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# What the Spirit Knows: Charles Williams and Kenneth Burke

## **Abstract**

Explores parallels between the philosophy of Kenneth Burke and the poetry of Charles Williams.

# WHAT THE SPIRIT KNOWS: CHARLES WILLIAMS AND KENNETH BURKE

GRACE L. VEACH

## Introduction

KENNETH BURKE WAS THE INITIATOR AND CODIFIER of many great critical ideas of the twentieth century. Although Burke's religious faith, or lack of it, is less readily obvious than Williams's, he made religious terminology central to much of his writing and criticism. As I read Kenneth Burke's critical works, I wondered how his ideas, which are tolerant of if not sympathetic toward Christianity, would aid in reading a poet who was unashamedly Christian. In this paper I hope to answer two main questions. First, can Burke's central ideas, which he himself used in short critical vignettes, be productive when used as a critical method, especially with a Christian poet? And second, will the poetry of Charles Williams yield new insights if subjected to a Burkean reading?

I plan to look at *Taliessin Through Logres* and *Region of the Summer Stars* as read through some of Burke's primary critical methods. First I will examine substance—the beginning of postmodern psychology, and scapegoat—the psychology of blame. Finally, since Burke saw the dialectic as ultimately entelechial, that is, moving towards perfection, I will examine some of Burke's statements on the dialectic and look at the dialectic in Williams's poetry.

This experiment traces one possible application of Burke's critical methods to a fairly large body of work. I was able to come to some fairly certain conclusions. First, I do think that Burke can successfully be used to write literary criticism. Though many have reduced the pentad, Burke's motivational questioning of Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose, to a reductive formula, there are other strong and fruitful lines of thought to develop. Second, Burke's critical methods present an interesting starting point for "Christian" criticism. Burke's vocabulary and the Christian critic's vocabulary overlap to the extent that there are almost unlimited possibilities for using Burke as a springboard for specifically Christian criticism. Finally, I will show that using Burke to read Williams highlights some aspects of Williams's poetry that have yet to be fully explored.

In "Neither Trust nor Suspicion: Kenneth Burke's Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," Timothy Crusius shows how Burke is able to integrate hermeneutics and rhetoric by abandoning both the hermeneutics of tradition and

the hermeneutics of suspicion and choosing a third alternative which leaves both trust and suspicion suspended in paradox (80). This is done through Burke's technique of "discounting." Crusius's discussion of discounting and identification in Burke is useful in applying Burke's concepts of identification to Williams. Identification is also a key term for Dennis G. Day in "Persuasion and the Concept of Identification." Day shows how Burke revolutionized rhetoric by making identification the only means of persuasion.

Two writers focus on Burke's theories in relation to religion. James Macklin uses terms from Burke's logology in analyzing Augustine and the Catholic Mass in "A Trinitarian Logology." Macklin contrasts Burke with Derrida; although Derrida removes the object from his semiotic discussions, Burke does not. The presence of the object (crucial to Christian thought which is grounded in the Ultimate Object) makes Burke more effective in discussing religion than is Derrida. The trinitarian logology to which Macklin refers is derived from C.S. Peirce's triadic rhetorical theory that all communication requires a word, a thing, and an interpretant. Macklin shows that the third term is essential in explaining why religion has meaning; the third term relates the word to the unseen object (i.e. God).

Perhaps the author whose methodology I most closely approximate in this paper is Laurence Coupe in "Words and the Word: Kenneth Burke's Logology and T.S. Eliot's Mythology." Coupe writes, "Language defines humanity, and humanity always seeks to go beyond itself. A yearning for the supernatural is natural" (40). This is his take on Burke's emphasis on studying words about God. He goes on to look at *The Waste Land* as Eliot's attempt at mythopoeia (informed by Frazer and Jessie Weston). Just a few years later, Williams would take this same subject, Arthurian legend, and attempt to do the same thing that Eliot did.

