
Logology and Religion: Kenneth Burke on the Metalinguistic Dimension of Language

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Logology could properly be called central, and all other studies could be said to "radiate" from it. [KENNETH BURKE]¹

In the same years that Roman Jakobson and the structuralists were writing of the metalinguistic, Kenneth Burke was writing about a similar impulse of language.² Years before Fredric Jameson and Hayden White were studying the metacritical or the metahistorical, Burke was studying the way language folds onto itself.³ In the mid-thirties, Burke noted that our species is "the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of experience to a criticism of criticism."⁴ Forty years later, in the mid-seventies, Burke reaffirmed his view of our species as one "endowed by mutation" with the talent to use a language that "can comment on itself," a "'second-level' dimension (the possibility of words-about-words, symbols-about-symbols) that makes possible the development of human personality as we know it."⁵ If it ever sufficed to say that humans are the creatures who exchange signs or signals about their situation, it does no longer. Research on bees dancing pollen locations, on chimpanzees gesturing food preferences, and on whales singing reef configurations has blurred such boundaries. Burke's emphasis on "second-order" symbols

¹ Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 26 (hereafter abbreviated *RR*).

² See Roman Jakobson on the metalinguistic in his "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 356-57.

³ See Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary," in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 86 (January 1971): 9-18; and Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 6 (hereafter abbreviated *PC*).

⁵ Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy," in *Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature*, ed. Don M. Burks (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1978), p. 29.

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now seems a safer distinction: "Whereas many other animals seem sensitive in a rudimentary way to the motivating force of symbols, they seem to lack the 'second-level' aspect of symbolicity that is characteristically human, the 'reflexive' capacity to develop highly complex symbol systems about symbol systems, the pattern of which is indicated in Aristotle's definition of God as 'thought of thought,' or in Hegel's dialectics of 'self-consciousness.'"⁶ Actually, even the boundary between the unreflexive and a human awareness of its own mental events is not clear. Some of the higher primates have been observed seemingly referring to their own plans, and advanced cybernetic machines can be programmed to monitor their own functions. But, best we can tell, none approaches the human capacity to comment on a situation, much less to comment on comments. Indeed, our species seems to be the only one possessing the ability both to appreciate the concept of, and to self-consciously participate in, either an Aristotelian divine or a Hegelian dialectic.

Burke labels this tendency "logological." In his *Rhetoric of Religion*, subtitled *Studies in Logology*, he defines "logology" as "words about words."⁷ This is not very specific, for a great many words fall into this category. Morse Peckham has spoken of a division between exemplary statements (words about things) and explanatory statements (words about other words) and has noted the proliferation of the latter. A distinction between logology in the broad and in the narrow sense may be helpful. By "logology" in the narrow sense, we would mean "words used systematically to chart the general principles of word use." The term would apply to most of Burke's own works. His early reviews and essays, some of which were collected in *Counter-Statement*, are words about words and the way poets use them.⁸ His friend Matthew Josephson, in his description of life among the surrealists of Greenwich Village in the twenties, mentions that Burke occasionally referred to himself as a "words man."⁹ We might give this a logologist turn and christen Burke a "words-about-words man." Josephson reports that Burke would come back to his room after a walk through New York City, toss his hat on the bed, and announce, "I've got a new theory!" In the thirties, Burke tossed out *Permanence and Change*, *Attitudes toward History*, and *The Philosophy*

⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 24 (hereafter abbreviated *LSA*).

⁷ Burke, *RR*, pp. 1 ff. See also his "Theology and Logology," in *Kenyon Review*, n.s., 1 (Winter 1979): 153.

⁸ Morse Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), pp. 300–301; Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968; hereafter abbreviated *CS*).

⁹ Matthew Josephson, *Life among the Surrealists* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), pp. 35, 64.

of *Literary Form*, a series of new theories about words and the way poets and nonpoets alike use them. In the forties came a pair of books on human relations and the promise of additional volumes enough to comprise a trilogy or tetralogy.¹⁰ *A Grammar of Motives* schematized the underlying principles of terms in general, especially terms for human motivation, and *A Rhetoric of Motives* analyzed the procedures of all persuasive speech. His studies in logology culminated in his *Rhetoric of Religion*, in which he examines Augustine's *Confessions* and the Bible as classic examples of metalinguistic motives. His latest collection of essays, subtitled *Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, continues his exploration of the forms and purposes of "language as symbolic action" as these give away their own secrets.¹¹ In the course of these books, the movement of language becomes the primary reality: communication as the exchange of word centers; words coming together at each nexus to form patterns; the patterns interacting, structurally modifying each other as they clash, testing their bonds, then eventually disintegrating into units that will later recombine in new patterns at new loci—a veritable verbal swirl that, at points, folds back on itself, producing an awareness of its own dynamics. Everywhere we turn are languages to be interpreted, and the events that impinge on us appear in their terms.

