

# Kenneth Burke's New Deal

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## **Introduction: Tracing New Deal Ideology**

For decades, Kenneth Burke roamed the humanities as something of a loose cannon. Representations oscillated largely between uneasy and often dismissive classifications as off-beat New Critic, impure Freudian or iconoclast “Marxoid” on the one hand, and almost straightforward hagiography praising the autodidact genius in his remote Andover farmhouse on the other. It is only since his death in 1993, which triggered a new surge of interest in his thought, that scholars have begun providing a more nuanced understanding of Burke by reconstructing the network of intellectual alliances and political affiliations that surrounded his thought. Ann George and Jack Selzer’s *Kenneth Burke in the 1930’s* (2007) and the recent volume on *Kenneth Burke and his Circles* (2008) are but two prominent examples of what has become the most vital branch of Burke studies today.

A significant focal point for this new historicizing approach has been Burke’s intense but elusive involvements in the struggles of the American left during the Thirties, accounts of which often revolve around Burke’s supposed expulsion from the inner circle of the communist avant-garde following the delivery of a controversial speech at the First American Writers’ Congress in 1935. Arguing that the traditional, European Marxist rhetoric of class should be replaced by an Americanized, native liberal vocabulary in order to draw broader support for socialist ambitions, Burke found himself in the eye of a storm of indignation. Containing all the right elements to fit the popular myth of Burke as an intellectual maverick, the occasion has, as John Logie says, “proven irresistible for a generation of Burke scholars”: raising a controversial issue on a public occasion of great social and political immediacy, Burke both rode the wave that stirred the progressive intellectuals of the day, while remaining enough of an unruly outsider to deliver the clever truth that foreshadowed the inclusivist Popular Front philosophy. In the wake of Frank Lentricchia’s and Michael Denning’s influential accounts of Burke’s contribution to the First American Writers’ Congress,<sup>1</sup> Burke’s intellectual maturation during the Thirties is now generally understood as a dialogue with the various leftist factions of

the day, with Burke eventually emerging as the Popular Front's "foremost rhetorical theorist" (Denning 124). There are, to be sure, sound reasons for putting Burke's conversations with the proletarian movement at the heart of his intellectual development, as the letters, essays, and books from the period offer ample evidence of a strong preoccupation with Marxist thought.<sup>2</sup> While his critical line of enquiry on art, history, and politics necessarily led Burke to confront the growing communist influence in the contemporary debate on those matters, his critique of cutthroat economics and his focus on social amelioration seemed to make him (then and today) their natural ally—an alliance which Burke often eagerly cultivated.

It should be noted, however, that not every history of the American left embraces Burke unconditionally as one of its own. Frederic Jameson, while applauding Burke's preoccupation with language and power, accuses him of being "in the thick of a New Deal and Deweyan rhetoric of liberal democracy and pluralism," marked by his "implicit faith in the harmonizing claims of liberal democracy and in the capacity of the system to reform itself from within" (520). Although the apparent consensus among contemporary scholars with regard to the underlying ideology of Burke's writing during the Thirties has all but drowned out those voices that consciously situate Burke outside the circle of radical or communist thought, Jameson's suggestion that there is a much more "liberal" streak beneath Burke's apparent adherence to communism is, I think, worth while exploring. As Burke himself never tired of pointing out, every way of looking inevitably obscures part of what one is looking at; the imaginative dominance exerted by the Writers' Congress anecdote that triggered the inscription of Burke into existing histories of Thirties' leftist radicalism therefore inevitably downplays other determinants of his thought and writing.<sup>3</sup> When, in his controversial speech, he urged the imaginative writer to "propagandize his case by surrounding it with as full a cultural texture as he can manage" (273), Burke was advocating a non-exclusivist practice of broad cultural sensitivity that characterizes his own work. Nonetheless, current mappings of Burke's cultural politics rarely incorporate social or discursive formations beyond the communist or Popular Front perspective, even though accounts that pigeonhole Burke on the side of the radical left often have a hard time rhyming his political convictions with the aestheticism propounded in his work.<sup>4</sup> In this essay I will, therefore, try to determine whether there is any truth in Jameson's assertion that aspects of Burke's thought can be traced back to the New Deal, the allegiance between politics, industry, and the people that shaped America's political and social life during the Thirties. Unlike Jameson, however, my purpose is not to unmask Burke as a closet bourgeois, but to provide some suggestions for expanding our understanding of Burke's scene, and to link existing secondary literature on the topic to broader currents in historiography.

