding argument can be classified as satire, pointing out the loss of the scientific orientation’s standards of judgment. The argument would be structured around the claim that without scientific standards of judgment, “anything goes.” The circular reasoning at the end of Henderson’s statement tries to make palpable a vision of the world where pluralistic belief would be taught as scientific principle. The intelligent design movement, seen through Burke’s vocabulary, is an attempt to patch a gap in the vocabulary of science that perhaps mined too much from the old order, and Henderson can paint it as looking like an “abandoned building” of thought. This example clarifies the problems facing anyone who attempts to offer explanations for phenomenon that violate the orientation’s terminology by mining the past orientation. Burke, knowing that correctives are judged first and foremost by the standards of the dominant orientation, feels that a religious revitalization would be easily taken out by the standards of the scientific orientation.

Poetry, unlike religion, was not organized in the same hierarchical way and can therefore provide elements of human inducement that the scientific orientation leaves out. “[The Poetic] is the aspect of culture which the scientific criteria, with their emphasis upon dominance rather than upon inducement, have tended to eliminate or minimize” (*Permanence* 65). However, his charge against poetry as never having been institutionalized seems strange. A quick visit to the library reveals row upon row of “best poetry” anthologies, which do stand around like “abandoned buildings” their windows broken long ago. What exactly is the difference here between poetry and religion? Why is poetry more immune to the charge of “backsliding?”

Burke argues against this from the perspective of biological *mimesis*. “The devices of poetry are close to the spontaneous genius of man,” allowing for “a point of reference” that would be “biologically grounded” (*Permanence* 66). This permits the corrective to capture the standards of judgment held in the dominant orientation, “enjoying prestige in the rationalization which it would replace” (*Permanence* 66). Since poetry uses devices that are rooted in spontaneous human biology—an example might be the impromptu, nonsense rhyme of a child, or those moments of perfect verbal description

that stun us—they have a chance to fit within the scientific orientation’s vocabulary. Positioning poetry will allow for the poetic corrective to gain adherence via the orientation’s own standards of judgment. Religion, on the other hand, has the sediment of the scientific corrective to deal with and appears to not only be in opposition to the scientific orientation, but conquered by it once before. In short, the poetic corrective is much more “humanist” in the location of where we find the motive to act together. That is, the poetic orientation has a more value-laden vocabulary, and would not attempt the project of “objective” vocabulary, either from the perspective of moral correctness (religious orientation) or factual correctness (scientific orientation). Perhaps an ethical correctness might be the phrase for the poetic orientation. This is what Ross Wolin suggests when he argues for the importance of *Permanence and Change*:

One of Burke’s more important contentions is that, in order to adopt the proper attitude toward ethics, we must recognize that language lies at the root of ethics, and therefore we must understand the way language operates in human collectives or organizations. It is this insight that makes *Permanence* an important book. (77)

The ethic offered by *Permanence and Change* is not a fixed system but more “a basic position *toward* ethics, a flexible *attitude* or *approach*. Burke finds the general principles for his ethics in drama and poetry” (Wolin 77). I want to suggest that perhaps the poetic corrective recognizes the lack of this ethic within the scientific orientation, and confirms the desire to have our words function as more than simple instruments corresponding with an external reality. As Wolin is right to point out, “attitude” is the key here—as it is for a lot of Burke’s work—and the poetic orientation, once dominant, would suggest vectors of approach to problems and situations, considering the humanistic value first and the factuality second. The symbols of the scientific orientation seem to dry up for Burke when held against the political, personal, or the community struggles that human beings are faced with daily.

But the center of this corrective must be rooted in the terms of the old orientation. Simply having a body of “good poetry” will not be effective due to the preferences of the scientific order. “The center of authority must be situated in a philosophy, or psychology of poetry rather than in a body of poetry, until the scene itself becomes sufficiently stabilized for linkages to acquire greater spread and permanence throughout the group” (*Permanence* 66). The foothold this scientific perspective of poetry establishes would “revise the productive and distributive patterns of our economy to suit our soundest desires,” creating a “rationale of art – not however a performer’s art, not a specialist’s art for some to produce and many to observe, but an

art in its widest aspects, an art of living” (*Permanence* 66). This “art of living” would be the new orientation and, as it seems, celebrate the moments of daily life as “artistic” rather than “driven” or the direct result of scientific processes. Burke here prefers to use action as the category through which to examine human affairs, and not motion, as the scientific orientation seems to prefer.