But some of these language currents are more important than others. Though there could be many different logologies, each stressing different rules of the game of words, "logology" in a narrower Burkean sense is words about words that induce and purge guilt or words about words that cast an evil spell or words about words that partake of the desperation of survival. In other words, "logology" in the strict Burkean sense is words about words as these reveal their own moral obsessions. Burke is most intrigued with those moments when the users of a language achieve insight, individually or as a group, to which they themselves remain blind, especially those moments when writers in the Judeo-Christian tradition give away their secrets of redemptive sacrifice. Somewhere in almost every one of his books, usually at some critical moment, Burke returns to this issue of the surrogate victim. This we will discover if we look at three of his examples before concluding with his theory of the ubiquitous scapegoat and its relationship to similar theories, specifically, to those of Mircea Eliade and René Girard, both of whom also broach the subject of ritual violence.

¹⁰ See Kenneth Burke on his plans in *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. xvii–xviii, 442 (hereafter abbreviated *GM*), and in *CS*, p. 222. See also William Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 227–37.

¹¹ Burke, *LSA*.

At the end of an article in the *Hudson Review* in the mid-fifties, addressing the question of the relation between psychology and logology, Burke comments on the relation between "God" and "god-terms": "An idea of God need not be derived from the child's relation to its father and/or mother, but is also implicit in the *logic of language* [italics added], which naturally makes for culmination in some word of maximum generalization that serves as overall title of titles (and this is what we mean technically by a 'god-term')." ¹² Implicit in linguistic operations is the idea of a supreme term. By a "sheerly linguistic route" we can move from this to the idea of a supreme being. An idea of God need not be derived from the child's need for an omnipotent parent but is also a matter of language folding back on itself, discovering in its own hierarchical expansion the model for an overall deity: Title of titles, Lord of Lords. In other words, to some degree, the existence of God is derived from the existence of god-terms. Burke is careful to distinguish his logology from theology, repeatedly emphasizing that he is not proving or disproving the existence of a divine being but rather demonstrating the verbal nature of such proofs. At least five of the traditional attributes of any superhuman or superlinguistic being are derived from language as we experience it: love, from the rhetorical act of reaching out to make contact; power, from the coercive force of words; justice, from the universality of abstract terms; wisdom, from the referential use of words to "impart information"; goodness, from the sense of linguistic purpose. In other words, to some degree, the nature of God is derived from the nature of words. Of course, those who first argued for the existence of a Creator or who attributed a given character to such a One thought they were doing more than merely revealing "the logic of language." Burke does not decide the existence or nature of God. Perhaps with faith, we would see all analogies between God and language or between God and thought as divinely inspired, creative self-representations, as both Aristotle and Hegel suggest. On the contrary, perhaps with knowledge of each and every causal link we would see everything, including all turns and twists of communication, as the impersonal occasion of blind invariance. Whatever, Burke's point is that in any such theism or its counterpart is an element of the meta-linguistic or the logological.

¹² Kenneth Burke, "Symbol and Association," in *Hudson Review* 9 (Summer 1956): 224-25.

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At the start of his *Rhetoric of Religion*, addressing the question of the relation between theology and logology, Burke comments on the relation between words for God and words for words: "The rhetoric of religion furnishes a good instance of terministic enterprise in general." Burke's "logological thesis" is that, "since the theological use of language is thorough, the close study of theology and its forms will provide us with good insight into the nature of language itself as a motive." Burke finds the first three chapters of Genesis "just about perfect for the purposes of the logologer."¹³ They are certainly just about perfect for illustrating at least three of Burke's logologist theories. First, Burke has a theory of linguistic ethics: all statements are ethically charged. The language system evolves, not as a set of detached propositions, but as a set of admonitions about right and wrong and never completely loses this moral "tone."¹⁴ For there to be order and dominion, there must be norms of behavior. These norms will be expressed as the moral laws of the culture. Originally they will be presented not as human conventions but as divinely sanctioned absolutes, say, for example, as a tablet of commandments given to the tribe's patriarch atop a sacred mountain. Legends will flourish to mystify the source of the system, and violations of the code will become affronts to a pantheon of deities. The ethical order will be read into the natural order; death, a fairly natural event, will become the great punishment, and sex outside the sanctioned practices a great taboo. Failure will no longer be a practical matter of letting prey escape or crops wither but the failure to secure the blessings of the gods. Nor will the moral tradition be static. Second, Burke has a theory of linguistic entelechy: all linguistic strictures tend toward the perfection of their forms. Thus the moral laws will be, to use Burke's phrase, "taken to the end of the line."¹⁵ They will be refined and will proliferate to cover every corner of life, such that no one can abide by them all. The result will be broken laws and concomitant guilt. All will feel they have sinned and fallen short of the glorious commandments. As Burke says, "Moral evil arises not from the 'positives' of natural existence but from hortatory resources embedded in the negatives . . . whereby men

¹³ Burke, *RR* (n. 1 above), pp. vi, 3.

¹⁴ See Burke on the evolution of the negative in *LSA*, pp. 419–79. See also Rueckert, p. 253; and Greig E. Henderson, *Kenneth Burke: Literature and Language as Symbolic Action* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 140–42.

