

Toward Logological Skepticism: Kenneth Burke, Edward Said, and the Question of Atheism

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Abstract: This article configures Kenneth Burke as an atheistic thinker, aligning Burkean logology—the study of symbolic hierarchies—with Edward Said’s project of “secular criticism” in opposition to systems of heteronomous closure. It examines and defends Burke’s self-avowed secular orientation, illustrating how Burke employs religious terminology for metonymic, rhetorical effect rather than ontological judgment. It contrasts Burke’s and Said’s slightly divergent secular understandings of *god-term* with the ontological positions of Wayne Booth and Richard Weaver before stressing the cultural and disciplinary value of understanding atheism as a rhetorical response to symbolic order rather than a mere scientific debunking of the God hypothesis.

Keywords: Kenneth Burke, Edward Said, logology, atheism, entelechy

As “logologically” adapted, “God” becomes the overall title of titles for any system (as “dialectical materialism” might be deemed the “god-term” of Marxist atheism).—Kenneth Burke, “Symbolism as a Realistic Mode”

Orientalism is the discourse derived from and dependent on “the Orient.” To say of such grand ideas and their discourse that they have something in common with religious discourse is to say that each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.—Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*

Much of Kenneth Burke’s late writing coheres around the slippery term *logology*, a symbolic analogue to theology that Burke variously defines as “words about words” (Burke 1961/1970, vi), the “empirical” study of theological terms (Burke 1979, 153), the study of “symbolism in general” (Burke 2003, 212), and the selection of “terministic screens” toward a systematic understanding

of reality (Burke 1966, 47). Apart from the clipped and rather euphemistic “words about words,” no tidy denotation of *logology* recurs across Burke’s late corpus, leaving readers of his work from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to decipher a sort of fun house mirror of conceptual cross-reference. Across such work, however, Burke is adamant—defiant, even—about one thing: logology is a fundamentally *secular* enterprise, removed from divinity itself, and constrained to the worldly realm of human symbolic action (e.g., Burke 1961/1970, 1979, 1985). He is perhaps most pointed about the implications of this secular logological perspective in the essay “Symbolism as a Realistic Mode,” in which he offers “logological realism” as an alternative to both idealism (in the Platonic tradition) and dogmatic materialism (in the Marxist tradition)—the first amounting to would-be theology and the second, ironically, often cloaking would-be theology in the robe of “dialectical materialism” (2003, 214, 221). In this essay, he centrally aligns logology with the Aristotelian concept of entelechy, or the fulfillment of potentiality, which he reconstrues as the “tracking down of implications” toward images of perfection or would-be god-terms (219, 221). By this token, logology becomes the critical art of tracking such implications. Burke seems to position logology as an art of entelechial wrangling—of roping of god-terms down to earth and placing them in the worldly rhetorical context of symbolic action.

Here, I tease out the implications of Burke’s secular insistence, and I contextualize logology within Burke’s biographical atheism and skepticism. For the purpose of this argument, then, I will approximate *logology* as the study of worldly symbolic hierarchies goaded by entelechial order. In turn, I coin *logological skepticism* to denote a sort of rhetorical atheism that stems from Burke’s logological priority: one motivated not by scientific opposition to religious truth claims but instead by inherent suspicion of any god-terms that appeal to transcendental authority or offer themselves as something *more* than logological.

Here, my elaboration of Burkean thought takes inspiration from Edward W. Said’s defense of “secular criticism.” In his introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), Said emphasizes both a resistance to any top-down, immutable source of knowledge and an insistence that culture is made and remade in the worldly realm of human actors (22–27). For Said, all *true* criticism is secular and therefore *oppositional*: “In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into an organized dogma” (29). The only dogma, then, of Said’s secular criticism is skepticism toward what Stathis Gourgouris (2013) calls *heteronomous politics*, or political discourse in which “the power of real men and women is said to reside in some unassailable elsewhere” (28–30, xiv). Heteronomy, not religion per se, is the shifty adversary. Or, from the Burkean angle, the adversary is not religion itself but the logological sleight of hand that attempts to construe worldly value systems as something transcendent and more than human.

This apposition of Burke and Said emerges amid a welcome spate of scholarship on rhetoric and atheism, one centered chiefly on the social marginalization of

atheists. Most markedly, a series of essays by Kristina M. Lee (2020, 2021, 2022) stresses the problem of “theistnormativity,” or rhetorical construal of theistic belief as a natural default, as well as other linguistic and demographic challenges in studying the civic lives of American atheists. Read at once, a recent exchange between Lee (2024) and Leland G. Spencer (2024) provides a thoroughgoing summary of work on rhetoric and atheism: Spencer offers a comprehensive, “optimistic” survey of foundational rhetorical scholarship related to secular and atheistic perspectives, while in her appreciative response Lee stresses the ongoing marginalization of atheistic perspectives in the field.