Interestingly, Coupe contrasts Wallace Stevens's "rage for order" with Eliot's writing in "*Ulysses*, Order and Myth." Coupe refers to Stevens's "blessed rage," that "impl[ies] that the human urge towards perfection of language is in itself a mode of redemption, with the beauty of poetry revealing the sacredness of earthly existence" (43). He claims that Eliot "desire[s] release from words and world alike. 'Perfectionism' is a matter of negation rather than fulfilment" (43). As we will see, Williams recognizes both of these tendencies and accommodates them both in his 'Way of Affirmation' and his 'Way of Negation.' Like Burke, Williams recognizes that the most honest path (if not the easiest) is the one that allows for and affirms two possible extremes, even as the individual tries to exist in the space of paradoxical confrontation between them.

While the aforementioned critical works influence my ideas here, the critical method that I will use widens the scope of Burke's ideas that have been used in a single critical essay. The number of poems in Williams's cycles and the

difficulty in reading much of Williams's poetry have made this kind of broad treatment possible and indeed, productive.

### **Burke and Williams: Substance, Scapegoat**

Burke was one of the first Modernists to start questioning whether words could ever pin down the true nature, or substance, of anything. As he studied the ways that humans describe things by what they are not, he hit upon a living example of this concept in play within civilization, namely, the scapegoat. Like substance, a scapegoat is impossible to describe concretely; the scapegoat is identified with its representative people yet it is also cast out and destroyed as alien to that same people.

To Burke, substance is a paradox, since one must describe the essence of something in terms of what it is not. Although he believes that things do have their own intrinsic natures (*Grammar of Motives* 56-57), he admits that describing these intrinsic natures with precision is tricky if not impossible. In fact, he points out that we say that something is "substantially true" when what we mean is that it may be true in all aspects save one (in other words, false) (52). In his words, "whenever we find a distinction between the internal and the external [...] we can expect to encounter the paradoxes of substance" (47). Although Burke's idea anticipates deconstructionist theories of meaning, Burke asserts that even though substance may become ephemeral when examined too closely, examine it one must, in order to understand the real effects that any substance produces (56-57).

Williams's Taliessin poems also address the question of substance. For Williams, the nature of creation and humans' relationship to it, humans' relationship to the Creator, and humans' relationships to one another, all have at their cores questions of substance. One of the great controversies throughout religious history has been the existence of evil. If God created everything that exists, He must have created evil, since it exists. Yet if God is good, how could He create evil? Williams presents his answer to this question in the poem "The Vision of the Empire." In it, the unfallen Adam complains, "[A]m I not too long meanly retired / in the poor space of joy's single dimension?" (*eta*, 4-5). Even though the substance of all that he has experienced to that point is good (joy), he is bored, and wants to be like God: "Does not God vision the principles at war?" (6). Notice here the word "principles," which Burke singled out as a "first term" (*Grammar* 52), and which Williams certainly intended to use as such. Adam is unhappy because he thinks that God must be able to see something besides joy—the principles at peace, if you will—but he (Adam) cannot. He solves this problem by choosing to see good as evil: "Let us grow to the height of God and the Emperor: / Let us gaze, son of man, on the Acts in contention" (*eta*, 7-8). Once that happens, "the good lusted against the good" (14). Human refusal to accept

the given caused evil to result from wrongly perceiving something that was good in substance.

This seems to be Burke's view as well. He says in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "Because of our choice [to look for a generalizing motive], we can treat 'war' as a 'special case of peace'—not as a primary motive in itself, not as *essentially* real, but purely as a *derivative* condition, a *perversion*" (20). So while Williams describes the Fall as the beginning of hierarchical division, Burke is working towards reversing the process by showing us war as something we can generalize into the unity of good.

