

**TRANSFORMING ACTION:
KENNETH BURKE AND RALPH ELLISON OUT OF THE 1930s**

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This dissertation connects Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison in the context of a radical 1930s culture through their shared term “action” and explains the prominent appearance of “action” in Invisible Man as a vestige of Ellison’s radical beginnings. Chapters clarify the emergence of Burke’s and Ellison’s writings in the 1930s, cluster appearances of “action” in relation to other key terms, assess political motives, and counter readings and appropriations of their work that ignore, reduce, or redirect such political elements. Attending particularly to Burke’s first editions of Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History, as well as to uncollected writings in the period, the dissertation draws out Burke’s “communistic” attitude, commitments to organized politics as a literary and rhetorical critic, and wariness toward American philosophical pragmatism and John Dewey. It traces radical concerns and tropes from Ellison’s early writings to drafts of his novel and places Ellison’s positive reception of Burke’s paper at the third American Writers’ Congress in 1939 alongside the influence of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. The dissertation argues that Burke and Ellison conceived themselves as cultural participants in a project to transform social relations and shows how recent scholarship concerning these writers, especially work seeking to claim them from a neopragmatist perspective, domesticates markers of their 1930s political imaginary.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACR	“Auscultation, Creation, and Revision”
ATH1	<u>Attitudes toward History</u> (1 st edition)
ATH3	<u>Attitudes toward History</u> (3 rd edition)
CE	<u>The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison</u>
CRE	<u>Conversations with Ralph Ellison</u>
CS	<u>Counter-Statement</u>
EG	<u>Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius</u> (Jackson)
FH	<u>Flying Home and Other Stories</u>
GM	<u>A Grammar of Motives</u>
HN	<u>On Human Nature</u>
HC	<u>The Human Condition</u>
IM	<u>Invisible Man</u>
LSA	<u>Language as Symbolic Action</u>
PC1	<u>Permanence and Change</u> (1 st edition)
PC3	<u>Permanence and Change</u> (3 rd edition)
PLF	<u>The Philosophy of Literary Form</u>
QC	<u>The Quest for Certainty</u>
RE	<u>Ralph Ellison</u> (Rampersad)
RM	<u>A Rhetoric of Motives</u>
RR	<u>The Rhetoric of Religion</u>

1.0 KENNETH BURKE'S 1930s STYLE: POETRY AND PIETY IN ACTION

In September 1930, Kenneth Burke published a long review of John Dewey's The Quest for Certainty (1929) in The New Republic. This review, "Intelligence as a Good," marked Burke's first substantial published engagement with Dewey and American philosophical pragmatism. Dewey and pragmatism would continually appear in Burke's writings throughout the 1930s and 1940s, most prominently in his books Permanence and Change (1935), Attitudes toward History (1937), and A Grammar of Motives (1945). In the 1930s, Burke repeatedly engaged with the work of both William James and Dewey as he crafted his theory of culture and communication in Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History. He seems to have preferred William James's work at times for its openness and curiosity to Dewey's with its repeated endorsement of scientific method and pronouncements against the errors of metaphysics. Yet both proved to be unsatisfactory to Burke, for he saw each adding, surreptitiously and despite their stated intentions, ethical evaluation to their pragmatic method. Burke saw Dewey in particular having too much faith in his method as neutral, as outside social contexts and interests (PLF 183-84). Despite this concern, Burke in the 1930s nonetheless found in Dewey a contemporary who attempted to find a role for philosophy and art in years of economic and social crisis. He slyly referred to Dewey's work as "eye-opening,"¹ as he advanced a conception of the poetic that

¹The reference is to Dewey's Experience and Nature (1925) and The Quest for Certainty (1929) in his 1936 review of Dewey's Liberalism and Social Action (1935).

would stand in at least partial opposition to the scientific and instrumentalist orientation to which he saw Dewey overly committed (PLF 391).

Despite Burke's repeated resistance to pragmatism, several scholars have identified Burke as a pragmatist, positioning him within an American philosophical tradition among Ralph Waldo Emerson, James, and Dewey. Giles Gunn, for instance, has described Burke's method as "critical pragmatism," a "wary pragmatism" of "comic wisdom" in its attempt to avoid hypostatization of any particular perspective (Culture 86-87). Burke's comic attitude, as it appears most directly in Attitudes toward History, may seem to lend itself to Gunn's neopragmatism, which turns away from metaphysical absolutes and fixed truths and conceives itself as pluralist, cautious, and practical. As innocuous as such a perspective may appear, Burke expressed concern with what this philosophy, as he encountered it in James and Dewey, ignores and conceals.² Largely following Gunn, David Blakesley also highlights Burke's comic perspective, describing his "choice of comedy as the healthiest of the poetic metaphors" and his pragmatism as "seriocomic" (91, 75). "In Burke's view," Blakesley writes, "pragmatists investigate how interpretive frames exploit the resources of terminology to direct the attention and form the attitudes that motivate action" (71). Burke certainly did investigate "interpretive frames" and how the selection of vocabulary impacts "attitude" and the actions that follow, but

² For those that find pragmatism to be "just another way of thinking about issues that are not ultimates, or of thinking about them in a nonultimate way," Gunn responds that this does not mean that pragmatism "rules out the possibility of thinking about ultimates," only that such questions, regarding "moral and religious ideas," are "validated by a process of reflection that is essentially no different from the one we employ for the rest of our beliefs" (Thinking across 7-8). As I will show, this last point is more or less a position that Burke finds in Dewey. Gunn also says pragmatism "is a way of doing intellectual work that doesn't rule out any kind of reflection other than the desire... to rationalize one's own diffidence by adopting positions so overly determined, so ideologically seamless, as to permit, and even to encourage, the suspension of all speculation about the consequences of those ideas" (Thinking across 8). Indeed, pragmatism purports, Gunn affirms, openness to a wide range of resources and approaches—except ones that it finds "overly determined," etc. But what are the criteria that decide this? And will they not become ultimates or absolutes? Is the "process of reflection" that Gunn describes really as open and separate from unwieldy purposes and interests (i.e., political, economic) as Gunn seems to believe? Could it ever be? Burke raises similar questions in response to Dewey.

he did not characterize this as pragmatism.³ Even though it was available to him, this was clearly not his term. Burke actually treated pragmatism itself warily. In fact, when he did refer to pragmatism by name he made a point to distance himself from it, particularly as expressed by James and Dewey (and in incipient form by Emerson, too).⁴ Burke does not sit as comfortably among the pragmatists—old or new—as Gunn and Blakesley would have us believe.

In the 1930s, Burke saw his own emphasis on interpretation and selection of terms within the context of social and economic crisis. He intended his work to play a role, or participate, in negotiating the problems of his present. Dewey also conceived his work with social purpose in the 1930s, and as Burke repeatedly engaged with Dewey he saw Dewey's approach and selection of terms limited in their scope and misleading in largely seeing social change in terms of engineering—as, that is, a technical problem. Dewey represented for Burke a problem of orientation, or a sense of relationships, as it impacts selection of means.⁵ Burke's three reviews of Dewey's books and his references to Dewey in Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History provided occasions to develop and extend a larger critique of what, adapting one of Dewey's own terms, he called "the technological psychosis."⁶ William Rueckert has said that

³ Burke would call such investigation of interpretive frames criticism.

⁴ Burke's most substantial, direct statement on pragmatism is in A Grammar of Motives (1945). He describes the writings of Emerson, James, and Dewey in philosophy as marking a transition to "agency pure and simple"; pragmatism, for Burke, focuses on means and regrettably puts aside human purpose (GM 279). Pragmatism thus forgets, Burke notes, that its own methods, instruments, and operations, were themselves made with purpose.

⁵ David Hildebrand has considered, in more detail than anyone else, whether one can reasonably think of Burke as a pragmatist. He finds Burke's early work to be pragmatist but not his later work, particularly because of Burke's logology in The Rhetoric of Religion. Although he does not consider Burke's reviews of Dewey's work in either of his essays (he does, however, discuss Dewey at length ["Pragmatism" 308-11, 314-16]), he understands that Burke was highly skeptical of science's claim to be "an adequate paradigm for knowledge." Hildebrand rightly notes that "Burke largely disregarded the model of knowledge exemplified by the experimental method, and it is plausible this was the reason he shared little of the pragmatists' optimism for the constructive uses of science" ("Was Kenneth" 643). I specifically take up this objection to Dewey's "scientific method," and unlike Hildebrand see it to be a significant part of Burke's early work.

⁶ Stanley Edgar Hyman, Burke's former student and trenchant critic (in my estimation, Hyman's consideration of Burke in The Armed Vision [1948] remains among the most attentive treatments of Burke's early work), recognized

there are many Kenneth Burkes, and there are, of course, many John Deweys as well (3). The Dewey that critics have aligned with Burke often seems to be a variety of Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalist Dewey and not the metaphysical, naturalistic Dewey of, say, Experience and Nature or the overtly political, socialist Dewey of Liberalism and Social Action. But my intent is to consider the Dewey that Burke formed in the 1930s, to read his reading of Dewey and see how it connects with what Burke saw as the imperative of his own work in these years as a literary and cultural critic.

1.1 DEWEY'S TECHNIQUE

Dewey intended The Quest for Certainty, drawn from a series of lectures he gave at the University of Edinburgh in April 1929, to state succinctly his "philosophy of instrumentalism" in its mission to aright the conceptual baggage that modern philosophy and epistemology carried from Plato and Aristotle—that is, the continued assumption that a "complete correspondence" existed "between knowledge in its true meaning and what is real" and the conviction that "absolute certitude" could be achieved (QC 17).⁷ Knowledge, according to this tradition, "must relate to that which has antecedent or essential being" (QC 18). Dewey saw this view persist despite the rise of modern science and its alternative model—that knowledge could be only effective approximation arrived at through experiment. This knowledge is provisional and subject to adjustment. Philosophy, however, still maintained the Aristotelian devaluation of action and the order of the changing material world in relation to theory, the "pure" knowledge

that Burke's numerous reviews significantly "broadened the horizons of his work." He "gets critical ideas directly from problems that arise out of his reviewing" (388). Burke's exploration of pragmatism in reviews is one instance of this.

⁷ See pp. 14-20 for Dewey's critique of Platonic idealism.

of timeless truths (QC 16). Dewey sought to mend the division of knowledge or theory from practice, seeing these as inseparable and understanding knowledge as bound with human action. No absolute, fixed knowledge is possible, Dewey argues, for “no mode of action can ... give anything approaching absolute certitude; it provides insurance but no assurance” (QC 27).

For Dewey, “the most important watershed was the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century,” but he found it to be, as Robert Westbrook notes, only “a halfway revolution, for it failed to depose the classical metaphysical equation of the known with the real” (350). The continued application of rationality to the natural and social world within modern science is, for Dewey, another instance of the persistence of Greek idealism.⁸ Dewey contrasts reason, traditionally referring to “an inherent immutable order of nature, superempirical in character, and the organ of mind by which this universal order is grasped,” to intelligence, an activity “associated with judgment; that is, with the selection and arrangement of means to effect consequences and with choice of what we take as our ends” (QC 170). At stake for Dewey in dispelling such understanding of reason is to show humans as “participators” in the natural and social realms as they produce knowledge about objects within nature and society. Effective knowledge develops not merely through observation from a distance but in the closeness and interactions of experience. He thus cancels the “separation of knowing and doing” (QC 171). Intelligence adds “a new quality and dimension” to “the scene of natural interaction.” It directs change (QC 171). Consequences—Dewey’s preferred term as it had been for William James—are distinct from effects in that the latter just happen, but the former occur with intention.⁹ One

⁸ Dewey marks Newton’s philosophy and science, or what he calls the “Newtonian system,” as representative of this problem (QC 164, 169).

⁹ Burke would later make a similar distinction between motion and action, the latter purposeful (GM 135-37; PLF xv-xvi). Burke’s final and fullest, as well as most aphoristic, statement on the motion-action dualism is his “(Nonsymbolic) Motion / (Symbolic) Action,” published in Critical Inquiry in 1978 (HN 139-171).

selects means to achieve particular ends (QC 171). For Burke, precisely how intelligence, through experimentation and observation, chooses these ends that are then the basis for means selection is uncertain.

In his review of The Quest for Certainty, Burke generally appreciated Dewey's approach, noting that this work successfully shows how humans in their "quest for certainty [turn] to some rigid metaphysical or theological structure as compensation for the contingencies of daily life" (PLF 383). He sympathizes with Dewey's desire to move beyond metaphysical debates and toward the model of the natural sciences. For Dewey, "pragmatic knowledge," Burke writes, "is erected out of doubt, questioning, experimentation. It has no vested interests; to have one of its beliefs undermined is a gain, an aid in the better understanding of processes. It defines truth as what works" (PLF 384). Burke, however, questions Dewey's application of scientific method to values¹⁰:

the argument for an analogous application of experiment to the study of values (the ultimate aim of all philosophy) seems quite cogent. But should we situate the success of science in its perfection of measurement, it is harder to see that the application of its method to a criticism of values is analogous. (PLF 385)

Quantification may provide grounds for agreement in "pragmatic knowing," but for Burke values cannot be similarly measured. Values may "work" in the sense that "people seem to have lived and sung" with them, Burke notes, for they "are all somewhat pragmatic, since they have arisen

¹⁰ Dewey uses the word values "to designate whatever is taken to have rightful authority in the direction of conduct" (QC 204). Burke similarly uses this term: values, ethics, and morals are largely interchangeable in his work of the 1930s. Dewey's charge against modern science is that in abstracting immediate things as signs, in denuding objects of "all that was immediate, qualitative, final, and self-sufficient," values remained transcendentally secure: "The scientific revolution thus broke the continuity between Being and non-Being, the transcendent and the empirical, found in classical philosophy. Nature was now not qualitatively imperfect, but not qualitative at all. Having ceded the knowledge of nature to Newtonian science, philosophers rushed to assure their readers that their values remained well protected in a transcendent realm" (Westbrook 351, 352). Dewey's response was to treat values as contingent and also an object of scientific experimentation.

from human needs” (PLF 385). Yet, Burke adds, “they undeniably may become a menace¹¹ when they survive the situation for which they were invented, and the knowledge of the processes by which they arose can do much to break the force of their authority in the minds of those who still hold them” (PLF 385-86). Pragmatic analysis of processes, Burke concedes, “can clearly contribute greatly to the elimination of such outgrown values,” but experimental method cannot assist in the production of new values for it cannot evaluate values themselves without ultimately falling back on the authority of some “key value” from which judgment can be made (PLF 386). “Even a key value,” Burke argues, “must be dependent upon experiment for its justification, and its worth could be tested only by the adoption of some other key value by which to test it” (PLF 386).

Burke sums up Dewey’s predicament this way: Dewey “must necessarily avoid a key value, yet must have evaluations. How does he satisfy both needs? By his writings on the nature of intelligence, in which he praises the function of intelligence, tact, taste in the formation of our judgments. For intelligence is not a value; it is a process, a functioning” (PLF 386). Here lies Burke’s central difficulty with Dewey’s pragmatism: Burke finds a “key value” lurking in Dewey’s very notion “intelligence.” Dewey positions intelligence as a “good” although it purportedly designates mere process.¹² It is, then, Burke claims, the activity of “‘pure’ intelligence” that ensures proper judgment, thus being the “absolute” and metaphysical purity that Dewey intends to avoid. “Do we,” Burke muses, “face a choice between the circular chase

¹¹ In “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision” and Permanence and Change, Burke refers to such survival as “cultural lag,” explaining in the latter that “Veblen is most responsible for bringing out the aspect of moral confusion now called the ‘cultural lag.’ In its simplest form, his doctrine is concerned with institutions which, developed as a way of adequately meeting past situations, become a menace insofar as the situation has changed” (PC1 67; PC3 47).

¹² Dewey maintained that intelligence, a method, must always be connected to action—without which it is incomplete: “The peculiar significance of the method of the physical sciences is that they broke through this idea [the conception of intelligence “as something complete in itself”] that had for so long hypnotized mankind, demonstrating that action is a necessary part of intelligence—namely action that changes conditions that previously existed” (“Intelligence” 307).

from value to value, and the treatment of Intelligence as an absolute evaluator?" (PLF 387).¹³

Burke next makes a distinction that reveals his underlying concern. Dewey's intelligence as a "good" may very well be good in "a technical sense, like the goodness of one's liver," but "[i]ts goodness as an ethical good, a good for society in general, is less apparent" (PLF 387).¹⁴ This opposition of the technical and the ethical concerns Burke throughout his work in the 1930s. He repeatedly questions that "the scientific attitude could provide the grounding for a world of values" (PLF 388).

Nonetheless, Burke leaves open the possibility that "once values are given [Dewey's pragmatism] can certainly contribute to their better guidance" but his starting point is actually existing values: "If the world prizes justice or happiness... we need not seek the justification for

¹³ Burke rewrites this problem of "key value" as that of "god-term," specifically when again engaging with Dewey and pragmatism in the 1943 essay "The Tactics of Motivation." ("God-term" then appears more prominently in the Motives books [see GM 73, 105] and later in The Rhetoric of Religion.) God-term refers to "a summarizing term, a 'Title of Titles,' in which all explanation is implicit," and Burke shows how Dewey's scientific method becomes such a term ("Tactics" 47). Discussing his "operationalism," Burke writes that "since a philosophy of science is, after all, not itself a science, in the sense of a restricted technological discipline, but a set of words, like any other philosophy, we must at least guard ourselves against thinking that any philosophy, though it may eliminate "God" as a term, can thereby eliminate 'god-terms,' for such titular concerns are its very stock-in-trade" ("Tactics" 48).

¹⁴ Paul Stob, among the few Burke scholars who have considered Burke's assessment of Dewey, argues that Burke "missed a lot in Dewey's The Quest for Certainty and failed to see how for Dewey belief about values differed from scientific belief (see Stob 233) and that "[v]alues need only be open to the lessons of experiences" (234). As I have described, in seeing "intelligence" as Dewey's a priori "good" and "absolute evaluator," Burke seems to have addressed this. And Dewey clearly argues that values are subject to the same evaluative method as things in the natural world: "Operational thinking needs to be applied to the judgment of values just as it has now finally been applied in conceptions of physical objects" (QC 206). In any case, Stob's purpose is to show "the remarkable [political] separation between the two men. This separation is remarkable because, despite their opposition, both propounded a theory of 'the public' in which language was the tool for social amelioration" (234). Stob marks Burke as the "communist" and Dewey, of course, as the "liberal," but these terms in themselves do little to show the separation he has in mind. In fact, the basis for the "social amelioration" that he finds in each may indicate more unity than separation. Both explicitly opposed capitalism in their writings and were part of a general radical political culture even if within that culture divisions between proponents of Soviet Communism and varieties of socialism were prominent and adversarial. A more relevant question for determining the extent of their "unity," or at least one more apropos of their reception in their time, might be the extent to which each can be characterized as "reformist" if "amelioration" is to be the defining term. (I will consider Burke's communism in chapter two.) David Blakesley, who has commented on this review in more detail than Stob, describes Burke as questioning "whether it is possible to erect new values by experimental methods that reduce human actions (e.g., the use of intelligence) to motions" (84-85). Although the action/motion distinction would become quite important for Burke, these were not his terms in the 1930s. Blakesley, however, is right to characterize Dewey's "intelligence" as a reduction to motion, or to mere process as Burke puts it in the review. Burke soon turns to "action" as a way to emphasize human will, yet also human error and variation. Dewey presumes that implementation of proper method assures proper selection and judgment—an automatic, successful functioning of "intelligence."

these values; but we can use them to prove that some practice is reprehensible because unjust, or because it leads to misery” (PLF 388). Justification thus shifts toward the ends the values warrant; the question of their initial legitimacy and of conflicting interpretations Burke puts aside here but would not forget. He would seek a basis for establishing values in his major work of the 1930s. At this juncture, Burke highlights the social situatedness of values like “justice” and “happiness,” values accepted by the “world.” He distinguishes creating new values from guiding already established values. This engagement with Dewey’s The Quest for Certainty with Dewey marks his concern with “creation” and “revision,” and what he would soon refer to as poetry and recalcitrance in Permanence and Change.¹⁵

Burke again notes limits of Dewey’s philosophy in a subsequent review of Dewey’s Art as Experience in 1934, a review that he wrote as he was completing Permanence and Change.¹⁶ The review makes explicit his doubt about the reach of Dewey’s aesthetic theory as a “philosophy of science.” Yet in this review Burke shows surprisingly little interest in particulars of Dewey’s treatment of art, turning instead to the social relevance and purpose of his general philosophy. “One may ask,” Burke writes,

whether the “experimental method” itself is a sound basis upon which to erect a scheme of social solidarity, of group homogeneity, since it is essentially a

¹⁵ In 1932, Burke wrote, but never published, “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision,” his response to what at that time he saw as an increasingly dominant Marxist critique of art and of a Modernist “‘esthetic’ attitude” as escapism (ACR 63).

¹⁶ Paul Jay points out that Burke owes the terms of this title to Art as Experience and that “Dewey’s approach to the problem of permanence and change in the realms of art and culture provides a clear point of departure for Burke” (Contingency 15). Yes, a point of departure—but from which Burke would develop his disagreements with Dewey. Dewey writes in Art as Experience that “there is one problem that artist, philosopher, and critic alike must face: the relation between permanence and change. The bias of philosophy in its more orthodox phase throughout the ages has been toward the unchanging, and that bias has affected the more serious critics—perhaps it is this bias which generates the judicial critic. It is overlooked that in art—and in nature as far as we can judge it through the medium of art—permanence is a function, a consequence, of changes in the relations they sustain to one another, not an antecedent principle” (325-26). Burke, indeed, faces this problem in devising an account of “art” in social change. He would, however, strategically embrace “an antecedent principle” in biology, or the “human substrate,” to avoid what he sees as the limits of Dewey’s philosophy.

technique individualistic in genius, providing a definite technique for doubting the beliefs of one's group and hence working fundamentally against the authority of the "proprieties" which art mainly deals in. Perhaps we may eventually be forced to shift our whole notion of "agreement" to a much higher level than now prevails in the usual "for me or agin' me" attitude; perhaps an underlying basis of homogeneity for uniting the vast heterogeneity of scientific disciplines can be obtained by stressing one unified social purpose. ("Esthetic Strain" 316)

Science, Burke insists, must be "shape[d] to esthetic ends—and we can never do so until it has been made, in the fullest sense, a group possession" (316). This review does not indicate how such a "unified social purpose" might be achieved, but it signals the political and social purpose, "a scheme of social solidarity," that would be propel Permanence and Change, the book that would put ethics and the aesthetic together in response to the dominant orientation that Burke would refer to as the "technological psychosis" or "scientific rationalization." Burke sees Dewey as representative of this orientation: like The Quest for Certainty, Art as Experience reveals "scientist" tendencies. Permanence and Change responds to this limit and seeks to delineate a "sound basis upon which to erect a scheme of social solidarity." Although Dewey in Art as Experience is quite sympathetic to art (albeit as he subsumes it within the model of science), Burke's point in the end is that his method denies a fundamental place for the poetic as the area of human creative practice, which Burke sees as thoroughly social and ethical and would link to a "sound basis" in Permanence and Change.

After the publication of Permanence and Change, Burke, as he had in his review of The Quest for Certainty, again points to concealed ethical content in Dewey's characterization of "the functioning of 'intelligence'" in his review of Liberalism and Social Action:

Dewey manages to introduce nonviolent, noncoercive requirements into his notions of scientific method. He implies a difference in kind between the use of a chemical to eliminate vermin and the use of a chemical to eliminate human rivals, but his explication is vague at this important juncture. Particularly in view that Dr. Dewey usually celebrates scientific achievement as a ‘conquest,’ we become aware that, when applied to people, his idea of scientific method is not merely that of a power but adds hidden connotations of charity or solidarity usually connected with religion, ethics or poetry. (PLF 390-91)

This “ambiguity,” Burke notes, is also present in Experience and Nature and The Quest for Certainty. “When one talks of functions,” he explains,

one necessarily brings in nonhistoric assumptions of structure. The “function of intelligence” belongs to the long family tree, quite as does the “function of the heart.” History may tell us how the heart beat faster on a given day. But behind the effect of that given day, there lies a property of hearts, a “heart function,” that is not historical in the same sense at all. The attempt to divorce philosophy from metaphysics will always, I suspect, be merely a protective screen for the setting up of metaphysical assumptions. (391).

Here Burke extends his critique from the ontological perspective that he advances in Permanence and Change—what he calls “metabiology.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Experience and Nature may have influenced Burke’s thinking more than any of Dewey’s other books, even regarding critical practice. Dewey’s consideration of criticism in this work corresponds to Burke’s own comments on criticism at the beginning of Permanence and Change, as well as to Burke’s critical evaluation of Dewey’s work. Dewey writes, “philosophy is inherently criticism, having its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality; a criticism of criticisms, as it were. Criticism is discriminating judgment, careful appraisal, and judgment is appropriately termed criticism wherever the subject-matter concerns goods or values. Possession and enjoyment of goods passes insensibly and inevitably into appraisal” (298). This comment could well describe Burke’s own understanding and be seen in his broad application of criticism to cultural forms and concurrent meta-critical or philosophical reflections.

The reviews of The Quest for Certainty, Art as Experience, and Liberalism and Social Action reveal Burke's desire to find a basis for establishing universal values and motives and his dissatisfaction with Dewey's "scientism" and its distance from the poetic. In engaging Dewey's work, Burke begins to place the poetic, or what in Permanence and Change he would simply refer to as poetry, in opposition to science with its reduction of the human to mechanical processes. Dewey is an important figure in Burke's textual "conversation" (a term that I will consider later) in these years as Burke developed terminological equipment to contend with palpable social dissolution, to find terms that could orient and re-direct and that "could provide humility without humiliation" (ATH II: 256; 344).¹⁸ Permanence and Change is the key text of Burke's work of the 1930s, which its "companion volume,"¹⁹ Attitudes toward History, supplemented and which some of the essays collected in The Philosophy of Literary Form extended and amplified. The imperative of re-orientation, or Burke's re-working of Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values,"²⁰ toward greater "cooperation" is central to these works.

¹⁸ The parenthetical in-text citations for Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History present first the page numbers in the first editions, and, for the reader's convenience, second (after the semi-colon), the page numbers of the more readily available third editions of these works. Burke revised these books in the 1950s, altering phrasings, substituting words, and, at times, removing entirely long sections of text. I discuss the significance of some expurgated sections in chapter two.

¹⁹ Burke thought of Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History as "companion volumes" (PC3 295).

²⁰ Burke actually wants to transform some values, noting again that one must retain other values in order to advance new ones. Burke stresses this point in the paper he presented at the first American Writers' Congress (1935), "Revolutionary Symbolism in America." Burke suggests to the "pro-Communist audience" that artists and writers might be better propagandists by employing symbols or terms that are more integrated with "broader cultural elements" and values (88, 91). He recommends that the "imaginative artist show, in a general way, a wholesome alignment of attitudes, both political and nonpolitical," that "the imaginative writer seek to propagandize his cause by surrounding it with as full a cultural texture as he can manage, thus thinking of propaganda not as an over-simplified, literal, explicit writing of lawyer's briefs, but as a process of broadly and generally associating his political alignment with cultural awareness in the large" (92, 93). This essay is a practical application of ideas integral to Permanence and Change. I return to this in the next chapter.

1.2 BOURNE'S CALL: POETIC MALCONTENTEDNESS

In Permanence and Change Burke invokes Nietzsche to oppose the limits that he highlights in his reviews of Dewey's books, an opposition that Randolph Bourne seems to have inspired. In focusing on the question of values, in fact, Burke's review of The Quest for Certainty rehearses in part Bourne's critique in 1917 of Dewey's pragmatism and pro-war writings in The New Republic.²¹ Bourne's former enthusiasm for Dewey's pragmatism, as exhibited in his 1915 essay "John Dewey's Philosophy," was succeeded by disappointment and doubt.²² Two years later in "The Twilight of the Idols," Bourne excoriated Dewey's philosophy as an instrumentalism devoid of guiding values and, consequently, that its exponents had themselves become "efficient instruments of the war-technique, accepting with little question the ends as announced from above" (Radical Will 343). Although Dewey "always meant his philosophy,

²¹ Burke's connection to Bourne is manifold. In the spring and fall of 1917 Burke attended Columbia University (Selzer 192), where Bourne had been a student of Dewey during his time there from 1909-1913. Burke attended Columbia when Bourne's public critique of Dewey's position on US entry into the European war in 1917 appeared. In addition, Burke's first regular literary work was at The Dial, which had been Bourne's primary and final publication venue after Seven Arts folded toward the end of 1917. Bourne published numerous articles and reviews in The Dial from late 1916 to December 1918. (See Olaf Hansen's bibliography in The Radical Will [541-45] and Leslie Vaughan's in Randolph Bourne and the Politics of Cultural Radicalism). Burke published 24 book reviews in The Dial from 1920-28, four short stories from 1920-22, fifteen translations from German (including works by Mann and Spengler) from 1921-27, as well as six installments of his sole novel, Towards a Better Life (1932), and a poem in the final years of the journal from 1928-29. Burke was also the regular music critic for The Dial from December 1927 to June 1929. In tribute to Bourne, The Dial had published posthumously his "Autobiographic Chapter" in January 1920. Given his close association with The Dial for years, Burke was probably at least aware of some of Bourne's writings beyond "Twilight of Idols." One other corresponding detail is worth mentioning: Both Bourne and Burke negatively reviewed books by the "new humanist" Paul Elmer More: Bourne for The New Republic in October 1917, and Burke for The Dial in 1922. Burke's review of More's The Religion of Plato, incidentally, contains his first published reference to pragmatism. "The trouble with the pragmatists," Burke writes, lies "...chiefly in the fact that they attribute to their doctrines primarily an ethical content, whereas pragmatism—with its extreme emphasis on the creative—leads directly to aesthetics" ("Fides" 529). Already in this review, Burke is measuring a tension within pragmatism concerning ethics, but here the tension seemingly is with the aesthetic or creative. By the 1930s Burke would solve this problem for himself by aligning ethics and aesthetics—the moral and the poetic.

²² In this essay Bourne called for Dewey to apply his philosophy of the "concrete" toward "interpreting current life," to be, that is, a public intellectual; to not do so, Bourne cautions, would be a great practical loss as his philosophy so deftly "challenges the whole machinery of our world of right and wrong, law and order, property and religion, the old techniques by which society is still being managed and regulated" (Radical Will 334, 333). Dewey would soon oblige and regularly engage with topical issues for many years to come.

when taken as a philosophy of life, to start with values,” Bourne continues in a passage that seems to have influenced Burke, “...there was always that unhappy ambiguity in his doctrine as to just how values were created, and it became easier and easier to assume that just any growth was justified and almost any activity valuable so long as it achieved ends” (343).

Disapprovingly invoking Dewey’s own terms, Bourne argues that “[t]he defect of any philosophy of ‘adaptation’ or ‘adjustment,’ even when it means adjustment to changing, living experience, is that there is no provision for thought or experience getting beyond itself. If your ideal is to be adjustment [sic] to your situation, in radiant cooperation with reality, then your success is likely to be just that and no more” (344). Adjustment is mere cooperation in the sense of conformity with the conditions set “from above.” Here Bourne’s analysis of state power in this period, exemplified in his legendary statement that “war is the health of the state,” becomes visible.²³ Dewey’s pragmatism, he suggests, could not counter the ends set by economic and state interests; instead it had adopted their values in spite of its own democratic ambitions.

Leslie Vaughan makes a similar point, writing that for Bourne “pragmatism’s emphasis on the ability to judge consequences told one nothing about how to select among them or order them. Pragmatism had nothing to offer with regard to the criteria needed to judge political values” (103). Burke stresses that Dewey presumes “intelligence” itself in its discriminations to be a “good,” indicating that selection is the issue: which consequences does one select as desirable

²³ The phrase “war is the health of the state” appears in the essay “The State.” The first publication of this essay was posthumous in the collection Untimely Papers, edited by one of the editors of Seven Arts, James Oppenheim. Bourne died from influenza in late December 1918 soon after the Armistice and became a legendary figure for radicals. The principled “ghost” of Bourne, in fact, became part of 1930s culture, as witnessed in John Dos Passos’s verse appreciation in the collage opening of 1919 (1932). Earlier, Louis Mumford’s The Golden Day (1926) extended Bourne’s critique of Dewey’s pragmatism (Mumford doesn’t spare James either), providing further motive for Dewey’s concern with “values” and “culture” in The Public and Its Problems and his work into the 30s. Dewey had sought to address some of Bourne’s charges in Experience and Nature (1925), but Bourne (via Mumford and others) would continue to haunt. (Mumford had his own motives, of course; Robert Westbrook characterizes Mumford’s assessment of Experience and Nature as a “willful misreading” [386].) Ralph Ellison would later allude to The Golden Day in Invisible Man, indicating a multi-faceted textual convergence, to which Bourne tangentially relates, among the writers central to this dissertation.

and according to which criteria? Unless judgment is deferred indefinitely, resulting in the “circular chase from value to value,” intelligence must judge according to some criterion, which necessarily appears, at least provisionally, as sufficiently stable if not fixed. Burke would keep this difficulty in mind as he wrote Permanence and Change, explicitly attending to how orientations impact selection of means.

Dewey wrote several articles in The New Republic in response to those questioning his support of US entry into the war.²⁴ (Bourne was not least among these critics but Dewey never referred to him by name in these articles.) In “Conscience and Compulsion,” Dewey attributes the resistance to war in some quarters to a morality that “emphasizes the emotions rather than intelligence, ideals rather than specific purposes, the nurture of personal motives rather than the creation of social agencies and environments” (Middle Works 262). The charge, laid at a collection of actually diverse critics that he labels “pacifists,” is of idealism, of withdrawal to “self-conceit” and thus of irresponsibility (264). “Conscience,” Dewey retorts, must proceed to an examination of “how the machinery, the specific, concrete social arrangements, exactly comparable to physical engineering devices, for maintaining peace, are to be brought about” (263). This use of a “machinery” metaphor to describe social arrangements, and by extension social interaction, Bourne, and then Burke, found particularly troubling; each, in fact, offers art or the “poetic” as a necessary ethical supplement to Dewey’s “technique”—what Burke, re-

²⁴After the U.S. declared war on Germany, Dewey published “Conscience and Compulsion,” “The Future of Pacifism,” “What America Will Fight for,” and “Conscription of Thought” in The New Republic from July to September 1917, all demonstrating his support for US engagement in the war but also showing—in the context of the recent passage of the Espionage Act in April—an attitude of tolerance for those who had opposed US entry as a vital component of democracy. Seeking to address his chief critics on the war, Dewey also published “In a Time of National Hesitation” in the recently formed and short-lived Seven Arts, the publication that Randolph Bourne had participated in forming along with its editors (James Oppenheim, Waldo Frank, and Van Wyck Brooks) and where he began publishing articles against US participation in the war after The New Republic became unfriendly to critics of US involvement. Dewey had already published several articles in 1916 that engaged matters related in some way to the question of war: “Universal Service as Education,” “Our Educational Ideal in Wartime,” “Force, Violence and Law,” and “On Understanding the Mind of Germany” (see Dewey Middle Works). Part of Bourne’s frustration was in how quickly Dewey seemed to have relinquished his principles and philosophical imperatives to the position of the state once it shifted.

directing Dewey's own term as I will show later, would call the "technological psychosis" in Permanence and Change (63; 44).

Casey Blake claims that "Bourne's opposition of values to technique can be understood only in relation to his continued commitment to Dewey's goal of renewing American democracy through a public philosophy of experience" (163).²⁵ Bourne may well have been questioning Dewey from within a general pragmatist position, at least partially, for he does invoke William James at points in challenging Dewey. James's philosophy, he suggests, may not have so quickly succumbed to state interests, for it did maintain a space for judgment of ends independent of the seeming "success" that particular means, or techniques, may have.²⁶ In other words, Bourne saw the limits in the run up to US entry into war to Dewey's pragmatism if clear ends were not formulated according to "conscience." Dewey presumed, Bourne argues, that the assertion that the war was being waged toward democratic ends was sufficient. But without "the specific working-out of our democratic desires, either nationally or internationally, either in the present or in the reconstruction after the war," "democracy" remained "an unanalyzed term, useful as a call to battle, but not an intellectual tool, turning up fresh sod for the changing future" (340). Bourne writes that he and other now disillusioned pragmatists

were instrumentalists, but we had our private utopias so clearly before our minds that the means fell always into its place as contributory.... The American, in living out this philosophy, has habitually confused results with product, and been content with getting somewhere without asking too closely whether it was the

²⁵ Robert Westbrook, in his intellectual biography of Dewey, supports this view, seeing the "Bourne-Dewey confrontation" as "a family affair": "Bourne did not, as is often said, so much reject Dewey's philosophy as turn it, with a vengeance, back upon his mentor" (Westbrook 197).

²⁶ Bourne does have reservations about James's optimism, as would Burke. Burke's treatment of James, especially as pragmatist, is more critical, however. As I will discuss later, Burke sees James as the clear precursor to the problems he finds in Dewey and endemic to pragmatism.

desirable place to get. It is now becoming plain that unless you start with the vividest kind of poetic vision, your instrumentalism is likely to land you just where it has landed this younger intelligentsia which is so happily and busily engaged in the national enterprise of war. (343)

Dewey's stress on technique, Bourne continues, "exaggerated emphasis on the mechanics of life at the expense of the quality of living" (345). Intellectuals as functionaries of the state, as technicians, "have failed us as value-creators, even as value-emphasizers. The allure of the martial in war has passed only to be succeeded by the allure of the technical" (345). What was needed, Bourne argued, was "[t]he allure of fresh and true ideas, of free speculation, of artistic vigor, of cultural styles, of intelligence suffused by feeling, and feeling given fibre and outline by intelligence" (345-46). An instrumentalist philosophy could not support such emphases.

Looking past Dewey's—and James's—naïve optimism, Bourne calls for "malcontentedness": "Irritation at things as they are, disgust at the continual frustrations and aridities of American life, deep dissatisfaction with self and with the groups that give themselves forth as hopeful—out of such moods there might be hammered new values" (346). Nietzsche, for Bourne, was the exemplary "malcontent": "That thirst for more of the intellectual 'war and laughter' that we find Nietzsche calling us to may bring us satisfactions that optimism-haunted philosophies could never bring. Malcontentedness may be the beginning of promise" (347). Bourne calls for irreverence not barbarism: "these malcontents have no intention of being cultural vandals, only to slay. They are not barbarians, but seek the vital and the sincere everywhere. All they want is a new orientation of the spirit that shall be modern, an orientation to accompany that technical orientation which is fast coming, and which the war accelerates" (346). He calls for a "new orientation" and "new values" yet seeks conservation of some

“cultural values,” or their reorientation within the technology of Modernity. Complementing Nietzsche’s intellectual “war,” Bourne concludes by invoking “the spirit of William James, with its gay passion for ideas, and its freedom of speculation,” noting, with one final jab at Dewey, that “it is the creative desire more than the creative intelligence that we shall need if we are ever to fly” (347). He thus puts together Nietzsche and James, assembling a “will to power” and a “will to believe.”²⁷ The task, for Bourne, was relentless critical evaluation supplemented by the poetic impulse. Bourne tempered Nietzschean “destruction”: he invoked the resources of tradition, endorsing considered, unsentimental preservation alongside willful destruction that together could allow new possibilities. The “verve,” “feeling,” and “vigor” of what might be called a critical poetic was precisely what he found wanting in Dewey in 1917.

So Burke’s critique of Dewey in his review of The Quest for Certainty generally follows Randolph Bourne’s in 1917, and Burke continued to take up Bourne’s challenge in writing Permanence and Change: Bourne, in response to Dewey, demanded a new orientation and the capacity to create new values and that is precisely what Burke, with an eye on Dewey, sought to do in the 1930s. Showing a way to shape new orientations and values is the purpose of this book, and he invokes Bourne’s “malcontent,” Nietzsche, in order to do so. At work on Permanence and Change in 1933, Burke wrote to Malcolm Cowley²⁸ that as a critic “one must

²⁷ To some extent, Burke similarly uses Nietzsche and James as complements. In his book on Burke, Greig Henderson writes in passing that “Nietzsche’s philosophy is essentially pragmatist. His notion of will-to-power is not unlike William James’s notion of will-to-believe” (84). While I see Burke tempering what he finds to be Nietzsche’s excesses with James in some ways, and James’s with Nietzsche, their well-known terms are far from equivalents for him. Burke sees clear limits to using Nietzsche toward his purpose of creating new values (as well as to what he saw as James’s excessive optimism). In the end, I see each as primarily a literary resource for Burke in building character. In Attitudes toward History, Burke writes that James, in taking care in naming, “built himself a character” and that this act of naming was his “vocation” (I 7; 7). I read Permanence and Change itself as Burke’s building character—that is, social character toward a new socio-political formation.

²⁸ In 1933 Malcolm Cowley, Burke’s close friend since their childhood in Pittsburgh, was literary editor at The New Republic. I will consider Burke’s writings for The New Republic on communism, as well as some related exchanges with Cowley, in chapter two. Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History were published by New Republic books.

try to rehash the whole business, of orientation, of imaginative and ideological symbolism, of ‘meanings’ in their double function of both guiding and misguiding us” (Jay Selected Correspondence 206-7). Concerned with the question of re-orientation, Permanence and Change presents fundamental problems and concerns that Burke would extend in multiple directions in all his subsequent work. The rumblings of Counter-Statement, of art and literature as fundamentally contrary and disruptive to institutionalized forms and ways of seeing, Permanence and Change more fully socializes and democratically levels. Burke shows linguistic forms as constraining and debilitating but also potentially enabling

The subject of Permanence and Change, most broadly, is criticism as an everyday practice that is shaped by general orientations. Burke stresses the need for improvements in the “criticism of criticism” and to “interpret our interpretations” better (13; 6). He shows how a given orientation can become a liability—a trained incapacity—and provides critical tools to achieve a better orientation and interpretations (14-15; 9). Dewey’s philosophy of instrumentalism displayed insufficient critical capacity as it seemed to reduce judgment to mere mechanical process. Although Dewey emphasizes the necessity of adjustment to variable conditions and observation, he presumes, Burke maintains, the possibility of an orientation and method that are entirely separate from metaphysical assumptions. Truth is what works, Dewey says, but Burke wonders about the criteria for determining what counts as “working.” In Permanence and Change, he highlights this question with attention how what stands out in a given orientation limits “means-selecting” (17-24; 9-14). An orientation, Burke notes, is

a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be.

The act of response, as implicated in the character which an event has for us,

shows clearly the integral relationship between our metaphysics and our conduct.

For in a statement as to how the world is, we have implicit judgments not only as to how the world may become but also as to what means we should employ to make it so. (24; 14)

An orientation thus implicitly extends “permanence” (by judging how things were and are, thereby impacting responses and shaping what might be), but as it is not an absolute even if it is culturally and institutionally embedded, an orientation can be altered and largely replaced—itsself changing and effecting change. For Burke the problem is “faulty means selection,” and the establishment of inappropriate “linkages” that follow from a given orientation. Bourne’s critique of Dewey presented an important example of how a particular orientation became an incapacity, how Dewey’s method and judgments were part of a general orientation that coincided with state interests. Burke recognized the importance of criticism with its attention to verbalizations for evaluating an orientation and thereby producing different and possibly more appropriate orientation. As he saw from Bourne, the stakes could be at the level of international war. In fact, Burke begins Permanence and Change referring to the scourge of war in order to show just how badly orientations “can go wrong” and how much “better criticism” is needed: “No slight critical ability is required for one to hate as his deepest enemy a people thousands of miles away. When criticism can do so much for us, it may have got us just to the point where we greatly require still better criticism” (12-13; 6).²⁹ Burke means war not only literally, but also

²⁹ Permanence and Change shows that the threat of fascism was of particular concern to Burke as he wrote from 1933-34. War remains a concern in Burke’s writing, best summarized in his own “motto” and epigraph to A Grammar of Motives: ad bellum purificandum (toward the purification of war). (See Burke’s own comments on this motto on pp. 319-20 of A Grammar). The entry for “efficiency” in Burke’s “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” of Attitudes toward History bears some resemblance to Bourne’s critique of Dewey and the “war technique”; war presents an “extreme example” of efficiency in “rationalizing human purpose” (II: 120; 249). In demonstrating how orientations can “go wrong,” Burke here also introduces his notion “scapegoat mechanism” as “faulty means-selecting” (25; 15), which, as I will discuss in chapter three, Ralph Ellison would use as he took on the problem of orientation.

generally as a figure for social antagonisms, which he found more pronounced as he wrote in the deepening economic crisis in 1933.³⁰

1.3 COMBAT AND COOPERATION: TOWARD ONTOLOGY

As he was for Bourne's critique of Dewey's pragmatism, Nietzsche would be an important figure for Burke in Permanence and Change. In the 1984 afterword to the third edition, Burke remarks that the role of Nietzsche in this work was "much more 'critical'" than he had understood when he had "coined the expression 'perspective by ambiguity' in his name" (PC3 310). Following Burke's cue in this afterword, Debra Hawhee has attempted to redress the general inattention in the scholarship to Burke's use of Nietzsche. She rightly finds a "Nietzschean inflection" in Burke's writings, "particularly those that bear on his monumental term 'perspective by incongruity' and those that meditate on metaphor and art" ("Burke" 129). With its repeated mention of Nietzsche and introduction of "perspective by incongruity," Permanence and Change, not surprisingly, is the key text for Hawhee. In addition to inspiring "perspective by incongruity," Nietzsche was an additional resource in Burke's critique of the technological, scientific orientation's dismissal of the creative and poetic and toward his conclusion in Permanence and Change that "the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man's relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor" (338; 263). Burke's encounter with Nietzsche contributed toward his seeing the poetic as action.

In a sense, "perspective by incongruity" is just another name for metaphor, but with its incongruous verbal maneuvering it highlights disruption in generating insight. Burke, in fact,

³⁰ In addition to pointing to capitalism for its pernicious social consequences, Permanence and Change repeatedly refers to the threat of German fascism.

refers to it as “verbal ‘atom cracking.’”³¹ Indeed, Burke’s Nietzsche is “a philosopher deeply concerned with language as force” (Hawhee “Burke” 129) and “perspective by incongruity” reveals the destructive and creative power of language. The collision of incongruous terms breaks free new ways of seeing or perspectives. The “violence” that Burke finds in Nietzsche’s eventual aphoristic “dartlike style” (PC1 117; PC3 88), however, is at variance with Burke’s preferred style of “ingratiation” and “ethical universe building” (338; 263).³² Burke’s ongoing concern in Permanence and Change and later writings is the necessity of gaining greater awareness and thereby control over this force, to lessen humans’ divisive misuse of symbols. The potential disruptions of incongruous linguistic maneuvers, and of the figures of language generally, suggest to Burke that language need be handled with care. But Burke wondered how such care could take hold beyond individual preference and become part of a general orientation.

Quoting Burke from a 1922 letter to Waldo Frank, Hawhee shows Burke’s initial interest in Nietzsche on the terrain of ethics. “Nietzsche,” Burke writes, “is the first exclusively ethical philosopher, the first philosopher to begin on ethical terms, rather than on metaphysical ones” (132). Ethics here refers primarily to Nietzsche’s consideration of values as created by humans and his methodological attention to language as rhetoric within an overarching critique of metaphysical truth. Although Hawhee convincingly shows Burke’s initial attraction to Nietzsche as an “ethical” philosopher, she avoids considering some of Burke’s more hesitant and critical

³¹ The term perspective by incongruity is literally at the center of this book (part 2 of 3) and refers to the deliberate collision of terms, a terminological shattering that might lead to insight. It is also in the “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” of Attitudes toward History. Burke here defines it as “a method for gauging situations by verbal ‘atom cracking.’ That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category” (II 201; 308).