I take no side in this exchange except to note the absence of Burke and the transformative potential he offers. Burke was an atheistic thinker whose late writings on logology and entelechy might help redress problems like theistnormativity. More pointedly, however, he provides a transformative position for atheism within rhetorical inquiry, allowing us to position rhetorical inquiry itself as a secular practice that vitalizes the place of the rhetorician in atheistic thought.

In what follows, I first outline the stakes of Burke’s professed atheism, examining his own pronouncements about faith and logology in relationship to those of his friend and debate partner Wayne C. Booth. I contend that Burke deploys religious terminology chiefly for its metonymic power. I then contrast approaches to god-terms in the work of Burke, Said, Booth, and the traditionalist conservative Richard Weaver, noting the differences in attitude between Burke’s and Said’s slightly divergent secular stances and Booth’s and Weaver’s ontological positions. Finally, I advocate a Burkean version of rhetorical atheism, one infused by Said’s image of secular critique. I contend that this position fortifies the political and disciplinary stakes of rhetorical studies, both in advocating for human well-being and in appreciating the constitutive power of language.

Burke’s Atheism and Religious Vocabulary

Burke professed a dogged faithlessness, but he appreciated religious ritual. As Timothy W. Crusius (1999) puts it: “Burke consistently approaches religion from outside faith itself. An agnostic who writes prayerful poems to the ‘Big Shot’ he cannot quite believe in, Burke studies religion with a mixture of affection and suspicion” (14). This “affection” stems from his own upbringing in Christian Science and its adjunct vocabulary of piety, health, and prayer (Feehan 2001). In a conversation with William Cahill (2011), Burke quipped: “I don’t believe, but I love the theology.” His early scholarly efforts, after he lost his faith in high school, represent an attempt “to get from feelings of theology to secular equivalents of them, [linking] the idea of faith with the idea of self-expression.” These efforts yield the “secularized” religious vocabulary that pervades his theory, most notably the language of “piety,” “secular prayer,” “secular conversion,” and “transcendence” from *Attitudes toward History* (Burke 1937/1984) and *Permanence and Change* (Burke 1935/1987).

and the entelechial god-terms that frequently occupy his later work (see, e.g., Burke 1945/1969, 72–77, 101–13; Burke 1950/1969, 294–301; and Burke 1961/1970, 2–3, 24–27).¹ The “suspicion” that Crusius mentions translates to Burke’s unwillingness to confer any transcendental ontology on religion despite a deep appreciation for its rhetorical affordances.

A representative passage will clarify Burke’s stance toward religion and the secular. I quote from a 1962 review of *Milton’s God* by William Empson, wherein Burke targets Empson’s opprobrium for a certain monolithic image of Christianity: “If only by reason of its borrowings from Judaism, the Greeks, the pagan Mediterranean cultures in general, the successive stages of secular Western thought and many other sources besides the ‘Neolithic,’ Christianity could not be so efficiently horrendous as Empson would want us to believe. Thus, through my own approach to the terminology of any and all theologies is secular, I have the uneasy feeling that the old Puritan fury shows through Empson’s rabid brand of secularism” (541). Note the convergence of attitudes. Burke (1) reaffirms his own commitment to secular critique, even on matters of theology, (2) denies any transcendental essence to human expressions of Christianity, which can only be as “efficiently horrendous”—or efficiently virtuous, one assumes—as its multifarious worldly, cultural lineage allows, (3) but points out the dogmatic potential of fundamentalist Christianity (“the old Puritan fury”), and, finally, (4) levels the same charge of dogmatism against “rabid” secularists. His atheism leads him to reject (or at least set aside) the avowed transcendence of religious creed. But, because religions are worldly, they can only be as bad (or as good) as the world allows, and “rabid” secularists like Empson have merely picked a nonreligious theological surrogate to chase toward the horizon of dogmatism.

We should not misread Burke’s aversion to rabid secularism as a concession to theology as such. Nor should we misread logology as a mere subset of or surrogate for theology, though some critics have done just this. Burke—who defines *logology*, or “words about words,” through analogy to theological “words about God”—anticipated such a misunderstanding (Burke 1961/1970, vi, 1, 33; see also Burke 1979, 1985). In introducing *The Rhetoric of Religion*, he appears pressingly—almost painfully—aware that the comparison he proposes between logology and theology will provoke and confuse a readership for whom the Christian God provides the ultimate node of cultural hierarchy. He offers this category distinction: “It is not within the competence of our project to decide the question [of God’s existence] either theistically or atheistically, or even agnostically. This investigation does not require us to make any decisions about the validity of theology *qua* theology” (Burke 1961/1970, 2). In one form or another, he is echoing Giambattista Vico’s (1725/1984) distinction between poetic (human) and sacred (theological) wisdom, the former of which persists through the empirical cycle of knowledge and creation, and the latter of which eludes human comprehension.² The categorical distinction Burke offers between symbolic action, the realm of language and human meaning, and the nonsymbolic motion of brute physicality mirrors an equally categorical distinction between symbolic action and nonsymbolic divinity (Burke 1979, 184; Rueckert 1963/1982, 248).