Burke’s poetic corrective must not be placed in collections of poetry, but rather in a science or philosophy of the poetic. This groundwork might be necessary due to the role the term “idea” plays within the scientific orientation. Imagination does not reach its full potential until the modern era because it is the area “where poetic and scientist thought overlap” (Burke, *Rhetoric* 78). This overlap might be a sign of the weakness of the scientific orientation and the inability of its symbols to fully account for the recalcitrant universe. Whichever it is, Burke leaves his discussion of the future corrective here and moves further into the examination of orientation and perspective.

According to Bernard Brock, Burke’s work in earlier books such as *Permanence and Change* places Burke within the tradition of critical realism. “Burke’s approach questions the privileged nature of external reality, but even as he questions its independence, he assumes that human symbol-using is a response to an external reality; as a philosophy it reflects a form of critical realism” (*Contemporary European Thought* 9). Brock sees *Permanence and Change* as the beginning of Burke’s transition into someone interested in the relationship of language and reality. For Brock, “Burke’s observation that all animals, including human beings, respond to an external world accepts the duality of ‘reality’ and ‘intuited mental content’” (*Contemporary European Thought* 9). This understanding of Burke’s early work is a useful one. If Burke is trying to negotiate the relationship between an external reality and symbol using, the poetic corrective can be interpreted as perhaps picking up the slack for the failed symbolic response to reality offered by the scientific orientation. Examining the steps of societal evolution in *Permanence and Change* reveals the role that Burke assigns to each corrective and orientation, but leaves the poetic corrective underdeveloped. It’s not until the next book of the “critical realist” phase that we receive further insight into the poetic corrective, and we receive that insight through Burke’s treatment of the imagination. I believe that Burke’s discussion of the imagination and how it functions can contribute significantly to understanding how the poetic corrective functions.

Burke on Imagination

In *Attitudes toward History*, Burke suggests that the imaginary is the place where “we necessarily come upon the necessity of compromise,” because to carry out an imaginative possibility is to “bureaucratize it” (*Attitudes*

224). This is a normal and necessary process of social change for Burke. As imaginative possibilities are enacted, they conflict with the other forces of the moment, such as the material and cultural. These interactions force the imaginative possibility to be curtailed from an absolute sense, or “utopic” understanding, to something more manageable. As these perspectives adjust, there is a build-up of “by-products” threatening the underlying fidelity of people to that enacted possibility. “A given order must, in stressing certain emphases, neglect others. A bureaucratic order approaches the stage of alienation in proportion as its ‘unintended by-products’ become a stronger factor than the original purpose” (*Attitudes* 226). The by-products are the places where the opposition to the order can ground an appropriation of the symbolic structure to enact possibility into being.

This system, far from a problem for Burke, is a good and necessary one—the imagination is the location of all potential change of the human order. Burke argues that symbols are the economy by which social change is possible. People ground their symbolic debates around these “by-products,” or, said another way, the unintended results—meanings, understandings and attributions—that arise when the symbolic encounters the recalcitrance of materiality. Linking Burke’s understanding of the poetic corrective with the role of the imagination in any symbolic orientation provides some possibilities for understanding the missing parts of the poetic corrective.

Burke argues that within the scientific orientation we can see these by-products building up. These by-products are the things that are unexplained by the symbols of the dominant rationality. They can spark the insertion of alternative symbols from differing orientations. Normally, this would engender the creation of a corrective. But the scientific orientation has found a way to avoid the build up of unanswered questions from the imaginary. Burke argues that science has bureaucratized imagination itself, instead of the normal process of bureaucratizing the results of imagination. “The procedure of *invention* itself (the very essence of the imaginative) has been bureaucratized. . . . The West has been accumulating and perfecting a *methodology* of invention, so that improvements can now be coached by routine” (*Attitudes* 228). Clarifying Burke’s argument here is difficult, but I suggest this: Burke is arguing that under the scientific orientation, the methodology of the imaginary is the focal point, and the imagination becomes mechanized. The imagination, instead of being a process alongside of science, becomes an object of scientific inquiry, or perhaps something that should be described as a scientific process. For the scientific rationality, the imagination is interesting as an object, not a process of change. One can scientifically detect the presence of the imaginary in the experiment; one does not imagine the presence of the scientific within the experiment. The science is the experiment, or the scientific orientation permits experimentation to be valid.

As an antidote to this, Burke suggests that “perspective by incongruity” is a way of “deteriorating” the quality of the scientific perspective. This deterioration would take the form of a “democratization” of perspectives, a move to “[l]iquidate belief in the absolute truth of concepts by reminding us that the mixed dead metaphors of abstract thought are metaphors nonetheless” (*Attitudes* 229). Wolin describes perspective by incongruity as “piety’s mechanism of symbolic appeal” (76). Wolin’s expression emphasizes the power of perspective by incongruity to force the hearer or the reader to seek commonality where there only appears to be opposition. The use of perspective by incongruity forces the imagination to provide methods of accounting where the dominant orientation cannot. This is because perspective by incongruity encourages the smashing together of opposites in order to expose, create, or question meaning. The gap is forced into the foreground and must be explained—the imagination then becomes a force on par with the approved terms.

