Burke on Psychodynamic Aesthetics: Forms that Help Us Cope

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It is sometimes assumed that a discontinuity occurred between Burke’s early literary aesthetics, with its emphasis on form, and his later work. I argue that there was continuity: already in Counter-Statement (1931), the formal properties of literature that bring aesthetic gratification are also among those that, in his later thinking, enable texts to be “equipment for living” and “symbolic action.” Throughout, form was always a crucial factor in Burke’s view of how discourse may impinge on people’s lives. What broadened was the domain Burke considered. Throughout he aimed for “generalizations as to what poems do for everybody,” as he wrote in Philosophy of Literary Form (73), but aesthetic form was also central to his understanding of what texts of any kind can “do.”

From the beginning, Burke was fascinated by form and by discourse as equipment for living. When he wrote Counter-Statement, the material he discussed was mainly (while not exclusively) literature, but a primary concern of his was always form, wherever found, as equipment for living: as his scope broadened, he continued to study how form can help humans—speakers, writers, hearers, readers—cope with their lives.

I will discuss how Burke saw form as a psychodynamic agent, as discussed primarily in Counter-Statement. To offset what is distinctive in Burke, I will then set his thinking on this theme beside related ideas in some significant forerunners and contemporaries. Further, I will briefly exemplify how the psychodynamic function of form is evident in actual readers’ experience of poetry. Finally, I will locate a similar effect of form in a piece of non-poetic discourse spoken into a critical social predicament: Winston Churchill’s famous wartime speech on “blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” I suggest that this analysis of the psychodynamics of form accentuates a constant and central theme in Burke’s thought.

The Psychodynamics of Form

Much commentary on Burke posits a break away from the emergent school of “New Criticism,” among whose precursors he is often counted. For example, René Wellek sees early Burke as a New Critical pioneer, but notes that he, like R.P. Blackmur, “later rejected the New Criticism in strong terms” and “moved away from his neo-critical beginnings” (613-614).
I suggest instead that Burke’s thinking was always decisively different from New Critical doctrine, and that on the other hand his notions of how human discourse may function show a clear and original continuity.

In Counter-Statement Burke proposes an aesthetic psychology of literature, equating form with “the psychology of the audience” (31), whereas other critical schools with a psychological tilt usually mean the psychology of writers and/or fictional protagonists. Form, according to Burke, is the arousal and gratification of expectations in the reader—processes occurring in the reader during the process of experiencing the text. Clearly, such processes are even more central in the experience of (instrumental) music, whose elements lack the conventionally determined semantic meanings attaching to words, and in which purely formal phenomena for that reason acquire dominance. In fact, it seems plausible, as discussed by Bostroff and Tompkins (1985), that Burke’s early theory of aesthetic form in Counter-Statement grew out of his work in the late ’twenties as a music critic.

The fact that the pivot of his aesthetic theory is a concept of form that is most obviously in evidence in music foregrounds the original etymology of the word “aesthetics”: it concerns aisthēsis—i.e., sensory perception.

Aesthetics, however, is not all in Counter-Statement. There is also an awareness of an existential psychology of literature—of how it may help humans “encompass” situations in life. Later, Burke develops and further emphasizes the idea that symbolic action—in all kinds of discourse—helps people (writers and readers alike) encompass situations, although he sometimes tends to find the poetic mode of symbolic action superior to that of science because poetic visions of reality can better, through ongoing revision, encompass “recalcitrance” (cf., e.g., Permanence and Change, 257)—that is, the perceived world’s resistance to the vision applied to it.

The idea that symbolic action can help encompass life situations is developed in Permanence and Change (1935) and Attitudes to History (1937), as documented by Prelli et al. (2011). The discontinuity assumed by some between Counter-Statement’s insistence on the formal gratifications afforded by literature and the broader, existential psychology of symbolic action of all kinds in the following works is a misperception because the purely formal-aesthetic properties of texts are throughout an equal part of what endows them with existential-psychological functions (as “equipment for living”).