¹⁵ See Burke on entelechy in *CS*, pp. 178–81, and in *LSA*, pp. 16–17, 390–91. See also Kenneth Burke, *Dramatism and Development* (Barre, Mass.: Clark University Press, 1972), pp. 12–13 (hereafter abbreviated *DD*). See Burke on "seeing through to the end of the line" in his *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 3, 38n., 70, 83–84, 86, 88 (hereafter abbreviated *PLF*).

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can say 'thou shalt not' not only to one another, but also scrupulously even to themselves."¹⁶

Third, Burke has a theory of the bicamerality of language: implicit in linguistic operations is an ambiguity between logic and narrative. By a "sheerly linguistic route," we can shuttle between "timeless" first principles and a "time-drenched" story. Burke calls this shift "the temporizing of the essence."¹⁷ The opposite move, the shift from narrative plot to plotless analysis, we might call "the spatializing of the sequential." But regardless what we call it, language is always already operating in two modes at once, the linear and the holistic.¹⁸ Burke reads the first three chapters of the Bible as a temporizing of the essence of the social order. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, bringing this production to a culmination in a man and a woman, whom God placed in a garden of earthly delights with but one ethical edict at its center. Unfortunately, or fortunately, neither could abide by this law. The result was original sin. Both felt they had fallen short of the sacred commandment and deserved to be punished. Both also tried immediately to blame someone else for their own sins, Adam pointing at Eve, Eve at the Serpent. Burke spatializes this sequence in a diagram of relationships entitled "Cycle of Terms Implicit in the Idea of 'Order.'"¹⁹ If order, then disorder; if moral commands, then sinners; if sinners, then guilt; if guilt, then the need for cleansing; if the need for cleansing, then the desire for redemptive sacrifice; if the desire for redemptive sacrifice, then the search for a scapegoat.²⁰ This is the logic (or illogic) that unfolds in the traditional narrative. Of course, those who first told this story thought they were doing more than merely revealing "the logic of language." Burke does not decide the truth or falsity of the Genesis myth. Perhaps with faith we would see an invisible hand in the promulgation of rules to guide the tribe's behavior and ensure its survival. On the contrary, perhaps if we knew the effect of each and every cause, we would see only

¹⁶ Burke, *RR*, p. 89.

¹⁷ See Burke on "the temporizing of the essence" in *GM*, pp. 430–40. See also *PLF*, pp. 58–59, 75, 82; *LSA* (n. 6 above), pp. 363–65, 380–81; *RR*, pp. 27–29, 124, 183, 201–2, 212, 217, 232–36, 244, 254, 258; and *DD*, pp. 48–49. See also his *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 13–15, 189–203 (hereafter abbreviated *RM*).

¹⁸ The two modes of language may be seen as either the cause or the effect of the two "hemispheres" of the mind. On the bicameral mind, I traditionally recommend Robert Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1972).

¹⁹ See Burke's diagram itself and his own introductory comments on it (*RR*, pp. 184, 3–4). See also Henderson, p. 143; and my review of the same in *Genre* 22 (Fall 1989): 312–13.

²⁰ Following Burke, we might call this the "iron law" of sociolinguistics. See Burke, *RR*, pp. 4–5, and his "Dramatism," in *Communication: Concepts and Perspectives*, ed. Lee Thayer (Washington, D.C.: Spartan, 1967), p. 342; as well as Donald L. Jennermann, "Kenneth Burke's Poetics of Catharsis," in *Representing Kenneth Burke*, ed. Hayden White and Margaret Brose (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 39.

arbitrary proscriptions that grew by trial and error. Whatever, Burke's point is that in any such creation myth or its debunking is an element of the metalinguistic or the logological.

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Burke reads Augustine's *Confessions* as the record of its author's change of heart or "turn."²¹ His soul was restless till it found rest in God. In a recent monograph, Samuel Southwell says that Burke dissects Augustine's life change as a "psychological transformation made possible by the symbolic resources of language."²² Burke is fascinated by the resourcefulness of the symbol user, though he is more concerned with conversions back and forth "between secular words and the theological Word" in general than with the conversion of a particular late fourth-century "word merchant" from "teacher of pagan rhetoric to Christian theologian and bishop."²³ Augustine is a case study of the ethically charged linguistic dynamics sustaining all conversions. Again, by the operation of linguistic perfection, the moral laws of the culture tend toward the perfection of their forms. Again, the moral tradition is taken to the end of the line. Legalities are embellished to the point that no one, including Augustine, can abide by them all. Each individual comes to feel guilt and the need for redemption by virtue of being raised within a language group. Burke catches Augustine expressing a desire to return to a prelinguistic state. He lists roughly two dozen contexts in which Augustine employs the verb "cling," with its associations of clinging to the maternal breast.²⁴ Augustine's diction reveals an infantile longing for a time before words, before choice, before sin. His soul was restless till it found rest in his mother's love? In other words, Augustine attempts to use language to free himself from language-induced guilt—as we all do. He also tries to blame others for his own problems of faith, purifying himself by moral indignation against heretics. "In his disgruntlement, he turns to a hatred" of Manichaeans, Pelagians, and Donatists.²⁵ We might call the *Confessions* a kind of "writing cure," a linguistic solution to a linguistic problem. Southwell describes Augustine's Christianity as a "linguistically created

²¹ Burke, *RR*, pp. 49–51.

