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Towards a Consummated Life: Kenneth Burke's Concept of Consummation as Critical Conversation and Catharsis

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Towards a Consummated Life: Kenneth Burke's Concept
of Consummation as Critical Conversation and Catharsis

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Towards a Consummated Life: Kenneth Burke's Concept
of Consummation as Critical Conversation and Catharsis

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“Consummation” was the one term about which Kenneth Burke wasn’t particularly long-winded—odd considering his claim that it was the apex of his theory of form. Perhaps Burke never explained exactly what consummation was because he himself was never clear on the subject, as he told John Woodcock in an interview toward the end of his career. Burke began conceptualizing his theory of form early on—in his 20s—and published it in his first critical book, *Counter-Statement*, in 1931. At that time, Burke’s theory of form had already taken one evolutionary step—from self-expression, with the focus on the artist, to communication, with the focus on the psychology of the reader. Communication was to Burke an “arousing and fulfilling of desires.” However, by the 60s, Burke introduced us to a new term which he only used a handful of times in his entire corpus: consummation.

This paper attempts to define consummation by exploring Burke’s theory of form and looking to his correspondences with friends and scholars. It offers two answers: first, consummation is the act of a reader responding to a writer in critical conversation; second, consummation is the ultimate cathartic achievement. Both play an important civic role. Using current science regarding the gut in connection with emotional purgation, this paper treats seriously Burke’s essay “The Thinking of the Body (Comments on the Imagery of Catharsis in Literature)” and his ideas regarding the “Demonic Trinity”: micturition, defecation, and parturition, explaining Burkean catharsis as it differs from, deepens, and extends Aristotelian catharsis.

What can we learn from what Burke meant by consummation? That the symbolic world is much more significant to our survival than we may realize. As the world of scientific motion advanced rapidly during Burke’s lifetime, he began to lose hope that symbolic action could keep up with it. We can see how important poetry and the symbolic motive was for him; he seemed to think it was a matter of life and death. This paper explores what it meant for Burke to seek a consummated life, and the implications that held for him and for us. In the end, the paper posits the importance of catharsis to society in terms of war and peace.

Keywords: Kenneth Burke, consummation, catharsis, perfection, fulfillment, entelechy, imitation, duplication, William Carlos Williams, Malcolm Cowley, William Rueckert, (nonsymbolic) motion, (symbolic) action, second brain, gut, digestion, Demonic Trinity, micturition, defecation, parturition, urine, excrement, childbirth, sexual, urinal, fecal, body, central nervous system, purgation, communication, critical conversation, scapegoat, scapegoatism, magic, imagery, imagination, copy, poetics, ritualization, potentiality, implications, “track down the implications of a terminology,” “going to the end of the line,” “Ad bellum purificandum,” “rotten with perfection,” peace, love, war

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Towards¹ a Consummated Life²: Kenneth Burke's Concept
of Consummation as Critical Conversation and Catharsis

Confident in his ideas, he still wanted to listen, as much as to talk. [Burke] seemed to me to live outside himself, interested in others and what he and they together could learn. His work taught me much, but I think I can now learn more by locating his ideas within the context of . . . his life.

Gregory Clark, 1994

I. Introduction

Over time, *catharsis* has been understood as the process of relieving, cleansing, or purifying ones' passions through drama, historically tragedy, "thereby providing relief from strong or repressed emotions" ("catharsis"). This concept comes from Aristotle's civic theory of tragedy in his *Poetics*: "Tragedy, then is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; though pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (Aristotle 61). Catharsis occurs through punishment of a scapegoat, a literary figure or protagonist that symbolically stands in for the self or the society the self belongs to (Carter 18).

Burke, too, saw the self in terms of society. Just as Aristotle did, Burke considers that art has a civic function—though Burke's purgative term for catharsis became for him consummation (Burke, "Rhetoric and Poetics" 305). In Burke's own terms, catharsis, or this purging process, was "befouling the public medium" (qtd. in East, xxxi), meaning that literary pursuits—both writing and reading—are a way of unloading our junk *onto others*. We are able to vicariously participate in any number of anti-social emotions, imaginatively live out those emotions, and then reject them in the course of our own lives—all the while maintaining a healthy and holistic emotional life without

doing damage to those around us. In this way, catharsis plays an important civic role.

Burke took this idea of catharsis to the next step, intently focusing on the literal and very physical act of purgation. Necessary to the cathartic process is imagery that invokes certain emotions, which take shape in what Burke calls the “Demonic trinity”: micturition, defecation, and parturition—or urine, excrement, and childbirth (“The Thinking of the Body” 326)—, the “three motivational stages” (326) of the poetic motive. In this way, Burke extends, deepens, and develops Aristotle’s description of catharsis and means of cathartic experiences by performing a sometimes psycho-analytical reading of texts, as Sigmund Freud did to dreams. For example, a dreamer’s psyche might imagine for itself a train entering a tunnel; and Freud might read that train as a phallus and the tunnel as a vagina (Thurschwell 3). Here, the train entering the tunnel become symbolic of sexual intercourse. In like manner as “the analyst sees the elements of the patient’s dream in terms of what they symbolize” (3), Burke’s cathartic readings treat images symbolically, too.

Burke’s understanding of consummation is riddled with nuance. Yes, catharsis is one medium by which consummation occurs, but it is not the only one. The act of consummation is a joint act of not only purification by purgation, but of critically responding to literature, as well. If a writer receives critical reception, then his mind has been consummated by a reader whose mind has engaged with his. We will soon explore this aspect of consummation as the motivating force behind Burke’s critical work. This concept of consummation seems to me to be a very productive way of understanding what happens to people as they write and read literature, as the work they’re engaging in is a joining of minds and hearts with others in a collective experience.

Consummation may be the most important Burkean term that Burke himself never fully explained. Not only is an understanding of this word essential to understanding how we get along in society, but also to understanding how aesthetics help us to do so. I intend this essay to be an attempt to complete Burke’s various and incomplete explanations of consummation. My purpose

here is to draw from Burke's correspondence, his interviews, and what he did write about consummation to explain its nuances and significance as I understand them. To acknowledge the extent to which any writing and reading is a collective project, I will follow Burke's lead and use the term *we* in reference to myself to acknowledge my literary and intellectual forefathers. I consider my paper to be a collaboration with Burke, and, therefore, this paper to be a project of consummation.

This essay will first track Burke's evolution of his understanding of the poetic motive from *communication* to *consummation*, noting what follows for people engaged in utterance *itself* (critical conversation), and arguing that Burke understood consummation as the implications of the *effects* of artistic utterance when it is—in Burke's sense of this term—perfected (catharsis). Both ways implicate the symbolic motive, and both work for the benefit of society. Next, we will explore terms important to Burkean consummation: *entelechy*, *perfection*, *imitation*, and *catharsis*, as well as Burke's (*nonsymbolic*) *motion*/*(symbolic)* *action* binary. Hierarchically, consummation swallows catharsis, which swallows imitation, which is based in symbolic imitations of *motion*; consummation also swallows perfection, which swallows entelechy, which is based in a concept that stems from the realm of *motion*. Therefore, key to all of this is Burke's thinking regarding the action and motion binary—which was the basis of all Burke's thought. This binary complicates everything Burke did. In fact, in his letters to Wayne Booth, Burke insists over and over again that his action/motion binary was the lens through which the entire corpus of his work should be read ("To Wayne Booth," IX/18/78). Therefore, we will ultimately arrive at concepts we call *nonsymbolic consummation* (sex, in the realm of motion) and *symbolic consummation* (critical conversation and catharsis, in the realm of action).

In attempting to figure out the experience of consummation, we will treat seriously the ideas Burke proposes in his essay "The Thinking of the Body (Comments on the Imagery of Catharsis in Literature)," which treats catharsis in purgative, even scatological, terms. At the time it was published, many of Burke's readers didn't know what to do with this essay. For some it seemed disconnected

from the rest of Burke's work and, therefore, unusable.³ However, we can also surmise that perhaps "It's more complicated than that" (Burke, "Prologue" 282). While the apparent focus of Burke's essay may indeed be scatological, it was actually an argument for a holistic life, and a holistic poetics. As Burke himself explains, "only by excretion can the body remain *healthy*, and it is the *arresting* of excretion that is death" ("Thinking" 341). Later we will explore very real, very recent scientific evidence that suggests that Burke may have been onto something profound connecting the digestive tract to emotional, cathartic response. But for now, rather than turning up our noses at such a theory, we ought, instead, to note that this makes all the sense in the biological world in which we live.