A second concern related to substance is humankind's apprehension of God. Williams liked to use two sayings to describe humans' understanding of God: "This also is Thou" and "Neither is this Thou" (Lewis 335). Thus, while everything points toward God, since it was created by Him and thus bears His imprint, nothing by itself is equal to God. This concept can be illustrated by one of Williams's favorite ideas, the Beatrician moment. During a Beatrician vision, a man might see a woman not only as herself, but as an Ideal of Romance so perfect that to pursue the vision would be to move closer to God. Williams took this idea from Dante, of course, but it recurs time and again in this poem cycle. In the Beatrician moment, the woman is apprehended, but so also is something more, something that would approach the apprehension of God in some way. This introduces the possibility that substance is not static, but shifting. Added to the difficulties of defining true substance through language are the complexities of the flux of the substance itself.

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke describes a process very similar to this Beatrician moment:

The person becomes the charismatic vessel of some "absolute" substance. And when thus magically endowed, the person transcends his nature as an individual, becoming instead the image of the idea he stands for. He is then the representative not of himself but of the family or class substance with which he is identified. In this respect he becomes "divine" [...].

Thus, when the principle of social reverence attains its summing up in the person of a beloved, she is loved not merely "for herself," but for what she "represents," as charismatic vessel of a social motive which the lover, or communicant, would court roundabout. Indeed, marriage as a sacrament so binds social and religious reverence together that you could not tell where "careerism" ends and "God" begins. (277)

Here Burke and Williams both seem to agree that while romantic love can simply be romantic love, it can also be something more, namely, an approach to knowing God. This concept is key in the Taliessin cycle.

In the poem entitled "The Coming of Palomides," Palomides, who was a Muslim knight, comes to Logres and sees Iseult. Iseult, of course, is already well spoken-for as she sits between Mark her husband and Tristram her lover, yet Palomides sings for the court:

Blessed for ever be the hour  
when first the intellectual power  
saw triple angles, triple sides,  
and that proceed which naught divides  
through their great centre, by the stress  
of the queen's arm's blissful nakedness,  
to unions metaphysical (77-83)

Here is one of Williams's classic Beatrician moments. In this case, since Palomides was a pagan and since Iseult was already a representative of faithlessness, the vision ceases almost immediately:

Down the arm of the queen Iseult  
quivered and darkened an angry bolt;  
and, as it passed, away and through  
and above her hand the sign withdrew.  
[.....]  
and aloof in the roof, beyond the feast,  
I heard the squeak of the questing beast,  
where it scratched itself in the blank between  
the queen's substance and the queen. (103-106, 129-132)

Though the vision departed, it left Palomides a changed man; he became known as the knight who fruitlessly pursued the questing beast which he would never catch—a metaphor for his doomed quest to attain a relationship with that object of his vision which no longer even existed. Thus, the queen's substance and the queen are no longer one and the same; only in Palomides's moment of heightened perception did the queen ever truly attain her own substance.

In addition to trying to describe a person's own nature, or substance, Williams's poetry also deals with the relationships between people. Burke's writing on "consubstantiality" in the *Rhetoric* applies here. He describes how in many common ways, person A can be identified with person B (family relations, common occupation, etc.). Yet at the same time, A is not B, or, as Williams would say, "This also is Thou; Neither is this Thou" (20-21). Rhetorically, consubstantiality is a powerful tool for identification, although, as Burke points out, "to begin with 'identification' is, by the same token, through roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*" (22).

In "Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney," Williams depicts the central consubstantiality/division of the Matter of Britain. In this poem, Lamorack describes the two crucial misidentifications in the myth; two sets of consubstantial siblings, Balin and Balan and Arthur and Morgause, perform two acts, which Williams points to as the beginning of the downfall of Logres.

Balin had Balan's face, and Morgause her brother's.  
Did you not know the blow that darkened each from other's?