This powerful rhetorical move allows temporary suspension of the dominant frame, offering a moment of relativism, instead of attempting to purge incongruity as an abomination of the orientation. In short, the imagination for Burke is an escape from the tyranny of rationality, a way to ensure that one orientation does not stand in for rationality’s role. Imagination for Burke serves to make the world explainable, accountable, and sensible to beings that constantly approach the sublime in both its awesome and horrible dimensions. Without imagination, the horrors and the stunning brilliance of sublime moments would not only be lost on us, but we would quite literally *lose ourselves to them*. As Burke reminds us, human existence is a frail thing—“We in cities rightly grow shrewd at appraising man-made institutions—but beyond these tiny concentration points of rhetoric and traffic, there lies the eternally unsolvable Enigma, the preposterous fact that both existence and nothingness are equally unthinkable” (*Permanence* 272). The place of the imagination therefore is the placing of the human subject, the foundation for the most basic political moves, such as creating orientations and rationalities. With our existence functioning as a marker on an infinitely extending line of the unthinkable, we need imagination to attribute meaning to ourselves in the face of inexplicable vastness.

Burke also takes up the idea of the imagination in both the *Grammar of Motives* and the *Rhetoric of Motives*. In both, Burke again points to an understanding of the imagination that has both been limited and corrupted by scientific encroachment. According to Burke, “imagination” for the ancient Greeks and Romans was the capacity to expand “beyond mere argument”: by “enthusiasm and passion, you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience” (*Rhetoric* 79). Imagination today has been resigned, according to Burke, to the realm of fancy and excommunicated from the realm of the pragmatic (read: important) affairs

of the everyday: “[O]ften by the imagination today, as by the ‘unconscious,’ we mean simply the awareness of distinctions and discriminations not yet reduced to the systematic order of a filing system” (*Rhetoric* 82). Imagination waits in line for processing, as do all phenomena. It’s comfortable to have it as an object of study, instead of an alternate order of studies.

Burke would rather see the imagination as a vital part of thought, where the image and the scientific fact can merge and create new orderings of the world. “It [the imagination] can thus become ‘creative,’ and even visionary of things forever closed to sense, as with the language of the mystic, who would express his intuitions in images meant to transcend imagery” (*Rhetoric* 79). The Burkean imaginary must overcome its resignation to the realm of fancy and take on characteristics of the “mystical” and offer ideas that transcend the commonplace meaning of “imaginary.” Instead of fanciful creations, the Burkean imagination envisions realities that extend beyond familiar sensations, but maintain a sense of the particular—the visions *can* exist, they just haven’t been *made yet*. Therefore, the imagination is vital to inducing other human beings to action in order to bring about alternative worldviews—worlds that account for and respond to the changing needs of human beings.

Combining both Burke’s original discussion of the poetic corrective with his theories on the imaginary gives a picture of how the poetic corrective might function. The poetic corrective would look back for a sense of inducement that was lost during the shift from the religious rationality to the scientific rationality. Burke believes that poetics can be a possible root for the coming corrective, but warns that it must be partly rooted in the assumptions of the current scientific structure in order to gain some persuasive force. This rooting must come from the imaginary, which through history has allowed humans to solve their problems: a new ordering and accounting is created and applied to the situation, permitting new motives and strategies to emerge. Each orientation, as I argued above, must also create by-products—unaccounted for bits of excess in the dominant orientation—that lead to the next change. The scientific rationality is an exception to this normal cycle, as it has curtailed the very imaginary itself and pushed it outside of the boundaries of reasonable action, extending any and all of its exercise outside of normal meaning, past the borders of reason. Recovering a knowledge of the imagination that is equivalent to scientific rational knowledge is a vital step toward establishing the poetic corrective.

In the next section I will explore William Carlos Williams’s understanding of the imagination. Combining his concept of the imaginary with Burke’s gives the poetic corrective a political sense—a sense of what can be done and what “doing” the imaginary can provide for this “art of living.”