Foundational to consummation in any conversation is consideration of the body, or what Burke calls "This state of affairs . . . due to the *centrality of the nervous system*" ("Art—" 163). Burke tells us that consummation is about "track[ing] down the implications of a terminology' over and above the needs of either self-expression or communication" ("Rhetoric and Poetics" 395). If consummation is all about implications, then catharsis is also about overcoming the problem of the body and the implications of the central nervous system: isolation. Catharsis is Burke's ideal for overcoming the necessary isolation that comes of being imprisoned in bodies without a way to actually experience each others' pleasures and pains—in a sense, without a way to experience each other ("Art—" 163). Implicit throughout his work is the tragic idea that we are desperate for connection, desperate to get out of our bodies, however impossible it may be. As Burke said "My particular physical pleasures and pains are mine, not yours—and your particular physical pleasures and pains are yours, not mine" (163). Burke's work was about getting along (Burke, Introduction), and getting along involves finding ways to transcend this problem. Our isolation due to our separate nervous systems was always on Burke's mind.

If the implication of our central nervous systems is isolation, then what are the implications of our isolation? Burke would say war and peace. At the heart of this concern is the inquiry: if I can't

feel your pain, then how much more likely am I to cause you pain? Conversely, if I can't feel your pleasure, how much more likely am I to cause you pleasure? Interestingly, an attitude of peace and cooperation perfectly enacted, or brought to fulfillment, is exemplified in a metaphor given to us through the particular terminological screen of Burke's term consummation: the metaphor here is, not surprisingly, a consensual sex act. We will take this metaphor seriously, as it has profound implications in the civic realm. Conversely, an attitude of a refusal to cooperate perfectly enacted is exemplified in both murder and war—though it is more complicated in terms of war, as war-time operations require massive amounts of cooperation by certain parties.⁴ Of these two experiences—sex and war—, only sex offers us a counterfeit way of transcending the body. We will follow the implications of this metaphor to “the end of the line” later on (Woodcock 713). However, we can already read Burke's theory of poetics⁵ as a ritualization whose ultimate end may very well be peace.⁶

Rueckert writes, “A lot of Burke's literary criticism, especially his indexing and joycing, is head work, microanalysis for special interests, in which he is trying to work out some theoretical proposition about cathartic completeness” (Rueckert, *Unending Conversations* 104). “Cathartic completeness,” as Rueckert put it, is Burke's answer to the problem of the central nervous system. And Burke's desire for connection propelled him toward consummation in two ways: first, it altered his literary project, putting him on course to participate in a critical conversation; second, he spent his life working out the nuances of catharsis. Our ultimate goal is to make less mysterious Burke's mystery term, consummation, in a way that is meaningful for our lives, as well.

II. From “communication” to “consummation”

In 1931, Kenneth Burke published his first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement*, at the center of which is his concise definition of form: “form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of an auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (31). Elucidating this definition seven years earlier, Burke tells his friend Malcolm Cowley that form in art is a “crescendo” that utilizes “forms

of emotion”: “If I, by so many pages, awake in the reader the wish to see, let us say, a letter which one character has written to another, and at the proper moment produce that letter—that is form. Like the psychoanalysts, I agree in defining art as a waking sleep, but insist that it is a waking sleep for the audience, not for the artist” (“To Malcolm Cowley,” 20 Nov. 1924). From this we learn that Burke believed form, in its most basic material reduction, is emotional; that literary form is less a matter of dispassionate storyline and plot-telling than of intrigue; and that texts are human—the story is merely the tool through which humanity connects. According to Burke, this “emotional crescendo”—a carefully crafted progressive increase in curiosity that ultimately reaches its climax—is produced by an author creating an appetite in the mind of an auditor and then satisfying that appetite at the opportune moment. However, this statement represents only Burke’s second stop in the formal progression that constitutes his conception of the aesthetic: from self-expression to communication. His third stop he calls “consummation” (Burke, “Rhetoric and Poetics” 305). Burke published *Counter-Statement* just a year before his novel, *Towards a Better Life*. But sometime after publishing his novel, Burke began expanding his theory of form to reach for that third term. Why?

Simply put, Burke wasn’t receiving the critical response he wanted from his creative work. For example, throughout their correspondence with William “Billions” Rueckert, both Burke and his wife, Libbie, often refer to treatment of Burke’s publications, literary and critical.⁷ Burke wanted to know how people were reading him—and to correct them whenever necessary. In a letter to Rueckert Burke writes, “Also delighted with Bill’s review of TBL [his novel]. Very fine!” after which he goes on to critically treat the review (“To William Rueckert,” 13 Dec. 1966). He even tries to coax a response: “book of essays [on criticism] has already sold a thousand copies, though not a word about it has yet appeared in print” (“To William Rueckert,” 10 Feb. 1967). Shortly after dropping the above hint, Burke plead to Rueckert, “Heck, just slap out some quickie P’s on LSA and call it a day! K.B.” (“To William Rueckert,” 27 Jun. 1967). It wasn’t enough for Burke to know his books were

selling; he wanted critical reception. He wanted the world to talk back.

After publishing *Towards a Better Life*, not only did Burke take the opportunity to reexamine his symbolic motive, he also refocused his efforts on criticism. It may be that Burke arrived at his own sense of intellectual consummation only after publishing his novel *because* he felt the need to hear back from his readers—a need that wasn't fulfilled from his creative work. In fact, in late July, 1989, Gregory Clark and Grant Boswell visited Kenneth Burke at his home in Andover, New Jersey. Clark remembers “vividly that more than once he responded to our questions about theory by pointing at his creative work—at least a copy of *The Collected Poems* and *The Complete White Oxen* were on the table between us—and saying it was all in there” (Clark, interview). Clark recalls Burke saying that he began “to write theory because his readers didn't ‘get it’ written in creative form” (Clark, interview). Along similar lines, Burke's essay “Rhetoric and Poetics” recounts the evolution of his theory of form—his concept of the aesthetic, as well as his move from creative to critical work:

I began in the aesthete tradition, with the stress upon self-expression. Things started moving for me in earnest when, as attested in *Counter-Statement*, I made the shift from “self-expression” to “communication.” The theory of form (and “forms”⁸) centers in that distinction. For quite a while, as with many critics, I found it enough to work with these two terms, treating them as principles that variously correct and reinforce each other. But I am always happiest when I can transform any such dyad into a triad—and I subsequently did so by adding what I call “consummation.” (305)

Tellingly, here Burke marks his movement from self-expression to consummation at the same time he marks his movement from a focus on creative writing to criticism. In this way, consummation of a literary relationship may happen when a reader talks back. It was through his experience as a critic that “consummation” became for him his final term in his theory of form(s).

Catharsis as critical conversation has a role to play in the civic realm, too, as “the purification

of violent motives [catharsis], however, requires the purification of narrative [critical conversation]” (Carter 134). While conversation is a concept most of us are familiar with, critical conversation happens in a literary relationship as an author’s work is critically treated. It is the act of being listened to and responded to. But Burke also believed that “it is more important than ever that we critique our messages, and this means using language, which got us into trouble, to get back out again” (Carter 135). So not only does criticism consummate an author’s voice in an intellectual, literary conversation, it is through criticism that we “learn to take responsibility for our freedom Though we cannot break the circle of words, we can choose our words more carefully” (136). In this way, both types of consummation become important parts of civic life.

III. The many faces of Burkean consummation

a. What “consummation” means

Burke never did explain exactly what he meant by consummation, but he did leave us with some telling clues. In “Rhetoric and Poetics,” he tells us consummation “track[s] down the implications of a terminology’ over and above the needs of either self-expression or communication”—that it is “. . . not strictly reducible to the arousing and fulfilling of expectations in an audience” (305). This description is hardly clear. However, throughout his work, Burke uses the phrase “track down the implications of a terminology” along with “going to the end of the line,” and this does tell us something important about consummation: it is interested in “implications” and “ends.”