Balin and Balan fell by mistaken impious hate.  
Arthur tossed loves with a woman and split his fate.  
Did you not see, by the dolorous blow's might,  
the contingent knowledge of the Emperor floating into sight? (47-52)

Both the blind warfare of the brothers Balin and Balan and the blind incest of Arthur and Morgause are here equated with the Dolorous Blow (the blow which dealt the Fisher King a grievous injury, only curable by Galahad), and the self does irreparable damage not only to itself, but to the entire nation and even the world. Although the Dolorous Blow was actually struck by Balin, the confusion of identity and the violent acts against the self are here all attributed not only to him but to Arthur as well; the misidentification of the self and the misidentification of the Other are the central acts of error. Interestingly, this re-enactment of the Fall does not involve choosing to see wrongly as in the Fall, but the refusal to see rightly. As a result, the original plan of the kingdom of heaven being realized in Logres becomes an impossibility, but the "contingency" plan is already present to take its place.

A more positive poetic description of substance is presented in the poem "Bors to Elayne: The Fish of Broceliande." In this cycle, Bors and Elayne are the representatives of the ideal married life. Bors begins the poem by telling Elayne, "Taliessin sang of the sea-rooted western wood; / his song meant all things to all men, and you to me" (9). This foreshadows the appearance of the Grail at the Round Table, when it offered to each man the food he most preferred. For Williams, this is an opportunity to "prefer the given," to accept the grace that is offered rather than to "look upon the acts in contention" by choosing to be dissatisfied. In other words, Bors could have seen any woman he found desirable, but because his marriage was as it should be, he saw his wife (or perhaps because he saw his wife, his marriage was as it should be).

The "sea-rooted western wood" refers to Broceliande, a land of mystery and a source of poetry, so Bors, a practical man, is somewhat bewildered about what is happening. He imagines himself picking up a fish, which at once is Elayne and is not Elayne (This also is Thou; Neither is this Thou). Of course, in Christian poetry, a fish is never just a fish. In contrast to Palomides's vision of



Iseult which begins promisingly but comes to a jarring halt, this vision allows Bors to see Elayne as she really is but as he rarely gets to see her (the elusive quality of the fish). As C. S. Lewis says in his commentary, “a transitory vision is not necessarily a vision of the transitory” (301). There are few metaphors that describe the “slipperiness” of substance as described by Burke better than the wet and wriggling fish.

It is but a step in Burke’s writing from the paradox of substance to identification with the scapegoat. Once again, the opposing phrases “This also is Thou; neither is this Thou” can be invoked. The scapegoat is at once identified with and alien to the subject. As Burke puts it, “the pattern proclaims a principle of *absolute* ‘guilt,’ matched by a principle that is designed for the corresponding absolute cancellation of such guilt. And this cancellation is contrived by *victimage*, by the choice of a sacrificial offering that is correspondingly absolute in the perfection of its fitness” (*Permanence* 283-84). In this passage, Burke goes on to list many ways that the scapegoat can be portrayed in literature and culture.

Williams approaches the traditional scapegoat concept in a couple of ways, but he eventually seems to back away from each of them. For example, Palomides could have been a scapegoat; he was a knight, but he was also an outsider, since he was a Muslim. He was further isolated by his solitary pursuit of the Questing Beast. But rather than allowing Palomides to come to the end he deserved, especially after he triumphed over Lancelot at a tournament by cheating, Williams allows Palomides a choice, and Palomides chooses to become Christian, thus becoming one in substance with the rest of the knights rather than becoming a scapegoat.

Williams also toys with the idea of women as symbolic scapegoats:

I heard, as in a throb of stretched verse,  
the women everywhere throughout it [The Empire] sob with the curse  
and the altars of Christ everywhere offer the grails.  
Well are women warned from serving the altar  
who, by the nature of their creature, from Caucasia to Carbonek,  
share with the Sacrifice the victimization of blood.  
Flesh knows what spirit knows,  
but spirit knows it knows—categories of identity;  
women’s flesh lives the quest of the Grail  
in the change from Camelot to Carbonek and from Carbonek to Sarras,  
puberty to Carbonek, and the stanching, and Carbonek to death.  
Blessed is she who gives herself to the journey.  
 (“Taliessin in the Rose-Garden” 157-168)

Though all women share the “victimization of blood,” again Williams stops short of using women as scapegoats. They are living symbols of the Sacrifice, but are not called on to repeat the sacrifice.