Any rupture between Burke’s early insistence on formal aspects of literary texts and his later interest in how all kinds of discourse can be symbolic action and equipment for living is thus imaginary. While championing a psychology of form, Burke sees literature as not only offering
purely aesthetic gratification, but also as capable of cathartic or “propitiatory” action (a term used in *Permanence and Change*) —in part precisely by virtue of its *formal* properties.

To understand this better, recall how Burke often emphasizes the puzzling fact that we derive aesthetic gratification from form in works that we have read or seen many times; clearly the gratification they afford does not depend on new insight brought by their informational content. In this, literature differs from ordinary informative messages, but resembles music and ritual. Literature and music do something for readers/hearers—comparable to what ritual does for participants. In *Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), Burke resolutely generalizes this idea: “We propose to take *ritual drama* as the Ur-from the ‘hub,’ with all other aspects of human action treated as spokes radiating from this hub” (103; Burke’s italics). But already in *Counter-Statement* we hear that literature, by adding form to human “patterns of experience,” may provide cathartic release from the emotional stress such patterns generate: “Art, at least in the great periods when it has flowered, was the conversion, or transcendence, of emotion into eloquence and was thus a factor added to life” (41). A footnote describes Greek tragedy as “the sublimation of emotion into eloquence” (41). Eloquence equals form, in the Burkean sense circumscribed here. Turning situations into eloquence “encompasses” them; they achieve “poise and rhythm,” providing gratification. The “truth” found in art is simply “the formulation of symbols which rigidify our sense of poise and rhythm” (42). Human predicaments supply art’s content side, the substance in which art’s cathartic eloquence (form) is embodied (“individuated”)

Burke’s concept of form includes expectation and its fulfillment, gratification. We might paraphrase him with a physical metaphor by saying that formally generated expectation builds up the “voltage” of the process by increasing the felt resistance (Burke might say “recalcitrance”) and hence the reader’s forward urge; “current” comes from the emotional subject-matter involved. The cathartic process is analogous to Ohm’s law: voltage is proportional to current and to resistance.

Formal patterns have the power to engage because human beings are innately susceptible to them; this is true, for example, of what musicians call *crescendo*, and rhetoricians *gradatio* or *climax*: “the work of art utilizes climactic arrangement because the human brain has a pronounced potentiality for being arrested, or entertained, by such an arrangement” (45). The forms into which human experiences are embodied in literature provide gratification and cathartic effects because they fit the native susceptibilities of our minds in the way that keys fit locks. As symbol-using creatures we have a “feeling for such arrangements of subject-matter as produce crescendo, contrast, comparison, balance, repetition, disclosure, reversal, contraction, expansion,
magnification, series, and so on. ... At bottom these ‘forms’ may be looked upon as minor divisions of the two major ‘forms,’ unity and diversity” (46).

Burke repeatedly underscores this connection between forms and innate susceptibilities:

The formal aspects of art appeal in that they exercise formal potentialities of the reader. They enable the mind to follow processes amenable to it. ... The forms of art, to summarize, are not exclusively “aesthetic.” They can be said to have a prior aesthetic in the experience of the person hearing or reading the work of art. ... A form is a way of experiencing; and such a form is made available in art when, by the use of specific subject-matter, it enables us to experience in this way. (142-143)

In The Rhetoric of Motives (1950), Burke further explores how formal devices are “functional”:

processes of “identification” would seem to function here ... the audience feels as though it were not merely receiving, but were itself creatively participating in the poet’s or speaker’s assertion. ... we know that many purely formal patterns can readily awaken an attitude of collaborative expectancy in us. (57-58)

We see, then, that according to Burke even “mere” form without specific subject-matter (as in music) has the capacity to perform cathartic functions. But the themes and “patterns of experience” that literary works embody (Burke says “symbols” where most of us would say “themes”) also have the capacity to fit like keys into the locks of a readers’ minds, helping them cope with situations. As an example, Counter-Statement cites the works of Byron, which allowed readers to feel “Byronic” if thus inclined: “Mute Byrons (potential Byrons) were waiting in more or less avowed discomfiture for the formulation of Byronism, and when it came they were enchanted. ... the symbol being so effective, they called the work of Byron beautiful” (58). Thus a writer may provide for himself (and his readers) “a vocabulary to a situation (stressing such ways of feeling as equip one to cope with the situation)” (108).