In *A Grammar of Motives* (1945/1969), for example, he characterizes divine creation as a “pure” image of “the act,” but he offers this idea as a “logical prototype” of symbolic action rather than a metaphysical fact so that “even a literal believer would have to treat [creation] in terms that placed it, . . . at an intersection of time and the timeless—a point at which we place ourselves when we discuss [creation] in terms of those non-temporal firsts called ‘principles’” (64). Projected into the logological frame of Burke’s late work, this commentary describes an entelechial *use* of divine creation rather than divinity itself such that “even a literal believer” can apprehend the divine (“the timeless”) only through worldly, spatiotemporally contingent terms of logological order. *Real divinity*—whatever that might be—eludes the observable realm of symbol-using animals, but, unlike nonsymbolic motion, it also eludes empirical connection to symbolic action. This distinction forms the crux of Burke’s atheism.

I recommend that we take Burke’s atheism seriously, first, as a matter of biographical record that contextualizes his theory and, second, as an interpretative frame that extends the implications of his work, as I do below. Many critics have done the opposite—on both the biographical and the hermeneutical fronts—reckoning Burke’s logological method an accidental or “coy theology” that invites an essentially religious understanding of his work, for good or ill.³ For example, Greig E. Henderson (1988), an early skeptic of Burke’s late work, pejoratively contrasts logology with dramatism, arguing that Burke has created a “surrogate theology” in logology, replacing dramatism’s pliable “methodological priority” with logology’s reified “ontological priority” (105, 122).⁴ Christine E. Iwanicki (2008), similarly, criticizes Burke’s ostensibly supernatural “occulting” of language into something ineffable and transcendental (185). Speaking less reproachfully, Edward C. Appel (1993) dubs Burke only a “putative secularist” whose universal inscription of entelechial motives into language mirrors the theological will toward perfection, particularly those in alternative theological traditions that imagine both God and God’s creations as mutable progressions toward “a yet-unrealized telos” (100, 106). For Henderson, Iwanicki, Appel, and others, the impression recurs that, once his logological theory courts notions of ultimate terms and entelechy, Burke, wittingly or not, shepherds language into the domain of theology itself. As the thinking goes, god-terms imply a god.

This idea recurs most forcefully in the writings of Wayne C. Booth, Burke’s friend and fellow giant of rhetorical and literary theory. As Craig Rood (2014) delicately reveals, the convivial but fraught correspondence between Booth and Burke often concerned disagreements over the essence of Burke’s own thought, including the distinction between logology and theology (see, e.g., Booth 1974a; Booth 1979, 99–137; and Burke 1974). A series of Booth’s late essays and dialogues with Burke bespeak a sustained interest in rhetoric and religion that mirrors Burke’s own late pivot toward religion and logology. Predictably, the two writers’ inquiries frequently cross paths. In an essay dubbed “Rhetoric and Religion: Are They Essentially Wedded?” Booth (1991) answers his titular question in the affirmative, contending: “[W]henver any inquirer pursues rhetoric vigorously into its own habitat, whenever anyone

thinks hard not only about how to persuade to belief but about the grounds of human persuasion, whenever anyone asks honestly how it is that minds can ever meet at all through symbol systems, sooner or later that inquirer will discover that the entire enterprise depends on belief in . . . well, I ask my readers to choose their preferred God-term to complete the sentence” (64).

Booth argues, finally, that this “preferred God-term”—note the capitalization, a rhetorical demarcation of ultimate common ground—is finally synonymous with theology itself and that “*good* rhetoric,” as opposed to “*mere* rhetoric,” demands the pursuit of “God as the truth of truths” (1991, 77).⁵ Beginning with this consubstantial apposition of rhetoric and religion, Booth’s appreciative critique of Burke follows logically: Burke accurately describes the entelechial push toward ultimate terms but fails to admit his own theological commitment toward the “right” way of approaching communicative action in the world. Booth pursues this critique in a pair of essays—“Kenneth Burke’s Religious Rhetoric” (2000) and “The Many Voices of Kenneth Burke” (2001)—that include long excerpts of correspondence between himself and Burke, dramatizing his own efforts to persuade the secular curmudgeon of his own religiosity. Throughout, he repeats the core argument that, if Burkean logology yields “value-pyramids” crested by specific god-terms, then embracing any such hierarchy as superior to others amounts to religious commitment toward the god-term in question (Booth 2000, 35–36). He sees Burke motivated by legitimate concerns for peace and just discourse and, thereby, committed, wittingly or not, to the proposition that “we must not just ask the questions about [hierarchies] that the best religious questioners have always been asking, while translating them into a mere study of how language works: we must ask them religiously” (36). As the ostensible best path toward such harmony and goodwill, logology must itself become a god-term—or so Booth says.