The most thorough Burke-stated definition of consummation comes to us by way of an interview Burke granted John Woodcock in 1977. In it, Burke states

Consummation [is] what happens when an artist sits down and simply works something out in its own terms *carrying out the implications* of his own resources Given any nomenclature, any discipline with a set of terms, there’s

always a tendency, a compulsion, to *carry out the implications* of that nomenclature
 And this whole principle of *going to the end of the line* in art, of getting the kind of work
 which leaves a spell on you, is just like *tracking down these terminologies to their own*
conclusions. I keep running across this in all sorts of ways—but my attitude on it is still
 not completely settled. (emphasis added Woodcock 713)

Here, Burke both expands and reduces our understanding of what the “implications” of a
 nomenclature might mean for us, speaking to “any discipline with a set of terms.” Specifically, in a
 letter to Booth showing Burke’s thinking regarding the terminology that created the atomic bomb,
 Burke explains the ironic, scientific implications of—in Burke’s sense of this term—perfecting the
 symbolic motive: “. . .once developed, language has innovative powers of its own. Thus, technology
 can load the world with atom bombs; raw natural power could not”¹⁰ (“To Wayne Booth,”
 IX/18/78). This “conquest of nature and its transformation into the built environment” Burke calls
 “Counter-Nature” (Giamo). However, in the Woodcock interview, Burke constrains us somewhat by
 telling us he is looking, in consummation, specifically for “the kind of work which leaves a spell on”
 us, which leads us back to the arts.

We can also see from Burke’s “unsettled” attitude toward this term that there is room to
 conclude that there are at least a couple of ways to understand Burkean consummation. We will
 spend the duration of the essay fleshing out the significance of consummation as catharsis, beginning
 with the Aristotelian notion of entelechy.

b. Entelechy’s role in perfection: from Aristotle’s entelechy to Burke’s symbolic entelechy

It is not surprising that, in consummation, Burke chose a verb entangled in the body and
 complicated by both the physical and symbolic realms. The verb consummation is literally “rooted in”
 (*A Grammar of Motives* 431) its history, coming from the Latin *consummare*, combining *con-*,
 “altogether,” with *summa*, “sum total” (“consummation,” *New Oxford American Dict.*). It has many

meanings, though most of its meanings circulate around the idea of “perfecting,” (“consummation,” def. 1. a. *Oxford English Dict.*), “completing” or “finishing” (def. 2. a.). Specifically, in recent years, consummation has come to signify “an act of consummating a marriage or relationship; the action or an act of having sexual intercourse” (def. 2. b.). But the physical presence of the word itself cannot have escaped Burke’s notice, as it bears a close resemblance to *consume* + *motion* combined. To consume, of course, means among other things “to eat or drink; to ingest” (“consume,” def. II. 6. a. *Oxford English Dict.*), a notion that will gain special significance in our discussion of digestion—as will the term *motion*. Since Burkean consummation is the perfection of the symbolic motive, we ought now to inquire how entelechy—the Aristotelian concept of “perfection”—might enrich our understanding.

To Aristotle’s mind, the entelechial principle was a thing’s *raison d’être*; it was *the* motive or end toward which each thing strived, the motivating force behind life itself. The entelechial principle was every motivating factor for movement on earth and in the cosmos. Joe Sachs explains Aristotle’s theory of *entelecheia* thus: “The primary fact about the world we experience is that it consists of independent things. . . . Since thinghood is characterized by *wholeness (to telos)*, the wholeness of each independent thing has the character of an *end (telos)*, or *that for the sake of which (hou heneka)* it does all that it does” (31). Each thing is a unit of independent parts, smaller things working together for the good of accomplishing an end: becoming the greater thing through becoming the smaller parts of the greater thing. The potential end toward which all things work, or “*that for the sake of which* it does all that it does,” is the entelechial principle, Sachs explains. In Sachs’ own thought-provoking phrase, entelechy is “*being-at-work-staying-itself*” (31). The entelechial principle works toward an end: a completeness, a wholeness, a perfection. Perhaps most importantly, Burke tells us entelechy is “the striving of each thing to be perfectly the thing of its kind” (*GM* 249). The relationship between perfection and entelechy is, therefore, very important to Burke.

What Burke and Sachs are getting at here is the division of labor in which each smaller thing must participate to remain a unique unit within the wholeness of the greater thing. For example, Earth is a thing, but each smaller component of the earth is not swallowed up in its larger role as a part of the earth. The earth is made up of oceans, beaches, continents, mountains, valleys, trees, and so on. As well, the smaller components of each of the greater components of Earth retain their roles as unique but smaller parts, as waters, dirt, salts, grasses, barks, leaves, sands. Each thing in turn retains its potential to be what it started out becoming, “going to the end of the line.” Therefore, the entelechial principle available to each thing is present in its nascent state.

While Aristotle speaks of entelechy in terms relevant to the natural world, Burke extends it into the symbolic realm. In Stan Lindsay’s book, *Implicit Rhetoric: Kenneth Burke’s Extension of Aristotle’s Concept of Entelechy*, Lindsay explains that Burkean entelechy reaches into the symbolic realm as a “‘theory’ of the nature of language” (“Logology” 11). “Burke’s concept of entelechy,” he says “therefore, is not very applicable to the world of motion (physics and biology) nor to the human’s nature as an animal, but primarily to the human’s nature as a symbol user” (11). In other words, entelechy is relevant to Burke’s theory of literary form. What implications does that have for Burke? Burke states

Recall, in Chapter VII of the *Poetics*, where Aristotle propounds the proposition that “A whole is what has a beginning, a middle, and end.” There are few statements that are more platitudinous, and even fewer that are more fertile. In particular, owing to my study of dramatic and narrative forms, I became involved in somewhat paradoxical considerations whereby, if a work is integrally formed, then whereas a beginning, middle, or end must be *explicitly* exactly as it is, each such stage must *implicitly* contain the other two, in anticipation (as regards a beginning), in retrospect (as regards an end), while the middle would somehow contain the “substance” of

both. (“Poetics and Communication” 415)

The “*implicit*,” or internally impelled, continuity to which Burke refers here is part of his understanding of form in the symbolic realm. In any literary pursuit, each part ought to have “its end within itself” (*GM* 261). Burke explains, “By entelechy, I refer to such use of symbolic resources that potentialities can be said to attain their perfect fulfillment” (“Archetype and Entelechy, 1972,” 125). Attaining a literary thing’s “perfect fulfillment” is the goal.

Integrating entelechy into his theory of form gave Burke the idea not only that formal perfection could communicate implicitly, but also that a symbolic motive could be perfected. With entelechy in mind, Burke decides that “One can ‘track down the implications of a terminology’ over and above the needs of either self-expression or communication” (“Rhetoric and Poetics” 305). These “needs” consummate the symbolic motive. Considering a thing’s lifecycle, the idea that a thing in its least developed state—in seed, in embryo, etcetera—has the preprogrammed potential to become what it will become, and that when that thing reaches a state of development, it is perfected, this is eventually what perfection meant to Burke. Consummation is formal perfection (catharsis), but also perfection of the symbolic motive (critical conversation).

c. Perfection’s role in consummation: “man is moved by this principle”

Inasmuch as perfection in entelechial terms is the fulfillment of innate potential, Burke grafts entelechy into his understanding the symbolic motive by considering humanity’s “human” potentiality, or human nature.¹¹ Here I replicate only part of Burke’s definition, followed by relevant parts of his extensive and immediate explanation of perfection:

Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal . . . and rotten with perfection, . . . The principle of perfection is central to the nature of language as motive.