### I. A Burkean New Deal?

When New York governor F. D. Roosevelt accepted the Democratic presidential nomination in 1932, his promise was that of a “new deal” for an American people desperate for change. The stock market crash plunged the economy into a downward spiral, while Hoovervilles appeared in the cities and dust storms sent hundreds of thousands of farmers and their families on an exodus from their homes on the Great Plains to the cities of the Northeast and the West Coast. Roosevelt entered office in March 1933, and directed that immediate measures were to be taken in order to provide relief for the millions of homeless and unemployed. But the blueprint of the reform in policy that was drawn up during the president’s “first one hundred days” aimed at more than providing relief: it envisaged long-term plans for the economic and spiritual recovery of the nation through radical reform of the laissez-faire economy and ideology believed to have been the main cause of the Depression. In a radical redistribution of power, the federal government pushed forward to become the central authoritative agency that was to safeguard the welfare of the American citizens.<sup>5</sup> Burke, it seems, was more of an occasional—if attentive—witness than an active participant in the mainstream political reforms of the day.<sup>6</sup> Having earned some renown as a literary critic, Burke got around reviewing and publishing, taking the occasional odd job whenever in need of money. Backed by the Guggenheim scholarship awarded to him for *Permanence and Change*, Burke had the liberty to focus almost exclusively on writing, associating himself with various radical (both political and aesthetic) factions of the day. The New Deal, liberal in philosophy and mainstream in focus, apparently made no direct impact on this young, vigorous mind. Apart from a few scattered references throughout his books and some satirical pamphlets playing on the unorthodox monetary interventionism of the new-formed government, there is very little indication that Burke bothered too much with what went on in Washington.

However, as Michael Szalay argues, the lack of references to the New Deal in archives from the period is common; it is often hard, sometimes almost impossible to trace the impact of the Roosevelt administration in any piece of writing produced during the Thirties. New Deal measures seemed improvised and fragmented, aimed at immediate relief and therefore transitory: “the newly forming welfare state apparatus did not jump out at contemporaries in anything like a full-blown, totalized form” (18). Furthermore, maintaining a stance toward the New Deal amidst the high-pitched ideological battles of the decade proved extremely hard for writers, especially as the schism between dogmatic Marxists and those (like Burke) with more moderate socialist agendas became apparent. In an interview with Burke, Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and William Phillips on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the First American Writers’ Congress,

Cowley claims that “[t]he New Deal was still formally regarded as fascist, formally, although there were signs of reconciliation, a few signs, but the party line was still that the New Deal promoted not only a fascist organization of society but something approaching fascism in the arts.” Granville Hicks retorts: “Nevertheless, I doubt if you will find in this report on the American Writers’ Congress one single attack on the New Deal. I think the party had reached the point of being neutral on the New Deal but dead against fascism” (Young 68-69). “Fascist” yet at the same time considered compatible with leftist hopes of social amelioration, openly denounced but often silently approved, the middle of socialism and regulatory corporate liberalism of the New Deal had a hard time soliciting active vocal support from the radicalized intelligentsia. Yet even though its failure to be incorporated into the dualist logic of left and right resulted, as Hicks claims, in a largely “neutral” attitude towards its policies, the New Deal vision of the welfare state did radiate an ideology of its own that deeply pervaded American society and its writers. “Literary engagements with the welfare state during the Thirties and Forties did not emerge simply as a function of traditionally liberal, centrist political convictions,” Szalay states; “writers engaged the risk management procedures of the modern state regardless of their personal relation to the political divisions often fetishized by present-day critics of the period” (3).

Arguing that the impact of the newly shaped discourse of the welfare state on America’s writers can be traced beyond direct expressions of allegiance or rejection, Szalay places the economics of security at the epicenter in the mix of political pluralism, social reform, and economic planning. Taking several instances where Burke addresses contemporary issues of government and economics as my starting point, I will use Szalay’s daring insights to trace the series of intellectual transformations that lead toward Burke’s famous notion of literature as “equipment for living” to the radically new ethic of literary production and consumption promoted by the New Deal agencies. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate that it is possible to conceive his aesthetic theory to have taken shape, not in direct opposition to traditional liberal values, but in a complex dialogue with a liberal welfare state actively shaping itself.

## II. Writing the New Deal

Published in April 1941, the essays that make up Burke’s *The Philosophy of Literary Form* reiterate and round off his Depression-era writing. It is generally considered a transitional book; with some of the essays written as early as 1933, its publication during the height of Nazi aggression in Western Europe already made it seem hopelessly out of tune with the times. Furthermore, the diverse nature and uneven quality of the “backward-looking” essays makes it hard to determine the book’s status within the whole of

Burke's oeuvre (George and Selzer 183). If Ross Wolin characterizes it as "a critical juncture in the development of Burke's thought, a moment that simultaneously marks the culmination of one phase and the inception of another" (119), it is often crossed rather hastily toward the rich pastures of Burke's post-war criticism and its focus on rhetoric and sociology. Nonetheless, the book is noteworthy in that, after two volumes on history (*Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Towards History*), it takes Burke back to his first love—literature and literary criticism. Burke had, to be sure, never stopped being a literary man even while his interest in sociology deepened, but *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, and in particular the title essay of the volume, reflect Burke's renewed interest in conceiving literature as a way of thinking the social. As George and Selzer have it, much of Burke's literary criticism at the time was prompted by the experience of teaching literary criticism at the University of Chicago, internalizing the ideas of its sociology department, and building on previous readings of Peirce and Dewey (184). However, by the time Burke compiled the book, the idea that literature could be a way of "sizing up" and guiding social evolutions had also taken root outside the academy. It is, I think, not inconceivable that Burke's renewed interest in the literary answers to evolving changes in the role and stature of the literary.

