LOGOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: KENNETH BURKE AND THE RHETORIC OF RELIGION

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Religious and theological discourse are subsumable under the category of rhetoric "in the sense that rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion". (RR, v)¹ In The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (1961), the concern of Kenneth Burke is not with the truth-value of religion but with its terminology, its status as language. "Theological doctrine," he notes, "is a body of spoken or written words. Whatever else it may be, and wholly regardless of whether it be true or false, theology is preeminently verbal". (RR:vi) Whereas theology is words about God,

¹ For the sake of easy reference, I have used the following abbreviations for the Burke texts cited: D="Dramatism," LASA=Language as Symbolic Action, RM=A Rhetoric of Motives, and RR=The Rhetoric of Religion. Further bibliographical information may be gleaned from the list of works cited.
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logology is words about words, and Burke's enabling idea is that "what we say about words, in the empirical realm, will bear a notable likeness to what we say about God, in theology". (RR:13-14) Discourse about discourse and discourse about God are assumed to be homologous.

Anticipatory of the linguistic turn in contemporary critical theory, Burke's writings, the first collection of which appeared in 1931, embrace the fundamental rhetoricity of all discourse. Dramatism, the term he uses to characterize his general philosophical enterprise, is a method of linguistic and conceptual analysis that "invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought as modes of action" (GM:xxiii) rather than means of conveying information. Words, for Burke, are agents of power; they are value-laden, ideologically motivated, and emotionally weighted instruments of persuasion and representation. Occupying a middle ground between the extremes of unreflective objectivism and self-debilitating nihilism, Burke develops a critique of language that aims to demystify but not to debunk, for even if representation cannot be ontologically anchored in some transcendental signified or external frame of reference, it has a causal efficacy of its own in its power to induce attitudes and actions. To set aside the conventional claims of naive verbal realism is not to negate the fact that all theories do their representing with a purpose. Unlike some of his deconstructionist contemporaries, Burke tempers his antifoundationalism with the recognition that language is already in the world and does its work of power regardless of our philosophies. In Criticism and Social Change Frank Lentricchia makes the point incisively:

Deconstruction's useful work is to undercut the epistemological claims of representation, but that work in no way touches the real work of representation—its work of power. To put it another way: deconstruction can show that representations are not and cannot be adequate to the task of representation, but it has nothing to say about the social work that representation can and does do. Deconstruction confuses the act of unmasking with the act of defusing, the act of exposing epistemological fraud with the neutralization of political force.2