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Beth Eddy: The Rites of Identity

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CHAPTER ONE

IDENTITY AND THE RITES OF SYMBOLIC ACTION

The skin is a line of demarcation, a periphery, the fence, the form, the shape, the first clue to identity in a society (for instance, color in a racist society), and, in purely physical terms, the formal precondition for being human. . . . It is a thin veil of matter separating the outside from the inside.

—Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*

Closed societies are now the flimsiest of illusions, for all the outsiders are demanding in.

—Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*

Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man's very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it now is, partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions.

—Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*

TOO OFTEN, discussions that deal with personal identity issues, whether about race, gender, religion, or nation, descend quickly into an “us” and “them” opposition that ceases to do productive work and poisons the hopes of any participant for a satisfying resolution of conflict. Probably all of us have experienced the relief that comes from being able to get away temporarily from the conflicts we have with differing others. Playing poker with the boys on Saturday night can alleviate the ongoing domestic conflicts of married life. An Afrocentric school can educate young African Americans in a space free from the constant encroachments on self-esteem made in white supremacist environments. Churches, synagogues, and voluntary associations make space for us to have conversations and participate in activities premised upon views that we do not all share. Gentlemen's clubs provide some with a comfortable retreat. Women sometimes find all-female classrooms to be places where conversations can finally get off the ground floor without being derailed at the

level of definitions of terms. Although temporary separations like these are necessary to provide respite and sanity checks for the fatigued, permanent separations, even though they may be energized by a collective spirit, lead to cultural fragmentation. On the other hand, too often the only voices calling for an end to conflict have naive expectations or envision the assimilation of one party to another one without substantial change. Identities serve both as the insignia that clothe us in uniform to others' eyes, either as friend or enemy, and as the fortresses that protect our most crucial first premises about our hopes, fears, and needs.

This book highlights the centrality of identity in Kenneth Burke's and Ralph Ellison's cultural criticism. It emphasizes the religious language in which both men cast their descriptions of the ways societies sustain, fail to sustain, and transform human identities. I aim to show the tremendous influence of Burke's ideas on Ellison and to show that influence both in Ellison's embrace of and in his criticism of those ideas. Although there are similarities in the language of the two men there are also important differences in their social perspectives.

On one level, I want to think about rhetoric. The relevant religious concern I address here is "not about God, but rather, about the way we use our words about God on each other," to quote Burke.¹ Burke finds rhetoric and identity to be inseparable subjects; in a section of his work titled "Identity and Consubstantiality," he shows how the study of rhetoric is the study of

the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another.

Why "at odds," you may ask, when the titular term is "identification"? Because to begin with "identification" is, by the same token though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*.²

Ralph Ellison also writes, almost exclusively, about identity. His work centers on "the great mystery of identity in this country, really on the level of a religious mystery."³ This concern runs through his novel *Invisible Man* and through his essays on the novel and other American cultural forms. The mystery is this: "the puzzle of the one-and-the-many; the mystery of how each of us, despite his origin in diverse regions, with our diverse racial, cultural, religious backgrounds, speaking his own diverse idiom of the American in his own accent, is, nevertheless, American."⁴

Kenneth Burke's identity concerns focus on symbolic action, that is, on the rites that change human identity and maintain the connections holding together the discontinuities of human existence. "Our basic principle," he states, "is our contention that all symbolism can be treated as the ritualistic naming and changing of identity."⁵ Burke's concern with rituals of rebirth, purification, and initiation should signal his potential importance to the study of religion and to the social psychology of identity. He opens up a world

of local resources; as Stanley Edgar Hyman, his friend and critic, put it, a Burke reader often has “the sudden sense of a newly discovered country in his own backyard.”⁶

Both Burke and Ellison show “how greatly the ‘Americanness’ of American culture has been a matter of Adamic wordplay—of trying, in the interest of a futuristic dream, to impose unity upon an experience that changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude. In this effort we are often less interested in what we are than in projecting what we will be.”⁷ I plan to spell out the details of their mutual preoccupations with identity, religiosity, and American traditions.

I am putting forward three major claims. First, I try to show that Kenneth Burke was a major, perhaps *the* major, intellectual influence on Ralph Ellison. I will support this claim by presenting a substantial quantity of textual evidence that can be confirmed by anyone willing to do a close reading of the work of both men. Ellison’s writing virtually drips with the language of Burke’s literary and cultural criticism. To be sure, other analysts of Ellison’s work have noted the influence of Burke. But no one, to my knowledge, is talking about the extent of that influence. Burke is given a footnote or a paragraph at most in book-length treatments of Ellison’s work. The irony is that Burke and Ellison thought and wrote about precisely the sorts of identity formations, transformations, and preservations that help explain scholars’ neglect of the connections between the two of them. Obviously, the two men have racial identity differences. But to notice a profound intellectual resemblance between the two men is not to whitewash their racial differences. It is instead to make both the differences and the similarities all the more highly charged with importance and moral ambiguity.

Second, I claim that the two men belong to an American tradition of religious naturalism and that George Santayana is an important link in the chain that takes them both back to the “parentage” of Ralph Waldo Emerson. By religious naturalism I do not mean reductive materialism, or scientism, but rather the understanding of religious traditions and experiences as naturally available to human beings without the attribution of any special supernatural powers to any human ideals. Two of the three topics that organize the structure of my investigation have been chosen to mirror Santayana’s naturalistic religious emphasis on piety, spirituality, and the comic.

Third, I hope to show that this tradition has usable resources, ones rightly cast in religious language, for understanding what is currently true about human identities and differences. These same resources also help us to live gracefully within those contemporary constraints, even while imagining and negotiating toward a bit more of what *ought* to be true about the same. These resources grew out of a culture aspiring to be democratic—one composed from the beginning of mixed races, genders, religions, and ethnicities that all made sizable contributions to it. This American culture holds the simultaneous

achievement of justice and equality to be a higher human ideal than social stability; in my view, it need offer no apology for that priority. Yet this culture at the same time holds in tension resources for acting effectively when practical necessity calls for working within conditions of social inequality and power inequity. It confronts, rather than evades, the tricky interactions between human powers and human ideals. I emphasize this American particularity, not out of any nationalistic piety toward the country where I live, but out of my own “parochial preoccupation” to adopt what I’ve inherited and turn it to the critical evaluation of where I am in the attempt to brighten that corner a bit.⁸

Both Burke and Ellison highlight the unsung contribution vernacular culture makes to rites of identity in a specifically democratic society. In so doing, they help ameliorate elitist tendencies in cultural criticism and make a normative claim. “Antagonistic cooperation” as an exemplary attitude, one drawn from Emerson and elaborated by Burke and Ellison, can further help sustain democratic cultures involved in identity conflicts. This interpretation highlights a humanist emphasis on “comic” ways of interpreting and performing symbolic actions and cautions against an overly tragic and redemptive interpretation of social rituals of sacrifice.