In 1935, the US federal government launched what was to become the most comprehensive of all New Deal agencies. Reflecting Roosevelt's ambition to bring the American people a "more abundant life," the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was set up to provide jobs for all sections of society, including its unemployed literary men and women. Faced with the prospect of losing an entire generation of literary minds after the collapse of the stock market had run dry most private channels of funding, the government decided to provide America's artists with the means to develop their skills to the benefit of their fellow citizens: the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was created as a separate WPA branch and put to the task of employing young literary writers of the nation.<sup>7</sup> Expectations of its impact on the nation were high: as Forbes Watson, spokesman of the government's earliest patronage programs predicted, these federal initiatives would mean a "complete change in the economic and social relationship between the artist and his fellow citizens." Provided for by the state rather than subjected to the fickleness of the market, authors would again be able to attain pure forms of expression: "[h]appily installed in the simple life," the writer would "devulgarize the community and . . . raise its social level to the higher spiritual plane on which the artist normally exists" (qtd. in McKinzie 12). If the divisions inherent to cutthroat capitalist competition could be overcome, it was hoped, art would lay the foundation of a deeper sense of national belonging. "Of all the financial institutions regulated by the New Deal," Szalay states, "none was held to be more emblematic of the

utopian possibilities of the welfare state than the institution of art" (6).

In line with the conviction that the Depression had not been caused by insufficient production but rather by a lack of national consumption, the WPA argued that successful reform required as many citizens as possible to partake in the artistic process. To this extent, it sought to overcome traditional notions of how art was to be created and experienced. The traditional image of the lone literary genius catering to a well-off, passively appreciative readership was abandoned; instead, a newly professionalized industry of salaried writers working together on large commissions was created. Many of the young men and women that were hired for these projects were not professional creative writers—designed as a relief agency, the FWP was obliged to select its employees from relief rolls—but former school teachers, cartographers, and typists, sent out as field workers to record local histories or the slave spirituals of the South, map local forms of expression, or the hardships of Oklahoma migrants in California. More than other WPA art projects like the Federal Music Project or the Federal Theatre Project, which did employ mainly professionals, the FWP's heterogeneous assembly embodied the New Deal vision on the role of culture. The idea was to untie art from its dependence on a creative, elitist intelligentsia and to create a distinctively populist national art that would appeal to the working class. Art should, in the popular catch phrase of the time, "introduce America to Americans": what mattered was not the literary object that is eventually produced, but the labor needed to produce it, labor that would allow the individual to experience a form of imaginary participation in a collective cultural effort.<sup>8</sup> Employing writers at monthly wages to insure their independence from the market and adopting a performative aesthetic as its basic philosophy, New Deal reforms in the arts fused liberal humanism with an avant-garde distrust of the literary market and a Marxist revaluation of labor over the artifact produced. The FWP aimed at collapsing the distinction between writing and life, creating collective representation through collective agency. "This absolute identification between performer and audience," Szalay states, "is at the very heart of the New Deal modern fantasy"(267).

### III. Program for a Middle Ground

To what extent did Burke share this modern fantasy? The idea that art could express social values rooted in economic relations would certainly not have sounded new to him in 1935, nor was the conviction that those relations were in dire need of reform and that art should play a vital role in this process. In "The Nature of Art under Capitalism," a fairly short essay from 1933, Burke draws on Dewey's concept of the "occupational psychosis" to explain how social rituals and moral codes are closely intertwined with the individual's way of making a living. "Under capitalism," Burke writes, "this basic integra-

tion between work patterns and ethical patterns is constantly in jeopardy, and even frequently impossible" (316). Subordinating *industry* (the spontaneous joy experienced by man when using his mental or physical abilities) to *business* and raising the latter to the height of economic enterprise, the capitalist system loses touch with labor as its basic element of production. This dissociation inaugurates moral decay: "by its emphasis upon the competitive aspect of work as against the cooperative aspect of work, it runs counter to the very conditions by which the combative equipment of man is made ethical—or social" (317). While the opening months of Roosevelt's office saw a barrage of government measures aiming to reform the collapsed economic system, Burke was revising and expanding his earlier ideas on the function of literature in society to make them bear on the contemporary state of emergency. If it is clear that competitive capitalism must be abandoned as a form of social organization, its corresponding ethical and imaginative patterns must likewise be replaced. Pure art, Burke contends, cannot serve as a locus of critique against contemporary capitalist ills: by fusing disparate trends or yearnings that cannot be resigned within the existing social order, it promotes a state of acceptance and can therefore function only when the underlying moral order is sound. Until those conditions are fulfilled, "art cannot safely confine itself to merely using the values which arise out of a given social texture and integrating their conflicts. . . . It must have a definite hortatory function, an element of suasion or inducement of the educational variety; it must be partially *forensic*" (321).