Mordred is an obvious scapegoat in the Matter of Britain, but one cannot simply pin the blame on Mordred without first considering Arthur as a more ideal scapegoat. Arthur and Mordred serve as another Burkean example of consubstantiality, this one between father and son. As king, Arthur represents the entire nation. His tragic flaws have resulted in the birth of Mordred; therefore, it is fitting that Mordred should be the *agency* of the sacrifice of the scapegoat. While Arthur plays the part of the tragic hero in this cycle, thus assuming the role of scapegoat for the reader, the scapegoat in this case does not bring about the expected reconciliation. After Arthur’s death, the once-unified Empire also dissolves into warring factions. Lewis comments:

All over the world the principle of co-inherence is lost. The true doctrine that

the everlasting house the soul discovers  
is always another’s,

has become hateful to men and they are ‘frantic with fear of losing themselves in others’ [...]. One result of this is that they are busily engaged in ‘choosing foes.’ For if one will not have the City one is driven by the necessity of one’s nature to invent a substitute for it, and this cannot be done without finding a scapegoat. When race is separated from race ‘and grace prized in schism,’ when all our pleasure is to be *inside* some partial and arbitrary group, then of course, we must have ‘outsiders’ to despise and denounce—Jews, Capitalists, Papists, the Bourgeoisie, what-not—or it is no fun. That is how ‘the primal curse’ appears on the political level. For that primal curse is, for Williams, the refusal or denial of the Identity, the spirit which said in Eden ‘Let us gaze, son of man, on the Acts in contention.’ (366)

Thus in Williams’s thinking, guilt results in the division of the community into individuals, represented by the symbolic casting out of the scapegoat from the community. Williams, of course, holds the Christian belief that there is only one Perfect Victim who can bring about reconciliation through sacrifice—Christ. Therefore, any Christian poet’s use of the scapegoat, unless the scapegoat is Christ or represents Christ, will only allow for partial redemption.

In Williams’s Christian theology, however, the scapegoat motif is completed by the doctrine of Substitution. As Christ became a willing scapegoat and thus was, in Burke’s words, “a total cathartic *friend*” (*Permanence & Change* 288), the merger of *action*—the assumption of another’s guilt—with the formerly

*passive* concept of scapegoat brings in a new dimension. Williams believes that Christ was not the only one who can willingly accept the guilt of others. As Christians, we can follow Christ in this way as well. As we voluntarily take upon ourselves the burden of another, we also exceed the role of mere scapegoat; we are mysteriously invited to share in the role of savior. "‘He saved others, himself he cannot save’ is a *definition* of the Kingdom" (307) writes Lewis.

This complication of the scapegoat role can act almost dialectically as we see in the poem "Taliessin on the Death of Virgil." At the beginning of the poem, Virgil is playing the role of scapegoat, dying a pagan’s death and bound for Hades. But Christians, who have already accepted the substitutionary scapegoat in their lives, rush from the future to aid their hero:

Unborn pieties lived.  
Out of the infinity of time to that moment’s infinity  
they lived, they rushed, they dived below him, they rose  
to close with his fall;  
[.....]  
Others he saved; himself he could not save.  
[.....]  
Virgil was fathered of his friends.  
He lived in their ends.  
He was set on the marble of exchange. (19-22, 25, 39-41)

The scapegoat becomes the saved, to become in the future, a savior.

### **Williams, Burke, and the Dialectic**

Arguably, Burke’s greatest contribution for Christian readers is his theory of the hierarchical dialectic, which when encountered produces transformation and rebirth. For Burke, hierarchy and dialectic are closely related. As a term encounters its antithesis, a third term must be realized, but the third term must be one that produces a progression. As Burke comments on Plato’s types of government, he notes, "We are saying that to leave the four kinds merely confronting one another in their diversity would have been ‘dialectical’ in the sense of the parliamentary jangle, but that this attempt to arrange them hierarchically transforms the dialectical into an ‘ultimate’ order" (*Rhetoric* 188-189). For Burke, any ultimate order will culminate in what he calls "God-terms"; for the Christian, any ultimate order will culminate with God Himself.