My own approach is in part a response to a received view of Burke and Ellison scholarship. Both Burke and Ellison are usually read within the disciplinary context of the study of literature and rhetoric. Kenneth Burke has been studied by many fine scholars such as William Rueckert and Greig Henderson; I owe much to their analyses of Burke’s thought.⁹ But although I am indebted to these venues of scholarship, I would point out the limitations of such a narrow disciplinary focus. Neither Burke nor Ellison thought very much in disciplinary terms; in fact both men were more inclined to flaunt those boundaries, to the consternation of their peers. Fred Inglis (whose own intellectual history of Clifford Geertz sheds much light on these interdisciplinary connections) called Burke a “philosophic–historiographic–part Marxist–part pragmatist literary critic.”¹⁰ Yet scholars continue to read Burke primarily in the context of literature and rhetoric. John Callahan writes of an Ellison who worked on autobiographical essays, literary essays, music criticism, and cultural criticism and throughout these multiple tasks articulated a thesis that “the American ideal is equality, the American theory pragmatism, and the American style the vernacular” and that the search for identity is “*the American theme*.”¹¹ Yet Ellison is most often studied solely within the history of the American novel, or, more narrowly yet, the history of African-American literature. To place either man in so narrow a context doesn’t do what each thinker invites the reader to do. To read them with the breadth of interpretive context that they invite would take a reader into both the history of religious thought as well as the realm of American pragmatism. Both Burke and Ellison were driven by large concerns at once political, ethical, literary, and spiritual.

Meanwhile, while Burke and Ellison have been studied within an overly narrow disciplinary framework, something else has been going on in the field of American thought. Not so long ago, the concept of American pragmatism would evoke the names of Charles Pierce, William James, and John Dewey as the major contributors to its canon. But the scope of American pragmatic thought has expanded greatly in the last two decades. Thanks in large part to the work of Richard Poirier, Cornel West, and Stanley Cavell, students of American pragmatism can see that the tradition they are studying needs to go back at least as far as Emerson to tell the tale they want to tell. Hence, all the work that shows Emersonian influences can now be seen as likely connected in some way to the scope of American pragmatic thought. Poirier has illuminated the breadth of Emersonian literary influence within a wider pragmatic American thought. West has shown how the religious thought of someone like Reinhold Niebuhr has family resemblances to American pragmatism. He also points to W.E.B. Dubois in an expansion of a potential canon of American pragmatism that can encompass American cultural criticism concerned with matters of race.

In sum, the canon of American pragmatic thought has rapidly expanded past the scope of those few classical American philosophers. In this expanded context, Giles Gunn has paid particular attention to Kenneth Burke's work. I am trying to go through the door that Gunn's work has opened: The time is ripe for Burke and Ellison scholarship to enter this newly expanded field of American pragmatic thought. Both Burke and Ellison, I believe, would be pleased to be read not just in the context of literary disciplines, but also within the interdisciplinary realms of moral, religious, and political thought.

My own aim, then, is not so much to further the scope of contemporary Burke scholarship inside a received disciplinary framework as it is to make Burke's thought available to scholars in other disciplines who seem less familiar with it and who might find it relevant. Burke can help to fill in some intellectual genealogies that could benefit from all the historical continuity they can muster. To know one's own intellectual, disciplinary, and institutional history will likely take one outside familiar disciplinary terrain, which, Ellison would be quick to remind us, was never as defined and delineated as it appears in retrospect.

I could say the same about Ellison scholarship. I am attempting to take the excellent Ellison scholarship that is already out there and point out its relevance to scholars who are not studying Ellison already. I particularly want to take the implications of Ellison's thoughts about scapegoating and show them to be part of a usable past tradition of pragmatic thought to which American moral philosophers and culture critics might turn. In short, I am not trying to be either a Burke or an Ellison scholar, but rather to add Burke, Santayana, and Ellison to a family tree. I hope that this complication of the genealogical

picture will make for an expanded conversation, as any addition to a family tree should.

Few academic scholars of religion concerned with American religious thought currently notice Burke's relevance to the discipline. This is unfortunate; if solidarity informs what sense of community we have, then the central concern with identity of these two men would help us fill out the uses, abuses, and limitations of human solidarity and would highlight the stakes we have in our withholding of solidarity when we decide to do so.

Although Ellison is currently in less danger of academic neglect than Burke, he is being claimed, I believe, by critics who do not interpret him as he asks in his essays to be interpreted. To paraphrase his invisible man, he has "been called one thing and then another"; I'm making my best attempt to call him what he seems to call himself. By making Burke invisible in Ellison's work, critics deny it the universality of appeal that Ellison tried so hard and so consciously to achieve as a standard of excellence in craft and art. Burke and Ellison especially show some of the reasons why Americans can't "get past" racial divisions or, by analogy, religious and gender divisions in American identity; they offer a plausible explanation of what human "sacrificial motives" have to do with the matter and why those motives persist, as I will show in detail in later chapters. Ellison shows why lynching is a *perversion of the best* of human capacities *into the worst*.¹² Burke does the same for historical forms of anti-Semitism and provides similar examples.

Ellison's insights about scapegoating will add to a religious discussion about sacrifice, but will also show that religious identity is mediated in the same ways as other forms of social identity. Any academic discipline concerned with identity construction has much to learn from a discussion of sacrificial motives in the study of religion. Likewise, the study of religion has much to learn from those who think about the politics of racial, national, gendered, and ethnic forms of identity that might seem more "secular," but which are as subject to "sacrificial motives," as Burke and Ellison define them, as any other human social grouping.

Scholars of American religious thought and scholars of African-American literature have spaces within the academic study of religion. But that house has many rooms and fewer hallways in which to chat. Scholars concerned with what Ellison and/or Burke had to say as cultural critics ought to be interested in the ways that these two revealed connections between ethical concerns and aesthetic forms of appeal in literature, art, and music. Social scientists who study religion may find Burke's refusal to separate analysis from value concerns disturbingly revealing and "postmodern" long before its time. Religious philosophers and philosophers of religion looking to avoid an exclusively Christian theological framework may find the religious naturalism of both men congenial and may find that it offers ways to make historicist and structuralist philosophical outlooks speak to each other.

Along with the field of literary criticism, pragmatism has also left a significant imprint upon the social sciences and philosophy. Clifford Geertz is an intellectual pragmatist who has had an influence upon the study of religion as large as the influence of Richard Rorty or Cornel West, yet he is seldom thought of as a major contemporary proponent of pragmatism in the same way as they are.¹³ Clifford Geertz puts forward a view of religion as a part of a whole cultural web of ideas. Religion is the part of that web of ideas that deals with threats of impotence, meaninglessness, and injustice. Religions keep trying to patch up the webs and keep them intact in the areas most damaged by these experiences. For Geertz, it is not so much a matter of figuring out which or whether religious beliefs are true as it is understanding how they work to hold things together. For Geertz, religion is a bit like a human artwork, in that we interpret each others' artwork. But this artwork has very real social effects, so understanding peoples' religious productions is more dangerous and fraught than a stroll through an art museum. Geertz uses unfamiliar examples to reshape familiar interpretation; he juxtaposes the unfamiliar with the totally familiar in ways that begin to reproach, caricature, or accuse "us" rather than "them."¹⁴ Filling in the detail of the unfamiliar example with thick description tends to make it more relevant rather than less. Geertz demonstrates how to generalize within cases rather than across them. These methods have important moral and philosophical implications in the study of religion. People thinking in a philosophical and ethical way about religion along with pragmatists such as James are not, by and large, the same group of people who are thinking about Geertz in a social scientific way. But perhaps a greater familiarity with Burke can change that in the future.

