Rhetoric, Cybernetics, and the Work of the Body in Burke’s Body of Work

This article examines the development of Kenneth Burke’s early rhetorical theory in relation to the coterminous cybernetic research to which Burke was often responding. I argue that recuperating Burke’s early attempts to construct a rhetorical subject embracing nonrepresentational vectors is salutary for intervening in ongoing debates over subjectivity and affective experience in contemporary critical, rhetorical, and cultural theory.

Indeed, always beneath the dance of words there will be the dance of bodies, the mimetic symbol-system that all these animals will come close to having in common, though their sedentary ways of living will cause them to forget it, like persons still quite young, come in time to forget the language of their childhood, the language most profoundly persuasive of all. But talk of the dance, and its body-language, brings us to exactly the next step in our unfolding [...]

—Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion

Three Folds: Rhetoric and Origami

A participant identified as “Kenneth Burke” has been making the rounds in chatrooms and electronic message boards recently, announcing itself with a morbid invocation of one of Burke’s central concepts: “Hello I am Kenneth Burke; even though I have been dead for a few years, I would like to enter this conversation.” This eerie salutation from the digital beyond is not an instance of online haunting, but the “Kenneth Burke chatbot”—a program with enough language-recognition coding and stored Burke quotations to converse in a combination of case-specific response and Burkeisms.

Although Burkebot’s salutation lends a certain literality (however sinister) to the “never-ending conversation,” Burke’s digital reincarnation as symbol-
using code-script simultaneously undermines one of his more protracted interests—a career-long battle against the becoming-machine of humans (and vice-versa), which he saw occurring in registers both literal (for example, the increasingly uncreative and mechanistic nature of human labor) and theoretical (through the emerging control science of cybernetics, the interdisciplinary inquiry into “control and communication in the animal and the machine”). Burke’s struggle against the machine begins in his earlier works and becomes increasingly proleptic throughout his career in contention with material advances in technology and speculative advances in cybernetic theorizing. Human exceptionality in Burke’s thinking continually narrows in the age of intelligent machines, requiring defenses that shift from questions of epistemology to ones of response:

As regards our basic Dramatistic distinction, “Things move, persons act,” the person who designs a computing device would be acting, whereas the device would be but going through whatever sheer motions its design makes possible. These motions could also be so utilized as to function like a voice in a dialogue. For instance, when you weigh something, it is as though you asked the scales, “How much does this weigh?” and they “answered,” though they would have given the same “answer” if something of the same weight had happened to fall upon the scales, and no one happened to be “asking” any question at all. The fact that a machine can be made to function like a participant in a human dialogue does not require us to treat the two kinds of behavior as identical. (“Mind” 64)

Burkobot’s mastery of symbolicity mocks this initial distinction (and through Burke’s own words, no less). Unlike Burke’s hypothetical scale, it differentiates between “intentional” and “accidental” stimuli and the question of whether we should “treat” its dialogue like that of a human participant becomes a non sequitur insofar as this difference reaches high levels of indiscernibility in an electronic format. Similarly, the relative autonomy of Burkobot troubles the clean distinction of the agency of the operator versus the machine. Programmer, program, and source merge as Burke becomes sampled and Burkobot attains the agency of the DJ—sampling Burke into its emissions drawn from and reinserted inside symbolic environments.

Burke made allowances for such advances, admitting that cybernetic innovations might eventually require a complete rethinking of Dramatism; and although in opposition to both Darwin and cybernetics, Burke will argue that the difference among humans, animals, and machines is one of kind and not degree (“Order” 171), the biological and the mechanical are figured into a spectrum of
qualitative difference: “Man differs qualitatively from other animals since they are too poor in symbolicity, just as man differs qualitatively from his machines, since these man-made caricatures of man are too poor in animality” (“Mind” 64). Burke’s (and cybernetics’) three subjects become less static beings than the loci of capacities differing in their potentiality, vectors, and application. The implications of this position—the qualitative location of the human between and betwixt the animal and the machine—are foregrounded in an appendix to Burke’s “Definition of Man”:

The idealizing of man as a species of machine has again gained considerable popularity, owing to the great advances in automation and “sophisticated” computers. But such things are obviously inadequate as models, since, not being biological organisms, machines lack the capacity for pleasure and pain (to say nothing of such subtler affective states as malice, envy, amusement, condescension, friendliness, sentimentality, embarrassment, etc., ad nauseum). (23)

Here Burke discovers human difference beyond the realm of symbolicity and signification; the affective states and capacities he introduces simultaneously hail capacities not only distinct from machinic intelligence (“this does not compute”) but outside of (or at least prior to) human rationality, referentiality, and agency. The other half of this cycle closes in “Mind, Body, and the Unconscious,” where Burke writes that “a conditioned animal” provides a better model than the computer for “reductive interpretations” of the human, but that this animalistic parallel fails as well due to weaknesses in “the ways of smiling and laughing” (64). As per the epigraph above, beneath the dance of words continually returns the dance of bodies; human difference emerges in organic ruptures such as laughter, which Bergson reminds us is not a pivotal capacity separating humans and machines but the appropriate response to the denigration of this separation—“Something mechanical encrusted on the living” (39). Beyond the machine, laughter simultaneously trumps the reduction of humans animalistically—animals never get the joke—and takes us beyond human cognition (“What’s so funny?”) to affective response.