³² Burke, in fact, defines style as ingratiation: “In its simplest manifestation, style is ingratiation. It is an attempt to gain favor by the hypnotic or suggestive process of ‘saying the right thing.’ Obviously, it is most effective when there is agreement as to what the right thing is” (PC1 71; PC3 50). Style is a matter of appeal, of rhetoric, but within certain conditions. Because some situations may hold little basis for agreement about what “right thing is,” Burke seeks common ground beyond historical contingencies.

comments on Nietzsche regarding ethics in Permanence and Change. Burke would indeed see ethics as a domain of human creation and preferences as negotiated and maintained through language and “communication,” even if, as he makes clear in his reviews of Dewey’s books, he finds absolute critiques of metaphysics to be futile. More significantly, he locates an obstacle in Nietzsche toward resolving the “ethical confusion” that characterized modernity, for Nietzsche “was questioning, down to the very last value, every pious linkage which man had derived from his cultural past” (66; 46). Nietzsche thus shattered too many cultural “linkages,” linkages that formed the basis for social integration.³³ Such impatience, as Burke saw it, was in tension with Nietzsche’s additional attitude of “tragic poet.” Nietzsche, Burke writes, “wanted to sing of” the transvaluation of all values (65; 46), but his “magnificent equipment as an artist opened him constantly to the processes of piety; yet his sharply aphoristic intellect was turned upon the doubting of these processes” (66; 46).³⁴

Although Burke recognizes “the fertility of his work,” he also sees Nietzsche’s thought proceeding against itself and therefore limited in advancing a new orientation, which would have to enlist “pious” commitments. The creation and sustenance of new values—Burke’s imperative in the 1930s—cannot be realized, he seems to say, through Nietzsche. Burke describes this tension most directly in the section “Piety-Impiety Conflict in Nietzsche” in Permanence and Change (116; 87). He explains that Nietzsche’s

³³ Commitment to integration propels Burke’s method: he strategically invokes existing cultural linkages in order to foment new linkages. The recurring terms “cooperation,” “communication,” and in the first edition “communism” respond to the perceived social disintegration of modernity and economic depression in the 1930s.

³⁴ Singing, for Burke, refers to human feeling and an active relation to a given object. Singing, that is, relates to values. Quantitative social science metrics, Burke notes, do not “encompass enough” in order to make predictions (ATH1 II: 244-46; ATH3 334-36). Burke uses questionnaires and ballot returns as his example: “the expression of the vote (if by “voting” you mean this empty, passive, random process) tells you nothing. The future is really disclosed by finding out what people can sing about” (II: 244; 334-35). Singing, an instance of the poetic, involves “engrossment” with and valuation of materials or objects. Burke characterizes Nietzsche’s style as aphoristic, for aphorism, in contrast to the investments of singing or the poetic, refers to concision, a cutting away toward direct (darting), unadorned statement, largely separated from the linkages that Burke finds integral to communication as social interaction.

subject-matter was specifically that of reorientation (transvaluation of all values)—yet in facing the problematical new he spontaneously felt as a poet that he could glorify such a concern only by utilizing the unquestioned old. The essayist can be content to name a cause heroic. The poet can make it heroic only by identifying it with assumptions already established as to what the heroic is.” (116; 87)

Even for Nietzsche, Burke argues, some piety was necessary; it is essential to communication as social interaction: “Piety is a system-builder, a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole. Piety is the sense of what properly goes with what” (100; 74). Piety names not absolute conformity but strategic invocation of the “unquestioned old” in order to introduce something that might be perceived as new.³⁵ As such piety emphasizes congruity as a necessary complement to the Nietzschean ruptures of unapologetic juxtaposition and incongruity.³⁶ As a key term in Permanence and Change, piety stresses the importance of appeal to the felt permanence of custom to effect change.³⁷

³⁵ Piety might be seen as a precursor to Burke’s later articulation of rhetoric as identification and not mere persuasion: “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by ... identifying your ways with his” (RM 55). Identification, like piety, works toward integration and cooperation, or is at least “compensatory to division” (RM 22). Burke extends Aristotle’s topoi (commonplaces) as instruments of persuasion to acts of socialization and solidarity (RM 56). This social turn, a reworking of the common of commonplaces, has its beginnings in Burke’s work of the 1930s.

³⁶ Burke’s nearly oxymoronic term “planned incongruity” (borrowed from Henri Bergson) is not only his effort to institute a poetic attitude but also I would say, keeping his hesitancy toward Nietzsche in mind, his effort to contain the potentially hazardous disruptions of incongruity. Planning requires care even if the intent is generally to arrive at surprising (unanticipated or unplanned) outcomes or insights (PC1 156-57; PC3 118-19).

³⁷ As with many terms in Burke’s writings, “piety” becomes nearly synonymous with several other terms. “Style,” for instance, is defined similarly as “a constant meeting of obligations, a state-of-being-without-offense, a repeated doing of the ‘right’ thing. It moulds our actions by contingencies, but these contingencies go to the farthest reaches of the communicative. For style (custom) is a complex schema of what-goes-with-what, carried through all the subtleties of manner and attitudes” (PC1 346-47, n. 1; PC3 269, n. 2). Burke also sees gestures of piety as important for left politics in the 1930s. His explicitly political essays—for instance, “Boring from Within” and “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” (among others)—pitch the importance of piety or style for any radical politics. (I attend to specifics of this “political” Burke in chapter two). For more on how the terms of Permanence and Change readily link to each other—their connective lines “could be drawn at random,” Burke says—see his list and connections

With apparently this issue of radical incongruity in Nietzsche in mind, Burke qualifies another term from Nietzsche, a term that he found useful on occasion to characterize cultural dynamics and verbal disagreements: “combat.” Nietzsche, he writes, “held that a morality of combat is no despicable thing, however much it may plague us” (251; 198). Although Burke recognizes that military patterns were “observable in the efforts of the scientist, artist, explorer, inventor, teacher, or reformer,” and that “all cultural activity as we know it is erected upon them” (251-52; 198), because he did not see such patterns as inevitable Burke distances himself from this perspective and encourages approaching “the Nietzschean formula with safety” (252, n. 1; 198, n. 1). Tendency toward combat, literally and figuratively, is partly a cultural problem, one that Burke seeks to address through adjustments in verbalization. In Permanence and Change he outlines a noncombative program, which positions cooperation rather than combat as a central organizing term. In fact, his stress on congruity (piety) over incongruity at points is part of this general cooperative emphasis or attitude. Although Burke concedes that it may be possible to see an “underlying element of combat in all action, we do not thereby obligate ourselves to glorify a philosophy of combat. Action can be something qualitatively very different from combat” (252, n. 1; 198, n.1).³⁸ So his hesitation regarding Nietzsche’s combat--as well as to Bourne’s Nietzschean malcontent--concerns the potentially divisive practical consequences of its conception of human action. With the dangers of this Nietzschean perspective and even the

(where this principle reaches near comic proportions) in the conclusion of this work (337; 263). Here is his connective line relating to “piety”: “means-selecting, attention, ‘escape,’ style, sense of what goes with what, piety, propriety, property (tools and ‘shelter’), custom, ingratiating, inducement...” (337; 263).

³⁸ At another point, Burke rehearses this position relative to Nietzsche’s warrior. Again it’s a matter of selecting terms or metaphors. Burke sees “Nietzsche’s metaphor, man as warrior,” as just one possible metaphor—along with “the political being of Aristotle, Rousseau’s signer of the social contract, and the economic man of the Manchester school”—to approach human motives (PC1 339; PC3 263). He conceives all of these metaphors and “simplifications,” although potentially useful in themselves, as instances of the poetic metaphor: “the metaphor of the poetic or dramatic man can include them all and go beyond them all” (339; 264). And because Burke grounds the poetic metaphor in biology, Nietzsche’s “volitional man” or “warrior,” his “philosophy of becoming,” becomes subordinate to Burke’s “philosophy of being.”

hazards of “perspective by incongruity” in mind, Burke concludes Permanence and Change with “poetry of action,” articulating the ethical as participant. He thereby advances an understanding of human action as fundamentally social and cooperative, as always already enmeshed in human relations in addition to being spontaneously creative.³⁹

The subtitle of Permanence and Change, “An Anatomy of Purpose,” foregrounds Burke’s conception of human action as purposeful and relates to his understanding of change as potentially directed. Throughout this work, Burke contrasts purposeful action to a dominant scientific orientation that often reduces human activity to mechanical processes. “Man lives by purpose—and purpose is basically preference,” Burke writes, so purpose comes close to Burke’s definition of the ethical (301; 235).⁴⁰ And the word “anatomy,” the subtitle of Permanence also alludes to the biological ground to which Burke at points traces purpose, to what he sees as the “ultimate motive.”⁴¹ Although this is the bedrock of motive, it is mediated by culture and is therefore variable. So he tries to avoid the reduction of scientific causality—the “vis a tergo” concept of causality (the notion that all human acts are prompted by a ‘kick in the rear’),” for it leaves out purpose entirely (295; 230). Nietzschean combat, he also seems to worry, may readily imply behaviorist models of human activity. Burke intends to avoid such crude reductions (of which Dewey’s presumption that intelligence functions automatically and efficaciously is one example) while seeking a permanence that might facilitate change toward new forms of social integration.

³⁹ Burke selects terms carefully as they contribute to a general orientation and attitude and shape actions. Burke intends to sculpt an attitude.

⁴⁰ As I have already mentioned, Dewey represents for Burke one instance of the scientific orientation that can reduce human activity to mere process beyond purpose and ethics.

⁴¹ “Purpose” would become one of the terms of Burke’s Pentad in A Grammar of Motives, a work “concerned with the basic forms of thought ... in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it” (GM xv). Burke’s grammar is the systematization of a universal human pattern of motives, which he continues to ground in biology.

Burke began to articulate a biological ground of cultural form at least as early as Counter-Statement, and by Permanence and Change the biological as universal is central to his cultural theory. Burke's turn to biology, however, appears in qualified form in Permanence and Change as "metabiology" in order to distinguish his perspective from a reductive biologism (even if his statements at points may appear to verge on this). In Counter-Statement, Burke, drawing on currents in anthropology, conceives the poetic and culture within a "universal pattern" of "potentiality":

when we speak of psychological universals, we mean simply that just as there is inborn in the germ-plasm of a dog the potentiality of barking, so there is in the germ-plasm of man the potentiality of speech, art, mythology, and so on. And while these potentialities are continually changing their external aspects, their 'individuations,' they do not change in essence. (CS 48)

A universal, yes, but Burke conceives this primarily as a potential with varying possible expressions and opportunity for direction: "we can individuate the moral sense by directing it into a specific code or tradition" (CS 49). With Permanence and Change Burke introduces the term "metabiology" to establish a universal and basis for social "solidarity" that he saw missing or discouraged in Dewey and Nietzsche as he continued to resist "hypostatization in speaking of innate forms of the mind" (CS 49). Patterns in literature, he states in Counter-Statement, are ultimately an effect of biology: the universal presence of "crescendo" in literary form, for instance, exists "because we must 'think' in a crescendo, because it parallels certain psychic and physical processes which are at the roots of our experience" (CS 45). In Permanence and Change, Burke intends the perspective of "metabiology" to circumvent the mechanistic view of behaviorism and the positivist assumption of "complete rationality at the basis of biologic

phenomena” (299; 233).⁴² Burke resisted reduction of the human to a machine and repeatedly challenges such views in Permanence and Change.⁴³ Biology may be Burke’s ground and his strategy to encompass, but he qualifies it as metabiology to avoid biological reductionism or naturalism.⁴⁴ And he articulates this metabiology as part of a philosophy of being, thereby

⁴² Burke offers biology as that ground, as that place to which all human motives can be traced. This is a deliberate decision in the face of palpably dissolving social stability in the context of the Great Depression. “One must go in search of authoritative tests that lie deeper” than bare practical subsistence. “One must,” Burke intones, “seek definitions of human purpose whereby the whole ailing world of contingent demands can be appraised. Otherwise, one is trapped in a circle of self-perpetuating judgments, quite as with the practical politician of the Roosevelt type, who must do something for the banks to help 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 nauseum, ‘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” (PC1 285-86; PC3 223-24). Although Burke here comments on a rhetorical function of the term “experimentalism” regarding governmental policies, he also appears to have Dewey in mind as “experimentalism” was a chief term and practice in his method. Indeed, there are echoes of Bourne’s charge in Burke’s mention that if one merely flows with the stream of contingencies an ethical position will happen only by chance, and not be directed according to some human intervention or will. A perspective or orientation that can evaluate and initiate, even when limited by the terms at our disposal, is then necessary for Burke. This is the main impulse of Permanence and Change, with emphasis on the latter term of the title as purposeful, that is, conceived, in the main, as conscious and directed, albeit imperfect.

⁴³ He makes clear that this is not hostility to science but pointing to the limits of its metaphors: “The exclusively mechanistic metaphor is objectionable not because it is directly counter to the poetic, but because it leaves too much out of account” (335-36; 261).

⁴⁴ Timothy Crusius stresses this point: “Far from entailing a naturalistic metaphysics, Burke’s humanism explicitly rejects it” (Conversation 156). Crusius, in fact, is adamant that Burke is distant from a humanism that participates in “any metanarrative about Truth,” but he supports this claim with references to Burke’s work of the 1960s, not to Permanence and Change, in which Burke’s position is ambiguous—or, I would rather say, this question just did not concern him. In his 1954 prologue to the second edition of this book, Burke notes this ambiguity with admonitory distance: “At many points, by a ‘metabiology’ the author seems to have meant that all ‘higher manifestations’ of human culture are to be explained as ‘projections’ of the body in its sheerly physiological nature” (PC3 1). Although the mediatory role of language and culture was certainly also there, Burke finds it necessary to state this more strongly: “Even on an empirical basis, a ‘Metabiology’ needs the corrective of a concern with social motives as such. Thus, human kinds of domination and subjection must decidedly never be reduced to the strictly ‘natural’ or ‘biological.’ The necessary discount is implicit in the book at many points. But it is not as explicit as the author would now have it” (PC3 1i). While I think that Burke actually does make this clear in the first edition (only three or four sentences, if read in isolation, may suggest a biological reductionism or naturalism), his invocation of biology, I maintain, is largely strategic and rhetorical. In fact, he explains his decision to ground a new orientation (his poetic rationalization) “biologically” (Burke’s quotation marks) as a matter of strategic piety: this orientation “could enjoy an authority drawn from the scientific psychosis.” Buttressed with biology, his “framing of a corrective philosophy with poetic standards” is thus “within the scheme of ‘proprieties’ enjoying prestige in the rationalization which it would displace”—“the scientific psychosis” (92; 66). His biology is a strategic, stylized response to particulars of his situation (PLF 1).

establishing human commonality (as well as variation) within the body, as he had begun in Counter-Statement, in order to argue for a noncombative basis for human relations.⁴⁵

So Nietzsche's view of humans as essentially "fighters," as Burke understood it, was itself a choice.⁴⁶ In the "graded series" of which war and action (participation) are parts, Burke "chooses" to see humans as actors or participants, to see this potential as the "essence of [the graded] series" (PC1 301; PC3 235). And, as Bourne had similarly (in response to Dewey), he invokes "the Jamesian 'will to believe'" in emphasizing this view as a choice (301; 236)⁴⁷:

when considering war and participation, or war and action, as the two ends of a graded series, I have chosen action or participation as the word that shall designate the essence of this. Or we might choose such words as cooperation and communication, and note that even in war the cooperative or communicative element is largely present. Here, in all its nudity, is the Jamesian "will to believe." It amounts in the end to the assumption that good, rather than evil, lies at the roots of human purpose. And as for those who would suggest that his is merely a verbal solution, I would answer that by no other fiction can men truly

⁴⁵ He writes, "We wish simply to emphasize the fact that, insofar as the neurological structure remains a constant, there will be a corresponding constancy in the devices by which sociality is maintained. Changes in the environmental structure will, of course, call forth changes in the particularities of rationalization, quite as we must employ different devices for salvation if we fall into water than if we are sliding down a cliff" (212; 162).

⁴⁶ Debra Hawhee avoids some of Burke's qualifications and hesitations regarding Nietzsche. Burke notes, for instance, that we do not have to "say with the Nietzscheans ... that man is in essence a fighter, and that he has merely made himself miserable and bewildered by his attempts to erect rational structures which restrict his militaristic equipment." We could "say that man is essentially a participant, and that his military propensities are merely one aspect of his active and communicative needs" (PC1 300; PC3 234-35).

⁴⁷ This invocation of James's "will to believe" also provides an additional counterpoint to Nietzsche's "will to power" and combat in this section of Permanence and Change. But this choice to see (or this will to believe) the (human) "essence" as participant and cooperative is also marked as a fiction, which keeps Nietzsche in the fold.

cooperate in historic processes, hence the fiction itself is universally grounded.

(301-02; 235-36)⁴⁸

Burke's turn to biology as essence serves to support seeing humans fundamentally as participants, which Burke wants at the center of his fictive permanence and which justifies his emphasis on "cooperation" and purposeful change, including much that appears permanent according to the terms that orient people. Changing terms and consequent shifts in orientation may allow recognition of different potentialities--some then realized in consciously choosing different actions. As Burke refers to this ground as a "fiction," his perspective here is more poetic than rhetorical (rhetoric in the senses of persuasion and identification). That is, Burke emphasizes this ground as a creation in addition to a choice. As such, his philosophy of being is not an absolute. Biology, or metabiology, is "the most undeniable point of reference we could possibly have.... A point of view biologically rooted seems to be as near to 'rock bottom' as human thought could take us" (335; 261, my emphasis). It marks potentialities, which are mediated by social and linguistic patterning. Verbalizations (language), for Burke, thus can encourage or discourage particular outcomes.

Although he explicitly distinguishes his philosophy of being from a philosophy of becoming (again with Nietzsche in mind),⁴⁹ Burke emphasizes that this ontology is not

⁴⁸ With this choice to see humans as essentially good, Burke may seem to move toward Jamesian "meliorism" as he distances himself from Nietzschean combat, for this "goodness" needs to be encouraged rather than discouraged. His essentialism clearly recognizes the interference of socialization, the "second nature," within which he pursues linguistic materials for change. He moves away from the "dyslogistic" that he associates with Nietzsche and the impossible "neutral" of science (Dewey et al) to the "eulogistic." This, again, I read as strategic. His concern is to provide terms. Burke's choice here and his "philosophy of being" are perhaps best understood as his own "strategies for encompassing situations" toward transformation.

⁴⁹ Although she emphasizes Nietzsche's "philosophy of becoming" and its influence on Burke (despite Burke's explicit disavowal of this position [PC 348-50; 271]), Debra Hawhee recognizes a potential conflict, because of its stress on change, with Burke's ontological ambitions. As she puts it, to achieve the "new solutions" or orientation that he desires, Burke "must negotiate two conditions: one a being, a permanent state of possession, and one a becoming, an ever-changing emergence of force" (140). Timothy Crusius resolves this tension by qualifying Burke's ontology as "praxis being," or "being amid becoming" (Burke's "effort to retrieve a philosophy of Being

“surrender to historical textures” and that it “must not be taken as synonymous with a philosophy of passivity, or acquiescence. One may also ‘resign’ oneself to struggle” (349; 271). As a literary critic, Burke locates this struggle principally within language and communication. And verbalization—the creative and poetic—is active. His ontology, he underscores, is “activist” (349; 271). Ultimately, it is part of an orientation that he intends to enable social change. The very title Permanence and Change refers to a dialectic of the “fixed” dimension of the human and socio-historical variability. After defending the aesthetic and literary criticism in his earlier work of the 1930s (Counter-Statement and “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision”), Burke with Permanence and Change shows the importance of the practices of art and criticism to any political program—politics here understood as the struggle to shape social relations.

1.4 CHANGE AND SOCIAL OCCUPATION

Burke’s ontological orientation is not strictly biological. While Burke repeatedly describes his philosophy of being in reference to a biological “bedrock,” he makes clear that part of this being is social, noting that his ontology considers “the generic equipment of man as a social and

from Becoming itself) (Conversation 93, 101). As such, he writes, “Burke’s Being is quite foundationless, requiring no metaphysics and avoiding ontology in the traditional meaning of the word” (93). It “is not driven to deny the reality or significance of change” (101). Indeed, Crusius also finds Burke’s ontology to be strategic, which for him means rhetorical. He rightly sees Burke’s ontology as “affirming the reality and significance of historical textures” (109). Although Crusius attends to relevant sections in Permanence and Change, he generally situates this book within Burke’s entire opus. I, however, want to keep Permanence and Change within the 1930s and thereby see his ontology as part of a political orientation and strategic manual for particular struggles. Crusius, however, is mostly concerned with Burke’s placement within contemporary debates in philosophy and rhetoric and, seeing “vital opportunities,” he situates Burke within “the conversation going on now [mid-1990s] among hermeneuticists and critical theorists, not to poststructuralism or ... radical postmodernism” (229). The “conversation” trope, borrowed from Burke (itself a commonplace of Burke criticism), is part of Crusius’s own methodological framework. I will later try to qualify this trope in Burke through a different scheme in Permanence and Change. I should also mention that critics often use the “conversation” trope to position Burke as a pragmatist, and that Crusius describes Burke’s “early philosophy” (his work of the 1930s) as “rhetorical pragmatism,” by which he means “an anti- or non-epistemological position” where “truth is not correspondence or adequacy to the real” but “rather is ‘what works’” (88, 90). So his reading of Burke certainly resembles Gunn’s and Blakesley’s pragmatist placement at points.

biologic organism” (PC1 348; PC3 271). Permanence, then, also refers to social patterns that provide continuity and that appear solid and fixed: it also refers to social being. Particularities of social existence may vary but can be viewed as expressions of generic resources and impulses. Burke hereby justifies his approach to social forms, in all their variety, as fundamentally unified. So “any schema of the ‘good life,’” he writes, “tends to be anhistoric [sic] in quite the same way that an account of digestion or metabolism would be” (349; 271). Although such statements should still be seen as strategic or rhetorical, his example indicates his intent. “In subscribing to a philosophy of being,” he explains, “...one may hold that certain historically conditioned institutions interfere with the establishment of decent social or communicative relationships, and thereby affront the permanent biologic norms” (350; 271). The problem is interference. Expression of these norms—which, it is important to keep in mind, mark potentialities—is blocked via the institutionalized consequences of historical exigencies. As “conditioned” institutions become “natural,” Burke sees his own interpretive method and attention to language, or criticism, as well suited to locate and disrupt these obstructions. Permanence, in the end, refers to both the “biologic norms” (as “metabiology”) and to the naturalized habits of culture and institutions—that is, the seeming permanencies. Burke’s borrowing from Thorstein Veblen—trained incapacity—is his shorthand for the negative element in his implicit social theory: Training may impede, misdirect, and disable. And perspective by incongruity breaks habits of verbalization, freeing a point of view and new verbalizations, which for Burke is an impulse of the biologic norm and what he would refer to as humans’ “spontaneous genius” and poetry. As I’ve just described it, his project is a political one, which, I believe, consideration of two other key terms will make more clear.

Permanence and Change introduces several important terms that Burke would employ for many years, terms that he would rework and weight as he saw needed and as he began to think more systematically.⁵⁰ “Trained incapacity” and “perspective by incongruity” are two that persisted in his writings and that have been prominent in scholarly treatments of his work. Also prominent in Permanence and Change, the terms “occupational psychosis” and “poetry of action,” however, have not had as much attention in the Burke criticism. “Poetry of action” seems generally to be understood as a precursor to “symbolic action,” which would become the term for Burke and for scholars of his work, so it is not surprising that it hasn’t garnered much attention as “symbolic action” apparently supersedes it. Relative inattention to “occupational psychosis,” however, is not quite as easy to explain but may be a consequence of its conceptual similarity to “trained incapacity,” which may appear in the arrangement of this book to have priority over “occupational psychosis,” or perhaps simply may be understood as a more usable formulation of a similar idea.⁵¹ One might see “trained incapacity”—“that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses” (14;)—as simply the negative instance of “occupational psychosis,” which more generally describes mental orientations as effects of occupations. While Burke attributes the former term to Veblen, he credits “occupational psychosis” to Dewey. The exact terms, however, seemingly cannot be attributed to either Veblen or Dewey; the scholarship, in fact, has not been able to place either term in their respective work. Each term is Burke’s coinage and he employs them to his own purpose even if Veblen’s and Dewey’s work inspired them. As R. P. Blackmur notes in “A Critic’s Job of

⁵⁰ This tendency toward systematization becomes more fully realized with the arguably proto-structuralist A Grammar of Motives.

⁵¹ Burke says as much himself: “we consider Dewey’s and Veblen’s terms as interchangeable” (70). The “ambivalent nature” of their terms suggests, for Burke, their similarity, for each can refer to what is gained or what is missed, to capacity or incapacity (70).

Work,” Burke is a “master” at “re-defining the scope” of others’ writings to use them to their fullest (40). One begins to discern occupational psychosis and trained incapacity more clearly by viewing them in relation to each other and among Burke’s broader concerns in Permanence and Change and, more generally, within his writings of the mid-1930s.

It seems that Burke came across the idea that inspired “occupational psychosis” in Dewey’s essay “Interpretation of Savage Mind,” published in Psychological Review in 1902.⁵² Dewey here attempts to address an omission he finds in genetic psychology through consideration of “the mental structure of the savage” (“Savage Mind” 217). He presents Herbert Spencer as representative of the tendency to start with the “civilized mind” as the standard from which the “primitive mind” is seen only in terms of “lack,” its traits understood as “incapacities” (218).⁵³ Such definitions are “useless in suggesting, to say nothing of determining, progress, and are correspondingly infertile for genetic psychology, which is interested in becoming, growth, development” (218). Dewey thus calls for a “more positive” approach that explores mind as having “a pattern, a scheme of arrangement in its constituent elements” (219). He identifies “occupation” as the area of investigation, for “occupations determine the fundamental modes of activity, and hence control the formation and use of habits” (219 [my emphasis]). Furthermore,

⁵² This essay uses the word “psychosis” and discusses occupation but does not contain the formulation “occupational psychosis.” Although a few scholars have begun to attend to Burke’s relationship to Dewey, none has considered this idea within Dewey’s voluminous writings. I came across a reference to this essay as Burke’s likely source in a posting on a discussion list devoted to John Dewey. In Kenneth Burke in the 1930s Ann George and Jack Selzer have also cited this 1902 essay as the source of this term, which they learned via correspondence with Andrew Feffer, a pragmatism scholar (270, n. 6).

⁵³ In Permanence and Change Burke describes the main thrust of the article this way: “Dewey first proposed his term when objecting to the tendency among ethnologists to discuss savage thinking as a ‘failure’ to obey the thought-patterns of the West. Dewey suggested that the emphasis should be reversed: the investigator should consider these thought-patterns as positive instrumentalities developed to assist the savage in his tasks. Seen from this point of view, the Western man may as well be described as failing to think like the savage” (69-70; 49). Burke introduced this term in an essay he published in The Nation in 1933 (“The Nature of Art under Capitalism”), around the time that he started to write Permanence and Change. Burke here describes occupational psychosis as Dewey’s “thesis that a society’s patterns of thought are shaped by the patterns of livelihood, that ‘spiritual’ values get their authority because they reinforce the ways of thinking and feeling by which man equips himself to accomplish the tasks indigenous to his environment” (PLF 315).

“occupations determine the chief modes of satisfaction, the standards of success and failure. Hence they furnish the working classifications and definitions of value; they control the desire processes” (219-220). “So fundamental and pervasive is the group of occupational activities that it affords the scheme or pattern of the structural organization of mental traits. Occupations integrate special elements into a functioning whole” (220). Of great interest to Burke was Dewey’s comment that the mental pattern, or psychosis, developed according to a particular occupation. Dewey described the occupation of hunting as having “a controlling influence” on other social activities and this occupation would then provide interpretive guidance in approaching social forms: “if it can be shown that art, war, marriage, etc., tend to be psychologically assimilated to the pattern developed in the hunting vocation, we shall thereby get an important method for the interpretation of social institutions and cultural resources—a psychological method for sociology” (220).⁵⁴ In the context of the 1930s, Burke applied this idea of controlling occupation to technological modernity, and saw the diversity of occupations (division of labor) unified by one dominant perspective, which he called the “technological psychosis” (PC1 63; PC3 44).

With Dewey’s essay, Burke found a way to approach psychology as an effect of interaction with environment through social roles or occupations—which his term “occupational

⁵⁴ Writing his doctoral dissertation at the end of the 1930s (published posthumously in 1964), C. Wright Mills gave considerable attention to this social psychology in Dewey’s work and saw it appearing most firmly in his educational writings. Some passages in his account could well have described some of Burke’s concerns in the 1930s. Dewey, Mills writes, will keep “man’s biologized nature plastic enough to make social reforms possible,” while seeing it “unitary enough to be the seat and anchor and implicit standard of certain values. He will deny fixed ‘instincts,’ but keep modifiable ‘impulses,’ and thus steer clear of determinism on either side and allow for freedom. In the last analysis, human nature will be good if it is left alone, but to be good it must have a good society. A good society is one ‘congenial’ to the ‘potentiality,’ ‘growth,’ the working of human nature” (449-50). Although this may be part of Burke’s own objective in Permanence and Change, Mills indicates where one important difference lies: applied “intelligence” can safeguard “freedom” for Dewey, so social problems become an “engineering issue,” leading Dewey to an “engineering standpoint” (451). Mills relies heavily on Dewey’s Human Nature and Conduct in making his argument. As far as I know, there are no references to this book in any of Burke’s writings, but Burke would have seen in the books he reviewed and in Experience and Nature related statements and something close to what Mills quotes.

psychosis” would succinctly suggest. Primary human activities bring about mental structures, and Burke more fully articulates this as an occupation of mind. He would also, drawing on Pavlov’s reflex response (“conditional reflex”), characterize humans as “possessed” while being “inventors of new solutions” (343; 267). So here we find an extension of biological impulse (invention) through psychological conditioning (possession and occupation). As he saw in Dewey’s essay, this possession/occupation (Dewey expressed this as “determining” and having “controlling influence”) is not simply constraint but also “positive” and enabling. While Burke attributes the term to Dewey, he also, not surprisingly, sees this idea relative to Marxian (historical) materialism. “Roughly, the term,” Burke says, “corresponds to the Marxian doctrine that a society’s environment in the historical sense is synonymous with the society’s methods of production” (56; 38). From Dewey’s essay he develops a materialist framework in relation to psychology (with psychosis as mental state or “a pronounced character of the mind” [59; 40]), while seeking to avoid economic determinism as well as behaviorism: he sees constraints coincide with “positive” capability (the conditioning equips as well as limits).⁵⁵ Burke finds a way to materialize social forms without abandoning psychology. Equipped with Dewey’s social psychology and attentive to the Marxian stress on methods of production relative to social organization and culture, Burke turns to the exigencies of his own moment and identified what he saw as the dominant mindset that “carried over into other aspects of ... culture” (“Savage

⁵⁵ As Burke sees social conditioning and habits as embodied (occupation, possession), his implicit social theory bears some resemblance to what Pierre Bourdieu arrived at nearly forty years later: habitus as “embodied dispositions.” Dana Anderson connects Bourdieu’s habitus to Burke’s understanding of attitude as incipient action, most prominently appearing in A Grammar of Motives but also in Permanence and Change. He argues that attitude might be complemented with a “bodily incipience”—“an embodied potential for ‘future action’” (270). To do so, he highlights Burke’s grounding of motives in the body throughout his work. Although Anderson does not mention Permanence and Change, he might have, for Burke is here already suggesting a kind of bodily disposition with occupational psychosis. Burke, like Bourdieu with habitus, moves past the mind/body dualism (Burke, in fact, uses the term “mind-body” [293; 229]), describing his method as a “dialectical biologism” and moving “towards a somewhat Spinozistic conception of substance as two integrally interlocking modes” (293; 229). See also Debra Hawhee’s recent work on Burke and the body: she refers to Permanence and Change as Burke’s animal or “jungle book” (“Burke’s Jungle Book” and Moving Bodies).

Mind” 56). He names this mindset the “technological psychosis”: “It is the one psychosis which is ... contributing a new principle to the world. It is the center of our glories and distress” (PC1 63; PC2 44). Following “magic” and “religion” in Burke’s scheme, the third “great rationalization” is “science, the attempt to control for our purposes the forces of technology, or machinery” (64; 44). It is the “distress” that follows from the “technological psychosis” of science that concerns Burke. “Its genius has been called experimentalism, the laboratory method, creative skepticism, organized doubt. It has an occupational morality all its own, though at present,” Burke writes, “this is more forcefully revealed by its contribution to the break-down or cancellation of traditional moralities than by positive psychotic emphases” (64; 44). Burke in the end turns the term that he has derived from Dewey’s 1902 essay toward criticism of Dewey’s faith in intelligence and “experimentalism.” Burke sees Dewey’s philosophy in the end as an instance of the technological psychosis for it emphasizes “use value” and, as part of the scientific rationalization, it leaves too much out of account.

In addition to possession and occupation, he uses the word “interest” in this context, a word that he no doubt intended in the mid-1930s to refer to the interests of business and the economic system (as well as to their palpable failure and collapse) while also noting the problem of appeal.⁵⁶ His example returns his use of occupational psychosis to Marx and a context of

⁵⁶ Interest also refers to personal motives and pieties and relates to matters of rhetorical appeal. Some details of Burke’s exposition of “occupational psychosis” in Permanence and Change are part of a critical approach to overcoming difficulties in social communication (which for Burke is equivalent to participation). Burke had intended to title this book “Treatise on Communication,” but at his editor’s request changed it to something that would, it was thought, be more inviting, a decision that illustrates the matter of “interest,” in a double sense, with which Burke begins his section on “occupational psychosis”: “we interest a man,” Burke writes, “by dealing with his interests.” Burke then tellingly offers an example describing a type within commerce: “A salesman, sick of the day’s work and determined to think no more of it until tomorrow, will go to a motion picture and watch in delight the building-up of some character with precisely the brass, the ingenuity, and the social life which are the ideals of his calling. In this sense, he is not getting away from the matters of salesmanship at all, for he is watching the kind of character that exemplifies the ideals of his trade: the ideal fears, ideal hopes, and ideal methods that equip one for the business of selling” (55-56; 37-38). Interest thus lies in part in what something provides. The film affirms the salesman’s mental state and enhances his acumen to perform according to the occupational demands: it is in his

political organizing, a matter that he would directly take on in his address to the first American Writers' Congress. "Class morality," he writes, "may rise spontaneously, insofar as there are classes; but class consciousness must be taught by accurate appeal to the class morality" (PC1 65; PC3 45). Burke's references to piety, proprieties, style, and occupation (in the sense of interest) all concern, to some extent, social cohesion and, as in this example, bases for political solidarity. Burke calls Marx's class consciousness "a social therapeutic." He describes it this way, he says, "because it is reclassification-consciousness. It is a new perspective that realigns something so profoundly ethical as our categories of allegiance." And, as Burke generally conceived reorientations, this "new classification ... has implicit in it a new set of ideas as to what action is, and in these ideas are implicit new criteria for deciding what means-selection would be adequate" (149; 113 [Burke's emphasis]). Burke conceived his own work as therapeutic for the social body and as serving greater social cohesion and participation.⁵⁷ With his comments on Marx here, Burke describes a shift in orientation or attitude, what he, in Permanence and Change, begins to think of as incipient action. This last word, action, I want to place more closely with Marx and relative to Burke's work in the 1930s as a political project before I turn to the other neglected term of Permanence and Change, "poetry of action," around which the entire book builds and moves.

interest to watch for it "equips." The term "occupational psychosis" also encompasses "this secondary aspect of interest" (56; 38).

⁵⁷ The social body metaphor is implied in Burke's earlier use the word "auscultation," a diagnostic listening to bodily organs. Burke the critic probably saw his own work as that of physician and therapist for the social body.

1.5 ACTION; OR, THE POWER OF “ACTING IN CONCERT”

In his address to the second American Writer’s Congress (1937), “The Relation between Literature and Science,” Burke rehearses his view of science as leaving too much out of account. He comments in particular, as he often would, on naturalistic reductions of the human to “purely biological categories of human motivation: hunger, war, fear, and ‘psychological types.’” He notes with concern the disappearance of the classical conception of “man in society” and Aristotle’s zoon politikon from Augustine to naturalistic renderings. Marx, he explains, corrected the “naturalistic oversimplification. He restored the Aristotelian notion of man in society.... He considers men as members of politico-economic corporations (“Relation”161). Marx’s emphasis on humans as political beings, for Burke, “restore[s] a concern for the factor of origination, a concern for the ways in which man is an ‘unmoved mover,’ not merely the resultant of forces, but himself a force—in short a poet, a creator” (“Relation” 164-65). Poetry, as Burke uses this word in Permanence and Change, should be understood in this context: humans as fundamentally poets and political actors.⁵⁸ “Action” thus describes the poetic as a portion of political being. To create is to begin, and as this occurs within social contexts it is inherently political. He here distinguishes humans as political beings and as a politico-poetic force from naturalistic and scientific reductions of the human, and elsewhere he establishes action not just as a human commonality but also as a collective endeavor to change, as at the start of Attitudes toward History: “Action by all means. But in a complex world,” Burke writes, “there are many kinds of action. Action requires programs—programs require vocabulary. To

⁵⁸ In Permanence and Change, he writes that “all men are poets, even in those kinds of action generally considered distinct from poetry.” And linked to biological “norms,” this poetry/action is “our ultimate motive, the situation common to all, the creative, assertive, synthetic act” (332; [Burke’s emphasis]).

act wisely, in concert, we must use many words” (I: 2; 4).⁵⁹ Many words, indeed. Permanence and Change both selects vocabulary and comments on the process and implications of vocabulary selection, programmatically, and Attitudes toward History extends this. Burke’s statement here, in fact, both explains his attention to language and succinctly shows his primary intent in his work of the 1930s: to support acting wisely in concert.⁶⁰

In the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt developed a political theory in response to the horrors of totalitarian regimes and modern administered societies (the “society of jobholders” as she called it [HC 322]). In the late 1940s and in the 1950s Arendt conceives politics, or the political, as a realm of human activity entirely dependent upon the presence of others. “Politics,” she says, “is based on the fact of human plurality.” It “deals with the coexistence and association of different men. Men organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities found within or abstracted from an absolute chaos of differences” (“Introduction” 93). Burke’s metabiology is his attempt to locate essential commonality, which I am suggesting is linked to “acting wisely in concert” and matters of political organization. Both Burke and Arendt were attempting to humanize such organization, and for each (Burke as cultural critic and Arendt as political philosopher) this meant an examination of terms and concepts. Each made the term “action” an important part of their work as they contended with the horrors of war, social crises, and the increasing application and domination of scientific technique. Although not equating their situations or perspectives, of course, I do see Burke in the 1930s (remembering the First World War and observing, at a distance, the start of the Second) and Arendt in the 1950s (having experienced the rise of

⁵⁹ William James is the immediate occasion for these comments on “action” at the beginning of Attitudes toward History, comments that then lead to a general discussion of vocabulary selection and ensuing attitudes.

⁶⁰ In advocating use of the word “people” in place of “worker,” Burke’s address to the first American Writers’ Congress in 1935 is one expression of this motive.

German fascism, living in exile, and reflecting on the atrocities of the Second) as having some similar concerns relating to their use of “action.” Arendt’s “action,” vital to her political philosophy in the 1950s, helps clarify the sort of action that Burke conceives in the 1930s.

As he had for Burke, John Dewey represents for Arendt the problem of the dominance of scientific technique, or what she calls “scientific planning.” In 1946, Arendt reviewed Problems of Men, a collection of Dewey’s essays. She writes here that Dewey, despite his apparent intention “to humanize science” as he applies “scientific concepts of truth” to the social sciences, renders humans passive objects.

[S]cience, not man, takes the lead in [his] argument, with the result that man is degraded into a puppet which through education ... has to be fitted into a scientifically controlled world. As though it was not man who invented science but some superhuman ghost who prepared this world of ours and only, through some incomprehensible obliviousness, forgot to change man into a scientific animal; as though man’s problem were to conform and to adjust himself to some abstract niceties. (“Ivory Tower” 195-96)

The danger of human degradation also motivates Burke’s distance from behaviorism and other scientist reductions of the human—which, again, he associates with Dewey.⁶¹ Both Arendt and Burke, place action, conceptually, in opposition to these reductions. Their use of “action,” in fact, distances them from Dewey’s action in his pragmatist philosophy as they distinguish it as noninstrumental.

⁶¹ As for Burke, behaviorism, which Arendt sees as an extension of the Darwinian turn toward viewing the human as animal, is a symptom of the reduction of humans to biological process. “The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism,” she notes ominously, “is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualizations of certain obvious trends in modern society” (HC 322 [my emphasis]).

The philosophical problems that Arendt and Dewey saw within Modernity took each to antiquity, to Plato and Aristotle. While Dewey focused on the continued elevation of Plato and Aristotle's contemplation (*theoria*) as the "pure" knowledge of the fixed within Modern philosophy and its applications, Arendt saw a different problem in antiquity. Dewey was not wrong to fault Platonic idealism, Arendt would surely say, but his move to see action and consequences as the site of inquiry resulted in an instrumentalism that failed to recognize the actual "promise" of action. She returned to the pre-Socratics to find action as the highest form of human activity precisely because it is noninstrumental (HC 292, 302-304). Action is distinct from a calculus of means and ends. By the 1950s, Arendt saw the tendency toward instrumentalist science as marking the abrogation of politics,⁶² which for her was the realm of human freedom and possibility precisely because it was not an instrumentalist activity. The political was the domain of human action proper, of a noninstrumental *praxis* whose effects and meaning could not be anticipated; action is unpredictable and therefore resists scientization.⁶³ It is the activity that forms beginnings, and is closely connected to what Arendt refers to as the

⁶² "The instrumentalization of action," she writes, is "the degradation of politics" (HC 230).

⁶³ Largely taking Arendt's lead, Nicholas Lobkowitz in his conceptual history of theory and *praxis* puts particular emphasis on "the enormous reduction of action to *poiesis*" (i. e., making, fabrication) in Modernity (25). "[T]he modern error," Lobkowitz explains, "arises from the fact that the difference between doing [*praxis*] and making [*poiesis*] is forgotten and all human action is gradually conceived according to the model of production" (24). Lobkowitz's concern is the presumption in this model that all action can be scientized, and that neither *theoria* or *praxis* could then be "intrinsically meaningful," as the Greeks thought, because "a *bios theoretikos* that might arrive only at insights which are to be translated into directions for action cannot be an end in itself. ...likewise, a *praxis* that can be totally scientized cannot be a culmination of human life, that is, the goal to which all others are subordinate" (27). I am suggesting, once again, that Burke's difficulty with Dewey hinges on seeing Dewey's instrumentalism as a scientizing reduction of the human. In its effort to avoid metaphysical grounds, Dewey's instrumentalist method resembles the "scientist" character to which Burke strove to find an alternative, one that would see humans as purposeful actors, as beings that acted with intent (however imperfectly)—not, that is, as the machines of behaviorism—but also one that would not reduce to the "rationality" of Dewey's intelligence. His ontology, conceived as primarily strategic and a fiction, allows preference or choice and also variability, for it is mediated by culture. Or, to put it another way, Dewey, fixated on metaphysical errors, overcompensates and doesn't take the poetic seriously enough. The poetic is invention but it is also unpredictable. Burke begins to make this point in Counter-Statement in defending art against critics that assessed its worth according to standards of "usefulness." Balking at propositions that sought to measure the effectiveness of art, Burke writes, "No categorical distinction can possibly be made between 'effective' and 'ineffective' art, for the influence that any given work of art might have was entirely 'unpredictable'" (CS 90, 91).

human condition of natality—“the capacity of beginning something anew” (HC 9). With this capacity, humans act, “interrupt[ing] the inexorable automatic course of daily life” (HC 246).⁶⁴ Her motive is clear: to arrest the institutionalization of such automatic functioning, for the transformation of politics according to a calculus of means and ends leads to human degradation and atrocity. “We are perhaps,” she writes, “the first generation which has become fully aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justifiable to pursue something defined as an end” (HC 229). Justification of means according to efficiency is Bourne’s charge against Dewey and the pragmatic functionaries of the First World War, a charge that Burke continues in the 1930s.

Arendt conceives action as potentiality and power and highlights the conditions necessary to realize this power, to enable humans as active subjects. Action, distinct from other human activities, occurs only in the “presence of others” (HC 23): “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter,” she writes, “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. ...[T]his plurality is specifically the condition ... of all political life” (HC 7).⁶⁵ Power,

⁶⁴ After Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Arendt describes this capacity to act and begin anew with urgency: “The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (HC 246). Passages like this in The Human Condition recall (for me, in part) Walter Benjamin’s melancholy angel, yet Arendt generally responds to modern despair in foregrounding the potential and power of human action.

⁶⁵ Arendt’s action is one activity in a tripartite scheme, the vita activa. In addition to action, this model comprises labor, the activity concerned with basic physical sustenance, and work, which “provides an artificial world of things” (and which she also calls making and production) (HC 7). Arendt essentially brackets contemplation (theoria: bios theoretikos and then becoming the Latin vita contemplativa) by conceiving this as distinct from the vita activa (HC 14). (Lobkowitz, however, retains theoria with praxis and poiesis but excludes labor. See also Giorgio Agamben’s attempt to restore a classical sense of poiesis [art as “pro-duction”] contra praxis and labor, including his reading of Arendt [68-70].) Arendt sees labor as significantly eclipsing work in Modernity whereby making or production is reduced to mere animal laboring and “natural process.” (See pp. 320-22 of the concluding section, “The Victory of Animal Laborans,” in The Human Condition.)

then, is a “potentiality in being together,” and “power, like action, is boundless; it has no physical limitation in human nature, in the bodily existence of man, like strength. Its only limitation is the existence of other people” (HC 201). Furthermore, “power [is] generated when people gather together and ‘act in concert,’ [and] disappears the moment they depart. The force that keeps them together ... is the force of mutual promise or contract” (HC 244-45).⁶⁶

Burke also highlights “being together” as a condition for action when he conceives the poetic as participant. The creative act is also a socio-political act in that Burke sees language as always already social and, more importantly, understands the statements of individuals as inevitably public and subject to revision, an inherently social process. The poetic, as the expression of humans’ “spontaneous genius,” is thus simultaneously individual (as well as singular) and social. Burke ultimately understands the poetic as inseparable from “being together” and social exchange.⁶⁷

1.6 RECALCITRANCE AND PIETY

Burke devotes the third and final section of Permanence and Change to a defense of the poetic as fundamentally and necessarily ethical and very much part of his desired social transformation. He does not present the poetic metaphor as strictly opposed to the scientific; rather, it is a necessary supplement as it exceeds the domain of the scientific, which, in its distance from the human and ethical, is of limited scope:

⁶⁶ Parts of The Human Condition bear resemblance to Jurgen Habermas’s public sphere (specifically, Arendt’s idealized space of the polis), which also might be compared to Burke’s “parlor conversation” (I get to this below). Like Dewey, Arendt places some importance on democratic organization (legal and institutional framework), on a republican social contract, as a precondition for politics.

⁶⁷ See “Kenneth Burke’s Implicit Theory of Power” for another attempt to connect Burke’s and Arendt’s understandings of power as cooperative, as “power with” (Cheney 139-140).

The exclusively mechanistic metaphor is objectionable not because it is directly counter to the poetic, but because it leaves too much out of account. It shows us merely those aspects of experience which can be phrased within its terms. It is truncated, as the poetic metaphor, buttressed by the concept of recalcitrance, is not. (PC1 335-36; PC3 261)

Recalcitrance refers to the stubborn “facts” of the material world, as Dewey would emphasize, and to the revisionary process of socialization—of which the former is part as such “facts” are socially produced. Recalcitrance is integral to the human condition of being together. Human statements are “necessarily socialized by revision” (341; 265), a process that Burke underscores: “One strategically alters his statements, insofar as he is able, to shape them in conformity with the use and wont of his group. At this stage his message is taken up and reworked in many ways by many different kinds of men”; people shape it according to “the recalcitrance of social relationships, political exigencies, economic procedures, etc., transferring it from the private architecture of a poem into the public architecture of a social order” (332; 258). This collective revision leads to social products that become unrecognizable to individuals as human and ethical, for “private poems” in becoming socialized and public appear as an autonomous part of the social order. Human “poetry” or cultural inventions that are no longer seen as such are an agency of permanence in Burke’s scheme, for they take on the appearance of “facticity” and become “firmly established in our habits of thought” and institutions (332; 258). Burke first shows how, through language, points of view become firmly established and maintained, how “permanence” occurs. An ascendant orientation or point of view, which in his moment he names “technological psychosis” and “scientific rationalization,” “finds embodiment in our institutions and our ways of living” (331; 258). His point, once again, is to present how such “permanence”

is itself human creation and therefore not fixed, to show that specifics of an orientation—terms and concepts—although themselves recalcitrant, need not persist.