This anticipates the “equipment for living” idea formulated in Philosophy of Literary Form. The wording in Counter-Statement is that writers offer readers “appropriate symbols for encompassing a situation” (80). Situations may, as Burke will later say, show “recalcitrance,” but formal/aesthetic
appeal can help a symbol motivate and engage; symbol and form together accomplish “the conversion of an existential pattern into a formula for affecting the audience” (157).

What features tend to generate formal appeal? A look at Burke’s examples of texts offering formal gratification reveals, for example, many cases of strongly contrasting or opposite properties coexisting very near each other, or even coinciding as aspects of the same element. His first example in the section “Psychology and Form” is Hamlet, Act I, Scene 1—where Hamlet and Horatio wait for the appearance of the ghost. Their expectation (and ours), deftly generated by Shakespeare, is diverted as they hear the strident sounds of the King’s carousel offstage; they drift into a discussion of Danes’ overindulgence in drink—and then: “Enter Ghost.” Its arrival is eagerly expected and yet—because the dialogue has taken a different turn—a surprise (30); two opposite qualities in one element. This backhanded way of satisfying our “appetite” is particularly gratifying. The formal ploy coupled with the existential urgency of Hamlet’s desire to meet his father’s ghost (which generates our sympathetic desire) makes the moment uniquely powerful.

Our expectations and gratifications increase, rather than decrease, if, by re-reading, we become more familiar with the work and know what to expect. We enjoy an “exaltation at the correctness of the procedure, so that we enjoy the steady march of doom in a Racinian tragedy with exactly the same equipment as that which produces our delight with Benedick’s ‘Peace! I’ll stop your mouth. (Kisses her)”—this being the climactic moment in Benedick and Beatrice’s romance in Much Ado about Nothing (37).

Form thus involves “desires and their appeasements” (31); however, desire/expectation is not only formal/physical, but also symbolic (i.e., generated by theme/content). Thus formal “voltage” and symbolic “current” are proportional. Gratification provided by the “symbol” (i.e., theme) is the other main type of literary appeal that Burke dissects. In many of his analyses, the manifold partly subliminal meanings clustering around a symbol are what accounts for the work’s main aesthetic appeal—and at the same time for its capacity to serve a cathartic function. Here too, that factors that provide aesthetic gratification are also the ones that allow the text to serve as equipment for living. Poetic texts, like music, are not messages imparting insight or knowledge; if they were, we could not derive the same gratification and catharsis from them repeatedly, the more so the better we know them. Rather, they function like rituals, not like revelations: “Revelation is ‘belief,’” or ‘fact.’ Art enters when this revelation is ritualized, when it is converted into a symbolic process. … Art as eloquence, ceremony, ritual” (168).
This does not mean that Burke “separates” form from content. The formal appeal (the ritual form, we may say) moves a certain content forward, the content providing the motivating impulse. Correspondingly, ritual is the formal enactment of some content/story/myth/narrative. Burke’s main emphasis is precisely on the ritual nature of aesthetic experience: the cathartic power resides in the process itself, as in ritual, not in any new information or insight it provides:

The “thoughts” of a writer are not the mere “revelation,” not the statements of a fact – the “thoughts” are the framing of this revelation in ritual. Accordingly, our savants err who attempt to catalogue for us the “thoughts” of a stylist like Milton, by stating them simply as precepts divorced from their stylistic context. The “thoughts” of a writer are the non-paraphrasable aspects of his work. (168-169)

Forebears and Parallels
Burke’s ideas of what form in literature can do, not only in terms of aesthetic enjoyment, but also in ways that extend beyond the reading experience, may become clearer in light of a few anticipations as well as contemporary parallels.