This attention to aspects of human embodiment and their affective and asignifying corollaries runs consistently through Burke’s corpus, playing a central role from his earliest writings to later essays written in the 1960s through 1980s. It is therefore odd that Burke’s career-long interest in the body as topos has produced a less than vital response from critics; to summarize broadly, consensus views on the body in Burke’s thought position it as a dangerous essentialism (for example, Condit), a misstep on the way to more sophisticated treatments of rhetoric and subjectivity (Wess), or a lever in interpreting or
qualifying his other concepts (Crable, "Ideology"; Fletcher; Yoshioka). These bodies are perverse, adolescent, supplementary, and apologetic—they conceive the work of the body as an appendix to, rather than a vital part of, Burke’s body of rhetorical work.

My task, then, will be to assay these movements in Burke’s thought, engagements that flow between the seemingly oppositional ecologies of rhetoric and physiology and consistently put Burke in contact with the coterminous development of cybernetics, the interdisciplinary scientific movement introduced to the general public in 1948 by Norbert Wiener and his colleagues, and subsequently the midwife of such domains as artificial intelligence, complexity theory, and transgenics. Burke is a particularly salutary figure for the productive encounter of rhetoric and cybernetics for reasons in addition to the parallel development of his theorizing and that of first-wave cyberneticists; beyond the disciplines’ mutual interest in technologies (both mechanical and discursive) of “control” and “communication,” Burke’s early work on rhetoric and aesthetic theory foregrounds the more sophisticated intersections I will detail in the remainder of this essay, engagements perhaps best characterized by instances of another recurring trope in Burke’s works—foldings and unfoldings: (1) a folding of modernist and postmodernist thought developing in the wake of informatic models of human consciousness that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have termed “the cybernetic fold”; (2) a folding of “form” or structure that Burke locates in not only aesthetic and rhetorical tropes but also the physiological responses and rhythms of the human body; and (3) a folding of thought and agency emerging from asceticism, reinvented in the writings of Nietzsche and Bergson, and integral to the processes of self-transformation proposed by both Burke and cyberneticists.

The first fold begins after behaviorism and somewhere between dialectic and infinity. Though Burke was consistent and incessant about his disaffection for the emerging field of cybernetics, he shared many of the same concerns and points of departure with this interdisciplinary inquiry: an attempt to move beyond the stimulus/response pairing of behaviorism without recourse to depth psychology, a resultant concentration on internal rather than external mechanisms of persuasion and control, and an intense focus on affinities and divergences between human and machinic cognition and symbolicity. Writing in reference to American cybernetician Sylvan S. Tomkins, Sedgwick and Frank detail the results of such a “cybernetic fold”: Modes of theorizing inspired by “the moment when scientists’ understanding of the brain and other life processes is marked by the concept, the possibility, the imminence, of powerful computers” and based on a model constituted by components greater than two but less than infinity ($\text{infinity}>n>2$) (105). This model, today most commonly associated with
structuralism, is fundamentally pragmatic in its aim, guaranteeing that any theoretical taxonomy cannot be reduced to a vulgar dialectic (an “either/or”) but is also delimited into finite and identifiable categories. Although the production of further categories is possible, the \( \text{infinity} > n > 2 \) calculus demands that a theorist work immanently within an established system (though aware of its limitations) toward a given aim. For Sedgwick and Frank, this division of totality into finite components, a hallmark of structuralist thought, disappears in critical theory’s “sleek trajectory into poststructuralism” through the latter’s emphasis on social and discursive construction, denigration of the biological, and reliance on irreducible multiplicities (105).

One of Tomkins’ most famous applications of the \( \text{infinity} > n > 2 \) formula is helpful here in foregrounding both Burke’s engagement with this mode of cybernetic theorizing and its implications for his revaluation of rhetoric:

We have assumed that the major motives consist of eight primary affects: interest, enjoyment, surprise, distress, fear, shame, contempt, and anger [. . .]. These facial affective responses we assume are controlled by innate affect programs which are inherited as a sub-cortical structure [. . .]. These innate responses are later transformed in various ways through learning, but there is always a continuing openness to activation of the innate pattern of response. (“What” 261, 219)

Burke referred to the first assumption here (the parsing of motive into eight primary affects) as an act of “scope and reduction,” a strategy he introduces in direct opposition to behaviorism (Grammar 59). Burke’s work is replete with such constructions, the logic of scope and reduction undergirding not only the five (or six) components of Dramatism but also four “Master Tropes,” eight varieties of the unconscious, five levels of linguistic signification, four primary mechanisms of historical change, and so forth. The key upshot of such a formation is not its epistemic value (as Burke consistently reminds us) but its pragmatic potential. Structurally, it facilitates not so much epistemological resolution (“so that’s what it is!”) and the end of investigation but a dynamic potentiality for functional application (“so that’s what it does . . .”) and the beginning of practice. In other words, the point of such an operation is not the exposure of a certain mechanism but the potential that this mechanism might be manipulated through practice.3

Tomkins’ statement is additionally helpful in articulating two folds also implicated in both cybernetics and the engagement Burke stages between rhetoric and the body, but it is outside of Sedgwick and Frank’s formulation. Tomkins’ second assumption approaches structure on another level—subcortical struc-
ture—but to this we might add many other biological systems and networks implicated in a similar way by both cybernetic research and Burke’s interaction with this emerging field: neural nets, protoplasm, psychogenic and somatic response. These phenomena not only maintain the totality being divided through cybernetic folding—the “permanence” of Burke’s *Permanence and Change*—but locate originary (though, as we shall see, highly differentiable) capacities for response. In *Counter-Statement* Burke finds these capacities rhetorically through the persistence and robustness of symbolic tropes and arrangements, and aesthetically through the artist’s manipulation of “blood, brains, heart, and bowels” by inducing affective responses in an audience (36).