However, elements of this permanence must be respected to some extent—the conformity that he mentions—in order to be challenged. This “respect” Burke, once again, also refers to as “piety,” “the sense of what properly goes with what” (100; 74).⁶⁸ The possibility of change requires piety in order for any impiety—the new meaning and questioning of or divergence from the old—to take hold or even be considered. He thus encourages pious impiety. As I mentioned earlier, Burke worried that the Nietzschean “malcontent” could be too impious or antagonistic, too destructive of integrational elements, too verbally isolated from the social texture. This excessive impiety presents an obstacle to political solidarity, which was ultimately Burke’s concern in these years.⁶⁹ Dewey, too, presents a similar problem in that he presumes to banish, according to Burke, moral (ethical, poetic) traces from his pragmatic, scientific method. Both Nietzsche and Dewey, however, find that they cannot not be poets and end up “singing” anyway, or, more specifically in the case of Dewey, cannot adopt the “neutral” discourse of science without surreptitiously bringing ethics and metaphysics in the back door. Burke later refers to this inevitability as a consequence of the “limitations of debunking”: one can deflate only so much, and “humanitarianism,” the ethical, inevitably is “an integral aspect of the debunking

⁶⁸ Burke defines style identically. If one shapes one’s statements (responses) with style, one is selecting terms that go together according to specifics of a situation (recalcitrance). One thereby acts, to some extent, piously. What can go with what is open to selection and judgment (“sense”).

⁶⁹ In questioning Nietzsche’s pronounced antagonism, Burke continues a basic strategic position that goes back to at least his January 1931 essay “Boring from Within.” In this essay, Burke—contra Edmund Wilson’s call for an unapologetically Communist campaign—argues that any political program must start from the accepted values of the American situation, must stay within “our flags,” to “attack capitalism by the ideals of capitalism itself” (328, 326). Appeal to selected given flags or pieties is an expedient to combat other loyalties or flags, Burke maintains. He also invokes here the flaglessness of the human body, already turning to a biological absolute: “If the future is to be made livable, it will be made livable by our questioning everything but the certainties of the body itself, the dogmas of animal functioning” (329).

strategy” (PLF 183).⁷⁰ Burke emphasizes the importance of piety in negotiating social recalcitrance. Such negotiation is, then, a matter of style.

1.7 POETIC ACTION AND SYMBOLIC ACTION

Burke intends to provide resources for people’s greater awareness of the “civic process” and for directing their own participation in it, individually and collectively (PC1 341; PC3 266). Implicit is the assumption that such awareness allows greater control and effectiveness in using language.

⁷¹ “Poetry”—Burke’s shorthand, or figure, for the human, ethical, and creative—is thus his principal object of study. In the role of critic he alerts his audience to seeing institutional arrangements as produced by humans, and therefore not permanent, and to seeing the poetic as part of the means to change the given order. The title of the final section of Permanence and Change, “The Poetry of Action,” might be read with emphasis on the first term, “poetry,” thereby highlighting the ethical and creative. But it might also be read with weight on “action,” suggesting a doing with purpose. Yet more importantly, “poetry” becomes nearly synonymous with “action”: poetry is action. “[A]ll men are poets, even in those kinds of action generally

⁷⁰ Burke writes that “unless the [debunker] is totally antisocial, humanitarian elements must be engrafted upon modes of thinking that attribute human actions to motives low in the scale of values.” A “humanitarian afterthought,” a “corrective,” is added onto bleak assessments. He sees this unacknowledged humanitarian afterthought as pragmatism’s shortcoming, in James and then in Dewey: “James, as a humanitarian pragmatist, seemed to be saying in effect, ‘Truth is as truth does. But here’s to hoping that you’ll only ask it to do nice things’” (PLF 183). And “Dewey’s instrumentalism brings out James’ problem even more clearly, in so far as instrumentalism becomes the philosophy of technology (a philosophy that tends to confront the rigidified routines of technology while interpreting them mainly in terms of liquidity)” (PLF 183-84). Dewey, Burke maintains, rightly sees technology as a power but doesn’t fully appreciate that it is “ambivalent, capable of good uses or bad; and Dewey’s job was the ‘humanitarian’ task of saying ‘Power is the test of truth,’ and then furtively annexing, ‘But let us mean good power’” (PLF 184).

⁷¹ The resources of criticism, the equipment for judgment that may bring about different ways of seeing, Burke understands, “were themselves shaped by” the same point of view as the objects they examine (PC1 332; PC3 258). So elements of that point of view are necessarily part of any criticism, which he points out to inform more effective criticism of criticism by recognizing its “interests” and “occupations.”

considered distinct from poetry,” Burke explains, naming the “ultimate motive, the situation common to all, the creative, assertive, synthetic act” (332; 259 [Burke’s emphasis]). This “ultimate motive,” humans by definition understood as poets and critics, Burke grounds in the biological, his other “permanence.” The poetic thereby refers to “the spontaneous genius” of humans (92; 66). And to create is to act both within and outside existing proprieties or pieties—that is, it is to begin anew while never fully escaping the constraints of a given situation. By aligning poetry and action, Burke is doing much more than suggesting the practical function of language and art (although he does this, too); he sees humans creating language with intention, and such creative acts depart from the given. They initiate change. Action as poetry also argues that action (human doings) surprises as it creates. Despite intentions, both its initiation and its reach cannot be fully anticipated or controlled—marking his distance from Dewey’s scientism and “engineering standpoint” (Mills 451).

Once Burke introduces his term “symbolic action” in the title essay of The Philosophy of Literary Form, the creative and ethical emphasis of “poetry of action” as part of a general program for social change is no longer prominent. “Symbolic action” coincides with Burke’s shift in focus to conceiving linguistic acts for the purpose of literary analysis. This is not to say that Burke becomes entirely inattentive to the creative element of linguistic acts as part of larger social contexts. But his purview is drawn closer to the perspective of individuals using symbols for particular purposes in the production of literary texts as he developed a mediatory principle between cultural objects and their context. Burke insists on understanding “every document bequeathed us by history . . . as a strategy for encompassing a situation,” yet the situation in “The Philosophy of Literary Form” is restricted to the individual, as in his analysis of Coleridge’s

“The Eolian Harp” (PLF 109).⁷² Largely absent here is Burke’s earlier concern with poetic action as negotiated in association, in being together, yet Burke does not simply shift to a reductive formalism. The context of this essay and of the publication of The Philosophy of Literary Form suggests that Burke continued to negotiate the conventional opposition of historical criticism and formalism, but now to a different audience.⁷³ A “small excerpt” of “The Philosophy of Literary Form” (PLF xxiii) and three of the “longer articles” collected in the book were initially published in The Southern Review, a journal that became a principal home to literary “close reading” and the emergent New Criticism. Burke’s increased association with those close to The Southern Review and to the Louisiana State University Press, which published The Philosophy of Literary Form in 1941, accounts in part for his turn “to a theoretical and practical criticism that involved Coleridge and close reading.” Many of Burke’s essays in the late 1930s “spoke directly to” Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom (George and Selzer Kenneth Burke 45).⁷⁴

⁷² In this essay, Burke forecloses consideration of the larger historical context. Situation, for Burke, “is but another name for motives,” and motives become a matter pertaining to the individual when Burke divides “motivation” in Coleridge’s work into “the aesthetic problem, the marital problem, the political problem, the drug problem, the metaphysical problem” (PLF 93). Although the categories may suggest contexts beyond individual experience, each of these motivational problems turns out to be entirely personalized. That is, the political problem does not refer to specifics of the historical context in which Coleridge wrote “The Eolian Harp” but rather to his utopian “Pantisocracy” project, which Burke connects to the marriage and aesthetic problems. He conceives Coleridge’s “Pantisocracy” plans, then, as the starting point; that is, Coleridge had a certain political problem in mind that became entangled with his decision to marry and later aesthetic concerns, Burke’s point being to show “how various ingredients of motivation interweave” within the text (96). What chiefly concerns Burke in regard to Coleridge, as throughout this entire essay, is the interrelationship of such symbolic actions at the level of form. In this exposition there is no motive beyond the individual writer; motive is bound up with individual perspective, whether or not the individual undertakes these actions consciously.

⁷³ Burke’s “program, as a literary critic,” he explains in Attitudes toward History, “is to integrate technical criticism with social criticism (propaganda, the didactic)” (II: 234; 331). The main essays of The Philosophy of Literary Form are heavier on technical criticism than social criticism, especially compared with the companion 1930s books, but Burke’s effort to integrate these is still visible even if his emphasis has shifted.

⁷⁴ Led by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks and first published in 1935, The Southern Review “for the first years,” Ann George and Jack Selzer note, “was hardly limited to criticism, poetry, and fiction, but included broad-ranging social criticism by people such as Norman Thomas (on the New Deal), John Dewey (on William James), and Sidney Hook (on Trotsky)” (44). Burke’s contributions reflect such diversity, for although they clearly make

Nonetheless, the social recalcitrance and being together of Permanence and Change remain visible in “The Philosophy of Literary Form,” specifically with Burke’s introduction of what would become his best known figure, the “unending conversation.” Critics often quote the “conversation” passage of this essay for its appealing and undogmatic perspective on human affairs and culture as a large, and more or less friendly (despite disagreements), grand parlor discussion in which individual actors functionally participate without being fully aware of the history of the discussion and its terms. Burke directly appeals to his reader:

Imagine that you are in a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart.

And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress” (PLF 110-11)

appeals to practitioners of literary “close reading,” gestures toward social and historical context are always present. The preface to the first edition makes clear his intent to balance these critical approaches while anticipating likely objections from particular quarters, as in the following statement: “I shall be happy if the reader can say of this book that, while always considering words as acts upon a scene, it avoids the excess of environmentalist schools which are usually so eager to trace the relationships between act and scene that they neglect to trace the structure of the act itself” (PLF xvii). Tangentially a review of Permanence and Change in The Southern Review, Allen Tate’s commentary on Burke’s first contribution to The Southern Review in 1936, “Symbolic War” (a review of Granville Hicks’s Proletarian Literature in the United States), indicates, nonetheless, Burke’s distance from the general tenor of the journal. Tate, a principal contributor to the journal, refers to Burke as a “Communist” and “extreme left-wing” critic and chides him for being too sympathetic to propagandist writers, perhaps failing to appreciate fully what Burke means by “propaganda” (64, 62). Tate’s criticism may well have been in mind as Burke wrote this preface and the title essay.

Burke notes in the subsequent paragraph that the terms of this conversation “are grounded in what Malinowski would call ‘contexts of situation.’”⁷⁵ And very important among these ‘contexts of situation,’” Burke adds, “are the kind of factors considered by Bentham, Marx, and Veblen, the material interests (of private or class structure) that you symbolically defend or symbolically appropriate or symbolically align yourself with in the course of making your own assertions” (111-12). Ever sensitive to avoid models of determinism, Burke clarifies that these “interests do not ‘cause’ your discussion.... But they greatly affect the idiom in which you speak, and so the idiom by which you think” (112). Burke’s (Marxian) materialism thus persists from Permanence and Change and other 1930s writings. The conversation metaphor itself is an extension of Burke’s “recalcitrance” and “socialization by revision.” “Participation” in the conversation is seemingly without direction and proceeds according to previous statements and responses and to the established terms. Permanence and Change seeks to emphasize specifics of this idiom with purpose. Even so, the agents of conversation remain unclear. The agents are “individuals” according to the metaphor, but how they might exceed the individual subject, as institutions or collectivities, Burke does not explore directly. Burke’s conversation is an allegory of the workings of culture but participation may seem to be left to individual purpose (the “you”) as he describes it in “The Philosophy of Literary Form,” even if the text implies the recalcitrance of social interaction.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski also appears to have been Burke’s source for the term “symbolic action.” An idea of symbolic action appears in Malinowski’s “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,”⁷⁵ published as a supplement to C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards’s The Meaning of Meaning in 1923. In this essay, Malinowski describes language as a “mode of action” and introduces the term “context of situation” (Malinowski 296). See Greig Henderson’s discussion of Burke’s engagement with Malinowski (102-104); George and Selzer note Malinowski as the source also (Kenneth Burke 272, n. 17).

⁷⁶ This metaphor also does not account for exclusions. It is an idealized conversation that presumes participation and inclusiveness.

“Poetry of action,” in contrast to the “symbolic action” of “The Philosophy of Literary Form,” more clearly links to Burke’s political commitments in these years as it is part of an exhortation and stylistic guide to readers to be more conscious and effective participants together—a guide that supports the realization of action as power). It refers to the creative and ethical practices that people routinely undertake and to language as a medium of action and change. Likewise, the parlor conversation of this essay also loses some of its earlier impulse. Burke first introduced this “conversation” metaphor in “Auscultation, Creation, Revision”—this title’s terms referring to the revisionary process that he more firmly characterizes as social with the term “recalcitrance” in Permanence and Change.⁷⁷ Revision in each text is a term for change, and Burke highlights this more clearly in the version of the conversation metaphor in “Auscultation” through the figure of the “innovator.” As in “The Philosophy of Literary Form,” Burke presents the conversation as agonistic but also supportive in maintaining certain lines of discussion and terms. Yet in “Auscultation” he stresses the tenuousness of terms.

The “innovator” is a man who, after a certain trend of conversation has been going on for some time, goes back a few sentences to some point that was made and partially neglected—and from this partially neglected point he develops a line of thought somewhat different from that which the subsequent course of discussion had taken. The “coordinates of thinking” may thus seem to be all in the air at once, supporting one another but unsupported, [...] always on the point of collapse.”

⁷⁷ In 1939 Burke reviewed The Works of George Herbert Mead, a collection of Mead’s posthumous publications of the 1930s. George and Selzer note that Burke discovered, with some frustration in 1938, that Mead had already effectively used a figure of “unending conversation” (Kenneth Burke 241, n.57; 271-72, n. 11). Burke discusses Mead’s conversation metaphor in his review (PLF 380-81) and cites Mead after he presents the “unending conversation” metaphor in “The Philosophy of Literary Form” (PLF 111). (George and Selzer are also aware that Burke introduced this idea in “Auscultation” [Kenneth Burke 241, n.57]). Burke later gives attention to Mead in A Grammar of Motives on attitudes as incipient acts (236-38).

And a vocabulary, he adds, “seems to provide the most ‘illumination’ at moments when it gives us glimpses of possible realms beyond it” (ACR 102).⁷⁸ Burke intends the critical program of Permanence and Change to show the tenuousness of terms and to offer a glimpse of another realm, other possibilities, beyond the terms of the dominant conversation.⁷⁹ As critic, Burke is this “innovator,” mining past conversations for terms and concepts to assemble and revise toward encouraging new orientations, toward shifting the “coordinates of thinking.” Perspective by incongruity is thus a key practice of innovation. And Permanence and Change itself amounts to Burke’s own “poetry of action”: inventive, ethical, and purposeful of social transformation yet not predetermining specifics of ends.

Permanence and Change, then, is a kind of political style manual. Burke intends his analysis of terms and cultural processes to assist in shaping “new pieties of living” and a “cooperative way of life” (345; 268). Burke makes clear toward the end of this work that his “philosophy of being” and basic perspective is “activist,” even if according to the terms a dominant instrumentalist orientation and its limited understanding of “utility” it may seem passive.⁸⁰ Apparently concerned that his book might be understood on the left as “resigned” to

⁷⁸ Burke earlier discusses the “innovations” of the artist in Counter-Statement. He clarifies that innovation does not refer to “something new under the sun. By innovation is meant simply an emphasis to which the contemporary public is not accustomed. Thus, to a people improvident through excessive hopefulness, the artist who disclosed the cultural value of fear, distrust, or hypochondria would be an innovator. Any ‘transvaluation of values’ is an innovation, though it be a reversion to an earlier value. There could be no more pronounced innovator, by this definition, than a present-day Churchman who would stress the fundamentally anarchistic tenets of primitive Christianity” (CS 110).

⁷⁹ There are two subtitles to “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision”: “The Rout of the Esthetes” and “Literature, Marxism, and Beyond.” The first refers to the offense, the dismissal of the aesthetic as escapism, while the second to Burke’s response, an analysis that seeks to mend the opposition of literature and Marxism, or to move past this adversarial conceptualization. George and Selzer suggest that Permanence and Change is the “beyond” that Burke sought: “he had done [in Permanence and Change] what he looked forward to doing when he was writing Auscultation: namely developing an aesthetic framework that ‘went beyond’ standard aesthete and Marxist polarities” (Kenneth Burke 90).

⁸⁰ In his meticulous study of Burke, Robert Wess argues that Burke puts ultimate weight, with the biological frame (what he refers to as Burke’s “biological essentialism”), on “permanence” and not “change” in this book (Wess 66). I, however, understand Burke to use the biological as a strategic metaphor toward change. The biological substrate

acceptance of the given economic and political conditions of the mid-1930s, Burke takes pains to show that his “poetic or humane sense” of utility is “active, but it acts more toward the participant, rather than the militant, end of the combat-action-cooperation spectrum” (346; 269 [Burke’s emphasis]).⁸¹ “An activist philosophy of being, as advocated in these pages,” he stresses, “must not be taken as synonymous with a philosophy of passivity, or acquiescence. There are many forms of ‘resignation.’ One may also ‘resign’ oneself to struggle—and our treatment of combat-action-cooperation spectrum is framed with an activist concept of resignation clearly in mind” (349; 271). What is socially or cooperatively useful, Burke notes, may be “abnegation.” He thinks of this sort of resignation as integral to “style” (346, n. 1; 269; n. 2). Style is the basic equipment or attitude of participation, the selection of means toward “fitting in” but also part of suasion and struggle. Style supports “solidarity”; it is “congregational” rather than “segregational” (345-46; 268). And style shapes the potential of action. “To call a man a friend or an enemy,” he writes, “is per se to suggest a program of action with regard to him. An important ingredient in the meaning of such words is precisely the attitudes and acts which go with them” (225; 177).⁸² Burke’s poem, Permanence and Change, is

provides a ground for transcending cultural differences, for effecting communion or commonality, as well as discursive compatibility with the dominant language of science. The biological is a metaphor that Burke intends to lead to shifts in attitude, and then actions. Burke’s endpoint is not to establish a “permanence” via biology but to rhetorically establish commonality as an attitude that leads to action and change. In this sense, his philosophy of being, as he notes, is activist, while a historical viewpoint might be passive in that it may lead to “surrender on the grounds that one must adjust himself to temporal conditions as he finds them” (349-50; 271). I think Burke has Dewey in mind here as well in this last point; at the very least, the phrasing certainly recalls Bourne’s critique of Dewey.

⁸¹ With these concerns, Permanence and Change certainly is an extension at points of “Auscultation” and its explicit engagement of Marxist dismissals of art and cultural criticism as passive.

⁸² Burke would later explicitly define attitude as incipient action, most notably in A Grammar of Motives (see, in particular, GM 235-43). In Permanence and Change, he attributes an idea of incipient action to I. A. Richards, who explains, Burke writes, “that an attitude is an incipient plan of action, and that the poet can modify our attitudes” (324; 253). (See chapter 4 of Richards’s Principles of Literary Criticism, particularly pp. 112-113, for the relevant sections.) Burke, in considering Richards, refers to the “poet” in the narrow sense of vocation, but generally in Permanence and Change he broadens poet to include a basic human capacity and impulse for creative action.

toward cultivation of style and greater attention to the humane particulars of a given situation and to ensuing acts.⁸³

In the final pages of Permanence and Change, Burke again seeks to cultivate an attitude of humility, reminding his “metropolitan” readers “that the pieties of others are no less real or deep through being different from” our own (350; 271). His poem then concludes with this striking figure of “communalty,”⁸⁴ of plurality and humility:

always the Eternal Enigma is there, right on the edges of our metropolitan
bickerings, stretching outwards to interstellar infinity and inwards to the depths of
the mind. And in this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is
no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build
their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss.
(351; 272)

Humans make their cultures and symbol systems socially in the face of what cannot be known, “the eternally unresolvable Enigma, the preposterous fact that both existence and nothingness are equally unthinkable” (351; 272). This huddling—a protective formation⁸⁵ that may suggest disorder—is a condition for interaction, for conversing. The loquaciousness that attends this “huddling,” although potentially chaotic, serves to orient and equip. This final metaphor of nervous huddling on the brink of the unknown is both comic and dire. Attitudinally it clears the

⁸³ “Humane particulars” is a shared term in the correspondence of Burke and William Carlos Williams (East xxxii). Williams seems to have introduced it in a letter to Burke in 1945, but Williams’s use indicates that Burke may have used this term in a prior conversation with him (East 88).

⁸⁴ Note that Burke uses “communalty” instead of “communality” (see, for instance PC1 226; PC3 178). I suspect that he may have chosen this obsolete variation (as labeled by the Oxford English Dictionary) because its stress on the second syllable (communality) more clearly suggests the active verb commune in its nominalization. In any case, Burke does conceive social organization communally, as communions of participants, actors, or communicants.

⁸⁵ Etymologically, this word relates to the Teutonic root hud, meaning cover, and the late German word hudern, “to cherish, shelter, as a hen her chickens” (OED).

stage for the “comic frame” that Burke would foreground in his next book and concludes this work with the permanence of social interaction. But it also alludes to the necessity to change social arrangements, to generate and disseminate new meanings through participation so that greater participation would be possible. This huddling figure differs from Burke’s parlor conversation metaphor in that it does not distinguish individual actors or participants as agents. While the implicit functional cooperation of the parlor conversation may not suggest collective purpose or agency, huddling does suggest collective grouping with purpose—to protect, comfort, and participate in building a culture. It posits interdependency. But as the speaking individual subject of the parlor conversation merges with others in huddling, seemingly disappearing in an undifferentiated social mass, an agent of change is also uncertain here. How new meanings and verbalizations become, if they are to become, action toward that end is not clear. To frame Burke’s perspective in this way, however, is to adopt an instrumentalist logic. This question might not necessarily be a concern for Burke the cultural critic even if he seems to imply a social theory of change as part of his cultural criticism. Conversation and nervous loquaciousness require human association or communality; the interaction and chatter generate verbal responses and change, perhaps, but according to contingencies. It is the being together that matters. The problem is that no clear actor is posed even though the logic of Burke’s presentation hinges on purpose. Although Burke writes of individual actors and their employment of language toward particular ends, his references to groupings of individuals as “classes,” in his more Marxian moments, and as seemingly inchoate gaggles in others, avoids any coherent social theory. Changing terms according to his suggestions may break up obstacles to addressing social ills that concerned him and may facilitate cooperation, but it may not. Burke sings his poem and attempts to cultivate some awareness of the limits of particular orientations—namely, the

scientific rationalization—and to provide some resources to advance new meanings and to live differently. Burke is participating in a conversation of the early 1930s and offers his book as an act of recalcitrance to a scientific perspective (including its radical applications) that sees its method as capable over time of meeting all problems. He knows, of course, that his contribution in response to other viewpoints will be yet another statement in the muddle of “metropolitan bickerings,” more or less in alignment with some and in opposition to others. Burke’s emphasis on humility in the conclusion of Permanence and Change is thus cast in part as resignation—not just to the “eternally unresolvable Enigma” but also to the potential futility of his own symbolic acts. Nonetheless, he shapes an attitude toward huddling, which in itself opens beginnings. Burke, after all, resigns himself to struggle.

2.0 IN COLLECTIVE FORM

Kenneth Burke struggled in words. He examined and defined terms; he compiled and formed lists and charted clusters of terms. There are, for instance, the “Lexicon Rhetoricae” of Counter-Statement (123-83), the concluding list in Permanence and Change, and the “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” of Attitudes toward History, as well as other lists scattered among his essays of the 1930s. Burke thinks through clustering; he gathers and links words to clarify, to reveal, and ultimately to redirect—to begin differently. The term “clusters,” itself an entry in his “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms,” refers to terminological groupings that through examination reveal unexpected associative links. “Were we,” he writes, “to have a survey of the hills and valleys of the mind, to match our government’s geological surveys, it would be done by the charting of clusters, which have a momentous effect upon history” (ATH II: 76; 232-33). Clusters, the word groupings that become coordinates of thinking, impact history—are the stuff of history, its making and its telling. Charting clusters, for Burke, reveals associations, functions, deployments, uses, limits, and effects. As a critical act such charting, according to Burke, has the potential to intervene historically.

Forming new clusters and associations, following from charting or criticism, is an instance of Burke’s poetic action. It is the creation of a world (or “ethical universe-building” [PC 321; 256]) from within the materials of the existing world, by examining habits of thought and language and forming new links or associations. Poetic action and critical action thus work

in tandem. Criticism is the analytical complement to poetic acts, a taking stock of the linguistic inventory. “[A]s poet-plus-critic,” Burke writes, “one both acts and observes his act. By this faculty of observation, he matures his acts with relation to other people” (ATH II: 50; 213-14). Burke attempts to facilitate the maturation of social interaction, as both political end and resource to get there. Indeed, at times Burke encouraged such maturation within overtly political fora. As he pointedly notes, his concern with criticism does not end with observation. He sees a “‘moral obligation’ to do as much as can be done with the resources of analysis now open to us” (ATH II: 51; 214).

What did Burke intend to do with these resources? If we understand Burke’s criticism as his equipment for living as Paul Jay suggests (“Criticism” 29), this question enters the terrain of his socio-political situation, a situation that critics have often selectively ignored or not seen as fundamental to his work—if it is recognized at all—in approaching his books and essays. When this concern does appear in scholarly treatments of his work of the 1930s, critics often politely background and divorce it from his literary and critical equipment and exposition—from, that is, his analysis, rewriting, and redeployment of terms. Burke, however, was not so timid in the 1930s. Explaining his own “pattern of selectivity” regarding terms in Attitudes toward History, he comments, in hortatory style, on the critic’s task: “Facing a myriad possible distinctions, [the critic] should confine himself to those that he considers important for social reasons. Roughly, in the current state of the world we should group these about the ‘revolutionary’ emphasis” (ATH1 II: 32; ATH3 200). To put it in the terms of Burke’s later A Grammar of Motives (1945) and Pentad, I see his companion books of this period as concerned above all with exploring literature and criticism as agencies of change and then searching for a way to arrive at and support an agent for the change that he and many of his immediate contemporaries envisioned.

While Permanence and Change lays out the uses of literary criticism and invention for social transformation, its sequel, Attitudes toward History, explores in addition the question of the agent, or actor, of such change.

Burke's charting of his own lexicon in the 1930s reveals many words, he notes, that "begin with the sound of hard 'c'" (ATH1 II: 84). Most important to his 1930s companion books are the terms cooperation, communalty,⁸⁶ communion, communication, and collective. These words are associated phonically, thematically, at points etymologically, and they connote, if not denote, human interconnection. They also imply (and, in their clustering, enact) affiliative organization. Together they express Burke's driving social vision (as does, I have suggested, the word "huddling"). The change of Permanence and Change refers, in part, to movement toward the greater realization of these hard-c words and purposeful "huddling," or communal association. The linguistic interconnections within his general constellation of "c"- (and "co-") terms, in fact, are themselves a metaphor for social interdependence. Burke's listing, or clustering, of these terms is an act of organization, a drawing of coordinates for analysis, but it also serves as a metaphor for political affiliation. Cluster, that is, refers generally to a conscious grouping of words and, with his hard-c cluster, a grouping of people.

Attitudes toward History takes up c-words from Permanence and Change, adds a few more, and directs them toward realizing a radically democratic clustering and fuller cooperation. In his introduction to its second edition, Burke describes Attitudes as a book that "deals with characteristic responses of people in their forming and reforming of congregations."⁸⁷ The companion books are ultimately about this problem of congregation, of getting people together

⁸⁶ As I mention in chapter one, Burke uses this obsolete variant of communality—thus, with its stress on the second syllable, emphasizing the act of communing.

⁸⁷ This introduction is unpaginated. The quotation appears in the first paragraph of the introduction and remains in the third edition.

as he would later put it.⁸⁸ There are the institutionalized congregational formations (“permanence”) and the impulse to re-form or transform (“change”) wisely toward a different congregational arrangement and social clustering—toward, that is, a more fully cooperative and expanded collectivity. I take this last word to be the guiding term and investigatory problem of Attitudes toward History.

2.1 COMMUNISTIC ATTITUDE

Burke made his social vision and political alliance more clear when he used another hard “c” word in Permanence and Change as it first appeared in 1935, a word that encompasses the others and that points, more directly, to political struggle: Communism.⁸⁹ Burke writes,

So far as I can see, the only coherent and organized movement making for the subjection of the technological genius to humane ends is that of Communism, by whatever name it may finally prevail. For though Communism is generally put forward on a purely technological basis, in accordance with a strategy of recommendation advisable in a scientific era, we must realize the highly

⁸⁸ At the suggestion of Malcolm Cowley and Burke, in December 1965 American Scholar convened leading participants in the First American Writers’ Congress in 1935. Cowley, Burke, Granville Hicks, and William Phillips, as well as period chronicler and moderator Daniel Aaron, assembled to discuss their experiences in 1935; the conversation was recorded and then published in the summer issue of American Scholar in 1966. The discussion ranged from details of the First Congress, the subsequent two Congresses, perspectives on the role of the Communist Party, general attitudes and concerns in the 1930s, and considerations, relative to the 1930s, of the New Left in the 1960s. In their discussion Burke notes that “people have to get together” but, he seemingly laments, “they get together by having an enemy in common” (Aaron 60).

⁸⁹ In Attitudes toward History, Burke also included the word communism in his list of his own “hard ‘c’” terms: “To list at random some of them from my present work and ‘Permanence and Change’: coordinates, key concepts, cooperative, communion, community, communism, collectivism, cooperation, conversion, Catholicism, Calvinism, capitalism, conversion [sic], cues, clusters, and criticism” (ATH1 II: 84). This passage, as well as pages before and after it concerning single letters and sounds and that discuss acts of social identification, does not remain in the subsequent editions. The list appears in Burke’s entry for “Cues,” which is by far the longest of the Dictionary in the first edition (II: 81-113; 236-46). I don’t think it is at all arbitrary that the final term in the series presented above is “criticism”—itself an analytical and synthetic act that works toward re-vision.

humanistic or poetic nature of its fundamental criteria. The very word itself suggests its latent affinities with the religious or pre-technological rationalization, which perfected the attitude of inducement that flowers in man's maximum capacities for the cooperative. ...The very name Communism suggests echoes of the word "communicant," perhaps the key term about which the entire religious rationalization in the West was constructed. (PC1 93-94)

Burke used this term to refer generally to a socio-economic system that would maximize communication and participation in social life and resist technological domination. Within his cluster of "c"-words, "communism" is closely allied with "cooperation," which Burke conceives as "the pivotal term of the new rationalization" (PC1 94).⁹⁰ The presence of the term communism⁹¹ gives a different valence to the others, for the word, of course, also refers to a particular political movement, which Burke affirms in numerous writings, publication affiliations, and public appearances throughout the 1930s. Burke's use of this term and his clear political commitments also inflect his use of "action." Nearly twenty years after its publication, Burke notes that Permanence and Change was part of his "poetico-political speculations," and that he "had plumped grandly for" the word communism, along with other "family" words (CS 215).⁹² His advocacy of communism in word was indeed grand. He took this side—fully seeing

⁹⁰ Cooperation is often a proxy for communism in this text; in places, the word "communism" could easily stand in for "cooperation." The second edition of Permanence and Change at one point, in fact, simply replaces "Communitistic" with "cooperative" (PC1 345; PC3 268). (Schiappa and Keehner mention this particular substitution [196].)

⁹¹ "Communism" is always capitalized in Permanence and Change (as well as in Attitudes toward History [see, for instance, ATH1 II: 219], partly because, I believe, Burke understood it as a movement and not only as a socio-economic system. Capitalism is not capitalized.

⁹² In the early 1950s, Burke mentions a "family of key words" in Permanence and Change, craftily alluding to but not uttering the forbidden word "communism":

Unfortunately for the standing of this book in these uneasy times, the family of key words that includes 'communication,' 'communicant,' 'community,' and 'communion' also has a well-known relative now locally in great disgrace—and the experimental author, then contritely eager to think of himself as part of an over-all partnership, had plumped grandly for that word, too.

this position as a side—throughout the 1930s.⁹³ This commitment was the background and impetus for many of his terminological and rhetorical maneuvers⁹⁴ in these years and informed his critical program of poetic and symbolic action.

While I have argued that Burke's "poetry of action" is his key term in a project of sociohistorical transformation, Burke makes the political ambitions and sympathies of Permanence and Change explicit with direct reference to communism. Each of the three sections of this work—"On Interpretation," "Perspective by Incongruity," "The Basis of Simplification"—concludes with exhortations toward communism as the new rationalization, a new social and economic arrangement. Burke removed these "communist" conclusions for publication of the second edition of Permanence and Change in 1954, and they remained absent for the third edition in 1984.⁹⁵ He explains in the prologue to the second edition that he removed

Accordingly, statements that concern humanistic integration and cultural reconstruction in general were sometimes localized in terms of this one problematical '-ism.' And we hardly need add that, though the term is traditionally liberal and idealistic, with usages extending across whole millennia of history, it has recently been endowed with egregiously particular associations, by both the adherents and the enemies of one specific faction in contemporary world politics.

The term had particularly suited the author's poetico-political speculations of that time since he was concerned with the thought that secular communities might be formed after the analogy of monastic orders, or of the many theocratic or theologically tinged colonies that were attempted during the earlier stages of our nation's history, all of them variously modifying private property in the direction of possessions that were jointly owned or jointly served. (CS 215)

⁹³ The sense of plump here is "to opt for one of two or more possibilities" (OED). Burke clearly understood that he was choosing a side in the 1930s and when he reflected on these years in the early 1950s. Perhaps coincidentally, the noun plump—in its sense of a "group of people," "cluster," and "collection"—relates to what Burke was advocating (OED).

⁹⁴ "Maneuver" is a term that Burke uses when discussing literature as "equipment for living" and literary works as "strategies for dealing with situations" (PLF 296). He writes that "in one's campaign of living" "one 'maneuvers,' and the maneuvering is an 'art'" (PLF 298).

⁹⁵ These sections amount to nearly seven pages in total. Similar political purges were made for the second edition of Attitudes toward History, even though the first edition of this book did not contain the lengthy "communist" endorsements found in Permanence and Change. Nevertheless, other details of Attitudes, many remaining in the later editions, correspond to the communist tenor of the first edition of Permanence. Burke hardly backed away from his communist statements in Attitudes; this c-word still appears quite a few times, but he does not "plump" for it as he had in Permanence. His preferred term, as propagandist, became "socialism," a stylistic shift for, no doubt, Popular Front solidarity. Nonetheless, he still referred to Communism favorably enough in Attitudes to elicit the ill-tempered wrath of Sydney Hook, who reviewed this book for Partisan Review in 1938. Although "communism"

these “speculative” sections, for, “under the present conditions, the pages could not possibly be read in the tentative spirit in which they were originally written” (PC3 xlix). That was certainly true in 1954: his radical connections and writings, in fact, seem to have prevented at least one academic appointment.⁹⁶ However, Burke further claims in this prologue that the removal of the communist sections “could be called a ‘restoration,’ since they bring the text back closer to its original nature” (PC3 xlix). Yet the “pages speculating on the form that ... material cooperation should take” intertwine more closely with the critical scheme and motives of Permanence and Change, and to much of his work of the 1930s, than Burke lets on here. As he indicated to his friend Malcolm Cowley in 1932, he agreed with communist goals even though he did not fully adopt Party rhetoric and tactics. His tack, he wrote to Cowley, was to translate communism into his own terms.⁹⁷ Permanence and Change is Burke’s translation of, among other things, a

was not a key term in Attitudes toward History, this book still indicates a general “communist” perspective as Burke understood it and at a couple points directly supports the Soviet Union and the Party. Burke mostly used communism and socialism interchangeably as the desired future ideal. Writing to his friend (and then literary editor of the New Republic) Malcolm Cowley in 1932, Burke mentions that someone recently asked a question that “I have never been able to answer, an exact definition of the difference between socialism and communism” (qtd. in Burks 219-20).

⁹⁶Burke was denied a position at the University of Washington in the early 1950s because of his “communist” affiliations. Burke and Malcolm Cowley’s correspondence from 1950-52 presents some details (Jay Selected 286-87, 300, 306-313, 315). Denning (444) and Wess (56, n. 3) also cite these letters in their mention of this. Robert Heilman, chair of the English Department at the University of Washington in the 1950s, provides a detailed chronicle of the failed attempt to hire Burke as a visiting lecturer in 1952 despite departmental support (21-24). Malcolm Cowley, Heilman explains, previously had an appointment in the department in 1950, which had met “a strong last-minute outbreak of opposition” in Washington State because of his own former communist affiliation, thus setting the stage for administrative resistance to Burke as national political paranoia and grandstanding deepened (Heilman 19). Burke comments on the general situation in a poem in the mid-1950s: “Were you a bit too protestant? / Or not enough intolerant? / In social views vociferant? / In manifestoes jubilant? / In sponsorship insouciant? / Were you a parlor-pinkish termagant? / Who liked with Charlie Marx to gallivant? / Recant! Recant!” (Collected Poems 19).

⁹⁷Writing in June 1932 to Cowley, who strongly identified as a Marxist and Communist, Burke explains his method and resistance to adopting the terms of the Party: “I am not a joiner of societies, I am a literary man. I can only welcome Communism by converting it into my own vocabulary. I am, in the deepest sense, a translator. I go on translating, even if I must but translate English into English.... Having fully agreed with the communists as to objectives, and having even specifically stated in my sinful Program that I considered nationalization of private wealth the fulcrum of the new economy, I diverged solely in my notion of the tactics for arriving at these objectives” (Jay Selected 202-203). Burke refers here to the chapter “Program” of Counter-Statement, which, indeed, lays out a program and, as Stephen Bygrave puts it, “extrapolates an aesthetic attitude ... to a political attitude” (21). Burke

communist program while this work foregrounds the inventiveness of linguistic expression or the poetic. Michael Denning, in fact, seems quite right in claiming that the original editions of Permanence and Attitudes “are more coherent than the later ones” and “demonstrate a closer connection between the politics of Burke’s affiliations and the politics of his theory than most critics have allowed” (438). What this politics looks like relative to Burke’s affiliations and to his theory—what I will call his “acceptance frame”—and how these cohere, which Denning does not make explicit, requires clarification.⁹⁸

Many Burke studies have not considered the communist sections of Permanence and Change even when they have treated in some way the “politics of his theory.”⁹⁹ Among the few

wrote this letter while he was working on “Auscultation,” not Permanence as Paul Jay says (Selected 203, n. 2). (See also Robert Wess’s comment on this [60, n. 3]). As it is available in Jay’s Selected Correspondence (1988), this letter seems to be quoted by everyone who has mentioned Burke’s communism.

⁹⁸ Consideration, acknowledgment, and even recognition of Burke’s “communism” didn’t really begin until the early 1990s—after the end of the Cold War. Since Ann George noted with purpose in 1996 that Burke scholars “study Burke’s texts in a vacuum” and had “some work to do” (Review 92-93), she and other scholars have made an effort to fill in the apparent gaps in understandings of Burke. Although a number of scholars have now referred to the first editions of the 1930s companion books, specifically of Permanence and Change, analysis of the communist sections remains thin. A few essays published in a special section of an issue of Communication Studies (1991) helpfully broached the omission of these editions in the scholarship, one fully presenting the removed “communist” sections of Permanence and Change (Schiappa and Keehner; the other two essays here are by Don Burks and Philip Wander). Denning has highlighted some specifics in his ten pages on Burke in The Cultural Front (55-56; 434-45; 539-40, n. 25 & 29) and describes Burke as “the most important communist cultural theorist” and “the major cultural theorist of the Popular Front” (436, 445). George and Selzer in their study of Burke in the 1930s do not treat the “communist” particulars of Permanence and Attitudes in much detail although they do, through extensive archival research, painstakingly situate Burke in 1930s radical culture. Several other critics have, nonetheless, considered these sections. The first critical work to mention the communist passages was Don Abbott’s 1974 essay “Marxist Influences on the Rhetorical Theory of Kenneth Burke,” which still stands as the most detailed treatment of Burke’s engagement with Marx (for mention of Burke’s communism, see pp. 228-31). But, as far as I can determine, the next scholarly mention of Burke’s communism was a second, shorter article by Abbott published in 1989 and then the 1991 Communication Studies articles. It is as if the first editions did not exist from 1974 to 1989 (or 1991), a Cold War curiosity and silence. Before George and Selzer’s book, Ross Wolin’s study had two pages on the communist sections (78-79), part of a larger argument that attempts to situate Burke’s deepening shift to rhetoric in the 1940s as an extension of his turn away, in the 1930s, from his earlier aestheticism. Although I agree with Wolin’s contention that “many readers have largely ignored the social and political arguments that infuse his work,” and that chief concerns of the Motives books began as a part of specific social and political argumentation, in the end I see Wolin remaining at only the threshold of this complex topic (Wolin xii). Nonetheless, his book is a valuable contribution in approaching Burke’s institutionalization as rhetorician and dramatist while considering “how dramatism arose out of Burke’s earlier theories about art, politics, and language” (Wolin xiii).

⁹⁹ Among the book-length studies of Burke, for instance, those by Lentricchia, Henderson, Bygrave, Biesecker, and Crusius, although invoking at points Permanence and Change and/or Attitudes toward History and his politics, all

Burke scholars to refer to these pages, Robert Wess contends that although “Burke explicitly advocates communism” this advocacy “is pitched at the level of culture and value rather than economics and power.”¹⁰⁰ This potentially misleads, for Permanence and Change presents a theory of social change that sees cultural elements, specifically details of language, as a necessary part of political action, as a means or material of transformation.¹⁰¹ Wess further claims that when Burke’s support of communism “first appears at the end of part 1, what motivates it in the immediately preceding chapters is not the account of economic injustice under capitalism that one would expect, but an analysis of the cultural disorders that have created difficulties for literary artists. Communism, in other words, is depicted as necessary to make things better for literature” (58). It is difficult for me to see how he arrives at this conclusion in that Burke’s focus in Permanence and Change, in contrast to Counter-Statement¹⁰² and

use the revised editions. Lentricchia’s concern with Burke and politics in Criticism and Social Change, in particular, suggests the relevance of the communist passages of the first edition of Permanence and Change, but Lentricchia (who describes Burke as a “radical American intellectual” [24] and a “critical theorist of social change” [31]) seems not to have known that changes had been made to the 2nd editions of Permanence and Attitudes when he wrote this. Denning, in fact, notes a significant alteration to a passage in the 2nd edition of Attitudes that Lentricchia, apparently unaware that it had been revised, highlights in his argument (Denning 540, n. 29).

¹⁰⁰ George and Selzer also quote this line from Wess—twice (the second time without quotation marks or attribution [Kenneth Burke 4, 25]). It is their basic assessment, too.

¹⁰¹ Some might call this cultural politics, yet doing so may not assist in understanding these activities and their relationship any more clearly and may, in the end, just skirt old theoretical questions. This term often casually refers to some sort of political function and effect of objects conventionally conceived as cultural. As far as I can determine, in general usage of this term there is great imprecision in meaning. What exactly do “politics” and “culture” denote in this amalgamation, and what is thought to be achieved in putting these terms together in this way? Is the term “cultural politics” intended to address a basic lack in the conventional scheme of human doings? To enable some means of politics? To justify “cultural” work toward particular ends?

¹⁰² Already in Counter-Statement, Burke describes “art” as “eternal” according to a biological constant but “also historical—a particular mode of adjustment to a particular cluster of conditions. The cluster of conditions is fluctuant (from age to age, from class to class, from person to person) thus calling for changes of emphasis” (CS 107). Permanence and Change extends this idea, but now his chief term is “poetry” as the definitive human act. Permanence and Change is an extension of not just this line in Counter-Statement but of the entire chapter in which it is found: “Program” (CS 107-22).

“Auscultation,” is not artists or writers, by narrow vocation, at all.¹⁰³ As I discussed in the previous chapter, Burke argues for understanding humans fundamentally as poets—as creative actors and participants. Moreover, communism, for Burke, represents the fulfillment in social and economic organization of this human constant of the poetic; he sees communism as “a humanistic, or poetic, rationalization,” and thus “close to the spontaneous genius of man.”¹⁰⁴ It restores in the face of the impossibly neutral vocabulary and method of science, which Dewey attempted to apply fully to social life (much to Burke’s dissatisfaction), the ethical. Burke’s communism is the social organization that is more fully integrated with the human biological constant and with his philosophy of being. He writes,

Insofar as the neurological structure remains a constant there will be a corresponding constancy in the devices by which sociality is maintained. Changes in environmental structures will, of course, call forth changes in the particularities of rationalization, quite as we must employ different devices for salvation if we fall into water than if we are sliding down a cliff. But the essentials of purpose and gratification will not change. (PC1 212; PC3 162).

In the economic and social crises in the United States when he wrote in the 1930s, Burke saw communism as the ideal of sociality, as the change necessary to restore appropriate

¹⁰³ Burke does make a statement in his essay “My Approach to Communism” (1934) that may support Wess’s claim. One of his four approaches to communism emphasizes that art can be effective only within a stable socio-historical context: “The language of art thrives best when there is a maximum of stability in our ways of livelihood and in the nature of our expectations. A medium of communication is not merely a body of words; the words themselves derive their emotional and intellectual content from the social or environmental texture in which they are used and to which they apply. Under a stable environment, a corresponding stability of moral and esthetic values can arise and permeate the group—and it is this ‘superstructure’ of values which the artist draws upon in constructing an effective work of art. In periods of marked instability, such a superstructure tends to disintegrate into individualistic differentiations” (20). From this perspective, “effective” art appears within conditions of socio-historical stability and draws from and furthers cohesion; it is integrated within a culture. Poetry in Burke’s more general sense, however, comprises “any work of critical or imaginative cast,” from the mundane to the rarefied (PLF 1).

¹⁰⁴ The final section of Part I is titled “Communism a Humanistic, or Poetic, Rationalization” in the first edition and “A Humanistic, or Poetic, Rationalization” in the second and third editions (91; 65).

correspondence between the “human constant” and the Modern environmental structures. His theory of communication (as social interaction) assumes sufficient “environmental” (socio-economic) support. The terms that Burke uses and advances, including “communism,” are “changes in the particularities of rationalization” and part of his response to “changes in the environmental structures.” “Communism,” as Burke makes explicit in a section heading, is the needed poetic rationalization (PC1 91).

Reading the first edition of Permanence and Change from the beginning, one may encounter the communist conclusion to the first part with some surprise from today’s perspective perhaps—especially considering particulars of his institutionalization as a theorist of rhetoric—but these sections clearly follow from his emphasis on processes of interpretation and means of reorientation. He presents communism as the fourth order of rationalization, succeeding those of “magic, religion, and science” (82; 59). The revised second edition reduces the concluding section on “corrective rationalization” by more than half so that, unlike in the previous section “magic, religion, and science,” no comments on the social order corresponding to the “humanistic or poetic rationalization” remain.¹⁰⁵ This section in the first edition is hardly an endorsement of official Communist Party doctrine: it advocates communism “at the level of culture” but not, as I have mentioned, in the narrow sense of artist as “specialist” as Wess claims. Communism is the culture, in the anthropological sense, to be achieved—what he would soon situate as “futuristic norms” (and which I will consider below) (ATH I: 205; 159). Burke envisions that communism corresponds to “an art in its widest aspects, an art of living” (93; 66 [Burke’s emphasis]). These words conclude the first section in the revised editions, but in the

¹⁰⁵The text of the 1954 second edition (published by Hermes and then reissued by Bobbs-Merrill in 1965) is reproduced for the third edition. The pagination of the main text is identical in these editions. The Roman-numeraled pages for the prologue differ in the 3rd edition, however, due to the addition of Hugh Dalziel Duncan’s introduction.

first edition they directly precede his pitch for “Communism” as “the only coherent and organized movement making for the subjection of the technological genius to humane ends” and that could provide conditions to allow this “art of living” to take hold (PC1 93). He here extends his critique of the scientific rationalization, as “impersonal” and inhumane, and asserts that Communism—as a humane, poetic corrective—would take “human needs as its point of reference.”¹⁰⁶

Burke next grounds these needs in the biological constant, in “the permanency of the neurological structure itself” (PC1 94). Burke also marks cooperative, central to each edition of Permanence and Change, “as the pivotal term of the new rationalization,” or Communism. These final two pages of the first part of the 1935 Permanence and Change begin to synthesize several strands of the book—the poetic, the biological/neurological, and the cooperative—relative to Communism. Communism as poetic rationalization returns at the end of the second part. Here Burke emphasizes the cooperative more firmly as an extension of the biological or neurological and as a human need and impulse. This leads to his presentation of “philosophy of being” and “metaphor of a norm, that at bottom the aims and genius of man have remained

¹⁰⁶ A year before Permanence and Change was published, Burke describes four aspects of communism in an article for New Masses, “My Approach to Communism.” The sections from Permanence and Change that I have presented constitute two of those approaches, the historical (Communism as fourth rationalization) and the ethical, which “attempt to show why Communism is adequate morally as a replacement of capitalistic motives, while fascism is not” (“My Approach” 16). Burke’s historical narrative (or “approach” in this essay) is not one of simple chronology or progress. He invokes Spengler’s notion “contemporaneity,” in fact, to align communism at points with the religious rationalization he presents in Permanence and Change. In “My Approach to Communism,” Burke explains this more fully, writing that communism’s “humane emphasis allies it to the religious rationalization” in that it “is a doctrine aimed at the regularizing of human cooperation on the basis of the productive and distributive problems brought about by science and commerce since the close of feudalism” (20). “Communism,” he writes, “aims at a kind of ‘industrial medievalism’” (20). This analogy with medievalism (and monasticism) persists throughout the 1930s. Presumably, Burke intends this particular expression of communism as “industrial medievalism” in New Masses to bring to mind Lenin’s “soviets plus electricity” even if it also smacks of the utopian socialism that Marx attempted to counter.

fundamentally the same” (212; 163).¹⁰⁷ Burke thus situates “cooperation,” and by extension “Communism,” as a biological “aim.”