²² Samuel B. Southwell, *Kenneth Burke and Martin Heidegger* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987), pp. 30–31.

²³ Burke, *RR* (n. 1 above), pp. 49–50.

²⁴ Burke finds the *Confessions* replete with "maternal motives," noting that Augustine terminates his autobiographical narrative with his mother's death (*RR*, p. 123). See especially Burke, *RR*, on "The Book of Monica" (pp. 117–22) and "To Cling" (pp. 129–33).

²⁵ I am paraphrasing Burke (*GM* [n. 10 above], p. 336). On Augustine's "antiheretical polemics" vis-à-vis Burke's "charity," see Robert McMahon, "Kenneth Burke's Divine Comedy," in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 104 (January 1989): 59.

alternative."²⁶ But if Augustine escapes from guilt, he does not escape from words. From his first page calling for a session with God to his speculations on being raised within a language group to his conversion by the words of others and by the Word of the Lord, the early Christian saint never breaks from the circle of language—as evidenced by his continuous quarrels with himself and others.

Burke also reads Augustine's autobiography as a manipulation of the linguistic ambiguity between logic and narrative. Burke catches Augustine shifting from a chronology of his life in his first nine books to an analysis of the principles of memory in his last four books. John Freccero says that Burke dismantles Augustine's "theological edifice."²⁷ In fact, in his essay on Burke and Augustine in Hayden White and Margaret Brose's *Representing Kenneth Burke*, Freccero tries to reconstruct Christian doctrine in the face of what he calls Burke's "logological reduction." According to Freccero, Augustine views the material world as a temporizing of the divine essence. The "linear trajectory" of history is grounded in a divine, nonnarrative "syntax," and this transcendence, this "gathering up in an epistrophic movement is the essence of thought for Augustine."²⁸ Then Freccero makes the connection with Burke: "Careful readers of Burke will recognize several of the themes of his logological analysis—in particular, the recapitulation of history would seem to be nothing more than the translation into narrative form of logical possibilities."²⁹ Long before Burke was saying that language shuttles between the linear and the holistic, Augustine was saying that the experience of the word, human or divine, is a coexistence of time and the timeless, a joint tenancy that can be separated only analytically into its rectilinear and cyclical components. Freccero is correct in saying that Augustine anticipated Burke's doctrine of bicameral linguistics, though the bishop of Hippo may have here achieved a deconstructionist insight to which he remained blind. Trying to reach a divinity beyond words, beyond choice, beyond sin, Augustine ends up in the gap between a timeless first principle and its time-drenched actualization. Trying to embrace a divine presence, he encounters an aporia at the place where the holistic is translated into the linear. Trying to rise above the turmoil of this life, he plunges deeper into the ambiguity between logic and narrative—as we all do. Long

²⁶ Southwell notes the proto-Freudian, proto-Lacanian nature of Augustine's self-therapy, namely, its emphasis on the love for the mother and on the linguistic nature of these psychological bonds (pp. 30–31).

²⁷ John Freccero, "Logology: Burke on St. Augustine," in White and Brose, eds., pp. 53–58, 60–61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

before Burke took apart Augustine, Augustine had taken apart his own restless soul—and with it even the God in whom he hoped to find rest.³⁰

Nevertheless, Augustine offers the bicameral speech-act as a model of the unfolding, and of the perfecting, of the divine plan. When we speak, we string a meaning into time. Just as we must have in mind some notion of what we want to say before we say it, Augustine's God has the future in mind before stringing it into time. Just as each of our phonemes has its moment and then must yield to make way for the next sound, each of God's creatures lives its life and then must die to make way for future generations.³¹ And just as each fading syllable contributes to the meaning of the complete sentence, each passing life adds to the meaning of the Overarching Plan. Of course, there are problems with this Augustinian doctrine of predestination. No speech-act is perfect, and no conclusion of an act of speech ever exactly coincides with its original intention, much less the conclusion of the cosmic unfolding, if such there be, with its original conception. Between the alpha and the omega intervene factors that alter any message, however slightly. We might want to substitute a Whiteheadian model for the Augustinian, that is, to discuss these developments in terms of open rather than closed systems. Burke himself would prefer an Aristotelian-Leibnizian model based on the concept of perfection or entelechy, and he says so when considering Augustine's stealing of the pears as a predestined act. Burke does believe this idea of the divine speech-act helped move Augustine from a Manichaean to a Christian view. Augustine stopped emphasizing a corporeality riddled with evil and started emphasizing an overarching spirituality predominantly good.³² We are not trapped in an uncertain struggle between an evenly matched Good and Evil but released through a preordained unfolding basically friendly. Each transformation of the word—and hence of the world—is a potentially creative phase of the same underlying benevolence. If we could hear the whole story at once, Augustine is confident we would, as did the Creator after each stage of the original work, pronounce it good. But if we escape from supernatural malevolence, we do not escape from words. From the first call for light over the formless deep to the sentencing of the last sinner on Judgment Day, Augustine's universe is an act of

³⁰ The *Confessions* is deconstructionist in its focus on the world, human or divine, as an edifice that can be dismantled, but not in its assumption of dramatic presence or, a fortiori, divine presence. See *ibid.*, p. 54, and my review of same in *Genre* 17 (Fall 1984): 347. See also Paul Ricoeur on the aporias in Augustine's theory of time in his *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1:5–30.