Given this appreciative—even laudatory—description of Burke’s religiosity, one might wonder why Burke resisted being labeled *religious*, which he does in documented correspondence with Booth (Booth 2000, 34–38; Booth 2001, 196–97), Appel (Appel 1993, 100), and others (Burke and Cowley 1988, 204–5). Further, one might ask—as Booth and Iwanicki both do—why Burke avows a secular orientation while speaking *about* religion so effusively. In my understanding, the two matters are closely related. I believe that, apart from his nostalgic affinity for Christian Science, Burke addresses religion so frequently and borrows his demonstrative examples of logological hierarchy from Christianity for much the same reason that Said (1983) positions himself against “religious criticism”: that is, because religion—and, among Western societies, Christianity in particular—offers the most prevalent and hegemonic system of logological hierarchy, just as, for Said, *religious* denotes the most accessible expression of epistemic closure through reference to ineffable, extrawordly authority. Burke and Said each demand that the critic address the conditions of one’s own world, and religion pervades those conditions. This orientation epitomizes Said’s (1996) notion of the “true intellectual” as a “secular being” opposed to heteronomous systems of closure (120).

Yet, in one especially poignant passage, Iwanicki (2008) criticizes Burke for using religion “as a kind of *master-trope*” that bespeaks a nostalgic yearning for religion “as a desirable touchstone for understanding human existence and human efforts to engage in symbolization and communication” (181). Burke’s religious upbringing notwithstanding, I believe that his own writing on “master tropes” offers a less idiosyncratic and more systematically coherent explanation for his engagement with religion, which we should understand tropologically as both an extended synecdoche and a metonym.

In the essay “Four Master Tropes,” Burke (1945/1969) configures synecdoche—traditionally understood as the substitution of part for whole or whole for part—as a symbolic “relationship of convertability” between terms, one resembling a path of bilateral transit (508–9). For Burke, theology properly constitutes one form of logology. The part (theology) stands in for the whole (logology), but, more important, theology provides what William H. Rueckert (1963/1982) calls an *analogical matrix* for logology (245–46), one enabling an extended dialectic between part and whole that elucidates each term. In this sense, the extended analogy between “words about God” and “words about words” that begins *The Rhetoric of Religion* epitomizes Burke’s own notion of synecdoche, through which the theory of logology sharpens our understanding of Christian discourse and the example of Christian discourse sharpens the theory of logology.

Burke also stresses that the four master tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) mutually intersect. Specifically, metonymy often forms a special form of synecdoche, one that also applies to Burke’s religious vocabulary. Metonymy, for Burke, amounts to a “*reduction* of some higher or more complex realm of being to the terms of a lower or less complex realm of being” through the “basic ‘strategy’ . . . [of conveying] some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (1945/1969, 506). This is not to say that Christianity is categorically low or trite, but Burke’s fluid use of religious vocabulary in critical prose and correspondence does match this description of metonymy—an attempt to compress abstract and complex ideas into accessible, affectively “tangible” shorthand. *God-term*, for example, is a better expression than, say, *entelechial zenith*, offering the efficient, tangible *feeling* of godly authority and hierarchy that Burke knew well from his youth and Western audiences in general intuit through their familiarity with monotheistic culture.⁶ *Entelechial zenith* may be more technically accurate as a nonfigurative appellation, but *god-term* clicks at the level of rhetorical intuition. And the term still circulates, which suggests it has tropologically stuck.

Burke wrote *about* religion so often and appropriated religious terminology so widely because, as a rhetorician and lapsed Christian Scientist living in a “theist-normative” society (Lee 2020, 2022), he recognized the cultural, rhetorical importance of Christianity and respected the metonymic power of Christian terminology. What Iwanicki describes as Burke’s “occulting” of language and what Booth perceives as Burke’s unwitting gravitation toward theology as such each constitute, instead, Burke’s attempt to translate theory and experience into accessible terms,

thus collapsing the roles of rhetorician (the explanatory theorist) and rhetor (the practitioner seeking effect). Where Booth sensed latent religiosity in Burke's words, Burke likely saw himself applying the available means of logology, to tweak the Aristotelian apothegm. Burke the atheist is certainly guilty of reinscribing the cultural residue of Judeo-Christianity into his writing—but, again, he frankly admits a sentimental fondness for religion and never claims the secularist mantle of antireligious polemicism. Eradication of cultural religiosity was never his goal.