Yet if "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism" professes a degree of sympathy towards the wave of proletcult novels and leftist "mushroom magazines" that swept the US literary milieu after the stock market crash, it is certainly not an undivided vote of allegiance to the revolutionary aesthetic that supported them. Indeed, it seems that Burke never completely abandoned the "Program" for social reform he included in *Counter-Statement*, even after Granville Hicks had "blasted" it so vehemently two years before in *The New Republic*. Rather than class struggle or proletarian uprising, Burke's ticket for change involves an intensification of the bourgeois-bohemian conflict, a gradual corrosion of the industrialist ethos of practicality by the disrupting force of the aesthetic. Facing the growing appeal of fascism, the disrupted balance between production and consumption, and the problem of unemployment, it argues for "[t]he redistribution of wealth by some means" (147) through the large-scale implementation of the dole as a way of eliminating competition among the lower classes.<sup>9</sup> Though at times deliberately tongue-in-cheek, Burke's portentous "Program" speaks of a genuine desire to bring art, criticism, and life together through a thorough restructuring of the failing capitalist system, based on "the function of the aesthetic as effecting an adjustment to one particular cluster of conditions, at this particular time in history" (154). If the capitalists' occupational psy-

chosis is “efficiency,” the artist must align with inefficiency, non-conformity, and distrust. This is where, according to “The Nature of Art under Capitalism,” much of the proletcult literature can be found lacking: its insistence on class dichotomy and determinist historical vision merely doubles the efficiency psychosis of its adversary. Communist propaganda restricts the forensic potential of literature and lacks the consolatory power it can have and it fails to offer new symbols of allegiance for the disinherited working class: “[i]t is questionable as propaganda, since it shows us so little of the qualities in mankind worth saving. And it is questionable as ‘pure’ art, since by substituting a cult of disaster for a cult of amenities it ‘promotes our acquiescence’ to sheer dismalness” (322). Even though the times ask for a propaganda art, stressing the distinction between the worker and the middle-class bourgeois will not help reform society; what should be created is a middle ground where social propaganda and art come together: “perhaps more of Dickens is needed, even at the risk of excessive tearfulness” (322).

Could the New Deal provide such a middle ground? When the Federal Emergency Relief Administration began distributing unemployment benefits and created Agencies to provide work for America’s jobless citizens, it was in fact implementing a policy strikingly similar to the proposition for a generalized dole in “Program.” Burke, however, remained true to his poetics of suspicion: the haphazard measures and social experimentation of the Roosevelt administration, he claims in *Permanence and Change*, are lacking in vision, contenting themselves with patching up the wrongs of industrialism:

the practical politician of the Roosevelt type, [...] must do something for the banks to help the insurance companies, and something for the railroads to help the banks, and something for the insurance companies to help the policy holders, and so on, *ad inf.* and *ad nauseam*, “experimentalism” being the eulogistic word that serves to conceal the fundamental pointlessness of the legislative and administrative whole. Experimentalism is here synonymous with lack of perspective. Obviously, it can serve the ends of the “good life” only if the pattern of contingencies themselves happens to make for the good life, as it shows few signs of doing. (285-86)

Instead, Burke says, “[o]ne must seek definitions of human purpose whereby the whole ailing world of contingent demands can be appraised”: that definition, *Permanence and Change* claims, can only be communism.<sup>10</sup>

However, for Burke, the term “communism” refers to a pluralist



cultural politics of democracy, tolerance, and cooperation, rather than a philosophy of revolutionary fervor. As he wrote Malcolm Cowley: "I can only welcome Communism by converting it into my own vocabulary . . . My book [*Permanence and Change*] will have the communist objectives, and the communist tenor, but the approach will be the approach that seems significant to me" (Jay 202). Overall, Burke feels that contemporary communists place too much emphasis on technological or scientific arguments, at the expense of the highly humanistic or poetic nature he feels to be at the basis of its philosophy as Marx defined it. To remedy these shortcomings, George and Selzer note, Burke was "aligning himself . . . with broader traditions of aestheticism, mysticism, and spiritual socialism—traditions that helped him define and advocate the settling of a territory . . . 'beyond Marxism'" (112). As in the "Program," Burke's goal in *Permanence and Change* is to provide a "corrective rationalization" against a doctrine of efficiency, and to extend this rationale into a generalized philosophy on how to achieve and maintain "the good life."<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. Piety and Social Change