The mere desire to name something by its “proper” name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically “perfectionist.” . . . And even a poet who works out

cunning ways of distorting language does so with perfectionist principles in mind. . . . Thoughts on this subject induce us to attempt adapting, for sheerly logical purposes, the Aristotelian concept of “entelechy,” the notion that each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind, . . . Our point is: Whereas Aristotle seems to have thought of all beings in terms of the entelechy (in keeping with the ambiguities of his term, *kinesis*, which includes something of both “action” and “motion”), we are confining our use of the principle to the realm of symbolic action. And in keeping with this view, we would merely state: There is a principle of perfection implicit in the nature of symbol systems; and in keeping with his nature as symbol-using animal, man is moved by this principle. (“Definition of Man” 16–17)

Here, Burke makes clear man’s symbolic motive: “man is moved¹² by this principle”—“the principle of perfection.” Elsewhere, Burke makes clear the superiority of humanity’s symbol-using in relation to the other clauses¹³ of his definition: “Man being the typically language-using species, there is for him an intrinsic delight in the *sheer exercising* of his distinctive characteristic (language, or symbol-using in general)” (“The Language of Poetry” 38). In fact, according to Burke, humanity’s “distinctive characteristic” of all the characteristics “natural to [human] kind” is linguistic (38). Symbolic endeavors, then, lead us toward our end, our fulfillment, our perfection as humans, or “that for the sake of which [we] do all that [we] do.” According to Burke, our chief entelechial principle is symbolic. Literature is, therefore, more than a mere part of humanity’s process of perfecting itself as symbolic animals; it is the overwhelming majority of that process. Accordingly, to Burke, who believes our purpose as symbol-using animals is “intrinsically ‘perfectionist,’” a life devoid of literary pursuits—whether written or oral, rhetorical or poetic—is a life unfulfilled.

If “each being aims at the perfection of its kind,” and we are symbol-using animals, we must consummate our symbolic engagement to reach the pinnacle of human experience. Recognizing that

symbolic engagement is found just as well outside of literature, we nevertheless ask how do we perform literary consummation? Through imitation of the nonsymbolic realm, Burke tells us.

d. Imitation's role in catharsis: "the imagination has to imitate nature"

Looking at a passage in a letter to Williams in company with the last lines of Burke's essay on Aristotelian imitation, we can actually see the very beginning of Burke's concept of consummation as perfection coming into play. In January of 1951, Burke tells Williams, "Finally I have just discovered, within the last two years the significance of Aristotle's use of the word 'imitation.' It has overwhelming importance to the writer and to the artist generally and is for us a 'new' word. *The imagination has to imitate nature, not to copy it*— . . . , there is a world of difference there" (emphasis added "To William Carlos Williams," 24 Jan. 1951). Imitation, then has "overwhelming importance" for writers and artists. We link imitation to consummation by looking Burke's essay on Aristotle's true meaning of imitation, published in 1952.

At the very end of "A 'Dramatistic' View of 'Imitation,'" Burke connects both *imitation* and *consummation* with his newly emphasized concept of perfection as *an end*. Burke begins this connection stating, "One imitates entelechially, thereby attaining a universal, insofar as the individual is shown living up to the potentialities of its genus" ("A 'Dramatistic' View" 13). Then, quoting a scripture in The New Testament Book of John, Burke further contextualizes imitation to mean not just something perfected in the entelechial sense, but something consummated, finished, at its end: "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished"; *consummatum est; es ist vollbracht*, the Greek text has Tetelestai, a verb perfect passive in form, that contains the telos of 'entelechy,' to designate an 'end,' not just as a dying or desisting, but rather as a purpose, now at last fulfilled" (18). In this passage all the pieces of our puzzle fit beautifully together: consummation ("*consummatum est*"); entelechial imitation; "It is finished"; "a purpose, now at last fulfilled." All of these ideas are present in entelechy (*en* "within" + *telos* "end, perfection") and are present in consummation. If

entelechy is a part of perfection, and consummation is perfecting, then Rueckert makes the connection between imitation and consummation explicit, stating that this essay on imitation “redefines imitation to include the essential Burkean concept of entelechy—or the drive toward perfection intrinsic to language and to all forms of imitation and to literature in general” (Introduction xvi).

Before a full discussion of consummation as catharsis may take place, let us briefly return to Burke’s letter to Williams, where he says, “*The imagination has to imitate nature, not to copy it— . . . , there is a world of difference there.*” How is the imagination to imitate nature? Here, Burke suggests that in the same manner in which the body rids itself of impurities through purgation, so too must the imagination through literature. This, he believes, is accomplished through catharsis. Rueckert states that Burke began to “work out the physiological counterparts of his theory of catharsis . . . in an essay called ‘The Thinking of the Body’ in which he tries to show that the pity, fear, and pride that were purged in tragedy, according to Aristotle, had their physiological counterparts in the sexual, urinal, and fecal purges of the body” (Rueckert xiii). In catharsis, the imagination imitates purgation within the body. By pairing these two counterparts together, Burke draws attention to his understanding of the two poles at either end of human existence: nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action. It is through catharsis that this imaginative purgation, an imitation of bodily purgation, is realized. The addition of action and motion will help us consider two distinct definitions of consummation: nonsymbolic consummation and symbolic consummation.

IV. Make Love, Not War: Consummation as a means of finding peace

a. (Nonsymbolic) Motion and (Symbolic) Action

To Burke, action and motion inhabit separate spheres. As he told Booth, “There are trees, and there is the word ‘tree,’ and never the twain shall meet” (“To Wayne Booth,” Jan. 16, 1978). These spheres are at the heart of his definition of man as a symbolic animal. “This [distinction]” he

asserts, “is the basic polarity [of existence] . . . at the root of such distinctions as mind-body, spirit-matter, superstructure-substructure, and Descartes’ dualism, thought and extension, . . . though no such terms quite match the pair” (“(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action” 139). In recognizing these terms, Burke attempts to understand the universe itself—and feels keenly the superiority of his distinction above the rest. Perhaps this is due to the fact that these terms account for all movement within the known universe as well as all material existence. Symbolic action became for Burke one of his most important terms, as it categorically encompasses everything that gives meaning to motion. Symbolic action is key to our present discussion; but, in order to understand symbolic action, we must first understand what it is not: nonsymbolic motion.

Nonsymbolic motion is movement occurring spontaneously in the universe. Nonsymbolic motion is a plant flowering, a bee pollenating, the movement within a body, cells mutating and then correcting themselves again, and chemicals surging through corporeal roadways. “The human body,” Burke says, “in its nature as a sheerly physiological organism, would . . . be in the realm of matter, for which our term is ‘motion’” (140). We can see from this comparison that nonsymbolic motion needs no motivation, no intent, nor will. It exists separately from humanity. “Without man,” Burke says, “motion would go right on” (“On Literary Form” 85). Motion is independent of action in that “the realm of nonsymbolic motion needs no realm of symbolic action” in order to exist (“(Nonsymbolic) Motion” 141). Conversely, without motion, action could not exist; action is completely dependent upon motion. Burke says,

If all typically symbol-using animals (that is, humans) were suddenly obliterated, their realm of symbolic action would be correspondingly obliterated. The Earth would be but a realm of planetary, geologic, and meteorological motion, including the motions of whatever nonhuman biologic organisms happen to survive . . . there could be no realm of symbolic action unless grounded in the realm of nonsymbolic motion, the

realm of motion having preceded the emergence of our symbol-using ancestors

(141)

Further distinguishing action from motion, as we previously discussed, symbolic action is motivated and seeks an end, which end may change direction at any moment depending upon the conscience, or will, that created it (*GM* 228). Motion's end, however, may not change course without drastic measure. A seed may become a plant; in situations of hybridity, the type of plant a seed becomes may alter, but it will remain a plant. However, through translation, a song may become a play, a play may become a movie, a movie may become a book, and so on. Symbol systems, language, dance, cinema, and the like all occur within the realm of symbolic action. In short, all human communication, whether conscious or subconscious, exists in the realm of symbolic action.

b. (Nonsymbolic) Consummation and (Symbolic) Consummation

i. An Introduction to the Metaphor: (Nonsymbolic) Consummation

Burke's theory of imitation implies that all movement in the nonsymbolic realm may also by imitation exist in the symbolic realm. But consummation is a special case. In this case, nonsymbolic consummation is a consensual sex act, and symbolic consummation is imaginative purgation, or catharsis, rather than a fictional sex act. Symbolic consummation, therefore, imitates *the effects* of nonsymbolic consummation.¹⁴ While consummation in the symbolic sense was a literal term for Burke, his use of the term does put in place a metaphor with profound societal implications in terms of peace and war. We will explore it at length here so that we may understand its implications and effects when we discuss the details of Burkean catharsis. As we previously noted, consummation was Burke's ideal for overcoming "This state of affairs . . . due to the *centrality of the nervous system*" ("Art—" 163). Burke viewed symbolic action as a way of transcending our central nervous systems—as we said before, as a way of getting under each other's skins.

