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## Confronting Kenneth Burke's Anti-Semitism

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## Confronting Kenneth Burke's Anti-Semitism

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## Confronting Kenneth Burke's Anti-Semitism

Janice W. Fernheimer

As author of the earliest and most powerful deconstruction of Hitler's use of symbols in the 1939 "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" (hereafter referred to as *RHB*), Kenneth Burke is often championed as providing one of the most brilliant rhetorical analyses of anti-Semitism. Josef Schmidt writes that *RHB* was "a visionary and prophetic document whose profound examination proved to be only too true!"<sup>(1)</sup> Bryan Crable terms *RHB* "a systematic and relentless unraveling of Hitler's anti-Semitism" (134). In his essay contextualizing *RHB*'s creation, "Criticism in Context: Kenneth Burke's 'The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" Garth Pauley notes that *RHB* "has been heralded as one of Kenneth Burke's greatest essays and as an exemplar of rhetorical criticism" (para 2).

It is startling then, to hear Kenneth Burke confess to William Cahill on June 5, 1989, at age 92, four years before Burke would die, that in his own words, he had been "very anti-Semitic" in his early life, an outlook that caused him shame and embarrassment in his later life.<sup>1</sup> In the interview, Burke recounts his intellectual development in order to account for what he would term a transformation in his substance: "And then I got into—even anti-Semitism, a literary kind. Hitler fixed me up completely. I was very anti-Semitic, but I certainly got over it" (Cahill para 29). Although at first he qualifies his anti-Semitism as a "literary kind," in the next two sentences he simultaneously underscores that he was both "very anti-Semitic" and that he "certainly got over it" (Cahill para 29, emphasis mine). As Cahill and others have pointed out, "Burke noted that anti-Semitism was common enough in those days and in his family," though Burke was now "ashamed of it" (para 29, emphasis mine). Later in the same interview, Burke claims that he underwent a transformation from being "very anti-Semitic" for much of his life to finally "getting over it." Burke reiterates that "I got over the damn thing," though he also emphasizes "it was there for quite a while" (Cahill para 29, emphasis mine). The unspecified proclamation "it was there for quite a while" leaves an important ambiguity hanging in the "quite a while."

Burke writes about the relationship between ambiguity and transformation in the *Grammar of Motives*: "it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformations take place; in fact, without such areas, transformation would be impossible" (Burke *GM* xix). At the end of *GM* he observes, "And a transformation is a change in substance or principle, a qualitative shift in the nature of motivation. The old motivation could then be said to be 'substantially' retained only in the rhetorical sense, as when we say that something is 'substantially so' because it is *not so*" (Burke *GM* 357, emphasis mine). Burke posits, in his interview with Cahill, that he had undergone a significant transformation in the nature of his attitudes and "motivations" toward Jewish people and the Jewish community. But did he truly and "certainly" get over the "damn thing" of anti-Semitism? I am left to wonder if his use of "certainly" to describe how he "got over"

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke died November 19, 1993.

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his anti-Semitism is an unwitting suggestion that the transformation is “‘substantially so’ precisely because it is *not* so.”

Amos Kiewe in his *Confronting Anti-Semitism: Seeking an End to Hateful Rhetoric* rightly calls scholars of rhetoric to confront anti-Semitism and even uses Burkean theory to illuminate its symbolic origins and expressions. Drawing on Burke’s theory, Kiewe argues that the root of scapegoating lies in its “motivational starting point” which Burke and Kiewe identify as “guilt” (17). For Kiewe, “guilt” is a “generic term that encompasses a host of experiences such as inadequacy, incompleteness, insecurity, and deficiencies” and such feelings are overcome by a “process that rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke refers to as *dramatis*, whereby. . .the projection of counterforce such as scapegoating, victimage, and sacrifice of another or others . . .[helps to] achieve redemption and ultimately purification. . .” (17–18, emphasis in original). In Burke’s late correspondence he connects his own anti-Semitism to such “guilt” which he identifies in his own insecurity (Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, Letter, 15 December 1983).<sup>2</sup>