A quasi-ritualistic understanding of the capability of literary experience was proposed, of course, by Aristotle in his brief mention of catharsis in the Poetics. In Burke’s “Preface” to the second edition of Counter-Statement (1952), he says his view is the same as “the principle implicit in Aristotle’s view of tragedy, his somewhat homœopathic notion that we are cleansed of emotional tensions by kinds of art deliberately designed to affect us with these tensions under controlled conditions” (xii).

Aristotelian catharsis assumes the same connection that this article asserts: on the one hand it involves the specific processes activated during the progressive experience of the tragedy, and limited to that experience, by the tragedy’s distinctive properties—the expectations aroused in spectators and the gratification (the “tragic pleasure”) they experience in seeing such-and-such a hero undergoing peripety, anagnōrisis and the rest; on the other hand that experience also has an effect that lingers as an “afterglow,” and it is through that effect—for which the formal properties are enabling conditions—that a tragedy may become “equipment for living” for citizens of the polis. Burke sees an intimate connection between the purely formal-aesthetic gratification that pleases while experienced, and its afterglow that remains for a while, helping spectators cope with their emotional situation.
That *catharsis* mattered to Aristotle both as an aesthetic and a social concept is evident in his *Politics*. There, near the end, we find a lengthy discussion of the social roles of music (1339a-1342b), and of which kinds of music should be used for which purposes in the polis—whose overall purpose, as stated at the beginning of the *Politics* (1252a), is to secure as far as possible the good life for all its citizens. *Catharsis* is a process for which every citizen has a need, hence the state should make it available to all. A city-state aiming to secure the good life for all should provide music and tragedy and related artifacts for its citizens as equipment for living. Further, *catharsis* is a psychodynamic process activated by music no less than by art forms with a verbal component (such as tragedy). What matters for us is that music (i.e., instrumental music), which is, in a sense, pure form with no meaning content, can be just as cathartic as verbal artifacts, perhaps more so. Since semantic meaning is absent in instrumental music, it follows that the purely *formal* gratification provided to hearers is at least co-responsible for its psychodynamic effect. As for artifacts with a verbal or representational component, they provide cathartic experiences by virtue of formal properties *and* the semantic content that they represent (or “imitate”).

An anticipation of Burke’s thinking on form is also found, not surprisingly, in one of his literary heroes, Coleridge, whose reflections in *Biographia Literaria*, for example, discuss how versification can lend poems a distinctive kind of pleasure and at the same time enable them to offer readers an experience of willful mastery. This is particularly clear in Ch. XVIII, where Coleridge speaks of the “Origin and elements of metre”:

This I would trace to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion. It might be easily explained likewise in what manner this salutary antagonism is assisted by the very state, which it counteracts; and how this balance of antagonists became organized into metre (in the usual acception of that term), by a supervening act of the will and judgment, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure.

Significantly, Coleridge refers to “that pleasure, which such emotion, so tempered and mastered by the will, is found capable of communicating” (my emphasis). His is one of the few attempts in literary theory that may help explain the labor that poets invest in writing versified, rhyming discourse rather than prose. The imposition of versification onto words expressive of passionate emotion provides intense pleasure; whether Coleridge means to the poet or to the reader or to both
alike is not specified, but Burke would say: to both. Further, Burke would claim it can communicate an experience that the passions thus treated have been mastered or “encompassed.”

Other poets of the first rank have also attested to the power of poetic form. John Donne, in “The Triple Fool,” a poem on the frustration of unrequited love written around 1600, says:

Then, as th' earths inward narrow crooked lanes
Do purge sea waters fretful salt away,
I thought, if I could draw my pains
Through rhymes vexation, I should them allay.
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

What we see here is elements of a poetics quite along the lines of Burke’s early thinking in Counter-Statement. Even the idea of catharsis or “purgation” is there.

Burke’s “propitiatory” view of what literature can do has a contemporary parallel in Freud’s theory of humor (1928); humor is a tool developed by humanity to immunize us against the suffering that life forces on us. Mastery could be the common denominator between this and Burke’s thinking on how poetry may be symbolic action and do something for readers (and writers), rather than tell them insightful truths. Poems, like humor, may allow us to feel that we master or encompass situations in life.