There are other contemporary contributors to the broader culture of pragmatism who deserve to be better known than they are by scholars of religion. Along with literary critics such as Giles Gunn and Richard Poirier, rhetorical critics such as Wayne Booth and Hayden White have relevant contributions to make once the conversation takes on a less philosophical/theological tone.¹⁵ Burke and Ellison help highlight the connections between the study of rhetoric and pragmatism. Both groups are concerned with the social implications of relativism, the educational and spiritual needs of a democratic culture, and the proper modes of public address in a civil, pluralist society. Both groups worry whether the antifoundationalism common to their schools of thought will fuel political activism or quietism. Burke and Ellison offer points of view on these issues. Both men are political activists who stop short of endorsing martyrdom. Both offer conflict-laden conversation as a politically useful and manageable aid to democratic culture.

Burke and Ellison can help us get past the categorical impasse of pious students of religion versus critics of religion. Sometimes it seems as if the designation of one's scholarly work as "theology" or not determines whether one is placing oneself in the pious or the impious, "hostile to religion" cate-

gory. But this is a bad use of the word *theology*. Both Burke and Ellison showed how inheritors of any tradition that serves to shape up character can and should act in both pious and impious ways. Morally speaking, they claim that we need to be *both* pious poets *and* impious critics. They show us how a “both/and” heritage of thinking can ethically serve us better than an “either/or” heritage of thinking. The best of American pragmatists have always worked to undo dichotomous thinking by showing what those dichotomous categories cover up. They show us why our best moral resources will tend to fall into the gaps of dichotomous either/or thinking, and urge us to see the social world, its languages, and games in spectrums rather than dichotomies. By accepting that we are always both “a part of” the languages and traditions we inherit and always to some degree “apart from” them, given the individuality of our experiences, we keep those traditions alive, not as natural kinds of human religiosity that can be specified essentially, but as traditions of historical continuity that help us remember the good and bad of our past while hoping for the vitality, growth, and success of our future inheritors.

RELIGION AND ITS MODERN CRITICS

Burke wants to bring his Emersonian pieties into conversation with critiques of religion instigated by or implied in the works of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche.¹⁶ “I think I see (beginning with Bentham) the psychological devices for integrating ethical-esthetic-social-political judgments. I think I see a way of reapplying the ‘genealogists of morals’ (Bentham, Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Veblen) in ways alien to typical nineteenth-century ‘process-thinking.’ Through ‘meanings,’ or ‘Gestalten,’ it seems to me, we open up a new way of exhortation which avoids both ‘pure logic’ and ‘pure sentiment’ as the means of suasion.”¹⁷ Burke gives an account of the process of interpretation that can handle both scientific and religious sorts of interpretations and can make them both seem humanly worthwhile. He does this in order to take various modern critiques of religion seriously without allowing them to debunk the worth of human religiosity. By showing how all considered interpretations of life are partial accounts that abstract certain outstanding characteristics and take them for wholes, he shows how such partiality becomes both their strength and their weakness. He attempts to develop a “prosaic” criticism for poetic religion: “[A]ll the resources of prose thought must be developed in order that the poetic can be given its only genuine safeguards. That is: only a thorough body of secular criticism, secular thought ‘carried all the way round the circle’ can properly equip a society against the misuse of its most *desirable* aspects, the *poetic* or *religious* aspects.”¹⁸

Burke wants to integrate a pious appreciation of elements of human religiosity with the various debunking modes of criticism emphasized in the

nineteenth century. By bringing the human symbolic bridge-building of poetry and poetic religion to bear upon the mechanistic harshness of critical thought in order to allow space for the possibility of surprising human cooperation,¹⁹ he hopes to allow for social changes in terms of natural, vegetative development.²⁰

ACTIVE VIRTUE, CHARACTER, AND THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEMOCRACY

Both Burke and Ellison take debunking modes of criticism to be less than useful to the furtherance of democratic ideals. Democrats need to build bridges rather than create chasms between “us” and “them.” In Burke’s words, the perspective of the debunker “does not endow mankind with the dignity, or the hope or the tragedy which most persons feel that it actually possesses.”²¹ When critics debunk, Burke thinks that they fail to do justice to the mix of motives that underlie every social action. Likewise, Ellison claims that even the moral failures of people participate in virtue.²² Our weaknesses have a strength built into them, ready for reappropriation; likewise, our very strengths subject us to the “trained incapacities” of our particular “genius.”²³ Custom acclimates us to look for and see certain things but also blinds us to what would be apparent to others differently accustomed.²⁴ Typically, people act in ways that display their altruism while simultaneously feeding their egoism. Hence, the egoist; is likely not to be “purely” an egoist; that is, he or she is not *essentially* egotistical, but likely has altruistic motives mixed into egoistic acts which, when properly redirected, could help hold together democratic societies. Debunking the egoist burns that bridge to cooperation.

Democracies need people with the right sorts of character if they intend to survive. But this character is not the passive acceptance of a traditional role. The sort of character Burke and Ellison aim for requires active rather than passive virtue. Active virtue is dramatic. It is more than taking on a role with certain requisite character traits; it is the conscious wearing of a mask and the projecting of a possible self-identity. Ellison quotes W. B. Yeats to make the discrimination: “Active virtue, as distinct from the passive acceptance of a current code, is the wearing of a mask.”²⁵ He continues, “In Yeat’s sense, ‘masking’ is more than the adoption of a disguise. Rather it is a playing upon possibility, a strategy through which the individual projects a self-selected identity and makes of himself a ‘work of art.’”²⁶ Further, active virtue is dramatic because it requires both social cooperation and participation in social conflicts. This kind of virtue requires protest at crucial moments, but not just any sort of protest. It requires protest that aims at the transcendence of differences. The difference between active and passive virtue shows in Ellison’s response to Irving Howe, who charges him with not being identified with the “victim”

enough in a critique he wrote of “protest” writings. Ellison defends his position: “My goal was . . . to transcend. . . . The protest is there not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I *put* it there. If there is anything ‘miraculous’ about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.”²⁷ In his response, Ellison pits the protest of the victim against the protest of the agent.