As a Jewish scholar who has also used Burkean theory to offer analysis of none other than the complications of Jewish identity, and moreover, to argue for the importance of Jewish rhetorics,<sup>3</sup> reading Burke’s admission of significant anti-Semitism gives me significant pause. It raises important questions about the nature and timing of the alleged transformation. If we accept the Burke at 92 explanation, how long did he harbor anti-Semitic views? Taking Burke at his word that his anti-Semitism did come to an end, when would he date its demise? Did Burke ever *really* get over it, or did he merely wish he did? And why is it that even though Burke himself admits this embarrassing and deep-seated prejudice, very few people in the field discuss it?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I thank David Frank for calling my attention to the private correspondence cited throughout this essay.

<sup>3</sup> See also “Talmidae Rhetoricae,” *Stepping Into Zion: Hatzqaad Harisbon, Black Jews, and the Remaking of Jewish Identity*, (University of Alabama Press, 2014) and *Jewish Rhetorics* (Brandeis University Press, 2014), co-edited with Michael Bernard-Donals.

<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, only two scholars mention Burke’s anti-Semitism in their scholarship: Bertelsen and Crable. The only scholar to explicitly discuss Burke’s negative attitudes toward the Jewish community at length is Dale Bertelsen in his 2002 article, “Kenneth Burke and Multiculturalism: A Voice of Ethnocentrism and Apologia.” Even in this essay where Bertelsen describes Burke’s “apparent ethnocentric tendencies toward the Jewish community” as “particularly vexing” (83), noting that Burke “often used examples of Jews that contributed to and perpetuated uncomplimentary stereotypes” (83) and “Burke’s indelicate choice of terms sustains pejorative stereotypes of Jews and the Jewish community” (84), he stops short of identifying Burke’s attitudes toward Jews as anti-Judaism or anti-Semitic. Instead, he follows Burke’s lead in identifying the “tendency to use indelicate language and to perpetuate unflattering stereotypes” as a “continuing embarrassment,” claiming that “Kenneth Burke’s early indiscretions and use of coarse language exhibit ethnocentric tendencies” (85). Detailed as his investigation into the issue is, it is surprising that Bertelsen treads so gently around these “embarrassments.” Even though this article was first published in 2002, as of January 27, 2016, Google Scholar suggests it has received limited attention in the field, cited by only one other scholar in more than a decade. Similarly, Bryan Crable, whose recent book *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide* offers an insightful investigation of Burke’s relationship with Ralph Ellison and attitudes toward race mentions the anti-Semitic slurs as well. He writes of the 1968 Revised Preface: “This apologia—offered for the ‘bumpy passages’ in Burke’s early fiction—could also apply to portions of his correspondence that appear, to contemporary eyes, racist or anti-Semitic” (14). In his accompanying note 31 on page 179, Crable calls attention to the correspondence in the collection Jay edited, located in the collection’s index under “Burke, Kenneth, racial slurs of.” Citing an archived letter to Cowley (12 November 1921), Crable points out that Burke’s father was a member of an anti-Jewish golf club and that “Burke’s correspondence was often filled with such [ethnic/racial slurs] remarks” (179). Despite the ubiquity of such slurs, however, Crable contends “For present purposes, we

In this essay, I analyze Burke's 1983 "A Letter from a Gentile," his last public statement on the Jewish question, written at the age of 86, to determine how successfully Burke worked through his anti-Semitism and how this attempt relates to his broader theory of rhetoric as well as the field's reception of this theory and Burke himself. In his private correspondence, Burke notes that this public letter is his most significant effort to apologize for and work through his anti-Semitism; he calls it his "one solace on that score" (Letter to Paul Jay, 5 December 1983, 1). In it, he refers to other texts related to his attitudes towards Jewish people—both those that shaped him such as Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and those he wrote in response to these attitudes: his 1935 review of *Goethe and the Jews* in *The New Masses*, his later "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" *Rhetoric of Motives*, and the "Revised Preface" to *The Complete White Oxen* are some of the texts he mentions specifically in the 1983 "Letter."