William Carlos Williams, Imagination, and Poetics

William Carlos Williams believed that the human imagination was responsible for human knowledge, understanding, and potential. It is the imagination that makes not only civilization possible, but also the basic understanding that this moment is “today” not “yesterday” or “tomorrow.” The imagination for Williams was the tool that permitted human development, advancement, and change by altering the conditions under which material objects and ephemeral phenomena are known. As Brian Bremen explains:

The relationship between prose and verse . . . forms the critical site for the performance of Williams’s ideas in a dialectical development that moves from “facts” that already define objects and people for us within a given ideology, to “things” whose transformation within the imagination allow for an “identification” both of and with the object without destroying that object’s unique integrity, to the violence necessary to break those customs and habits that trap those “things” in historical “facts.” (11)

Bremen neatly models how Williams’s key terms work together. Williams’s poetics move easily-accepted facts into the realm of things, which then can be explored for new identifications and new relationships. Already, some connections with Burke should be apparent. But where Burke theorizes, Williams provides more concrete application. I would like to explore Williams’s sense of the imagination and argue that Williams can be seen as a practitioner of what Burke calls the “poetic corrective.”

As Bremen notes, Williams’s imagination theory serves two key human purposes: identification and the ability to break with traditionally held cultural understandings of “the known.” I will extrapolate this understanding in this section of my article, highlighting the tenets of Williams’s theory and their potential correlates in Burke’s poetic corrective. In the end, connections between these two thinkers’ concepts of the imaginary should provide a functional description of the poetic corrective and how it might look.

Williams’s theory of the imagination has two key elements. First, imagination is the force that allows human beings to understand the material universe through interpreting perceptions of objects. An encounter allows the individual to apprehend the material object, make it recognizable, but also includes the potentiality of transforming the object’s relationship to the individual and the context in which he or she encounters it. This has nothing to do with “correct” or metaphysical understanding of the object’s properties; it is a power located in the ability to render material objects as

“propertied.” For Williams, to name is to invest with potential or mar with blight, as this example shows:

Because snails are slimy when alive and because slime is associated (erroneously) with filth, the fool is convinced that snails are detestable when, as it is proven every day, fried in butter with chopped parsley upon them, they are delicious. This is both sides of the question: the slave and the despoiled of his senses are one. But to weigh a difficulty and to turn it aside without being wrecked upon a destructive solution bespeaks an imagination of force sufficient to transcend action. The difficulty has thus been solved by ascent to a higher plane. It is energy of the imagination alone that cannot be laid aside. (Williams, “Kora” 18)

Here it is clear that imagination allows multiple conceptions of the snail to occur. Both the senseless and the slave, as the extremes of the interpretation of snail, are the same because they avoid a destructive solution—a solution where the snail remains unrecognizable. The higher plane is a rhetorical connection, a Burkean consubstantial relationship of the snail to either the refined palate or the gag reflex. The power of imagination is the rhetorical ability to put material objects in their place. It places these objects into the map the human mind has already made of the world. Imagination not only provides for radical new ideas but has a conservative function as well—maintaining consistency with what is already believed.

Higher forms of the imaginary for Williams are not metaphysical. The forms that the imagination connects to the apprehended object are best understood through the rhetorical concept of the commonplace—the way that the audience arranges phenomena already, and the hierarchies that are made possible through those arrangements.³ This is a very human-centered theory of imagination. As Williams states, “It is obvious that if in flying an airplane one reached such an altitude that all sense of direction and every intelligible perception of the world were lost there would be nothing left to do but to come down to that point at which eyes regained their power” (“Kora” 79). This metaphor indicates a humanistic fidelity in Williams’s theory, preferring an imagination that is comprehensible with human senses to one that is fantastically beyond human ability to perceive. Williams, like Burke, is interested in the limits of the human being as embodied, as well as what happens when that body bumps up against the recalcitrance of everyday life. Both Burke and Williams include a pragmatic element to their understanding of the imaginary, in so much as they are uninterested in universal conceptions that lose sight of their “grounding.”

The imagination is also at the core of human ontology. Williams

quite clearly rejects a poetics of mimetic description, favoring instead a highly contingent view of nature as a construct, already rhetorical from the point of its inception:

Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight. ("Spring" 149-50).

Through the action of poetry, the poet reaffirms reality. Imagination is not a departure from reality, or escapism. It is an affirmation of a new relationship with the material world. This is why Williams rejects simple *mimesis* in the quote in favor of a metaphor from nature. Williams compares birds to words in the sense that air's "solidity" is confirmed by bird flight. Williams evokes one of the traditional functions of rhetoric in his conflation of the imagination with poetry when he argues that poetry does not alter the world, but moves us into or out of a particular reality.⁴ Going a bit further, it seems that Williams wants to posit the imagination as both an understanding and creation of reality. If the imagination is the capacity to understand the material, then poetry is the political—the affirmation of real connection through "beating" the vocabulary through poetics. Burke has a similar metaphor, where he imagines a flock of birds that live in different environments but still organize themselves as one homogenous group communicatively.