Another contemporary of Burke, the Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, proposes a related idea in his early treatise The Psychology of Art (1925, English translation 1971). One of his main examples of cathartic form is Ivan Bunin’s story “Gentle Breath,” in which Vygotsky finds that the imposition of form on a deeply depressing plot imbues the reading experience with a feeling of lightness and, indeed, “gentle breath.” And Vygotsky’s analysis of Hamlet makes the overall point that the play achieves its cathartic power through form as it leads spectators unexpectedly and by devious and surprising routes to the eagerly awaited result.

In musicology, a seminal idea reminiscent of this and of Burke’s aesthetic thinking was proposed by the composer and philosopher Leonard B. Meyer (1956), who argued that value and greatness in music are functions of expectations deferred and then fulfilled.

As mentioned, Burke’s thinking is often aligned with that of his contemporaries, the “New Critics.” For example, there is the notion of “the heresy of paraphrase,” elaborated by Cleanth
Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947). Comparing literature to an exquisite urn (the book title is drawn from Donne’s poem “The Canonization”), Brooks asserts that a poem’s value is not in its informational content; but at the same time he insists that a poem is *more* than a mute, well-formed artifact: the poet, he says, gives us “an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which, at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern” (214). We see here the characteristic New Critical valorization of “irony” and “paradox”—devices based on contradiction—and a belief in the power of poetry comparable to Burke’s; however, we also see a doctrine that the New Critics never abandoned, but which Burke never held: that the power of poetry comes from the *insight* it brings. Such insight, the New Critics would insist, is of a “higher and more serious” kind, made un-paraphrasable by properties such as irony and paradox. In contrast, Burke sees what poetry provides as ritual action, including but not limited to insight. Its ritualistic or formal element accounts for much of what it can do. Burke, in *Counter-Statement*, certainly shows himself to be just as much of a connoisseur of irony and paradox as the New Critics, but he sees these devices as aspects of *formal* appeal; poetry is *not* revelation. Burke deviates from New Criticism by recognizing that what poetry/literature does, partly in virtue of its formal “eloquence” (or “rhetoric,”) is not to provide knowledge or insight (“revelation”); nor is its function *only* to provide aesthetic gratification, but also to perform “corrective,” “cathartic” or “catalytic” functions in the lives of readers’ (and writers). New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks shied away from embracing a truly psychodynamic poetics, relying instead on their ambiguous theory that poetry does provide insight or knowledge, only of a “higher,” non-paraphrasable kind. They highlighted many of the same properties as Burke—irony, ambiguity, paradox, contrast—but had little to say on the *function* of poetry, being generally anti-psychological, anti-emotional, anti-sociological, etc., like many of the leading intellectuals and creative artists of their period. They tended to believe, with a famous quote from Archibald MacLeish, that “a poem should not mean / but be”; to Burke a poem certainly also means something, but what it means is a vehicle for what it can *do*. He saw the gratifications provided by form and “symbol” as together constituting the aesthetic potential of a text, and thus its cathartic potential. Symbolic and formal effects, while not the same, are coordinated: “Symbolic intensity arises when the artist uses subject-matter ‘charged’ by the reader’s situation outside the work of art. … Formal charges may be attributed to arrangements within the work itself” (163-164). What poetry can do for writers and readers is this: “Increase of perception and sensitivity through increase of terminology (a character or a situation in fiction is as much a term as any definition in a
scientific nomenclature). An equipment, like any vocabulary, for handling the complexities of living” (183).