Tomkins’ third and final assumption—the potential of *transforming* these affective responses—both reaffirms the permanence of these programs and introduces the possibility of their alteration. Here “program” moves from noun to verb, as the possibility for difference that always haunts repetition is mobilized, and the body becomes not so much an inscribed site of actualization but a location for experimentation and transformation. Though contemporary readings of cybernetics often focus exclusively on the movement’s impulse toward disembodiment and the creation of artificial intelligence, the movement was additionally (if not equally) committed to how cybernetic research might aid in transforming human perception and response. Not surprisingly—as a concomitant to the earlier folds mentioned above and as a general production of the impulse to diagnose the affinities and divergences between the human, the animal, and the machine—this impulse also traverses Burke’s project in reevaluating rhetoric, threading throughout his corpus but finding its most explicit formulation in his “Metabiological” concept of human communication and “Perspective by Incongruity,” Burke’s Nietzschean/Bergsonian method of breaking affective habitation.

The following takes up this tripartite (*infinity>*n>*2*) logic of structure (form), affect, and transformation in reference to Burke’s *Counter-Statement* and *Permanence and Change*. This itinerary will ultimately fold rhetoric into the biological and mechanical (and vice versa) through these three smaller folds intersecting cybernetics and Burke’s early writings; though more immediately recognizable to the former than the latter, folding becomes the practice of both the origami master and the rhetorician.

### Once More with *Feeling*:
**Repetition, Affect, and Psychology of Form**

Speaking nearly a half-century after the book’s publication, Burke emphasizes the relative originality of his project in *Counter-Statement*: “I started from
poetry and drama whereas most of such speculation starts from questions of truth and falsity, problems of knowledge. I started out with other words for beauty” (“Counter-Gridlock” 374). In other words, Burke responds to a world gone suddenly informatic—networked and linked by mass communication and rapidly proliferating media technologies—by dislocating knowledge; rather than entering epistemological territory, Burke shifts focus to aesthetics and, rhetoric and their corollaries of structure, form, and feeling. As Burke explains in his response to Granville Hicks’ critique of Counter-Statement, the imbrication of rhetoric and aesthetics offered in the essays “Psychology and Form” and “The Poetic Process” is focused on the effects of language and art and the responses they elicit rather than judgment of these effects or prescriptions for the “proper” uses of art. Burke is initially concerned not with

what effects should be produced, but how effects are produced. In discussing the processes of walking, one must avoid any judgment as to whether a man should walk north or south. A moral imperative is not proper to a rhetoric, any more than the study of the mechanics of a motor equips us to decide whether motors should be used for warfare or trade. (101)

Pushing beyond the normative models of both Marxism and Psychoanalysis, Burke gets thoroughly physical. Art becomes “a coercive force in itself” (“Counterblasts”), unsubsumable to both superstructure and sublimation. As such, the crucial site of persuasion emerges neither as the unconscious nor false consciousness but the corporeal.

Burke begins by essaying the constitutive elements of communication. He distinguishes two forces operating in any given communicative representation: a “psychology of information” manifested in the content of communication and focused on the transmission of signification from its producer and a “psychology of form” contained in the expressive structure of communication and actualized through the effect it produces on the receiver. Ecologically, the two psychologies are engaged in a zero-sum game: “The hypertrophy of the psychology of information is accompanied by the corresponding atrophy of the psychology of form” (33). Discretely, however, the two exist differentially in any given representation. Referencing a satirical conflation of Cézanne’s painting of trees with a forestry bulletin, Burke asks: “Yet are not Cézanne’s landscapes themselves tainted with the psychology of information? Has he not, by perception, pointed out how one object lies against another, indicated what takes place between two colors?” The viewer cannot help but receive content from the painting; its image automatically hails spatial and temporal resolu-
tion, the reception of some cognitive signification even if it is only the knowledge of “how one object lies against one another.” Yet the real force of the image resides not just automatically but autonomically in the affective, embodied response it provokes separate from its content or ostensible subject, “what goes on in the eye rather than on the tree” (32).

Brian Massumi is helpful here in unpacking both the effects of such a response and the relation between content and form emphasized by Burke:

[. . . I]t may be noted that the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between content and effect: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image’s effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. This is not to say that there is no connection and no logic. What is meant here by the content of the image is its indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its sociolinguistic qualification. This indexing fixes the determinate qualities of the image; the strength or duration of the image’s effect could be called its intensity. What comes out here is that there is no correspondence or conformity between qualities and intensity. If there is a relation, it is of another nature. (24)

For Massumi this mechanism of affect is neglected by what he refers to as “dominant” strains of social-constructivism that argue “everything, including nature, is constructed in discourse” (38). Recognizing affective forces and relationships then becomes vital to a necessary and “serious reworking” of the concepts of nature and culture, one that might express “the irreducible alterity of the non-human in and through its active connection to the human and vice-versa” (39).