³¹ Burke, *RR*, pp. 81–85, 96.

³² See also Burke on Augustine defining his identity against not just the Manichaeans but also the Pelagians and Donatists (*ibid.*, pp. 115–16n., 127).

communication that never breaks from the circle of language—as evidenced by our continuing quarrels with ourselves and others.

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What we have just analyzed are three instances in which Burke discovers linguisticity masquerading as spirituality. Perhaps we should not be surprised given his belief that the realms of language and spirit are analogous—and never does he draw the conclusion that the show has no meaning. Allow me to conclude with three additional comments. First, Burke isolates the logological dimension from the expressive or the persuasive or the referential or the poetic to remind us that our world is primarily linguistic. The theist philosophers, the Hebrew mythmakers, the early Christian theologian—all are word merchants extracting profits from an abstract enterprise, followed by later analysts who roll over the same accounts into higher speculations. Are such investments worth it? Burke thinks that logological reflections pay dividends just by reminding us that, though we act with many different motives, we cannot escape from words. In the Burkean view, a self expressing itself in a message or a receiver rhetorically manipulated by a message are as much verbal structures as the words that pass between them. Even the setting around them, to which they often refer, is shaped by language. Burke is structuralist in his emphasis on the semiotic character of these dynamics. Everywhere we turn are languages to be interpreted, and the events that impinge on us appear in terms we learned by virtue of being raised within a language group. Our reality, to paraphrase Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, is a “linguistic construction.”³³ The logological, concerned as it is with language itself, offers unique access to the dynamics of other dimensions of experience insofar as all of these are linguistic phenomena.

Second, years before Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, Burke was reminding us that this linguistic reality has neither firm foundation nor essence.³⁴ Our symbolic landscape is not so much a realm of literal truths or of simple one-to-one correspondences between clearly defined terms and clearly demarcated objects as an insubstantial realm of metaphor, of what Burke calls “analogical extension.”³⁵ Burke is deconstructionist in his

³³ Burke is structuralist in his doctrine that everything human is a matter of interpretation, but not in his pragmatic reluctance to postulate that meaning is totally arbitrary. On the social construction of reality, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966). See also the first two chapters of Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 1–51.

³⁴ See Frank Lentricchia on “Burke's ruthless investigation of his own terminological resources” in his *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 71.

³⁵ See Burke on “analogical extension” (PC [n. 4 above], pp. 97–124). Burke is deconstructionist in his focus on the figurative or literary nature of our linguistic reality but not in his assumption of dramatic presence.

emphasis on the unstable character of these dynamics. Everywhere we turn linguistic forms are being stretched to cover new situations, and the constant turmoil means that the old must be sacrificed to the new. *Burke finds the most notable deconstructionist tendency to be a turn toward victimage.* Again, the narratives with which we frame our lives are ethically charged. Again, the linguistic system out of which we construct our identities is not a set of detached propositions but a series of moral commandments, by all of which none can abide. The result is ubiquitous guilt and a search for scapegoats. Like Augustine, all desire to return to a prelinguistic state. All try to blame someone else for their own sins. All desire "to cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own iniquities" on a surrogate victim.³⁶ The scapegoat "performs the role of vicarious atonement." The sacrificial choice becomes a "vessel . . . of unwanted evils"; then, driven from the circle of the guilty, it carries away the sins of the tribe.³⁷ What Burke calls "the dialectic of the scapegoat" is not limited to pretechnological societies. In the industrial age, "criminals either actual or imaginary may . . . serve as scapegoats" in any society that "'purifies itself' by 'moral indignation' in condemning them though the ritualistic elements operating here are not usually recognized by the indignant." Deprived of an outlet for their frustration, some may "turn in their disgruntlement to a hatred of Jews, foreigners, Negroes, 'isms,' etc." For Burke the "scapegoat mechanism" is a linguistic mechanism that serves as "the overall category for . . . human relations" and that the language reveals, though perhaps blind to its own insight, in its metalinguistic or logological dimension.³⁸

Here the Bible as a whole is just about perfect for the purposes of the logologer (Burke's usage). If the Old Testament illustrates the interrelationships among order and dominion and victimage, the New Testament stretches these to cover a new situation. The developing tradition experiments with various genres, but, as the myth absorbs legend, law, psalm, and history, the spiritual record also takes the form of a cycle of sin and repentance. As the handwritten scroll is unrolled, a tale is told of commandments handed down and ignored, of covenants made and broken, of dispensations received and violated. Page by page, episode by episode, in stops and starts, assumptions of a monotheistic benevolence, of a separate-but-not-quite-equal malevolence, and of a last judgment—all develop.³⁹

³⁶ On "the dialectic of the scapegoat," see Burke, *GM* (n. 10 above), pp. 406–8, as well as *PC*, pp. 14–17, and *PLF* (n. 15 above), pp. 39–45.