I have approached the problem of Burke's potential affinity with the FWP's modern fantasy using writing that antedates the latter's inception because I believe this may shed some light on what underlies Burke's apparent neutrality towards the New Deal. While the Roosevelt administration was devising new patterns of governance to counteract the state's seeming incapability to cope with the material and moral devastation left by the collapse of the financial market, Burke was looking for ways to resolve the tension between the two poles of modernism that oscillate throughout *Counter-Statement* (the doctrine of artistic withdrawal from a world considered corrupt and degraded, and an aesthetics of engagement). For both the government men and Burke, the answer meant an intensified engagement with the material and moral fabric of society; while the former envisaged a top-down transformation of laissez-faire economics into an interventionist welfare state that would provide for the arts through funding, Burke imagined a bottom-up approach that would take art into the social fabric. To claim that both met each other halfway would be an overstatement: though Burke could identify with efforts to reduce destructive competition in private industries and the introduction of social measures like unemployment benefits, the New Deal's accumulation of debt, cartelization of industries, and the immense bureaucratic apparatus of the state would remain effects that Burke observed with a vigilant eye. Yet in all, Burke's efforts during the first half of the Thirties to produce a social, economic, and moral rationale for an aestheticized "art of living" seem to demonstrate a definite degree of susceptibility to what would evolve into the ideology and aesthetic of the FWP.

The most prominent expression of their similarities were their

efforts to find a communal grounding for the highly individual, seemingly un-worldly act of poetic invention; for even though Burke had established its forensic potential, it was by no means clear how literature's capacity to provide "perspectives by incongruity"—that is, to split, join, or move existing concepts to other discursive fields in order to uncover their disruptive or creative abilities—could percolate into the world of material existence to spur effective change. *Permanence and Change* suggests a way out of this problem, arguing that the language is "a system of attitudes, of implicit exhortations" (225) that plays on existing schemas of orientation, or what Burke calls people's "piety." Taken from the field of religion, the term denotes the deep emotional and psychological investment in social or moral codes that are shared by one or more groups. Every act of language is rhetorically laden, argues Burke, a way of positioning oneself with regard to the ideological divisions (between different economic castes, political views, etc.) that inevitably mark social systems: "men have ever approached ultimate concerns from out the given vocabularies of their day, these vocabularies being not words alone, but the social textures, the local psychoses, the institutional structures, the purpose and practices which lie behind these words" (232). Therefore, given that language is literature's medium, it can never be reduced to a mere form of individual expression, but actively takes part in the socio-economic system in which it is produced and read.

By thus uniting material conditions, ideology, and art through the working of language, Burke closes the gap between literature and the real. Proclaiming that "we are all poets" (102) giving shape to the world surrounding us through symbolic action, Burke argues for the creation of a poetic society, a poeticized "art of living" (93) that would aim at revitalizing American culture. Poetry, he argues, has "the advantage of emphasizing the participant aspect of action rather than its competitive aspect; hence offering a prompt basis of objection when the contingencies of our economic structure force us to overstress competitive attitudes" (342). "If there are radical changes to be made in the State," Burke continues,

what metaphor can better guide us than the poetic one as to the direction in which these changes must point? Particularly at this time, when the circle of contingencies is badly broken, so that millions cannot respect their efforts, and many more millions cannot even expend their efforts, the poetic metaphor provides us with the necessary admonitions. (343)

Though Burke seems to privilege the radically disruptive language of modernist authors as prime examples of perspectives by incongruity,<sup>12</sup> *Permanence and Change* essentially lodges the dynamic of social change in the ordinary, daily language of everyman. Mediating between different

(and often contradictory) ideologies, between past and present and between dream and existence, language is continually engaged in what Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* described as “procedures of intervention:” a continuous conceptual renewal through a process of rewriting, delimiting, and translating.<sup>13</sup> When he called for a revolutionary symbolism that would draw middle class Americans into the emancipatory struggle by replacing the factional symbolism of the “worker” with that of the “people” in his address to the 1935 American Writers’ Congress, Burke was advocating the creation of a rhetorical space where American traditions and revolutionary thought could merge. A message of change can be communicated effectively only when it plays upon established pieties: fusing the existing nationalist rhetoric of “the people” with the new, cooperative philosophy of communism, Burke argues, would be more effective in bringing about the humanist ethics implicit in Marx’s writing than the formulaic proletcult literature and its schismatic vocabulary. Reconciling disparate desires into symbols that allow people to identify with certain ideals or movements, the writer can become a generative force for social transformation by creating new “myths,” which are “the social tool for welding the sense of interrelationship by which the carpenter and the mechanic, though differently occupied, can work together for common social ends” (“Revolutionary Symbolism” 87). “Much explicit propaganda must be done,” Burke writes, “but that is mainly the work of the pamphleteer and political organizer. In the purely imaginative field, the writer’s best contribution to the revolutionary cause is implicit” (91).

