

## Introduction

In a way, perhaps, a modern Rhetoric should aim at the best of two orders—it should seek to make us realize the full extent of our national and international responsibilities, and keep us in mind to accept them as a definition of our problem as social beings—at the same time, it should keep alive, if only as a “loyal opposition” which is never expected to get its way, a critical doctrine which might at least be accepted in fragments, or heard now and then for a moment when there is a lull: the awareness that, as *Candide* would say, our soundest humanity is in tending our own gardens.

—KENNETH BURKE

The spring of 1948 reached full bloom as a northeast wind drove mottled clouds across the sky. Uncertain of all, save that the winter sabbatical had ended, a chime of wrens poured out a liquid song that glittered in the sunlight like new copper coins. The small waves of sound traveled across the lawn, up the porch, and into the room where Kenneth Burke sat at his writing desk. Peering up from a stack of notes, he noticed that his once tidy farm was now overgrown with weeds. This was not the first time Burke had encountered such a problem. And, up to this point, he had resisted an industrial solution. But in a surprising turn of events, he broke precedent, if not principle, and purchased a power-driven cutter bar.<sup>1</sup>

The cutter bar, which he named “Putt-Putt,” was a revelation. “I’ve started reclaiming the fields,” Burke wrote to his mentor and patron James Sibley Watson, “and Jeeze, what exsta-sazzy” (30 May 1948, JWP). Burke’s identification with Putt-Putt was so strong that in the same letter he referred to himself by that name: “Call me Putt-Putt. I know of no act more gratifying than this extending of my dominion. Until the day when something goes wrong with the motor, I say: Bless the Industrial Revolution.”

Burke’s collaboration with Putt-Putt was a timely and perhaps necessary distraction from his writing. Although he had invested more than two years in drafting and revising *A Rhetoric of Motives*, he was struggling to draw



Fig. 1 Putt-Putt

its constituent parts together. In the 30 May letter to Watson, Burke wrote, “Stanley Hyman was here over the week-end and he thinks that my items on the political logomachy will just about get me tarred and feathered by the reviewers, and to the glory of no one.”<sup>2</sup> The “political logomachy” was a chapter in which Burke catalogued modern rhetorical devices in the contemporary news media.<sup>3</sup> Burke had observed, for example, that US politicians were concealing the material interests of their economic policies by spiritualizing their nation’s ideals. He placed these appeals under the heading *spiritualization* and archived them along with ten other modern devices that were characteristic of the early postwar period.<sup>4</sup>

Defining and analyzing these devices was unusually challenging for Burke. He had a tendency to be overly critical of his contemporaries, which made his approach to rhetorical criticism feel like a “thumbs-down” activity (Burke to Cowley, KBP, Burke-1, 27 September 1946).<sup>5</sup> The topical nature of Burke’s analyses obscured, as well, the universal framework that his philosophy of modern rhetoric sought to establish. To solve this problem, he proposed a more allusive style: “The political incidents should be de-localized, as per the personal anecdotes. About people like the Ambassador of Preenland, his Excellency of Pronia, The Grand Apex of Onlychurch II, etc. Factions should always be the Ins and Outs, or Innables and Outables, or the Perfectists and the Loathesomites, etc. Let the anecdotes be strong in *allusive* value—but all sins of direct application *must be committed by the reader himself*” (Burke to Watson, 30 May 1948, JWP). Burke’s revision—“the solushe,” as he called it—had the further advantage of illustrating “the forms [of the devices] and their applications, but without having to meet the burdens of

[a timely analysis] and without sacrificing what [he] consider[ed] to be the over-all attitude” (Burke to Hyman, 30 May 1948, SHP). Everything seemed to be pointed in the right direction.