³⁷ Burke, *PLF*, pp. 39–40.

³⁸ Burke, *GM*, pp. 406, 336, 338.

³⁹ On the development of Hebraic theology, see Berger, pp. 113–25. On the development of Hebraic demonology, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 28–42. On the development of a belief in an afterlife, see Hans

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Again, by the operation of linguistic entelechy, the story tends toward the perfection of its forms. Gradually the hope for an eternal truce between the warring forces of God and Satan intensifies. Gradually the wish for a just distribution of rewards in heaven and punishments in hell is embellished. Gradually the desire for a perfect scapegoat—a scapegoat to end all scapegoats—is “taken to the end of the line,” though the ritualistic elements operating here are not usually recognized by the indignant. Once the efficacy of butchering animals at the altar has been thrown into question by the written record, none of these sacrifices having proven able to prevent the recurring moral decline of the Hebrew nation, the search begins for a sacrificial vessel who can carry away the sins of the tribe once and for all. This desire receives its highest expression in the account of the ultimate sacrifice (of the firstborn) by the ultimate being (God) for the ultimate purpose (the redemption of the crown of Creation). Burke reads the extension of the Old Testament into the New as a temporizing of the essence of a final redeemer. The genre of the scapegoat narrative culminates in the account of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Jesus of Nazareth performs the role of vicarious atonement. The repentant sinner, on first hearing the whole story at once, pronounces it good. But in the Burkean view, the Bible is also seen as a centuries-long revelation of its own secrets. Long before Augustine analyzed the mediatory principle operating between God and God’s creatures, the Word had made available for logological analysis its own developmental stages. But if the Bible as a whole dares us to break from its rhetorical spell, it does not enable us to escape from words. From the Garden of Eden, with an ethical edict at its very center, to the offering of a scapegoat on Golgotha, the sacred text has not enabled us to break from the circle of language—as evidenced by the continuing saga of sin and repentance the world over.

Does this mean that we are merely bards of some panoramic scapegoat epic, the only species capable of serving as both audience for and tellers of this Overarching Narrative? Burke does not decide the fact or fiction of his culture’s central poem. As he warns at the outset, such validation falls outside the purview of his logology, which aims at lifting into awareness the usually unremarked dynamics of language.⁴⁰ But years before Eliade and Girard were locating the scapegoat at the base of human civilization, Burke was describing ritual sacrifice as the “hub” of the human drama.⁴¹ Eliade has said that the “tragic concept . . . that life must be perpetuated

Küng, *Eternal Life?* trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), pp. 82–91. On the development of word technologies that may underlie all these other developments, see Walter Ong, *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

⁴⁰ Burke, *RR* (n. 1 above), pp. v–vi.

⁴¹ Burke, *PLF*, pp. 103 ff.

by murder was characteristic of a large proportion of humankind for thousands of years."⁴² In ancient China, the will of heaven required an occasional human immolation. In ancient India, the Vedic goddesses demanded the blood, the virility, and the will of their worshippers. The shadow of dark sacrificial rites falls across the golden age of ancient Greece. The temple precincts of ancient Israel witness a similar spilling of blood even after the fulminations of the prophets against such cults.⁴³ And in premodern Europe, Druidic priests minister the slaughter of human victims. "In all traditional societies human sacrifice was fraught with cosmological and eschatological symbolism that was singularly powerful and complex, which explains its persistence among the ancient Germans, the Geto-Dacians, the Celts, and the Romans (who, incidentally, did not forbid it until 97 C.E.)."⁴⁴ Such cultural practices led to acts "dangerous," even "monstrous"; nevertheless, they have been practically as common as cosmic rhythms of night and day, winter and summer, death and birth.⁴⁵ "As for Christianity, it was founded on the voluntary immolation of Christ."⁴⁶ Eliade begins with the rise of religion, which he discusses as an encounter with sacred mystery, out of which meaning is formed and order established. Primitive men and women confront the enigma that all life risks death and that evil is enmeshed with good. For Eliade, the essence of the human is a religious courage in the face these existential contradictions, a courage which finds expression in myth, symbol, and ritual, including human sacrifice. The rites of victimage that serve to perpetuate a meaningful and orderly world are more the product of human or cultural choice than of nature, more mythology or theology than animal instinct. Interviewed in the mid-seventies, Eliade pointed out that early agriculturalists adopted the notion that their food supply was "the result of a primordial murder": "A divine being had been killed, then cut up, and the pieces of his body had given birth to plants not known before, in particular the tuberous plants that thereafter provided [their] main source of nourishment. But, in order to guarantee a further crop, the first murder must be ritually repeated. Hence human sacrifice, cannibalism, and other sometimes very cruel rites."⁴⁷

Girard, too, begins with the rise of religion, which he discusses as an

⁴² See Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 121.

⁴³ See Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols., trans. William Trask, Alf Hiltebeitel, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, 1978, 1983), 1:259, 354. See also 1:217-20, 256-59, 345-56, 2:8-9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:152.

⁴⁵ The adjectives are Eliade's. See *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, p. 121.

⁴⁶ Eliade, *A History of Ideas*, 1:259.