How would this cultural mongrelism affect them? Their responses would be thrown into a muddle. The startled cry of one member would lose its absolute value as a sign. The placidity of the group in a tree might not any longer be an adequate safety sign for those in the water. A cry of danger among those feeding on the shore might no longer indicate similar danger for those in the water or in the trees. (*Permanence* 55).

Burke argues that this diversification means that new signs must be developed around specificity. This metaphor shows how Burke believes terminologies of an orientation narrow as the society broadens and diversifies.

This is the problem Williams is addressing with his poetics. The narrowing of terminology must be countered by reconnecting individuals to the world of things instead of the world of terms, or in Williams's vocabulary, ideas.

The human being must function in spite of imperfect communication, always lacking in her description of the object, always unable to provide any means of escape from material restrictions. The poetic act conceptualized as an art of weaving and manipulation of middle-ground materiality neither mimics nor ignores the presence of such external limits. Poetry provides room for maneuver in the material maze. Here we see definite connections between Williams and Burke on the role of the imagination in poetics—it questions as it affirms, and it weighs as it critiques, all while attempting to “patch up” gaps within our flock's terminology.

There is another way of reading Williams's theory of the imagination, and that is to consider the problem from a perspective of mediation. Williams can be thought of *as a media theorist*, in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan and other media ecologists, but with a reverse twist—his concern is that a *lack* of mediation between the material world and the human being can be disastrous. The struggle for Williams is to make sure that the world is properly mediated by art, instead of the scientific orientation's desire to purge all mediation from understanding to end up with uncorrupted, pure information:

It is easy to fall under the spell of a certain mode, especially if it be remote of origin, leaving thus certain of its members essential to a reconstruction of its significance permanently lost in an impenetrable mist of time. But the thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose. It is this difficulty that sets a value upon all works of art and makes them a necessity. (“Kora” 14)

Things that do not appear interpretable are the biggest barrier for Williams. The function of good art is to interrupt the obvious so that the belief can be seen as a thing through the senses in a different way. The “certain mode” Williams refers to here has correspondence with Burke's “orientation,” and the function of the corrective is to allow “reconstruction of significance.” Williams gives some workability to Burke's theory, placing art as the thing that allows for the rise of the imagination and the confrontation with closely held belief. Critical distance, supplied by art, is needed to re-understand what we term as obvious.

For Williams then, all encounters with things run the risk of simplification. Such simplification of the encounter with the object is the natural

judgment of the human senses for Williams: “The senses witnessing what is immediately before them in detail see a finality which they cling to in despair, not knowing which way to turn” (Williams, “Kora” 14). Williams argues that the poetic work intervenes in this process, complicating encounters, which the senses apprehend as a simple and concrete relationship. The struggle to complicate the appearance of reality is the struggle of the artist, and its difficulty lies in the application of imagination to the object in order to transform the object’s relation from simple understanding to complex possibility. The imagination cannot take the object away from its material existence or else one’s poetry would be escapist, opposing engagement with intent to understand phenomena.

It appears that Williams uses the term “art” to mean the application of imagination to a belief so that reality can be re-configured around this item through critical distance. “Art” gains a rhetorical dimension in this definition, since the artist is the one who must find a way to re-configure the obvious belief so that the audience can investigate their relationship to it. The point of this is to make certain that (in Burkean terms) a corrective can always be created to a dominant orientation. Williams and Burke share the sense that there is a dire need to offer alternatives to the scientific rationality, and its “bureaucratization of the imaginative:” “The so-called natural or scientific array becomes fixed, the walking devil of modern life. He who even nicks the solidity of this apparition does a piece of work superior to that of Hercules when he cleaned the Augean stables” (Williams, “Kora” 14). The power of the scientific orientation, in Williams’s view, is Herculean. The correspondence with the natural is where this “walking devil” gets its power, and Williams believes that art has the best chance to “nick” away at this apparition. Burke’s investigation of rhetoric hopes to accomplish the same thing when he extensively compares “magic” to “rhetoric,” arguing that the so-called primitive deployment of “magic” was modeled on the power of language to spark human cooperation symbolically: “The realistic use of addressed language to *induce action in people* became the magical use of addressed language to *induce motion in things* (things by nature alien to purely linguistic orders of motivation)” (Burke, *Rhetoric* 42). This reversal, Burke hopes, allows for the rise of rhetoric, which has important corrective properties since “it is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (*Rhetoric* 43). With this in mind, the rhetorician’s tools become central, not peripheral, to the scientific orientation: “To be sure, the rhetorician has the tricks of his trade. But they are not mere ‘bad science’; they are an ‘art’” (Burke, *Rhetoric* 42). Seeing rhetoric as an art makes sense under Williams’s definition, as the function of rhetoric is to spark inducement, cooperation, and identification.