Identification through shared victim status is not enough to act responsibly in a democracy. Ellison writes of a vocal drunk outside his apartment who disturbed his writing: “Identification, after all, involves feelings of guilt and responsibility.” The drunk failed to inspire his identification: “I felt in no way accountable for his condition. We were simply fellow victims.”²⁸ On the other hand, active identification goes beyond passive co-victim status. A singer, who also disturbed Ellison in his apartment as he tried to write, achieved what the drunk could not. Ellison explains, “in listening I soon became involved to the point of identification. . . . If she sang badly I’d hear my own futility in the windy sound; if well, I’d stare at my typewriter and despair that I would ever make my prose so sing.”²⁹ The singer and Ellison shared an aspiration that facilitated their identification.

In Burke’s and Ellison’s view of active virtue, identity is necessarily what one does, not simply who one is. It involves habits of character, but “character” here means something like “character” in a novel.³⁰ These constantly reevaluated habits culminate in actions whose end is the repair and maintenance of democratic culture.

In particular, Burke and Ellison give us good reasons to employ pragmatist traditions of thought, the better to avoid scapegoating, a perversion of the best of human sacrificial motives into the worst of human social behaviors. They show how we perform our religious lives; how we enact them in rituals, exhort acceptance of them with our rhetoric, and set the stage for them with our language games—all to performative purposes. Both Burke and Ellison premise their ritual and symbolic view of social life on the view that symbols link the world as we imagine it to the world as we live in it. The world, they would both agree, is at least in part a product of the ways we write about it, dream it, and wish it, despite its constant recalcitrance.

BURKE AND STRUCTURALIST THOUGHT ON IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

Like structuralists and poststructuralists, Burke is concerned with the formal elements of symbolic activity. Organization by form is what ritual, drama, and rhetoric (three of the ways Burke analyzes identity) have in common. Further, Burke would agree with structuralists and poststructuralists that imagination,

as one human capacity among others, can allow for the free play of signs against each other and need not depend upon the philosophical notion of “substantiation.” But for Burke, communication puts the brake on the free play. The human imagination can handle and make use of signs with absent referents. The imagination can even playfully (or not so playfully) “kill off” signs for difference in order to make identity more “substantively” meaningful. Thank goodness for playful human imaginative capacities, Burke would say. But imagination unfettered by any desire or need to communicate with others is a symptom of something amiss in the play that takes place between solitude and society. It fuels narcissism, and Burke criticizes this pathological tendency, which he takes to be dangerous to social beings.

Therefore, Burke shares much of the framework for thinking about identity and difference with his structuralist and poststructuralist friends. However, as Clayton W. Lewis rightly points out, “one can reduce Burke’s language conception to arrive at [Paul] de Man’s and [Hillis] Miller’s, but one cannot expand in scope de Man’s and Miller’s to arrive at Burke’s.”³¹ Burke attends to linguistic structures that shape various understandings of identity and difference, but he doesn’t see anything particularly “deeper” than anything else about them. They tell a critic *something* worth knowing, but not *everything* worth knowing. By examining the structural relationships in a piece of literature, a critic can gain some relevant knowledge about the author or the “poet” of the writing. The “absent other”—the sign that is not one³²—Burke could embrace this as someone’s *real wish*, and, as such, its study could make available important information to understand in a social context, insofar as we critics (and we are all critics) want to help or hinder making particular wishes come true. For instance, Ellison adopts Burke’s thought on these matters of imagination when he assesses white southern culture in the United States. He writes that “while the myths and mysteries that form the Southern mystique are *irrational* and even *primitive*, they are nevertheless real, even as works of the imagination are ‘real.’ Like all mysteries and their attendant myths, they imply . . . a rite. And rites are *actions*, the goal of which is the manipulation of power.”³³ Structural analysis helps illuminate what other members of our society wish to accomplish with words. But it neither tells how the whole world is nor demolishes the social value of the wish in the very revelation of it. For Burke, the structural relationships within any symbolic act—relationships imparted by an author who is him- or herself an actor—have a social and historical context, a scene, which they aim to influence through a conscious or not-so-conscious strategy. Burke writes not about literary “deep structures,” but about personal and social linguistic *habits* of thought and action, some helpful, some hurtful, which have a *history* that others might wish to take to be timeless and unchangeable “deep structures” if we let them get away with it by our silent assent to their view.

Burke's author/actors cannot extricate themselves from the scene in which they perform, so they cannot rise above that scene as its priests who mediate between the realm of literary language and everything else. Of the structuralist and poststructuralist schools of thought Lewis writes, "The work of the critic becomes analogous to the work of the priest; in [writers'] failures the poet and critic observe the religious mystery at the center of language."³⁴ Burke, in his later writings, does not try to "valorize literary language."³⁵ He analyzes *vernacular* signifiers along with literary and philosophical high culture.

Similarly, Ellison writes, " 'Language is equipment for living,' to quote Kenneth Burke. One uses the language which helps to preserve one's life, which helps to make one feel at peace in the world, and which screens out the greatest amount of chaos. All human beings do this."³⁶ Throughout his works, Ellison aimed to show "how elevated styles of speech related to the spoken vernacular."³⁷ The two men have no discernable intention of replacing a "metaphysics of presence" with a "metaphysics of absence." Harold Bloom, even though he writes an introduction to a collection of essays on Ellison that on the surface seems admiring, displays this tendency to valorize the mystifying elements of literary language. Neither Burke nor Ellison would appreciate his efforts on this score. Bloom makes Ellison an honorary member of a club to which Ellison would not, I think, want to belong. Though Bloom refers to Ellison as "both pragmatist and transcendentalist," after the manner of Emerson (that much of the legacy Ellison would claim), Bloom's clear preference is for the more mystical interpretation of Ellison's work. Ignoring Ellison's tendency to demystify language with comedy whenever he can, Bloom portrays Ellison's main importance as being predecessor and bridge to the work of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, he claims, crosses over where Ellison would not into "the apocalyptic Zone where we may yet live again (if we live)," and steps into Pynchon's "Kabbalistic vision that he calls 'sado-anarchism.'"³⁸ "Bloom rightly observes this as the step "that Ellison is too humane and humanistic to have taken,"³⁹ "but he allows Pynchon's vision to consume roughly half of the space allotted for his commentary on Ellison, certainly something of a backhanded compliment as the introduction to a book about Ellison. It is not that poetry mythically (and hence timelessly) precedes religion and informs it rather than vice versa, as Bloom maintains, but that beauty (of all sorts—not just literary eloquence) has been historically entwined with goodness at least since Plato, and with some degree of self-consciousness in the construction since Edmund Burke's thoughts about the sublime and the beautiful.

Bloom also attends to Kenneth Burke's writing, handing him the closest thing to a compliment that a "strong reader" could muster: "[W]hat I think is least understood by others in my own work is the rather extended concept of trope that I employ . . . that goes beyond trope as expounded by any rhetorician, ancient or modern, though here as elsewhere I happily acknowledge the example of Kenneth Burke."⁴⁰

EMERSONIAN IDENTITIES

What Bloom admires about both Burke and Ellison is the way he takes them to exemplify an Emersonian American religion that, in his interpretation, is a form of Gnosticism with a negative theology of *self-reliance*. Further, he claims, it is a literary religion. I too will claim that both Burke and Ellison self-consciously belong to an Emersonian tradition that is one important element of American religious thought among others, but I see no reason to accept the additional baggage of the Gnosticism Bloom proffers and some reason to accept that members of a democratic culture ought to worry about it.