Burke enjoyed religion, but his logological theory necessarily implies an anti-foundational, metalinguistic awareness of the sort of terminological hierarchy religion exemplifies so well. As Rueckert (1963/1982) explains: “[T]he empirical restraints that Burke always seems to put on himself favor the view that Christian theology is a function—that is, a creation—of language, and that logologic can give you all the moral/ethical principles of Christianity” (245). Burke (2003) argues that, whatever may or may not be true of the nonlinguistic, nonsymbolic realm of divinity, “[n]omenclatures are formative, or creative.” Terminologies are, therefore, “*methodologically* justified” according to their inventive, heuristic effects (122, 123). For this reason, religious readings of Burke strike an ironic impasse. Booth is right that logologists probably think logology is a good system—maybe the best—but proper logologists must also recognize what they are doing with their own critical vocabulary. This attitude keeps ontological claims at arm's length and preempts what Booth describes as the religious embrace of an ultimate term. Burke's atheism, then, boils down to metacritical linguistic awareness. Notice, too, that Burke again embodies Said's secular stance insofar as logological criticism flags and criticizes god-terms and appeals to heteronomous authority even as it notes their rhetorical power. The nondogmatic flexibility of logology, in turn, explains the “fabulous eclecticism” for which Said (2000) credits Burke and for which, I suspect, he regarded Burke as a critical ally (63–64). On that note, we can return to the comparative examination of these two thinkers and their revelatory pronouncements about God and gods.

A Symposium on God-Terms

At this stage, I employ the expression *god-term* as a representative anecdote in the comparative examination of logology and secular criticism. I examine how variations of this term function across the work of four thinkers—Burke, Said, Booth, and the conservative Platonist rhetorician Richard M. Weaver—no two of whom completely agree and whose differences prove illuminating. I finally advocate a sense of the term congruent with Burke's usage but infused with the spirit of oppositional skepticism Said provides that, in turn, heralds the vision of rhetorical atheism I finally seek in associating Burke with Said. Booth and Weaver each offer points of contradistinction.

I begin with Weaver, a traditionalist conservative, and Booth, a pluralist progressive. They differ politically and epistemologically, but both forward the possibility

of transcendent, ontological authority. Weaver, Burke's contemporary, writes extensively about god-terms in the essay "Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric," which concludes his 1953 *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Here, he describes god-terms—examples ranging from *science* and *progress*, the terms he finds most insidious, to more culturally immediate instances like *the war effort*—in language often resembling Burke's. Also, like Burke, he describes the god-term as a node of hierarchy, or an "expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate dominations and powers" (212), thereby evoking what Burke would later detail as logological systems of order.

Where Burke employs *order* as a largely value-neutral expression of human nature, Weaver imbues the notion with something earnest and sacrosanct. In the foreword to his philosophical and polemical *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver (1948/2013) laments that "the world is now more than ever dominated by the gods of mass and speed and that the worship of these can lead only to the lowering of standards, the adulteration of quality, and, in general, to the loss of those things which are essential to the life of civility and culture" (xx). Note the disdainful use of lowercase *gods*. As a point of clarity, I pause here to propose a distinction between rhetorically transcendent *god-terms* and ontologically transcendent *God-terms*. The waning "standards" and "quality" that Weaver perceives correspond to the decline of centralized cultural authority in American society, or the scattered allegiance to various god-terms that forge vulgar facsimiles of the legitimate God-terms—*God* itself, for instance, alongside *tradition* and *the West*. For Weaver (1948/2013), the legitimate God-terms inscribed into religion and tradition naturally undergird rational society: "The Greeks identified god with mind, and it will be found that every attack upon religion, or upon characteristic ideas inherited from religion, when its assumptions are laid bare, turns out to be an attack upon mind. . . . There is some ultimate identification of goodness and truth, so that he who ignores or loses faith in the former can by no possible means save the latter" (133). His essay "Ultimate Terms," accordingly, sounds a conclusive alarm against the "evil" of god-terms like *science* and *progress* that allow unscrupulous rhetors to lead gullible listeners away from true sources of moral authority—that is, away from the intellectual tradition of the Christian West (Weaver 1953, 232).⁷

Like Weaver, Booth seems to believe in a transcendent grounding of epistemic authority, though he shares no affinity for the singular allure of conservative tradition. He widely espoused critical pluralism and accepted Burke as a key figure in his own critical pantheon (Booth 1979). Again, however, his religious rebranding of logology left Burke uneasy in his promotion to theologian. In his commentary on Burke, rhetoric, and religion, Booth lauds God-terms as rhetorical tools for discovering "a serious embrace of some conception, however loose-joined or 'pluralized,' of the divine" (1991, 64) such that "rhetorical questions pursued honestly will finally lead to a God-term" (1974b, 136). His pluralism presumes that multiple paths of rhetorical inquiry provide virtuous and legitimate ingress into this truth of truths. In *Critical Understanding* (1979), he likens critical positions to rhetorical

topoi, configuring each as “an inhabited place in which our valued activity can occur among all those who find their way in” (339). Notice, in its intimate tranquility, how this image reflects the church, the synagogue, the temple—the holy edifice that isolates and petrifies time against more fast-paced, opportunistic, and unscrupulous discursive practices that invite the pejorative label *mere rhetoric* (Booth 1991, 72). God-terms, topoi, and critical positions are, for Booth, consubstantial notions, all representing the true common ground of rhetorical discovery, spaces to be “explored” where people can “dwell together in understanding” (1979, 339). God-terms, by this configuration, access the theological home of truth itself: all paths of true rhetorical inquiry lead to God, just as all roads proverbially lead to Rome.