Burke engages this latter objective in Permanence and Change (a point I will return to later in this essay), but as early as his writings in Counter-Statement, affective technologies were vital in articulating a new theorization of the relationship between rhetoric and the body. Burke locates these affects in not only the visual but also the verbal, citing aphorism—which “satisfies without being functionally related to the context” (34)—as an example amongst a multitude of rhetorical tropes recuperated or invented through his Lexicon Rhetoricae. The crucial element of Burke’s distinction between information is the affective intensity of communication that operates before the level of signification—that which is produced by an image or articulation but that remains fundamentally unrepresented and unarticulated. As Burke details, this intensity is written immediately on the body but cannot be written down immediately by the body: “To arouse the human potentiality to be aroused by the crescendo, I must produce some particular story embodying the crescendo [. . .]. Here I have replaced the
concept by a work of art illustrating it” (46). Affect remains distinct from both signification and irreducible to emotion—a latecomer that can only respond to, rather than mediate, affect: “[T]he emotions cannot enjoy these forms [. . .] (naturally, since they are merely the conditions of emotional response) except in their concreteness, in the quasi-vitiating material incorporation, in their specification or individuation” (46–47).

I am interested in Burke’s early theorization of affect for two primary reasons. First, it occupies a conceptual plane negotiated outside of both informatic reductionism and the kind of overreaching social-constructivism that Massumi so compellingly critiques. Burke’s concentration on affect would (as noted above) continually reappear as a principle of differentiation between humans and “intelligent” machines. The disjunction of “information” and “form” foregrounds the importance of the latter in human physiology and human interaction over and against the former term, one popular in emerging cybernetic work of Burke’s time. Take, for example, the following passage from Norbert Wiener’s The Human Use of Human Beings:

[. . . T]he many automata of the present age are coupled to the outside world both for the reception of impressions and for the performance of actions. They contain sense organs, effectors, and the equivalent of a nervous system to integrate the transfer of information for the one to the other. They lend themselves very well to description in physiological terms. It is scarcely a miracle that they can be subsumed under one theory with the mechanisms of physiology.

(43)

Burke’s distinction between “information” and “form” would recognize the pragmatic use of this conflation of the biological and mechanical but foreground the physiological processes he will associate with affective relations as unique to human beings. However, Burke’s concentration on human physiology in this process (as I will detail in the next section) additionally attends to factors of human corporeality and their relation with nonhuman phenomena in a manner that resists recourse to social-construction. Moreover, his treatment of affect emphasizes the mutual reductionism they perform in different registers: Just as a vulgar social constructivism would reduce the nonhuman to a cultural or discursive construction of the human, a vulgar cybernetic would reduce the physiological operations of the human body to informatics. The key difference in these operations emerges in the former’s impulse to the critical deconstruction of phenomena under review contra the latter’s emphasis on the material construction of pragmatic technologies based on this principle of conflation.
Secondly, and in a similar vein, Burke’s early treatment of affect is salutary for reconsidering contemporary critical work on affect and embodiment in both the discipline of rhetoric and composition—where affect has both been hypostasized as a systematic structure of influence available to be decoded and resisted (thus occupying a role similar to that which “strong” conceptions of ideology used to play in critical theory)\(^4\) and the asignifying and “nonrational” has been invoked generically to critique logocentric or consensus-based schools of rhetoric\(^5\)—as well as humanist approaches to cybernetics, where embodiment and affective processes have been pitted against popular conceptions of artificial intelligence or informatic subjectivities.\(^6\)

Burke’s relatively novel and nuanced engagement with affective phenomena arises from a close attention to the underlying structures and conditioning factors of these forces. Though following humanist approaches to cybernetic theories that uphold affective phenomena as processes that (currently) cannot be captured by high-technological simulations of human consciousness or intelligence (even as the resources we use to quantify these phenomena—PET scans, infrared oculography, facial electromyography, and so forth—are increasingly of this nature), Burke additionally attends to the fact that the vectors of these forces contain a consistency that is oddly mechanical in nature. In this sense the pragmatic potential for manipulating affective forces is foregrounded over its use as an “outside” to either traditional rhetoric or early cybernetic conceptions of informatics, and Burke appropriates key vectors from both disciplines in his endeavor. Principal to this conception is Burke’s argument that affective forms develop and sustain through an imbrication of physiology and repetition, a sequence he will associate with the rhetorical technology of the trope: forms of language and expression unified by their structure rather than their content and that share structural affinities with biological and nonhuman processes.

Repetition maintains the ubiquity of these forms, a point Burke makes in detailing the “contribution” of the psychology of form as distinguished from the psychology of information: “Truth in art is not the discovery of facts, not an addition to human knowledge in the scientific sense of the word. It is, rather, the exercise of human propriety, the formulation of symbols which rigidify our sense of poise and rhythm” (42). Music—compositions that maintain their integrity solely through the production of form and repetition—provide the ultimate example of the force working through form: “The reason music can stand repetition so much more than correspondingly good prose is that music, of all the arts, is by its nature least suited to the psychology of information, and has remained closer to the psychology of form” (34). Form cannot atrophy here, and the asignifying, repetitive quality of music entirely occludes intrusion by the
psychology of information. Nevertheless, these forms themselves manifest a consistency that making them available for use and manipulation.