### V. Socializing Loss

Although Burke, contrary to the FWP’s aesthetic ideology, does not wholly reject the role of the creative individual as a catalyst of social change, he too was grounding poetry as a communal, rather than individual effort. Burke’s poetry is, as the title of the final chapter of *Permanence and Change* indicates, a “poetry of action,” the foundations of which are not lodged in some sanctified body of texts but in the creative potential of man as a language user. It is from the public grammar, which encompasses both the language of the government representative and the bricklayer, jokes in middle-class suburbia, and songs in ghetto slang, that the poet takes his material. Thus, even the most autobiographical of lyrics transcends its individualist origins: “The words of the poets are not puppets, but acts,” Burke argues in *Attitudes towards History*: “They are a function of him, and he is a function of them. They are a function of society, and he is a function of society.” Thus, the poet who argues for change must be open to the whole of society, actively registering its drifts and fissures: “The future is really disclosed by finding out what people can sing about. . . . You find history foretold in the areas where people cannot possibly ‘sell out’ or make decisions at random” (*At-*

*titudes 2: 244-46).*

*Attitudes toward History* is Burke's highly idiosyncratic score book of the dominant tunes discernible throughout the history of the Western World, developing harmoniously into the emergent collectivism growing on the ashes of naïve capitalism. Yet even though the book's Hegelian division of history into a series of successive cycles is highly teleological in nature, the path towards a collectivist society is not, in the end, ultimately determined. Collectivism may come through violent revolution or social consent yet, according to Burke, is most likely to enter "by the back door," through the welfare state policy of the "socialization of losses":

In our liberal democracies, the processes of political mediation have been leading towards socialism, via a policy which has been named (accuracy making for irony) the "socialization of losses." One group after another draws upon the collective credit of the government for support of its private fortunes, as when our federal treasury comes to the rescue of private banks. This policy for "socializing" losses has been creeping into favor for many decades. It took a significant step forward with Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation. And the tendency towards the quantity production of a good thing led to a greater democratization of this salvation device under Roosevelt. We are still far behind England in the extent to which the "socialization of losses" has been democratized, in the organization of federal doles to the people at large—but perhaps we have been slower only because we could afford to be; and as the situation demands, the necessities of political mediation may carry us further in this comically inverted approach towards "socialism," unless the cataclysms of war intervene to arrest it. (1: 128-29)

Striking, here, is the change in attitude towards the practical policies of the Roosevelt administration: while *Permanence and Change* frames it as a mere collection of reactive and ideologically empty stop-gap implementations, Burke now considers the welfare state to be the future's prime political determinant—and America's most likely course towards change. Indeed, the "comic approach" towards the understanding of human action that is expounded at the end of *Attitudes toward History* can be seen as an ethics for living amidst the plurality of voices in the social democracy as it was taking shape during the New Deal era. This ethical life entails "maximum

consciousness" (1: 220), the awareness of man being simultaneously prop, actor, and critic in the drama of human relations: "the comic frame of acceptance but carries to completion the translative act. It considers human life as a project in 'composition,' where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, transition, also 'revision,' hence giving maximum opportunity for the resources of criticism" (1: 223-24)

If the rallying cry of *Counter-Statement's* "Program" had been to "reaffirm democracy (government by interference, by distrust)" (152) by embracing art as the cure to the degradation of life by science and business, *Attitudes toward History* modifies this vision to match the changing social and political reality of the New Deal era. Yet even though the overall tone is one of optimism, Burke is not blind to the dangers of his time: the book shows great concern about the rise of fascism, the lack of measures to counter the ecological devastation that causes droughts and dust storms, and the devious symbolism that often accompanies the technique of the "socialization of losses." George and Selzer have pointed out how much of Burke's writing during the early Thirties was engrafted on the genre of cultural history as practiced by Thorstein Veblen, Van Wyck Brooks, and others: diagnosing contemporary American culture as suffering from a spiritual or material crisis, these histories suggested reorientations by providing new orders to live by and new values to embrace;<sup>14</sup> the aestheticized "art of living" Burke proposes in *Permanence and Change* fulfils much of the same role. The "comic perspectivism" of *Attitudes toward History* can be said to complete this vision, yet it also leaves a more pessimistic aftertaste. Although it grants man the power to escape the gravitational pull of history via the power of verbal and social composition, it also acknowledges that every such act of the imagination, when confronted with the full complexity of existing social structures, is eventually forced to compromise. The comic attitude toward the drama of life implies that the latter can also be tragic, with poetry acquiring a consolatory rather than admonitory function.