In terms of nonsymbolic consummation, a consensual sex act is the most connective physical

activity possible for the human family. When two people unite physically through sex, they attempt, though unwittingly, to transcend the limitations of their physical bodies. This transcendence may also occur through orgasm, an emotional experience that allows people to connect to each other through their bodies. Not only does sex physically enact an attitude of unity and a willingness to connect, but through the act, children are born into the world. In an ideal world, a child symbolizes the very recent love and cooperation of two individuals.¹⁵ The existence of a child tells us that, for at least a few moments, two members of humankind connected in a consummately peaceful union. Therefore, it is ideally through an act of peace that the human family is perpetuated. Not only are children a symbol of hope and peace in the world, they are the product of the sex act itself. When we consider potentiality, that “what goes in must come out,” the act perfected potentially creates a child. Male sperm enters a female body, and what leaves the body is a tiny human. In this way, physical consummation *perfected* alters the world forever through the addition of human life. You might say that consummation, therefore, takes on a life of its own.

When we think of consummation and perfection, it is easy to think only in terms of ends. However, as we’ve just seen, sex is also a beginning. For this reason, instead of thinking of consensual sex as an *end*, think of it rather as a *fulfillment*—the ultimate act of cooperation, or an attitude of cooperation acted out perfectly. While Burke believes the act takes place in the realm of nonsymbolic motion,¹⁶ it becomes symbolic when we understand the attitude it enacts. Consensual sex symbolizes two people’s abilities to fully cooperate with one another. In consensual sex, each partner invites the other partner not merely into his or her physical space, but also into his or her body. The act of sex is invasive; an invitation requires an attitude of extreme cooperation.¹⁷ No wonder it is the rite of marriage. The act breaks down not only the barrier of the body, but also the emotional and physical boundaries two individuals put in place to separate themselves from the rest of the world.

ii. (Symbolic) Consummation

Likewise, in terms of symbolic consummation, literary catharsis is a means of transcending the boundaries of our bodies, of using language to get under each other's skins. Burkean imitation would have symbolic consummation imitate the effects of nonsymbolic consummation, not merely to copy the effects. Remember, Burke said, "there is a world of difference there." Symbolic consummation should, therefore, fulfill both functions of nonsymbolic consummation: it should take on a life of its own, and it should have a civic function.

The answer to the first half of that question comes in the form of critical conversation, the answer to the second half through both critical conversation and catharsis. Catharsis performs a civic function when it gives people the opportunity to experience the full range of human emotions—of being holistic participants in emotional life—in rather harmless ways. We can read Burke's theory of poetics¹⁸ as a ritualization whose ultimate end may very well be peace. It also imitates the sex act in that its crucial goal is an emotional release available to both writer and reader (East xxxi).¹⁹ If we take the metaphor of symbolic consummation "to the end of the line," we are free to say that catharsis imitates orgasm in its bodily effects. Considering potentiality, along those lines, as with sex, it is also through consummation of an utterance that a response is born into the world. True connection doesn't occur when one person is speaking *at* another, as in Burke's idea of communication. The literary exchange must be reciprocal. For Burke, a response is consummation of the literary relationship. In this way, critical consummation also alters the world forever.

c. War: "a perversion of communication"

If we look at consensual sex as enacting an attitude of cooperation perfectly, then we may also look at the inability to enact cooperation perfectly: on a global or national level, war, and on a more personal level, murder. Speaking in terms of murder, if two people utterly refuse to get along, that attitude drawn out to perfection in action would prove the physical elimination of the other—

and in order to fully eliminate another, we must kill her. In terms of war, Burke states that the cause of this inability to cooperate perfected is a “perversion of communication” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 22). In war, symbol systems are used for destructive rather than productive means. Speaking globally, Burke points out the irony and tragedy of war, as it is a powerful means of invoking cooperation: “To begin with ‘identification’ [or unity] is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*. And so, in the end, men are brought to that most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts, wherein millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act. We refer to that ultimate *disease* of cooperation: war” (22). War is the inability of one group of people who share a common identity to cooperate with another group of people to the extent that the other group should be eliminated. This is an extreme inability to cooperate invoked by undesirable emotions—perhaps hate, anger, and fear toward an opposing group, pride toward oneself, and pity toward one’s own group. Both murder and war perfect a perverse symbolic motive.

d. Imitating the Body: Peace Through the Magic of the Imagination

Burke recognizes the symbolic means by which, through both rhetoric and poetic symbolic action, peace is possible. He had the *Latin* phrase “Ad bellum purificandum” written on the wood above a window his personal home library. The Latin means “towards the purification of war.” Of this phrase, James Zappen writes,

This vision of a continual striving toward perfection conveys a hint of the deep irony in the phrase “Ad bellum purificandum”—the hope, on the one hand, of an end to war achieved through an order or symmetry that encompasses competing points of view and an acknowledgment (explicit in the word *ad* or toward), on the other, that this hope will very likely never be realized, for we humans are, and likely will remain, “‘rotten’ with perfection” (Zappen, “Some notes”).

What Burke means in his “Definition of Man” when he says man is “rotten with perfection” is that

“A given terminology contains various implications, and there is a corresponding ‘perfectionist’ tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications” (“Definition of Man” 19)—even if they mean our eventual total destruction.

But Burke believed in the “magic” of imaginative cathartic purgation (“A ‘Dramatistic’” 17), whereby humanity might rid itself of its “perfect rottenness.” For Burke, this is one possible means of avoiding war. Jeffery Murray explains that

[Burke’s] dramatistic dialogue attempts to pursue peace in the very maintenance of difference, [and, i]n this way, dramatistic dialogue offers not the “purification of war” but its perpetual postponement. War is at once the end/eschaton [or the final event] of the dialectic of a grammar of motives—the “rottenness of perfection”—and the end/motivation of the dialogue of disparate grammars of motive. (42)

While Murray refers to rhetorical-dialectical exchanges (pertinent to this paper in terms of critical conversation), Burke also believes peace is possible through poetics. Thus it is through symbol systems that humankind may not only come to an explicit understanding one with another through rhetorical-dialogical exchange, it may also purge itself of emotions that lead to violence through poetics.

While this may seem like a lofty claim, Burke doesn’t think it impossible: “Imitations can be endowed with a magical power not present in the things imitated” (“A ‘Dramatistic’” 17). Burke explains the power of the imagination when he recounts the following story:

[W]e know of a child who awoke in the night, shrieking, from the dream of a snake. Yet the next day he placidly bathed in a pool while a water snake lay on a branch nearby. His mother asked him: “Why aren’t you worried about this snake, when you were so afraid of the snake you dreamed about last night?” And he answered: “This one is real.” (17)

Burke then follows, “There is a magic in imitations that probably draws in part upon the magic of dreams” (17). Here, Burke sees the imagination as a powerful tool, and he explains to us the way symbol systems may work for peace: in art, we may substitute our actual enemy for an imaginative one, purging ourselves of less-desirable emotions. This is called “scapegoatism”:

[I]nasmuch as substitution is a prime resource of symbol systems, the conditions are set for catharsis by scapegoat (including the “natural” invitation to “project” upon the enemy any troublesome traits of our own that we would negate). . . . many kinds of guilt, resentment, and fear tend to cluster about the hierarchal psychosis, with its corresponding search for a sacrificial principle such as can become embodied in a political scapegoat. (“Definition of Man” 19)

Peace is possible as humanity purges itself of the fears, guilt, and resentment it directs—either appropriately or inappropriately—at another. Though perhaps not ideal, through the sacrificial scapegoat, catharsis may purge a body of the emotions that prevent peace in the “real” world.