Through his first sustained encounter with rhetoric and the body in Counter-Statement, Burke’s double gesture introduces the affective, asignifying components of rhetoric as well as the rhetoricized faculties of the body: the capacity to detect and respond to forms that emerge from the natural processes of the body and are maintained by repetition. Yet repetition, by nature of its continual iteration, invites the possibility for difference. In fact, as Burke notes, “restatements with a difference” are not just a possible mutation of form but constitute one of the more reliable and consistent existing forms. I take up the potential this formulation carries for transforming thought and perception later in this essay; for now I want only to note that Burke’s emphasis on the “conditioning” that instantiates affect leaves open the possibility for further “re-conditioning.”

Rhetorical Bodies: Metabiology

So what of this body then? In Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations, William Rueckert titles his chapter on Counter-Statement “Both/And.” For Rueckert, Burke’s theory of form creates a “merge” between “essences” and “structures” best described by this term often associated with poststructuralist thinking, a relation later replaced by Burke with the superior formulation of dramatism. In his recent “Symbolizing Motion: Burke’s Dialectic and Rhetoric of the Body,” Bryan Crable—drawing on the same “progress narrative” of Burke’s writings that informs Rueckert’s analysis—conceives Burke’s theorizing of embodiment in Permanence and Change’s Metabiology as a misstep to be corrected by an “either/or”—the dramatistic dialectic of the action/motion pairing. Such a polarity provides for Crable a tool for distinguishing how symbolic action, in the form of social construction, is routinely passed off as nonsymbolic motion—the “natural” (134).

However, Burke’s engagement with corporeality in Permanence and Change might pose questions more vital to contemporary rhetoric, ethics, and subjectivity than either dialectic or social-construction. Metabiology auscultates a relation that is neither the “poststructuralist” “both/and” nor the dialectical “either/or.” The cybernetic logic of infinity>n>2 moves from form to body (the only way form ever moves) in the interstice between Counter-Statement and Permanence and Change; the presumably strictly autopoetic structures of body and culture are radically linked in this movement, one we might term after Deleuze and Guattari a logic of “either, or, or” (12). For Deleuze and Guattari, this formation hails not dialectic or endless convergence but a dynamic set of
linkages and disjunctions. Through metabiology this affiliation follows the logic of what scientists such as Eric D. Schnieder have argued is the organizing vector of both the “symbolic action” of organisms and the “nonsymbolic motion” or tornadoes and global weather patterns—the gradient. The relation between the body and the symbolic (or culture or the socius or rhetoric) emerges not as opposition or subsumption but “a difference across a distance” (Margulis and Sagan 45).

If the folding of form that marks Burke’s project in Counter-Statement was a reaction to an informatically networked world driven by a contemporary “cult of excessive technological ‘progress’” (“Biology” 17), then metabiology assays the possibility of a different, more organic and ancient topological connectivity: “[T]he entire attempt to distinguish between organism and environment is suspect” (Permanence 232). Joining early cybernetic scholarship arguing for the necessity of viewing human actions and thought processes as networked within larger ecological systems, Burke’s metabiological perspective augments first the organic and then rhetorical ecologies deployed in this equation, linkages that were rapidly being crowded out by a concentration on the material and theoretical human/machine fusions of artificial intelligence and automata. Conceiving the world as a meshwork of bacteria and gene in addition to (and before) one of wires and circuits—an anticipation of what we would now call the Gaia hypothesis: earth as “cybernetic system” (Lovelock 131)—Burke extrapolates two consequences from this conclusion. First, the body becomes more ratio than closed system, and divisions become the production of language and terminology rather than structure: “Is oxygen environmental or internal? Are the microscopic creatures in our blood stream separate from us or a part of us? They are members of a ‘civic corporation’ which we call the organism” (232). For Burke the environment cannot be the “distinctly prior factor” in any analysis of human activity and behavior (233). Although we can discern “events manifesting sufficient individuality from our point of view to be classed as separate organisms,” the “universal texture” of experience is composed of a dynamic interaction between the sentient, nonsentient, organic and inorganic components of the environment.

Second, Burke emphasizes the “participant aspect” of these actions and exchanges rather than their “competitive aspect” (266). The neo-Darwinian emphasis on agonistic becoming as the primal relation among and between species and their environments is replaced by an unfolding structure of cooperation, communication, and homeostasis: “Life, activity, cooperation, communication—they are identical” (236). Thus “fitness” of species and ecological change emerge not from a capacity to endure or overtake but to productively respond. The key upshots of this formulation are its resistance to a rigid separation between participants in an ecology and its refusal to subsume the biological into a
subject to be either cognitively interpreted or dismissed as a social construction. The biological and the affective emerge as phenomena to be interacted with, and the relation between the physical and the symbolic becomes much more complex than simple cognition.

Indeed, although Burke is willing to take this ecstatic physicality far enough to disperse the cogito by insisting we follow Bergson in thinking of the “mind-body” as a merge rather than separate entities (94; Crusius 97), the (apparently) exo-biological communicative structures of symbolic culture prove a thornier issue. As a microcosm of this process, Burke draws on the developing field of endocrinology and the example of psychogenic illness to diagnose the connection between enculturation and physiologic response that is at play, for instance, in the cocktail of dopamine and (sub)socialization that gives meaning to a term such as drug culture. Writing in the afterword to Permanence and Change, Burke retrospects on the metabiological body-culture relationship undergirding such a process:

The principle of individuation (which is grounded in the centrality of the nervous system) features a dualistic distinction between “primal, immediate” sensations that we experience in the realm of nonsymbolic motion and the vast “mediated” knowledge of “reality” acquired by the learning of symbol-systems (resources in the realm of symbolic action that give us access to wholly public modes of interpretation, orientation, and corresponding cultural relationships).