Williams himself compared Burke's work to his own theory of the imagination in their correspondence. In discussing the *Grammar of Motives*, Williams wrote to Burke, "Any youth, any intelligent child who should be started in life with such a book as this of yours at hand should land in the middle of life ten years ahead of the best I did and ten times as well armed for the fray. The intelligence, a naked flame if you will at its best, needs such shucking as this before it can even reach the metal for its play" ("Dec 14, 1945"). Williams believed in the power of the imagination, but that imaginative power doesn't come naturally, it must be trained. And with Burke's ideas in the *Grammar*, Williams felt he found a good resource for such work. The imagination is powerful, but must be directed appropriately.

Williams's conception of the imagination thus established, we should engage in some shucking of our own with Burke's later ideas of rhetoric and the consubstantial in order to bring Williams's thought to bear on the proper place of the poetic corrective.

So Much Depends: Williams next to Burke

Burke states, "To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (*Rhetoric* 21). That is, even though a person identifies with another, they are still each "an individual locus of motives" (Burke, *Rhetoric* 21). However, as far as their interests are concerned, they are of one "being." This is the major contribution that Burke makes to rhetoric—the inclusion of the idea of identification and division, the double movement that humans engage when they seek to become consubstantial—or aligned with—others or the ideas of others. The question of rhetoric is the formation of such identifications, and how to induce cooperation through identification and division:

A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial. (Burke, *Rhetoric* 21)

When this occurs, individuals at the same time divide from other memberships. "Because, to begin with 'identification' is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of division" (Burke, *Rhetoric* 22). Each time an individual joins with others under like-minded interests, he or she is at once removing opposite associations. But identifications are not complete and never will be. Likewise, the divisions are similarly incomplete. This is because as humans, we are individual, biological beings. We cannot be each other. Our interests and attitudes are always an arm's reach from one another. For Burke, this is the core of rhetoric:

In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only through a mediatory ground that makes their communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for their interchange of blows. But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric. (Burke, *Rhetoric* 25)

This characteristic invitation is brought about by ambiguity. For Burke, people live in a state of ambiguity that they attempt to clarify through a mutual narrowing of terms into an orientation. But as identification is incomplete, so are our terminologies. There are always gaps that need patching—things that cannot be explained by our narrowed terminologies. Correctives, or alternate vocabularies, rise to fix what was missing. Usually they backtrack to a previous orientation in order to re-discover material for these correctives. The poetic corrective seeks to “patch up” our scientific orientation, but is halted by the objectification of the imagination.

Williams believes that applied imagination, or art, brings the possibility of new understandings and relationships between people and things. His idea of art and Burke’s sense of corrective have much in common. Williams feels that good poetic practice seeks to reify reality instead of escaping from it. He believes that the dominance of the apparition of scientific unity needs dispelling, and hopes art can provide the means to do that. Here we have a combination of beliefs that I feel gives new insight into the underdeveloped poetic corrective.

How does this understanding of rhetoric, the thing which seeks to carve out identifications and divisions from ambiguity, inform understanding of the poetic corrective? For Burke, the realm of the rhetorical focuses on the consubstantial, the grammatical deals with substance, and the symbolic with identity (Burke, *Rhetoric* 21). Lining up these terms with the three major orientations of magic, religion, and science, we could see magic as corresponding with substance, rhetoric with religion, and science with identity. These correspondences are not totalizing and separate; there are elements of the rhetorical in all of the divisions. Rhetoric is also involved in the scientific orientation, but science, like the symbolic, is interested in sewing together a unity from necessarily dissociated terminologies. The poetic corrective would, in its necessary move of returning to the religious rationality for elements of what is “left out” in the scientific orientation, *turn toward* the rhetorical and *away* from the symbolic. It would stress more cooperation and inducement than the cleaning-up and unification of

a total form. What it might gain over the scientific orientation is the element of ambiguity that is necessary for identification and division to come to pass.