As I suggest in the first chapter, Burke’s metabiology¹⁰⁸ is strategic and rhetorical in that it selectively exploits the dominant scientific discourse for legitimacy, a sort of preemptive inoculation against expected social recalcitrance. With its transcendence of cultural and historical differences, the biological metaphor thus provides a basis for social solidarity in “a grossly mismanaged present.”¹⁰⁹ His “theory of communication” follows from this biological constant. Yet the social activity of communication, Burke maintains, must have support within economic arrangements: “A sound system of communication, such as lies at the roots of civilization, cannot be built on a structure of economic warfare. It must be economically, as well as spiritually, Communistic—otherwise the wells of sociality are poisoned” (PC1 213). For Burke, communism is the alignment of economic and social arrangements with biological imperatives and the poetic, thus making possible and supporting social communication.

Burke does not clearly indicate how such communistic conditions would “be built,” even though he implies that the linguistic resources and attitude that he presents in Permanence and Change could play a supportive, even essential, role. He selects and applies terms to support a cooperative attitude, but he also suggests that, first, economic and social arrangements would

¹⁰⁷ With this metaphor Burke distances himself from narratives of historical progress: “We replace the metaphor of progress (and its bitter corollary, decadence) with the metaphor of the norm, the notion that at bottom the aims and genius of man have remained fundamentally the same, that temporal events may cause him to get far from his sources, but that he repeatedly struggles to restore, under new particularities, the same basic patterns of the ‘good life’” (212-13; 163). Burke developed this position in “Auscultation” and then made it part of Permanence and Change (ACR 120).

¹⁰⁸ By meta, as he makes clear in his etymological consideration of method as meta hodos (PC1 299; PC3 234), Burke means “after” in the sense of following from or simply following (as in the Roman naming of Aristotle’s Metaphysics—that is, the work following his Physics). So it is what follows from or comes after biology that is his interest. In this context, I am suggesting that Burke sees “Communism” as “following from” the “biological substrate” and “genius,” and that capitalism continues as an effect, in part, of what he sees as social or “symbolic accretion”—what one might call institutional sedimentation (PC1 42; PC3 27. ATH1 II: 94, n.).

¹⁰⁹ I read this as another dig at the technocrats, with whom, following Bourne, Burke positions Dewey.

have to change, for a “sound communicative medium arises out of cooperative enterprises” that cannot exist within a capitalist framework. The current “segregational, or dissociative state cannot endure—and must make way for an associative, or congregational state,” he says, without directly indicating how this congregational state, Communism, would be achieved (PC1 213). Burke in Permanence and Change often presumes that revolutionary change is inevitable—a commonplace in his New York left circles in the mid-1930s. In the communist conclusion to Part III, he does not, however, seem hopeful about the prospect of this change occurring “peacefully.” Although the “ultimate goal of the poetic metaphor would be a society in which the participant aspect of action attained its maximum expression” and although Burke repeatedly advances an ideal of cooperation, the separations and divisions furthered by the “competitive” “economic patterns” that he sees as defining modern life under capitalism lead to conflict (PC1 347; PC3 269-71):

there seems far too little likelihood that those who have control of our economy will peacefully relinquish this control in the interests of culture. Rather, they will continue to degrade people, and to contemn¹¹⁰ them for being degraded. Their very ‘morality’ is involved in their privileges; their means and purposes are adjusted to them; their concepts of the ‘good life’ are grounded in them; their fabulous possessions are their tools and shelter; their incapacity is their training. Hence, it is not likely that we can expect a better day until the opportunity to persist in their kinds of effort has been taken from them” (PC1 347-48).¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Yes, “contemn” not “condemn”: “to treat or view with contempt” (OED).

¹¹¹ This passage is absent in the 2nd and 3rd editions. His endorsement of the communist movement and the presence of direct appeals to readers (“one must uproot the entire commercial structure” [PC1 320, my emphasis]) lead Schiappa and Keehner to see Permanence and Change as a “a call to action” (194).

Burke's suggestion of class conflict and of seeming inevitable violent struggle ("taken from them") places this conclusion more firmly within a Marxist-Leninist discourse.

Is Burke's poetic metaphor and theory of communication part of what enables change or what occurs once significant socio-economic change has occurred? Both? Burke, I believe, attempts to address what I have presented as inconsistency and insufficient elaboration of how his program fits with the change he envisions. He casts his activist philosophy of being in potential opposition to "historically conditioned institutions." As it must have "adequate embodiment in the architecture of the State, a philosophy of being may commit one to open conflict with any persons or class of persons who use their power to uphold the institutions serving an anti-social function" (PC 350; 271-72). Burke exhorts his readers to have the primary "mode of action ... be that of education, propaganda, or suasion," but he is quite aware that conflict of perspectives and interests may result in violent conflict. He advances, at least rhetorically, a biological "ground" to provide a basis for and to encourage a communal, humane attitude that leads to more cooperative action.¹¹² This preference, an ethic, Burke places as part of the biological impulse, but through the mediation of language and culture this has been obscured and redirected (or subordinated to a "competitive" biological impulse) by way of historical institutions. He therefore stays close to attending to specifics of language, exploring how verbal and consequent attitudinal changes could help alleviate violent tendencies even if he, from his perspective in the mid-1930s, appears to find violent class conflict inevitable. Faced with the prospect of violence, he intones, "any instigation to select one's means from the realm

¹¹² I would like to point out that Burke's invocation of rhetoric in this work clearly occurs in the context of 1930s oppositional politics. Achieving communism, "by whatever name it may finally prevail," is the backdrop and motive (the context of his situation) for Burke's turn to suasion and rhetoric, "the 'art of appeal'" (PC1 341; PC3 266). Abbott, in fact, describes Burke's exploration of rhetoric as emerging from his engagement with Marx, with Attitudes toward History being the key text ("Marxist" 230-31). Paul Jay also situates the motives of Burke's rhetoric within the 1930s, relative to Marx and Freud, but he does not refer to the communist passages of Permanence and Change in doing so (See "Kenneth Burke" 535-36).

of violence must come solely from the violence of those who attack him for his peaceful work as a propounder of new meanings—a state of affairs which he will strive to avoid as far as possible by cultivating the arts of translation and inducement” (PC1 350; PC3 272).

Burke now presents violent means largely as a choice. People select starting points or choose to begin from among various possibilities, and greater recognition of acts of verbal selection and their effects alters orientations. As a “propounder of new meanings,” Burke’s task entails not only linguistic choices and form (which he would later more firmly articulate as rhetoric) but also the matter of forum, of some public space in which such presentation may occur and take form. Critics would later celebrate this in terms of Burke’s “parlor conversation” metaphor, but I am suggesting that this metaphor has its beginnings in a concern for political organization and fora.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the question of forum would here be left unresolved, a topic and problem that he would explore in his next book. Burke ambiguously positions communism in Permanence and Change as his motive for attention to linguistic form and usage yet also as the social organization that would allow for the fulfillment of actual or “humane” social communication. As both an “organized movement” and the ideal society, Burke roots communism in cooperation. In addition, Burke’s “peaceful work” is part of a general orientation of nonaggression. He chooses and presents terms to support a nonviolent, cooperative attitude—which, for Burke, is the beginning of cooperative actions. Yet this remains at the level of suggestion and encouragement, so we are left with the uncertain figure of huddling at the close of Permanence and Change.

Attitudes toward History attends more specifically to the problem of conflict, extending in particular Burke’s desire to lessen the likelihood of violence while maintaining his political

¹¹³ The necessity of sociopolitical spaces, what I am calling fora, bears some resemblance to Hannah Arendt’s emphasis on the polis as the precondition for the political or action.

commitments. Burke begins to do this by reformulating his attention to interpretation and orientations, and his desire for re-orientation, as a matter of “frames of acceptance.” He defines frames as “the more or less organized systems of meaning by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (I: 3-4; 5). This adoption of a particular role and how it follows from a given frame is of particular interest to him. Acceptance, for Burke, is active and not passive even if it leads to unsatisfactory outcomes. This allows the possibility to change how people interpret the world. Each frame of acceptance names “both friendly and unfriendly forces,” drawing a “line between ‘friendly’ and ‘unfriendly’ ... in its own way” (I: 24, 25; 20, 21). Rejection, then, “is but a by-product of ‘acceptance.’ It involves primarily a matter of emphasis.” So far, this is not altogether different from Burke’s discussion of orientation, interpretation, and piety in Permanence and Change. He adds an additional focal point with another term: symbol of authority. Rejection “takes its color from an attitude towards some reigning symbol of authority, stressing a shift in the allegiance to symbols of authority. It is the heretical aspect of an orthodoxy” (I: 26; 21). A frame of acceptance, if dominant, functions to maintain a particular order by furthering allegiance to such symbols and the social institutions and arrangements they support. From an oppositional standpoint, how this line is drawn between “friendly” and “unfriendly” has great consequences. The tendency of polemics, Burke mentions, is to emphasize strategically “the no more strongly than the yes” (I: 26; 22).

To illustrate this, he considers the Communist Manifesto as polemic. In the main, Marx’s historical narrative of antagonisms and dialectical resolution underwrite Burke’s discussion of historical frames. A culture may reach a point of crisis, Burke says, in which frames become inadequate and “conflicts” can no longer be “bridged symbolically” (I: 34; 28).¹¹⁴ Burke

¹¹⁴ This symbolic bridging of conflicts occurs effortlessly when “the world is deemed about as satisfactory as we can make it, and thinkers of all sorts collaborate in constructing a vast collective mythology whereby people can be at

considered his present, the mid-1930s, to be this moment of cultural disintegration, which might invite social emphasis on rejection to the point of fanaticism, or what he defines as “the singling out of one factor above all others in the charting of human relationships.” “Frames stressing the ingredient of rejection tend to lack the well-rounded quality of a complete here-and-now philosophy” (I: 35; 28). Too much stress on rejection (as with too much impiety) would invite the familiar response to the heretic within a reigning orthodoxy: some form of excommunication or exclusion, if not worse, results. Burke understands this tendency, then, to be a potential obstacle to any political movement. So he tries to rescue Marx from those who would see him as only a polemicist:

Marx, being born into the great century of rejection philosophies, discloses the scars of his environment; nevertheless he did unquestionably lay the foundations for a vast public enterprise out of which a new frame of acceptance can be constructed. Arising among idealists, he caught the genius of realism. His project, we might say, was pre-realism or pro-realism, a here-and-now philosophy designed mainly for action during the late capitalist interregnum, but containing the ingredients for a post-capitalist reintegration (I: 35-36; 29).

Burke, imagining himself as “a symbolist of change,” focuses on developing linguistic resources and analysis for this action, aiming toward the coming (as he saw it) reintegration (I: 27; 22).

Attitudes toward History extends this purpose from Permanence and Change, refining Burke’s scheme of poetry and criticism. Burke now introduces frames of acceptance as resources, and argues for one above others for its integrative potential. At stake is appropriate action. The central terms of Attitudes toward History, in fact, are all linked to an idea of action. “Each frame

home in that world. Conflicts are bridged symbolically; one tries to mitigate conflict by the mediating devices of poetry and religion, rather than to accentuate their harshness. Such is man’s ‘natural’ vocation” (ATH1 I: 34; ATH3 27-28).

[of acceptance] enrolls for ‘action’ in accordance with its particular way of drawing the lines” (I: 120; 92). Some frames are polemical; they can be “wholly ‘debunking’” and therefore disintegrative. Significantly, Burke’s Marx balanced the polemical and disintegrative with the “eulogistic” and integrative (ATH I: 120-22; 92-95). Movement toward either pole of this antithetical scheme does not permit understanding “the full complexities of sociality” and thus will “warp our programs of action” (I: 121; 93). Burke draws this out in a discussion of Marx relative to Bentham. “Marx felt [the] atomistic, disintegrative genius in the utilitarians’ theories of motivation.” Bentham, in “trying the old liberal trick of founding a ‘virtue’ on a ‘vice,’” ended up with an “essentially negative” scheme: as individual self-interest was the inevitable basis of human motives, it had to be tactically converted at every turn to positive social expression (I: 123-24; 94-95). In contrast, Marx, Burke writes, achieved a “positive quality” through “his concept of class solidarity. Marx’s collectivist emphasis even introduced the possibility of self-sacrifice, as the conduct of the individual was located with reference to the requirements of his group.”¹¹⁵

Yet Marx in recourse to history as impersonal dialectic rendered the individual superfluous, according to some interpretations, and bypassed for Burke a psychological problem. With the role of artists and writers in mind—as at the First American Writers’ Congress, which I will soon discuss—Burke makes this matter important to Attitudes toward History and a program of action. He asks, “[S]hould not the synthetic future already make itself felt incipiently in the minds of poets confronting the antitheses of the present?”¹¹⁶ With its stark antithesis, the

¹¹⁵ Burke, as I’ve discussed, attempted to argue this socio-biologically through his terms metabiology, piety, and recalcitrance.

¹¹⁶ Burke seems to mean “poets” more narrowly here, in the sense of artists and writers. But he implies elsewhere in this book that this statement would also apply to “poets” in general, humans as creative, social beings, as he does in Permanence and Change.

“rational symmetry of [Marx’s] frame could persuade him that the pacific norms of a future ‘classless’ society need not muddle the simplicity of ‘class war’ here and now. [Marx] seems to have relegated the business of mediation to a historical process alone. But when this same act of mediation is done, not by ‘history,’ but by people, the sharpening of class lines tends to be obliterated” (ATH I: 124; 95). This statement well reveals Burke’s motive in much of his work of the 1930s. Because it is people that make history, a social theory of stark antithesis, itself a frame of acceptance and an attitude, renders the possibility of social mediation limited for it furthers division and disintegration. Marx is central to Attitudes toward History, inspiring and informing Burke’s meditation on the shaping of history¹¹⁷—yet always selectively by way of Burke’s usual method of translation.¹¹⁸ Seeing a positive vision of a possible future in the

¹¹⁷ The whole book might be seen as Burke’s application to cultural material of Marx’s famous comment in the Eighteenth Brumaire that humans make their own history but not within circumstances of their choosing (Marx 32). The question Burke poses is how humans can make history in the face of powerful symbols of authority, part of the circumstances they did not choose.

¹¹⁸ Burke’s resistance to orthodox Marxism as “science,” the “bureaucratization” of strains within Marx, that began with “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision” persists throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In consideration of the 1930s companion books, Attitudes is often referred to as Burke’s Marxist book. William Rueckert, for instance, sees “Marx, with his emphasis on class structure and the economic basis of social action (property relationships), ... everywhere in the book” (68). Rueckert, however, entirely separates Marx from Burke’s communism (the presence of which he fails to acknowledge in Permanence and Change), writing that Burke “rejected Communism (but not Marx)” (67). George and Selzer claim that “while in Permanence and Change, [Burke] had presented Marxism merely as a necessary first step (and not necessarily as final goal), since Marxism was retaining too many of the destructive materialistic values of industrial capitalism, in Attitudes toward History Burke went to lengths to identify closely with a Marxist position” and “credit Marx for important concepts” (Kenneth Burke 152). There is some truth to this in that Marx is certainly named much more in Attitudes toward History than in Permanence and Change and he here directly invokes many hallmarks of Marxism, but they also say that “in P & C Burke typically attributed concepts to Veblen or to various nineteenth-century thinkers when he could have tied them to Marx, in order to distance himself from Communist Party orthodoxy” (152). Given Permanence and Change’s substantial “Communist” conclusions, this “distance” is often not great at all. At any rate, Burke’s relationship to Marx and Marxism is much more complicated than their appraisal suggests. I am more inclined to see the explicit presence of Marx in Attitudes toward History as a gesture toward the Popular Front in opposition to fascism, which they also certainly understand to be a contextual factor in Burke’s writing of Attitudes. They may be right that Burke in Attitudes was more attentive to dialectical materialism, as evidenced in his rather mechanical “curve of history,” yet they seem to overstate their case when they say that in Permanence and Change “Burke had argued strenuously against positing the material realm as the initial causal element in history” (153). Burke clearly objected to determinisms, economic and otherwise, but he did foreground the material realm as an initial force, with biological substrate and with interest, which he clearly linked to material conditions. As I tried to show in the previous chapter, he conceived this force dialectically to avoid an iteration of determinism. The second nature of culture (what he would later rework as “counternature” regarding technology [HN 285-86]) he thus justified as his principle terrain of investigation. (George and Selzer mention that Burke’s unpublished reply to Henry Bamford Parkes’

Manifesto and in Marx generally, Burke insists that “the pacific norms” of this future be included in the present, so that that future might be achieved. Burke highlights the importance of drawing from such “futuristic norms” to inform the undertakings of the present.¹¹⁹ So “class solidarity,” itself divisive to Burke in that it separates and names an “enemy,” is tempered in the present with the future solidarity of a classless society in mind. He next details a frame of acceptance that could assist in “gauging the present” toward roles that would participate in forming such a future.

Burke discusses frames for the purpose of action and seeks a “unifying attitude.”¹²⁰ He names the perspective that he finds most useful for this purpose “the comic frame of acceptance.” This frame is

the most serviceable for the handling of human relationships. It avoids the dangers of euphemism that go with the more heroic frames of epic and tragedy.

And thereby it avoids the antithetical dangers of cynical debunking, that paralyze social relationships by discovering too constantly the purely materialistic

ingredients in human effort. The comic frame is charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. (I: 138-39; 106-107)

Furthermore, the comic frame “considers human life a project in ‘composition,’ where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, also ‘revision,’ hence giving maximum opportunities for the resources of criticism” (I: 223-24; 173). This frame is

review of Attitudes toward History in the Southern Review provides greater clarity on Burke’s “effort to negotiate between determinism and individual agency” [Kenneth Burke 263, n. 18].)

¹¹⁹ “One constructs his ‘frames of acceptance’ for the present in reference to ... futuristic norms” (ATH I: 204-205; 159). I detail specifics of this below. In addition to The Communist Manifesto, Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire may also have been an influence in this formulation. Marx writes, for instance, that “the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future” (34). The dramatic and poetic metaphor of this work surely would have been of great interest to Burke.

¹²⁰ I am placing this phrase from Burke in a slightly different context. He uses it to describe how a single word might be chosen in an effort to organize “the complexity of experience,” hence exhibiting a “unifying attitude,” which is an act (ATH3 244, n.). Burke also searches for terms that would unify, or cluster, social actors. I refer, then, to his unifying attitude.

part of Burke's project to find and advance an appropriate attitude for greater human association and collective action. It is part of his program toward nonaggressive, cooperative action and relates to his implementation of Marx's "concept of class solidarity" (with its "positive quality") and "theory of collective historic purpose" (ATH I: 204; 159). While "cooperative" may be the key "c"-word of Permanence and Change, "collective" is that of Attitudes toward History.¹²¹ Burke's comic frame was intended, at least partially, to assist in forming attitudes for the collective shaping of history.

I turn now to one of Burke's explicitly "political" appearances to illustrate that many of Burke's chief terms and impulses in the companion books and related essays were very much connected to organized political activity in the 1930s. The forms Burke arrives at follow such fora, seeking to mitigate their problems, as Burke sees them, and assist in realizing their potential. Attitudes toward History, as a "project for 'getting along with people'" (II: 129; 256), extends directly from the political purpose of his first appearance at the American Writers' Congress, occurring soon after the publication of Permanence and Change.

2.2 THE FIRST AMERICAN WRITERS' CONGRESS: PARTICIPATION AND PROPAGANDA

In May 1935, Kenneth Burke published a summary report in the Nation on the first American Writers' Congress, describing the Congress as "an extremely impressive matter." The Congress

¹²¹ The word "collective" appears over thirty times in the first edition of Attitudes toward History. A sample of relevant phrasings follows: "collective enterprise" (II: 144; 266); "collective emphasis" (I: 148; 116); "collective frame" (I: 71-72; 56 and I: 141; 111); "collective poem" (I: 17; 15); "'collective poems' evolved by the widest group activities" (I: 141; 111); "'collective poems,' the total frames of thought and action" (I: 129; 99); "the collective poems of socio-economic organization" (II: 35; 202); "in constructing a vast collective mythology" (I: 34; 28); "the logic of collective purpose by which the individual act is located" (II: 212-213; 315); "a theory of collective historic purpose" (I: 204; 159); "collective symbolism" (I: 126; 97); "collective strategies" (II: 254; 343); "collective action" (II: 209, n. ; 313 [moved to main text]); "collective technique of living" (I: 90; 70).

was supported and largely organized by the Communist Party, which Burke made a point to note in his description¹²²: “This congress was unquestionably made possible only by the vitality and organizational ability of the Communist Party.”¹²³ Burke also made an effort, however, to characterize this event as not merely a Party function but as a vital exchange not bound to narrow doctrine; the Congress sought “to enlist cultural allies on the basis of the widest possible latitude.” “As one who is not a member of the Communist Party, and indeed whose theories of propaganda, expressed at one session, even called down on him the wrath of the party's most demonic orators, I can state with some claim to 'impartiality' my belief that no other organization in the country could have assembled and carried through a congress of this sort.”¹²⁴ In addition

¹²² In this report, Burke is speaking to two audiences. He gestures toward the doctrinaire choir, affirming the Party's importance, and to those suspicious or critical of the Party, distancing himself enough to establish credibility with this audience without alienating the former. He is concerned with promoting solidarity across left factions, a point I will return to later.

¹²³ Part of Burke's endorsement of party communism was, as he implies in Permanence and Change, a matter of an established organizational space in which radicals could congregate. He attended each of the three Writers' Congresses because he felt them to be actual congresses, spaces in which attitudes for action might be debated and developed, where a collectivity could form.

¹²⁴ These “demonic orators” included Michael Gold, who gave the opening address at the Congress, Joseph Freeman, and Jack Conroy. Frank Lentricchia's account of Burke's appearance at the Congress suggests that Burke was greeted with nothing but hostility (21-22). But Burke's summary in the Nation and his own recollection thirty years later (Aaron 72-74) show that Burke was hardly ostracized or alone. (Although it is apparent that this episode still troubled him in 1965, Burke clearly indicates that the strident, doctrinaire objections of Freeman, Gold, and others were not universal. To make this clear, he tells how when he saw Freeman the next day there were no hard feelings, and that Freeman even apologized.) Michael Denning provides a more nuanced account of this event than Lentricchia, situating Burke within an ongoing debate within the radical left: “the story of Burke at the American Writers' Congress is not one of Burke against the left [the story Lentricchia tells], but one of a controversy within the left” (442-44). George and Selzer agree (one might read their entire book, in fact, as an elaboration of Denning's ten pages on Burke). The open call for the Congress (published in New Masses and Partisan Review, written by Granville Hicks, and signed by, among many others, Burke) invited “all writers ... who have clearly indicated their sympathy to the revolutionary cause” yet was deliberately nonsectarian (George and Selzer Kenneth Burke 22). And Burke's call for use of the word “people” instead of “worker,” was hardly “prophetic,” even if Burke proposed this two months before the Comintern officially adopted the “People's Front” strategy at the 7th Congress in late July (Wander 202; George and Selzer Kenneth Burke 22). Denning writes that Burke “was simply articulating a common position on the left, one that he had developed both from the New York John Reed Club school, where he had taught, and from Calverton's Modern Monthly” (444; see also George and Selzer for a much fuller account, Kenneth Burke 12-29; George and Selzer also present here the full text of Burke's unpublished “precongress commentary” for Partisan Review, 14-16). Denning, however, places Burke's appearance in left culture rather late. He writes that Burke “had moved closer to the left in 1934,” without really explaining (442). But Burke's explicitly leftist writings and publication venues began earlier. Considering sections of Counter-Statement (parts of “Program”) and his “Boring from Within,” one might place this closeness at least by the end of 1931, when it had

to serious considerations on art, Burke saw “another attitude, equally important in vitalizing the congress.” Apparent “internal sectarian distinctions derived their whole point, their entire shaping, from a still broader basis, a basis on which the divergencies [sic] merged into unity. I refer to the general feeling that all these writers must somehow enlist themselves in a cultural struggle; that however meager their individual contributions may be, their work must be formed with relation to historic necessities; that what they say, and the way they say it, must involve fundamentally a concept of social responsibility” (“Writers' Congress” 571). Permanence and Change had just been published when he wrote this.¹²⁵ In presenting his paper “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” at the Congress, Burke imagined himself as one of these writers. He enlisted in cultural struggle while making a case for it.¹²⁶

The “comic” frame is already implicit in Burke’s address at the first American Writers’ Congress as he contends with “human life as a project in composition” (ATH I: 223; 173). “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” extends and recapitulates elements of Permanence and Change and seeks to encourage a basis for cooperation and solidarity through attention to language as composition material. Burke addresses what he understands to be an audience largely sympathetic to communism if not actively supporting the Soviet Union and the CPUSA. Laying bare Burke’s political motives, this address explains Burke’s attention to symbols for achieving “some unifying principle” that would “bind” and facilitate “communal relationships” (87). He describes his task, and that of radical writers and artists generally, as the production of “myth,” defined as “the social tool for welding the sense of interrelationship” so that diverse

become clear that the economic crisis following the crash of 1929 was not merely a repetition of the recession of 1921 (Kennedy 56).

¹²⁵ By his own account, Burke wrote Permanence and Change from 1932-33 (CS 216). The book was published in late March 1935 (George and Selzer Kenneth Burke 10-11).

¹²⁶ As Burke puts it in the early fifties, he was at the time “eager to think of himself as part of an over-all partnership” (CS 215).

people “can work together for common social ends” (87). Understanding his time as a “revolutionary period,” a period “in which the people drop their allegiance to one myth, or symbol, and shift to another” (88), Burke makes a case for propaganda. He specifically recommends that the revolutionary, communist movement employ the word “people” instead of “worker” “as our basic symbol of exhortation and allegiance” for its greater inclusiveness and appeal in the American democratic context (93). This specific recommendation illustrates his more general point that symbols play a necessary role in any political movement.

“Revolutionary Symbolism in America” has unity as its purpose.¹²⁷ The collective project, he tells his audience of writers and artists, is to create myths, to elaborate a mythology.¹²⁸

¹²⁷This address has been a regular part of discussions of Burke’s politics in the 1930s since Frank Lentricchia highlighted its purported raucous reception at the inaugural American Writers’ Congress in 1935 (25-28). Denning revised Lentricchia’s account, positioning Burke within lively left debates and controversies and not at all as a renegade “against the left” (444). For Denning, Burke is part of a general Popular Front radical culture. Within this diverse, heterodox anti-Fascist culture, Burke was a communist, in fact “was more a communist,” Denning maintains, “...than a Marxist” (439). Denning sees Burke as a “communist cultural theorist” (436) concerned with shifting “allegiance to symbols of authority” (ATH II: 234; 331. Qtd. in Denning 438). Denning rightly notes that “critics have generally discounted Burke’s symbolic acts of the 1930s, portraying him as the quintessential fellow traveler. His political essays and affiliations with “various Popular Front organizations are usually seen as incidental to the major theoretical projects of his books” (436). I don’t disagree. The Burke scholarship largely continues to position Burke in this way when it examines his 30s writings and to isolate details that point to Burke’s eventual rhetorical theory. Denning, however, frames Burke’s radical affiliations within a general “Popular Front” orientation, yet they actually began as early as February 1931 with “Boring from Within,” so this blanket term might be qualified. And if we understand this orientation to be centered on anti-fascism, on opposition specifically to Hitler, then an important part of Burke’s project is shunted aside for he clearly leaned toward the Communist end of the Popular Front spectrum. He remained throughout the 1930s explicitly anti-capitalist. Although Burke’s delivery of “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” in 1935 was soon part of a change in Comintern strategy (formally established in August 1935), Burke began to develop key parts of his position with “Boring from Within” and then chose to affiliate himself, in name, with Communism by the end of 1933 (see his “Nature of Art under Capitalism” [December 1933] and “My Approach to Communism” for *New Masses* [March 1934]) as well as lecturing at the New York John Reed Club, “loosely but intimately tied to the American Communist Party,” from 1931-34 (George and Selzer “What Happened” 50). See Judy Kutulus’s account of the CPUSA’s shifting position, at the direction of the Comintern, following the first American Writers’ Congress to a “People’s Front” [87-94]. Kutulus largely mimics Lentricchia’s account of a renegade and alienated Burke at the Congress, writing that Burke “was roundly booed by the assembled crowd as ‘a premature adherent of the People’s Front’” (Kutulus 92). Mostly following Denning’s lead, as they acknowledge (“What Happened” 60, n. 5), George and Selzer provide the fullest account of Burke’s appearance at the Congress in 1935 and argue that Burke’s seeming anticipation of the official Popular Front policy, officially established two months later by the Comintern, was “in the air well before then” (“What Happened” 60, n. 7). They characterize the first Writers’ Congress as “something of an olive branch, an effort not so much at John Reed Club-style solidarity but at reaching out to a broader range of writers ...and of recruiting them to a broadly proletarian cause” (“What Happened” 52). Its stated purpose was to form the League of American Writers to be affiliated with the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (“What Happened” 51; 60, n. 9). See also Stacey Sheriff on how “My Approach to Communism” was an abridged John Reed Club lecture.

With his recommendation to use the word “people,” Burke points out the importance and, as he noted about Nietzsche and Dewey in Permanence and Change, the inevitability of affirming some established values and pieties. He describes the artist as specially equipped to undertake this work in “cultural struggle.” As he discusses in Attitudes toward History, “the artist specializes in the manipulation of the symbolic structure” (ATH II: 78; 234). In this address he describes this manipulation for social purposes as propaganda, a manipulation that many scholars see as another instance of Burke’s concern with rhetoric, the word and discipline that dominates approaches to Burke’s work.¹²⁹ Yet for Burke in 1935 propaganda, even if we approach it as rhetoric, concerns political enlistment and “recruiting” (“the extension of one’s recruiting into ever widening areas”). Such recruiting “is possible only insofar as the propagandizer and propagandized have kindred values, share the same base of reference” (“Revolutionary Symbolism” 89). As with his comments on polemics and Marx in Attitudes toward History, Burke here notes that “the emphasis on the antithetical tends to incapacitate a writer for his task as a spreader of doctrine by leading him too soon into antagonistic modes of thought and expression.”¹³⁰ It gives him too much authority to condemn.... As a propagandizer,” Burke underscores, “it is not his work to convince the convinced, but to plead with the unconvinced, which requires him to use their vocabulary, their values, their symbols, insofar as

¹²⁸ Burke uses the terms “collective mythology” and “collective poem” in Attitudes toward History (I: 34, 17; 28, 15).

¹²⁹ Seeing Burke principally as rhetorician often entails forgetting his radical affiliations and motives of the 1930s. As I have mentioned, it is quite typical to see readings of the companion books from the perspective of Burke as rhetorical theorist that has been institutionalized (which Burke played a role in achieving) than to see, say, his continued use of Marx (GM 204-216; RM 101-111) and of his articulation of rhetoric as identification (RM 15-31) (which I read as a communistic gesture initially) stretching from the more obviously radical concerns of his unexpurgated 1930s work.

¹³⁰ The problem of antithesis in Marxism long concerned Burke. He writes in “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision” that radicals “must drop the note of Antithesis, so ably suited for convincing the convinced, and so thoroughly unsuited to anything else” (qtd. in Crusius “Burke’s Auscultation” 358).

this is possible” (92). The task, he implores, is “propaganda by inclusion,” to foster alliance not division (93). The propagandist’s use of the word “people” broadens appeal, as this word aligns more meaningfully with existing cultural norms. “Reduced to a precept,” Burke concludes,

the formula would run: Let one encompass as many desirable features of our cultural heritage as possible—and let him make sure that his political alignment figures prominently among them.... And I am suggesting that an approach based upon the positive symbol of ‘the people,’ rather than upon the negative symbol of ‘the worker,’ makes more naturally for this kind of identification whereby one’s political alignment is fused with broader cultural elements. (91)¹³¹

On one hand, Burke took sides in the 1930s, as his appearances at the Communist-supported American Writers’ Congresses show.¹³² On the other, he tried to lessen, or “purify,” adversarial tendencies. The problem for Burke is how “to get people together” without fomenting division and without scapegoats. Burke’s objection to Dewey’s scientism, his concern with what he saw as Nietzsche’s excessive, debilitating impiousness, Permanence and Change’s consequent foregrounding of piety and a biological universal, and the stress on propaganda “by

¹³¹ Burke’s 1931 essay “Boring from Within” begins these themes in his writings, which became central to Permanence and Change and Attitudes toward History. This essay was Burke’s contribution to an exchange on the “position of the progressive” that ran over several issues of The New Republic, beginning with Edmund Wilson’s “An Appeal to Progressives.” Suspicious of Wilson’s call for the nationalization of industry and recommendation that this program be explicitly advanced as socialism or communism (seizing the world communism from the communists, Wilson says), Burke begins to take on the problem of achieving sufficient unity for social movements that he would develop in later essays and in the companion books. Here he articulates the matter of “allegiances” in terms of “flags.” Positing “an objection to flags,” the standard bearers for “orgies of enthusiasm, of faith, of evangelizing, of Christian soldiering,” Burke presents, in contrast, an affirmation of “the certainties of the body itself, the dogmas of animal functioning itself” (327, 329). “Flags may still be needed to combat flags,” Burke writes, “but the triumph of the last flag should coincide with the triumph of flaglessness” (329). With “communism,” Wilson offers a new flag in direct opposition to the old flag, and in this Burke sees insufficient inducement and great divisiveness. Hence his turn to what he would soon call the “human substrate” and then the biological or neurological constant. This is Burke’s flaglessness. So Permanence and Change with its turn to the biological constant continues Burke’s program to assert a universal basis for congregation—for the purpose of (and as the end of) political transformation. But by then he had adopted the term communism.

¹³² Burke presented at the first three Congresses in 1935, 1937, and 1939. There was a fourth (and final) Congress in 1941, emphasizing “peace initiatives,” but Burke did not attend (George and Selzer Kenneth Burke 202).

inclusion” in “Revolutionary Symbolism” were all part of an effort to salve division and create some semblance of unity for functional cooperation to achieve freedom. Attitudes toward History deepens Burke’s consideration of the problem of forming a broad, self-determining collectivity, as well as of the role of artists and writers as “symbolists of change.”

“Revolutionary Symbolism in American” could be read as an application of central concerns of Permanence and Change to the particular demands of the cultural context of the American Writers’ Congress. I do not mean that this address should be seen as merely an application of these concerns. Considering the communist conclusions of the three parts of Permanence and Change, I see “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” showing more clearly what Burke already had in mind with many of the terms of Permanence and Change and then how this address leads to key elements of Attitudes toward History. Burke crafted Permanence and Change to support human association and participation in programs of social change and to show the importance of criticism and literary concerns for this project. Its attitude, as well as some of its terms, appears seamlessly in his explicit effort to do this at the Congress. With its explicit political purpose and plea, “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” affirms the political intent and attitude of Permanence and Change and provides the basic framework for Attitudes toward History.¹³³ Permanence and Change endorses a political movement and project (which Attitudes toward History continues under the name “collectivism”) and comments on the role of terms, presenting symbols to support what Burke understands to be communistic cultural struggle and mythmaking.

¹³³ In addition to “Boring from Within” (1931), “The Nature of Art under Capitalism” (1933), “My Approach to Communism” (1934), and “The Relation between Literature and Science” (1937), to mention a few additional articles, clarify further the radical attitudinal framework of Burke’s companion books.

2.3 MYTHMAKING, SYMBOLS OF AUTHORITY, ACTS OF IDENTIFICATION

Attitudes toward History, which Burke described as “a work of socialist exhortation,”¹³⁴ extends several topics of Burke’s address to the first American Writers’ Congress. Matters of symbolic “allegiance,” of broader “identification,” and mythmaking and propaganda are central coordinates of this book. At the Congress, Burke recommends that “propagandizers” adopt the mode of plea, that they “wheedle and cajole, [and] practice the arts of ingratiation” (“Revolutionary” 90). This plea—often placed under the heading “rhetoric” in the Burke scholarship (along with “ingratiation” and “petition”)—reappears as “secular prayer” in Attitudes toward History (to “pray” is to plead).¹³⁵ Burke offers secular prayer to assist in “forming a new collectivity,” something he attempted to support at the Congress (ATH II: 68; 226). “In ‘secular prayer,’ there is character-building, the shaping of one’s individual character and role with respect to a theory of collective historic purpose. The contemporary symbols of authority being in disarray, one forms his mind with relation to an ‘ideal’ concept of authority, still to attain its total bureaucratization, its embodiment in the totality of institutions, productive methods, and property relations. One constructs his ‘frame of reference’ of the present by reference to these futuristic norms” (ATH I: 204-205; 159). These norms are the imagined ideal of a possible future and seemingly extend from Burke’s description of the word “people” as “pointing more

¹³⁴ Burke refers to it as this in a substantive reply to a review of Attitudes in The Southern Review. Burke withdrew this reply, “On ‘Must’ and ‘Take Care,’” for publication (George “Kenneth Burke’s” 21). The full text of this reply appears as an appendix to Ann George’s essay (28-37).

¹³⁵ Burke describes prayer as opposite polemic, which he calls “prayer-upside-down”: “The essence of prayer is petition. Its simple reverse, we might say its grotesque caricature, is denunciation, invective, excommunication, ostracism, the pronouncing of anathema. It is polemic” (II: 225-26; 325).

definitely in the direction of unity” than “worker,” for “it contains the ideal, the ultimate classless [future]¹³⁶ which the revolution would bring about” (“Revolutionary” 90).

In Attitudes toward History, the reigning “symbols of authority” are now his critical target. He boldly explains his object and intent as critic in two direct statements that closely follow the “Revolutionary Symbolism” text¹³⁷:

Facing [...] myriad possible distinctions, [the critic] should confine himself to those that he considers important for social reasons. Roughly, in the present state of the world we should group these about the “revolutionary” emphasis, involved in the treatment of art with primary reference to symbols of authority, their acceptance and rejection. The critic thus becomes propagandist and craftsman simultaneously: he serves a didactic purpose in that he constantly reaffirms, in varying subject matter, the necessary tactics of transition; and he gives proper attention to the formal organization of poetry in that such an approach reveals the basic strategy of poetic symbolism (ritual, “secular prayer,” dramatic change of identity, etc.). (ATH II: 32; 200)

Our own program, as literary critic, is to integrate technical criticism with social criticism (propaganda, the didactic) by taking the allegiance to the symbol of authority as our subject. We take this as our starting point, and ‘radiate’ from it. Since the symbols of authority are radically linked with property relationships, this point of departure automatically involves us in socio-economic criticism.

¹³⁶ The 1935 text here reads “classless feature,” which does not seem to fit and is probably a typescript error. Burke refers twice to a “classless” “future” in Attitudes (I: 124, II: 65; 95, 224), and I suspect that he read “future” at the Congress.

¹³⁷ I already quoted part of the beginning of the first passage at the start of this chapter.

Since works of art, as “equipment for living,” are formed with authoritative structures as their basis of reference, we also move automatically into the field of technical criticism (the “tactics” of writers). And since the whole purpose of a “revolutionary” critic is to contribute to a change in allegiance to the symbols of authority, we maintain our role as “propagandist” by keeping this subject forever uppermost in our concerns. (II: 234-35; 331).¹³⁸

There are several things to note in these passages. Burke continues to think of himself as a propagandist with the same basic task that he argued to the writers at the American Writers’ Congress. Allegiance to symbols remains the terrain in which writers challenge, as “symbolists of change,” the dominant cultural frame supporting the socio-economic order. (Symbols of authority, as he expressed at the Congress, are particularly vulnerable in a transition period. They disintegrate and signal that it is a transition period—the Marxist or “late-capitalist” interregnum as he also puts it [ATH II: 9, I: 36; 185, 29].) Burke also continues to argue for writers and critics as propagandists, simultaneously occupying the role of propagandist toward his audience and purveying his wares or propaganda “equipment.” He is, in other words, now enacting “secular prayer.”

Finally, I note the presence of the phrase “dramatic change of identity,” appearing as part of “the basic strategy of poetic symbolism.” The tendency in the Burke scholarship would be to read this from the perspective of the Motives books as marking Burke beginning to articulate his dramatism and rhetoric (as identification), the foci of these books. One certainly could do this.

I, however, want to point to “identity,” or more precisely “identification,” as another term

¹³⁸ The first passage was not altered for the 2nd edition, while the second was reduced. The final sentence that I quoted was removed, as well as three rather innocuous subsequent sentences. Presumably, Burke’s characterization of himself as a “‘revolutionary’ critic” is the offending element. But the first passage similarly uses the word “revolutionary” and also suggests that this is Burke’s role (again using “we” and here more hortatory (as at the Congress) with the use of “should.” Was the problem then redundancy?

appearing in his address to the Congress and as a key term for the “revolutionary” critic of Attitudes toward History. Burke argues that the word “people” leads to an “identification whereby one’s political alignment is fused with broader cultural elements” (“Revolutionary” 91). I approach this word, identification, in an active sense—as, that is, the nominalization of the verb identify. It is an instance of poetic or symbolic action. In this address, Burke explains how “people” encourages broader alliance and allows individuals to see themselves as having a common, humane basis with others; it permits, that is, a “broader basis” for identification. Although Burke had used “identity” a number of times before, particularly in Counter-Statement, as far as I know this is the first time that he uses identification in this sense. He deploys it as part an effort to get people together with shared purpose.

The word identification features prominently in Attitudes toward History, closely bound with its political motives. Burke, in fact, sees it sufficiently significant to warrant an entry in this book’s “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms.” He cues its importance at the beginning of the entry “Identity, Identification,” stating “all the issues with which we have been concerned come to a head in the problem of identity” (ATH II: 138; 263). Contrary to efforts of individual psychology, which conceived, he says, identification beyond the self to be pathological and thus sought “cures” to remove such “faulty” identification, Burke argues that identification with some “corporate” body or grouping is unavoidable and necessary to psychological well being. One cannot remove it—only change it. “Identification is not in itself abnormal; nor can it ‘scientifically’ eradicated. One’s participation in a collective, social role cannot be obtained in any other way. In fact, ‘identification’ is hardly other than a name for sociality itself.” A particular identification may not be in people’s interest, he notes, “as occurs when one identifies himself with the reigning symbols of authority while these symbols of authority are in turn

identified with covertly anti-social processes” (ATH II: 144; 267). In the companion books, Burke focuses on how human beings might get together with greater understanding and toward shared purpose, which he refers to in Attitudes toward History as “emergent collectivism” and socialism, these representing the futuristic norms (ATH I: 205, 207; 159, 161).¹³⁹ This imagined future is linked to an act of identification; it guides the form that the identification will take. He writes that once an identification is recognized as not serving one’s needs, or as having “disastrous implications,” “his only salvation is to make himself an identity in an alternative corporation. The struggle to establish this alternative corporation is called the struggle for the ‘one big union’” (ATH I II: 140-41).¹⁴⁰ By specifically invoking the slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World, Burke shows further the political alliances of this term, as it emerged for the Writers’ Congress, and names his preferred alternative corporation. “Communism,” he asserts, “is the completion of the ‘one big union’ principle” (ATH II: 141).¹⁴¹

Burke comments on identification as a variety of action in his essay “Twelve Propositions on the Relation between Economics and Psychology” (1938).¹⁴² He forcefully presents identification here as collective or social and therefore active. The eleventh and twelfth propositions are most relevant to my discussion. “People,” he writes, “are neither animals or

¹³⁹ The reference to socialism here (ATH I: 207; 161) survives through the later editions, the word “socialism” apparently more permissible than “communism,” which was mostly removed from this work, as in the entry “Identity, Identification.”

¹⁴⁰ This and other sections are absent in this entry for the 2nd edition.

¹⁴¹ This sentence is unusual for the first edition of Attitudes toward History as it specifically names communism as the ideal.

¹⁴² This essay was originally published in the Marxist journal Science and Society as Burke’s response to its review, by editor Margaret Schlauch, of Attitudes toward History. Schlauch’s review is critical but hardly hostile. Referring in conclusion to this book as a “brilliant essay” that “reveal[s] how much is yet to be done in the general field of Marxism and the humanities,” she cautions that Burke “make[s] it appear that economic development is subordinate to or dependent upon the history of poetic forms” (Schlauch 132). This suggestion of subordination is the issue from a “more orthodox Marxist” and “economistic” position, as Robert Wess notes in his consideration of Attitudes and Schlauch’s review (Wess 87-88). Burke, however, does not simply invert the relationship of the economic and cultural, he complicates their relationship beyond a simplistic base-superstructure model.

machines... but actors and actors [sic]. They establish identity by relation to groups.” Unlike “individualistic concepts of identity,” identification is active, “the only active mode of identification possible” (PLF 311). One must engage or communicate with others (communication being “the cooperative act”); identification is necessarily cooperative, communicative, and participant (311).¹⁴³ As such, identification resists alienation and conflict, seeking “unity without conformity” (312). It is flexible, not fixed or predetermined. Identity is not an essence for Burke; it is relational and fluid within social contexts. Identification as an act, as described in this article, clearly follows from sound communication, social participation, and cooperation—“the coordinates of socialism” he says (PLF 311).

Secular prayer bears some resemblance to the process of identification as it “involves ‘character building’ in that one shapes his attitudes, the logic of his life, by the coordinates he chooses, and one shapes his actions with reference to the judgments that follow from the coordinates” (ATH II: 227; 326). Identification similarly builds a character by way of social coordinates and communication with others. Prayer as petition or plea requires establishing a connection with others, aligning one with their features or coordinates, so we can see how Burke eventually gets to rhetoric as identification in A Rhetoric of Motives: He is already thinking of prayer and identification similarly. Yet these terms, in Attitudes toward History, are part of Burke’s “project for ‘getting along with people’ and getting them together. He is discussing the formation of people, the creation of forms of human life and modes of interaction. With identification, Burke seeks to show the human creating itself among and with others, both collective self-determination and individual variation. This capacity for self-determination, he seems to say, would be enhanced by socialism or communism. Revolutionary activity could be

¹⁴³ Burke continually resists individualistic frames of identity. In Attitudes toward History, he writes, “The so-called ‘I’ is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting ‘corporate we’s’” (ATH II: 140; 264).

goaded to choose terms that would assist in wider identifications, reaching more people, and making perhaps a collective character or identity, as his “Revolutionary Symbolism” address suggests also.

The “one big union,” or communism, is the utopian, futuristic ideal. Burke saw glimpses of this ideal in his own participatory activities, as his description of the first American Writers’ Congress attests. His summary of this event is itself secular prayer. He petitions his readers to participate in the formation of the social “character” or collectivity he describes, through exchanges and fora that try to enact in some way the norms of the “future classless society.” Identification, in this context, was one of Burke’s symbols to promote action toward expanding the possibilities of human association with revolutionary purpose. Burke perhaps did see something of the futuristic norm at the Congress, an organized collective space, in that people were working together, sorting out how they might get to that future, by whatever name it would be known, even as they disagreed.