(313)

In Permanence and Change, Burke has a multiplicity of names for such “modes of interpretation, orientation and corresponding cultural relationships” in both their positive and negative actualizations: trained incapacities, pieties, occupational psychoses, and so forth—“complex interpretive networks” developed through habituation.

Cognitive psychologist Merlin Donald is helpful in unpacking the varying connections between the symbolic and physiological, the impulse behind Burke’s project to determine human “symbolic behavior as grounded in biological conditions” (275). Donald describes the unique symbol-using capacity of humans as both a radical openness and dependence:

The human brain is the only brain in the biosphere whose potential cannot be realized on its own. It needs to become part of a network before its design features can be expressed [. . .]. The result is that we are plugged-in, as no other species before us. We depend heavily
on culture for our development as conscious beings. And by exploit-
ing this connection to the full, we have outdistanced our mammalian ancestors. (324)

But this capacity comes with a cost; the “hybrid brain” of humans makes the indi-
vidual “distinct” but never “fully autonomous” from the symbolic structures of
their culture (326). The fact that the “modes of interpretation” installed by the
symbolic technologies of culture form through repetition and practice rather than
conscious acceptance suggests that they similarly cannot be removed by a
simple process of exposure or rejection. Rationally, there would seem to be no
changing these structures.

Writing in the afterword to Permanence and Change, Burke approaches
such an obstacle in foregrounding the primary component of Metabiology that
he still finds appealing: “Above all I would cling to the notion that the concept of
a biological ‘method’ suggests a useful way of avoiding the oversimplified
reduction to a blunt choice between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’” (297). I take up
Burke’s refusal to reduce situations to this binary in the following section, an
impulse that finds its most productive manifestation in his Perspective by Incon-
gruity—a singularizing technology for altering structures of interpretation by
working by the same logic that creates and sustains these structures.

A Closer Look: Perspective by Incongruity

As indicated earlier, concentrating on Burke’s treatment of the body and
its relation to affect and the symbolic through Metabiology reveals a crucial
period in his engagement with these topics, a moment when Burke paused
from cataloguing the development and circulation of orientations and “sponta-
neously opted for the principle of transformation” (308). Early in Permanence
and Change, Burke writes that “shifts in interpretation make for totally differ-
ent pictures of reality, since they focus the attention upon different orders of
relationship.” Although, as Burke documents relentlessly, we “learn to single
out certain relationships in accordance with the particular linguistic texture in
which we are born,” there is still the potential to “manipulate this linguistic
texture to formulate still other relationships” (36). This possibility for manipu-
lation is mobilized in Perspective by Incongruity, a concept Burke develops in
reference to two theorists who also performed significant critiques of the divi-
sion between rationality and irrationality and share his views concerning the
differential relationship between affect and content: Bergson and Nietzsche.

For Burke it is Nietzsche, who “knew that probably every linkage was
open to destruction by perspectives of a planned incongruity” and who pro-
vides the most vital contribution to the process of “experimentally wrenching
apart all those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which still remain with us” (91, 119). In her analysis of Burke’s debt to Nietzsche, Debra Hawhee emphasizes how the latter’s “perspectivalism” (and in its adaptation by Burke into Perspective by Incongruity) works by a logic of multiplication (the quantitative accumulation and application of different perspectives) and a concomitant critique of totalizing systems of knowledge. Although this is undoubtedly true—Nietzsche and Burke both state as much, and it fits with Burke’s later comments in Attitudes Towards History on the effects of the device—I would like to foreground here the connections between Burke’s concept and emerging cybernetic conceptions of subjectivity as well as a concomitant aspect of Perspective that is more closely tied to Burke’s reading of Bergson rather than Nietzsche: the logic of reversal and inversion by which it operates.

As detailed above, although Burke dismissed the rigid equivalences between humans and machines articulated in popular debates over cybernetics, engaging this problematic was salutary for his theorization of human affect and agency and the impact of rhetorical technologies in producing and manipulating these structures—conceptions that troubled traditionally humanist conceptions of subjectivity and self-sovereignty even as it resisted reductively informatic depictions of the same. On this score, and generally in regards to structural affinities between cybernetics and rhetoric, it is helpful to remember the provenance of the neologism cybernetics as it was coined by Norbert Wiener. Wiener selected the title for the emerging interdisciplinary movement from the Gorgias, cybernetics being his approximation of the Greek term for steersman or navigation. In the dialogue Socrates compares this function to rhetoric, separating them both from the privileged domain of philosophy in an incidence that foregrounds for second-order cyberneticist Satosi Watanabe that Wiener’s appropriation was pre-scient for the discipline’s subsequent engagement with scientific epistemology:

[. . . I]t is highly significant that in his mind Plato somehow associated rhetorics and cybernetics. We should notice that these two arts have indeed something in common: They both represent flexible and adaptive methods aiming at utilizing, influencing, controlling, and overcoming the outside world, mental or physical, in order to achieve one’s own goal. They are entirely different from primarily disinterested sciences such as geometry or astronomy or from straight technology such as bridge-building or oil pressing. (152)

