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Kenneth Burke and American Studies: A Response to Giorgio Mariani

Debra Hawhee

On the second floor of Kenneth Burke's ramshackle farmhouse in Andover, New Jersey is a tiny, closet-like room where Burke wrote. The walls are lined from floor to ceiling with books, with space to allow for the window. Above the window frame, Burke etched two phrases: *potius convincere quam conviciari/ad bellum purificandum*. The phrases are repeated, this time in reverse order, on a welcome sign, inscribed by Burke's wife Libbie, hung on the right of the window frame. In a recent set of meditations on these inscriptions, James P. Zappen, S. Michael Halloran, and Scott A. Wible suggest that the pair of phrases sheds considerable light on the well-known, if slightly puzzling, motto of (and epigraph to) *A Grammar of Motives* (1945): *ad bellum purificandum*, toward the purification of war. The other phrase, *potius convincere quam conviciari*, can be translated "better to demonstrate than to revile."¹ The first verb, *convincere*, implies fairness, respect, and even, in best cases, learning, while the latter, *conviciari*, implies enmity, imbalance, what Thomas M. Conley calls, in reference to Burke's treatment of the malign aspects of communicative action, "the Kill" (276).² The preferred action therefore resides in the realm of rhetoric and deliberation, while the less desired action, *conviciari*, slides toward the realm of enmity, hatred, and even death.

As Wible discusses in his reflection on the pair, at stake in the phrase *ad bellum purificandum* is *attitude*, a crucial component of Burke's critical method, and one Giorgio Mariani's analysis honors even if it does not call it by name. Likewise, at stake in the specifics of Mariani's call for more attention to the history of what

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he calls a “homegrown tradition of militant pacifism” is a certain style of protest, a stubborn, resistant, even warring attitude. The paradox of someone willing to fight for peace is the kind of paradox that enlivens the likes of both Mariani and Burke, and, as Mariani intuits, it is the attitudinal paradox itself that underwrites Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives*. Even though as a pair, war and peace may seem to be the focus of *ad bellum purificandum*, the discovery of the partner phrase, *potius convincere quam conviciari*, offers another pair of terms crucial for both *A Grammar* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950): war and rhetoric. In other words, while Mariani rightly suggests that *ad bellum purificandum* effectively “debunks” the opposition of war and peace by “channeling” warlike impulses against war itself, that debunking is best understood in the context of Burke’s theories of rhetoric, and the importance of attending to rhetorical matters is a point overlooked—or perhaps understated—in Mariani’s intervention. For Burke, the paradox of purifying war presents rhetoric on a sliding scale, with war and peace at either extreme, but it is a scale on which both extremes meet, hence Burke’s reading of war as “a ‘special case of peace’—not as a primary motive in itself, not as essentially real, but purely as a derivative condition, a perversion” (*Rhetoric* 20). Yet to pass over the context of these observations is to miss what Burke has to offer American studies in addition to a strenuous objection to war: a robust theory of rhetorical engagement, a rhetorical version of criticism, one that stretches beyond words and the individuals who deploy them.

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The discussion of war and peace cited by Mariani appears in a section of *A Rhetoric of Motives* entitled “The Range of Rhetoric.” Here, Burke revisits the ethical questions that have plagued rhetorical pedagogy and practice since Plato’s dialogues pinned the sophists against the wall of truth and virtue. Put simply, according to Burke rhetoric arises when people are at odds with each other (*Rhetoric* 22), which means that rhetoric’s range is rather vast. In rhetorical studies, Burke is perhaps best known for augmenting understandings of rhetorical engagement with his concept of identification, which he uses to discuss a joining of interests (*Rhetoric* 20–21). In building a theory of rhetoric on top of the concept of identification, Burke de-emphasizes (but does not exclude) the older, more narrow emphasis on persuasion. Identification may sound rather coddling to some, and deeply Freudian to others, but to Burke it is neither. As with Barack Obama’s bowling outing during the 2008 presidential primaries, identification is punctured with failure. Identification is imperfect, unpredictable, messy, multiple, and uneven, much like the “at-odds” situation it is used to overcome. At base, identification—indeed, rhetoric more

generally—is impure. Point, Plato. But for Burke, that does not mean we should shy from it; instead, it effectively heightens the challenges critics face.