By carefully analyzing the 1983 "Letter," his last public effort as a scholar to confront the Jewish question, as one of several Burkean attempts to call attention to and apologize for what Burke terms his earlier ethnocentric "embarrassments," I will make an uncomfortable point. Burke struggled with racism and anti-Semitism throughout his life and attempted to work through both with his scholarship. Though Burke himself would like to dissociate his later, more self-aware self from his earlier more anti-Semitic self to claim he "got over the damn thing," and scholars in our field would like to do the same, I contend Burke never did fully "get over it." Rather, he wrestled with anti-Semitism and the anti-Judaism it grew out of and the later color-based racism it helped shape over the course of his life. He continually oscillated among several competing and troubled identifications, often with Jews themselves. In what follows, I trace the trajectory of Burke's anti-Semitism up to the 1983 "Letter," provide a close reading of the "Letter" as Burke's last sustained effort to escape from anti-Semitism, and then outline the implications of my study.

### **The Trajectories of Burke's Anti-Semitism**

Burke developed his anti-Judaic attitudes as a result of his family and surrounding culture. Burke's father was an anti-Semite. Burke's relatives united against him by calling him "Jew" and one of his uncles called his father a "Kike" because he didn't like him (Kenneth Burke to Paul Jay, Letter, 5 December 1983).<sup>5</sup> In his correspondence with Paul Jay, Burke admits that "I myself had never met a Jew personally until I met Malcolm's friend, Jake Davis, at Peabody High" (Kenneth Burke to Paul Jay, Letter, 5 December 1983). Burke also encountered these attitudes in his formal education where he read and identified with texts such as *Ivanhoe* and *Merchant of Venice* that perpetuated anti-Jewish stereotypes. The absence of substantive interaction with real Jewish people enabled Burke to absorb unquestioningly the negative stereotypes associated with Jews and money he encountered in literature and his family. These familial, educational, and literary interactions deeply impacted Burke, so much so that even in the moments

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should simply conclude that all of these statements reflect the ubiquitous hierarchies of race that Burke and his fellow Pittsburghers internalized" (179). Like Bertelsen, Crable too follows Burke's own impulse to collapse the agent's motives into the historical scene and absolve Burke of anti-Semitism.

<sup>5</sup> "I recall two brothers (second cousins of mine) who fought each other like friends, but playfully united by, in almost every other sentence, addressing me as 'Jew.' One of my uncles didn't like my father, 'hence' called him 'Kike.'" (Kenneth Burke to Paul Jay, Letter, 5 December 1983), emphasis mine.

when he attempts to apologize for his own self-recognized anti-Semitism, he cannot overcome the depths of these early anti-Jewish influences.

Even when he was authoring anti-Semitic slurs as part of what he calls his “stylistic groove” (Letter to Paul Jay 5 December 1983, 1), he did not engage in eliminationist anti-Semitism; rather as he self-described it, his was a more “literary” type. As Daniel Goldhagen has noted in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, not all anti-Semitism is created equal. Goldhagen defines “eliminationist anti-Semitism” as a “virulent and violent. . . variant of anti-Semitism,” a strain which he argues, “existed in Germany well before the Nazis came to power” and which “called for the elimination of Jewish influence or of Jews themselves from German society” (23). That said, literary anti-Semitism affects and shapes the imagination that is the bridge to eliminationist anti-Semitism. As Burke himself writes in the *Rhetoric of Motives*, “Once you think of the imaginal, not as inducement to action, but as the sensitive suspension of action, invitations that you might *fear* in rhetoric can be *enjoyed* in poetry” (Burke *RM* 91, emphasis mine). This characterization of the imagination is quite chilling when read in light of Burke’s own anti-Semitic slurs.

Earlier in the *RM* Burke notes that “poetic language is a kind of symbolic action, for itself and in itself, and whereas scientific action is a preparation for action, rhetorical language is inducement to action (or to attitude, attitude being an incipient act),” thus emphasizing the important function of language in shaping attitudes (Burke *RM* 42). Since Burke deeply understands the ways literature, in creating attitudes that become incipient actions, provides a very important type of “equipment for living,” it is surprising that later in his life he attempts to “excuse” his earlier anti-Semitic remarks by suggesting they are “merely” stylistic.