However, this methodology required a complex view of human agency. Although Watanabe foregrounds the self-directed nature of cybernetic work, the discipline was equally premised on a nuanced conception of the imbrication of
the individual and her environment, one that drew on informatics and automata theory to detail the impact of ecology and interaction on human knowledge production and human perspective. Such a conception was at the forefront of often-neglected cybernetic work in the human sciences, articulated, for example, by anthropologist and cyberneticist Gregory Bateson in his essay “Cybernetics of ‘Self,’” a consideration of the coincidence between “the theology of Alcoholics Anonymous” and the “epistemology of cybernetics” (309):

Cybernetics [. . . recognizes] that the “self” as ordinarily understood is only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does all the thinking, acting, and deciding. This system includes all the informational pathways which are relevant at any given moment to any given decision. The “self” is a false reification of an improperly delimited part of this much larger field of interlocking processes. Cybernetics also recognizes that two or more persons—any group of persons—may together form such a thinking-and-acting system. (331–32)

Burke’s Perspective by Incongruity would draw vectors from the seemingly oppositional dynamic of self-direction and interdependence, conceptual tools circulating in early cybernetic theorizing and still very much at play in trail- ing-edge artificial intelligence programs based on response mechanisms—such as Burkebot’s—by positioning would-be practitioners of Perspective as both subjects and objects in its process. In encouraging readers to “deliberately cultivate the use of contradictory concepts,” Burke positions them as first self-directed decision-making subjects and then responsive and responsible objects inside a greater affective and conceptual network (94). This planned encounter with the seemingly illogical would aim at disrupting established conceptual habituations and chronic modes of response by both drawing on and challenging the aspects of human knowledge production and cognition that form our deepest affinities with both nonhuman animal cognition and mechanical “intelligences.” As such, it constitutes a rhetorically based practicum in encountering and cultivating alterity—training in how to conceive and think differently.

Bergson’s writings on metaphor and perception would provide for Burke the core of the new “approach to reality” actualized in Perspective by Incongruity and the complex consideration of human agency undergirding it (95). For Burke, Bergson’s application of metaphor provides a way of disjoining and conjoining substances by working on a level other than rationality: “Indeed, the metaphor always has about it precisely this revealing of hitherto unsuspected connectives [. . .]. It appeals by exemplifying relationships between objects which our cus-
tomarily rational vocabulary has ignored” (90). Bergson provides perhaps his most concise treatment of this process in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, a work focusing on that rather irrational response, which, as detailed at the beginning of this essay, Burke saw as constitutive of human difference and potentiality. For Bergson the “incongruous” marks not solely a critique of rationality and a disruption of habituated linkages, but an ability of the human mind to be affected by a logic other than that of rationality:

Such a proposition as the following: “My usual dress forms part of my body” is absurd in the eyes of reason. Yet imagination looks upon it as true. “A red nose is a painted nose,” “A negro is a white man in disguise,” are also absurd to the reason which rationalises; but they are gospel truths to pure imagination. So there is a logic of the imagination which is not the logic of reason, one which at times is even opposed to the latter.—with which, however, philosophy must reckon, not only in the study of the comic, but in every other investigation of the same kind. (42)

The human capacities to perceive and respond to the incongruous provided not only the structure of comedy but also a vital port of entry into investigating how perception and thought in general are disciplined into a cycle of rationalization, critique, and judgment. Intervention into this process requires a “special effort” to forestall lockstep judgment by cultivating habits of the imagination rather than reason:

In order to reconstruct this hidden logic, a special kind of effort is needed, by which the outer crust of carefully stratified judgments and firmly established ideas will be lifted, and we shall behold in the depths of our mind, like a sheet of subterranean water, the flow of an unbroken stream of images which pass from one into another. This interpenetration of images does not come about by chance. It obeys laws, or rather habits, which hold the same relation to imagination that logic does to thought. (42–43)

Burke’s Perspective by Incongruity is essentially a technology for retraining human response, drawing on the capacity to respond to (in)congruity that Bergson elaborates above. It works by nature of both meanings of *trop*: *trop* as designation for static structures of form and language counted on for producing a consistent response, and the *trop* of “troping,” an action that introduces juxtaposition into this first mechanism of conditioned response, thereby
producing a differential relation between the original structure and its perception. As Nietzsche reminds us, all perspectives are only perspectives, and as Burke reminds us, all perspectives are in a sense already “perspectives by incongruity”: metaphorical constructions linking divergent phenomena. However, Burke’s methodology of planned incongruity works by the acceleration and deceleration of these already-ubiquitous processes. On the one hand, we have a *speeding up* of perspectivalism; Burke echoes Nietzsche in calling for the quantitative multiplication of perspectives and the concomitant devaluation of any one single “correct” perspective. On the other hand, we have a deceleration of the habituated reaction to perspectives: a replacement of the lockstep impulse to judgment with hesitation. Burke hails a qualitative (in addition to quantitative) operation on perspective; the complexity of incongruity creates a space for response rather than judgment or rationalization.