3.0 “POSITIVE ACTION”: RALPH ELLISON BECOMES A WRITER

At the end of the introduction to his 1964 essay collection Shadow and Act, Ralph Ellison appreciatively acknowledges his debt to Kenneth Burke, “the stimulating source” of many “ideas and critical standards for two decades” (CE 60). Indebtedness to Burke, in fact, is apparent in Ellison’s language throughout this introduction.¹⁴⁴ Ellison’s use of attitude, identity, and especially symbolic action all suggest Burke’s intellectual presence. After he had become an established writer and an award-winning novelist, Ellison invoked Burke’s idea “symbolic action” frequently; this term became part of his equipment for talking about the activity of writing and the power of language and fiction. When Ellison first encountered Burke’s symbolic action in the late 1930s or early 1940s, it had the tenor of Marxist praxis, a term enmeshed with the revolutionary longings and activities of a radical culture that Ellison knew quite well. Ellison, in fact, repeatedly uses the word “action” to express his own revolutionary desire in articles in these years and through the drafts of Invisible Man to at least the late 1940s. From Burke and others, Ellison perceived an expanded field of political activity in which writing had an important place, and he resolutely participated in cultural struggle toward the substantive

¹⁴⁴ As Beth Eddy says in her book on Burke and Ellison, “Ellison’s writing virtually drips with the language of Burke’s literary and cultural criticism” (3). Her treatment, however, leaves out the political inflections and purpose of Burke’s criticism and terms, as well as Ellison’s own political associations and writings. They are thus put together under the sign of American philosophical pragmatism, ignoring crucial details of their convergence before the Second World War. Her reading, as Burke would say, is a reduction as any reading is, of course, but do her emphases and omissions indicate something more? Do they mark a general cultural amnesia or habitual exclusion of a radical past? This chapter begins to explore this question as it presents another way of reading and connecting Burke and Ellison.

social transformation that he thought necessary. He saw himself, among others, fashioning a new collective will toward this outcome in a historical situation of felt crisis.

In an interview in the 1970s, Ellison reflected on his beginnings as a writer, carefully limiting, as he always did in the postwar years, his radical past: “I never wrote the official type of fiction. I wrote what might be called propaganda—having to do with the Negro struggle—but my fiction was always trying to be something else” (CRE 124). That something else was “art,” of course, but when he became a writer in the late 1930s he did not understand his “propaganda” to be in conflict with literature as art.¹⁴⁵ He arrived, in fact, at a position similar to Burke’s at the first American Writers’ Congress: literature could, and at times should, function rhetorically as propaganda with the purpose of transforming social relations. Writers produce myths, Burke says, and “so pattern the mind as to give it a grip on reality. For the myth embodies a sense of relationships” (“Revolutionary” 170). Ellison came to feel that such production was the writer’s responsibility in order to begin to form a “sense of relationships” toward an altered social formation. He became, in other words, a mythmaker. The crisis of the 1930s—economic, social, political, cultural—was, as Burke recognized, a crisis of authority, or what Antonio Gramsci referred to as a “crisis of hegemony.” In this crisis, Ellison, like Burke, saw this mythmaking as intervention.

Ellison later employed the term “scene” in order to describe the role of social and historical context in forming individual personality—a word that Burke included in his Pentad to designate materialist philosophies (GM 128-31). “Scene and circumstance,” Ellison writes,

¹⁴⁵ From the 1950s, Ellison repeatedly made a point to describe “art” as distinct from protest, whether or not it happens to engage in it, and fundamentally separate from any particular politics. In his famous replies to Irving Howe, compiled as “The World and the Jug,” Ellison says this: “I can only ask that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight some ideological battle” (*Collected Essays* 182). In making this claim, Ellison does not seriously consider how a work of art might function politically or ideologically despite the writer’s intent—as if people cannot (or should not) evaluate “art” according to socio-political contexts. I take up particulars of Ellison’s exchange with Howe in the next chapter.

combine “to give ideas resonance, and to compel a consciousness of perspective.” “The scene, then, is always a part of personality, and scene and personality combine to give viability to ideas. Scene is thus always a part, the ground, of action—and especially of conscious action” (CE 673). These comments are from a talk that Ellison gave in honor of Richard Wright in 1971, eleven years after Wright’s death. He describes here Wright’s development as a writer within a radical 1930s scene: Wright “set out to come into a conscious possession of his experience as Negro, as political revolutionary, as writer, and as citizen of Chicago” (CE 667). Had he replaced Chicago with New York, Ellison might have used these very words to describe himself in his twenties. His guiding friendship with Wright and radical associations in Harlem from the late 1930s through the mid-1940s “compelled a consciousness of perspective” for a “political revolutionary.” Although Ellison does not say it, the historical contingencies do not mechanically compel this perspective. They form conditions that instigate and within which people must create that perspective. His task, as mythmaker, is to contest, to reconfigure, and to invent cultural forms.

Although scholars generally recognize the importance of Burke’s writings for Ellison, they have not considered Burke and Ellison relative to each other in the “scene” of 1930s oppositional culture that greatly impacted each.¹⁴⁶ Many of Burke’s most lasting ideas—

¹⁴⁶ When Ellison’s connection to Burke has been considered, in fact, it is usually framed entirely without consideration of historical context, thereby concealing their political affinities and desires. Timothy Parrish’s 1995 essay “Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Form of Democracy” is among the first extended considerations of Ellison relative to Burke, and establishes the general contours of the Burke-Ellison criticism within a tradition of American democracy and pragmatism, a tradition that Parrish locates from Emerson. Beth Eddy’s book, the longest treatment of Burke and Ellison to date, is also largely within such nativist coordinates, as is James M. Albrecht’s “Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson.” Although Parrish refers several times to what I consider to be instances of Burke’s and Ellison’s most explicitly radical writings, he does not attend to details in these texts that demonstrate their (shared) radical political commitments. In fact, he silently passes over their presence, as when he quotes from a letter Ellison wrote to Burke in 1945 (which I consider much differently below) and does not mention its blatant radical militancy—presumably because doing so would complicate, if not thoroughly undermine, his understanding of Ellison’s “form of democracy” (117-19). In the next chapter I will detail tendencies in the Ellison scholarship that serve to maintain Ellison’s own Cold War liberal fashioning, which I see Parrish’s essay to exhibit. In addition to Parrish’s and Albrecht’s essays and Eddy’s book, essays by Robert O’Meally (1994), Robert Genter

including “symbolic action” and “identity” (or “identification”)—emerged within a radical political context of the Great Depression. And Ellison became a writer in the late 1930s within Communist and leftist circles in Harlem, mentored first by Langston Hughes and then Richard Wright.¹⁴⁷ Some studies over the last decade have attended to Ellison’s radical beginnings and to Burke’s communist turn separately, but they have not considered their writings alongside each other within the context of those beginnings. Both Burke and Ellison attended the second and third Writers’ Congresses, were associated with the Communist-influenced League of American Writers, and published in the left periodicals New Masses and Direction. They converged and participated within a Communist-inflected Popular Front scene and were part of what Michael

(2002), Donald Pease (2003), and Jonathan Arac (2003) have also taken up, to varying degrees, aspects of the Burke-Ellison connection. Genter aligns Burke and Ellison as pragmatists as part of his response to the charge that “Ellison remained trapped in an aesthetic framework that prioritized the cultural project of the meritocratic artist over the practical needs of oppressed populations” (194). Unlike Parrish, Albrecht, and Eddy, however, Genter starts by briefly describing Ellison’s “involvement in political circles” as a young writer, for he intends to establish Ellison as consistently concerned with the social relevance of art, before and after the war. In his reading, Burke’s understanding of rhetoric appealed to Ellison for “he was much more interested in how art functions in the context of lived social experience than in formal aestheticism” (195). And, Genter argues, “[r]ead through the lens of Kenneth Burke, Ellison’s aesthetic project emerges as a piece of rhetoric and a form of cultural politics. In this sense, Ellison was deliberately attempting to overcome the depoliticized character of postwar modernism without falling into the trap of social realism” (195). My hesitation toward this argument concerns the “form” and limits of this cultural politics (and not just the stock binary of modernism and social realism), for it appears to me that Genter, as well as other neopragmatist critics like Ross Posnock and Morris Dickstein, offers a rather toothless understanding of politics, at variance with Ellison’s early impulses and narrowly bound to a Cold War orientation that tends toward modest reform within the terrain of cultural production. This argument, however, is for the next chapter.

¹⁴⁷ Although always asserting his independence and wariness, from the late 1960s Ellison openly spoke in several interviews about his apprenticeship as a writer in radical contexts in the late 1930s and early 1940s. See in particular his 1967 Harper’s interview with Steve Cannon, Lennox Raphael, and James Thompson; his 1971 interview with David L. Carson; his 1974 interview with John Hersey; and his 1977 interview with Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, and Steve Cannon. These are collected in Maryemma Graham and Anritjit Singh’s Conversations with Ralph Ellison (the following pages are particularly relevant: 124-26; 199-200; 292-96; 345-48). “Remembering Richard Wright,” from which I quote above, also contains extended comments on Wright’s communism (as well as assertions of Ellison’s relative autonomy) in these years (CE 662-672). Ellison’s biographers drew heavily from these materials and Ellison’s account, and not always with sufficient verification of Ellison’s recollection. As I will show in the next chapter, I read the Ellison criticism in significant respects to be of a piece with Ellison’s own Cold War self-fashioning.

Denning refers to as the “cultural front.”¹⁴⁸ Their shared political perspective might be called Marxist, communist, or simply leftist, words that each on occasion would embrace. The “structure of feeling” or culture that brought them together in the late 1930s was revolutionary left. So when Ellison first heard Burke speak at the third American Writers’ Congress in 1939 and had begun to define himself as a writer, part of Burke’s appeal was a matter not only of literary form and philosophy but also, perhaps most importantly, of a shared political perspective and concern with negotiating the complex topic of art in relation to, as well as function within, political movements. Ellison first encountered Burke’s work and terms, that is, as politically purposeful. The paper that Ellison heard Burke read at the third Congress, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” gave more credence to his belief that writing mattered greatly in political activity.

Since Ellison’s death in 1994 and the deposit and partial availability of his papers at the Library of Congress from 1997, some scholars have paid increased attention to Ellison’s “political” beginnings as a writer—to his early stories, essays, and reviews relative to his radical affiliations. Barbara Foley, Lawrence Jackson, and William J. Maxwell, for instance, have made contributions, albeit with somewhat different aims, that understand Ellison’s early writings within a general left culture and that take on his sole published novel, Invisible Man (1952)—and, in the case of Foley, also its drafts—in relation to these writings. With this chapter, I try to add to and complicate this scholarship through focusing on the significance of the emergence of one term, action, which I trace from Ellison’s beginnings as a writer to Invisible Man, where it appears as a vestigial marker of Ellison’s erstwhile radical commitments and militancy. I choose this term because I see it as central to both Burke’s and Ellison’s projects in the 1930s

¹⁴⁸ Denning conceives this as a distinct culture, or “structure of feeling” in Raymond Williams’s sense. He also relies on Williams’s related notion “cultural formation,” formations being “simultaneously artistic forms and social locations” (Denning xx). He understands the “cultural front” as a formation.

and because it gives pause to readings of their work that I see as narrowly “culturalist”¹⁴⁹ and that displace what they thought of as the vital linking of symbolic action and political activity. They crafted a symbolic in relation to a political movement, conceiving it to play a role in supporting, defining, and directing that movement.

In The Cultural Front, Michael Denning attempts to broaden conceptions of the US left in the 1930s with his notion “cultural front” and establish cultural coherence across social and geographical differences with this figure of common opposition. Yet there is a tendency in his book to de-link cultural forms from organized political activity—something I find, too, in the “political” Ellison scholarship. As some labor historians have noted, Denning tends to disconnect the cultural productions that he meticulously compiles from particulars of a concrete political movement and its failures. He does not, Lawrence Glickman mentions, give sufficient “attention to the question of power—specifically the limited political power and institution building of the Cultural Front” (323). Denning’s book “underemphasizes the need for organizations and institutions that perpetuate and nourish culture” and fails to consider the implications of the Cultural Front as marking more than the “popular taste” of the period and that was insufficiently connected to political organization to have substantively persisted. Additionally, insofar as Denning attempts to show the continued influence of the Cultural Front into the postwar years, Peter Rachleff finds that Denning “loses sight of the relationship between social movements and cultural expressions” and also “fails to theorize [the] important theme of hegemony,” with which he begins the book (333; Denning 6). His approach of cultural materialism, then, loses some of its force, for he does not delve into how the “labored” culture of the 1930s emerged from, supported, and sought to impact social relations in connection to an

¹⁴⁹ I mean by this the substitution of cultural production and analyses for political activity—the de-linking of politically motivated cultural production and organized politics.

organized movement, however insufficiently. Denning seemingly forgets Gramsci's emphasis on organization as necessary support and preparation. "The decisive element in every situation," Gramsci writes, "is the permanently organized and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favorable (and it can be favorable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware" (185). Ellison was very much concerned with the formation of such a force and saw his role as a writer in facilitating the necessary awareness or consciousness. Timothy Brennan, drawing in part from Gramsci,¹⁵⁰ articulates such a conscious force as an "organizational imaginary" and "collective subject" (82). This imaginary, Brennan recognizes, depends on myth—a "political myth" that it "must have to recruit and expand" (90).¹⁵¹ Ellison's own mythmaking was part of just such a project—the formation of a collective subject and imaginary.

Ellison's early work presents the case of a writer that saw himself as part of an organized movement and struggle. He emerged as a writer within the Popular Front, "nourished" by its "organizations and institutions," often having some connection to the Communist Party. Tracing Ellison's usage of "action" from the late thirties through the forties begins to reveal continuity in Ellison's writings despite changes in his feelings toward the Communist Party. Ellison maintained the importance of militant action, which at times clearly coincided with "official" Party objectives but which he consistently saw as a component of a black liberation movement.

¹⁵⁰ Brennan does not quote the passage from Gramsci that I do, but it does support a main claim of his essay.

¹⁵¹ The occasion of Brennan's essay is the Clinton impeachment, but his concern is the general failure of the US left to counter the right and, most devastatingly, what he sees as the American cultural left's theoretical orthodoxies and tendencies that serve, perhaps inadvertently, "to destroy [an organizational imaginary] in others" (102). His argument is not against cultural struggle; it is an argument for placing such struggle in relation to effective political organization.

He conceived such action within contexts of oppositional organizations and saw his efforts as a writer to be in support of forming, developing, and making more self-aware, or “conscious,” an oppositional force. Militancy, for Ellison during this time, comprises dedication and sacrifice and designates aggressive opposition.¹⁵²

3.1 PREPARING TO ACT

The word “action” conspicuously appears in both the prologue and epilogue of Invisible Man, arrestingly bookending the narrator’s chronological account of his experiences. It expresses a desire, perhaps political, yet one that remains unfulfilled at the novel’s close—the term itself nearly as ambiguous as at the novel’s start. The narrator boldly declares at the end of the prologue, “I believe in nothing if not in action” (IM 13). Then, in the epilogue, he understands his reflections to lead inexorably to “action.” “[W]hy do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled ‘file and forget,’ and I can neither file nor forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency. Why should I be dedicated and set aside—yes, if not to at least tell a few people about it? There seems to be no escape” (579). What he has learned compels some sort of action. At the end of the epilogue, the narrator announces that he is at last leaving his underground room, his place of “hibernation,” which, as he tells readers in the prologue, is “a covert preparation for more overt action” (13).

¹⁵² In common usage, this term is routinely pejorative and implies extremism, fanaticism, and violence. Despite the word’s etymology and connection to the word military and soldiering, it is not strictly or necessarily connected to violent activity. In Ellison’s usage, it certainly leaves open the possibility of violence, but its essential quality is committed engagement. So King’s “nonviolent direct action,” as well as Gandhi’s “satyagraha” movement and Thoreau’s “civil disobedience,” are instances of militancy. I take up the question of militancy again in the next chapter relative to Ellison’s detractors in the 1960s and to some recent scholars’ consideration of the postwar Ellison as appropriately “political.”

The text that the narrator has produced, the story or “lesson” of his life, is now repositioned as preparation for action (572). He is “shaking off the old skin,”¹⁵³ “coming out” of his “hole” and hibernation, compelled at last to act (581). In Burke’s terms, which Ellison knew, the narrator’s attitudinal shift here—emerging from his narration and reflection on his experience—constitutes “incipient action,” the beginning of an act (GM 242-43). Burke understands the moment of incipience as “a region of ambiguous possibilities,” the point of beginning where an act is “partially but not fully in existence” (GM 242).

The uncertainty of the narrator’s professed desire to act, then, maintains a sense of possibility. As the novel ends at this moment of incipience, the ambiguity of the word “action” comes to signify “possibility” itself, the uncertain, hesitant moment prior to acting. The suspension of that moment seemingly trumps and stalls action. Part of the difficulty is that by the end of the novel the narrator understands that to begin is inevitably to limit the field of what is possible. And this is a preoccupation of Invisible Man: in setting out, in beginning, there is the tendency to misapprehension, rendering things invisible in acts of naming. Nonetheless, the narrator recognizes that he cannot and must not defer indefinitely. “I suppose it’s damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that’s my greatest social crime, I’ve overstayed my hibernation, since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). After the narrator announces his social obligation, the novel concludes with his stated intent to leave his hole and to act. This action is not strictly symbolic and certainly not the solitary symbolic production of the writing of his life story.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ This image of “shaking off the old skin” bears resemblance to Burke’s discussion of “rituals of rebirth” in Attitudes toward History as “dramatic change in identity,” these occurring “[p]articularly in periods extremely transitional in emphasis” (II: 216, 215; 318, 317).

¹⁵⁴ In his treatment of the Burke and Ellison, Timothy Parrish prefers to read the narrator’s stated belief in action as “symbolic,” arguing that in conjunction with the final lines that speak directly to the reader such symbolic action,

The narrator suggests, at the very least, that such action requires the presence of and association with other people, even if the form “social responsibility” would take is not clear. If we keep in mind Burke’s understanding of attitude as incipient action as we read the epilogue, limits are already present for action has already begun; it is “partially in existence.” Although the possibilities may be ambiguous and a course is not absolutely set, what can occur, the forms action might take, have narrowed in particular ways. Indeed, in the epilogue the narrator reflects on beginning as a problem, as both a moment of invention and change and as the hardening of form. Edward Said, in his extensive consideration of beginnings, observes this difficulty to be integral: “we can say that formally the problem of beginning is the beginning of the problem. A beginning is a moment when the mind can start to allude to itself and to its products as formal doctrine” (Beginnings 42). The narrator’s terms and story have already taken on the status of doctrine even if ostensibly opposed to doctrine. The narrator’s “final” statement in the epilogue has the weight of doctrine even as it appears hesitant. That the narrator feels that he has learned lessons (in the process of narrating his life) indicates as much.

When the word “action” became an important part of Ellison’s lexicon in the early 1940s, it signified a political imaginary that Invisible Man at least partially abandons and eclipses. The tension that I have described between the narrator’s concomitant desire for “action” and for “possibility” marks the novel’s distance from Ellison’s own beginnings, for here the risk of foreclosing what he terms “possibility” constrains what “action” might be. The Ellison of the Cold War truncates the parameters of what is possible, seemingly denying certain paths in the name of pluralistic openness and freedom. The narrator opines, “Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility” (IM 576). “I assign myself no

the narrator’s writing of his story and Ellison’s writing of the novel, would “demand action on the part of his reader” (141). Really?

rank or any limit.... [M]y world has become one of infinite possibilities” (576). This sense of possibility expresses a negative conception of liberty. Invisible Man tells us that without impositions, presumably the objective of “gangs,” the world is essentially free. This expression of negative liberty—that is, fealty to possibility—itself becomes a straitjacket, for it may routinely deny the legitimacy of efforts to create conditions for freedom, to conceive liberty positively. From this viewpoint, such efforts are always dangerous to “freedom” and pose too great a risk. Therefore, they cannot commence. The lines that I quote concerning the narrator’s desire to act, however, are also traces from Ellison’s earlier radical writings and of a militancy he then termed “positive action.” This is an action of resistance to dominant patterns of oppression and includes (symbolic) action that creates positive forms to support ways of living in shared liberation. As such, these lines concerning action in Invisible Man refer back to another Ellison and remind us of the limits of a course that he took and, yes, the possibilities of some that he abandoned.

3.2 ELLISON’S NEW YORK SCENE

In 1936, after his junior year at Tuskegee Institute as a music student, Ralph Ellison planned to spend the summer in New York City to earn money for his fall tuition and to study sculpture, a newfound interest, with Harlem sculptor Augusta Savage. He would not return to Tuskegee. The day after arriving in Harlem from Alabama, young Ellison ran into Alain Locke, intellectual impresario for the Harlem Renaissance and the so-called New Negro (whom Ellison had recently met at Tuskegee), and Langston Hughes, at the time the most prominent black American poet

(EG 163, 157; RE 82).¹⁵⁵ This chance encounter quickly ushered Ellison into a world of art and letters and of radical politics in Harlem. Hughes enlisted Ellison as an occasional secretary and provided introductions to Louise Thompson, who furthered Ellison's immersion in Harlem's communist and bohemian cultural scene,¹⁵⁶ and then the following year to Richard Wright, another self-described communist, who mentored Ellison as he began to re-imagine himself as a writer. As Arnold Rampersad says, "The influence of Hughes and Thompson, in the context of the Depression and his raw ambition, virtually ensured Ralph's radicalization" (RE 90). Ellison's introduction to Wright deepened this. Both Hughes and Wright provided crucial support and encouragement in Ellison's turn to writing, and to conceiving the writer as necessarily engaged, as Jean-Paul Sartre would soon express the political obligation of the writer. It was not just Hughes and Wright, however. They were actively part of a highly politicized and communist culture in Harlem and throughout New York. In these years, "the Harlem Party served as the hub of an immense range of cultural activities." With attention to "the Afro-American's contribution to American culture as an important political question, Communist Party leaders unleashed a flood of creative energy among black and white intellectuals attached to their movement" (Naison 218). By the mid-1930s, the Party "and its

¹⁵⁵ Specifics of Jackson's and Rampersad's accounts of this meeting are largely drawn, like many details of Ellison's early New York experience, from Ellison's own comments in interviews and essays. See, in particular, Ellison's description of encountering Hughes and Locke in "Remembering Richard Wright" (1971) (CE 660-61). At times, as with his first encounter with Burke, such reliance on Ellison's accounts leads Jackson and Rampersad astray.

¹⁵⁶ Thompson reports, "We used to have discussions in our home with [Wright], Paul Robeson, Langston [Hughes] and Jacques Romain, a Haitian poet we greatly admired.... Ralph Ellison used to be part of that scene as well. He used to be at my house almost every day" (qtd. in Naison 218). James Smethurst puts Ellison's mentors together succinctly: "Hughes was, with the exception of Richard Wright, the black writer most identified with the Communist Left during the 1930s" (93). In contrast to Rampersad, Jackson qualifies Ellison's "radicalization." Ellison was attracted to "communist theory ... as a means to explain racism" but had "no need for membership" in the Party and remained content with being a fellow traveler (EG 186). He "entered the movement," Jackson writes, "well to the right of his Marxist friend" Wright and supposedly maintained his distance and independence, as Ellison would repeatedly note years later (EG 182).

supporting organizations had attained the size and breadth to constitute a distinct social and cultural entity” (Solomon 281). Ellison began to re-imagine himself within this world.

Much to his displeasure, at the start of 1937 Ellison was working at a paint factory (EG 174; RE 91).¹⁵⁷ He describes in a letter to his mother in April his friendship with Hughes and his “uncomfortable,” uncertain existence in New York: “in spite of my confidence in desiring to become a musician, so many things happened in school and here that I’ve become a little bewildered. And the urge I feel within seems not to fade away but becomes more insistent for expression, and I have yet to discover just what form it will take. Let us hope I shall soon find myself.” In August, after living in New York for over a year, Ellison reveals to his mother something of that form: “I am very disgusted with things as they are and the whole system in which we live. This system which offers a poor person practically nothing but work for a low wage from birth to death; and thousands of us are hungry half of our lives. I find myself wishing that the whole thing would explode so the world could start again from scratch.” Recalling his family’s hardships to his mother and noting that he and his brother Herbert were both currently unemployed, he points to a way to address the social ills he encounters:

All those years and all that work, and not even a job to bring a dollar a week. The people in Spain are fighting right now because of just this kind of thing,¹⁵⁸ the people of Russia got tired of seeing the rich have everything and the poor nothing and now they are building a new system. I wish we could live there. And these

¹⁵⁷ This experience over several months presumably provided material for the memorable Liberty Paints factory episode of Invisible Man.

¹⁵⁸ Not long before Ellison wrote this letter, Langston Hughes had left for Spain to report on the war. Ellison made considerable effort to follow him but was denied a passport and then encountered further difficulties as he devised alternative means to get there (RE 94-95).

rich bastards are trying to take the W.P.A. away from us.¹⁵⁹ They would deny a poor man the right to live in this country for which we have fought and died. You should see New York with its million of unemployed, the people who sleep in the parks and in doorways. The old women strolling down Fifth Avenue carrying their dogs which are better cared for than most human beings. Big cars and money to burn and right now I couldn't buy a hot dog. I'm sick thinking of the whole mess and I hope something happens to change it all. ("American" 36)

Playing a part in working toward such change was now becoming a conscious part of Ellison's life as he considered the prospect of being a writer.

Wright moved to New York from Chicago at the start of June and became a staff writer for the Harlem bureau of the Daily Worker (Gayle 100; Rowley 125-27; Jackson Ralph 178).¹⁶⁰ Hughes promptly introduced Ellison to Wright and within days these two attended the second American Writers' Congress together, hearing Hemingway's keynote address concerning the Spanish civil war on June 4th. Ellison then began to spend a considerable amount of his spare time at the Daily Worker office (Jackson Ralph 184; Rampersad 96).¹⁶¹ Wright encouraged

¹⁵⁹ By the summer of 1937 the Roosevelt administration began making deep cuts to the WPA (Kennedy 355). Additionally, conservative attacks on the perceived politicization of WPA cultural projects further beset affiliated artists and writers. The House Committee on Un-American Activities, established in late 1938 and chaired by Texas representative Martin Dies, focused on Communist influence at the WPA. Ellison had just begun working on the New York Writers' Project at that time yet managed to keep his position through political purges until the Project's termination in 1942. Wright, however, became a grandstanding target during the initial hearings for Dies, who denounced Wright's autobiographical essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" as "filthy" (EG 215). Dies, of course, was not referring to the brutality that Wright encountered—the "Jim Crow education" that he starkly depicts in this essay—but seemingly to the fact that Wright dared to mention it at all (Uncle 7). Obeisant silence, after all, is one of the lessons of the "education" that Wright presents in this essay. Here, with Dies, anti-communism seamlessly blends with the maintenance of racial hegemony.

¹⁶⁰ The accounts of this vary. Rowley contends that Wright intended to transfer his work for the Illinois Writers' Project to the New York chapter of the Federal Writers' Project. Jackson, however, claims that "Wright's superior James Ford sent the young writer to New York to placate him" following "a deep misunderstanding with the Chicago Communist Party during the 1936 May Day parade" (EG 178).

¹⁶¹ Ellison later claimed to have first encountered Wright through a poem, "which I liked," published in New Masses not long before he met Wright in person (CE 73, 210; CRE 292). "I was interested," Ellison says, "because I did not

Ellison's interest in writing and arranged Ellison's first publication, a book review for the recently launched New Challenge, for which Wright was associate editor. Ellison's review of These Low Grounds, a novel by Waters Edward Turpin, appeared in the same issue as Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing."¹⁶² Wright shared details of his essay with Ellison as he advised him on reviewing. Not surprisingly, Wright's "Blueprint" informed Ellison's assessment of Turpin's novel and what Ellison saw as its failure to "grasp the historic process as a whole, and his, and his group's relation to it" ("Creative" 91)¹⁶³. Following Wright, Ellison finds Turpin's failing in his limited perspective: his novel did not show the African-American predicament in the context of history.¹⁶⁴ With this allusion to social conditions in the context of history as process and human creation, Ellison's fledgling review bears markers of a Marxism that would characterize much of his writing for at least the next five years.

"Blueprint for Negro Writing" explicitly advances a Marxist standpoint, hitting key notes of the contemporary Communist doctrine, and implores black writers to abandon what Wright

see the techniques of modern poetry in the work of Afro-American poets" (CRE 292). This poem was probably "We of the Streets," the fourth of five that Wright published in New Masses. The poem, like his others for New Masses, displays figures of unity, commonality, and revolutionary activity. The "we" is not just "of the streets" but also in the streets. The poem concludes, "there is something in the streets that made us feel immortality when we rushed / along ten thousand strong, hearing our chant fill the world, wanting to do what / none of us would do alone, aching to shout the forbidden word, knowing that we / of the streets are deathless..." (14). (Jackson follows Wright's biographer Michael Fabre and says the poem in question is "Between the World and Me," which was published in 1935 in Partisan Review, so the year and publication venue depart from Ellison's account (EG 175). Jackson's endnote, however, allows that it may have been "We of the Streets" [EG 464, n. 38]).

¹⁶² Its cover exhilaratingly placed Ellison's name, typographically in equal standing, with those of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and others.

¹⁶³ Ellison repeats this charge in his 1941 Direction essay "Richard Wright and Recent Negro Fiction." Turpin, at this point the author of a second novel, "betrays the lack of a fully integrated world-view; a fact most glaringly revealed in his clinging to obsolete technical devices" ("Richard Wright" 12). In a 1974 interview with John Hersey, Ellison mentions his first review in New Challenge—"not a very good one"—and comments that he "later reviewed the same book for the Times" (CRE 293). (As far as I can determine, however, there is no record of such a review attributed to Ellison in the New York Times.)

¹⁶⁴ Ellison also may have here first encountered a variation of what he would later discuss as "American identity" and its complexity. Wright's usage, however, is closer to Burke's as I discussed it in the previous chapter, for he writes of becoming "identified with American civilization" (64). As with Burke, for Wright this "identification with" serves to bring about unity for the purpose of political activity.

saw as the apolitical aestheticism of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. “Negro writing, ” Wright demands, must address itself not “to a small white audience [but] to a Negro one,” to shape the “lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals” (56). Writers must bridge “the gap ... between them and their people” in order to achieve “a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired” (“Blueprint” 54-55). Wright not only asserts the basic Marxist premise that humans make society (history) but also that blacks in the US constitute a distinct “people,” following the Party proposition known as the “nation within a nation” or Black Belt thesis. This thesis asserted that “blacks in the United States were an oppressed nation which had the right of self-determination in those parts of the South where they formed a majority of the population” and became official policy at the Sixth Comintern in 1928 (Naison 17). The formal statement also “called for full racial equality” and the necessity “for the Party to draw closer to black proletarians” (Solomon 82). “The belief that Black Belt agrarian Negroes constituted the germ of a ‘national revolutionary movement’ was now official policy. Yet it was also incumbent upon the Party to explain to Negro workers and peasants that only unity with white workers and a ‘victorious proletarian revolution’ would permanently resolve the agrarian and national questions” (Solomon 82). This policy appeared within the general Third Period emphasis on working-class revolution, for which such unity was vital.

After much factional dispute at the Sixth Congress, the 1928 Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States conceived the situation of blacks in the US as a national question and not primarily a racial one.¹⁶⁵ “The CPUSA position claiming that African

¹⁶⁵ See Solomon’s detailed account of this debate at the Sixth Comintern Congress when Harry Haywood and Charles Nasonov presented their “nation within a nation” thesis (70-81). The resulting 1928 Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States marked the importance of a “national revolutionary movement in the ‘Black Belt’” and the “right of Negroes to national self-determination in the southern states.” The subsequent 1930 Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question more explicitly presented its conception of American blacks as a “an oppressed nation.” (See “1928 and 1930” for the full text of these resolutions.)

Americans constituted a ‘nation,’” as James Smethurst points out, “was a cultural argument that denied any biologically determined essentialism” (23). Smethurst quotes from a 1930 article by Harry Haywood, one of the chief architects of the Comintern position, to show how emphasis on “nation” functioned to undermine normative biological understandings of “race.” “Race as an ideology,” Haywood writes, is “a factor in the national question,” but it is “erroneous ... to ascribe to what is in fact an ideology the importance of the social question itself. To do so would be equivalent to reducing the national question to one of its factors. Concretely it would be tantamount to reducing the Negro question, a social question, to a question of race-ideology, i.e., to blur over the economic and social roots of this question, and finally to a capitulation before bourgeois race theories” (qtd. in Smethurst 23). The commonplace description, then and now, of this desired unity as “interracial”¹⁶⁶ is therefore potentially misleading (and part of “bourgeois race theory”) in that it, if reflexively understood biologically and not ethnically,¹⁶⁷ may reproduce the very ideology that Haywood and others were trying to supplant in stressing the Negro question as a social question.

¹⁶⁶ Today, the term “mixed” in regard to race (as well as to “culture”) functions similarly, for it presumes the existence of “pure” (or unmixed) races and reinforces belief in their existence.

¹⁶⁷ Although the struggle against “race” as a biological concept has been ongoing for more than a hundred years in the United States, this remains the normative, institutionalized understanding. Even the current, dominant science of genetics, which after the completion of the human genome in the late 1990s averred that “race” did not exist materially, routinely traffics in practice in what I see as “racial profiling” in that it often fails to see a distinction between “race” and “population,” as the science theoretically demands, in something as basic as the selection of subjects for clinical trials. “Race” thinking and “seeing,” of course, persist culturally and institutionally, a hegemonic formation as Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued, that one finds everywhere, from the revamped, bizarrely incoherent 2000 Census conceptions of race and ethnicity (reproduced in 2010) to mainstream representations of and reactionary commentary on “race” in the purportedly “post-racial” age of Obama—as well as on Obama himself. Through the dominant science and Census adjustments, individuals and institutions re-ritualize and reinvent “race” within the changing terrain of social life (see Barbara Fields on this [117-18]). Orlando Patterson’s proposal to jettison the race concept and term altogether, to be replaced with ethnicity (72), is understandable but unlikely to occur any time soon given how effectively the “logic” of race reproduces itself, withstanding the familiar challenges of the “cultural left” and even the reigning “hard” science of genetics/genomics. Part of my intent, then, in describing the “nation within a nation” or Black Belt thesis as comprising a challenge to normative understandings of “race” is to present a position that remains current in addition to showing an important element in Ellison’s radical formation. (Patterson, by the way, has recently claimed that by 2050 “the social virus of race will have gone the way of smallpox”! See David Roediger’s astute remarks on this prognostication in the context of “Obamamania” [213-14].)

Ellison surely encountered features of the Black Belt position among many he met in Communist Harlem. Langston Hughes, for one, espoused a black nationalism toward alliance with white workers. Clearly within the orbit of the 1930 Comintern Resolution and Black Belt thesis, Hughes directed black writers at the 1935 Writers' Congress to articulate a black consciousness¹⁶⁸—"we can reveal to the Negro masses ... our potential power to transform the now ugly face of the Southland"—toward worker solidarity.¹⁶⁹ "Negro writers can seek to unite blacks and whites in our country," Hughes said, "not on the nebulous basis of an inter-racial meeting, or the shifting sands of religious brotherhood, but on the solid ground of the daily working-class struggle to wipe out, now and forever, all the old inequities of the past" ("To Negro Writers" 139). Hughes positions the category of class as replacing that of race (even though he understands race culturally). "Class" unity, we are to understand, transcends race and is a precondition of a revolutionary workers' movement—his address in keeping with the general emphasis during the Third Period and the dominant Marxist theory. Hughes balks at conceiving unity as "inter-racial," for doing so would reinforce exactly what this position intends to transcend.

Very soon, however, the Party broadened its conception of "unity" to include liberals and socialists and de-emphasized the strategy of black self-determination. Following the Seventh Comintern Congress in the summer of 1935, the anti-fascist Popular Front strategy commenced, and in November the Central Committee formally shifted focus from self-determination in the Black Belt to disenfranchisement and issues of civil rights (Naison 173). As endorsement of

¹⁶⁸ Hughes presented during the opening session of the Congress on April 26, the day before Burke gave his "Revolutionary Symbolism in America" paper. (Ann George and Jack Selzer's Kenneth Burke in the 1930s reproduces the full Congress program [24]).

¹⁶⁹ Wright's "Blueprint" is to some extent an expansion and amplification of Hughes's short address to the first American Writers' Congress.

elements of the New Deal and alliances with liberal and socialist groups became the order of the day, greater acceptance of the Party followed, including among the black professional class. For some black radicals associated with the Party, however, commitment to self-determination and nationalism strongly persisted, as Wright's "Blueprint" shows. Residual and tacit acceptance, if not active support, of Party positions often continued despite abrupt and unsettling shifts in policy, from the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact in 1939 and ensuing opposition to war¹⁷⁰ through the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and sudden vigorous war effort. Wright's great disappointment with Party positions and de-emphasis if not abandonment of black self-determination and anti-racist programs became certain, and very public, anger by the war's end. Ellison mostly echoed Wright in this. Yet Ellison's allegiance to the principle of black self-determination and the Black Belt thesis took its own course through the war years, where these matters appeared, not always comfortably for Ellison we will see, as part of the CPUSA "Double V strategy"—victory against fascism and racism at home and against fascism abroad.

Ellison's concern with "consciousness"—and that he saw himself as a writer advancing an international revolutionary consciousness—has its beginnings in the intersection of black nationalism and interracial revolutionary ambition, specifically as Wright articulated these. The call to writers in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" is a matter, Wright says, of consciousness or perspective, "that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people" (61). Following the Black Belt position, Wright places importance on recognizing the "whole culture" of black American life as a nation, and then stresses that this consciousness must ultimately be international, anticipating the transcendence of the category of race itself and locating alliances in class position. The "starting point"

¹⁷⁰ As Lawrence Jackson says, following the nonaggression pact "American Communist policy shifted to near militant advocacy of black rights in an effort to hinder the American war machine" ("Birth" 325). That changed in 1941.

therefore is “a Marxist conception of reality and society,” the “dramatic Marxist vision” (60).¹⁷¹ “Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something” (62). Finally, Wright, with number ten of his “Blueprint,” calls for “collective work” and stresses that “the ideological unity of Negro writers and the alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of our day is the primary prerequisite for collective work.” Wright cautions against African Americans losing “the desire to become identified with American civilization,” even though the “white-hot iron of exclusion” and “the whole special way of life which has been rammed down their throats” certainly invites this (64). Such rejection, Wright believes, would impede the unity necessary for revolutionary activity. His was not, however, a programmatic demand for proletarian fiction (even if it may not have been entirely separate from this): Wright attempts to balance the free expression of art with political purpose. Ellison would not lose sight of this balancing act for years. Wright’s emphases on black nationalism, transracial unity, and international solidarity among oppressed peoples became Ellison’s own, informing his writing from the late 1930s through much of the 1940s.

Wright’s “Blueprint” became Ellison’s evaluative template as he reviewed books and reported for New Masses from 1938 to 1942.¹⁷² He tried as a writer both to fulfill Wright’s vision for black writers and, in reviews, to hold other writers accountable to its criteria. Writers, he felt, must have sufficient historical perspective to facilitate the unity necessary for

¹⁷¹ Might Wright have just read Burke’s Attitudes toward History (1937), which also refers to Marx’s “dramatic” vision?

¹⁷² Richard Wright had become a member of the New Masses editorial board in June 1938 and was able to help Ellison get review work for the publication (EG 205; RE 112). After the review for New Challenge, Ellison published his next thirteen reviews and articles in New Masses through 1940. Robert O’Meally’s bibliography of Ellison’s writings presents the complete listing of his New Masses publications (Craft 185-91).

revolutionary activity. Reviewing in 1939 the novel Boss Man, by Louis Cochran, Ellison reproves the author for reducing a white boss's brutality to merely personal frustration and for not seeing an individual's position within a framework of "ruling class" interests and "consciousness." Although the novel contains scenes of "a white sharecropper protesting his exploitation" and of "a Negro exerting his will in revolt," Cochran does not understand, according to Ellison, "the historical significance of such incidents" ("Ruling-Class Southerner" 27). In 1941, Ellison again found insufficient perspective in William Attaway's Blood on the Forge. "The power of Blood on the Forge lies not so much in Attaway's presentation," he writes, "as in the tremendous vitality and appeal of the book's basic situation" ("Great Migration" 24). Its flaw, however, is that "[t]here is no center of consciousness, lodged in a character or characters capable of comprehending the sequence of events. Possibly this would have called for an entirely new character. But at the same time it would have saved the work from finally disintegrating into a catalogue of meaningless casualties and despairs" (24). The Marxist perspective that Wright demanded is here Ellison's standard. "Inclusion of such a consciousness would not have been a mere artistic device; it would have been in keeping with historical truth" (24). Ellison furthers his Marxist critique by noting that Attaway fails to perceive the dialectical process of history: chronicling industrialism, "Attaway grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level." Ellison completes the dialectic by positing the "trade union movement" as its synthesis (24).¹⁷³ Buttressed by the Black Belt thesis and Wright's "Blueprint," Ellison typically posited the black trade unionist as the

¹⁷³ Ellison consistently approaches novels and art from an explicit Marxist perspective in his reviews for New Masses. He praises writers who appear to achieve something of this vision, even if incomplete. In his review "Negro Prize Fighter," for instance, he complements Len Zinberg for successfully presenting "a Marxist understanding of the economic basis of Negro personality" in his novel Walk Hard, Talk Loud. "That, plus a Marxist sense of humanity, carries the writer a long way in a task considered extremely difficult: for a white writer successfully to depict Negro character" (27).

vanguard force.¹⁷⁴ Grounded in the perspective of an oppressed nation, this figure, Ellison thought, could nonetheless point to the transcendence of race and nationality and become a guide toward a revolutionary international class solidarity.

Ellison's radical judgment would not spare even Langston Hughes. In another New Masses article from late 1940, Ellison applied, albeit tactfully, Wright's standard when evaluating Langston Hughes's autobiography The Big Sea. Although appreciative, his review anticipates what he sees as possible criticisms of Hughes's book among New Masses readers, noting that with Hughes's style "too much attention is apt to be given to the aesthetic aspects of experience at the expense of its deeper meanings.... To be effective the Negro writer must be explicit; thus realistic; thus dramatic" ("Stormy" 20). This line in particular leads both Jackson and Rampersad to emphasize this review as demonstrating Ellison's distance from Hughes and closeness to Wright. Rampersad writes that Ellison "rebuked Langston for lacking radical seriousness in The Big Sea" (RE 139); Jackson similarly notes that Ellison "chastised Hughes for his literary—and intellectual—irresponsibility" (EG 234).¹⁷⁵ Ellison does this, yes, but he has

¹⁷⁴ It is possible that C. L. R. James may have influenced Ellison's articulation of the black trade unionist as revolutionary force. Ellison probably met James in the late 1930s when James had become part of Richard "Wright's circle" (EG 211). Jackson claims that James's Trotskyism "advanced Wright and Ellison theoretically" (EG 211) and suggests that James may have played a role in Ellison's vanguardist comments in "Recent Negro Fiction" (EG 257-58). Rampersad, too, mentions it was likely that Ellison had met James by 1940 (RE 135). (Rampersad also quotes from a 1953 letter James wrote to Ellison, complementing Invisible Man—"in many ways, the finest novel I have read for years" [RE 276].) Christopher Hobson argues that James's understanding of political "spontaneity" appears toward the end of Invisible Man—part of his effort to show how "Invisible Man's later chapters and epilogue distill and crystallize, into both political concept and myth, specific concepts of African American radicalism in the 1940s" (Hobson 360, 367). Hobson, however, positions James's "spontaneity" in direct opposition to vanguardism—seemingly ignoring James's Leninism. As far as I can tell, there seems to be some confusion regarding matters of leadership and organization and the extent to which James's "spontaneism" is distinct from a Leninist vanguardism (see Hobson 372, n. 15; James "Americanization" 286; EG 258). More on spontaneity in the next chapter as I take on Ross Posnock's drawing Ellison as "political" writer.

¹⁷⁵ Jackson also reads Ellison's review of The Big Sea as marking "a rupture with black dabblers in artistic theory," Hughes among them (EG 235). Ellison does mark his commitment to the revolutionary movement and to Wright's program for committed writers, but he remained loyal to Hughes, due both to Hughes's personal assistance and, I maintain, to his own longstanding participation in the communist movement. Ellison saw himself as continuing this example. Jackson also sees this review as the beginning of Ellison's abandonment of the "proletarian fiction" endorsed by the CPUSA (EG 235, 254-55). The standards that Ellison applies to fiction here, however, remain

Hughes's own demonstrated "radical seriousness" in mind. "[A]fter 1930," Ellison reminds his readers, "Hughes was more the conscious artist." Considering "the power" of several of Hughes's poems in these years ("Stormy" 20), his speeches at the International Congress of Writers, and "his presence in Madrid during the Spanish war," Ellison finds Hughes adopting what he saw as the writer's appropriate "revolutionary role." The Big Sea demonstrates, Ellison concludes, "the processes by which a sensitive Negro attains a heightened consciousness of a world in which most of the odds are against his doing so—in the South the attainment of such a consciousness is in itself a revolutionary act. It will be the spread of this consciousness, added to the passion and sensitivity of the Negro people, that will help create a new way of life in the United States" ("Stormy" 21). Although The Big Sea clearly disappointed him as it might have achieved much more, Ellison carefully locates its "revolutionary consciousness," presumably keeping in mind Hughes's explicitly political writings and activities of the 1930s—of which Ellison had had first-hand glimpses.¹⁷⁶ Most importantly, Ellison reads Hughes's biography as showing the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness. His reading of Hughes's biography, in fact, prefigures his plan as he began to write Invisible Man: to narrate a shift in consciousness leading to collective action.

Rampersad mentions that Ellison "watched with fascination as [Hughes] winnowed his radical verse for A New Song" (EG 90). Published in 1938 by the International Workers

those of Wright's "Blueprint," which do not strictly demand the naturalism of proletarian fiction. Thomas Schaub covers some of this New Masses material to establish that "Ellison easily accommodated Marxist ideology with other themes that he has since retained" (94). Schaub finds, for instance, Ellison's early concern with "consciousness" to be compatible with the "project of Invisible Man" and the "modernist move toward the interiority of psychological realism"—for Schaub part of "the discourse of new liberalism" and Cold War ideology (94; 114). He fails to see Ellison's concern with consciousness as an important part of Ellison's radical commitments.

¹⁷⁶ Ellison apparently reveled in Hughes's familial link to John Brown—a militant exemplar that Ellison would invoke as he began to draft Invisible Man in 1945. He made a point to mention Hughes's "family background" in the review, noting specifically his "revolutionary grandmother whose first husband died with John Brown"—almost as if that alone would establish Hughes's radical credentials ("Stormy" 20).

Order,¹⁷⁷ this pamphlet presents Hughes's vision of "a new society created by a united working class" and shows the continued influence of the Black Belt thesis in the Popular Front years (Smethurst 112). Ellison would have seen the collection as the work of a committed and "conscious artist." The title poem, "A New Song," emphasizes interracial unity and calls for revolutionary "action."¹⁷⁸ Speaking "in the name of the black millions / Awakening to action," the poem concludes with typical Marxist and Communist motifs and phrasings—as much under the influence of the Communist Manifesto as the Black Belt thesis.

Revolt! Arise!

The Black

And White World

Shall be one!

The Worker's World!

The past is done!

A new dream flames

Against the

Sun!

The poem highlights the role of verbal invention in imagining and achieving this "new dream," the possible future by which readers might measure the present:

In many mouths—

Dark mouths where red tongues burn

¹⁷⁷ Knopf had "turned down [publishing] his radical poems." Louise Thompson found them "powerful and uncompromising" and assisted Hughes in finding a way to publish them. At the time, she worked for the International Workers Order, "the powerful fraternal benefit society linked to the Communist Party" (Rampersad Langston Hughes I: 335).

¹⁷⁸ The communist-inflected lines that I quote are revisions to its original publication in 1933.

And white teeth gleam—
New words are formed,
Bitter
With the past
But sweet
With the dream.

Not insignificantly, this creative, verbal, and vocal action is militant—“Tense / Unyielding / Strong and sure” (Hughes Poems 145-46). “A New Song” outlines Ellison’s own “unyielding” purpose and the “consciousness” that Ellison sought to advance—awareness of the “past” coupled with a positive “dream” of the future. As a young writer, Ellison attempted to form “new words” toward a unity for “revolt.” His attention to form and “technique” in reviews and in his own writing was consciously to this end. In the years ahead, Ellison’s work would attempt to prompt and sustain the “awakening to action” that Hughes’s poem describes.