Nonsymbolic consummation and symbolic consummation thus unite in their relationship toward war and peace. Nonsymbolic consummation enacts an attitude of peace, whereas symbolic consummation may help to make that attitude possible. Through symbolic consummation, we are given the opportunity to experience the full range of human emotion without violent ends—whereby enabling a holistic rather than an incomplete emotional life. Symbolic consummation, then, imitates nonsymbolic consummation in its potentially peace-promoting effects. This conversation will be helpful to us as we delve into Burke’s theory of catharsis.

V. Conversation and Catharsis: or Relational and Textual Consummation

a. Relational Consummation

Now that we are done with our metaphor, let us recall the two types of consummation this paper discusses: relational consummation and textual consummation. We decided that relational

consummation occurs when a reader responds to a writer; it is a shared, potentially world-altering experience (conversation). Textual consummation is a symbolically purgative literary experience (catharsis). If this discussion seems to be going in two directions at once, it is because consummation confused Burke himself.²⁰ While Burke may have been unsettled or unclear in his thinking regarding the term consummation—and it is easy to see why—he eventually led a highly relationally consummated life. Not only did he participate in the tradition of literary criticism as a prolific critic himself,²¹ he eventually was the recipient of many critical encounters with his work, too. In this way, his literary life was deeply consummated.

b. Textual Symbolic Consummation

Textual consummation is itself confusing and has many parts that relate to the text. James H. East, in his introduction to Burke's correspondence with William Carlos Williams, states,

. . . Burke linked the function for form first set down in *Counter-Statement* to other discursive forms, and went on to trace the way in which the internal components of a work might be used to interpret its symbols—. . . later, [Burke] would link these ideas to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis in as much as a work of art, closely studied thus, may reveal the artist's maladjustment and how his composition both explicates the ailment and at the same time discharges it—"as we may relieve ourselves of private burdens by befouling the public medium"—through his "symbolic action" whereby he "socializes his position" and achieves "ritual catharsis" for both himself and his auditor. (Introduction xxxi)

East latches on to the fact that catharsis is perfected only after a symbolic, cathartic "discharge" has taken place. And this discharge happens ideally to both the artist and the auditor.

East's explanation also expresses Burke's own confusion on this point. Consummation is a way to trace "internal components" in a work, but it is also a way for both author and reader to

“achieve ritual catharsis” together. How can all of this be? Recall the interview where Burke tells us that “Consummation [is] . . . what happens when an artist sits down and simply works something out in its own terms . . . carrying out the implications of his own resources . . . the implications of that nomenclature . . . getting the kind of work which leaves a spell on you” (Woodcock 713). From this we learn that symbolic consummation is something that transcends the artist-reader relationship—it allows for a multilateral cathartic experience. The artist “works out” a piece of art—a poem, for example—in its own terms, “explicates the ailment,” “relieves [himself] of [his] private burden” “through symbolic action,” “achieves ritual ‘catharsis’” (East xxxi), and experiences some sort of emotive discharge. This we will call *writerly consummation*. Next, the piece of art is complete unto itself, perfect in its own terminological implications. This we will call *true textual consummation*. Finally, a reader picks it up, experiences it, and from the work a “spell” is cast over her and she experiences an emotive discharge. The circle is now complete; this we will call *readerly consummation*. At every level, consummation may occur. Ultimate consummation occurs also, of course, when the reader responds to the writer—as, in perfection, every literary utterance demands a response. At this point, textual consummation slips back into relational consummation, or critical conversation.

The “spell” Burke speaks of is a cathartic spell. Here, we will begin to explore the messy details of catharsis. To begin the discussion, recall Rueckert’s statement that Burke was attempting to “work out the physiological counterparts of his theory of catharsis . . . [and] that pity, fear, and pride . . . , had their physiological counterparts in the sexual, urinal, and fecal purges of the body” (Introduction, Rueckert xiii). In catharsis, the imagination imitates purgation within the body. To Burke, located inside the symbolic realm were counterparts corresponding to certain cyclical motions only apparent within the realm of nonsymbolic motion. But in terms of human significance, Burke believed the symbolic interpretations of those motions were more important than the motions themselves. In fact, to Burke symbolic interpretations of biological experiences lent credence to

them. This further demonstrates his point that it is symbolic action that gives meaning to motion.

Burke claimed that

Whatever the possible range of incidental readjustments, DUPLICATION is so basic to the relation between motion and symbolicity, nothing of moment seems quite complete unless we have rounded things out by translation into symbols of some sort, either scientific or aesthetic, practical or ritualistic. Sex is not complete without love lyrics, porn, and tracts on sexology. The nonsymbolic motions of springtime *are completed* in the symbolic action of a spring song. The realms of nonsymbolic motion and symbolicity (with its vast range of implications) are so related that the acquiring of skill with symbol-systems is analogous to a kind of “fall” into a technical state of “grace” that “perfects” Nature. (“(Nonsymbolic)” 154)

This passage is significant for two reasons. First, in it Burke places sex into the realm of sheer motion, as discussed above; as such, it must be perfected or consummated through symbolic translation. That implicates the second significance of this passage: the very fact that, to Burke, nature itself only reaches its end or perfected state through human interpretation of it. This implies that, to Burke, our bodies may be consummated through symbolic duplication and imitation. As catharsis imitates bodily purgation, or discharge, it may reasonably consummate the body. Before we explore the way Burke analyzes catharsis in text, let us first briefly discuss the scientific findings that back up Burke’s scatological theory of catharsis, so that we might take it seriously.

V. The “Second Brain”: Burke’s Scientific Insight into the Enteric Nervous System

i. Scientific justification

Symbolic consummation, to my mind, is Burke’s most brilliant and insightful addition to literary criticism. As previously stated, for the health of the organism, what goes in must come out. While Burke apparently wrestled with this theory seriously in his latter critical work, its scientific

roots began setting much earlier, coloring everything he did; the journey towards consummation was really a lifelong pursuit. In the Woodcock interview, when asked to explain what were some of the more “important changes in [his] career,” Burke immediately tells of his time working “with one of the Rockefeller charities” (Woodcock 707), the Bureau of Social Hygiene (BSH) to be exact. Here, Burke claims his work for Colonel Arthur Woods,—with a vague command to just “look into drugs”—made a “terrific difference” (707). But it did much more than that. In her chapter “Burke on Drugs,” Debra Hawhee tells “[after his notes on drugs suddenly disappeared], far from vanishing Burke’s work at the BSH stayed with him—arguably more closely than he realized” (56). Likely due to his work on drugs, in terms of sheerly “scientific” insight, Burke was well ahead of his time. He was reading literary works and thinking about poetic motives, complicated by his suddenly intense awareness of motion, the body, and its influence on the symbolic sphere.

In his theory of form, Burke intuited what would later be learned about our digestive organ: that the gut is largely responsible for the release of emotional chemicals into the body. In fact, ninety-five percent of the body’s serotonin is released first in the gut before eventually making its way to the brain (Gershon xii). This is significant, as serotonin is known to affect mood in terms of depression and anxiety, as well as regulate sleep, vomiting, and migraine headaches (“What is Serotonin?”). The gut is apparently important to quality of life. In the last forty years, scientists have learned an incredible amount about the gut, both of its independence and its importance—even to linguistic development.

First, the gut functions independently from the rest of the body. Even when removed from the body, it continues to reflex (Gershon 6). This is because it is controlled by its own nervous system, the enteric nervous system, or what scientists have nicknamed “The Second Brain.” The enteric nervous system is an intrinsic nervous system that “consists of sheaths of neurons embedded in the walls of the long tube of our gut, . . . which measures about nine meters end to end from the

esophagus to the anus” (Hadhazy). Not only were our “second brains” actually the first nervous systems to develop in the bodies of vertebrae (Gershon xiii), by performing the not-so-nice activities of the body, they also allowed our ancestors’ brains and nervous systems to “attend to more attractive things, like finding food, escaping destruction, and having sex with other organisms” (xiii), as well as other things—such as symbolic pursuits.