In this sense, then, Burke gets us much closer to the forces shaping structures of thinking than any deliberation on the process could achieve. The realization that orientation and conditioning shapes perspective on a level beneath rationality—perhaps the most consistent topic in Burke’s corpus—eventually led Burke away from the “debunking” of such structures to the pursuit of the most beneficial one (a project that ends whether by choice or chance with logology). Among the various perspectives Burke cultivated in his writings, however, Metabiology emerges as singular in one crucial aspect: It marks a point in Burke’s trajectory where his attempt to provide the most appropriate interpretive frame leads us instead to the creation of tools for cultivating singular and differentiating shifts in interpretation.

**Conclusion: On Seeing Differently**

Above I’ve attempted to map out sites in Burke’s early work where new ways of thinking about the human body and the correlations between the symbolic capacities of humans, animals, and machinery prompted reinvestigations of the connections between the body and rhetoric. In most cases this relation has foregrounded how corporeality affects rhetoric, but Burke describes in the afterword to *Attitudes Towards History* a very personal event during the construction of the Perspective by Incongruity section of *Permanence and Change* where rethinking rhetoric affected his body:

And precisely then, at a time when I was focusing on the concept of “double vision” and as I began seeing the design of my whole project changing, the twist of vision became actual. On the road to go shopping, I saw two cars coming whereas I knew it was only one,
looking double. I could see close up without the doubling, but the farther off things were, the wider apart the two images became. What was this? Cancer of the brain, perhaps [. . .]. Yet so far, no diagnosis; nothing but plans for further and costlier examinations. (399)

True to his consistent emphasis on the affects of psychogenic illness, Burke performs a self-diagnosis linking his physical ailment to his mental state and prescribes a self-experiment in response:

I have had several occasions to learn that, if we get involved enough in the using of words, the words in turn begin using us. “Inspiration” is an honorific word (thus dangerously deceptive) for a process of self-hypnosis that can result from over-susceptibility to whatever terms one happens to be engrossed with. So I diagnosed the situation thus: When speculating on the resources of the term “double vision” at the same time that I was shifting my perspective on my own books on perspective, I began seeing double. So I worked tentatively on the assumption that I was subjecting myself to the magic of some obvious “let there be” equations. I clearly “solved” the dizzying formal problem thus brought to the fore when the Nietzschean theme of “transvaluation” in the middle section of P&C introduced what Trot-skyites might call a variation on the theme of perpetual revolution. My recovery followed forthwith—and you can’t imagine what a truly sybaritic delight it was, to look down the road and see just one car coming. (399)

Burke’s “double-vision” marks human susceptibility to persuasion and connection, a capacity his early works detail as operating through the body rather than through rational cognition (a process “doubly” emphasized by Burke’s physical symptoms). Perspective by Incongruity emerges as the “perpetual revolution” against the negative effects of this condition, a sustained retraining of response that manipulates rather than blocks human capacities to be affected.

Burke’s early writings, which I have tried to illustrate as dynamic attempts to fuse rhetoric and the corporeal and recognize the importance of affect and the nonrational, occupy a tentative place in his canon. Rueckert speaks for many (though perhaps more explicitly than any) when referring to these works as a “stylistic and terminological underbrush” and “an irritation, a distraction, the rank growth of a fecund mind” (5). When these writings are not summarily dismissed, they typically (as for Rueckert) function largely as anticipation for
Burke’s later works, adolescent versions of his more domesticated concepts such as dramatism and more generically familiar methodologies such as dialectic. The recuperation of Burke as a proto-poststructuralist by many critics (the works of Wess, Biesecker, and Crusius being perhaps the more prominent) has also contributed to an emphasis on the later works and the (perhaps paradoxical) canonization of Burke as both our preeminent rhetorical humanist and most important postmodern rhetorician.

However, I would like to end here by suggesting that Burke’s early writings might provide more powerful (and more timely) tools than either humanist rationality, dialectic, or social-constructionism and that he concomitantly provides a new telos for contemporary rhetoric. Having essayed the power of form and habituated structure to shape perception through the rhetoric and aesthetics of *Counter-Statement* and the metabiological frame of *Permanence and Change*, Burke invites us to get involved in these processes themselves rather than their critique. Working immanently through rather than outside of these productions, Burke prescribes the redirection rather than elimination of already existing (and unavoidable) structures of influence. Such a process instantiates not so much a resistance to the force behind orientation but a surfing of these forces gained through an engagement with their effects rather than their meaning: Rhetoric emerges not only as a technology for persuading others but also as a technology of the self used by rhetors to discipline and transform their own habits of response. Picture Burke looking down the highway and delighting in his perception of only one car: a movement from *multiplying* perspectives to *manipulating* perspective, from seeing doubly to seeing differently.

Notes

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2For an account of first-wave cyberneticists’ response and resistance to behaviorism, see Heims (particularly 1–13; 201–47).

3Burke comments on both of these impulses in “Counter-Gridlock”: “That’s where the deconstructionist guys are cutting in, on that sort of thing. I want to stay halfway there. Destroy it, yes, if you will. But first let us see it as having the form it does, with its particular kind of beginning, middle, and end” (22).

4See Lynn Worsham’s “Coming to Terms: Theory, Writing, and Politics” and “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion” for nuanced accounts of this conception.

5See Ballif (153–94), Davis (21–115), and Vitanza for examples of this critical move.

6See, for instance, Hayles’ influential *How We Became Posthuman* (244–46) for a critique of artificial intelligence theories that minimize the importance of emotion and Wilson (103–32) for an examination of reductive interpretations of embodiment within the same.
Works Cited


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