As I will demonstrate in my reading of the 1983 “Letter,” Burke was ultimately unsuccessful in his struggle to overcome his anti-Judaism, a finding that has important ramifications for the way we think about and employ his theory and critical oeuvre, replete as it is with the terministic screens and blind spots that come with his prejudices. When he revisited his earlier writings late in his life, Burke felt tremendous shame and embarrassment for his earlier “indelicacies of parlance.” Even though he could not fully overcome the anti-Judaism girding the actions, at the very least his later remorse demonstrates that he was both conscious and self-conscious of these earlier expressions of anti-Semitism and, in his own words, he was trying to “absolve himself” of his earlier misguided actions (Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, Letter, 7 December 1983, 1).

Before discussing Burke’s public attempts at apology, I draw from David Nirenberg’s *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* to make an important distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, demonstrating how the latter is much broader than the former. Nirenberg explains that anti-Judaism is “a way of critically engaging the world. It is in this broad sense that I use the words *Judaism* and *anti-Judaism*. And it also for this reason that I do not use *anti-Semitism*. . . .” (3). While Kiewe calls attention to the need for greater rhetorical analysis of anti-Semitism, characterizing it as a school of thought that arose from Christians’ need to differentiate themselves from the earlier Jewish religion that still existed, Nirenberg expands the concept of anti-Jewish thinking to include other anti-Judaic attitudes, and thus also traces its origins even to the period of antiquity with the ancient Egyptians, way earlier than the anti-Christian framework upon which Kiewe focuses. Nirenberg cogently argues that an Egyptian tradition

growing out of the work of Manetho characterized Jews in decidedly negative terms that remained “remarkably stable” over time and included the following assumptions: “1. The Jews are a people once driven out of Egypt. 2. Their practices are diametrically opposed to those of all other peoples, especially Egyptians and Greeks. 3. They are enemies of all the gods. 4. Whenever and wherever they rule, they rule brutally and tyrannically. 5. They are misanthropes, enemies not just of Egypt, but of all mankind” (30–31). Nirenberg emphasizes that while the first point “was of interest primarily to Egyptians; the others prove so useful that they continue to provide cornerstones for ideologies up to the present day” (31). He implicates none other than the great “father” of Western rhetoric, Aristotle, for his political philosophy that “understood tyranny as a form of misanthropy” as perpetuating a myth that contributed to the interpretation of the “struggle against tyranny” as a “struggle against the Jews” (39).<sup>6</sup> For Nirenberg, anti-Judaism is an early and powerful ideological apparatus that provides a rhetorical inventional topos, which “would remain available to later millennia. . . and [be] put to new uses by later generations of apologists and historians” (46). Consequently, “anti-Judaism should not be understood as some archaic or irrational closet in the vast edifices of Western thought. It was rather one of the basic tools with which that edifice was constructed” (Nirenberg 6). Nirenberg argues that as part of the deepest structures of Western thought, anti-Judaism is foundational to much of the intellectual tradition we inherit in the West.

As part of that Western tradition, Burke seems unable to escape his anti-Judaism fully. Perhaps ironically, the depth of Burke’s entrapment becomes most illuminated at the precise moments when he attempts to confront his own anti-Semitism, which he tries to make *innocent* with scenic explanations that suggest the slurs he uses were *merely* stylistic choices that were a product of his historical moment. In the *Grammar of Motives*, Burke details precisely the type of linguistic acrobatics that he engages in to anesthetize his anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. He writes, “we may note a related resource of Rhetoric . . . *one may deflect attention from the criticism of personal motives by deriving an act or attitude not from traits of the agent but from the nature of the situation*” (Burke 17, emphasis mine). By dissociating the slurs from the person who made them, Burke attempts to attribute them to the scene he lived in and through instead of to the agent he once was and continues to be. Even more disturbing, in the “Letter” that he identifies as his “one solace” on account of his use of slurs, Burke moves from anti-Jewish to anti-Israel sentiments, sometimes within the same sentence. This slippage shows the extent to which Burke both recognizes the problems associated with anti-Judaism and the depth to which his thought is steeped in it. He enacted his theory of scenic deflection by casting his anti-Semitism as literary and as his anti-Judaic comments as a function of his scene.