What’s most exciting about the gut, and proof of Burke’s genius, is its involvement in emotional release and, therefore, mood regulation. A common example given of the way our guts make us feel is “butterflies in the stomach” (Hadhazy)—but this is only one example. Recent discoveries regarding the enteric nervous system give us insight into the importance of gut health: for example, Irritable Bowel Syndrome is now being considered a “‘mental illness’ of the second brain” (Hadhazy). The point is, if digestion is the king of purgation—as it accounts for two-thirds of Burke’s cathartic motive—, then the enteric nervous system clearly reigns. When he implicated digestion in the conversation surrounding catharsis, Burke was certainly on to something—and well before his time.

ii. Cathartic Discharge as an Imitation of Scatological Purgation

What we have just done is argue that there is now a scientific basis for Burke’s theory of catharsis. Rather than being a dirty, silly, or eccentric theory, Burke’s essay “The Thinking of the Body” puts forth a smart, forward-thinking, intuitive analysis with significant implications for our lives. However, because at the time of Burke’s writing there was little scientific background for a conversation of this sort, and because of the topic’s indecorous subject matter, Burke anticipated a resistance to his theory. This is evidenced when he writes, “I am aware that, no matter what one might say on this subject, one is bound to encounter some resistance” (“Rhetoric and Poetics” 297). And that resistance has taken shape variously. He mentions one point of resistance to his ideas on catharsis in the addendum to his essay “The Thinking of the Body,” which he calls “After Words”

(339). “A colleague” he tells us, had expressed his sincere opinion that grown men didn’t care one lick about urine or feces: “There’s a heap of water, all shapes and sizes in this world; and such a little bit of it is trickling and micturing” (339–340). The rest of his response to his colleague reads as an apology for his demonic trinity, and Burke rightly points out that “only by excretion can the body remain *healthy*, and it is the *arresting* of excretion that is deathly” (341). Just as the body necessarily excretes and purges itself of impurities through the workings of the enteric nervous system, and just as it brings into the world new life in parturition, Burke believes literary endeavors must imaginatively invoke these processes to carry their terminologies “to the end of the line.”

In the above critical examples where bodies are concerned, consummation always leads to discharge. As East mentioned above, catharsis produces certain effects. But note Burke’s language as he discusses form: “And though the questions to do with the arousing and fulfilling of expectations [or self-expression and communication] are, in the last analysis, but ways of asking pointed questions about a work’s *unity* . . . , they do serve well as goads, or arrows, prodding us to take a close look at the dynamics or *musculature* of either Poetical or Rhetorical performances” (“Rhetoric and Poetics” 306). Here, self-expression and communication point forward at consummation, at “the musculature” of performance. In other words, formal consummation *affects* the body. The sort of affect is the “dynamics or *musculature* of a Poetical or Rhetorical performance” (306). Process. The process of internalizing a message, poetical or rhetorical. Digestion, in one sense. Apparently, Burke wasn’t joking when he referred once to humans as “digestive tract[s] with trimmings” (“Art—” 157).

In catharsis, the effect is the important part. Burke’s catharsis, in order to produce its ultimate effect, occurs in what Burke calls “analerotic . . . patterns of creativity” (“The Thinking of the Body” 323). Always a proponent of the triad, in Burke’s own words, there are three ways these “analerotic” patterns might “carry out [their] implications to the end of the line.” He calls this catharsis the “Demonic trinity”: micturition, defecation, and parturition—or urine, excrement, and

childbirth (326)—the “three . . . stages” of the poetic motive (326). For those of us who need further convincing that catharsis was such messy business in Burke’s head, consider the following passage from a letter to Williams dated Dec. 24, 1956: “At present, am in the *thick* of speculation on Catharsis. It’s a *gruesomely* easy subject to *gas* about, so I’m have one *devil* of a job trying to *condense* it into *solidities*, while at the same time permitting its range” (emphasis added “To William Carlos Williams”). Catharsis was really and truly scatological to Burke.

So what would this kind of analysis look like? The subtitle to Burke’s essay “The Thinking of the Body” reads “(Comments on the Imagery of Catharsis in Literature).” What Burke is looking for are purgative images, then. He gives us one example of this kind of analysis in his essay “Version, -Con, -Per, -In,” where he interprets a scene in the book *Nightwood*. In this scene, Burke reads the giving of a doll from one female to another female as a sort of symbolic child birthing. He states, “Here is a twist whereby one woman’s giving of a doll to another woman stands somehow for impregnation, gestation, parturition and parenthood linking the two” (251). That is one example of an image symbolizing more than is presently obvious. Another example is his reading of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. Here Burke explains,

Its essence is mythically symbolized by a deity associated with the primeval waters. His abode is called a “stream” (*rheuma*); and a neat bit of condensation occurs when Prometheus explosively prophesies to him that “rivers of fire” shall burst forth from Mount Aetna. We might further note that the word for “bit,” being a diminutive of *stoma*, has the following range of connotations: aperture, opening, curb, mouth, outlet, such as mouth of a river. (“Thinking” 321)

Later Burke reads in Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers* (*Choephoroe*) “in which the Chorus is composed of mourners sent to pour libations (choai) . . . the corresponding verb (chéo) means: to pour; to pour liquids, as to make rain; it can also apply to the shedding of tears. Other meanings: to flow, stream,

gush forth” (321). To Burke, rain and tears symbolize urination. The opening of a river might be either the urethra for urination or the vagina for parturition, from which either urine or a newborn baby would come. An image of “the corruption of a dead body (as with the euphemistic use of the word ‘ashes’)” Burke says “would naturally suggest acts associated with the body imagery of fear,” invoking urine (321). From this we gain important insight into the kind of symbolic catharsis Burke was looking for. Here, art imitates life through image, the symbolic exchange standing in for purgative occurrences in the realm of motion.

Thus we see that for Burke the text mustn’t necessarily come right out and defecate on its reader as many may have previously thought; a *symbolic imagistic representation* of parturition, defecation, or micturition suffices. Micturition might not obviously seem to relate to excrement; however, Burke explains, “Images from the cloacal sources are basic to the ‘thinking of the body’” (*GM* 302). As an example, an image leading to fear would stand in for urination, which is a form of excrement. But they would also invoke parturition:

Thus, the imagery of rain might on analysis disclose that, besides its function as a transcendent translation of release (as physiologically conceived in terms of urination) it also had the connotations of erotic purposiveness. Of course, one may learn, on a purely social level, that moisture assists the germination of seeds; and the emotional effects of such knowledge may be considered enough in themselves to account for a poet’s equating rain with fertility. But in considering the Grammatical potentialities the “excremental” nature of the invective or vilification would allow for a translation of erotic purpose from “love” to “war.” (302–303)

Here we see the range of Burke’s analysis and the possibilities available to us. We also see how one may purge herself of feelings that would lead to conflict. Images provoke catharsis, as “Drought and rainfall, famine and plenty, hunger and feast may contain a dialectic of the purposive,” Burke tells us.

“All scapegoats are purposive, in aiming at self-purification by the unburdening of one’s sins ritualistically, with the goat as charismatic, as the chosen vessel of iniquity, where one can have the experience of punishing in an alienated form the evil which one would otherwise be forced to recognize within” (301). Specifically, images of catharsis lead to peace, fulfilling a civic function in Burke’s own words:

What we now most need is to perfect and simplify the ways of admonition, so that men may cease to persecute one another under the promptings of demonic ambition that arise in turn from distortions and misconceptions of purpose. With a few more terms in his vocabulary for motives, for instance, the rabid advocate of racial intolerance could become a mild one; and the mild one would not feel the need to be thus intolerant at all. And so human thought may be directed towards “the purification of war” . . . in the sense that war can be refined to the point where it would be much more peaceful than the conditions we would now call peace. (305)

VI. Conclusion

Burke believes the arts have very serious real-world implications for humanity, implications that include scientific terminologies and realities. One example of this inclusiveness is found as Wayne Booth recalls Burke saying “with his own lips, that ‘bombs’ and ‘poems’ are ‘the same word’” (“Kenneth Burke’s Way of Knowing” 3). Expounding upon Burke’s metaphor, Booth explains

Literary criticism will thus be only one of many agencies, an *aspect* of the disorienting but finally irenic discourse we need. The world of such criticism has its own gloomy route to match the “perfection” of total annihilation by the bomb. That route would lead to the annihilation of free discourse about the poem by establishing a single, final reading readers must accept. Poems like bombs are actions; bombs like poems can be symbolic actions. To fix what those actions will or should be for any future

reader is to kill the kind of vital relation between poem and reader that alone can keep literature alive. (Booth “Kenneth Burke’s Way of Knowing” 13).