“In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, ‘I’ I mean also, ‘you.’ And so together, as one, we shall begin” (Williams, “Spring and All” 23). This line from William Carlos Williams seems to answer the invitation of the ambiguous situation discussed above. Williams’s starting point is also the starting point for Burke’s rhetoric—they both assume an “embrace,” at a bit of a distance, as both participants in the exchange attempt to reach consubstantiality. The role of poetry for Williams is to shake the easy and “natural” dominance of simple sensory input over the world, allowing humans to interact and shape themselves by keeping a critical distance from material objects and things so they can always have recourse to a corrective. As Burke points out, the distinction of action from motion is a rhetorical one, and Williams’s poetic practice of the imagination gives us a tool that can pry the imagination away from its bureaucratization. Williams’s imagination provides the necessary democratization of the scientific ideal to a human necessity. To fail to apply the imagination, or to refuse to apply it, is to suffer at the hands of motion, disallow consubstantiation, and live at the whim of the empirical human senses, which are highly limited, yet do not offer self-evidence of their limitations. As Williams wrote to Burke, “I am too deeply concerned with the field of poetry which, I believe, offers unguessed opportunities—opportunities such as Mozart realized in music . . . [I]t is blocked by ordinary thinking and by all metaphysics” (“To Burke” Feb 4, 1947). Apparently Williams was concerned with the role of the scientific rationality in restricting the potential for artistic alternatives to arise. Williams’s poetics focuses on methods to overcome the blocks through innovation:

With this in mind, I don’t give a damn what the philosophers say about my meaning, my “beautiful” or otherwise body of thought. I want to think as well as I can but that isn’t the point: the point is HOW am I to embody that thought in the technical matrix of the poem, how NEW to embody ANY thought in the INVENTION of the poetical body alive! For only by invention IS the body of poetry kept alive. (Williams, “To Burke” Feb. 4, 1947)

For Williams, as well as for the rhetor, the quality of thought is only as good as its expression. To embody a poem is to keep the body of poetry alive. Williams is concerned with the technical demands of the poem, which we know to be important to the interruption of static, obvious thinking. Williams finds his answer in the dismissal of over-intellectualizing his meaning,

and focusing on the unique combination of ideas and form.

Burke, responding to this letter, offers his view:

My notion is that, if life is worth living, it is worth being meditated upon. That is, it is worth having “key terms” for all the important motives in it (such as love, poetry, property, dreams, war, work and its problems, etc.). It is worth our asking ourselves how all these things are or should be related to one another. And since such a line-up must be done by words, for both appreciative and admonitory purposes we should want to know how the *nature of the words themselves* may both favorably and unfavorably affect the line-up (Burke, “To Williams” Feb. 14, 1947)

If Williams is interested in the “technical” aspects of poetic production, Burke could be said to be interested in the “symbolic” aspects. For Burke, as noted earlier, poetry can be considered a special type of act. In order to understand the implications (or results) of that special act, we must be familiar with the possible acts that can be read from an equation of words. “For a book is, *at the very least*, a set of *words*. And according to my notions, to understand it properly we must, *at the very least*, know what it is doing *just as word*. This accounts for my notion that, in order to call the plays in a given set of terms, we should first have clear ideas about the resources of these terms *in general*. Such knowledge, I feel, can help us better to place their use *in particular*” (Burke, “To Williams” Feb. 14, 1947). Burke’s call for the necessary map of general meanings can be read as that missing element that avoids the charge of “backsliding” when one mines previous orientations for corrective terms. The move of finding out what language is doing in a poem sounds analytical enough to perhaps offer itself as a scientific process for analyzing poetry. Rooting a sort of “word science” for the coming poetic transformation is a practical step toward the poetic corrective as a foundation in the sorts of meanings that the scientific rationality does not reject. The general meanings of words available for the poetic act will give some sense to the poet of the particularities available to the reader to connect the equation to the symbolic transaction of the poem. Functioning as a corrective then, both the natural word and the natural order are not hidden things passively awaiting discovery through proper instrumentation, but become a moment of creation. Thus we have a moment of rhetoric instead of scientific discovery, where the poet and the reader share identifications and divisions. It’s a move that allows the situational resources of rhetoric to fill in a gap left by the scientific orientation, which Williams seems frustrated by. He dismisses the philosophical interpretation of his work in his letter, indicating the importance that the

poem and the idea together create. Burke responds with a suggestion of rhetorical criticism, placing the “situation”—or the poem as it is—above the psychology of its creation.

Mark Huglen, in a very insightful review essay which addresses the volume of letters between Williams and Burke, connects the two thinkers through the common term of “contact.” For Huglen, this term sums up nicely the distinctions and similarities between both men around the incomplete cluster analysis that Burke promises to Williams early in their relationship:

I feel that Burke sees his own clusters and equations as *contact*. After Burke promises Williams that he is going to do a cluster analysis of his poetry, but always fails to produce throughout the entire series of letters, the reader might get the impression that Burke is not responsible or following through, asking: why would Burke mention so many times that he would like to do an analysis of Williams’ work, but never do it? (Huglen 190)

Huglen interprets “contact” as a key term seen by Williams as something localized around things, experience, and directness with the world. We lose “contact” when we begin to theorize and remove ourselves from that moment. “If we follow Williams’ rhetoric of silence directly and conduct our own cluster analysis, we would closely associate ‘things,’ along with nature and natural bodily processes, with *contact*, and we would associate ‘ideas’ with theory and philosophy—ideas that become models or terminological calculi for application” (Huglen 190). This is exactly what I mean when I argue that Williams is concerned with exactly the right level of imagination for poetry to be created. Too much theorizing and the recalcitrant elements are lost—and so is the poem in its most important sense—its ability to create space for the shaping of our relations to the material world.