**Form in a Reader’s Experience**

That grief and other unwieldy emotions may be “fettered” in verse (to use Donne’s term) is known and felt not just by poets, but also by their readers. I will offer one example of this, a statement made by a graduate student, John, who took a graduate course of mine on “Why and How We Read” at a large Midwestern university. Students in the course had been asked to bring along literary texts or passages that had given them powerful aesthetic experiences. John brought Dylan Thomas’s frequently anthologized poem “Fern Hill.” Its speaker recalls his youth in highly suggestive language that is often slightly deviant in innovative ways; it is a poem much quoted by literary theorists for examples of linguistic “foregrounding.” Irregular though the poem is linguistically, it is extremely rule-bound formally, using the same intricate metrical pattern—John calls it a “homostrophic form”—in all six stanzas:

This isn't really the way he lived his youth and none of us have our lives as well defined as this ... what he is doing here is imposing order on something. This is a good contrast, he's dealing with a subject which is mutability itself, time, and he imposes order on it, it's kind of yoking of opposites ... Thomas is using a homostrophic form here to combat the kind of chaos which his personal life possessed and which the passing of time possesses for all of us ...

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke assigned to aesthetic form a function of which the order-imposing effect described by John the reader and the “fettering” celebrated by John Donne the poet are specific examples. In the poetics Burke developed in *Counter-Statement* we can observe what he later described by saying “I was trying to develop a theory of literary form” (1976, 62). By expressing themselves in form, writers and speakers communicate to themselves, and to readers or hearers, an experience of overcoming something that needs overcoming. Here we find a bridge, rather than a rupture, between what poetry does according to early Burke and what rhetorical action in general does according to later Burke.

Another way of asserting this is to say that Burke would have seconded Jeffrey Walker’s argument against “the bifurcated views of ‘literature’ and ‘rhetoric,’ or of epideictic and practical civic rhetoric” (146).
Eloquence to Match Exigence

I would like in conclusion to offer an example of how sheer formal eloquence of the kind that early Burke primarily finds in poetry can function similarly in non-poetic, public rhetorical action—in this case, a celebrated piece of rhetoric addressing a nation in a desperate situation: the speech given by Winston Churchill to Parliament on May 13, 1940.

At this time, Germany was victorious on all fronts. British forces had been humiliatingly ousted from Norway, and Hitler’s armies seemed unstoppable in France. Only three days before Churchill had succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Chamberlain’s appeasement policy, which Churchill had long opposed, had been discredited. Churchill too had opponents in all parties, but was seen as the only politician who, as Prime Minister, could muster the confidence of all parties.

The speech, later that day broadcast to the nation, has been seen as the one that cemented Churchill’s leadership and his status as master orator. His grandson, in a collection of his grandfather’s speeches, writes: “With this speech, which was subsequently broadcast to the world, Churchill electrified the House and the nation. … In the House, as he sat down, there was a moment of stunned silence, followed by a wholly exceptional standing ovation” (Churchill 168). Likewise, there are numerous examples of the energizing effect the speech had on ordinary Britons; for example, Nellie Carver, a London woman, is quoted in Toye’s monograph The Roar of the Lion as writing this on the day the speech was broadcast: “Winston’s speeches send all sorts of thrills racing up and down my veins and I feel fit to tackle the largest Hun!” (8).

The speech is only 730 words long and took c. 6 minutes to deliver. The first two thirds of it (491 words) are held in formal, almost bureaucratic language, beginning with “On Friday evening last I received His Majesty's commission to form a new Administration.” It continues in a style that might be described as “ceremonial,” the parlance of parliamentary procedure, as in this representative excerpt: “I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make allowance, all allowance, for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act.”

At just this point, moving into the last third of the speech, without any pause or paragraph, Churchill abruptly shifts into the pathos of the famous words: “I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this government: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” Between these words and the previous passage there is a contrast that must have been surprising to all and may have been shocking.
A first observation about form at this point is that countless aesthetically powerful artifacts—from folktales to operas—have a structure where the last third, or the last unit of three, while continuous with the first two, differs markedly from them. Churchill’s last third is the celebrated part; yet it could not have had the resonance it achieved if the preceding two thirds had not prepared a foil for it. It follows here (reprinted after Churchill, 168-169):

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, "come then, let us go forward together with our united strength."