### I. 1968: Scenic Deflection

The first time Burke offers a public apology for what he terms his ethnocentric “embarrassments” and engages in this type of scenic deflection is in 1968. When the University of California Press published a revised edition of Burke’s *The Complete White Oxen*, Burke provided a “Revised Preface.” The Preface’s final paragraphs read as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> See also Deborah Holdstein’s “The Ironies of Ethos.”

Two words on two *embarrassments*, and I shall be through:  
 I grew up in an *uncouth* age and neighborhood in which *it was taken for granted* that minorities “normally” referred to one another as Dagoes, Hunkies, Niggers, Micks, Kikes, and such, along with *our sound suspicion that we were all minorities of one sort or another*. (Imagine the stigma, for instance, of living in Brushton rather than Homewood, or Homewood rather than Squirrel Hill, and so on.) Thus, some of my early stories show occasional pre-Reichstage Fire laxities. Since then, Hitler and his noxious Ism have made it hard even to remember the climate in which such laxities were taken for granted.<sup>7</sup> Gone for ever [sic] (and perhaps for the better) are the days when it could be considered *good clean fun*, at a booze party, *if Whitey the goy sang Negro spirituals in a Yiddish accent*. I leave the *bumpy passages* as they were. First, *they’re not so tough anyhow*. And second, *I have the firm conviction that my subsequent work makes my position quite clear on the subject of ethnocentric bias*, except that in the sense of culture as a picture gallery that can liberally accommodate many different kinds of portrait and portraiture. (xvii, emphasis mine)

In this awkward apology, Burke makes several interrelated dissociative moves to make his earlier anti-Semitism seem “innocent.” While on the surface it appears that he is trying to apologize for what his then-current-1968-self rightly interprets as inappropriate and offensive ethnic/racial language authored by his younger self; upon closer examination, the apology itself is so qualified that it begs the question of Burke’s motives, even in 1968. I point out this tension between style and content because it is a tension that reappears each time Burke publicly tries to account for the “embarrassments” of his earlier years. It is also a dissociative move that Burke employs to separate himself from the embarrassing words he authored earlier in his life.

In this revised Preface, Burke proclaims that he grew up in an “uncouth age and neighborhood” where it was “taken for granted that minorities referred to one another” with a long list of ethnic/racial slurs: “Dagoes, Hunkies, Niggers, Micks, Kikes, and such.” In this quick and easy sentence, Burke suggests that in engaging such slurs, he is merely a product of his historical/environmental “scene”—one that was rife with ethnic/racial tension and one whose language reflects those tensions. He dissociates the agent (his earlier self) from the historical scene, to displace responsibility for the “stylistic” word choices in the social norms of the earlier time. In that very same sentence Burke employs syntax that suggests he believes himself to be part of one of these minorities: “*our* sound suspicion that *we* were all minorities of one sort or another.”

The use of “our” groups Burke in with other minorities while defusing the very real differences in lived experience that members of these minorities would have encountered *as* minorities. This more inclusive “our” simultaneously deflects attention away from the powerful sting of a person of relative privilege engaging in such slurs. As Bryan Crable points out, though Burke “might have suspected otherwise, even in the early 1900s Burke occupied a quite favorable position within the American racial drama” (15). To occupy a position of relative privilege but perceive oneself as a

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<sup>7</sup> Crable and Bertelsen offer critical context for this admittedly odd apology, and yet, they tend to stop here, without quoting or including the next line, which provides what I would argue is the most telling part—where anti-Jewish and anti-black attitudes are linked in the sentence that follows.



persecuted minority points to some of the blindnesses of Burke's terministic screens when it came to racial and social hierarchies. One of Burke's more complicated and troubled identifications is his self-identification as part of a persecuted minority and with Jews themselves; this identification reappears in his later 1983 "Letter."