Huglen concludes that “contact” for Burke is identification and division, or the movement of words to move people:

Identification/division [sic] grew out of clusters and equations. I feel that the concept is something less than a theory or terminological calculus: it is *contact*. Sorting through and charting the clusters and equations is more than theory building: it is, literally, what the people are doing. It is closer to *contact* than a theory, form, model or metaphor. (Huglen 190)

Huglen sees the distinction as a misunderstanding between the two. Burke is interested in accounting for actions with words, which he wants to see as a particular type of action—symbolic action. Williams is

interested in accounting for the sensory encounter with the thing without too much theorizing. This is how poetry is produced in Williams's view. Both men, according to Huglen, are making "contact," but both miss each other's contribution in an ironic way.

Williams and Burke agree that poetry has a pivotal role in moving thought forward from the current domination of scientific rationality. However, the starting place for the corrective would be different for each man. For Burke, the starting point is with identification, for Williams, the imagination. Both identification and imagination are "poetic" ways that human beings make sense of the material brought to mind by the senses. In my application of Burke's understanding of rhetoric to his poetic corrective, Williams's imaginary can be seen as a tool providing a deeper, more robust understanding of how the corrective might function.

Conclusion

Robert Ivie argued recently that, "We think of Burke's social theory as a way of accounting for rhetorical practice rather than as a way of addressing social problems and improving human relations." I hope that in this essay I have moved Burke's idea of the poetic corrective in this direction, articulating some of the ways that it can be helpful in understanding the function of the imagination as it relates to modes of poetic and scientific rationality.

Poetry, for Williams, is the rhetoric produced by the imagination in combination with the senses. Poetry for Burke is "equipment for living," or a "corrective" that will help account for the limits of the current rationality (Burke, *Philosophy* 293). Both offer poetry as a way of engaging with the world, either by altering it or adapting to it. In this essay, I have explored the poetic corrective and the imagination as understood by both thinkers. Burke's poetic corrective can gain needed definition and scope through Williams's theory of the imagination, and Williams's theory of the imagination gains political salience outside of its use as a model of poetic composition.

In our current situation of continuously reducing the human condition to the interaction of chemicals and "gene speak," conceptualizing terrorism as a pathology, and insisting on absolute certainty instead of high probability when considering our environmental policy, offering alternatives to the scientific orientation seems a critical step rhetoricians can take in the political sphere. To quote Ivie again, "The thoroughly rhetorical critic, I want to argue, is a productive scholar who enriches the social imaginary for the purpose of enhancing human relations. Such a critic develops theory as a rhetoric of social relations by drawing on rhetoric as a source of invention." Recovering the poetic corrective as a rhetorical intervention is a solid step in the direction of offering a viable alternative to these and other limits of the scientific orientation. This exploratory and introductory essay to Burke's

and Williams's thinking has illuminated some of the possibilities for a viable theory of the poetic corrective. Scientific certainty continues to be globalized as the only acceptable explanation for human behavior in major media outlets on an hourly basis. The poetic corrective, rhetorically understood, could provide ways of loosening the vise grip scientific rationality has over human potentiality, improving human relationships once humans are more than mere bags of chemicals electrically charged. Concluding poetically along with William Carlos Williams:

My heart rouses
 thinking to bring you news
 of something
 that concerns you
 and concerns many men. Look at
 what passes for the new.
 You will not find it there but in
 despised poems.
 It is difficult
 to get the news from poems
 yet men die miserably every day
 for lack
 of what is found there (Williams, "Asphodel" 73-74).

Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the NCA Convention for the Panel "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision: Burke as a Site for Curative Rhetorical Theory" at the National Communication Association Annual Conference November 2006 San Antonio, Texas.
2. For example, see Carter's *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process*, Ruckert's *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*, Biesecker's *Addressing Postmodernity*, and Brummett's *Landmark Essays on Kenneth Burke*.
3. For an excellent articulation of the rhetorical concept of "commonplace," see Lanham's *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (169).
4. I am thinking here of the famous formulation attributed to St. Augustine who is drawing upon Cicero, among others: that rhetoric's function is to teach, please, and move. See Conley's *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (77).

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