We can see from this metaphor that the world changed for Burke after WWII, after the first atomic bomb was dropped and he realized that the implications of the scientific symbolic world could lead to our total destruction. Our destruction would, therefore, be “the implications of a scientific terminology” “going to the end of the line,” perfected, or consummated. But if ultimate destruction is one implication of the symbolic motive perfected in terms of nonsymbolic motion, there is another implication that the symbolic world has to offer us: symbol systems perfected that lead to ultimate cooperation. Cooperation enacted, instead of our utter destruction, is perfectly stated by the peace activists of the 60s reacting to the Vietnam War. Their slogan was “make love, not war.” If death is the extreme implication of scientific terminologies, then love epitomized in consummation is the extreme implication of literary terminologies. Poetry doesn’t have the danger of executing one final reading, as Booth suggested is possible with criticism. Poetry is that which offers catharsis, and it does so without the danger of perfecting the world in the same way the bomb does. Its perfection is of a completely opposite nature.²²

Implicit above is the fact that Burke viewed the world through his dualistic system of “(nonsymbolic) motion/(symbolic) action.” He viewed symbolic action as a way of transcending motion, including the problem of our central nervous systems (“Art—” 163). Since our bodies separate us from each other with impenetrable boundaries, symbolic action offers us the only legitimate way of getting around those boundaries. In its ability to provoke emotional response, catharsis is a way of getting under each other’s skins. Consummative symbolic action doesn’t replace consummative nonsymbolic motion. The two participate in different realms, both necessary for us to live consummated lives, and both necessary for Burke to live his life perfectly, to be who he was born to be: Burke perfected, consummated toward the end of his existence. The symbolic realm was

to Burke “. . . a plane of symbolism capable of pointing towards ‘perfections’ intrinsic to itself” (“Art—” 162). To Burke, perfectionist symbolic capacities imitated motion. And he was constantly attempting to instantiate contact between the two realms.

Burke’s theories of form and criticism all circulated around connection, or “CONTACT,” as Williams called it. Burke longed for contact. Sadly, his wife Libbie passing before him left a huge echo in his parlor. Never before had his theories been confirmed to him in such a personal way. Burke wanted to share his life. This is evidenced by the enormous amount of correspondences he carried on throughout his life. It is telling that the moment of his acquaintance with Williams that stands out the most in Burke’s mind was the point of contact between the physician and a dog he healed on a walk near the ocean. Burke writes on December 31, 1960,

Poetry and medicine! I watched you finger that dog’s paw down in Floridoh [sic], looking for sand burrs, with your weaker hand yet—and I saw how quickly the dog knew that here was a guy who knew his business Yet, I’ll bet it never even crossed your mind what an act that was. Probably you were just having Contact, in this case with a stray mutt on the beach. That’s what you demanded of us all, in our work. And it’s just what you got, in yours. (228)

Perhaps it was Williams’ influence, probably not, but Burke lived to connect with other living beings, physically and symbolically. That is beautifully demonstrated as he remembers this moment to his friend.

Consummation is a form of physical and symbolic contact. In literary form the act of connecting with an auditor is symbolic perfection. This is why the central nervous system was Burke’s bane, for it prevented perfect human-to-human connection from ever taking place. What Burke had to settle for, instead, was the most perfect communication possible: symbolic consummation. Communication with the potential for healing outcomes. “Poetry and medicine!”

(228). Burke had to transcend the limits of motion through symbolic action by way of cathartic discharge: what goes in must come out. In the same way, form as communication became unacceptable to Burke. He wanted conversation, not talk.

Fortunately for Burke, before he departed this world alone, he was able to listen to the sound of his own voice echoed in the utterances of others. “Billions” Rueckert went on to publish a complete work of Burkean Criticism called *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke* (1966). In 1984, the Kenneth Burke Society was formed, a society dedicated wholly and completely to the study of Burke-works (KBJournal), a society of friends I lovingly call *Burke-ers*. All of this is proof that Burke made the right choice in switching to criticism early on. Not only was he able to “relieve [himself] of [his] private burdens by befouling the public medium” (East xxxi) of his criticism, but at the end of his life Burke finally gained what he sought: consummation in the form of critical acclaim, a dedicated readership, others engaging with his mind and ideas, correspondence, and conversation, propelling him towards a better life.

Notes

¹ Kenneth Burke told William Rueckert once “my studies have convinced me that ‘Towards’ is a shit-word” (Rueckert, *Letters from* 26).

² A play on the title of Burke’s only novel, *Towards a Better Life*, published in 1932.

³ For an example, see William Rueckert’s introduction to *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955*, where he calls Burke’s essay “The Thinking of the Body” “some of the most tortured and absurd and analyses he ever wrote” (xiii).

⁴ Burke famously states in *A Rhetoric of Motives* that war is the “ultimate *disease* of cooperation” (22).

⁵ Burke told Rueckert his “Poetics [was] (built around catharsis)” (Rueckert, *Letters from* 3).

⁶ The irony, of course, occurs as we realize that consummation is also an end, specifically of the world: “Chiefly in biblical contexts with reference to the end of the world, final judgement [sic], etc.: a conclusion, end. Freq. in consummation of all things, consummation of the world” (“consummation” def 3 a. *Oxford English Dict.*). In this way, consummation may also be a warning.

⁷ For examples, see pages 12, 97, 151 in *The Letters from Kenneth Burke to William H. Rueckert* (2003).

⁸ Remember, Burke tells Malcolm Cowley in 1924 “there are as many crescendos in art as one cares to embody in the particularities of subject matter.” At that time, Burke understood “emotional crescendos” to be “emotional forms,” which he later, in *Counter-Statement* (1931), calls “form.”

⁹ In a sense, Burke wants to see the answer to an equation, not just the equation itself. What are the implications of a given terminology? What is the potentiality of utterance?

¹⁰ In greater detail, Burke tells Wayne Booth: “[T]he advances of technology have brought things to the point where man-made conditions introduce tests of survival quite different from the tests that selected our ancestors, thereby enabling said ancestors to become capable of perfecting conditions of survival wholly different from conditions prior to such developments, hence subject to tests quite outside the natural environment involved in ‘Darwinism’ tests of survival. Simplest example: Our

ancestors whose descendants invented the atomic bomb fought a lot but never under conditions of world-wide holocaust such as those surviving descendants's [sic] inventiveness now brings to the fore" ("To Wayne Booth," VI/24/78).

¹¹ We will assume that humanity has a nature, as defined by Burke.

¹² Burke chooses carefully his words. Recall that earlier he states in his discussion of form that "things started moving for him" when he made the change from self-expression to communication.

¹³ Burke's definition of man includes five aspects of human nature: "Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection" ("Definition of Man" 16).

¹⁴ A fictional sex act would merely copy nature, but the imagination has to imitate nature.

¹⁵ For the purposes of this paper, we will stick with our ideal and bypass the dreadful reality of rape, its varied kinds, and complications.

¹⁶ See discussion of imitation and duplication on page 25.

¹⁷ This discussion needn't be phallogocentric, as there is obviously a range of possibilities available.

¹⁸ Burke's "Poetics [was] (built around catharsis)" (Rueckert, *Letters from 3*).

¹⁹ See discussion of textual symbolic consummation beginning on page 23.

²⁰ Recall the Woodcock interview, where Burke states "my attitude on it [consummation] is still not completely settled" (Woodcock 713).

²¹ Burke's collected criticism, *Equipment for Living: The Literary Reviews of Kenneth Burke* (2010), is over 600 pages long.

²² A bomb's perfection would destroy life, whereas poetic perfection (catharsis) would enable more peaceful conditions to exist.

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