Burke in Counter-Statement lists “crescendo, contrast, comparison, balance, repetition, disclosure, reversal, contraction, expansion, magnification, series, and so on” as “potentialities of appreciation which would seem to be inherent in the very germ-plasm of man, and which, since they are constant, we might call innate forms of the mind” (46). The abrupt change before the last third of the speech instantiates some of these phenomena—one could see it as a sudden crescendo creating a resounding contrast between before and after. Burke notes: “Over and over again in the history of art, different material has been arranged to embody the principle of the crescendo; and this must be so cause we ‘think’ in a crescendo, because it parallels certain psychic and physical processes which are at the roots of our experience” (45).

From here on Churchill continues in elevated, almost liturgical style, with literate, semi-archaic words like ordeal, grievous, and others from a pathos-laden register. We now find recurrent, tiny deviations from an unmarked, communication-conveying style, as in many long months of struggle and of suffering—the second of is a small, almost unnoticeable deviation from how one might normally say this. Similarly in You ask, what is our policy? I can say ... , can has a similar effect of slightly deviating from the standard phrase one might normally use (which would just be: I say).

Aristotle declares in the Rhetoric: “It is therefore well to give everyday speech an unfamiliar (xenikon) air: people like what strikes them, and are struck by what is out of the way” (1404b).
Churchill’s little deviations from daily idiomatic speech have this quality, yet the passage seems to heed Aristotle’s further advice that a rhetor “must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally nor artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary” (1404b). In other words, a feeling of the “unfamiliar” must be conveyed, but hearers must not be conscious of the unfamiliarity as a deliberate device. A modern term for features that impart an “unfamiliar air” to a text is foregrounding; in several empirical studies it has been shown that foregrounding involving “defamiliarization” correlates with affect and even a feeling of “sublimity” in readers (Miall and Kuiken 1994; Miall 2007).

Another formal artifice has to do with expectations aroused and gratified—but not necessarily gratified in the expected way. Consider, for example, the words to wage war, by sea, land and air. This phrase may raise an expectation that an anaphoric series has been begun, with wage war as the repeated initial element. But the continuation is not a parallel phrase beginning with wage war, but instead an adverbial phrase: with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us—which in turn might create an expectation of another anaphoric series where with all ... is the recurrent initial element. However, now that hearers have probably stopped expecting a series with wage war, we do in fact get a reiteration of wage war. We may recall Burke’s Hamlet example: the ghost doesn’t appear when expected, but when the talk changes and almost makes us forget about it, it appears.

Churchill thus repeatedly raises and gratifies his listeners’ expectations—either by fulfilling them, or by circumventing them and then fulfilling them when not expected, or in ways not expected. He inserts apparent beginnings of parallelisms, having us guess whether there will in fact be a parallelism, and if so, how complete and long it will be. In the passage without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised, the short sentence Let that be realised helps cancel a possible expectation that an anaphoric series with without victory is to begin; but as soon as that expectation is likely to be canceled in listeners’ minds, it is fulfilled. Significantly, Churchill admiringly wrote about the oratory of his father: “No one could guess beforehand what he was going to say or how he would say it” (Toye 14).

In Counter-Statement, Burke dissects specimens of “expert prose” (133), highlighting the prevalence of “dissimilar balances”—sequences where units are “intellectually equivalent” but “formally diverse.” In Churchill’s speech we find the converse phenomenon: recurrent words and forms that turn out to have different meanings or functions. Consider this anaphoric series with its apparently similar relative clauses beginning with that: no survival for the British Empire, no
survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. The first that-clause here is clearly a defining relative clause: it defines the scope of all. It is then natural to understand the second that-clause, beginning with that mankind... , similarly, i.e., as defining the scope of the ages. But in retrospect it turns out to be a parenthetical clause, relative to the noun phrase the urge and impulse of the ages: the object of the urge and impulse is that mankind will move forward towards its goal. Hearers are momentarily led to understand that they are hearing a complete parallelism, but must revise that understanding retrospectively. Linguists call such structures “garden path phenomena” (Pritchett 1988).