First of all, the sentence that might be taken as the theme of *Invisible Man*—"I yam what I am"—which Bloom would interpret as a rejection of all "created" identities, is uttered by the novel's protagonist in a moment in which he *reclaims* his continuity with his own this-worldly past. The "yam" is important. The same reclamation of continuity with one's past takes place in Ellison's short story "Flying Home." In their restored continuities, both pieces lack what Bloom thinks to be *the* American difference, the drive to establish discontinuity. Clearly, Ellison is up to something that can restore broken continuities, when called for, by serving as a bridge to the past as well as to the future. Bloom acknowledges Burke's explicitly Emersonian use of "bridging" as transcendence "through love of the farther shore," but Burke sees that bridge as one toward human communion, hence the point of love, while Bloom sees that bridge not as a connection with, but as a negation of, society with all natural beings. "The farther shore . . . is no part of nature," he writes, "and has no room therefore for created beings."⁴¹ In saying this, Bloom pays homage to his mythic grounding in a story about what came *before* Creation, one that influences him and steadies his sense of identity. Neither Burke nor Ellison has any ax like this to grind; they both aim at the *good* of human communion. They "bridge" gaps by pitting one categorical understanding of language metaphorically against another one. Eloquence, or the sublime, serves the end of making identifications out of divisions in Burke's and Ellison's view.⁴² Ellison writes that "the novel's medium of communication consists in a familiar experience occurring among a particular people, within a particular society or nation . . . and achieves its universality, if at all, through accumulating them in patterns of universal significance. . . . [T]hrough the eloquence of its statement, that specific part of life speaks metaphorically for the whole."⁴³ The part tells about the whole, and alters its categories, as necessary. A story about conflicting natural sources of human well-being and historically changing environments and senses of identity would be sufficient grounding for the "bridging" they do. A narrative that would exemplify this process would look more like a novel than a myth; it would look more like *Towards a Better Life* or *Invisible Man*, for example.

Further, Bloom reads Emerson as one who embraces a perspectival “perfection.” “What we are, that only can we see. . . . Build therefore your own world,” he quotes from Emerson.⁴⁴ From what? I’d ask. Burke, by contrast, urges us to “earn our own world” by doing pious work on our inheritance, as I will explain in chapter 2. Ellison explains a bit of Burke’s revised “perfection”:

Words that evoke our principles are, according to Kenneth Burke, charismatic terms for transcendent order, for perfection. Being forms of symbolic action, they tend, through their nature as language, to sweep us in tow as they move by a process of linguistic negation toward the idea. . . . As a form of *symbolic* action, they operate by negating nature as a given and amoral condition, creating endless series of man-made or man-imagined positives. . . . In this way, Burke contends, man uses language to moralize both nature and himself. Thus, in this nation the word *democracy* possesses the aura of what Burke calls a “god-term.”⁴⁵

Burke describes the drive to perfection as the tendency to “moralize” the “amoral.” But Burke’s “morality” is ambivalent and contrasts with amorality rather than with immorality. Humans are motivated, he claims, in part by symbol systems that organize hierarchy and use status incentives.⁴⁶ People form concepts of supernatural relations by hypostasizing the abstractions of social symbols, these now-“substantial” creations being more perfectly what they are not (because symbolic and essentially negative) than animal nature (essentially positive) could ever be. Symbolic supernatural relations are analogous to the social hierarchies that metaphorically shape them. Humans strive to encompass situations of need in ways that define the situation so that “perfection” equals the fulfillment of their needs. Hence, symbol systems tend to create “perfect” enemies to make catharsis effective; this catharsis is only possible because the economy of language permits such perfection. Further, humans are driven by their “terministic” compulsion to carry out symbolic possibilities toward their perfect end up to the limits of their resources.⁴⁷ “Perfection,” for Burke, encompasses both the best and the worst of human capacities. Fortunately and unfortunately, it is unachievable for particular humans. Imperfectability’s lack of finality consists in fallibilism, not in mysticism; it is a caution, not a mode of worship.

But if Burke and Ellison do not match up as participants in the Emersonian American religion as described by Bloom, they still owe debts and bear family resemblance to Emerson. Burke explicitly claims Emerson, Walt Whitman, and William James as predecessors in *Attitudes toward History* (1937). He echoes several Emersonian themes: that the rhetorical play in the relations of parts and wholes does religious work,⁴⁸ that the contrast between the idea and the false performance engenders comedy.⁴⁹ But both Burke and Ellison are Emersonian critics critical of Emerson. As such, they take Emerson’s metaphors, run with them, and take them to task. Sure you can eat the world, they

both challenge overly sentimental Emersonians, but can you digest it all? Does it nourish you or does it make you gag? Is it medicine or poison to your body?

Both Burke and Ellison stand on the edges of an “aesthetic tradition of American spirituality.”⁵⁰ As marginal Emersonians, they can see both inside and outside; they can both appreciate and critically evaluate what the tradition has to offer. Both critics adopt Emerson’s visual metaphors. Like Emerson, Ellison knows that he does not see immediately. He must necessarily see, as he writes to Burke, “the universe through the racial grain of sand.”⁵¹ But particularity of vision does not eliminate the need for universality of communication, as far as Ellison is concerned. When questioned about his stance as African-American writer, Ellison responded that “there was never any question in my mind that Negroes were human, and thus being human, their experience became metaphors for the experiences of other people. . . . The role of the writers . . . is to structure fiction which will allow a universal identification while at the same time not violating the specificity of the particular experience.”⁵² Both the metaphoric approach and “the universe in a grain of sand” are Emersonian. Ellison makes metaphors reveal the better to help us see.

Burke, too, claims that “alternative metaphors are as valid as you make them so by the rounding-out.” He goes on to say that a metaphor is “not formally justifiable or attackable—its sole value is in what you show can be done with it.” “Let each partisan *fill out* his program,” he continues, “and in the course of doing so, they will evolve a margin of overlap.” What the filling out should reveal is the “stuff that the A’s can borrow from the non-A’s, and v.v.”⁵³

Whereas Emerson thought that the beauty of nature was hidden from unredeemed eyes, Burke and Ellison challenge this equation of beauty and divinity. Both claim that sometimes the ethical lines up neatly with the aesthetic, but sometimes the two work in tension with each other. Beauty in concert with the good can make the good seem even better, but the beatific vision of something morally troubling can tempt human beings to divinize what ought not to be taken as divine. Sometimes the ruin is *not* in our own eye, *pace* Emerson. Not all transparent eyeballs are our own, nor are any of them truly transparent. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator has an eyeball encounter of the comic kind: “I stared at the glass, seeing how the light shone through, throwing a transparent, precisely fluted shadow against the dark grain of the table, and there on the bottom of the glass lay an eye. A glass eye.”⁵⁴ On rare and comic occasions, the eyeballs of powerful people can roll out on the table for all to see. Granted that lucky distance of alienated identity, we can see the rawness and redness of another’s eye as the ugly thing it is.⁵⁵ Sometimes those “eyes” are blind. Under those circumstances, we can stop morally blaming our own eyes when the world looks ugly to us but beautiful to almost everyone else and realize that in some instances the good fails to coincide with the beautiful. When

we discover that the eyes of some leaders are blind and their vision flawed, communion as an aspiration to shared identity—to be a brother or even to be a servant to this particular master—does indeed become a troubling goal.