If Booth sees God as a path to *truth*, Burke views gods as tools of rhetorical *meaning*. For Burke, as we have seen, *god-term* denotes a discursive expression of entelechial hierarchy, a linguistic node below which other terms and gestures of symbolic action organize in systems of order. Absent from this definition, however, is Burke’s lively, playful, arguably neo-sophistic appreciation of god-terms. Contra Weaver and Booth, Burke perceives no such things as God-terms since, logologically, *God* constitutes nothing more than another linguistic expression of cultural hierarchy. Yet such hierarchy *can* proceed benignly. Burke often delights in the affective circulation of god-terms, which organically infuse all corners of rhetorical life. Consider, for instance, his largely overlooked commentary on “divine radiance” that concludes book 3 of *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950/1969, 294–333). Here, he focuses chiefly on literary examples of god-terms, but the range of his analysis reveals how entelechial motives fragment and refract through manifold lines of inquiry. In one especially revealing subchapter, he examines the so-named *deity of things* expressed in Henry James’s preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896–97), a narrative concerning an estate full of fine heirlooms. Burke plucks a long inventory of notable god-terms from James’s preface—*household gods*, *vital particle*, *grain of gold*, *brazen idols*, and so forth—all of which, as he tells it, lend the novel’s central conflict “a higher dimension, as James finds in the objects a glow that can place them in some order transcending the quarrel as such” (1950/1969, 295, 296; see also Wetherbee 2015).

I want to note four revealing features of Burke’s short analysis. First, Burke addresses James’s god-terms in a positive, appreciative tone. He nowhere implies, as Weaver might have, that James is overstepping his bounds or misusing pseudoreligious language. Second, he notes the productive, generically salient use of those terms, which bolster both James’s rhetorical exploration of material taste and his poetical dramatization of such language. The heirlooms in *The Spoils of Poynton* attain a rhetorically transcendent and, therefore, dramatically enticing quality, just as real-world antiques and relics can circulate as rhetorical symbols of tradition and taste. Third, Burke appreciates that James’s inventory of god-terms is specific and contextually useful. He would surely agree with Weaver that *freedom*, *progress*, and their ilk historically constitute god-terms of large-scale public deliberation, but he stresses here that many minor gods inhabit the polytheistic range of rhetorical expression. Fourth, however, Burke also cautions against reading this “divinity”

literally, stipulating that “we should not treat the material ‘Things’ as though [James] meant them to be endowed with true divinity, like sacred objects on the altar of Almighty God” (296). Rather, *The Spoils of Poynton* deploys its *own* vocabulary of entelechial terms that happens to reflect the motive of “perfection” epitomized by religious discourse. To name these expressions “god-terms” is, again, to use “god” metonymically. In sum, while Burke often excoriates specific entelechial appeals and rhetorical strategies, he also sees god-terms as inevitable, useful, productive, and often admirable.

Said, too, employs the word *god* liberally and metonymically but more pejoratively than Burke does. The project of secular criticism targets and rebukes imperatives to heteronomous closure—and, again, Burke’s principle of entelechy points comfortably to heteronomy, or what Gourgouris (2013) characterizes as the transubstantiation of human “law (*nomos*)” into something extrawordly and “other (*heteron*)” and, therefore, into would-be God-terms (94). Addressing this tension, Said most directly engages and rebuffs gods in the conclusion to *Representations of the Intellectual*, a chapter titled “Gods That Always Fail” (1996, 103–21). There, he rearticulates his vision of the intellectual as a secular agent working against the oppressive and hegemonic powers of heteronomous dogma, instead grounding conversation in the worldly experience of marginalized people. He worries that many political movements of political transformation merely move “from one god to a new one,” such that the intricacies of political strife wither under heteronomous slogans and “penitent formulas.” At his most strident, Said poses this provocation:

Because you serve a god uncritically all the devils are always on the other side: this is as true when you are a Trotskyist as it is when you are now a recanting former Trotskyist. You do not think of politics in terms of interrelationships or common histories such as, for instance, the long and complicated dynamic that has bound the Arabs and Muslims to the West and vice versa. Real intellectual analysis forbids calling one side innocent, the other evil. Indeed the notion of a side is, where cultures are at issue, highly problematic, since most cultures aren’t watertight little packages, all homogenous, and all either good or evil. (115, 119)

Note that, ironically enough, Weaver (nostalgic paladin of the West) and Said (foremost critic of Western cultural orthodoxy) agree on one key point: god-terms constitute dangerous, unearned imitations of “real” authority. Where Weaver locates authority in tradition, Said points to lived relations themselves, past “watertight little packages” to the heterogeneous particularities of culture, history, and language. Authority, he implies, is earned through sustained attention to these details, not through allegiance to any heteronomous god. By this standard, of course, Weaver’s own God-terms *tradition*, *religion*, and *the West* constitute especially insidious and cruel god-terms attempting to flatten the details of human strife.