⁴⁷ Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, pp. 120, 122, 124, 125, 142, 144-45, 150.

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encounter with finite resources, out of which meaning is born and order established. Picture a ring of hands reaching for the same object. These are the hands of "mimetic rivals," who define themselves attempting to wrest from one another the object they all desire. Out of this "possessive" or "acquisitive" mimesis comes "conflictual" mimesis. Now the hands copy each other, not grasping for mates or food or the best grazing lands, but reaching for similar weapons and delivering similar blows. "Mimetic violence is at the heart of the system."⁴⁸ This violence is contagious and may spread out to distant relatives and down through future generations. Unchecked it results in the disintegration of the community. Eventually the original object of contention is lost in a seemingly endless cycle of attack and counterattack. According to Girard, the origins of the killing are forgotten and all that remains are the warring "doubles," pairs of antagonists locked in mortal combat. But when the frenzy reaches the necessary proportions, the feuding factions unite against a common foe. In a moment of paroxysm, all blame some more or less innocent party for their own troubles and then sacrifice him, her, or it. The calm that follows is taken as proof that the scapegoat was indeed guilty. But the dead do not die in vain. The new world order erected on their graves will deify them as gods who sacrificed themselves, and whosoever believes in them shall not die but live in peace. A network of laws will be enacted to discourage another round of revenge, and rites will be instituted to encourage another sacrifice of the chosen and thus to celebrate, by such a reenactment, the founding of the order. For Girard, the essence of the human is this paradox of sanctions, a concoction of legal thou-shalt-not's that maintain order and of ritualistic thou-shalt's that administer homeopathic doses of a return to chaos. The simulated disintegration is believed "to ward off the real disintegration."⁴⁹ As for Christianity, it is actually a revelation of this "foolish genesis of bloodstained idols and the false gods of religion."⁵⁰ Girard tells a story of the rise of cultural self-consciousness. Only after centuries does the culture attain a level at which science makes such practices the object of systematic reflection. Only after millennia, at least so Girard implies, does the spirit of humanity finally begin to articulate, and thus to chart in greater scope, the violent origins of the sacred, hidden since the foundation of the world.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, collaborators Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 13. See also pp. 18, 16, and 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 24, 27, 28, 22.

⁵⁰ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 212.

⁵¹ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, pp. 3 and 436 ff. See also Girard on the current state of "the science of myths" in *Scapegoat*, pp. 95–99, and his *Violence and the Sacred*,

Girard is structuralist in his stress on the transindividual nature of the cultural pattern. For Girard, what comes first is the imitative behavior that sets the stage for conflict and the choosing of a defenseless surrogate. If mimetic rivalry, then radical division; if enough divisiveness, then a sudden unification against a chosen victim. This is the logic (or illogic) that unfolds in the mimetic crisis. The structure of prohibition and ritual, being ethically charged, then promulgates rules to control the tribe's behavior and ensure its survival. "Religion is nothing other than this immense effort to keep the peace," claims Girard.⁵² I do not recall Burke making a statement of such finality on religion. For Burke, what comes first is the system of commandments that proliferates and defines greater criminality. The language, being ethically charged, guides the behavior of its speakers but, perfecting its moral demands, induces in them guilt and the need for a surrogate victim. For Girard, all hands tend to mimic each other's reach for the same object, which leads to trouble and, in the end, to the establishment of the legal code. For Burke, legally induced guilt creates needs for self-justification that make it difficult for any reaching hand to consider compromise and withdrawal. For Girard, the scapegoat precedes the law. For Burke, the law precedes the scapegoat. Who is to say which should be privileged over the other? I am trying to suggest their doctrines are mutually reinforcing. Both Burke and Girard demonstrate why so many people—hunters, gatherers, peasants, workers in the modern factory—seek to blame others for the own inadequacies. At the very least, both try to explain why the more empirical Eliade unearths, when he surveys the history of religions, so much sacred violence.

To generate a complete theory of culture from a principle of primordial murder is a legacy of Sigmund Freud, for whom the essence of the human is the Oedipus complex. In an act of familial bloodshed the sons of the primal horde depose their tribal father. Girard has said of Freud's theory that it recognizes "the necessity of real collective murder as a model for sacrifice" but that, with its assumption of a single significant murder, which occurs only once for all time, it "cannot explain the repetition of rituals."⁵³ "The idea that a group would gather to immolate any sort of victim in order to commemorate the 'guilt' they still feel for a prehistoric murder is purely mythical. What is not purely mythical, by contrast, is the idea that men would immolate victims because an original, spontaneous murder had in fact unified the community and put an end to a real

trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). On the modern scapegoat, see also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 1–69.

⁵² Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, p. 32.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 25.