Burke and Ellison owe some of their critical leverage on Emerson to Santayana. Along with Emerson, James, and other Americans that stand out, the ambivalently American philosopher of religion George Santayana greatly influences Burke in particular. Santayana gave a twist to Emersonian transcendentalism that appealed to Burke in its moral critique of what Santayana had called “the higher optimism” of transcendental Nature-worship and its embrace of whatever is as good. Santayana’s naturalism provided Burke with space for a moral critique of nature that could give “the highest honor to the highest, not to the strongest, things”⁵⁶ while duly acknowledging the efficacy of material powers.

As Emersonian culture critics, both Burke and Ellison inherit that tradition’s tenseness and anxiety about the sometimes-too-literary means of the critic and the questionable efficacy of the critic’s agency for social change. But Ellison, unlike most other American thinkers in an Emersonian pragmatic tradition,⁵⁷ never did fit comfortably into mainstream, middle-class American society. Ellison gives not only lip service but substantive content to the Emersonian study of “the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, [and] the meaning of household life” by the American scholar.⁵⁸ Burke, though white, male, and middle-class in identity, also advocates the study of literature of all sorts, from essay to newspaper ad to folk proverb, not as literary elitism but as “equipment for living.”

Ellison, contrary to Bloom’s interpretation, emphasizes continuity with one’s past, but not without plenty of angst and resistance of the temptation to “kill off” those attachments by establishing a discontinuity. Ellison’s identification with Emerson is overdetermined by his very name, Ralph Waldo Ellison. As a boy, he was teased about the name Waldo. “I did not destroy that troublesome middle name of mine,” he writes; “I only suppressed it. Sometimes it reminds me of my obligations to the man who named me.”⁵⁹ It is not clear whether Ellison means his father, who reputedly named him (and died when he was three), or the American man of letters who “fathered” the critic.

Neither without critical evaluation, Ellison might answer. “[T]o embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others,” he explains, “is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience.”⁶⁰ In his essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” he writes, “I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer, but I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to achieve some of the things which he asked of the American writer.”⁶¹

But how does Ellison allow the man who thought that the Negro belonged to the “fossil formations” to serve as a father figure and bestower of name and trade?⁶² In part, he does so by turning the metaphor to a figurative discussion

of “coal” as a resource in *Invisible Man* and by advocating the more palatable Emersonian premise that the Negro was “an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization.”⁶³ He transcends Emersonian difficulties with Emersonian resources. He cannot digest all of Emerson, but he can find nourishing parts there.

Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, like his essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” charts his debts to and criticisms of Emerson. The novel tells the story of a young man who, after many false starts, finds out who he is. Ellison describes the form of his story: “Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as designed for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing: ‘Keep this nigger boy running.’”⁶⁴ The theme of rejecting identities assigned by others is characteristically Emersonian. But embedded in the work is implicit criticism of Emerson.⁶⁵ In particular, Ellison plays with Emerson’s essay “Fate,” in which Emerson meditates on matters of race. Emerson thought that the black race was destined to death and that the “imperial Saxon race, which nature cannot bear to lose,”⁶⁶ were “proud believers in Destiny.”⁶⁷

As the narrator of *Invisible Man* drives Norton around, Norton instructs him in Emersonian self-reliance and matters of destiny. “I am a New Englander, like Emerson,” he explains. “You must learn about him, for he was important to your people. He had a hand in your destiny.”⁶⁸ When questioned by the narrator, Norton explains that he funded the narrator’s college because he believed that “your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny,”⁶⁹ a lesson he takes from Emerson. Norton has high hopes that he can look forward to a pleasant fate, and he tells his driver, “I hope yours will be as pleasant.”⁷⁰ “Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue,” he admonishes the young man. “I shall look forward with the greatest of interest to learning your contribution to my fate,” he tells the narrator, extracting a promise from the confused young man that he will inform Norton of his fate someday.⁷¹ Ellison’s construction of Norton’s advocacy of “self-reliance” in relation to his request to know “your contribution to my fate” is in itself ironic. But the young man, if he doesn’t know Emersonian self-reliance, has learned the college’s lesson about its trustees: that “[y]ou have yours, and you got it yourself, and we have to lift ourselves up the same way.”⁷²

But as Emersonian critic of Emerson, Ellison turns his own essay against him. “Fate,” Emerson had claimed, “is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought,”⁷³ and straight through the fire of thought is precisely where Ellison aims to take Norton and the narrator in the course of his novel. The narrator’s first apprehensions about Norton’s version of fate show when he broods, “I was thinking of the first person who’d mentioned anything like fate in my presence, my grandfather. There had been nothing pleasant about it.”⁷⁴ Ellison will teach his reader this lesson that Emerson taught him: “Once

we thought, positive power was all, now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half.”⁷⁵ Half is within the self, half outside its powers. It matters where one is—and what is the scene of the action.

Norton makes an appearance near the beginning and near the end of Ellison’s novel. It turns out that Norton, who knows his life rather well, does not know his way around underground; as it also happens, a lot is going on down there. At the outset, the narrator drives Norton around; by the end of the story, Norton meets the narrator in the subway. When Norton inquires as to whether his young driver reads Emerson, the narrator is embarrassed by his unfamiliarity.⁷⁶ At the end of the novel, it is the narrator’s turn to ask Norton, “Aren’t you ashamed?” In the earlier episode, the narrator finds himself on an unfamiliar road; in the later scene, it is Norton who is lost. In the first scene, Norton tells the narrator, “Yes, you are my fate, young man. Only you can tell me what it really is.”⁷⁷ In the epilogue, the narrator tells Norton, “I’m your destiny, I made you.”⁷⁸ In the former scene, the narrator wonders why he should know Norton. In the latter scene, Norton asks the narrator, “Why should I know you?”

“Because I’m your destiny,” the invisible man answers.

Norton does not know where he is when he is underground. Ellison wants to show that “to lose a sense of *where* you are implies the danger of losing a sense of *who* you are.”⁷⁹ It is the narrator who gets the cathartic moment bought at terrible cost in the final meeting: “seeing him [Norton] made all the old life live in me for an instant, and I smiled with tear-stinging eyes. Then it was over, dead.”⁸⁰ Knowing one’s own identity depends upon knowing not only one’s self rather well, but also the scene—the environment—outside the scope of personal will and agency.