Similarly, Said would fault Booth for conflating the rhetorical and worldly with the religious and transcendent. Though both would likely agree on many political

positions, Said would insist that, as a public intellectual, Booth should spurn adherence to any God and instead redistribute his focus among the specific conditions of worldly life. Indeed, Booth's plea for pluralistic religiosity perhaps echoes the dead-end cycles of heteronomous conversion and deconversion that Said decries in *Representations of the Intellectual*.

Said and Burke, then, finally agree that the critic of language, society, and culture can make no pronouncements about an ontological God, a figure that may or may not actually exist—but, if so, only in Vico's sacred, nonsymbolic realm of the ineffable and extrawordly. The two critics offer mutually complementary perspectives on god-terms: Burke stresses their omnipresence, variety, and rhetorical utility, while Said stresses their obfuscatory danger. Burke and Said yield compatible terministic screens emphasizing two angles of the same notion, one that remains an empirical, symbolic construct of worldly human action.

In closing, consider Stephen Bygrave's (1993) aphoristic summary of Burke: "God is the terminus of all rhetoric" (53)—a theological inversion of logology that, in truth, better represents Booth's position than Burke's own. We might revise Bygrave's telling of Burke to something like this: gods are the termini of all rhetoric, but these termini themselves remain shifty and perhaps unattainable, for they represent entelechial imperatives more than true final destinations. Said, moreover, would add that the "intellectual" (or rhetorician) ought to remain vigilant and skeptical toward such would-be gods and their attempt to redirect our gaze from the worldly plane of human poesis.

Toward Logological Skepticism

Refracted through Said's secular perspective, then, Burke offers a basically atheistic, skeptical logology defined by its resistance to heteronomous authority but appreciative of heteronomous terms' metonymic power. Burke's logology and Said's secular criticism unite as a worldly, unfinalizable process of inventive evaluation and critique, keeping one eye on the rhetorical utility of quasi-religious abstractions and the other on their epistemological sleight of hand. Or one last reprise: both Burke and Said would seem to accept Burke's (1966) famous dictum that humans are "rotten with perfection" (16). For Burke, we are rotten with *perfection*; for Said, we are *rotten* with perfection. Stressing *perfection* means appreciating the constitutive power of logology and entelechy. Stressing *rottenness* means maintaining a stance of skeptical opposition.

In turn, Burke offers a rhetorical, metalinguistic orientation to atheism premised not on a scientific or philosophical debunking of the God hypothesis but on a skeptical opposition to heteronomy. The question is not, Does God exist? Other, better questions arise. How do people's beliefs interact with symbolic action? What can people do with god-terms? And, pressingly, how can we further worldly well-being in a context mediated by hierarchies of logological power?

Despite the historical compass of this article, the stakes of logological skepticism lie pressingly in the present. As I write, my own federal government—led by an egotistical libertine and convicted felon who has remade the presidency in the image of reality-TV melodrama—wages a campaign of autocratic terror domestically and abroad, demonizing gay and trans citizens as predators, immolating the crews of Venezuelan sea vessels through unilateral airstrikes, and unlawfully abducting immigrants off the streets of the United States, from New York to Chicago to Minneapolis to Portland. Burke, whose *Rhetoric of Motives* reflects immediate fear of Cold War-era nuclear holocaust, might recognize this spiraling tragedy as one more “disease of cooperation” fueled by cruel identifications made under spurious flags of heteronomous power (1950/1969, 22).

In a recent address to military top brass, Pete Hegseth (2025) illustrates the architecture of MAGA logology. He describes the newly rebranded Department of War (formerly the Department of Defense) through familiar, nationalistic terms of military service, such as the valorous choice “to serve something greater than yourself, to fight for God and country, for freedom and the Constitution.” He pairs these affirmative terms with parallel idioms of negation. “This administration,” he says, “has done a great deal from day one to remove the social justice, politically correct, and toxic ideological garbage that had infected our department, to rip out the politics. No more identity months, DEI offices, dudes in dresses. No more climate change worship. No more division, distraction or gender delusions. No more debris.” The god- and devil-terms line up plainly: *God, country, freedom, and the Constitution* stand opposed to *social justice, ideology, identity politics, DEI, trans delusion, and climate change hysteria*. It is holy to revere the flag and the Lord. “Climate change worship” is profane.