Although dialectic can apply in many secular situations, as Burke illustrates, it bears special weight for Christians who identify themselves as having been "born again." Burke explains this in *A Grammar of Motives* when he discusses the results of the sacrifice of the Scapegoat: "[T]he alienating of iniquities from the self to the scapegoat amounts to a *rebirth* of the self. In brief, it

would promise a conversion to a new principle of motivation—and when such a transformation is conceived in terms of the familial or substantial, it amounts to a change of parentage” (407).

Williams uses hierarchical dialectic in the poem “The Vision of the Empire.” As Burke defines humans as the “symbol using” animals (*Rhetoric of Religion* 1), Williams employs the same nomenclature here. He uses both kinds of antitheses that Burke describes, the counterpart—*intelligo* and *credo* (*delta*, 5)—and the opposite—the Emperor and the Headless Emperor (*theta*, 20, 33). Williams makes a careful distinction between the two types; while counterpart and paradox are a valuable illustration of the concept of coinherence, opposites illustrate duality. Because duality was one of the heresies he described in “Prelude,” (III, 1-3), it could not represent the fullness of the Empire; only true coinherence, as of the Trinity, or the body, could. This echoes Burke’s distinction between dialectic—opposing terms—and hierarchical or transformational dialectic, in which two antithetical terms can combine or coinhere to approach transcendence.

I find it interesting that although Burke does seem to be able to situate Christ as the perfect example of the scapegoat, he does not also specifically describe him as the perfect example of rebirth through dialectic. For if Christ represents Good, Life, and Freedom, in His death on the cross He encounters His antitheses: Evil, Death, and Slavery. In His nearly literal Rebirth, He is changed, since before His Passion he was God but not Savior. Burke does approach this truth in the *Grammar* as he describes God’s change of attitude toward humanity:

Theological notions of creation and re-creation bring us nearest to the concept of total acts. [...] Here we have something like the conversion of God himself, brought about by Christ’s sacrifice (a total action, a total passion). From the godlike nature came a godlike act that acted upon God himself. And as regards mankind, it amounts to a radical change in the very structure of the Universe, since it changed God’s attitude towards men, and in God’s attitude towards men resides the ultimate ground of human action. (19-20)

Burke may or may not have been a Christian believer; he was comfortable enough with paradox that it would probably delight him to leave his reader wondering. Nonetheless, he uses Christianity as a frame for so much of his thinking and his writing that it is easy for the Christian scholar to “appropriate” Burke’s thought without much modification. What then is the difference, the place where Burke and the Williams, an overtly Christian writer, part ways? In *Attitudes toward History*, Burke writes,

One wants to foretell the course of history. One wants to know "the trend." So one draws up a simple questionnaire, on a post card [...] [O]ne tabulates the returns. [...] [B]y a matter of simple arithmetic you can learn the "attitude of the public" on this important issue. And you size up the "trend of history" accordingly.

As a matter of fact, the expression of the vote [...] tells you *nothing*. The future is really disclosed *by finding out what people can sing about*. (334-335)

In the Taliessin cycle, what Williams "sings" about is the "contingent plan." What is a contingent plan after all but a dialectic of plan, failure, transformed plan? While Burke stops at hierarchy, Williams sings of hierarchy transformed:

The Table ascended; each in turn lordliest and least—  
slave and squire, woman and wizard, poet and priest;  
interchanged adoration, interdispersed prayer,  
the ruddy pillar of the Infant was the passage of the porphyry stair.  
[.....]  
manacled by the web, in the web made free;  
there was no capable song for the joy in me.  
(*"Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass,"* 45-48, 51-52)

As Williams might say about Burke, "Flesh knows what spirit knows, / but spirit knows it knows" (*"Taliessin in the Rose-Garden,"* 163-164).

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