## VI. Poetry as Welfare

Interestingly, this change of emphasis coincides with the rise to prominence of "security" as the key symbol of the New Deal welfare programs. As Szalay demonstrates, the relative failure of the first New Deal to prevent social upheaval (1934 saw widespread and often violently suppressed strikes) or implement sustained changes in the economic fabric of the nation (1937 would bring new economic hardships), forced the government to abandon its policy of active intervention. As it became clear that not even large-scale planning would be able to counteract economic fluctuations, the Social Security Act of 1935 modeled the role of the government on that of an insurance company. Promising federal support to the unemployed, elderly, and various other social groups that did not actively produce value in the

market, the state offered social security as the answer, “not simply to unemployment and other economic exigencies, but far more broadly, to the displacing conditions of modern life in a rapidly evolving capitalist society” (9). Ingrained in the New Deal’s modern fantasy, then, was the belief that an art that encouraged people to create and participate could also contribute to a general feeling of security. When Burke opens his 1936 review of *Proletarian Literature in the United States* by claiming that “Poetry . . . is a matter of welfare—as religion and politics are matters of welfare” (134), it foreshadows the declaration in that “[p]oetry is produced for purposes of comfort, as part of the *consolatio philosophiae*. It is undertaken as equipment for living, as a ritualistic way of arming us to confront perplexities and risks” (“The Philosophy of Literary Form” 61). Faced with experiences that are beyond control or comprehension, man invents linguistic ways of sharing the burden, of downsizing the magnitude that overwhelms him: “[s]hould we not begin with this as our way into the subject—treating all other manifestations of symbolic action as attenuated variants of pious awe (the sublime) and impious rebellion (the ridiculous)?” (“The Philosophy of Literary Form” 61).

Burke reconfigures his critical methodology so as to unravel and index the different ways this equipment for living is put to use. Extending the methods of statistical calculation used by the welfare state apparatus to keep track of its current and future need for unemployment compensation, old-age benefits, and public health agencies, Burke advocates a sociological literary criticism, one that will map the recurrence of certain topics, symbolic clusters or themes that can be shown to represent a given social trend.<sup>15</sup> The work of every writer, he states in “The Philosophy of Literary Form,”

contains a set of implicit equations. He uses “associational clusters.” And you may, by examining his work, find “what goes with what” in these clusters—what kinds of acts and images and personalities and situations go with his notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc. And though he be perfectly conscious of the act of writing, conscious of selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain kind of mood, etc., he cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all these equations. Afterwards, by inspecting his work “statistically,” we or he may disclose by objective citation the structure of motivation operating here. There is no need to “supply” motives. The interrelationships themselves are his motives. (20)

Both on the surface and in the deeper, unconscious levels of their work,

writers translate their attitude toward the world into associational clusters. The critic's job, then, is to lay bare these synecdochic processes within a single work or constellation of works and determine their function, both as unconscious response, rhetorical strategy, and explicit reaction in relation to the cluster of biographical, social, or historical factors that may have influenced a text or texts.

At the same time, this method of analysis opens up the possibility of interpretation beyond the limits of authorial intention or the historical specificity of the text: "[m]any of the things that a poet's work does for *him* are not things that the same work does for *us* (i.e. there is a difference in act between the poem as being-written and the poem as being-read). . . . The critic may quite legitimately confine himself within any rules of discussion he prefers" (73). Through this proto-structuralist methodology, the critic buys the freedom to enlist whatever aspect of the text he scrutinizes to his particular program; at the same time, it forces him to acknowledge that interpretation is merely another form of representation, although, as Lentricchia has it, "'representation,' carries none of the freight that it is generally made to carry in the history of mimetic theories of art." It is, as the New Deal aesthetic, essentially performative,

an activity simply charged with power, an activity we call aesthetic praxis provided that we understand the aesthetic against the grain of highly specialized meaning that tends to dominate thought about literature and art since the late eighteenth century. Against the grain we retrieve a more classical sense of the aesthetic as the practical and the rhetorical: the aesthetic as the *sine qua non* of the cultural economy. (Lentricchia 153)

In "The Philosophy of Literary Form," Burke brings together art, criticism and the social into the "unending conversation" that would become his most famous metaphor: a uninterrupted stream of civilized interaction, open to anyone, and continuously changing. Representing Burke's ideal of the literary critic's environment, the conversational parlor is a vision that takes its strength from the New Deal's modern fantasy of participation, community, and hope of establishing durable change.

Burke had a knack for prophecy. His breathtaking 1939 analysis of *Mein Kampf* proved eerily accurate in its indictment of Hitler's rhetoric and its predictions of Nazi brutalities. But Burke was also spot on when he voiced his fear that the politics of socialization of losses would come to an end at the outbreak of war. World War II would indeed signal the end of most New Deal art projects, its measures giving way under the weight of one of the most violent conflicts in human history. The vision of peace and

community projected in the metaphor of the unending conversation must to most readers have seemed like a naïve dream in a world at war when *The Philosophy of Literary Form* eventually came out in 1941. “God knows, there are ominous structures of authority taking form in the contemporary world,” its author notes grimly in “The Calling of the Tune,” written around the same time as his famous essay on *Mein Kampf* (228). Burke addresses the risks implicit in the practice of federal funding of artists: like any structure of authority, even the newly shaping welfare state has its own psychoses and blind angles. In the eyes of Burke, the New Deal is “a transitional phase of federal administration that could hardly be expected to continue indefinitely”; its comparative liquidity of cultural pluralism, security, and tolerance may gradually disappear when continued for a long time (223). Artists might be less inclined to bite the hand that feeds them; government funding runs the risk of leading to the production of mere propaganda. Overall, however, Burke believes the impossible desire to create an art that would refuse any form of authority is far more dangerous. The aesthete’s refusal to embrace any vision of social betterment, as in the Joyce-Stein *transition* school, he claims, runs the risk of letting established structures remain master of the controversy: “If one approaches the situation from a categorical rejection of all authority,” asks Burke rhetorically, “does he properly equip himself and his readers for a choice among the various real structures of authority that necessarily arise whenever a ‘vision’ is given embodiment in the material organizations of ‘this imperfect world?’” (228-29).