Hughes’s political poetry and association with the Communist Party allowed Ellison to see him alongside the radical exemplar Wright. He saw both writers within the same oppositional, Communist-inflected culture in New York and witnessed each showing commitment to a movement in that they often wrote explicitly for that movement. Motivated as much by radical solidarity as personal loyalty, Ellison consistently defended Hughes by locating his revolutionary perspective, even retroactively applying mid-1930s radical standards to Hughes’s earlier work. In “Recent Negro Fiction” (1941), for instance, Ellison complements Hughes’s fiction of the 1920s as distinct from other black fiction of the decade as it “showed an awareness of the working class and socially dispossessed Negro and his connection with the international scheme of things” (22). Once again, Ellison approves of Hughes’s work according

to Wright's criteria: his "fiction, expressing this broader conception of the Negro group through advanced techniques and drawing upon folklore for its sources, was thus more vital and enduring than the work of most of his contemporaries" (22).

Wright remained Ellison's primary influence and benefactor in these early years, and Ellison did not hesitate to express his loyalty to him either.¹⁷⁹ Wright is the main feature of "Recent Negro Fiction," an expanded version for New Masses of "Richard Wright and Negro Fiction," which Ellison had just published in Direction, also in 1941.¹⁸⁰ He positively assesses Wright's fiction as a model for black writers in both essays. Ellison had now become, as critics have noted, a "tireless defender of Richard Wright's Native Son" while he continued his concern with shaping consciousness in order "to create new ways of life" (Mazurek "Reinventing" 171; Ellison "Stormy" 21). Consideration of Wright's work, he argues, is imperative "if the Negro writer is to create the consciousness of his oppressed nation" ("Recent Negro Fiction" 26). He praises Wright for two important achievements. The first is the technical skill of his fiction. Native Son "possesses an artistry, penetration of thought, and sheer emotional power that places it into the front rank of American fiction" ("Recent Negro Fiction" 22). The second is its exemplification of a "new synthesis" in the best of recent American writing of "the technical discoveries of the twenties" with "the new social themes" of the thirties: "the concepts of American democracy and social justice were revitalized" (23). Ellison sees these "new social

¹⁷⁹ Rampersad sees Wright as the primary influence on Ellison well into the forties, even as others, including Burke, became increasingly important (RE 161).

¹⁸⁰ A few years later, Ellison reviewed Wright's Black Boy for The Antioch Review. This extended essay, "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), was collected in Shadow and Act (1964) and then in The Collected Essays (1995), the bulk of which comprises Ellison's two essay collections (Shadow and Act and Going to the Territory [1986]). The later "Remembering Richard Wright" (1971) rounds out Ellison's consideration of Wright and is in Going to the Territory. John Callahan, unfortunately, chose not to select either of the 1941 essays concerning Wright for inclusion in The Collected Essays, so this volume presents only some details of Ellison's relationship to Wright as writers that saw themselves in a revolutionary movement and only as recollected from his Cold War vantage point. I quote exclusively from the longer treatment for New Masses.

themes” as material for the organized Communist movement. “Such writers’ organizations as the John Reed Clubs and the League of American Writers attempted to give these trends conscious direction. They created centers of literary and cultural discussion which encouraged the emergence of the major fiction of 1939 and 1940” (23). With their successful merging of technical achievement and new social themes, Richard Wright’s two works, Uncle Tom’s Children (1938) and Native Son (1940), transcend “limitations imposed upon” black writers through enforced isolation. Their accomplishments show “the full effect that political and cultural segregation has had upon Negro writing” (24). Quoting Wright’s account in “How Bigger Was Born,” Ellison finds Wright’s membership in the Chicago John Reed Club to have been vital. He describes the importance of

the effect upon Wright of his participation in an organization [...] concerned with all of the intense issues affecting American life and which profoundly influenced the flow of American events. Wright, through exercising his function as secretary of [the Chicago John Reed Club], and, through his personal responsibility, forcing himself to come to grips with these issues and making decisions upon them, built up within himself tensions and disciplines which were impossible within the relaxed, semi-peasant environs of American Negro life. (25)¹⁸¹

Here lies the “disciplined” writer’s role: “Today the Negro people are struggling ... under a handicap because they have been historically denied opportunities to become conditioned in working class methods of organized struggle. It thus becomes the task of fiction to help them overcome this handicap and to possess conscious meaning of their lives” (26). As he had in his

¹⁸¹ I note that two key terms in Invisible Man are present in this passage on Richard Wright: “discipline” and “personal responsibility.” These appear toward the end of the Brotherhood chapters, the narrator’s “personal responsibility” opposing the authoritarian “discipline” of the Brotherhood (IM 463, 472, 474, 475). In this passage on Wright, however, the terms are not in tension and occur productively within and as a benefit of a political organization.

review of Blood on the Forge, Ellison, from a Marxist position, holds “Negro unionists” to be the vanguard force (“Recent Negro Fiction” 26).¹⁸² Writers, as associates of an organized movement, would thus support, effectively present (by way of suitable “technique”), and align themselves with this force. This is Ellison’s perspective throughout his nonfiction writings in the late 1930s and early 1940s, which leads Barbara Foley to see him as “proletarian journalist.”¹⁸³ Ellison also took up the concerns of these New Masses writings as he began to write fiction, intending to facilitate, among his readers, possession of “conscious meaning of their lives.”

3.3 THE EARLY STORIES: NARRATING UNITY AND INCIPIENT ACTION

Thematically, Ellison’s first efforts as a fiction writer significantly correspond to his reportage and commentaries in New Masses and The Negro Quarterly from the late 1930s through the war years. John Callahan’s summarizing statement in his introduction to his collection of Ellison’s unpublished and lesser-known stories (Flying Home and Other Stories), however, guides readers to see the young Ellison’s fiction as seamless with his later work. The celebrated American

¹⁸² See William Maxwell on “a dialogue on vanguardism and belatedness” that he follows from Ellison’s first publication through to its resolution in Invisible Man (“Creative” 79). He intends to “tell a different story of relationship” and to bring together “Ellison’s radical and liberal careers” (79). Maxwell concludes that with the appearance of the zoot-suit subway boys near the novel’s climax, Ellison “supplied a version of the African-American leadership class he had sought in New Challenge and Negro Quarterly, an invisible band radical enough to refuse distinctions between ‘the rear’ and ‘the avant-garde’ (82). Maxwell covers some of the same materials that I do but with different emphases and toward a much different conclusion. Although he works seriously from Ellison’s radical beginnings (even complementing Barbara Foley, “Ellison’s best-informed and least-forgiving recent radical critic” [78]), he ends at the point that much Ellison scholarship does (when it considers politics at all). It is a nice essay, and I can’t fault many of its assured moves, except where they lead: politics as Ellison conceived it for a decade disappears into Maxwell’s presentation of figural exchanges and correspondences—which masterfully and quietly elides the radical Ellison and his concerns by the essay’s end and replaces these with yet another liberal celebration of democratic pluralism. And this, as I will discuss, was certainly not the “African-American leadership class he had sought” during the war years.

¹⁸³ Of Ellison’s writings for New Masses, Rampersad says that Ellison wrote “mainly as a hack” and “followed Party dogma” (RE 140). I see how readers might arrive at this conclusion—especially if, as for Rampersad, Ellison’s motives are suspect—but for Ellison it was not the directives of the Party that mattered but the black nationalism toward international ends that, for a period, the Party supported and that Ellison saw throughout Harlem and, most importantly, witnessed Richard Wright actively advancing.

themes of his novel and later essays, according to Callahan, are present right from the start: Ellison's writings in his view mark the unfolding of the liberal American mind. "Taken together," Callahan concludes, "the short stories point to Ellison's remarkably consistent vision of American identity over the fifty-five years of his writing life" (xxxviii). This integration of Ellison's pre-war and post-war writings directs readings of the early stories toward an American pluralist project and individualism, thereby disarming the glaring presence of Ellison's preoccupation with transracial solidarity toward radical social transformation. Because these last concerns prominently appear in these stories, Callahan must, of course, acknowledge their presence, but he subordinates them to the grand American theme. Never mind that "identity" had not yet become Ellison's central concern in these early years as he would articulate it later in Invisible Man and in essays like "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1977).¹⁸⁴ He did not then pronounce the word "identity" even though Callahan and others retroactively apply it—an imposition of the present on a past that seemingly must remain obscure. Instead, Ellison routinely took up the word "consciousness" as he had encountered it in Wright's "Blueprint"—a radical, Marxist consciousness or perspective. This consciousness conceives identification as an act of group solidarity, quite similar to Burke's usage in Attitudes toward History, and not the individualistic identity—inherently sufficient and self-knowing—that Callahan desires.

After accepting Ellison's first book review for publication in 1937, Wright encouraged Ellison to try writing a story for New Challenge. Ellison quickly submitted "Hymie's Bull." Wright approved it for publication in the second issue of New Challenge, but the magazine folded before the issue appeared (EG 190; RE 100). Nonetheless, with Wright's continued

¹⁸⁴ In 1955, Ellison tells an interviewer that the "search for identity" "is the American theme" (CE 219). Extending from Invisible Man's own devotion to "possibility," "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" is Ellison's seductive, culminating meditation on—and celebration of—the chaotic, mysterious, and unexpected movements within the vast field of "American cultural possibility" and "pluralist democracy" (CE 519, 513).

assistance, Ellison was able to publish another story, “Slick Gonna Learn,” in the glossy Popular Front cultural magazine Direction in early 1939. Ellison published nine stories, including one that would become a chapter in Invisible Man, before his novel appeared in 1952.¹⁸⁵ He also wrote several additional stories and sketches from 1937 into the 1940s that remained unpublished until after his death in 1994. The early fiction, mostly appearing in left magazines when published, presents communist-inflected ideas, particularly the possibility and necessity of a class-based, race-transcending unity that would lead to what Ellison would see, with the example of Owen Whitfield, as “positive action.” “Slick Gonna Learn,” for instance, describes a young African-American man, who having just faced racially motivated police brutality and narrowly escaped death, is given a lift by a white truck driver whose apparent openness reveals unforeseen possibilities to the protagonist. Ellison would take up the theme of the potential for an interracial (toward transracial) class unity in several other early stories. The unpublished story “The Black Ball,” which Ellison wrote in the late 1930s, exemplifies his basic scheme. Although initially suspicious of a white union organizer’s advances, the black working-class narrator realizes by the story’s end the promise of affiliation beyond race, an ideal that he at first expresses to his young son with the category of “American” as preferable to the binary black/white. This story, however, is not quite the exploration and affirmation of “American identity” that Callahan sees it as. Ultimately, the category “American” is not the unifying figure; instead, the narrator envisions transcendence of racial and economic division through the agency of a multiracial union (FH 122). And through its less-than-subtle symbolic color scheme, this

¹⁸⁵ Direction was “a semi-official organ” of the League of American Writers and came out of the inaugural American Writers’ Congress in 1935 (George and Selzer Kenneth Burke 5). Following “Slick Gonna Learn” in 1939, the published stories are: “The Birthmark” in New Masses (1940); “Afternoon” in American Writing (book) (1940); “Mister Toussan” in New Masses (1941); “That I Had the Wings” in Common Ground (1943); “In a Strange Country” in Tomorrow (1944); “King of the Bingo Game” in Tomorrow (1944); “Flying Home” in Cross Section (book) (1944); “Invisible Man” in Horizon (1947), the final published story before Invisible Man appeared in 1952. Ellison also published an excerpt from the prologue of his soon-to-be-published novel in Partisan Review in 1952.

story resolves the opposition of white and black with red: the narrator sees the ruddy complexion of the white organizer in a way he had not anticipated (FH 111, 113).

Ellison's early stories sketch interracial encounters that posit incipient alliance, often along lines of socioeconomic class and implying transcendence of racial position. As these stories outline unity as the basis for social action, they also clearly show the difficulty of achieving this unity psychologically and politically. Nonetheless, as tales of affiliation, the early fiction consistently describes situations that Ellison sees as the necessary beginning for a political movement. The stories typically end at a moment when that beginning becomes palpable—often consciously to the narrator or another character. It seems likely that Ellison intended these early stories to encourage organized political activity, which, Ellison understood initially in relation to the Communist movement and, by 1945, to an anti-Communist left movement.

In other stories, Ellison suggests agencies beyond the Party and unions. The second story that Ellison published in New Masses (and one of the three so-called Buster and Riley stories), “Mister Toussan” (1941), alludes to a key figure in a historical revolutionary movement. This story describes a playful exchange between two boys, first lamenting the harshness of their parents and then ubiquitous white cruelty. Conveying a history lesson from a teacher, Buster introduces Riley to “Mister Toussan,” who with his men “shot down them peckerwood soldiers and fass as they’d try to come up” (FH 27). This “Toussan,” who comes “from a place named Hayti,” refers, of course, to Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the Saint-Domingue or Haitian Revolution. As Buster tells the story, with Riley at first questioning and then encouraging and amplifying, the narrative forms an emboldening call-and-response exchange. It displays, in fact, an active, participatory mythmaking that, as in Burke’s sense, establishes a “sense of

relationship” and, in this case, emergent opposition (“Revolutionary Symbolism” 87).¹⁸⁶

Lawrence Jackson is right to read this story as “a ritualistic, signifying conversation ... with revolutionary undercurrents,” arguing that “the two boys demonstrate the role of both ritual and history in the development of revolutionary consciousness” (“Birth” 332). In keeping with Ellison’s journalism and reviews, the story shows the emergence of this consciousness just as Wright’s “Blueprint” had advised. “Mister Toussan,” in fact, stages the production of myth for resistance. With the invocation of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Ellison turns to a legendary figure of insurrection, laying out material that became significant as he began to draft his novel in the mid-1940s. The reference to L’Ouverture also implies the matter of leadership, which would particularly concern Ellison when he wrote for The Negro Quarterly, and to what W. E. B. Du Bois refers to, in reference to the Haitian Revolution, as “blood-sacrifice” (44). (As we will see, Ellison invokes “blood sacrifice” and John Brown as he drafted Invisible Man.)¹⁸⁷ Du Bois links the Haitian Revolution to the “days when John Brown was born,” “just as the shudder of Haiti was running through all the Americas” (40). The Revolution was an inspiring historical event for Brown, as it would be for many radicals internationally. It is a crucial historical moment in Du Bois’s biography of John Brown because it “foretold the possibility of coordinate action” in response to “grave injustice” (Du Bois 43). Ellison’s telling shows it to be this, too.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Jackson makes some similar comments on this story in “The Birth of the Critic,” describing it as “a ritualistic, signifying conversation... with revolutionary undercurrents implied through the transformation of an abstract historical narrative into a local symbol for resistance and education” (332).

¹⁸⁷ “Sacrifice” appears in Ellison’s response to Hannah Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” and its regrettable disapproving comments on “forced integration.” Arendt, Ellison says, did not understand the importance of an “ideal of sacrifice” in “the struggle to integrate the school” (qtd. in Warren “Ralph Ellison” 159). See Kenneth Warren’s “Ralph Ellison and the Problem of Cultural Authority” for incisive consideration of their exchange.

¹⁸⁸ Ellison most likely read Du Bois’s John Brown at some point, perhaps in the 1930s but maybe not until the 1940s. I am aware of no references to this book in any of Ellison’s published writings or in the Papers at the Library of Congress. Ellison does, of course, show some familiarity with Du Bois’s work, particularly The Souls of Black Folk. Interestingly, the figure of John Brown does appear in Invisible Man in a song sung by Party members in the Brotherhood arena scene (339).

Ellison's work for the New York Writers' Project—a position that Ellison held, once again with Wright's assistance, from 1938-1942—no doubt furthered his thinking about insurrection and “blood sacrifice” during this time (EG 200; RE 110).¹⁸⁹ His research at the Writers' Project gave further support and material for his stated commitments in his New Masses writings. He conducted interviews for a “living lore” assignment and also produced articles on the history of African Americans in New York City, including a study of the slave rebellion of 1741 (EG 200; RE 110-11).¹⁹⁰ This study led to Ellison's consideration of the limits of “individual attempts by ... blacks at retaliation” in the brutal slave system and recognition of the necessity of organized resistance (Ottley and Weatherby 23).¹⁹¹ Other writers at the project produced accounts of black radicals and documented historical events of revolt and resistance, included treatments of Toussaint L'Ouverture and John Brown. (These figures, not surprisingly, were part of the radical culture at the Project.) At this point, Ellison still viewed the trade unionist as the avenue of organized resistance and revolutionary change, and as he worked at the Writers' Project he had the opportunity to report for New Masses on a contemporary that represented just such resistance.

3.4 “REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIALITIES”

For two New Masses articles, Ellison covered Owen Whitfield, a union organizer and part-time Baptist preacher who gained national attention as a leader of the Missouri highway protest in

¹⁸⁹ Project worker Jerre Mangione writes that Ellison “worked steadily on his assignments, five days a week for nearly four years, and was one of the last writers to leave the Project” (257).

¹⁹⁰ This was published as The Negro in New York in 1967, edited by Ottley and Weatherby (27-30).

¹⁹¹ True to the concerns of his essays and fiction, Ellison pointedly notes a key location in the plotting: a tavern with “free mingling of blacks and whites” (29). His focus on “interracial” association appears here, too. Foley, too, mentions that his account “stresses the multiracial character of the rebellion” (“Race, Class” 35)

1939. “Perhaps more than any other single depression-era event,” historians Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll write, “this southeast Missouri protest, where sharecroppers proudly stood amid their meager belongings along two federal highways, made America's dispossessed visible to the nation” (303).¹⁹² With this organizing success, Whitfield exemplified the black unionist that Ellison hoped would be the new revolutionary force. In “Camp Lost Colony,” Ellison first described the continued struggles of sharecroppers in Missouri a year after their demonstration.¹⁹³ Whitfield’s union, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, was from 1937 an affiliate of the Communist-backed Committee on Industrial Organization, which at the time was increasing its presence in Harlem.

Ellison then covered the National Negro Congress in April 1941 in Washington as a proposed alliance between the Congress and the Communist CIO took center attention. A. Philip Randolph, organizer of the original Congress and a nationally respected black leader, opposed the alliance and Communist influence. Randolph winced as executive secretary John Davis honored John Lewis, leader of the CIO, for his service to black Americans and spoke vehemently against the alliance and the CIO’s Communist influence (RE 132). But the delegates sided with Davis and so did Ellison, who still openly supported, like many others, the Communist Party after the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact. In his article “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend,”¹⁹⁴ Ellison takes Randolph to task for his aloofness and redbaiting, contrasting his speech to Owen Whitfield’s. Whitfield’s address, Ellison writes, “is not a speech from above,

¹⁹² In its coverage, the New York Times characterized this protest as a “mass demonstration” (“Army of Sharecroppers” 6).

¹⁹³ The occasion for Ellison’s article in January 1940 was Whitfield’s appearance in New York to gain further support and assistance for the sharecropper cause.

¹⁹⁴ This New Masses article is the only previously uncollected piece from this period that John Callahan, Ellison’s literary executor, decided to include in Ellison’s Collected Essays. Callahan has carefully controlled the presentation of Ellison through his introductions and selection of materials for the Collected Essays and for the early fiction collection Flying Home and Other Stories.

like Randolph's. He speaks with pride of his Missouri people, and the audience is with him when he lashes out at leaders who avoid positive action out of fear for their 'status.'" (CE 24).¹⁹⁵ Ellison sees Whitfield representing "a new pole of leadership" for blacks, and the promise for the "unity" that Ellison thought necessary for not just a sense of belonging but for political action, a unity that he seemed to feel that the NNC had a great chance to realize.

For years Negroes have struggled for that unity, seeking to find their allies; sometimes gaining, and sometimes losing ground. And in all Negroes at some period of their lives is that yearning for a sense of group unity that is the yearning of men for a flag: for a unity that cannot be compromised, that cannot be bought; that is conscious of itself, of its strength, that is militant. I had come to realize that such a unity is unity of a nation, and of a class. I had thought vaguely of the Congress in such terms, but it was more like a hope to be realized. I had not thought to seek this sense of affirmation in it. Now I realized that this was the need it must fill for myself and for others. (CE 16)

He optimistically concludes this article with an image of transracial unity and of incipient power and action: "there in the faces of my people I saw strength. There with the whites in the audience I saw the positive forces of civilization and the best guarantee of America's future" (26).¹⁹⁶ In a letter to Wright, Ellison gushes that the Congress was "the most exciting thing to happen to me": "I found in it the first real basis for faith in our revolutionary potentialities" (qtd.

¹⁹⁵ Ellison uses the term "positive action" in an April 1940 letter to Wright when discussing critics' misappraisal of the significance of *Native Son* and its protagonist: "Would that all Negroes were as psychologically free as Bigger and as capable of positive action!" (qtd. in RE 132 and, with more context, in Fabre 201).

¹⁹⁶ The Brotherhood arena speech scene in *Invisible Man* echoes in part Ellison's description here. I look at the narrator's Brotherhood speech in the next chapter.

in RE 133). Having written articles and stories that attempted to advance such potentialities for several years, Ellison now felt that he was witnessing it take form.

3.5 PEOPLES' WAR

In 1942 Ellison became managing editor of The Negro Quarterly, a new journal edited by Angelo Herndon that would, according to its inaugural mission statement, “strive to reflect the true aspirations of the Negro people and their traditions and struggle for freedom” (“Statement” 3). Ellison was now in the presence of an organizer and communist activist whom he first met “at the zenith of his fame” in 1937 in New York (Griffiths 622). With this new position at The Negro Quarterly, Ellison remained among black radicals and communists. Also a writer (however slight compared with Hughes and Wright, who would both publish in the Quarterly), Herndon presented more significant activist credentials than Ellison’s mentors: he was a radical legend. In 1932 Herndon had been tried and sentenced to 18 to 20 years on a Georgia chain gang for “insurrection” in organizing a march in Atlanta demanding relief for the unemployed. Herndon had then been the inspiring radical figure of Langston Hughes’s “militant one-act play” Angelo Herndon Jones (1935)¹⁹⁷ (Rampersad Langston 320). Buddy, the lead character of the play, says that Herndon “organized people what was starvin’, black and white, and got ‘em together” (Hughes Plays 186). By 1934 Herndon had become “a household name beside the Scottsboro defendants,” who were represented, as he had been during his trial and appeal, by the Communist-backed International Labor Defense, and for whom he campaigned once freed

¹⁹⁷ The title refers to the name that an admiring supporter of the incarcerated Herndon chooses for his expected child.

(Griffiths 623). Ellison presumably saw in Herndon, as he had in Whitfield, an example of the militant black organizer and a communist cohort.

World war was the defining event for this journal's brief four-issue run from 1942-43, as its mission statement made clear in the inaugural issue. "The rapid change of life introduced by the war makes apparent the need of reflecting upon the genuine attitudes, thoughts and opinions of Negroes, and of giving direction and interpretation to certain new social and economic factors and their relation to the special problems of the Negro" ("Statement" 3). William Maxwell notes that the journal's "articles addressed a constituency wider than the Communist party, but remained within the orbit of Harlem anticapitalism, for which the party still provided the majority of debating points" ("Creative" 74). However, at the start of 1942, the Quarterly did not directly engage in analysis and critiques of capitalism in relation to black oppression but instead focused on the significance of the war and degree of black Americans' participation in it as the abiding concern. The Quarterly's editorials and many of its articles negotiated the contradictions of the war and the problems it posed for black Americans and disenfranchised peoples internationally even if in the main its editorials seemingly adopted, as Maxwell says, "the 'Double V' line"—"dual victory over Axis fascism and American Jim Crow" ("Creative" 74).¹⁹⁸ Even if the editorial position may have been nominally in support of war participation, this was with hesitation, even resignation, as it sorted through "the special problems of the Negro." The Communist Party's about-face on US entry in the war once the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 proved more troubling to black radicals than the Hitler-Stalin pact two years earlier, for now the Party nearly abandoned the struggle against Jim Crow and giving consideration to blacks as a distinct nation. "The downplaying of race in the interests of

¹⁹⁸ Jackson, too, says that the The Negro Quarterly, "unlike the Communist Party, was 'Double V' for all of its four issues" (EG 264).

‘national unity’ by the CPUSA during the Second World War,” James Smethurst writes, “...caused a number of the CPUSA’s leading African-American writers, most notably Wright, Ellison, and Chester Himes, to become disaffected from the party.... However, what appears to have influenced Wright and Ellison the most was a shift in CPUSA ideology regarding the ‘Negro Nation’ rather than a practical shift in its policies regarding African Americans” (45-46).¹⁹⁹ While New Masses mostly adhered to the Party’s revised position, Ellison found greater latitude in The Negro Quarterly to support a black nationalism and the Party’s prior commitment to the Black Belt thesis. The editorials do not unquestioningly endorse the “Double V” position; in fact, two editorials—the two that Ellison may have authored—place much more emphasis on victory against Jim Crow at home. When the editorials do endorse victory abroad, they primarily frame advocacy for the war effort toward the goal of the emancipation of oppressed peoples internationally.

Although it is difficult to know precisely the extent to which Ellison was involved in writing the editorials of the three issues for which he was managing editor, it seems clear that he had a hand in them. The editorial comments question black leadership in similar terms as Ellison’s report on the Negro Congress and continue the concerns of his expanded review of Blood on the Forge for the first issue of Negro Quarterly, newly titled “Transition.” Considering the role of art in a time of war, Ellison writes,

A true work of art is at the same time an encounter with the past and a challenge to the future. The blood spilled at Pearl Harbor has emphasized the demand that

¹⁹⁹ Although she is aware that the CPUSA’s turn away from programs of antiracism and directly challenging white hegemony lost many black radicals, Barbara Foley contends that as managing editor of The Negro Quarterly Ellison loyally followed the Party line on the war. Foley finds it important to maintain that Ellison remained committed to the Party through the war years, yet at one point she qualifies this position: “[E]ven though he apparently enjoyed considerable political independence—Ellison advocated critical support of the war effort that did not break with the CP position, even though he pressed against its limits” (“Ralph Ellison, Intertextuality” 240-41). My sense is that Ellison wrote right at the limits of the policy and only may appear to have supported it because he did not directly challenge it. As I try to document, his support, if one can even call it that, was hesitant and qualified.

works like Blood on the Forge be more than a summation of phases of the Negro people's aching past: they must be a guide and discipline for the future.²⁰⁰

The editorials' hesitancy toward war corresponds to Ellison's comments in his final New Masses article, "The Way It Is," which appeared just after the second issue of the Quarterly, so it seems clear that he would have at least endorsed them. This article stakes out a position that the Negro Quarterly advanced in each of its editorials, most expansively in the second issue, which Ellison probably wrote. Both pieces emphasize the troubling gap between government rhetoric and actual policy. He explains African Americans' hesitancy toward the war as an effect of habitual, justified skepticism toward government positions: "Morale grows out of realities, not out of words alone" ("Way It Is" 11). The Quarterly's editorials turned on this problem, the "lag between Allied theory and practice," demanding that the stated ideals in the Allied propaganda for the war effort be seriously implemented and realized. For African Americans, resolving the obvious contradiction of the segregated Armed Forces, "the most irritating symbol of their social and political debasement," with the supposed mission of the war was paramount, but more was at stake ("Editorial Comment" 1.2 ii). Still drawing from earlier Communist policy and the Black

²⁰⁰ A number of critics attribute the editorial of the final 1943 issue to Ellison. This editorial bears clear markers of Burke's influence with its use of "attitude," "acceptance and rejection," and "incipient action," but there is near silence among scholars on the editorial comments in the two preceding issues. The three editorials are continuous in perspective and style and one might attribute some phrasings to Ellison without significant grounds for quarrel. Whether he was the primary author or not, the editorial comments take a position that Ellison's review in the first issue of The Negro Quarterly and his final article for New Masses would support. I have concluded that he certainly wrote the final editorial and at least participated in the production of the editorial for the second issue, as co-writer and/or editor if not sole author, in consideration of matters of style and emphasis. The editorials of the second and fourth (final) issues are also the longest editorials of the journal's four issues. Frederick Griffiths, incidentally, is the only critic, so far as I know, to assert that it was Herndon and not Ellison that wrote the final editorial comment ["The style and arguments of Herndon's following article on Douglass [in the final issue] are continuous with the editorial" (620)], but I don't find his assessment persuasive (Griffiths fails to see all the Burkeisms in this editorial). It seems probable that Ellison and Herndon were in simple agreement regarding the failures of black leadership and adopted hesitant, qualified support of the war (Maxwell more or less reaches this conclusion as well ["Creative" 76]). Only Rampersad seems to attribute the editorial of the second issue to Ellison, too (RE 157). I join him because of its textual markers. Rampersad supports this claim by quoting from a letter that Ellison wrote in 1969, in which he says he did "the actual writing of most, though not all, of the editorials" (qtd. in RE 153). Of course, beyond the mission statement of the first issue there were only three editorials, so even if we give credence to Ellison's recollection over twenty-five years later, which has been unreliable on other points, this comment in itself may not provide any additional clarity.

Belt thesis, the editorials vigorously internationalized the principle of nationalism and self-determination. The editorial of the second issue articulated the world war as “a peoples’ war for national liberation” (i). “As the war progresses it becomes increasingly evident that in order to fight fascism successfully a people must possess both a national will for its own independence and the independence of all other nations” (ii).²⁰¹

From this second issue, the “editorial comments” make this argument through continual reference to the “Four Freedoms” that Roosevelt presented in his State of Union Address of January 1941: freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear (Kennedy 469).²⁰² Roosevelt had called for “a world founded on four essential freedoms” and the Negro Quarterly editorials attempt to hold leaders accountable and argue, considering the government’s interest in enlistment and wide support in the war effort, that these principles be seriously implemented at home and internationally. “In order that American Negroes and the other darker peoples of the world might willingly participate in this struggle with enthusiasm, pride, responsibility, and a sense of dignity, it is imperative that the concept of the Four Freedoms be made the basis of all democratic thought and action” and “if they are to inflame the imaginations of the dispossessed peoples of the world, they must be sloganized in terms of the specific national aspirations of all peoples” (“Editorial Comment” 1.2 v). The editorial thus aligns black

²⁰¹ With this perspective, Ellison, assuming he wrote this editorial, is still showing the influence of “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and Wright’s gesture toward an international solidarity among the oppressed and need for black writers to be aware of “the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere ” (62).

²⁰² The Four Freedoms became ubiquitous government propaganda—soon with pictorial embellishment by Norman Rockwell (with postage stamps)—for the war effort, which in January 1941 was limited to garnering support for the US as war arsenal producer for the Allies. As Kennedy notes, with the inclusion of freedom from want and fear, in principle “there was unmistakable continuity between Roosevelt’s domestic policies during the Great Depression and his foreign policies in the world war” (470). Ellison remained clearly to the left of such policies, but as editor for The Negro Quarterly in wartime he clearly saw advantages in employing Roosevelt’s rhetoric to advance African-American and international interests. Understanding Ellison’s considerable involvement in writing the editorials allows one to see more clearly his Negro Quarterly year as extending from his New Masses writings and the influence of Wright. It provided for Ellison important space to reflect on the significance of the war for African Americans while holding to a variety of black nationalism without pressure to conform to the current Communist Party line.

Americans with “Africans, Chinese, Indians, Latin Americans”—“the darker peoples” who desire dignity and “the economic and cultural necessities of living” (“Editorial Comment” 1.2 i, iii). These peoples, the editorial emphasizes, have no interest in defending and preserving the world as it is, but possess a “desire to create a better world” (iii). Ellison understood black rights, as Jackson says, “within a broad international context of Asian and African anticolonial movements,” at times “bordering on the seditious” (EG 265-66).²⁰³ Jackson, however, may underestimate how thoroughly a seditious attitude runs through the editorials.

The final editorial takes up the position of the “Negro people” more directly as political actor and the war as a historical moment of opportunity.²⁰⁴ Adding to the second issue’s consideration of the gap between words and actions among Allied leaders, Ellison turns to the “power potential” of African Americans and calls for leadership that, still echoing Wright’s “Blueprint,” is integrated “with the Negro masses.” He then foregrounds the importance of “centralization and direction of power” (“Editorial Comment” 1.4 300, 301). This “centralization” refers to the gathering or organizing of people in order to concentrate power. In “our revolutionary times,” Ellison demands, black leadership “must (1) see the Negro people as a political and economic force which has, since the Civil War, figured vitally in the great contest for power between the two large economic groups within the country; that (2) despite the very real class divisions within the Negro group itself during periods of crisis—especially during times of war—these divisions are partially suspended by outside pressure, making for a kind of group unity in which great potential political power becomes centralized—even though Negro

²⁰³ Jackson does not say “seditious” lightly: “Herndon’s brainchild [The Negro Quarterly] and the events that he sponsored were actively monitored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation” (EG 266).

²⁰⁴ Alan Wald reads the final editorial of The Negro Quarterly, rightly I think, as “Ellison’s declaration of Marxist independence from the Communist movement” (284).

leadership ignores its existence, or are [sic] too timid to seize and give it form and direction” (299-300).

In the end, Ellison does not argue against supporting the war effort, but he does demand that African Americans support it only if their participation leads to political demands and if the war becomes an international “peoples’ war.” Peoples’ self-determination is crucial here—no longer is the Party position relevant for Ellison—and he specifically takes up the question of African-American leadership, laying out basic considerations toward “centralization and direction.” “Negro leaders” he writes, “must obey the impetus toward Negro self-evaluation which the war has made a necessity,” observing relevant techniques and trends “among other peoples and nations” and creating new techniques and theories in order to harness “the power potential of the group” (300). This requires integration with the group, as Wright had emphasized in “Blueprint,” and leads to an awareness that can more fully grasp the present situation and people’s everyday practices. “Many new concepts will evolve when the people are closely studied in action” (300). Such study, Ellison explains, involves examining particulars of what people actually do and “learning the meaning of the myths and symbols which abound among the Negro masses. For without this knowledge, leadership, no matter how correct its program, will fail.” Anticipating a direction that his own criticism would take, Ellison then writes, “Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power—if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle. On this knowledge depends the effectiveness of any slogan or tactic” (301). Ellison here implicitly makes a case for the value of the critic’s work: cultural analysis can reveal resources of political power and effective rhetoric. He approaches the problem of understanding the mystery of black myths and symbols as psychological,

solved only by a Negro leadership that is aware of the psychological attitudes and incipient forms of action which the black masses reveal in their emotion-charged myths, symbols and wartime folklore. Only through a skillful and wise manipulation of these centers of repressed social energy will Negro resentment, self-pity and indignation be channelized to cut through temporary issues and become transformed into positive action. (“Editorial Comment” 1.4 301-302)

Ellison views cultural analysis, then, as a resource for enabling what he continues to call “positive action,” the human doings that transform, purposefully and creatively, social existence. This editorial is also Ellison’s first published writing that shows clear markers of Kenneth Burke’s influence (“psychological attitudes and incipient forms of action”). Here the influences of Wright and Harlem Communism blend with Burke’s psycho-Marxism to form elements of a political organizing handbook for black leaders. Leaders are to detect and direct “incipient forms of action”—to transform, that is, “repressed social energy” “into positive action.” Ellison here applies Burke’s sense of attitude as incipient action toward the militant or positive action that he saw Owen Whitfield exemplifying. The editorial also clarifies how Ellison had begun to formulate “unity” as incipient power, not unlike Hannah Arendt’s “being together” as the precondition of politics, and it begins to account for Ellison’s militant response to Burke in 1945, which I soon discuss.

3.6. “REAL ACTION”: GRAPPLING WITH BURKE

Ellison came to know Kenneth Burke personally in the early 1940s.²⁰⁵ At first, Burke presented an answer to a problem that had troubled Ellison as a young intellectual and writer. Ellison, as often noted in the scholarship, was fond of remarking how Burke showed a way for him to “put Marx and Freud together,” to meld the psychological and sociological, the personal and the social (CE 666; CRE 364). The crucial encounter, Ellison recalls,²⁰⁶ was his hearing Burke’s delivery of “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” at the third American Writers’ Congress on June 4, 1939.²⁰⁷ By this time, Ellison was writing fiction and reviews and advancing Wright’s imperatives in this work. He most likely received Burke’s paper at this time as an extension and deepening of Wright’s own concern with Marx and Freud in his “Blueprint.” Burke’s treatment of Hitler’s demagoguery allowed Ellison to see more fully the relevance of close literary analysis

²⁰⁵ Stanley Edgar Hyman, Burke’s friend and former student at Syracuse University, introduced Ellison to Burke during the winter of 1942-43 (RE 161; Crable 7).

²⁰⁶ Ellison misremembered the year that he saw Burke deliver this paper, and most of the Ellison scholarship that refers to this event, including the two Ellison biographies, reproduces this error (EG 181-82; RE 96; also in Jackson “Birth” 329). In a 1977 interview, Ellison recalled that it was 1937, but that was the year of the Second Congress (CRE 363). Burke actually presented “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” at the Third Congress in 1939. Rampersad and Jackson both make extended claims about Burke’s influence on Ellison with this paper in 1937. This mistake has entered the scholarship generally. See, to mention but two instances, Donald Pease’s erroneous comments on Burke’s influence on Ellison’s first stories (Pease actually places their first encounter in 1935, a year before Ellison was even in New York) (66-67) and John S. Wright’s *Shadowing Ralph Ellison* (34). I do not mean to make too much of this common error, but I do note that it has allowed for treatments of Ellison to more readily remove him from the real and extended influence of Hughes, Wright, and others in the Harlem communist scene and not to see his receptive initial encounter with Burke as extending from that experience. This coupled with the concomitant understanding of Burke according to a similar historical misprision tends to lead scholars away from the radical context of the emergence of their writings and their affinity within this context. I remain agnostic regarding whether Ellison’s misremembering is another instance of what Jackson documents as Ellison’s repeated, seemingly deliberate, enhancements and adjustments to his life stories—including the year he born and his biological father’s military record—“a kind of home-improvement approach to his own past and history,” Jackson says (“Ellison’s Invented Life” 19; for Jackson’s consideration of Ellison’s account of his year of birth and his father’s supposed “illustrious career as a soldier,” see 18, 24).

²⁰⁷ *The Southern Review* published “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle” shortly after the Congress in 1939. Unlike the first two Congresses, the proceedings of the Third Congress were not published. *The Southern Review*’s publication of “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle,” however, appears not to have significantly altered Burke’s presentation at the Congress. Burke, for instance, alludes to the Congress’s United Front context at the beginning of the published essay (2; PLF 192). (Relatively minor changes were made for this essay’s inclusion in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* [1941]—some additions and some subtractions.)

to social critique and political purpose. Burke at least made it clear at the Congress that this was his intent. “[L]et us ... try to discover what kind of ‘medicine’ this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America” (1; PLF 191). Burke shows how Hitler was able, rhetorically, to unify a people by establishing a “symbol of a common enemy” (2; PLF 193).²⁰⁸

Ellison found an ally and intellectual provocateur in Burke, and they began corresponding with some regularity by the early 1940s. In his letters, Ellison demonstrates familiarity with Burke’s work and, by 1943, the development of Burke’s Pentad, remarking that his book in progress, A Grammar of Motives, “promises something stable in a world too much in flux” (Letter to Burke, 28 May 1943; qtd. in Crable 7). In a long letter to Burke in late 1945, Ellison refers to Burke’s 1938 exchange in Science and Society following its review of Attitudes toward History (a “farce,” he says), and writes that he is, “as you say, becoming quite at home in that amalgam of sociology, psychology, Marxism and literary criticism” (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945). In addition to demonstrating Ellison’s obvious enthusiasm for Burke’s work and its impact on him, this 1945 letter shows that Ellison would not hesitate to challenge Burke vigorously and what he probably saw as Burke’s occasional myopic effusions. To wit, Ellison takes issue with Burke’s stated “preference for an ethic that is ‘universal’ rather than ‘racial,’” explaining that he is “forced to arrive at that universe through the racial grain of sand, even though the term ‘race’ is loaded with ... lies” (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945; qtd. in Crable

²⁰⁸ Burke begins to consider this technique, and Hitler, in the section on “scapegoat mechanism” in Permanence and Change (24-28; 14-17). “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” is an application, and amplification, of Burke’s discussion in Permanence and Change to Hitler’s method of persuasion (“Rhetoric” 15).

12).²⁰⁹ Ellison stresses that although he would like to proceed as a “citizen of the world” he must struggle from within his imposed “racial” position.

Bryan Crable has quoted portions of this 1945 letter to support his argument that the line of influence between Burke and Ellison was hardly one way, persuasively showing that Ellison affected Burke’s thinking on race and significantly influenced its treatment in A Rhetoric of Motives. Crable sees Ellison’s letter as “one of the most concise (yet eloquent) statements on his position on the question of race and American race relations” (13). Perhaps, yet Crable silently passes over much of the context and what I find to be the most significant content of the letter pertaining to “race relations”: its unabashed militancy. The letter shows Ellison holding to the black nationalism that he supported from his first published review, when he was considerably under the influence of Wright and the Black Belt thesis. He only slightly modified this commitment after his experience as editor of The Negro Quarterly at the start of the war, his own two years in the Merchant Marine from 1943-45, and then Hiroshima. “‘Nationalism’ in the cultural sense seems a more accurate term [than “race”],” he explains to Burke, “but the Fascists have rendered it confusing.” Referring to Burke’s concern that such nationalism may lead to “the possibility of civil war” and bloodshed, Ellison boldly counters. His response not only clarifies his intellectual relationship to Burke but also illuminates his intent in passages from the drafts of Invisible Man that I examine in conclusion below:

[D]on’t you see that war exists already and its effects are in many ways more serious than any more shedding of blood. It has warped our culture, truncated our ability to think deeply and broadly and schooled us to drop atom bombs on a

²⁰⁹ The occasion of Ellison’s letter was Burke’s assessment, as conveyed by Stanley Edgar Hyman, of his recently published essay “Richard Wright’s Blues” (1945), which Ellison had enthusiastically sent to Burke. Burke notes in a letter to Hyman that, in Ellison’s account, Wright paradoxically “protest[s] fully as a Negro by separating himself out as an individual; but such a protest, by the nature of the case, resists organization. What would Ralph say?” (qtd. in Crable 10).

defenseless city; and God knows what else is in store. And I sometimes wonder why Negroes haven't a larger responsibility in this matter than we suspect.

Perhaps by not fighting, by not producing wide-spread civil conflict, we have done America and the world more harm than "progress." Perhaps what is missing from American tradition is a major internal conflict of such a nature as to make us aware of the dangers of arrogant power and an over-simplified and contemptuous approach to human life. (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945)

Ellison may have sincerely thought that the Four Freedoms that he invoked in The Negro Quarterly editorials could actually become part of effective rhetorical ploys in resisting "arrogant power" and perhaps even become the basis for substantive policy directives. The actual course of the war and the US role in it, however, destroyed that hope, which Ellison had at least half expected given his own hesitation toward war participation in the pages of the Quarterly. Responsibility—a term that runs distended throughout Invisible Man and links at the end with the democratic "principle" of the grandfather's words—here means to act much more directly, even violently, yet also for democracy, albeit one significantly radicalized (IM 574). Burke had made similar thrusts in the communist sections of Permanence and Change, which Ellison probably read by 1945 and may have in mind in this letter.²¹⁰ If "we call ourselves democrats,"

Ellison writes, "then we have the responsibility of fighting anything and anyone who threatens

²¹⁰ He might also have had in mind Burke's abrupt shift before and after Pearl Harbor in two editorials in Direction. Burke first questioned US entry into war (in "Where Are We Now?") and then stridently endorsed it, nearly advocating what Ellison may have recognized as the "univocal" fascist unity that he had denounced in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle." "[I]n this solemn situation," Burke writes following Pearl Harbor, "our first duty to our nation and to ourselves is to approach every problem, to conceive of every issue, in terms that will make for the maximum of national unity, and so for the maximum of effectiveness against our Axis enemies" ("When 'Now'" 5). "Criticism, there still should be," Burke nominally gestures, quickly sacrificing such criticism to "national unity." Unity now means authoritarian univocality—the very stance that Burke continually challenged in his writings before and after the war. He writes, "absolutely every utterance should be put forward and considered only in ways that contribute, most exactly, towards unity of action—unity of action among ourselves, and unity of action with our international allies. Not plaint now, but the firm sense of unity" (5). This "voice," implicitly enabling exclusion and oppression, is precisely what Ellison resisted when he invoked democracy in opposition to fascism in the pages of The Negro Quarterly.

that democracy—and with weapons at hand.... If this must come to civil war, let it.” Unlike its eventual articulation in Invisible Man, here “responsibility,” Ellison suggests, requires militant commitment—to the point of civil war if necessary. Of course, threat to democracy was the government’s main argument for entry into the Second World War, but Ellison turns that back again to the home front, the abandoned object of the other “V,” which the Four Freedoms never really meant to address: the brutalities of Jim Crow. The situation after Hiroshima, Ellison says to Burke, is this:

Negroes now have a conscious sense of having been pushed into a corner and this time they’ll fight, not with any hope of surviving but of “carrying as many white folks with me as I can.” So you see this matter does not depend upon a rational equality of numbers, but the explosion of outraged humanity against an oppression which it can no longer confront with hope or optimism. (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945)

The Ellison of this letter, as openly militant here as in any document that I have seen, was at this time at work on the novel that would receive the National Book Award eight years later. His anger and frustration with injustices in the United States that he had expressed to his mother in August 1937—“I find myself wishing that the whole thing would explode so the world could start again from scratch”—reappear with nearly the same image. Years later, he expects violence and still desires that new beginning, but now he cannot point with any optimism to a movement that could effect it.

Ellison informs Burke in this same letter that he was “writing a novel now” and shares its basic plan. He indicates his dissatisfaction with the Communist Party to Burke when describing the working novel. After discovering “the organized discipline of communism,” Ellison writes,

the narrator of his novel sees the familiar “antagonisms” between black and white communists persisting without hope of resolution. “Like Wright,” the narrator “begins slowly to discover that he has not escaped the nightmare which set him careening away from the pre-individual mass, but that he has found another of its many forms.”²¹¹ “Should he,” Ellison asks,

remain loyal to a political party, accepting it for its stated aims, for its former rather than for its current action, or should he remain loyal to his people and to his own experience? I believe, for my part, that if one truly believes in communism one had the obligation to reject the course it has taken in this country since 1937, and that had more of those intellectuals who left it had stated their reasons publicly, they might have saved the Left from becoming the farce it has now become.²¹² (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945)

The break from his association with the Communist Party was now complete (as was Wright’s membership), but not because he had become a “liberal”—that would come later—but because the Party’s presumed militancy and stated objectives had gone unfulfilled.²¹³ Even though his description of the Party here bears some resemblance to the role of the Brotherhood in the published novel, his position on the Party at his point is not one that lends itself so easily to American Cold War ideology as the Brotherhood of Invisible Man does.²¹⁴ For Ellison denounces the Party from the left, excoriating the Party for not being communist enough, for not

²¹¹ Ellison deliberately reproduces some of the language that he uses to characterize Richard Wright in “Richard Wright’s Blues” (1945) (CE 140, 142).

²¹² Ellison may be including himself. He was, after all, among those who supported the Party after the Moscow Trials (along with Wright and Hughes) and, among fewer, after the Hitler-Stalin Pact. See Rampersad (RE 135), Wald (287), and Foley (“Race, Class” 36-37).

²¹³ Wright went public with his break from the CPUSA in an article for the Atlantic in August 1944, “I Tried to Be a Communist.” This article was expanded and included in the influential Cold War anticommunist text The God that Failed (1949), then providing cultural support for US anticommunist policies.