Unfortunately, the proposed revision did not hold. Burke spent the better part of 1948 drafting and revising the chapter on rhetorical devices, only to suspend its completion—along with three similarly focused chapters—approximately one month before he sent the first volume of *A Rhetoric of Motives* to his editors at Prentice Hall. Burke teased the existence of these unfinished chapters in a footnote on page 294 of the published version of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, where he writes, “The closing sentences were originally intended as a transition to our section on The War of Words. But that must await publication in a separate volume” (RM 294). Burke would return to these chapters in subsequent years, publish small portions of them, describe them in letters to friends, and give public lectures from their contents, but he never published them during his lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its status as an incomplete project, *A Rhetoric of Motives* continues to inspire rhetorical critics and educators around the world. Brilliant studies of the book have deepened the field’s appreciation of Burke’s work.<sup>7</sup> And yet, for all the critical attention *A Rhetoric of Motives* has received over the years, no scholar has produced a systematic explanation of its argument. Donald Stauffer’s 1950 review captures the problem that critics face: “Mr. Burke’s scope is such that he includes all that he has read, heard or thought. Structure and selection are not his strong points. In his desire to bring in everything (one of his parentheses runs in length for a page), the argument is often temporarily lost, and the system itself becomes a stalwart symbol for an attempt to impose order on chaos.”<sup>8</sup> Granted, Burke’s line of reasoning is often temporarily lost—a fact punctuated each time he writes, “Where are we, now?” But Stauffer’s reading is limited by the negative connotation he assigns to the term *chaos*, which, in his estimation, resists systematic thinking.<sup>9</sup> Like many critics of Burke, Stauffer makes the right move, but in the wrong direction. He recognizes that Burke is imposing order on a chaotic landscape but uses this observation to close down inquiry rather than open it up.

It is now time to shift the terms of the discussion and ask what lessons may be drawn from Burke’s attempt to order the chaos in *A Rhetoric of Motives* and *The War of Words*. In raising this question, the incomplete status of *A Rhetoric of Motives* becomes an entry point for gauging the historical, theoretical, and personal problems that worked against Burke’s drafting and revision process. The interpretive difference this question makes may

be slight. But in the chapters that follow, I show how it makes all the difference.<sup>10</sup> Namely, we learn to read *A Rhetoric of Motives* with greater generosity, treating it not as an incoherent muddle of concepts but as a coherent and evolving philosophy of modern rhetoric that holds significant implications for the past, present, and future of rhetorical studies.

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The linchpin of Burke's philosophy of modern rhetoric is the concept of *identification*—that much is clear.<sup>11</sup> The less obvious insight is that identification finds its transhistorical footing in the context of myth. Within this context, identification becomes a dimensional concept that appears in diverse historical periods and textual genres. Within this context, Burke's catalogue of postwar rhetorical devices participates in the long history of rhetoric and suggests the existence of a nonconscious domain of human motivation. Within this context, Burke shows that all general theories of rhetoric may be structured by mythic images and terms.

I have broken this book into two parts. Part I presents an archival account of how Burke drafted and revised *A Rhetoric of Motives* and *The War of Words* between 1945 and 1950. Over the course of nine chapters, I track the problems he encountered and attempted to solve in each volume. As we will see, Burke often turns to myth when a difficult problem requires a philosophical solution. Not surprisingly, Burke's reliance on myth creates its own set of problems, leading arguably to the greatest problem he never fully solved: completing *A Rhetoric of Motives* as a two-part work that addressed the dangers of the postwar period.<sup>12</sup>

Part II explains the theoretical and methodological implications of Burke's reliance on myth. The first chapter establishes what Burke means by *myth* and explains how the mythic images and terms he creates and cites support the signature concepts that distinguish *A Rhetoric of Motives*.

Once this mythic infrastructure is in clear view, I explain, in chapter 2, how *identification* functions in Burke's modern philosophy of rhetoric. Specifically, I show how myth yields a dimensional theory of identification that expands the scope of rhetorical analysis.

The third chapter focuses on how rhetorical devices—when understood in the context of Burke's mythic framework and dimensional theory of identification—organize group perception at a nonconscious level. Burke leverages his theoretical insights to create a form of rhetorical criticism that prepares audiences to consume news media more conscientiously.

The fourth chapter explains how Burke's mythic framework draws disparate historical moments into identification with one another. If, Burke argues, the problem of verbal warfare is not peculiar to the postwar period,

then rhetorical critics may identify examples of verbal conflict throughout history. Burke's investigation begins with an analysis of mythic images and terms that justify, sustain, or transform verbal conflict. By making these images and terms the site of conscious reflection, Burke expands how historiographical research may be conducted in rhetorical studies. He also helps critics maintain equanimity in the face of deep political and cultural divisions.

So much for explaining why the book's subtitle is *Refiguring the Mythic Grounds of Modern Rhetoric*. Why *Kenneth Burke's Weed Garden*?

Throughout his drafting and revision process, Burke differentiated his writing from his daily chores. These distinctions began to blur, however, as he revised the remaining chapters of *A Rhetoric of Motives*. For example, just a week before purchasing Putt-Putt, Burke began characterizing the news media's rhetorical devices as weeds. "Having definitivized about 20,000 words of first chapter on the Logomachy," he wrote to Hyman, "it's an anthology: Kennel Bark's Little Golden (in psychoanalytic sense) Treasure of Rhetorical Weeds. It's fantastically easy to read, since nearly every paragraph can stand alone" (21 May 1948, SHP).