Indeed, how do we choose in this imperfect world? Or more exactly, how do make the *right* choice? The answer, Burke suggests, lies not in one particular ideology, as “one is never a member of merely one ‘corporation.’ The individual is composed of many ‘corporate identities.’ Sometimes they are concentric, sometimes they are in conflict” (307). In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate that the same thing holds true for Burke. Arguing along the insights provided by Michael Szalay’s *New Deal Modernism*, I have tried to draw parallels between the literary practices promoted by the nascent welfare state and Burke’s early attempts to conceptualize a theory of poetic action. By doing so, I hope to have unearthed some potential aesthetical and ideological linkages that are left largely unexplored in existing secondary literature on Burke’s scene during the Thirties: adopting the macro-perspective of New Deal ideology, I have argued, might help us account for some of the startling methodological and ideological transformations of Burke’s thought. Stretching throughout all sections of society and thereby transcending ideological divisions between left and right, the social reforms of the New Deal (even if they went mostly unacknowledged by their contemporaries) provided an alternative way of conceptualizing the link between the economical, the social, and the aesthetic that Burke was looking for.



### Notes

1. Lentricchia and Denning emphasize, respectively, Burke's distance from, and adherence to, the leftist philosophies of the Thirties. See Lentricchia (21-38) and Denning (442). The anecdote has been sufficiently worked over in the existing literature on Burke—see also, for instance, George and Selzer (16-29), so I take the liberty of restricting myself to a summary description.
2. See George and Selzer throughout, but especially 141-180.
3. This lacuna is partially remedied by George and Selzer's *Kenneth Burke in the 1930's*, although the authors do retain Burke's experience at the Congress as a way in to a more general exploration of his intellectual and social scene.
4. Denning succinctly summarizes the issue when he states that, "[t]he story of Kenneth Burke and the left, it would seem, is that of Kenneth Burke against the left" (444).
5. Whether the New Deal triggered an actual and lasting redistribution of (political) power is still a source of debate among historians and economists. The controversy, it seems, is mainly due to the complex interrelations between the economic, social, and scientific dimensions of what is commonly understood by the term "New Deal" or "welfare state." In general, apologists tend to stress the innovative quality and relative success of its reforms, while its critics point mainly to its failure to effect a lasting redistribution of wealth. My own contention that the New Deal's inauguration of the welfare state did substantially alter the relation between the government and its citizens is derived mainly from Ankersmit: "[t]he modern welfare state considers its main task to lie in organizing the security of the citizen within a complex system of welfare facilities. What used to belong to the domain of civil society—security—has now become the very *raison d'être* of the state" (276). Other works that proved informative to this essay as general background to the New Deal era and politics include Arthur Schlesinger's three-volume *The Age of Roosevelt* and William Brock's *Welfare, Democracy, and the New Deal*.
6. Burke was, as George and Selzer express it, "*observing* the launching of the New Deal in Washington" (88; emphasis mine).
7. See Hirsch (1-13) and McKinzie (1-25).
8. As Hirsch expresses it, the WPA did not seek to establish "a culture of plays, paintings, concerts, or novels. . . . Rather, in their publications they tried to present the American people a broad knowledge of their own culture" (35).
9. See also Selzer (153-57).
10. See Denning (436-38).
11. Later editions of *Permanence and Change* elide several passages in

which Burke expresses his allegiance to communism. The cuts are usually interpreted as a tactical move in the virulently anti-communist McCarthy era (a revised edition being published in 1954); see Schiappa and Keehner (191-98). However, Burke's own explanation that "under present conditions, the pages could not possibly be read in the tentative spirit in which they were originally written" might suggest that, apart from tactical motives, Burke simply felt that the semantics of the term "communism" had changed to the extent that it could no longer serve as a vehicle for the ideas he wanted to express ("Prologue" xlix).

12. Joyce is mentioned as the author that "blasting apart the verbal atoms of meaning, and out of the ruins making new elements synthetically, has produced our most striking instances of modern linguistic gargoyles," but Burke also mentions Baudelaire, de Gourmont, and Bergson, among others (151-56).

13. See Foucault (65).

14. See George and Selzer (132-40).

15. See Szalay (13-14).

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