These conditions of holiness and profanity are, of course, rhetorically constituted and radically enthymematic. Hegseth offers no evidence that trans people are threatening the Constitution and the sanctity of the military, but he does offer a logological ordering of militaristic, masculinist Christian nationalism that coheres in opposition to the deviant other. Staring down similar cruelties of jubilant militarism in his own age, Burke’s advice is clear enough:

[T]here is always the need for the experimental dissociating of patriotism and militarism. (Or, as regards recent conditions, the dissociating of patriotism from a cult of “cold war,” since old men are given to talk of a cold war, which younger men are potently prone to translate into talk of a “shooting war.”) Return to this suicidal association (or “identification”) if you must. But at least put it to the dissociative test, to make sure that your choice has been made after free inquiry, and is not imposed upon you by a dismal rhetoric of warmongering. It is a fallacy to make personal freedom identical with the liberating of all ideas; there is freedom also in associations, if they are the right ones; but no one in the world is free so long as large sections of our population, however inattentively, are being bound by the identifying of patriotism with military boastfulness (1950/1969, 153–54).

Following Burke's "dissociative test" against militarism and Said's opposition to heteronomous closure, the skeptic would adopt Burke's mantle of individual freedom through logological interrogation. The skeptic would deny not only Hegseth's god but also the equally heteronomous images of American patriotism, freedom, the Constitution that Hegseth conveniently conjures at God's hip. Indeed, the skeptic would rightly perceive no categorical difference between Hegseth's God and Hegseth's Constitution.

Hegseth's rhetoric is overtly theistic, but the strongest response is not merely to debunk his god and raise a competing banner of *reason* or *logic*. By my assessment, postmillennial "New Atheism," represented by figures like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens (see Lee 2021, 222–26) has, in its scientific opposition to the God hypothesis and theological doctrine, followed a narrow path and failed to address the reach of heteronomous violence. The rhetorical promises and failures of New Atheism are a topic for another essay, but the debunking of God matters less than the logological wrangling of would-be God-terms.

Nor is the answer to rebuke the Hegseths of the world for merely choosing the wrong god. Regress toward the service of godly truth restricts the path further. This is true of Booth's theological pluralism, Weaver's traditionalist ontology, and various Christian scholars within rhetorical studies who demote rhetoric to the service of a higher truth (e.g., Campbell 2004; Medhurst 2004). If rhetoric serves a heteronomous authority, then the epistemic promise of rhetoric withers on the vine. If we cannot claim that language creates the conditions of human experience, then the generative purview of rhetorical invention radically constricts accordingly. Logological skepticism, then, offers a *disciplinary* defense of rhetoric in the same gesture as it offers a critical and inventive approach to the god-terms that constellate within the everyday practice of rhetorical life. This doggedly secular approach to life and language represents the strongest form of atheism—and the strongest form of rhetoric.

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Notes

1. On "spiritualization" in the posthumously published *The War of Words*, see Burke (2018, 92–109).
2. On Burke's and Vico's similar accounts of rhetorical epistemology and its relationship with religion, see Schaffer (1996). Said (1983) counts Vico as a vital forebear to secular criticism: "Knowing is making, Vico said, and what human beings can know is only what they have

made, that is, the historical, social, and secular. As for sacred history, it is made by God and hence cannot really be known, although Vico understood perfectly well that in a priest-ridden age such as his, God had to be respected and loudly celebrated” (291).

3. The phrase *coy theology* comes most famously from the “Prologue in Heaven” that concludes *The Rhetoric of Religion* (see Burke 1970, 301).
4. For his own part, Burke (1985) argues the opposite: that dramatism represents an ontological framework while logology represents an epistemological one.
5. Booth’s use of the capitalized *God-term* signals an ontological stance that differs from Burke’s methodological stance and his use of the lowercase *god-term*. I explore this distinction further in the next section.
6. I recently heard a terrific explanation and example of this rhetorical tactic from the trans YouTuber and cultural critic Natalie Wynn (2018): “Intellectually, I don’t think [essential womanhood] makes any sense. I think it’s heartwarming gibberish. But there’s also, I think, a legitimate role in the discourse for heartwarming gibberish. Sometimes you have to explain what it means to be trans to a person who believes that dogs go to heaven. And, in most circumstances, saying, ‘I’m a female soul in a male body,’ gets the point across” (15:57–16:18). Exactly.
7. For a scathing indictment of Weaver’s traditionalist perspective and its frankly racist and misogynistic implications, see Crowley (2001). For instances and discussion of Weaver’s sexism, see Weaver (1948/2013, 160–62) and Crowley (2001, 75–76), respectively. For a frank example of his racism as applied to the ostensibly “animal” and “primitive” art form of jazz, see Weaver (1948/2013, 77–79).

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