While many existing models of pacifism depend on a kind of philosophical purity which holds that all conflict is bad, Burke's view of rhetoric (and of war for that matter) is a doctrine of impurity. Humans, he famously wrote, are "rotten with perfection," and the technological advances that led to the development of "the bomb" are his favorite instance of this rot ("Definition" 507). There is no such thing as purity of motive, Burke argues in *A Grammar of Motives* (309ff). And as rhetorical scholar M. Elizabeth Weiser has recently demonstrated, Burke argues this explicitly in the context of World War II, the conflict which would seem to be the closest approximation of "pure motives," e.g., the pure motive of fighting fascism. Burke contends here with Aldous Huxley, who, according to Burke, holds "that only by peaceful means can we get peace." Burke, on the other hand, argues quite plainly: "if we could get peace by peaceful means we'd have peace already; and if we couldn't get it by means somewhat short of peace, then there would be no use in attempting to get it at all." "All means," Burke continues, "are necessarily 'impure.' For besides the properties in them that fit them for the particular use to which they are put, they have other properties (properties that would fit them for other possible uses, including hostile uses)" (*Grammar* 309). It is perhaps easier to read these lines during the Iraq War, with its plainly mixed (and mostly impure) motives, than it might have been in the years following World War II, when *A Grammar of Motives* appeared. But an ability to argue a difficult case is exactly what attracted Burke to rhetoric. When Burke carved the phrase *potius convincere quam conviciari* above his window frame, he deliberately chose two closely related terms. The choices here, between proving and reviling, are both grounded in conflict. But for Burke, the conflictual scene of rhetoric is far preferable to the destructive scene of war.

Aside from stressing the importance of the back-and-forthing of rhetoric as a means of deterring war, Burke also holds that attempts at identification transpire not just between two individuals, but between one individual and a group, or between groups. Rhetorical studies, with its thriving subfield of social movement studies, is at home with group discourse and protest. Can the same be said for American studies? It is striking that in carving out a tradition of militant pacifism, Mariani holds up singular individuals and singular texts—e.g., Emerson and his "Cherokee letter"—as exemplars of this tradition. Perhaps an examination of collective militant resistance is counter to the tendencies in American

studies, particularly its literary arm, what Burke would call, following Veblen, “trained incapacity” (Burke, *Permanence* 7). Or perhaps a stress on collective interventions would be inimical to that which is deemed American. It is true that the jeremiad, the particularly American genre of protest discussed by Mariani, is individual through and through, and that strong figures such as Thoreau had reason to doubt the effectiveness of group or collective action. Still, I believe Mariani’s call, which offers individual exemplars, is a crucial beginning, one that can—and ought to—lead to critical discussions of collective acts of protest. It is difficult to discuss Jane Addams, after all, without reference to the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

And what about silent protests that are still strenuous? Must oppositional, spirited rhetoric always take the form of words? Burke, I contend elsewhere, would say decidedly not, which is why, in a subsequent edition of *A Grammar of Motives*, he issued an erratum, disguised as an “addendum”: in the first edition he had failed to give *attitude* the stress it deserves in his dramatic approach (443). Attitude, though often manifest in words, is at base a nonverbal, even bodily orientation, made visible in snarls or fists, in the determined refusal of crossed arms or the heavy limpness of “passive” resisters.

It may seem strange for someone who started with words above the window frame of an individual’s home office to broaden the domain of militant pacifism to more-than-words, or to collective action and utterances. Yet in offering Kenneth Burke as an exemplar of agonistic pacifism, Mariani also, unwittingly or not (I suspect not), imports an imperfect, unwieldy model of rhetoric, a vibrant and, at times, vitriolic rhetoric that exceeds words, that temporarily binds individuals together in impure, even fractious groups. In my view, scholars ought to follow Mariani’s lead, as a way of what Burke liked to call “seeing around the corner” of American studies (*Permanence* 222).

Notes

1. Thanks to my colleague Tom Conley for confirming the translation.
2. For a more extended account of how *ad bellum purificandum* translates into Burke’s comic critical method, see Robert McMahon, “Kenneth Burke’s Divine Comedy: The Literary Form of *The Rhetoric of Religion*,” *PMLA* 104.1 (1989): 53–63. For how it relates to Dramatism more generally, see M. Elizabeth Weiser, “Burke and War: Rhetoricizing the Theory of Dramatism,” *Rhetoric Review* 26.3 (2007): 286–303.

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