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mimetic crisis." Burke has said of Freud's theory that anthropologists "seem to have done it quite a lot of damage" but that, with its narrative of the archetypal patricide, it gives temporal form to an essential insight about human society.⁵⁴ Burke might say that Girard's theory of a series of primordial murders, while the likely target of similar anthropological skepticism, similarly translates the logic of culture into a story. Anticipating the central principle, he would probably not debate the historicity of the Girardian myth. Girard extends the Burkean argument for the Bible as a linear expression of the sacrificial cycle to announce the New Testament as a radically new genre of scapegoat narrative, one that encourages an awareness of its own dynamics by telling its story from the viewpoint of the victim, though many of its readers, even its Christian readers, remain blind to this insight.⁵⁵ Girard does acknowledge Burke's influence, expressing his hope that someday Burke "will be recognized as the great man he is."⁵⁶ For Burke, the essence of the human is the "Sacrificial Motive."⁵⁷ The chief value of his doctrine is the perspective it offers for disentangling inauthentic from authentic religious motives. As Feuerbach's projection theory and Marx's opium theory and Freud's illusion theory have taught us to discriminate various human foibles from the act of worship, Burke's scapegoat theory counsels us to discount the mechanism of victimage.⁵⁸ His work, together with the work of others, can be used to isolate the foundational violence, in order to appreciate what is still valid in religion, though often still hidden.

Perhaps the metaphor of a foundation is not the best choice. Our world of words may be centered around the scapegoat, but it is fluid enough to allow us to redirect its forces. Burke, and this is my third concluding point, is deconstructionist in his assumption that a disruptive energy constantly bursts into the world, but, unlike the deconstructionists, he campaigns these bursts be given a more positive direction at the locus of the person. He does not completely decenter the self. The Burkean self has neither firm foundation nor substance. A product of the verbal swirl, it is as insubstantial as a fading syllable, always already undergoing transformations made possible by the symbolic resources of language. But it is also a unique nexus of experience at which an understanding of its own dynamics can be attained. A place where language folds onto itself, the self can face its own moral obsessions. A point of intervention, the self can act to

⁵⁴ Burke, *GM* (n. 10 above), p. 431.

⁵⁵ I allude to Girard's chapter, "The Key Words of the Gospel Passion," in *Scapegoat*, pp. 100-111.

⁵⁶ René Girard, *To Double Business Bound* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 221.

⁵⁷ See Kenneth Burke, "On Catharsis, or Resolution," *Kenyon Review* 21 (Summer 1959): 338.

⁵⁸ On Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, see Küng, pp. 33 ff.

reverse its own dangerous trends. Burke, like Eliade, reminds us to take responsibility for our freedom. He accepts that language itself furnishes many of the motives for the absurdist theater of human emotions, but he does not resign himself to the suspicion that there is nothing to be done. Though we cannot break from the circle of language, we can choose our words more carefully. Though we cannot free ourselves from language-induced guilt, we can frame our narratives more benevolently. If guilt and a concomitant search for scapegoats, then the need to choose our surrogates more self-consciously. If we have to blame someone, let us start by blaming ourselves for participating so blindly in the scapegoat process, then let us proceed to determine crimes and punishments more humanely and more fairly. Burke, like Girard, urges us to see from the vantage point of the victim, to be guided by love rather than hate. As Girard concludes, "The time has come for us to forgive one another."⁵⁹

* * *

Nothing in my conversations with Burke or with those who know him has ever indicated to me his willingness to affirm God's existence in any orthodox sense. To a degree faintly Eliadean, Burke does allow for a truly religious language in which words open themselves to the miracle of their own operation. This sense of numinal mystery is strongest at the end of his books, especially at the end of his *Rhetoric of Motives*.⁶⁰ But to a degree almost Girardian, Burke is more concerned with the dangerous ways we are twisted and turned by language, especially with our deadly tendency toward victimage. Whereas other animals seem responsive in a rudimentary way to an urge to eliminate rivals, they seem to lack the "second-level" aspect of symbolicity that is characteristically human, the "reflexive" capacity to calculate murder. Douglas Hofstadter has remarked on the ubiquity of loops in various forms of human endeavor, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin has seen the phenomenon of the human as essentially a bending back of spirit on itself.⁶¹ But the most dramatically human loop or bend may be the way we turn on our own kind. Actually, even the boundary between the unpremeditated and a human penchant for homicidal mayhem is obscure. Some of the higher primates have been observed making lethal raids on their neighbors. But, best we can tell, none approach the human capacity for mass murder. Indeed, our species seems

⁵⁹ Girard, *Scapegoat*, p. 212.

⁶⁰ See Burke on "ultimate identification" (*RM* [n. 17 above], pp. 328–33). On the religious or numinal dimension of language, I traditionally recommend Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

⁶¹ See Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (New York, Vintage, 1980); and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

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to be the only one possessing the ability both to perform and to relish ritualistic sacrifice. This Burke discovers at those points at which language tells its own story, and he turns his reflections into a warning about that which must now be lifted into explicit awareness. Thus he reaffirms his faith in our species as one also endowed with the logological talent to use a language that "can comment on itself," a "second-level" (or "third-level"?) dimension that makes possible our critique of ourselves and our acting to reverse dangerous trends. Burke is deconstructionist in his belief that language gives away its own self-destructive secrets, but, unlike the deconstructionists, he openly admonishes us, with some real urgency in his voice, not remain blind to the still-too-seldom-remarked secret of the "scapegoat mechanism." Logology in the very strictest Burkean sense is a metalinguistic attempt to decrease the number of sacrificial victims.