But with this novel, Ellison criticizes not only Emerson in Emersonian terms, but also Burke in Burkean terms. If we take Burke at his word, Ellison succeeded in making Burke and his friends step back and see themselves in a less than flattering light. Hints that Ellison is speaking to Burke personally can be found in his text. For instance, on the initial drive with the narrator, Norton can see neither the oxen nor the people laboring alongside them for the trees.⁸¹ (Burke’s first book was titled *The Complete White Oxen*; trees are Burke’s symbol of proprietary maleness.) Norton does, however, concede that the trees are good timber (an implicit Burkean criticism by Ellison of the mix of the utilitarian with the pious motives present in Burke’s tree-loyalty, a matter that will be treated at length in chapter 2) as he gazes at the long ash of his cigar. Burke, of course, gets the message; in a letter to Ellison, Burke claims that Ellison helped him and his colleagues to see the elements of “Nortonism” in themselves.⁸²

If Emersonian critics were to strive to see earliest as if no one had ever seen before them, this was “a Kantian ‘as if’ ”⁸³ that both Burke and Ellison took to be safe only when practiced as a totally self-conscious performance and

pretension of an actor who consciously wore a mask and projected a character. Neither Burke nor Ellison held much truck with starting anew or with conversion metaphors. Ellison does write: “The American creed of democratic equality encourages the belief in a second chance that is to be achieved by being born again—not simply in the afterlife, but here and now, on earth. Change your name and increase your chances. Create by an act of immaculate self-conception an autobiography.”⁸⁴ But he does not write this without irony, as will become more apparent with the fuller examination of his work. The false discontinuities of “conversion” struck both men as disingenuous. The conversion metaphor inherited from Emerson they both will use, but to ends that highlight all the elements that stay the same when “everything changes” and the identities of people are reborn.

SYMBOL-USING ANIMALS

Burke claims that man is the symbol-using animal; he consistently deconstructs and reconstructs this dualistic term dialectically. At most times he emphasizes how symbol use aids human animals, but at other times he shows how human identification with the rest of the animals ought to temper symbol uses that would “perfect” humans right out of their this-worldly existence.

When asked once, Burke described his own understanding of his work as the integration of symbol use with the needs of the animal that uses them. While individuality is indeed constructed collectively and culturally, he is reported to have said, it is also constructed bodily and thus separately. However connected we are socially, Burke maintained, we experience those connections in separate nervous systems.⁸⁵

Because humans are “symbol-using animals,” they have symbolic needs and biological needs that cannot be assimilated to a mutually exclusive dualism which can then be reduced to one of the elements that is the essence of the two. Humans hold some needs in common with other animals, such as the needs for food or shelter. But humans also have symbolic needs, such as the need to transcend individuality when socializing a loss or the need to distinguish oneself from a group in order to be elevated within a social hierarchy. Burke takes biologic need quite seriously, for all symbolic needs are predicated upon adequate satisfaction of “animal” needs. In a note to a friend, Burke confided that if symbolism didn’t figure in something so real as the operations of a tear duct then he needed to start over again.⁸⁶ Concerned with holding on to human ideals, but no metaphysical idealist, Burke would no doubt dismiss as laughable any account of symbolic action that didn’t include the animal actor.⁸⁷ Whatever else symbolic action may accomplish or erase, it cannot erase the very flesh—the nerve and muscle—of the actor.⁸⁸

Although Burke defends the importance of individual bodily perception (“my toothache being alas! my private property”) and the ultimate separateness of the individual who dies alone,⁸⁹ his entire corpus of writings on identification affirms it to be a process undertaken by social animals and a necessity for their association. For Burke, identity is thoroughly social. He writes, “The so-called ‘I’ is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting corporate we’s.”⁹⁰ Though this individual is marked by its own psychological processes and actively holds together whatever sense of ego it has, this ego, for Burke, has irreducibly social, or corporate, components. The biologically significant fact of separate nervous systems contained within separated skins does not, for Burke, turn identity into something private or idiosyncratic, however difficult it may be to assimilate biological separateness with social connectedness. Burke thinks that this difficulty misled past theorists of identity:

[W]hen bourgeois psychologists began to discover the falsity of this notion [of autonomous identity], they still believed in it so thoroughly that they considered all collective aspects of identity under the head of pathology and illusion. That is: they discovered accurately enough that identity is not individual, that a man “identifies himself” with all sorts of manifestations beyond himself, and they set about trying to “cure” him of this tendency. It can’t be “cured,” for the simple reason that it is normal.⁹¹

But if “normal” collective associations can’t be dissolved, they can nonetheless be stretched, altered, changed, reorganized, collapsed, and reassembled when need be. *When* need is, what sorts of needs those might be, and the uses, abuses, and techniques of identity transformation form the moral core of Burke’s work.

Being the sort of linguistic animals that we are, the language that we use requires an economy in order to be fit for one purpose or another. For instance, a map is a codification designed for the purpose of getting us where we want to go, but it is woefully inadequate as a description of the type of flora we might find along the way, if that is what we want to know.⁹² Those details get left out. The symbol-using ability of human animals gives them the ability to conceptualize—to glean general theories from particular accidents in order to project and generate possibilities. The human usefulness of conceptual ability has its flip side, though; the ability to conceptualize creates the liability to draw wrong general theories about specific happenings and makes the rhetorical manipulation of people through symbolic acts possible. Still, symbol systems function usefully precisely to the extent that they do leave out detail. Therefore, Burke’s phrase *symbol-using animal* is cautionary, not congratulatory.⁹³ As Ellison describes the liability Burke points out, “all men are the *victims* and the *beneficiaries* of the goading, tormenting, commanding and informing activity of that imperious process known as the Mind.”⁹⁴

Language-using animals need to know that language has to describe things in terms of that which they are not; negativity is intrinsic to language. This moralizing power of language separates it from the amorality of other parts of nature; Ellison writes of “the power of the negative, that capability of language which Kenneth Burke has identified as a symbolic agency through which man has separated himself from nature.”⁹⁵

Because symbols abbreviate, they help “transcend” motion and matter because they leave out the material constraints and details of the things referred to by symbols. On the other hand, nature has only positives. A negative admonition—“thou shalt not”—entails a positive image. Ethical terms, claims Burke, have this polar nature. To effectively use words, humans must understand that words are not the things they stand for. The language constructed by humans separates them somewhat from their own natural needs as animals insofar as it leaves out details pertinent to other purposes we might have.⁹⁶ Ellison, echoing Burke, describes language as “the identifying characteristic of a symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal. It is through language that man has separated himself from his natural biologic condition as an animal, but it is through the symbolic capabilities of language that we seek simultaneously to maintain and evade our commitments as social beings.”⁹⁷

We cannot even know differences without first isolating a common point of departure—no contest without common rules, no war without the commonalities internal to the warring parties, no different eye colors without possession of the thing called “eyes” in common to determine what it is we are considering with the word. Morris Cohen, in a letter to Burke, found these commonalities difficult to appreciate. He writes:

In regard to the question of polarity, let me call your attention to the fact that by polar opposites, I mean categories or predicates which are *mutually exclusive*, so that man is not the polar opposite of animal, etc., nor is business the polar opposite of industry, nor for that matter is “language” the polar opposite of the “universe.” Two categories are polar opposites if they seem to be mutually exclusive and *one or the other seems to be the necessary predicate* of our universe of discourse. Thus, unity and diversity or plurality, the ideal and the real, what is and what should be, the concrete and the abstract, are genuinely polar. Now, of course, there is a sense in which there is a unity between every pair of polar categories, like the unity of the two combatants in a fight. There would be no fight unless both of them were involved. But the important point to me is that this unity does not mean identity. The North and South poles are different, even though one could not exist without the other. Of course, the principle of polarity applies to language also but it is primarily a logical principle which serves as a caution to prevent too hasty solutions of cosmologic or general philosophical problems.⁹⁸

Breaking down polarities is not always to the point. Sometimes people want their symbols to establish mutually exclusive differences, so that one side of the polarity can be named as essential, or “the necessary predicate.” In such instances, Burke’s inclination to bridge the gap comes as an annoyance. For Burke, “the pairs are not merely to be placed statically against each other, but in given poetic contexts usually represent a development *from* one order of motives *to* another.”⁹⁹ He changes polar dichotomies into spectrums.

People use symbols to exhort each other and to obtain cooperation in social situations. The right sorts of symbolic actions can moderate guilt and loss and can make the agent more comfortable in more or less chaotic situations. Ellison claims that “whatever the assigned function of social institutions, their psychological function is to protect the citizen against the irrational, incalculable forces that hover about the edges of human life like cosmic destruction lurking within an atomic stockpile.”¹⁰⁰

People need approval of their self-identity, hence they need to induce agreement with their “perfected” petitions in others, thinks Burke, due to their own guilt or lack, in order to socialize those shortcomings. Ellison concurs; “I suspect,” he writes, “that all the agony that goes into writing is borne precisely because the writer longs for acceptance—but it must be acceptance on his own terms.”¹⁰¹ He continues on the need for affirmed identity, “You might know this [your identity] within yourself, but to have it affirmed by others is of utmost importance. Writing is, after all, a form of communication.”¹⁰² It must not only express the identity of the writer but also capture and hold an audience if it is to rescue the writer from the separation from others he or she feels. Art, for Burke and Ellison, is necessarily rhetorical. Ellison claims: “[I]t is not within the province of the artist to determine whether his work is social or not. Art by its nature is social. And while the artist can determine within a certain narrow scope the type of social effect he wishes his art to create, here his will is definitely limited. Once introduced into society, the work of art begins to pulsate with those meanings, emotions, ideas brought to it by its audience, and over which the artist has but limited control.”¹⁰³

As symbol-using animals, people use words, but words also use people. Cliofus, a character in Ellison’s short story “A Song of Innocence,” explains the phenomenon: “They say that folks misuse words, but I see it the other way around, words misuse people. Usually when you think you’re saying what you mean you’re really saying what the words want you to say.”¹⁰⁴ But as Mark Busby notes in his interpretation of the story, “Nonetheless, through words Cliofus finds stability for both himself and Severen. The words, Cliofus says, are ‘what makes me *me*.’”¹⁰⁵ Just as humans can use or misuse words, they can be used or misused by them. Audiences interact with “artists.” Ellison tells how the artist, in this case the novelist, interacts with the audience, in this case the reader: “We repay the novelist in terms of our admiration to the extent that he intensifies our sense of the real—or, conversely, to *the extent*

that he justifies our desire to evade certain aspects of reality which we find unpleasant beyond the point of confrontation.”¹⁰⁶ Nothing about the sociality or the rhetoric of symbolic activity guarantees that we all end up for the better.

In this social understanding of religious rhetoric, which bears a family resemblance to Emile Durkheim’s methods of interpreting religion, without the Kantian overtones, “God” is the perfected object of the petition; what impedes the petition becomes demonized. Fortunately, claims Burke, different schemes get in each other’s way due largely to limits in resources. Comedy often ensues, as chapter 4 will examine.

STRUCTURE AND “METHOD”

For the purposes of an investigation of Burke’s thoughts on human identity and its transformations, his work of the 1930s and 1940s contains the material most relevant to my purposes. During this period, Burke’s personal concerns with his own identity and the push and pull of his identifications with other people and groups shape all he writes. The economic changes of the Great Depression force Burke to face a number of vexing personal questions about his vocation as a writer, his political identity, his argumentative and agonistic personality, and his lifestyle. During this decade Burke changes from a writer of fiction to a critical essayist, divorces his first wife and marries her sister, leaves life in the middle of urban New York and settles on a permanent rustic lifestyle in rural New Jersey, conversant with but consciously distanced from the publicists and editors of the city. Burke’s moral reflections during this period on the shape of human identity and his own, I would argue, orient the rest of his life’s work.

I have organized this discussion topically around Burke’s and Ellison’s use of the terms *piety*, *sacrifice/tragedy*, and the *comic*. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 discuss Burke’s use of these three terms respectively; chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine Ellison’s use of the same terms. In all of these chapters I will set up the connections and differences in the thought of these two men and draw them out. Along the way, I will support my second claim about the tradition of religious naturalism and its background common to both Burke and Ellison. In chapter 8, I will sum up the examination, make some more specific suggestions supporting my third claim about the usability of the legacy they leave us, and suggest potential contemporary conversations in which Burke and Ellison might participate.

My methodological machinery is minimal and eclectic. On the issue of methodology, I take Burke, Ellison, and myself to be nourished by American pragmatism. Burke counts Emerson, James, and Santayana as predecessors. This particular strand of American pragmatism tends to take more seriously the religious activities of human beings as vital to their well-being than do

some other branches of pragmatism or other modern critiques of religion, while dodging the more metaphysical commitments of religious traditions. Pragmatists, in general, tend to be suspicious of loyalties to any one methodology to the exclusion of all others—loyalties, in their eyes and mine, rightfully belonging not to methodologies but to helpful or edifying results for human lives.

My argument will stand or fall by the pragmatist's standard that Burke articulated. Its "value is in what you show can be done with it." I hope that my expositions and interpretations of the work of the two men will be suggestive. Either my suggestions will seem useful or they will not; I make no real attempt to disable competing points of view.

Further, the evidence I will present is text-centered. I rely mainly on close readings of primary materials written by both Burke and Ellison. Though I show places in which Ellison gives direct credit to Burke for particular ideas, the bulk of my evidence is not so highlighted and depends upon a background knowledge of Burke's thought, so that an Ellison reader can recognise a Burkean idea when she sees it. I have not relied upon archival evidence of shared meals and social engagements, of mutual friends—Shirley Jackson and Stanley Hyman, of interactions at Bennington, in New York and New Jersey, but that evidence is also available to the curious who seek it out. The history I have concentrated upon is more intellectual history than anything else.

The test of a point of view is not in its introduction but in its filling out. Filling out my reading of Burke's and Ellison's point of view on matters of piety, sacrifice, and comedy is the aim of the next six chapters.