²¹⁴ Morris Dickstein, for instance, approvingly reads Invisible Man in this way. More on this in the next chapter.

adhering to its own stated principles and aims. He then, in this same letter to Burke, clarifies how he understands the role and duty of the individual, marking his distance from the published novel's presumed postwar individualist ethic, which critics often build around the key term "identity." He writes that "when we sneak away in hurt and outrage we hold our tongues and hope that things will get better with a 'change in the political situation,' never facing the fact that we, each of us, is the political situation, or that the rejection of an organization is as much a function of belonging and belief as that of accepting and carry[ing] out its program" (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945).²¹⁵ Ellison does not reject political organization outright, as some understand the completed Invisible Man to suggest (the organization as inherently totalitarian, authoritarian, and inevitably in opposition to the sanctified "individual," etc.). He elaborates this point with the example of Richard Wright's public break from the Communist Party, continuing the position that he had developed in the pages of The Negro Quarterly: Wright "did the CP a service if he taught them that Negroes will reject their handshakes if real action is not forthcoming. And if they appeal to Negroes to join them on the basis of Negro suffering, then they must have expected Negroes to reject them on the same basis" (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945). Ellison is hardly questioning the importance of political organization and its role in "real" or "positive" action. In fact, he affirms the necessity of commitment to agreed "beliefs" and objectives within an organization. He concludes this reflection emphatically, quite comfortable with the paradox of his reasoning: "all of us who pretend to think have now the obligation to resist and reject even while we participate in organization. It is an ambiguous solution, but hell, so is the situation" (Letter to Burke, 23 Nov. 1945; qtd. in Crable 13). The individual's role, as Ellison sees it, is to ensure that the organization fulfills its stated and agreed upon mission—that

²¹⁵ Following from the question of "responsibility," Ellison's mention of the tendency to blame "the political situation" reappears in the epilogue of Invisible Man, where the register is now individual responsibility (and action) rather than group or collective responsibility (see IM 575-76).

it engages in “real action.” Resistance from within is a necessary part of commitment and of participation.

Burke responded quickly to Ellison’s letter with his own long letter (“The better a letter is, the longer it waits for an answer. But I am violating that sound principle to answer yours in much less than a month”) (Letter to Ellison, 16 Dec. 1945). Burke devotes several paragraphs to the matter of race and what he understands to be “the high percentage of indignation with which you apparently propose to write on the condition of the Negro.” Burke mostly finds Wright’s approach in Native Son to be counterproductive in that it reinforces precisely the “racial thinking” that it seeks to oppose. Additionally, Burke questions “an out and out battlecry kind of literature,” a provocation that alienates when one would want to engage rhetorically, encouraging collective identification and solidarity. His disagreement with “battlecry” literature is a matter of rhetorical effectiveness. With Ellison’s appreciation of Dostoevsky in mind, Burke offers that “to have the true Dostoevsky quality” while showing “the true complexity of the Negro situation” there “must be a figure who is struggling always to picture some little island of green, right in the midst of squalor.” This “would be to prove that there is a different area still alive in every Negro mind. There is, because there is in everybody[...]. Only in such figures as that will the Dostoevsky motive come through, and contribute to the humanization of the issue[...]. There are no sheer brutes in Dostoevsky” (Letter to Ellison, 16 Dec. 1945). As I have suggested, Ellison was already doing this in his fiction, picturing in nearly every story he wrote interracial association and a transracial, transcendent “humanization.”²¹⁶ But isn’t Ellison in his

²¹⁶ Michel Fabre shows Ellison to be quite concerned with such humanization in his letters to Richard Wright in the 1940s. Ellison complements Wright for attempting to humanize Marxism at points in Native Son: “you were trying to state in terms of human values certain ideas, concepts, implicit in Marxist philosophy but which, since Marx and later Lenin were so occupied with economics and politics, have not been stated in humanist terms of Marxist coloring” (qtd. in Fabre 210).

“indignation” noting the limit of the rhetorical adjustments that Burke recommends, perhaps partly reminding Burke that more than rhetoric was necessary?

Burke’s main complaint in this letter, however, is Wright’s public break with the Communist Party. Contrary to Ellison’s continued approval of Wright, Burke argues that loyalty to a cause exceeds the matter of party membership.

As for the quarrels with the Communists: I grant that there is something unsatisfactory about remaining silent. But there is something much more unsatisfactory in selling one’s grievances to an audience which loves to hear of them for wholly reactionary reasons. It’s not just a matter of our being under the sway of “gang morality.” It’s a matter of rhetoric. And it’s a matter of percentage. An article against the Communists, written for publication in the Atlantic Monthly, is justified only insofar as it shows how much real talent and real sacrifice goes along with the fantastic ills of the bureaucracy. (Letter to Ellison, 16 Dec. 1945)

Burke, as I mention in the previous chapter, never publicly renounced his association with the Party (not when Hook attacked him in Partisan Review, not during the peak years of anti-Communist hysteria after the war, not ever publicly), and he understands Wright’s “selling” of his “grievances” to be not just simple betrayal but unwise because of the uses it might have for reactionary forces (which it soon would, especially once it became part of The God that Failed [1949]). And, perhaps most troubling to Burke, Wright’s denunciatory account reduces the labors of those associated with the Party to the “ills of the bureaucracy.” Although Ellison would continue to be Wright’s defender, his own separation from the Communist Party hardly provided material for such forces, as his work for The Negro Quarterly shows. As he indicates

to Burke, he remained loyal not only to Wright but also to a form of revolutionary left politics when he began to write Invisible Man.

3.7. TOWARD INVISIBLE MAN: LEROY, RESPONSIBILITY, MILITANCY

Some sections of the unpublished drafts of Invisible Man reveal how Ellison was trying to work through the problems that he presents to Burke in his 1945 letter and to make a case for militancy. I turn to one character that Ellison removed late in the drafting of the novel—probably in 1950, nearly six years into Ellison’s writing.²¹⁷ This character, Leroy, firmly ties Ellison’s militant position—apparent in Ellison’s letter to his mother, in his writings for New Masses, and in his letter to Burke—to the term “action.” Ellison calls this militant commitment “responsibility” in his letter to Burke. In fact, several ideas, terms, and even phrases that appear in this letter correspond closely to those of draft pages that cover Leroy. There is much to suggest, then, that Ellison attached to this character some of his own political views.

In her five essays on Ellison, Barbara Foley consistently repudiates Invisible Man for its distortions of the record of the CPUSA.²¹⁸ She sees the novel as advancing “a generalized fear

²¹⁷ Some sections of the narrator’s encounter with Leroy’s journal appear to have been retained through four or five drafts. Jackson mentions that Harry Ford, editor at Knopf, recommended that he remove the Leroy sections (EG 416). For scholars, the organization of the drafts of Invisible Man at the Library of Congress poses challenges. As Foley says, the drafts “contain multiple versions of many passages and chapters. Even though Ellison appears to have categorized the sections of the novel under various rubrics [...], the page numbers follow different sequences, and it is often very difficult to trace the order in which the various sections, and the many revisions within chapters, were composed” (“Drafts” 165). In my own review of the materials, sometimes I was able to link pages among the various folders by observing the kind of paper that they were typed on. Within some folders it is possible to determine roughly, by noting Ellison’s handwritten corrections and revisions and then subsequent drafts that included these changes, the sequence of revisions of some sections. But dating with regular precision is quite difficult if not impossible.

²¹⁸ I say five essays, but she has also published a substantive reply to Brian Roberts regarding his response to her essay “Reading Redness” and a long review essay of the Ellison scholarship. Regrettably, Foley’s long-awaited book on Ellison, Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, was published in late

and anxiety of the left”—what she terms a “rhetoric of anticommunism” (“Rhetoric” 530). The first Ellison critic to consider the drafts in considerable detail, she cogently argues that the drafts reveal that Ellison’s deradicalization, his “anticommunization,” “was hesitant ” (“Drafts” 164).²¹⁹ “Ellison,” Foley argues, “appears to have only gradually reduced his Communist characters, black and white, to the cartoonish exemplars of Stalinist authoritarianism appearing in the 1952 text” (165). Here she is not, however, referring to the left generally but instead specifically to the Communist Party. In fact, in her essays she often misleadingly conflates the two.

Raymond Mazurek, self-identified as a “democratic socialist” and taking his cue from Michael Denning’s rather celebratory account of the Popular Front years, sees particulars of Ellison’s radical beginnings as leaving “their mark on Invisible Man in more complex ways” than Foley suggests in her account. He also argues, not very compellingly to my mind, that “there is something to be learned from the critique of the Left embodied in Invisible Man,” citing the novel’s “criticism of Brotherhood ‘discipline’ or of democratic centralism, the insistence that members follow the Party line after a decision has been reached” (Mazurek “Writer on the Left” 114).²²⁰ I consider the completed Invisible Man and its drafts somewhat differently than both Mazurek and Foley. I agree with Foley that the drafts do show “a process of decommunization”—in the sense, that is, of deradicalization—even though I find her attempt to “correct” distortions of the actual CPUSA unhelpfully confining at times. I also agree with

November 2010, just after I completed my two chapters on Ellison. I currently do not know how she might have altered and expanded her arguments from the essays.

²¹⁹ Lawrence Jackson gives a helpful overview of the changes Ellison made in the drafts once he began working with editor Albert Erskine (see EG 426-31).

²²⁰ The lesson apparently is that party authoritarianism is “bad,” itself a Cold War truism that has had remarkable staying power. Is Invisible Man truly instructive on this point? Or do today’s readers and teachers re-ritualize it as such to keep new challenges to hegemonic orders (authority) at bay, even as they flash “progressive” credentials? I take these questions up in the next chapter.

Mazurek that the finished novel bears traces from Ellison's radical period, which I date from 1937 to at least 1947, even if I do not always agree with his examples.²²¹ I approach the draft pages concerning Leroy, then, as leaving "their mark" on the finished novel. Such surviving markers are a reminder of another Ellison, a writer who, as his letter to Burke makes clear, saw militancy necessary and inevitable in confronting injustices of American society and for transcending what he would later refer to as "American identity." Leroy, in fact, may have been on Ellison's mind as he wrote to Burke in 1945.

When the narrator becomes a boarder at Mary Rambo's house in the early drafts,²²² he moves into a room that had been formerly occupied by Leroy, a Merchant Marine who had died at sea after lodging at Mary's for three years. Among a small personal library in this room—with "books too complicated and advanced for me"—the narrator finds Leroy's journal.²²³ Approximately eight pages in the typescript cover the narrator's reading of this journal. The journal stirs the narrator to reassess his own thinking and offers an alternative to the perspectives of Bledsoe and the Brotherhood. "I tried to look at my life through Leroy's eyes," he says. Referring to a scene that Ellison retained in the published novel, he wonders what Leroy "would have seen in young Emerson's revealing the contents of Bledsoe's letter." He concludes, "Probably with his attitude he would have opened the letters on his own account before he ever

²²¹ In addition, I agree with Mazurek's claim, in a different essay, that "[h]ad more of Leroy's journal survived, Ellison probably would have been read as a champion of the truncated anticommunist left in the McCarthy years" ("Reinventing" 173). (In making this statement, Mazurek seems to be relying on only Jackson's brief mention of these draft pages in his biography and not on firsthand knowledge or even Foley's account in "The Drafts of *Invisible Man*").

²²² In the drafts, Mary's house has several boarders, including Leroy's white Southern friend and fellow Merchant Marine, Treadwell. Conversation, as well as advice for the narrator, takes place at the meal table. Ellison made an effort in the drafts to present Mary's house as a communal, interracial space. Part of Ellison's exploration of what he eventually terms "social responsibility" in the published novel occurs in his confrontation with the words of Leroy's journal but also in his discussions with the other boarders, regarding Leroy's life and his own.

²²³ From this point I quote exclusively from the folder "Leroy's Journal," box 145, of the Ralph Ellison Papers at the Library of Congress.

left the campus.” Leroy’s boldness, general questioning attitude, and political concerns significantly influence the narrator. After reading the entire journal, he is perplexed yet emboldened. He commits “to learn the meaning of the journal” and “read every book on the shelves.” He feels a “dependence upon Leroy” for he “justified the feelings that I had kept repressed within myself.” And in “those days to follow when I was falling apart it was his attitude that kept me going.” From the start in the Leroy draft pages, Ellison presents the journal as eliciting a shift in the narrator’s perspective. He begins to take on Leroy’s attitude--in Burke’s sense of incipient action. How to live and to act, in fact, becomes the narrator’s chief concern in this section of the drafts.

Large portions of the journal are presented directly, interspersed with the narrator’s response. Beginning to read, the narrator encounters “notes the like of which I had never seen or dreamed.” He finds comments on Frederick Douglass (“one of my grandfather’s heroes,” he says) as a “typical 19th Century idealist” who “made mistake of throwing his best energies into speeches” (qtd. in Foley “Drafts” 176). His encounter with this journal entry reveals a perspective that astounds him. This Leroy wrote like a criminal!” he exclaims:

Had he spent his time in organizing a revolt he would have been a far more important man today; he would have fathered a tradition of militant action around which men could rally today. What method? Why guerrilla warfare, the tactic and strategy of John Brown, a man more reasonable in his so-called madness than Douglass dared allow himself to admit.

Barbara Foley quotes this passage in her consideration of the drafts, but not the subsequent lines, which more clearly show Ellison’s sense of “action” and “responsibility” as he drafted Invisible Man (Foley “Drafts” 176-77).

No matter if a million had died, but died with guns in their hands a tradition of responsible civic action would have been established that would have become a living force in our national life. We are ourselves a living force in our national life. We are ourselves responsible, partially, for the historical trend of which we are the victims and we do not suffer alone.

Leroy concludes that “Douglass’ speeches for all their present day validity are themselves eloquent witnesses of the ineffectuality of their 19th cent. eloquence.”²²⁴ In this he expresses Ellison’s own seeming ambivalence regarding what words might achieve. Douglass and Brown pose contrasting options. Noting the limits of Douglass’s speeches, Leroy argues, as Ellison had similarly stated to Burke in 1945, that even the most effective words are insufficient. Another form of action, as supplement or substitute, is necessary. “In some instances,” Leroy starkly asserts, “bullets are the only effective words.”²²⁵ Symbolic action apparently requires additional support.

Passages in the Invisible Man drafts show the necessity of other forms of intervention in certain historical moments to supplement, and complement, the production of knowledge.

Militant direct action, at times employing violence, is not necessarily separate from or opposed to symbolic action. In these draft pages, Ellison sees these together. The narrator soon reads in

²²⁴ Foley mentions that Leroy’s dismissal of Douglass “shows him to the left of contemporaneous Communist doctrine” as “Douglass occupied an especially important position in the Red pantheon in the war years” (176, 177). I agree. She does not, however, read Leroy as demonstrating Ellison’s “decommunization” in the drafts—only this character’s removal. But Leroy clearly poses a political orientation separate from the CPUSA, as she tacitly acknowledges in noting his hostility to Douglass. Her comment, then, that “Leroy might as well be a card-carrying member of not just the National Maritime Union ... but of the CPUSA” seems inconsistent and a misreading (176).

²²⁵ Ellison would seem to endorse Leroy’s preference for John Brown over Douglass for Brown represents the “responsibility” that Ellison considers in the 1945 letter to Burke. At times, taking responsibility requires violent action. This was Brown’s rationale for the violence in Lawrence, Kansas and in the raid on the Harper’s Ferry arsenal. As W. E. B. DuBois explains Brown’s reasoning, “so deep-seated and radical a disease [as slavery] demanded ‘Action! Action!’” (53). Brown saw militant “action” as his moral obligation and responsibility. Ellison anticipated an “explosion of outraged humanity,” and it seems that he understood “responsible” action to include organization that could give form to and direct that energy.

the journal about Leroy's "first job out of college" as a butler for the mistress of an ambassador. Leroy recounts his experience being privy to intimate details of their lives and that the white ambassador viewed him as possessing "no marks of intelligence." That the ambassador could not have imagined that Leroy would, or could, read papers in his attaché case was itself a weakness in skills of diplomacy. Leroy expects, then, "that he'll make a serious mistake of statesmanship.... Approach him on his blind side and he's done. Change the rules and he's your fool." Ellison here presents the familiar theme of invisibility of the published novel as an asset in political maneuvering. That the paternalistic ambassador does not "see" him signifies not only racialism and racism to Leroy, but also incompetence and inevitable failure. Leroy shows the narrator how this "blindness" may permit insight and opportunities for those who are not seen and are excluded. It can be a tactical advantage and point of intervention. If it is necessary to "take the backdoor to knowledge," Leroy asserts, then it is also necessary to "be assiduous students. An essay on the private life of a diplomat written by his butler or his wife's maid would make history—and how!"

At this point in Leroy's journal, lines that Ellison would retain and reassign nearly verbatim to the narrator in the epilogue of Invisible Man follow: "Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled 'file and forget.' I can neither file or forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me, they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency."²²⁶ In the draft these words are in a context of "militant action" and knowledge production as cultural struggle—of compiling and craftily using knowledge, when possible, to undermine adversaries and institutions ("Change the rules and he's your fool"). At the close of the published novel, however, the lines gesture, relatively feebly, toward social interaction and nebulous democratic

²²⁶ Ellison made negligible changes to this passage when these words became the narrator's in the novel (see IM 579).

participation. In that revised context they also contribute to a redefinition of responsibility and democratic participation. The narrator is leaving his hole at the end of Invisible Man, yes, but to do what? That he declines to outline a “plan” may ensure appropriate openness to what cannot yet be known, to specifics of the situation in which he will soon find himself. But privileging “possibility” may become indefinite deferral, which, he has already sharply noted, is irresponsibility itself.

I suggested earlier that the published novel, despite its closing paean to possibility, rigs the game against certain paths and toward others. The narrator’s reflection on his grandfather’s words shows this more clearly as he affirms the American democratic “principle” and, I infer, the general American political framework. He has already rejected possibilities for direct political action, appearing most clearly with the suspect Brotherhood and Ras (the narrator eventually sees Ras’s methods of Exhortation as Destruction). By at least 1950, with Leroy’s removal Ellison apparently abandons his attempt to articulate a militant or “responsible civic action” that would “become a living force in our national life.” The narrator of the published novel conceives “responsibility” chiefly as affirmation of “the principle on which this country was built,” but he does not specify precisely what that “principle” is or how one might take responsibility for it (IM 574). Does the novel ultimately, then, adopt mere vapid sanctimony?

At the National Book Award presentation ceremony in 1953, Ellison gravely describes a tradition in American writing of taking “responsibility for the condition of democracy” that mostly “had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain” (CE 152-53). Invisible Man, he tells his audience, was an “attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy” (CE 151). For the novel’s narrator, this means ending his hibernation in order to

find “a socially responsible role to play” (IM 581).²²⁷ Just a few years before the National Book Award ceremony, however, Ellison had Leroy see this taking responsibility leading to “revolt” and requiring “guns” and “guerrilla warfare.” Leroy and the narrator’s engagement with his journal continues Ellison’s understanding of responsibility in his 1945 letter to Burke and his 1941 consideration of Wright in “Recent Negro Fiction.” Leroy seems to have been part of Ellison’s effort to show that unapologetic militant action had its place, especially in the face of the obvious injustice of legal segregation and following the disappointments and horrors of the Second World War. Writing, Ellison then thought, was part of the struggle to address these issues. When accepting the National Book Award, Ellison presumably did not mean that his novel returns to that militant “mood.” Invisible Man, nonetheless, bears traces of it.

During his year as managing editor for The Negro Quarterly, Ellison began to see Wright’s and Burke’s work together meaningfully. Militant action at this time comfortably overlapped with Burke’s symbolic action. Leroy’s attention to “bullets” and to the writing of history elucidates how Ellison a few years later continued to see each as intervening “action” when he began to draft Invisible Man. Although Leroy bluntly separates “weapons” from “words”—the latter insufficient in addressing systemic social injustice—Ellison the militant writer continued to see the importance of words as “weapons.” He had made this clear in a November 1941 letter to Richard Wright praising the publication of 12 Million Black Voices. This book, Ellison writes, “calls for exaltation—and direct action” (qtd. in Fabre 210). “When experiences such as ours are organized as you have done it here, there is nothing left for a man to

²²⁷ John Callahan, among other critics, not unreasonably argues that this role is to be a writer (“Lingering Question” 224). Pertinent questions, however, remain. What does the “socially responsible” writer write and for whom does this writer write?

do but fight” (qtd. in Fabre 211).²²⁸ For Ellison, Wright’s book shows that “after all the brutalization, starvation, and suffering, we have begun to embrace the experience and master it. And we shall make of it a weapon more subtle than a machine-gun, more effective than a fighter plane” (qtd. in Fabre 212). 12 Million Black Voices, he tells Wright, “gives me something to build upon” and that now “my work is made easier.” When he began to draft Invisible Man, it seems Ellison was trying to build upon what he understood to be a successfully realized militant book, a work that shapes experience into a “subtle” and “effective” weapon. 12 Million Black Voices “convinced” him “that we people of emotion shall land the most telling strokes, the destructive-creative blows in the struggle. And we shall do it with books like this!” (qtd. in Fabre 210). Giving form to that experience, Ellison indicates, is simultaneously a creative and destructive act. Creation’s destruction of established forms is inevitably part of “the struggle.”

In the early 1960s, Ellison clearly distanced himself from Wright’s militancy of the 1930s and 40s, explaining that “Wright believed in the much abused idea that novels are ‘weapons,’ ...[b]ut I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life” (CE 161-62). (One might also see this as fulfilling Burke’s advice in 1945, contra “battlecry” literature, to retain “some little island of green” and sufficiently “humanize.”) True novels, he continues, “would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject” (162). Here Ellison rehearses part of the narrator’s final reflection in Invisible Man. Meandering toward something like a conclusion, the narrator states, “I condemn and affirm, say no and yes, say yes and no” (579). His “approach” to his life is “through division.” He denounces because he has been “hurt to the point of invisibility” but defends “because in spite of all I find that I love” (580). Critics have seen this turn to “love” as the novel’s salutary

²²⁸ The final chapter of Wright’s 12 Million Black Voices (1941)—what Michel Fabre accurately characterizes as “the militant section of Wright’s book”—appeared in the second issue of The Negro Quarterly, probably selected by Ellison for inclusion (213).

resolution of conflict. Condemnation best occurs in affirmation—of the democratic “principle,” of “humanity.” John Callahan understands this “love,” with support from some remarks in Ellison’s National Book Award address, to be the very essence of democracy (“Lingering Question” 220). The narrator, he argues, implores readers to “say yes to the proposition that politics become an expression of love in America” (226). Not surprisingly, Callahan does not reveal how this would come to pass or what it would look like, but his reading approvingly places Invisible Man, and by extension Ellison, as undertaking national service. Condemnation and rejection, meanwhile, slip by Callahan. “Love” apparently could have nothing to do with Leroy’s “responsible civic action” or militancy, which could be only “bitter” rejection and destruction.

The 1941 letter to Wright, however, shows that Ellison conceived militancy as necessarily affirming and rejecting: novels as weapons did not only reject a given order. Even though he may later have seen militant stances as disturbingly crude encounters with reality, when he first read 12 Million Black Voices Ellison also understood militant writing to affirm an imagined “positive” future, something other than what it opposed. (This is part of Burke’s “small island of green,” too.) But the narrator heavily weights his grandfather’s words toward affirmation and away from rejection in the epilogue. He describes black Americans as having “to affirm”—even more than whites—“the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed—not because we would always be weak nor because we were afraid or opportunistic, but because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others and because they had exhausted in us, some—not much, but some—of the human greed and smallness” (IM 574). We might see this as Ellison’s reworking, for a different time, of his earlier Marxist understanding of black workers as vanguard force and that insight

may emerge in oppression. Yet strong rejection of the social conditions of that oppression, an effect of that insight, is absent. The narrator's embrace of affirmation in this way is a misreading of his grandfather's words and turn away from their challenge. As appearing at the beginning of the first chapter, his grandfather makes it clear that he agreed in order to undermine and advises his grandson to resolutely resist. The grandfather's mode of engagement is "treachery" (17).

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (16)

Saying "yes" is calculated deception, a strategy that the grandfather undertook for survival. Saying "yes" is not "affirmation" but resistance and opposition. The grandfather understands himself to be at war; he aims to destroy. This grandfather is quite close to the militant Leroy. In the epilogue, however, the narrator converts the grandfather's "anger" into affirmation of "the principle on which the country was built," as Ellison reassigns Leroy's comments on "action" to the narrator's voice of affirmation (574). But if we read the grandfather's statement as vestige of Ellison's militant period—by way, that is, of the Leroy passages, Ellison's letters to Wright and Burke, and his New Masses writings—affirmation would primarily be of another possible future and of resistance to social forms in the present. The grandfather affirms the necessity of militancy and presents this insight as legacy—"Learn it to the younguns," he whispered fiercely" (16). His grandson abandons that legacy just as Ellison turned away from his own

fiercely radical commitments and participation in “the good fight.” That past, however, lingers patiently in textual details and fragments, still suggesting other paths and possibilities.

4.0 MAKING ELLISON “POLITICAL”

Fifty years after its publication, John Callahan, Ralph Ellison’s literary executor and dutiful champion, writes that Invisible Man “is one of those rare novels whose commercial and critical success coincide in a continually accelerating, rising curve” (“Introduction” Casebook 4).²²⁹ The novel, he says, “must be considered an overwhelming favorite to enjoy an undiminished, robust longevity worldwide” (3). By the measure of scholarly output alone, this prognosis seems accurate. The fiftieth anniversary of its publication, in fact, inspired four collections of essays and a special journal issue devoted to Ellison’s writings.²³⁰ These publications certainly show Ellison’s continued “critical success” in an academic context, even if these materials reveal that this is an American affair, in theme and production. Reviewing these collections of essays, Barbara Foley sardonically dubs this prodigious scholarly output “the Ellison industry.” Ellison, she says, “has become a national cultural institution” (“Ellison Industry” 325). Foley highlights

²²⁹ Callahan’s role in shaping Ellison’s reception after his death should not be overlooked. He vigilantly executes Ellison’s literary estate and public presentation. Callahan assembled Ellison’s early fiction for publication (Flying Home and Other Stories), carefully selected Ellison’s nonfiction (beyond inclusion of his two published essay collections) for the Modern Library’s Collected Essays, produced from published stories and drafts an imagining of Ellison’s long awaited second novel, first published as Juneteenth in 1997 (and then, with his former student Adam Bradley, more fully offered this second novel as a lengthy process of composition, published as Three Days Before the Shooting in 2010), and has controlled access to the Ellison papers at the Library of Congress. Callahan has successfully managed Ellison’s public persona through these publications and his own commentaries. Ellison would have been pleased, for Callahan’s fidelity to Ellison’s postwar vision of himself, as he expressed in interviews and essays, is remarkable.

²³⁰ These are Callahan’s Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook (2003); A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison (2004), edited by Steven C. Tracy; Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man (2004), edited by Lucas E. Morel; The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison (2005), edited by Ross Posnock; and a special issue of the journal Boundary 2 (2003), edited by Ronald A. T. Judy and Jonathan Arac.

this institutionalization as part of the continued presence of American anticommunism, the main target of her five previous essays on Ellison and a focus that at the very least opposes varieties of American nationalism and updates of the tiresome story of American exceptionalism. That Foley's work is, with few exceptions, ignored in the scholarly "industry" may itself support her point.²³¹ My interest, however, is in how a lot of recent scholarship attempts to place Ellison as "political"—and appropriately political—for the post-Cold War moment. Such articulations are at least implicitly defensive, responding to charges that some radicals and untoward critics have made against him since the publication of Invisible Man and that have persisted, with modifications through changing historical circumstances, to the present day—that he was an anticommunist Cold Warrior, a race traitor, a reactionary, "an establishment writer," and so on. These defenses of Ellison do more than burnish the reputation of the historical person and the value of his writings, of course; they also tend to serve institutional and state interests in limiting our understanding of political activity.

In a 1955 interview, Ellison says that he did not see his novel lasting even twenty years: "I failed of eloquence, and many of the important issues are rapidly fading away. If it does last, it will be simply because there are things going on in its depths that are of more permanent interest than on its surface" (CE 217). That the novel has lasted much longer than twenty years and now approaches sixty testifies to both its depths and surfaces. Some critical interest relates to Ellison's privileging of the novel form and criticism as matters of national concern. Consciously writing as an American, Ellison saw himself "contributing not only to the growth of literature but to the shaping of the culture as I should like it to be. The American novel is in this

²³¹ Callahan, for instance, does not include any of Foley's four essays that would have been available to him in the fairly extensive "selected bibliography" of criticism in his 2004 Casebook. Nor does he include other considerations of Ellison's radical writings, by Raymond Mazurek (2002) and Frederick Griffiths (2001). These omissions seem deliberate and part of a larger effort to direct scholarly attention to particular areas and not to encourage others.

sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it” (224). That Ellison links creation to conquest may seem unremarkable, but as he became cozier in the seat of US power—with appearances at Johnson’s White House and at West Point during the Vietnam years—this connection takes on troubling significance. When critics in the postwar years, particularly the post-Cold War years, shape Ellison as a political writer they routinely elide both Ellison’s militant past and his reactionary Cold War stance. Yet the Ellison who moved relatively comfortably in the corridors of power should not be ignored and entirely separated by critics from his celebrated ruminations on America as bastion of liberty and cultural pluralism, in all its surprising and chaotic movements as he would often discuss.²³² Ellison may indeed have participated in a kind of conquest or social domination, as one of his most damning critics asserted in 1970, and his recent politicization obscures that role as critics enhance his institutionalization in a period of renascent military expansion. Ellison’s own postwar reinvention still provides the basic terms for the scholarship that undertakes this work as it adopts a defensive posture against Ellison’s radical critics of years ago, and it simultaneously serves as a bulwark not just against their more recent incarnations but also to affirm, however implicitly, a national vision that poses little obstacle to state power and social inequities. As such, recent politicization in Ellison criticism rehearses Ellison’s own state entrenchment in the Vietnam years in the current period of militarization.

²³² See Ellison’s “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” for his definitive statement on American—Ellison says “our” without fear of contradiction—“pluralistic cultural identity” (CE 508).

4.1 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Two moments in Ellison's postwar career continue to pattern considerations of Ellison as "political." The first is Ellison's exchange with Irving Howe, precipitated by Howe's critique of Ellison and James Baldwin in favor of Richard Wright in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons." Ellison soon assembled his initial response to Howe and his rejoinder following Howe's reply, each published in 1963-1964, as "The World and the Jug" for his first collection of essays, Shadow and Act. With the publication of Ellison's Collected Essays, Ellison's side of this exchange remains in clear view, while Howe's points are usually visible only through Ellison's reporting in the "The World and the Jug." The second moment is another critique of Ellison, one clearly hostile, which critics usually identify as that of those associated with the "Black Arts" movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and which some casually conflate with Black Power. Among the targets here is Ernest Kaiser, one of the contributors to a special issue of Black World on Ellison in 1970. I note that critics often approach these two moments as appraisals of Ellison made by a paternalistic white socialist and, the second, by intemperate black militants—an invocation of recognizable types that still successfully functions to establish Ellison as inappropriately beset and therefore immediately sympathetic. Invocation of such types also suggests that Ellison, at times, may be simply an occasion for some to vent disapproval and even outrage toward what they already dislike.

For his Casebook, Callahan selects two essays that contain less flattering assessments of Ellison: Larry Neal's "Ellison's Zoot Suit" and Morris Dickstein's "Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture." The first disarms criticisms of Ellison as an apolitical aesthete, a charge made by some associated with the Black Arts Movement, while the second responds to more recent efforts to characterize Ellison as Cold Warrior. Neal's essay counters black denunciations

of Ellison in the 1960s and 70s from within radical black nationalism, directing readers toward an appreciation of Ellison's "cultural nationalism" and serious effort to delineate a "black aesthetic" in music, "speech patterns," and styles of living (Neal 93, 97-98). Neal, like Ellison after the war, shows maturation, Callahan believes, as he moved away from the stridency and simplistic denunciations of black nationalism and Marxism in those years. "No longer the antagonist he was in the early days of the Black Arts Movement," Callahan explains, "Neal discerns the 'black aesthetic at its best' permeating Invisible Man" ("Introduction" 14; Neal 98). Neal deftly does the work that Callahan needs accomplished: he takes on radical denunciations of Invisible Man and Ellison and, even if qualifying his praise at points, locates in Invisible Man an effort to achieve a "black aesthetic" that retains political purpose. In seeing Invisible Man as "one of the world's most successful 'political' novels," Neal reads it against Ellison's own comment in response to Irving Howe that the novel "is always a public gesture, though not necessarily a political one" (Neal 106; CE 158). "[H]owever minute a [public] work's political characteristics might be," Neal contends, "they are always present. The way one approaches these features, however, varies" (106). Callahan uses Neal to redirect and contain such features if they cannot be passed over entirely. This approach has apparently taken on some urgency; a number of recent critics have at least implicitly advanced such containment strategies. Ellison, I will argue through examining additional "defenses," has become fertile terrain for domesticating political understanding. In order to show the contours and implications of this, I now look at some particulars.

Timothy Parrish's 2007 review essay of Arnold Rampersad's biography of Ellison and books by Kenneth Warren and John Wright exhibits the main features of defenses of Ellison.²³³

²³³ That Parrish has also attempted to link Ellison and Kenneth Burke within a pragmatist tradition makes this essay particularly relevant for my purposes. His judgment of Howe in his exchange with Ellison is present in that earlier

Warren's and Wright's books, respectively So Black and Blue (2003) and Shadowing Ralph Ellison (2006), serve primarily as positive foils for Parrish's main concern and target:

Rampersad's biography. He writes, "Where Warren follows Ellison to question the utility of race-based designations of cultural identity in this age of identity politics, Rampersad, following a line first made famous by Irving Howe, accuses Ellison of failing to live up to his political obligations as a black man" ("Finished and Unfinished" 641-42). I put aside for the moment whether this accurately characterizes Howe's charge (Ellison was hardly the focus of Howe's essay—Wright and Baldwin were), yet Parrish certainly rehearses the main complaint in Ellison's response to Howe. He foregrounds Ellison's exchange with Howe in 1963-64, for he understands it to be

probably the most important moment in Ellison's post-Invisible Man career. It canonized the intellectual position that Ellison would defend—and be attacked for—during the remainder of his life. Most subsequent critical responses to Ellison can be filtered through this exchange, and, in retrospect, one can see it as crystallizing an intellectual conflict between black and white readers that was first expressed with the initial reviews of Invisible Man and has now achieved its apotheosis in Rampersad's biography. (643)

Ellison's reply certainly has become canonical. Ross Posnock, for instance, greets it as "a classic statement of intellectual freedom" ("Chronology" xiv). It is not clear, however, why Parrish sees initial reviews of Invisible Man primarily in terms of "an intellectual conflict between black and white readers," for those reviews cannot be so neatly divided according to

essay, "Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Form of Democracy." There, in a footnote, he aligns Burke and Ellison as defenders of art's autonomy, heralding "The World and the Jug," along with Burke's Counter-Statement, as "the best analysis of the true relationship between art and politics in American letters" (143, n. 3). Should it not be surprising that Parrish, who styles himself as pragmatist, writes so confidently of a "true relationship between art and politics"?

racial position as Robert Butler's assessment of these materials shows: more important was political perspective (235-37).²³⁴ Furthermore, in seeming contradiction with Parrish's appreciation that Warren highlights Ellison's questioning of "race-based designations of cultural identity," this characterization of the initial reception of Invisible Man, as well as of later contestations, and his account of Howe and Ellison's exchange seem unconsciously locked in this racializing habit.²³⁵ "By calling Ellison out publicly as one whose work was either indifferent or tone-deaf to racial political realities ... Howe put Ellison on the defensive as a black man. Ellison responded in kind. Acknowledging Howe's position as a well-meaning white liberal, Ellison bristles that '[o]ne unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell'" (644). Ellison here employs a central motif of his novel, the invisibility of blacks in structures of white domination. As in Invisible Man, however, this "blindness" is not strictly a matter of racialization for Parrish. It is more significantly an effect of political orientation, and he carries forward this dimension of his defense of Ellison against Howe to Rampersad's biography. The "core of [Howe's] argument," Parrish laments, "would be replicated in the assaults on Ellison made by the Black Arts Movement and figures such as Ishmael Reed, Addison Gayle, and Amiri Baraka" (642). Parrish then charges Jerry Watts for reviving such

²³⁴ Ernest Kaiser's review in 1970 of Invisible Man's reception also indicates this, especially in regard to Ellison's representation of communists (82). Kaiser's survey of the materials up to 1970 appears to argue at points that most black reviewers found Ellison's representation of black life to be a distortion (82) while white reviewers, Kaiser says, "were unanimous in their praise." But he presents several examples (reviews in the Nation and New Leader (82), for instance, and Howe's own later qualified praise) that contradict this. These reviews show that political and racial positions do not neatly coincide.

²³⁵ Of course, Ellison plays to this perception even though he often keenly challenges racial categories. As the earliest interviews show, interlocutors often drove him into a corner of "race-based designations of cultural identity." At other times, he clearly embraced speaking authoritatively for "the Negro," and not on a "lower frequency." Overall, Ellison consistently dismissed anything that smacked of sociological determinism. But in doing so he downplayed the impositions of racial thinking, as well as of segregation, and gave more attention to choice and opportunity, which no doubt significantly broadened his reception.

militant black hostility to Ellison in his 1994 book Heroism and the Black Intellectual.²³⁶ So Rampersad follows Howe's basic position and its strident amplification by these black radicals (645-46). His biography, Parrish tells us, "attempts to destroy its subject by means of a 1990s identity-politics personal attack" (647). Notice how Parrish here places a movement that intended to disrupt forms of oppression within what he pejoratively describes as "identity politics." The implication is that the liberatory black nationalism of the Black Arts Movement is not just divisive; it is not to be taken seriously as politics at all.

Lawrence Jackson's biography, in sharp contrast to Rampersad's for Parrish, "tells an exciting story about a black man who overcomes extreme poverty, the early death of his father, and the brutal limitations of Jim Crow to become a preeminent figure in American and African American literature" (647). Rampersad's biography may not be sentimental or fawning—and it even reads as tabloid gossip at times, which Parrish does not fail to document—but it hardly takes on the form of "insensitive" character assassination as Parrish would have us believe. In fact, much in the biography allies with Parrish's concerns. Rampersad also dismisses Howe's criticisms and sees Ellison's "The World and the Jug" as the "richest apologia for his life as a writer who happened to be black, as well as for the Negro culture that had made him" (Ralph 403).²³⁷ Parrish's tidy summary of the merits of Jackson's biography is equally misleading, for between "extreme poverty" and literary success (Jackson's biography ends with the publication

²³⁶ In So Black and Blue, Kenneth Warren considers Howe and the "Black Aestheticians," as well as Jerry Watts, but without Parrish's animus. His account, apparently lost on Parrish, is much more nuanced when it takes up matters of politics and aesthetics. For Warren, "Confronting Ellison ... means trying at once to see through the window on reality provided by the novel while also getting at what the novel as social practice necessarily obscures" (So Black 21). Watts and others, Warren realizes, attend to the latter. Parrish seems to want some things to remain obscure.

²³⁷ Instances of Rampersad's clear appreciation of Ellison in the biography are too numerous to document, but I should mention that Rampersad clearly approves of Ellison's turn away from communism and Marxism, referring to his "brave refusal of coarse, destructive forms of militancy, his eloquent embrace of studied moderation, and his complex patriotism" (RE 403). We find here a familiar opposition—"moderation" and "militancy"—one that Parrish would surely endorse, so he may be much closer to Rampersad than he recognizes. (Rampersad places Ellison's turn from Marxism several years too early, however, dating it to 1943.)

of Invisible Man) lies Jackson's considerable handling of Ellison's radical years and writings.

Parrish, in order to maintain Ellison's own postwar narrative of himself in the face of Rampersad's supposed irreverence, needs to avoid mentioning this, as well as Rampersad's own coverage of this period, for it might bring notice to parallels between Ellison's radical commitments in the 1930s and those of his postwar radical detractors.

Nonetheless, Irving Howe's complaint against Baldwin and Ellison is not quite what Ellison presents it as and what Parrish reproduces.²³⁸ As one reviewer of Shadow and Act recognized in 1964, "anyone who reads only this book will not know how misleading Ellison is being about his adversary." He "twists Howe's essay rather badly. What he was really attacking was not an argument at all ...but any trace of certain assumptions he knows how to detect better than anyone" (Sale 127).²³⁹ Among these is the assumption that "any effort a Negro makes to be himself is immoral in so far as it ignores the pain of other Negroes so ravaged they barely have selves to be" (Sale 127). There may indeed be a hint of this in Howe's critique, which would have rightly irked Ellison, but Howe's concern and most significant points lie elsewhere. Not surprisingly, Ellison selectively presents Howe's argument and avoids its most compelling charge. In "Black Boys and Native Sons," Howe makes clear his qualified appreciation of Invisible Man—"brilliant though flawed"—but emphasizes how it plays to dominant perspectives of the postwar years. "If Native Son is marred by the ideological delusions of the

²³⁸ Parrish is not alone in largely adhering to Ellison's representation of Howe's purported missteps. See also Lucas Morel's introduction to the essay collection Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope. For a variation in support of Ellison's presentation of Howe, from someone who initially sided with Howe (in his review of Shadow and Act in 1964, "My Negro Problem—and Ours"), see Norman Podhoretz's "What Happened to Ralph Ellison" (1999). Podhoretz's conservative conversion leads him to reassess Ellison's merits as an essayist and ideologue. Podhoretz celebrates Ellison's insistent exposure of "the aggressive black nationalists and separatists and mau-mauers who have grown more numerous today for the whiners and braggarts and self-haters Ellison despised them as being." That ideological work alone, Podhoretz says, made Ellison "deserve all the prizes he won" (58). (As he had in his review, Podhoretz still questioned the aesthetic value of Invisible Man.)

²³⁹ The reviewer, Roger Sale, nearly reproduces Howe's own words in response: Howe writes that Ellison had "wildly twisted the meaning of what I wrote" ("Reply" 12).

thirties,” he writes, “Invisible Man is marred, less grossly, by those of the fifties” (180-81).

Howe faults specifically, as some early reviewers had, its segments concerning the Brotherhood: “The middle section of Ellison’s novel, dealing with the Harlem Communists, does not ring quite true. Ellison makes his Stalinist figures so vicious and stupid that one cannot understand how they could ever have attracted him or any other Negro” (181). Howe, of course, has in mind how such caricature, in the guise of quasi-realism, would speak to its Cold War audience. More recently, Thomas Schaub and Barbara Foley would extend this criticism, noting the novel’s ideological service in the 50s. Yet Howe also pointedly takes on a related key figure in the novel, one that much recent criticism still holds in great esteem: possibility. With the novel’s “sudden, unprepared, and implausible assertion of unconditioned freedom” in its epilogue, Howe sees “Ellison’s dependence on the postwar Zeitgeist.” One is not, he writes,

easily persuaded by the hero’s discovery that ‘my world has become one of infinite possibilities,’ his refusal to be the ‘invisible man’ whose body is manipulated by various social groups. Though the unqualified assertion of self-liberation was a favorite strategy among literary people in the fifties, it is vapid and insubstantial. It violates the reality of social life, the interplay between external conditions and personal will, quite as much as the determination of the thirties. The unfortunate fact remains that to define one’s individuality is to stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way, all too much in the way, of ‘infinite possibilities.’ Freedom can be fought for, but it cannot always be willed or asserted into existence. And it seems hardly an accident that even as Ellison’s hero asserts the ‘infinite possibilities’ he makes no attempt to specify them. (181)

Howe objects that Ellison's novel functions to contain resistance to those "social barriers" to freedom by vaguely celebrating the idea freedom while dismantling an agency to achieve it. He also suggests that to specify a possibility and work toward its realization is inevitably to close off other possibilities and, in the social realm, to begin political struggle. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Ellison refrains from specifying and indefinitely suspends that step. Part of what I am suggesting at this juncture is that Ellison's empty usage of these terms—"freedom" and "possibility"—is endemic to his institutionalization. But I need to spend additional time with Howe to show more clearly that he offers salutary reminders for the present and that the canonical treatment of his debate with Ellison is selective and forgetful.

Howe takes on the matter of political activity more directly when he refers to Richard Wright's militancy and James Baldwin's explicit rejection, in the essays "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), of Wright's naturalism and rage. "Baldwin's rebellion," and then rapprochement as he effectively became a "spokesman" in the Civil Rights Movement, is Howe's focus.²⁴⁰ Baldwin, Howe notes, may "score a major point" in showing that "the posture of militancy, no matter how great the need for it, exacts a heavy price from the writer, as indeed from everyone else" ("Black Boys" 177). But Baldwin later recognized, Howe claims, that he could not ignore protest. Circumstances demanded that he would have to "pronounce with certainty and struggle with militancy," then "reach[ing] the heights of passionate exhortation" in writings such as The Fire Next Time (1961) (186). Ellison resolutely kept his own militant years in the past as a groundswell of protest emerged. Howe's emphasis on the necessity of militancy recalls at points Ellison's earlier orientation; he adopts a

²⁴⁰ Ellison appears for a couple pages nearly as an afterthought, which he may itself have read as a slight even though Howe clearly states that of these two writers Ellison is the superior novelist (but perhaps not essayist).

position that Ellison himself had assumed through the mid-1940s.²⁴¹ In 1964, however, Ellison responds to Howe by reframing the issue of freedom in terms of art, where segregation “has been far from absolute”: “no matter how strictly Negroes are segregated socially and politically, on the level of imagination their ability to achieve freedom is limited only by their individual aspiration, insight, energy and will” (Collected 163). Of course, Howe, like Ellison in other moments, is concerned with freedom not only in imagination but also in social and political existence. Artistic activity is not as separate from these realms as Ellison here implies. The patterning and restrictions in these areas have grave consequences, formerly of paramount concern to Ellison. The Ellison of “The World and the Jug,” however, locates oppression chiefly in what he characterizes as Howe’s effort to prescribe the stance that Ellison and other black writers should take. So Ellison finds that Howe comes out worse than the segregated South: Howe “would designate the role which Negro writers are to play more rigidly than any Southern politician.” Howe demands, according to Ellison, that black writers “should not become too interested in the problems of art and literature,” that “between writing well and being ideologically militant, we must choose militancy.” Ellison then concludes with what some might generously read as hyperbolic flourish²⁴² but which certainly served dominant interests in the United States at the time. Howe’s position “sounds quite familiar,” Ellison writes, “and I fear the social order which it forecasts more than I do that of Mississippi” (CE 167). Ellison here deemphasizes the inequities and brutality of racial segregation and ends up affirming what he

²⁴¹ William Maxwell correctly notes that Ellison’s treatment of Wright in this essay is a clear reversal of his appreciative essay “Richard Wright’s Blues.” Ellison quotes from the same paragraphs in Black Boy in “The World and the Jug” as he does in the earlier essay yet to opposite ends (New Negro 216-17, n. 6).

²⁴² Ellison begins his “Rejoinder” by humorously trying to limit the fallout from this statement before resuming his basic charge: “I am sorry Irving Howe got the impression that I was throwing bean-balls when I only meant to throw him a hyperbole. It would seem, however, that he approves of angry Negro writers only until one questions his ideas” (“Rejoinder” 15; CE 168).

supposedly opposes. As we will see, that Mississippi comes out better than Howe did not offend only Howe.²⁴³

Howe later reflected on their exchange when “Black Boys and Native Sons” was published again in his Decline of the New (1970), noting that in Ellison’s response “[e]very piety of the moment was prepared for enlistment” (188). Howe does say in his essay that resistance may be inevitable for black Americans (and that Invisible Man is a kind of “protest novel” despite its other ambitions [“Reply” 14]), and this leads Ellison, after interpreting this view to be prescriptive, to apply a central motif of Invisible Man to Howe. Toward the end of Invisible Man, the narrator sees Jack, Norton, and Emerson as “one single white figure,” for “each attempt[ed] to force his picture of reality upon me” without concern “for how things looked to me” (IM 508). Howe is, then, another instance of their “arrogant absurdity” (508). (Never mind that in Invisible Man the narrator’s grouping of these characters as “one single white figure,” signifying white domination, is at odds with another central theme--that broad categories obscure and deny the reality of “diversity” and “complexity.”) Ellison could now, with near impunity, piously denounce the slightest indication of the imposition of a limited “picture of reality.” To say this is less a defense of Howe than it is to note how Ellison expressed, with his personal imprint, a position fully compatible with the Cold War coordinates of the publication venue of

²⁴³ Mississippi at the time had the lowest percentage of blacks registered to vote of any state in the country, leading to SNCC’s Freedom Summer registration campaign later that summer. The state, of course, had been an important site of struggle (boycotts, Freedom riders, sit-ins, etc.) in the Civil Right Movement for years.