Burke's characterization of rhetorical devices as weeds indicates at least one purpose of *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke believed that the speed of proliferation of modern rhetorical devices made them difficult, if not impossible, to manage. By tracking these devices and teaching his contemporaries to do the same, Burke felt that he could exert a modest level of control over them. "I recognize I might be fighting two Jungles at once," he explained to his friend Matthew Josephson, "and at least the other will win, sooner or later (as usual, I feel, sooner); still, there's the Hierarchy for me, there's my Old-Man transcendence, my Putt-Putt, pot-pot, putter-putter purpose" (9 June 1948, MJP). Burke's purpose was not to dominate the landscape per se but to develop a system that explained why the landscape was so difficult to tame. As he explains in *The War of Words*, "you recognize the prevalence of the Scramble, while striving to surmount agitation by connoisseurship. And above all, you watch for the goadings of the hierarchic principle, so near to the ironic roots of human relations" (WW 185).

Ordering this chaotic landscape was difficult work. In a letter to his childhood friend the noted literary critic Malcolm Cowley, Burke wrote:

Am still knocking off, bumpily, my first draft of the Rhetoric. The problem that emerges is this: To decide to what extent I shall make the Rhetoric simply my own contribution to the subject, and to what



Fig. 2 Kenneth Burke scything, 1947

extent I shall try to cover the field in general. The second obligation comes to the fore, as soon as one thinks of such a book from the standpoint of sheer pedagogy. But the main line is so astoundingly well traveled by Aristotle, and the new stuff (on modern propaganda, advertising, etc.) is so obvious to everyone, that only by working the marginal lands can one hope to do much that has any element of newness about it. (7 December 1945, MCP)

Burke's comments suggest that neither the classical tradition nor contemporary methods of media criticism were capable of sponsoring the attitudinal shift he imagined. Burke solved this problem by defining Aristotle's approach to classical rhetoric as a well-cultivated landscape. As a point of contrast, he then characterized the modern rhetorical situation as an unforgivingly wild space. Just as Aristotle ordered his landscape by identifying rhetorical devices in classical oratory, Burke sought order over his landscape by identifying how rhetorical devices functioned in the contemporary news media. To make this landscape new, Burke wrote a philosophy of modern rhetoric that centered on the concept of *identification*.<sup>13</sup> He defined identification as a persuasive effect of language that exists somewhere between conscious and unconscious awareness—what I will characterize as nonconscious identification.<sup>14</sup> When presenting identification for the first time in *A Rhetoric of*

*Motives*, Burke writes, “There is an intermediate area of expression that is not wholly deliberate, yet not wholly unconscious. It lies midway between aimless utterance and speech directly purposive” (RM xiii).

By tracking identification’s appearances throughout history in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke prepared audiences to understand the complexity of contemporary rhetorical devices in *The War of Words*. Whereas classical rhetoricians focused on conscious acts of persuasion in a primarily oratorical society, modern rhetoricians would focus on nonconscious acts of identification in a society characterized by the expedient delivery of mixed media. Identification would not eclipse persuasion but rather would coexist alongside it in order to build a more comprehensive field of study.

I admit that *weed garden* is an odd turn of phrase. One does not create a weed garden but instead removes weeds in order to cultivate a flower or vegetable garden. The advantage of this awkward phrasing is that it communicates a sense of incompleteness that is crucial to understanding the textual condition of *A Rhetoric of Motives*. By choosing not to publish *The War of Words*, Burke never cleared the landscape as he had planned. Relegating the incomplete chapters to his personal archive, he allowed the weeds in post-war media to proliferate largely unchecked. And yet, by choosing not to complete the work as he had planned, Burke provides us with an opportunity to explore the historical, theoretical, and personal factors that worked against the completion of *A Rhetoric of Motives*. These factors disclose important challenges that rhetorical historians, critics, and educators face in their attempts to counteract contemporary forms of nationalistic aggression. The phrase *weed garden* thus establishes a common topos for rhetorical historians, critics, and educators.

Kenneth Burke’s incomplete project is a weed garden, then, because it orders the landscape well enough for contemporary scholars to appreciate the challenges he faced and to complete, where possible, the program he established. It is now time to kneel alongside Burke and get our hands dirty.