The synonyms urge and impulse themselves may momentarily challenge hearers’ interpretive capacities, making them inadvertently seek a subtle semantic difference between these two nouns of apparently identical meaning: if Churchill intends no such difference, why does he use both? But this spontaneous reaching out after a supposed semantic nuance may pass as the next sentences follow, and what is left in hearers’ minds may then be a vague sense that more meaning was conveyed here than they had time to grasp. This use of synonyms is distinctive of discourse that is generally felt to be elevated or sacred—for example, the poetry of the Old Testament (cf. Jakobson 1966).

I would suggest that numerous tiny effects of these kinds in the last third of Churchill’s speech (Burke might say “a frequency of formal eloquence”) are apt to induce an affect, a sense of elevating grandeur, scope, and power in the words, that transfers to the hearer.

I should emphasize that I do not assume hearers may have had a conscious awareness of all these small features that would enable them to analyze them in the way I have suggested here. On the contrary: as Aristotle repeatedly points out, the “unfamiliar” stylistic air that he counsels orators to assume, depends for its effects on its being “disguised,” i.e., not registered consciously by hearers.

In The Rhetoric of Motives (1950) Burke observes that “purely formal patterns can readily awaken an attitude of collaborative expectancy in us,” and that “where a decision is still to be reached, a yielding to form prepares for assent to matter identified with it. Thus, you are drawn to the form, not in your capacity as a partisan, but because of some ‘universal’ appeal in it” (57-58); in other words, the effect of a formal pattern may be that “on the level of purely formal assent you would collaborate to round out its symmetry by spontaneously willing its completion and perfection as an utterance” (58-59). This “purely formal” appeal to the audience is, he again asserts in a later essay (“Rhetoric and Poetics,” in Language as Symbolic Action, 1966), “universal. Hence, an
audience can readily yield to this aspect of an exhortation” (296). Already in Counter-Statement Burke spoke about “the value of formal appeal in inducing acquiescence. For to guide the reader’s expectations is already to have some conquest over him” (178).

There is in fact a great deal of empirical evidence that the May 13 speech helped Churchill have conquest. It won him a unanimous vote of confidence in Parliament, and Britons as well as occupied peoples felt increasingly energized to fight the “Hun”—although he had said nothing substantially new in the speech, offered no arguments for his intransigent attitude towards Germany (which many Britons questioned), and offered nothing but “blood, toil, tears and sweat.” Instead, it seems plausible that this speech and others helped Churchill’s audiences “encompass” Britain’s situation by sheer formal means. This suggests that the formal devices Burke knew from poetry can also be “propitiatory” and serve as equipment for living when used in rhetorical action in response to a critical worldly exigence.

Recently, rhetorical affect theory has focused on workings of rhetorical utterances akin to what we find in Churchill’s celebrated oratory, or in great poetry. Jenny Edbauer Rice, in a discussion on recent work in affect theory, notes: “affective energies will still remain part of rhetoric, discourse, and communication. Theories of affect are worth our time and our attention, even if not yet our full agreement” (211).

I suggest that Burke would have welcomed affect theory on the critical scene. He discussed and analyzed form-induced affect more thoroughly than anyone else in his lifetime. There was no discontinuity between his early aesthetic formalism and his later life-encompassing rhetoric. The observations on quasi-ritual effects of form in literature that dominate his earliest book are continuous with his later thinking on language as symbolic action. Throughout he saw form in language as equally powerful, and similarly powerful. This was inherent in his literary theory and criticism from the beginning and remained central as he expanded his purview to the entire realm of discourse. Rhetorical scholars would do well to always take the psychodynamic power of form into account in their analysis and critique of rhetorical action.

References


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1 A parallel to this reading of Churchill’s historic speech is an analysis of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address by the Shakespeare scholar Stephen Booth (1998). Just as Churchill has numerous inconspicuous deviations from ordinary idiomatic English, so also Booth finds that the “simple, straightforward” Address is in fact “full of small gratuitous stylistic perversities that complicate—but do not weaken—our perceptions of the continuity and connection that syntax, logic, and phonetic patterning assert” (38). According to Booth, these “perversities” make the hearer feel, on the one hand, that he fully grasps the speaker’s meaning, but on the other hand that this meaning, paradoxically, has a depth and complexity beyond his normal reach.