Ellison repeats and expands his comparison of Howe with Mississippi in his “Rejoinder,” but perhaps not to his credit: “I fear the implications of Howe’s ideas concerning the Negro writer’s role as actionist more than I do the State of Mississippi. Which is not to deny the viciousness of which exists there, but to recognize the degree of freedom which also exists there precisely because the repression is relatively crude, or at least it was during Wright’s time, and it left the world of literature alone” (CE 181). Is he serious? Viciousness for sure, but there is, he tells us, a “degree of freedom” because that viciousness is so crude. Thankfully, he says, the “world of literature” is safe, but for whom and in what ways? Notice that Ellison uses the word “actionist,” redirecting his earlier positive use of “action.” Ellison makes similar comments on “action” and activism in his review of Howard Zinn’s The Southern Mystique, published not long after his “Rejoinder” in 1964. For his specific comments on action in this review, see CE 564, 566, 568, 571-574.

his response, The New Leader,²⁴⁴ and of its general “anti-totalitarian” context. As Howe says in his reply, when Ellison argues from the position of “the free artist against the ideological critic, the knowing Negro writer against the presuming white intellectual,” he undertakes “a strategy calculated to appeal, readymade, to the preconceptions of the liberal audience” (“Reply” 12). Ellison enlists such a strategy by attributing to Howe a crude “sociological” vision that reduces the diverse experience of black Americans to “a metaphysical condition, a state of irremediable agony” (CE 177), thereby denying “the broad possibility of personal realization which I see as a saving aspect of American life” (CE 162). In his long rejoinder, Ellison illustrates this “broad possibility” with his personal experience, a move that instantly deters many from challenging his position, for how could one question heartfelt experience? So Ellison writes that he “found it far less painful to have to move to the back of a Southern bus, or climb to the peanut gallery of a movie—matters about which I could do nothing except walk, read, hunt, dance, sculpt, cultivate ideas, or seek other uses for my time—than to tolerate concepts which distorted the actual reality of my situation.” The limitations of the segregated movie theater were not the primary issue, Ellison says, for “I could escape the reduction imposed by unjust laws and customs, but not that imposed by ideas which defined me as no more than the sum of those laws and customs” (CE 169). Of course, Howe nowhere says that the social restrictions of segregation would define an individual absolutely, only that these were a significant part of that person’s experience. They are substantial constraints, so any discussion of and struggle for freedom would have to take these conditions into account. Others who faced these constraints felt that they could do more than “walk, read, hunt” in response, but Ellison does not acknowledge this. Nor does he admit a connection between the apparent limitations of segregation and the imposition of ideas, which he

²⁴⁴ At the time, The New Leader’s listing of its “regular contributors” included Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Sydney Hook, and Reinhold Niebuhr—an array of influential Cold War intellectuals who did much to shape terms of debate for years to come.

certainly would have in the 1940s. I am not interested in simply faulting Ellison for taking this argumentative line. His stance in the “debate” with Howe warrants scrutiny, however, for it has persisted mostly without question, and often with firm endorsement, to the present. Recent critics in particular have read Ellison’s essay selectively and ignored its worst features. Might Ellison’s appeals to “the preconceptions of the liberal audience” still successfully operate?

In 1970 Ernest Kaiser brings up Ellison’s exchange with Howe in The New Leader as part of his case against Ellison in a special issue of Black World (Kaiser 92-93). While Larry Neal in the same issue mostly affirms Ellison as an important writer (one would, however, have to read this essay in the context of general disapproval of Ellison among black nationalists in these years, Neal’s audience), Kaiser goes on the assault, savaging Ellison for his seeming indifference if not open hostility to direct political engagement and questioning his ability as a writer. I think it is possible to discount Kaiser’s aesthetic judgment—he refers to Ellison as “a writer of weak and ineffectual fiction and essays mostly about himself and how he became an artist”—while giving some credence to Kaiser’s critique of Ellison’s political judgment as it bears on his writing (95). Quite aware of Ellison’s radical past (54-56), Kaiser charges that “Ellison has become an Establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formulations of the Black freedom movement, a defender of the criminal Vietnam War of extermination against the Asian (and American Black) people, a denigrator of the great tradition of Black protest writing” (95). His essay is vitriol and, for better or worse, it may feel very distant from the present moment in many of its gestures. But let us explore one of these charges even if we feel that there is much more to Ellison and his work than Kaiser allows. Kaiser raises concerns that the Ellison industry keeps at bay even when it finds Ellison to be suggestively exploring “the meaning of politics,” as we will find Ross Posnock to have done. Although a

number of recent critics refer to the Ellison-Howe debate, they tend not to mention details that might lead their audience to see some merit in Howe's position and to see reactionary tendencies in Ellison's thought. It seems that much resistance to do this turns on acceptance of Ellison's characterization and rejection of Howe's essay as demanding "militancy." Aversion to this "militancy" complements affirmation of literary freedom and literature itself.

In 1973, an interviewer asks Ellison what he would say to "black students who feel you haven't been militant enough?" Ellison replies, "I say, 'You'd [sic] be your kind of militant and I'll be my kind of militant'" (CRE 235). Ellison, of course, objects to demands to be more "militant" as an imposition on creative freedom—a prescription to take stands and to write in a certain way, as he had claimed to see in Howe's essay. His commitment, his militancy, is to unfettered artistic creation. Although some may have demanded that Ellison as a public figure had a responsibility to "speak out," to militantly engage, which may also have demanded something of his writing, others were more concerned that he appeared to so openly support what he refers to as the "power structure" (CE 113). When Kaiser refers to Ellison as an "Establishment writer," he is including Ellison's seeming indifference to, if not at least tacit support of, the Vietnam War. The defining moment in the background here is Ellison's refusal to protest the war by boycotting an event at the White House.

In 1965 Robert Lowell stated in an open letter to Lyndon Johnson that because of his opposition to the war in Vietnam he would not attend the Festival of the Arts and Humanities at the White House, an occasion "intended to celebrate Johnson's commitment to art and learning" (RE 417). Twenty writers and artists not invited to the event signed a letter in support of Lowell's decision, and once at the White House Dwight McDonald circulated a similar statement for attendees to sign (RE 418). Ellison attended but did not sign this statement. In an interview

for Harper's soon after, Ellison implicitly justified his decision to attend as he questioned Lowell's judgment. "I think [Lowell's position] was unfortunate. The President wasn't telling Lowell how to write his poetry, and I don't think he's in any position to tell the President how to run the government" (CE 741; CRE 123). For someone who celebrates the diversity and opportunities of American democracy, this statement seems incongruous in its clear allegiance to authority and also undemocratic in that it acknowledges no relevant connection between government policies and the desires of citizens. Although Ellison may have "felt a keen attachment to President Johnson," as Rampersad says, he surely would have to concede that in publicly criticizing policy Lowell and others were exercising a fundamental component of a functioning democracy (RE 418). This itself is a banal point. Whether he is rejecting simply Lowell's position against the war or the taking of an adversarial position publicly, Ellison strictly maintains the separation of art and artists from political commentary and intervention. In that, he appears militant.

One does not have to take up or even acknowledge Ellison's assessment of Lowell, of course, yet I do not think that it is entirely unconnected to currents in his writing. His defensive comment on Lowell is not a bald statement of a writer's freedom but rather of the writer's role as entirely separate from taking positions on social issues, from being a certain kind of democratic participant. The issue is not that Ellison did not openly protest Mississippi or Vietnam but that he chose to question others' protests in alarmingly absolute terms. If the turn to celebrating "infinite possibilities" in Invisible Man is, as Howe claims, a denial of social reality and the complex "interplay between external conditions and personal will," then we begin to see more fully the extent to which Kaiser's charge of "establishment writer" may apply. Ellison's

statements on Mississippi and Vietnam draw a firm line between the “aesthetic” and the “political.” How then would critics attempt to rehabilitate Ellison as “political” writer?

4.2 CENTERING ACTIONS

Ellison’s framing of his exchange with Howe apparently speaks to many critics today, as Timothy Parrish’s comments show and as do similar understandings by Morris Dickstein and Ross Posnock. Dickstein, a ubiquitous presence in mainstream commentary on Ellison and postwar American literature,²⁴⁵ includes Ellison in his effort to reconceive the fifties as “a far more restless, dynamic, and contradictory period than we have generally allowed. It can easily be shown how the roots of the sixties lay in the new energies of the postwar years, when writers, along with jazz musicians, abstract painters, and maverick filmmakers, contributed to a creative ferment that matched the growth of the economy and the spread of American influence” (30). The parallel that Dickstein draws between artistic innovation and economic expansion is telling: his story is of uniform American success and progress, but the “spread of American influence” is somehow separate from Cold War policies and American geopolitical positioning. Domestically, Dickstein also wants to see cultural developments as a supporting analogue of emerging social movements and places Ellison alongside the titans of be-bop and abstract expressionism. Ellison, Charlie Parker, and Jackson Pollock, then, are all exponents of “improvisation, spontaneity, [and] an experimental attitude.” They thus prefigure and gesture toward the social ferment of the 1960s (30). Laying out this line of influence, Dickstein intends to claim Ellison as a cultural radical against his detractors during the sixties and in opposition to

²⁴⁵ In addition to having written a standard account of postwar American literature for the Cambridge History of American Literature, Dickstein is routinely quoted by the New York Times and has appeared as an “expert” in several documentaries, including PBS’s account of Ralph Ellison in an installment of American Experience.

more recent critics like Thomas Schaub, who reads Ellison's work in the context of Cold War "chastened liberalism" and, in some respects, as "indistinguishable from the centrist discourse to which both New Critics and New York intellectuals contributed" (91). Dickstein reimagines the period as less dour and stifling than some histories suggest and aims to see its artistic innovation as anticipating social protest. His argument, however, rests on the facile assumption that these are simply analogous, that social and creative "ferment" are one and the same. Because his cultural history greatly limits the historical field and because he reads cultural innovation itself as social protest, he ends up adopting the "chastened liberalism" that Schaub describes. Dickstein's own "centrist discourse" avoids asking too many questions of his materials and exploring the complex and discontinuous roles artistic productions may have. Could Ellison's work not be both "innovative" and chaste? At turns oppositional and normative?

Dickstein begins his essay with Ellison's debate with Irving Howe to undermine treatments that see Ellison as part of conservative Cold War culture. He affirms Ellison's primary complaint that Howe fails to see black Americans at all, that he confines the richness and diversity of the actual "world" to a mere "jug," to the barren numbers of crude social science and to the misapprehensions of the category "race." Dickstein highlights, then, Ellison's insistence "on the variety and complexity of black life and the range of influences, from Hemingway and T. S. Eliot to jazz, that had been enriching for black artists" (31). Ellison, contrary to Howe according to Dickstein, sees race as "hardly more than a mystification" and "not a fate to which individuals have been ineluctably condemned, or an essence that limits or defines them" (Dickstein 38). Ellison's "pragmatic response" to Howe's supposed reduction of black experience to "a metaphysical condition" of "agony" (Ellison's words)—as well as "to Baldwin, to white supremacists and black nationalists alike"—"is that identity is fashioned rather

than given, created rather than determined by biology or social statistics” (Dickstein 38-39).

“For Ellison,” Dickstein continues, “the construction of identity is analogous to the hard work of making art, involving a mixture of personal discipline and subtle cultural influences” (39).

Ellison says as much in his exchange with Howe, yet it is remarkable that Dickstein glibly accepts and reproduces this position without considering how social conditions impact and constrain that making. He explains that “Ellison’s emphasis is always on imaginative freedom within political and social unfreedom, within limits that can be only partially transcended” (48). But are those limits to be “partially transcended” only imaginatively? Should we not understand Howe’s quarrel as asserting that social circumstances significantly constrain self-fashioning and that, even though those circumstances vary, this undertaking is not entirely determined by or available to the individual?²⁴⁶ At stake for Howe is politics as the struggle to change social existence: this is to say that in order to reshape the terms and conditions in which self-fashioning might occur, “social action” is necessary (Howe “Reply”). Ellison does put pressure on social existence by questioning the category of race, but he situates this questioning in a way that reinforces normative patterns, for he often limits it to a private affair, of individual “choice and will” (CE 181). In doing so, he at least de-emphasizes forms of direct engagement, a matter that appears throughout their exchange with the term “militancy.” As we have seen, Ellison renders this word pejorative and, finding militancy to be part of Howe’s demand to him, places it in direct conflict with personal freedom.

Ellison’s course here is part of what Dickstein appreciates in Invisible Man. “After steering us through every kind of emotional and ideological excess,” Dickstein avers, “Ellison’s work represents the triumph of the center, the victory of moderation. Summing up every

²⁴⁶ Admittedly, I am taking on Dickstein’s argument from within his terms, reluctantly conceding some validity to his understanding of “individual” and “identity.”

ideology roiling the turbulent waters of black life, Ellison wrote a great ideological novel, perhaps the single best novel of the whole postwar era” (50). Invisible Man’s “centrism” stays clear of the “ideological excesses” of communism and black nationalism. In reading the novel in this way, Dickstein intends to recuperate the novel’s Cold War investments that Schaub, Howe, and others have pointed to disparagingly. He notes approvingly that Ellison’s novel “is linked not only to the postwar discourse of anticommunism but to the closely related defense of liberal individualism and cultural pluralism in the work of social critics like Lionel Trilling, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.” (49).²⁴⁷ “Liberal individualism” and “cultural pluralism” announce, however vaguely, freedom and respect for diversity—the civility of moderation. Dickstein presents all these as self-explanatory values, so their association with a “discourse of anticommunism” and state machinations in the Cold War, domestically and internationally, is of little concern. The postwar contours of Dickstein’s “center” pose no obstacle to its present relevance, so the novel’s “centrism” is a general lesson. His defense of Ellison is a celebration of political moderation, of inhabiting a “center” between extremes. His position, then, significantly conforms to mainstream political doxa in the United States today. This order relentlessly expresses these extremes, usually without much specificity, as “far left” and “far right,” often casually applying such labels to whomever offends. The directional metaphor that operates here facilitates acceptance of the orthodox “center” as halfway point and place of compromise, the very mode of “pragmatic politics.” According to this ubiquitous logic, any respectable political position must avoid extremes, for reasons of practical success, sighting what is possible, and just plain decency.

²⁴⁷ Dickstein’s “triumph of the center,” I presume, alludes to Schlesinger’s 1949 The Vital Center, but Dickstein’s usage in the late 1990s is not unrelated, it seems, to a rhetoric of centrism during the Clinton years.

Dickstein refers both to the extremes as “ideological” and to the novel that espouses such centrism as “ideological”: so on one hand this word appears as pejorative and on the other as something positive (“a great ideological novel”). As pejorative, his usage appears to be nothing more than the mainstream sense of the term as political doctrine, often in application to “extremes.” But when he applies it to Ellison’s novel, that commonplace negative usage of the term falls away and his meaning becomes positive endorsement. One might read Dickstein’s characterization of Invisible Man as ideological to be an open admission of how he sees its function and importance. The problem is that in marking it in this way Dickstein inadvertently reveals the incoherence of his reading of Invisible Man, for its own ideology, as he has termed it, cannot appear as doctrine, the arresting and hardening of thought, because it would then be in conflict with precisely what he appreciates about the novel: its anti-doctrinaire recognition of fluidity and infinite possibility or the “freedom” of actual—that is, American—existence. Nevertheless, his reading of the novel as ideological shows that it overlaps with Cold War doctrine, which Dickstein half recognizes but nonetheless insists on seeing as anti-doctrine. Of course, Howe and Kaiser, as well as Schaub, more or less make this very charge, that the novel participates in a dominant Cold War logic. Dickstein and others dismiss these critics without fully seeing that this complaint may apply to them as well.

As Dickstein attempts to place Ellison’s work as appropriately political, finding Ellison to be judicious in his avoidance of extremes, Ross Posnock, too, sees value in Ellison’s “political” vision in the postwar years. Instead of explicitly offering Ellison’s novel as advancing a politics of centrism, Posnock finds in Invisible Man parallels with Hannah Arendt’s formulation of “the political” in The Human Condition. Now politics as an affair of public life in a general, theoretical sense appears to be the concern, but Dickstein’s focus on politics as a set of

beliefs and commitments is not far from Posnock's approach and aims. Like Arendt, Posnock says, Ellison "reanimated the possibility of political participation during a postwar period when the very notion of meaningful agency had been cast into doubt by the trauma of totalitarianism" (Posnock "Ralph Ellison" 204). That Posnock places them together in this way is not simply a matter of historical correspondence. With its attention to "political participation" and "meaningful agency," he sees "urgency in Ellison's vision for the contemporary moment" (Posnock "Introduction" 1). Ellison thus becomes part of a project to articulate what meaningful politics is—and is not. With Posnock's guidance, Ellison's novel offers significant instruction, we are to believe, but reading along we may find ourselves in the same restrictive Cold War framework that Dickstein advances and that Howe detected in Invisible Man years earlier.

As with Dickstein, Posnock finds it necessary to respond to the persistence of critical treatments that see Ellison "as a- or anti-political" ("Ralph Ellison" 203).²⁴⁸ It is little surprise, then, that Posnock also returns to what he calls Ellison's "compelling skewering of Irving Howe" (203). Ellison's side of the exchange, in fact, provides Posnock with a key sentence from which he builds his case for Ellison's urgent exploration of political activity. "I understood a bit more about myself as a Negro," Ellison writes in "The World and the Jug," "because literature has taught me something of my identity as a Western man, as a political being" (CE 164; qtd. twice in Posnock 203, 204). Posnock latches onto Ellison's use of "political being" to begin to establish Ellison's "preoccupation" with the political in Invisible Man (203). Fuller consideration of the context of Ellison's mention of this "political being," however, returns us to specifics of his exchange with Howe and begins to undermine Posnock's designs (203). Ellison uses this phrase in reference to how literature had broadened his sense of possibility beyond the

²⁴⁸ As with Dickstein, Thomas Schaub's characterization of Ellison as a "chastened liberal" of the Cold War is in the background here, too (see Posnock 215, n. 12).

dictates and confines of the South. “Books,” he says, “...were to release me from whatever ‘segregated’ idea I might have had of my human possibilities. I was freed not by propagandists or by the example of Wright..., but by composers, novelists, and poets who spoke to me of more interesting and freer ways of life” (CE 164).²⁴⁹ As Dickstein recognized, Ellison refers here to imaginative freedom. This could relate to political activity and what he earlier called “consciousness,” but that is not quite what Ellison means here. “Political being” does not really refer to any sense of politics at all but rather to greater awareness of social existence. In fact, Ellison’s statement avoids political matters in that he does not give consideration to the very real issue of restrictions on access to the literature and culture that supposedly “freed” him—as well as to formal political participation itself. Substantive “political freedom” is not primary to his sense of “political being.” This term actually deflects attention from that freedom and its absence. When Posnock elaborates Ellison’s “political being,” this deflection continues. He pays no mind to the problem of access in the social confines of segregation and to how Ellison avoids confronting this in his response to Howe. He, too, puts aside the realities of Mississippi.

Nonetheless, Posnock, again not unlike Dickstein, intends to rescue Ellison from association with retreat from politics. Ellison’s story, he tells us, is not that of the New York intellectuals, of “migration from a youthful embrace of Marxism in the 1930s to a cold-war embrace of literature as an end to politics” (204). Instead, Posnock understands Ellison’s mention of “political being” to bring literature and politics together:

Challenging the modernist tendency to oppose literature and the political, Ellison implicitly declares here their affinity. The political and the aesthetic are realms of

²⁴⁹ Posnock does quote the first sentence here, noting that it is “part of our canonical image of Ellison,” before getting to “political being.” But he does not present the following sentence, which says more about how Ellison understands that “political being” (203).

freedom, of release from the confinement of “segregation” anchored in the deadly reductionism of race. (204)

So Ellison’s remark that “books” released him “from whatever ‘segregated’ idea” he may have had of what was possible for him leads Posnock to see this “aesthetic” freedom as similar to “political” freedom. Each apparently provides “release” from “segregation.” Ellison’s “‘segregated’ idea” clearly refers to conceptual confinement, to limitations in imagination. The concept race is a “deadly reductionism” in this sense. “‘Segregated’ idea,” of course, also alludes to the social system that imposed severe limits on people’s movement and expression, which the conceptual framework of race justified and reinforced. Howe objects that Ellison’s response did not sufficiently acknowledge segregation as social order and material reality. While reading great writers in Alabama, Howe pointedly notes, Ellison “could not in Macon County attend the white man’s school or movie house” (Howe “Reply” 14). Ellison had exposure to Western culture and literature—which Posnock reads as “aesthetic freedom”—but within social unfreedom, within a social formation that sought to prevent such exposure and much more. When Posnock rewrites Ellison’s “‘segregated’ idea” as “segregation,” he obscures any distinction between aesthetic freedom and social freedom and begins to confine “the political” to his understanding of “the aesthetic.” Ellison’s supposed “aesthetic freedom” thus conditions Posnock’s sense of “political freedom.” Posnock makes this more clear when, drawing again on Ellison’s “political being,” he claims that Ellison sees literature as “an unraced realm of universalism, quality, and impartiality” and that it is therefore “a paradigm of political equality” (204). Posnock reads Ellison as conceiving “literature” as a figure for the political ideal, which Posnock defines as “a civic participation that emerges only when a social order no longer depends on blood” —“the classical sense of the political,” he asserts (205, 206).

Posnock arrives here mostly through his reading of Arendt's The Human Condition. He resolves the alleged modernist opposition of the "political and the aesthetic" by reading Ellison's use of "action" in the prologue and epilogue of Invisible Man by way of Arendt's understanding of this term as the essence of the political. "Arendt," he explains, "emphasizes action's spontaneity, its recalcitrance to rule or prediction, its character of 'startling unexpectedness'" (206). When the narrator of Invisible Man proclaims belief "in nothing if not action," Posnock sees recalcitrance to rule (the authoritarian Brotherhood, etc.) and declaration of freedom. Arendt's sense of "action" as free, unpredictable activity gives Posnock warrant to see it as integral to the aesthetic, too, and thereby contributes to his alignment of politics and art. Each, according to Posnock, is "creative public action." "Creative" is not actually Arendt's term but Posnock's gloss on her use of "natality," the human "capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (HC 9). Rewriting this as "creative" is not necessarily a problem, yet because of this word's closer association with "the aesthetic" this choice shows Posnock leaning toward that realm and with less consideration of "public." Posnock's questionable reading of Ellison's expansive encounter with books as political freedom itself, then, continues to operate. "Creative" takes precedence over "public," and Posnock's aesthetic continues to absorb the political.

The "public" of his "creative action in public," however, is not quite what Arendt discusses. For her, "public" refers to that vital zone where individuals can interact without constraint, speak freely, and make decisions collectively —the ideal space of the "polis." The polis "is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together" (HC 198). The putative "individual," in fact, "appears" only in relation to others, only in this open collective space. It does not exist otherwise. Posnock recognizes that Arendt sees "the realm of

freedom exemplified by the polis as the public arena of political activity,” but in his view this “freedom” largely becomes a matter of “autonomous” individual expression (“Ralph Ellison” 205). Although I may understand how he could see this in Arendt’s discussion of action and the polis,²⁵⁰ he does not sufficiently appreciate her “public” as “being together.” Posnock seems to read Arendt, and link The Human Condition to Ellison, through the hesitance toward groups and collective spaces that pervades Invisible Man—through, that is, what Dickstein lauds in the novel as the ideology of liberal individualism. Ellison and Arendt’s “affinity” lies, Posnock argues, in their “effort to revitalize politics as creative action in public, a commitment sustained while remaining skeptical of political ideologies preaching radical social change” (203). Instead of creativity being a public occurrence, in public and also of the public (collective, that is), Posnock’s creativity is the province of the individual actor who then presents it publicly.

Posnock also reveals in his characterization of their “affinity” how he approaches them, at least partially, through a Cold War register—much like Dickstein does. For he finds it necessary to mention that in their shared commitment to “creative action in public” they remained “skeptical of political ideologies preaching radical social change.” Efforts toward “radical social change,” he implies, are never far from ideological dogma or the “trauma of totalitarianism” (204). That Posnock negatively associates desire for “radical social change,” and in such stock terms, immediately limits the field of what politics might be. He claims that “Ellison seeks to defamiliarize our received ideas of the political,” but his effort to show this appears instead to affirm those “received ideas.” In fact, he remains significantly in the ideological orbit of Invisible Man as Dickstein articulates it. The way he connects the aesthetic and the political—and subordinates the political to the aesthetic—shows this. He applies

²⁵⁰ Arendt certainly does emphasize the space of the polis in relation to what we might think of as individual freedom (HC 194), but as I detail later this occurs according to the collective conditions of that space. This freedom is not simply a matter of individual volition; it occurs only in the presence of others.

portions of Arendt's attempt to revive thinking about politics in the postwar years but remarkably reduces her provocation within political philosophy in the 1950s to creative expression generally. His defense of Ellison and articulation of Ellison's "remarkably fertile relation to the political" therefore seems to restrict ways of thinking about politics more than it opens them (214). The familiar pattern of authoritarian domination versus individual freedom governs his reading of Invisible Man, too. Consequently, his motives and approach prevent him from seeing elements in the novel that escape this pattern and that may have additional things to say about political activity.

4.3 SPONTANEITY IN ORGANIZATION

Posnock reads Invisible Man, he says, in opposition to "black nationalists" who "condemn[ed] it as quietist and elitist." He turns to one scene to show the novel's effort to "revitalize" political thinking. "Reading Ellison and Arendt together," Posnock says, "foregrounds what readers often ignore: the catalytic effect upon the narrator of witnessing the 'overt action' of a group in Harlem acting in concert to end inhuman living conditions" ("Ralph Ellison" 204). This display of "political action" "inspires" the narrator's "aesthetic action," the writing of his story (212). Here is Posnock's description:

...the narrator stumbles upon a group of men, led by the compelling, taciturn Dupre. The group is bent on "fixing to do something that needs to be done" and to do it with organization and the right tools. After getting flashlights and buckets of oil, Dupre and his men carefully soak their despised "deathtrap" of a tenement

with kerosene, empty the building of tenants and then calmly, methodically torch it. (211)

“Observing Dupre’s determined actions on behalf of community renewal,” Posnock argues that “invisible man recognizes a new kind of leader.” “Instead of making history, i.e., assimilating to the Brotherhood’s grand narrative, Dupre emerges as a political actor whose speech and deeds bring into being a collective intervention” (211). Although Posnock, of course, sees Dupre in contrast to the Brotherhood in Ellison’s scheme, whether this “destruction” constitutes “community renewal” is another matter. It may be the first step—literal and symbolic—in such renewal but there is no indication in the novel of re-building so we are left with destruction. Posnock might see renewal in the narrator’s altered perception, but he attaches much more to this event. “This action gives birth to the possibility of something new—the destruction of dehumanizing conditions. The fire not only opens up a space for change, long promised but never delivered by the Brotherhood, but renounces the passive, private suffering that is the lot of the invisible” (211). This act of destruction may indeed open “space for change,” but that remains only one possibility of many. Even if there is “change” as Posnock contends, will it necessarily be in recognition and for the benefit of “the lot of the invisible”? Why would it not be an occasion for further displacement and the beginning, say, of another gentrification project? Ellison’s own commentary for the New York Post of the Harlem riots in 1943, which inspired this section of the novel, was not as sanguine.²⁵¹

Posnock makes sure to read the tenement burning as “collective” in addition to being spontaneous. Part of his intent, in response to Ellison’s detractors presumably, is to show that in its “rejection of Marxism and nationalism” Invisible Man does not ultimately affirm the individualism of “cold-war liberalism” (212). He also seems to follow, without explicit mention,

²⁵¹ As Rampersad describes Ellison’s account, “the dominant vision was of chaos” (RE 167).

Arendt's emphasis on what she calls "acting in concert" and plurality—to a point. For Arendt, action "corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (HC 7). The political is bound with this "acting in concert" and power, which "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (HC 200). Power, simply put, is the "potentiality in being together" (HC 201). As he reads Invisible Man, and particularly the scene with Dupre, Posnock neglects to consider this "being together"—a crucial component of how Arendt understands "the political." He seems to recognize the importance of "being together" as the men "organize" to set fire to the tenement, but not the loss of this potentiality once they disperse. That the narrator reflects on this event in isolation conveys this loss. One who is in isolation, Arendt emphasizes, "forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons" (HC 201). The narrator's partial recognition of this seems to motivate his eventual decision to leave his hole. I say partial because he does not consider the importance of securing conditions to enable this power. Arendt explains, "What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call 'organization') and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power" (HC 201). Here Arendt implies the necessity of "organization" for action. Posnock does refer to the action of Dupre's group as "organized," but he does not seem to realize its full importance. If organization is only spontaneous, as it appears to be in his account of this scene, an individual is in a state of waiting—waiting for a situation in which people gather and power will emerge. For political action to be assured, I suggest, the space for the political needs to be minimally secured, and this happens through the "lower" activity of what Arendt calls making (laws, for instance, are made) (HC 194-96). So although Arendt, like many of her contemporaries, is highly critical of certain forms of social organization (as in The

Origins of Totalitarianism), she understands a certain degree of organization to be essential for what she calls the political: the being together of organization is necessary, however provisional and subject to change it may be, for the possibility of power and action. Power “arise[s] only out of the cooperative action of many people” (Arendt “Introduction” 99).

Posnock may present a more nuanced reading of Invisible Man than Dickstein, but he tends to read the novel, as it indeed often prompts us, quite strictly according to the familiar opposition of social control and freedom. He views the Brotherhood and Dupre as contrary poles through this thematic dichotomy. Like Dickstein with his Cold-War liberal centrism, Posnock does not seem able to witness textual details in the novel that substantively weaken the hold of this frame, that return us, in fact, to concerns in Ellison’s radical beginnings. To open the text and allow it to speak to the present in a way that Posnock’s perspective cannot permit, however unconsciously and against his seeming intent, I consider two scenes that complicate his presentation of the narrator’s reflection on Dupre’s group. These occur in the Brotherhood chapters, or middle section of the novel, which critics still routinely read perfunctorily according to that Cold War conflict between the authoritarian party and the sacrificial, oppressed individual. The first, in chapter 13, is the Harlem eviction where the narrator finds himself suddenly becoming a leading participant. Not dissimilar to the Dupre scene as Posnock reads it, this episode presents spontaneous organizing. The crowd that has gathered to watch the eviction of an elderly couple becomes increasingly agitated as they observe two white men remove the couple’s belongings to the street. As one man threatens violence against the white “trusties,” the narrator intervenes, imploring the disparate onlookers to “organize” (IM 276). The narrator engages them and through interaction they form a “public” and then collectively decide to carry the couple’s belongings back into their apartment. Members of the Brotherhood arrive as the

crowd enlarges—eviction protests were a common Communist Party endeavor in Harlem in the 1930s—and one of them complements the narrator’s speech, remarking that he had “certainly moved them to action” (IM 284). Arendt’s sense of this term is relevant here, for the crowd, once “organized” through exchange, acts in concert according to what Arendt refers to as “agreed purpose.” Of course, soon the novel narrates his recruitment as exploitation and domination: subsequent to this scene the Brotherhood enlists him as spokesperson in its Harlem office, provides him with a “new identity,” and “trains” him to fulfill a particular function for the party (IM 309). Perhaps surprisingly, the narrator’s entry into this controlled space is not the end of spontaneous action.

Despite the authoritarian character of the Brotherhood, which soon becomes more pronounced in the novel (“You were not hired to think,” Brother Jack eventually says to the narrator [IM 469]), free exchange toward collective action, albeit unrealized, recurs a little later, this time more fully within the organized space of the Brotherhood. In chapter 16, after attending a Brotherhood party and reading “some of the Brotherhood’s literature” (IM 331), the narrator goes to a Brotherhood rally in Harlem to give a speech. Notably, given that the Brotherhood has already been marked as hierarchical, dogmatic, and controlling, the narrator is not instructed as to content of his speech or even asked about it; he is told only to observe the speakers before him. At first, while listening to the other Brotherhood members’ speeches, the narrator tries to “snatch a phrase here, a word there, from the arsenal of hard, precise terms,” but eventually he gives up, choosing just to allow “the excitement to carry me along” (IM 341). The event has already taken on the feel of “a symphony orchestra”: “Songs flared between speeches, chants exploded as spontaneously as shouts at a southern revival” (IM 340). His speech reflects these circumstances and emerges out of the particulars of the situation, much like his speech at

the eviction. To begin he selects what he understands to be a familiar “political technique,” what he calls the “old down-to-earth, I’m sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they’ve-been-treating-us approach” (IM 342). The speech develops with the encouragement of a voice from the crowd, “a co-operative voice” (IM 342). So we find here, following the symphony metaphor, a concordance of voices through which the “speech” emerges. Consequent to this process, the narrator reflects in front of the crowd,

I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand?
More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am
more human. I feel strong. I feel able to get things done! I feel that I can see
sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the
footsteps of our militant fraternity. (IM 346)

Here, I think, is something very close to the figure of the political that Arendt imagines and that the young Ellison saw as the potential of the National Negro Congress.²⁵² It is a moment, as the narrator later understands it, of what Arendt also refers to as “disclosure.” “I had only intended to make a good appearance,” he reflects, “to say enough to keep the Brotherhood interested in me. What had come out was completely uncalculated, as though another self within me had taken over and held forth” (IM 353). Ellison perhaps plays on “appearance” here, for the “self” that the narrator had wanted to find now appears. This way of describing the self and identity is at variance with how these notions appear in most of the novel. For it is not quite finding a self that already exists, but rather of a self that emerges according to particulars of being with others. Here is what I want to emphasize in contrast to Posnock’s reading: This unanticipated “appearance” has occurred due to the organizing of the Brotherhood. He is, of

²⁵² It seems that Ellison drew some of the language for this scene from his account of the National Negro Congress for *New Masses* in 1940 (see CE 16-25). As I discuss in the previous chapter, he writes then of emergent “unity,” “militant indignation” with “direction,” “positive action,” and “transformation” (CE 16; 24, 25; 24; 20; 25).

course, at a political rally. Far from being a threat to his individuality and freedom, as the novel overwhelmingly characterizes the Brotherhood, at this point organization provides conditions for disclosure. The presentation of this event, as well as of the eviction protest, counters the novel's general conception of freedom in negative terms, as the removal of constraints and determination, for the narrator becomes more "human" through the organized space of the political despite all the obvious negative markers of the Brotherhood. Freedom, that is, now appears in positive terms, through political affiliation with others—through, that is, a particular kind of determination. As Arendt tells us, freedom is not possible otherwise. The stark opposition that both Dickstein and Posnock maintain—Brotherhood (control) vs. autonomous individual or spontaneous assembly (freedom)—collapses.

Alongside the revelation of "militant fraternity," this part of the novel imagines, together with the eviction and Dupre scenes, a broader avenue to personal realization, Ellison's concern in his reply to Howe. But here the novel shows this appearing among others while gesturing toward collective action. The narrator's "speech" to the audience is an exchange and collective production. It is "uncalculated," spontaneous, and occurs despite the authoritarian presence of the Brotherhood leaders, who become mere onlookers. It is, as the narrator recognizes, a beginning. The Brotherhood quickly imposes itself following the narrator's delivery, with Brother Jack instructing that the "energy" of the unruly crowd must be "organized" and "directed" (IM 347, 351). The free "action" that has begun in this space cannot develop immanently, so there is no "meaningful agency" beyond the narrator's exchange with the audience. The power that has emerged vanishes, just as the power that emerged within Dupre's group did after it dispersed. In each case, the space of the political, the polis that emerges through interaction in situations of "being together," disappears. This power and the possibility

of action disappear because there is no attempt or mechanism to keep participants together and to prevent disruptive intrusions. Invisible Man, despite its Cold War investments, poses that challenge—to find ways to sustain that political space and power without enabling authoritarian control. Dupre’s group, contrary to Posnock’s reading, shows the ineffectual destruction that may occur in the absence of such vital organization.

Behind Posnock and Dickstein’s readings of Invisible Man lie considerable neopragmatist sympathies if not ambitions. Dickstein’s association with the “revival” of pragmatism is clear, and Posnock makes an effort to situate Ellison’s use of “action” within a pragmatist tradition by way of Arendt.²⁵³ To do this, he links Arendt’s attention to beginnings and natality to John Dewey’s pragmatism and “philosophy of action” (207). Both Arendt and Dewey, Posnock claims, embraced “the messy incalculability that inhabits both experience and democracy” (208). I have already mentioned Arendt’s negative appraisal of Dewey’s pragmatism as instrumentalism in the first chapter.²⁵⁴ For Arendt, Dewey presumed that experience and democracy were calculable, that they were to be approached as objects of scientific method.²⁵⁵ Posnock seems unaware that Arendt ever commented on Dewey’s work (“Arendt never mentions her contemporary John Dewey” [207]), and he presents a sentence from Dewey’s work to establish correspondence with Arendt’s natality, a sentence that certainly could

²⁵³ Regarding Dickstein’s association with pragmatism, I am thinking specifically of the essay collection he edited, The Revival of Pragmatism. In the introduction, he says that “[f]or pragmatists the upshot of thought comes not in logical distinction but in behavior, the translation of ideas into action” (“Pragmatism” 2). Posnock, incidentally, has an essay on W. E. B. DuBois as pragmatist in this collection.

²⁵⁴ I refer to her review “The Ivory Tower of Common Sense.”

²⁵⁵ I allow that Posnock refers to only The Human Condition here, but that is ambiguous (207).

have been written by Arendt years later.²⁵⁶ Yet his suggestion is misleading not only because Arendt saw Dewey as representative of the instrumentalism that she found so troubling in the 1950s but also because he intends to have Dewey support his understanding of the political in Arendt and Ellison. In Posnock's view these three comfortably sit alongside each other in an American pragmatist tradition that has something helpful to say about doing politics.

Posnock's pragmatism, however, appears to enact the "tenuous relation to old pragmatism" that Mark Bauerlein discovers in the essays concerning culture in Dickstein's edited volume on the new pragmatism (Review 426).²⁵⁷ I have no interest in exposing the new pragmatism as "pseudo-pragmatist," part of Bauerlein's intent, but I do note that Posnock's invocation of pragmatism is part of an effort that reduces politics (Review 426). The Dewey he invokes is not the Dewey of the 1930s, for whom Kenneth Burke had qualified appreciation. In fact, one could connect Dewey and Arendt much differently, and in a way that might spur consideration of the limits of the "fertile relation to the political" that Posnock finds in Ellison and Arendt. In Liberalism and Social Action (1935), for instance, Dewey emphasizes the importance of organization, a matter I have tried to draw out of neglected parts of Invisible Man. By "organization" Dewey means the patterning of social relations and "the method of intelligence," or "the organization of intelligent action" (58, 45). And he also means political

²⁵⁶ "Each individual that comes into the world is a new beginning; the universe is, as it were, taking a fresh start in him and trying to do something, even on a small scale, that it has never done before" (qtd. in Posnock 208; Posnock does not mention the source, but it is Dewey's lecture "Construction and Criticism" (Later Works 127)).

²⁵⁷ Bauerlein's general complaint, here and elsewhere, is that the neopragmatists, particularly in literary studies, do not bother much in trying to understand "the concepts and arguments" of the old pragmatists—Peirce, James, and Dewey. For neopragmatists, "pragmatism becomes an instrument for doing cultural and political work" (Review 427-28).

organization that can “direct” or effect the “socialized economy” that he finds necessary. Dewey writes unequivocally as a socialist here.²⁵⁸

Ideas must be organized, and this organization implies an organization of individuals who hold these ideas and whose faith is ready to translate itself into action. Translation into action signifies that the general creed of liberalism be formulated as a concrete program of action. It is in organization for action that liberals are weak, and without this organization there is danger that democratic ideals may go by default. Democracy has been a fighting faith. When its ideals are reenforced by those of scientific method and experimental intelligence, it cannot be that it is incapable of evoking discipline, ardor and organization.

(Liberalism 64)

This passage closes with another word that Ellison eventually lampoons in Invisible Man—discipline. But notice how Dewey says that discipline and organization, along with passion, are exactly what liberals need if they are to have any relevance, if their democratic ideals are to have any chance of realization. He stresses the importance of “an organization of individuals” that can mobilize into action. This was Dewey’s “philosophy of action” throughout the 1930s. It was a necessary component of “meaningful agency” for him.

²⁵⁸ As many know, Dewey was anticommunist, but he was also clearly anticapitalist in these years. Philosophically liberal, he was politically socialist, supporting Norman Thomas in the presidential elections of 1932, 1936, and 1940 (McDermott xxiii; Sleeper 101). Liberalism, Dewey says, “must now become radical, meaning by ‘radical’ perception of the necessity of thoroughgoing changes in the set-up of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass” (Liberalism 45). And chief among the necessary “thoroughgoing changes” is a socialized economy: “Earlier liberalism regarded the separate and competing economic action of individuals as the means to social well-being as the end. We must reverse the perspective and see that socialized economy is the means of free individual development as the end.” “[S]ocial control of economic forces” must be “the goal of liberal action” (63). Clearly this is not the Dewey that Posnock has in mind. It was not Richard Rorty’s Dewey either, even when Rorty wrote on political “agency” and encouraged renewal of the role of the left in the United States (104-107).

Let me allow Arendt's own words to respond to the limits that I detect in Posnock's use of her work when reading Invisible Man. Arendt, consciously writing in the midst of the new uncertainties of the atomic age, begins The Human Condition with this proposition:

What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing. (HC 5)

Posnock and other critics, I am saying, pose an instance of thoughtlessness in that they rely on hackneyed truths, the controlling relics and conditioning of the Cold War era, as they purport to think politics in literature. What we actually get from them is a reiteration of what Howe lamented in Invisible Man from its publication—the foreclosure of political practice itself.

5.0 CONCLUSION: PARTICIPATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF COLLECTIVITIES

This study has tracked the term “action” in the work of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison and shown its relation to their political desires and a radical culture in the 1930s in the United States. I have assembled textual particulars that signal Burke’s and Ellison’s radical social and cultural affiliations and tried, in the end, to expose critical efforts that function to de-emphasize, conceal, or redirect these markers—that effectively take such details in their work out of that past. I argue that Burke’s and Ellison’s “action” points to radical social transformation and the achievement of an agency toward such transformation. I have also tried to show their common, though not equivalent, interest in forming a collective agent and their related participation in organizational activity. That project and practice, I believe, make particulars of their 1930s convergence worth exploring today.

Drawing from Antonio Gramsci, Cornel West has staked “at the level of politics and ideology” the role of the critic and intellectual to be that of “critical organic catalyst.” This person “brings the most subtle and sophisticated analytical tools to bear to explain and illuminate how structures of domination and effects of individual choices in language and in nondiscursive institutions operate” (36). Kenneth Burke engaged in this sort of critical activity. In the 1930s, he developed equipment to handle language and culture as social form. His criticism became at times a kind of ideological analysis, I think, even if Fredric Jameson, in his much-discussed

exchange with Burke in the late 1970s, did not see Burke quite doing that.²⁵⁹ Burke saw political importance in writing as he analyzed cultural objects and imagined social alternatives, a concern he shared with Ellison.

West intends the clarifying analysis of intellectuals to be relevant to social groups and support opposition to patterns of domination, so he stresses the importance of intellectuals developing connections to such groups and actual movements. From this perspective, West finds at the end of the 1980s that the “academicization of Marxism, feminism, and black studies,” what some have characterized as retreat, needed significant supplementation. This means “the spilling over of Marxist, feminist and black studies into working-class, women’s, and black communities.” Enabling this contact, West believes, would encourage “significant social motion, momentum, and ultimately movements” (33-34). His emphasis on the necessity of intellectuals’ connection to ongoing and emerging movements, following Gramsci and his reflection on the “organic” intellectual, captures an attitude that Burke and Ellison knew in the 1930s.

As writers and intellectuals, Burke and Ellison saw themselves as participants in oppositional, even revolutionary, politics. My contention has been that both conceived their work as part of and serviceable to a movement. This is a salient dimension of their writings in the 1930s and into the 1940s, a feature that scholars have not explored sufficiently, I think, even as they approach questions of politics. I have approached details of Burke’s and Ellison’s political participation and engagements in their writings as a way to counter, in however small a

²⁵⁹ See in particular Jameson’s “Critical Response” (419). Jameson’s “diagnosis” is that “Burke’s too immediate celebration of the free creativity of human language (in its broadest symbol-making sense) overleaps the whole dimension of our (nonnatural) determination by transindividual historical forces” (422). Although he may be correct in ascribing a limited sense of “false consciousness” to Burke’s explicit consideration of ideology in A Rhetoric of Motives, Jameson does not recognize that Burke routinely pointed to constraints in humans’ use of language, and this is particularly important in the 30s books as a matter of social and historical force. Burke indicates this succinctly in Attitudes toward History: “Words are not puppets. They also command.... [The individual] uses them, and they use him” (ATH1 II: 237; ATH3 332-33).

way, that deficiency in the scholarship— itself perhaps symptomatic of the degraded state of political thinking generally in the United States.

West's interest is not just ideological analysis but also the production of an ideology, what Burke and Ellison each thought of as the crafting of myth. Stuart Hall has said that "the whole purpose of what Gramsci called an organic (i.e., historically effective) ideology is that it articulates into a configuration, different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations." "It constructs," he says, "a 'unity' out of difference" (19). This helps clarify Burke's and Ellison's understanding of mythmaking as constructive, and it names their object, too. "Unity" was the slogan. Burke's unifying and participatory rhetoric, or his sense of identification that appeared at the first Writers' Congress, was part of an effort to construct a collective, and Ellison's stories of transracial unity for New Masses took on a similar purpose. From Hall's perspective, their object was to form an effective ideology that mobilizes and produces power.

When Edward Said sought to complement Foucault's forbidding "imagination of power"—its diffuse, relentless functioning—he conceived power from "insurgent and utopian" perspectives. At stake was the potential to effect social change. So Said thought about power "to arrive at some assessment of what power you would need in order to vanquish present power" and also "to postulate a range of things that cannot be imagined or commanded by any form of power that exists at present" ("Foucault" 242). Matters of insurgency and utopian imagination, I have shown, were part of Burke's and Ellison's writings, including their personal correspondence. Not unlike Gramsci, Burke clearly saw social crisis and the attendant vulnerability of "symbols of authority" as political opportunity, a moment and space for intervention. He made an effort to outline a possible future, his "futuristic norms," in order to

assess the present from the perspective of what might be. In the 1930s, he intended his work to assist in constructing that future. Ellison's transracial narratives also show an effort to imagine another way, to mobilize in the present while glimpsing a different future. Hall mentions that Gramsci saw that "every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also reconstruction" (19). Of course, as Hall knows, there is no guarantee that how and for whom that reconstruction occurs will be preferable to the previous order. As Burke and Ellison clearly understood in the 1930s, crisis requires struggle over those specifics. That was part of their work.

Said, too, wanted to show the possibility and importance of oppositional effort, what he found undervalued in Foucault. He foregrounds

the relative success of ... counter-discursive attempts first to show the misrepresentations of discursive power, to show, in Fanon's words, the violence done to psychically and politically repressed inferiors in the name of an advanced culture, and then afterwards to begin the difficult, if not always tragically flawed, project of formulating the discourse of liberation. ("Foucault" 243-44)

Said's mention of Franz Fanon, whose influential Black Skin, White Masks appeared the same year as Invisible Man (1952), brings to mind Ellison's own investments in the 1940s. By the time Ellison was working with Angelo Herndon at The Negro Quarterly he had firmly adopted an internationalist perspective and sought to advance a liberatory discourse beyond the dominant national terms in the United States. And this "international political consciousness," as Lawrence Jackson suitably describes it, made its way into the drafts of Invisible Man, specifically with the Merchant Marine Leroy (EG 427). We know Ellison abandoned this

project, but one could approach this as a legacy worth exploring and continuing—or at least allow it to speak back to his position as US apologist in the 1960s.

Part of the “discourse of liberation” that Said advances involves the formation of a collective agent. And this is something that Hall, again drawing from Gramsci, brings into greater focus.

Where Gramsci departs from classical versions of Marxism is that he does not think that politics is an arena which simply reflects already unified collective political identities, already constituted forms of struggle. Politics for him is not a dependent sphere. It is where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively worked on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination. This is the production of politics—politics as a production (20).

This work includes producing a collective. “To construct a new cultural order,” Hall writes, “you need not to reflect on already-formed collective will, but to fashion a new one, to inaugurate a new historic project” (21).

So I want to see in Burke’s and Ellison’s writings that came out of a politicized 1930s culture not a clear political model, of course, but efforts to create a political project and “discourse of liberation.” We find in Burke and Ellison an impulse to shape a collective will—through rhetoric, through narrative, through appearances and interactions among others. They were participants in this creative work to form a collectivity. Among others, they began to constitute that collectivity as they wrote cooperatively to create it. Sighting and reinvigorating that participatory oppositional impulse toward the production of a collective remains vital.

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