But here in the preface, Burke moves from ethnic/racial terrain to that of socio-economic status calling attention to the relative social prestige associated with various parts of Pittsburgh,<sup>8</sup> and, from here, he suggests that "some" of his "early stories" engage in stylistic "laxities." In this way, he continues his attempt to qualify and mitigate the perception of his stories, arguing that only "some" of these "earlier" stories engage in "laxities" of a stylistic or what he would later term "literary" nature. The dissociation of style from content furthers the dissociation Burke makes to discredit the seriousness of the offense. He also continues to flesh out the scenic explanation—claiming that Hitler and the (here unnamed anti-Semitism) "Ism" he represents make it "hard to remember" a time when such "laxities" were "taken for granted." In this odd sequence, it is Hitler's actions rather than Burke's own self-awareness which cause the change in permissiveness that allows for such slurs to be made without notice. The syntax of the text suggests that it is not so much that Burke realizes they are offensive and chooses not to use them, but rather the fact that they are no longer deemed socially acceptable or appropriate that makes Burke wish he had not used them in the first place.

The scene, after the tragic consequences of the Holocaust, had changed dramatically, and, in 1968, Burke was now ashamed of his "pre-Reishtage Fire laxities." Of course, it is because of Hitler and the horrific threat Burke rightly perceived as inherent in Hitler's rhetoric that Burke authored "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" arguably the most insightful and piercing piece of rhetorical criticism to analyze Hitler's anti-Semitic logic. Yet, here, this oscillation between scenic contextualization and dissociation of verbal style from content combine to create a dual excuse for "getting Burke off the hook." This dualism is accompanied by a further interconnection that links his anti-Judaism to his racism as illustrated in the next sentence where "Whitey the goy" engages in double appropriation.

After his attempts to make the slurs more innocent than they first appear, Burke then laments the earlier moment when "it could be considered good clean fun" for "Whitey the goy" to sing "Negro spirituals in a Yiddish accent." Although he acknowledges that such days are "gone for ever," he undermines the sincerity of his apologetic account when he includes the hesitancy "[p]erhaps for the better." This rather unapologetic apology is authored in 1968, four years after the civil rights act passed and the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, 1968 is a year famous for the myriad social movements that took shape to increase the rights accorded to women, students, and African Americans while also protesting the Vietnam War. At the very least, Burke expresses a nostalgic longing for what he perceives to be a "simpler" time when such verbal so-called indelicacies could simply

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<sup>8</sup> As Crable points out, Squirrel Hill was a considered a "predominantly Jewish" neighborhood (16, and also note 38 pages 179-180).

<sup>9</sup> I thank my colleague and friend Nazera Sadiq Wright for the insight that when national laws are passed that give blacks more rights, such as with *Plessy v. Ferguson* or *Brown v. Board of Education*, whites reacted to these laws by lamenting their loss and longing for the past when they did not have to be racially aware and follow laws.

“*be taken for granted*”. Here it is worth pointing out that Burke’s imagined “good clean fun” is dually appropriative, where “Whitey the goy” not only sings “Negro spirituals” but does so in a “Yiddish accent,” so as to link and amplify the outsider status of both Blacks and Jews in this scene.<sup>10</sup> This image also calls attention to the types of behavior Burke seems to deem funny or entertaining. For a critic whose theoretical apparatus rests heavily on the transcendent power of both images and the comic, it is disturbing that here both elements are used in such a culturally appropriative way.

Burke moves from what is now a truly repellant image to a further qualification that the “bumpy passages” remain intact for two reasons. One, Burke doesn’t think they were “so tough anyhow” and two, he believes his “subsequent work makes my position quite clear on the subject of ethnocentric bias.” It seems that Burke is alluding to none other than “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” which had garnered him significant critical attention, and according to this preface, “absolved” him of his earlier laxities.<sup>11</sup> These two qualifications—(1) the slurs were not so bad and (2) his later work and the critical apparatus they set forth make up for his earlier indiscretions—suggest that Burke, though authoring an apology, does not seem to think it is truly necessary to apologize. What is so striking to me is just how flippant and unapologetic this apology reads. For a later Burke concerned about his reception, he is remarkably comfortable with his earlier “embarrassments” or at least projecting that he is. Rather than claiming full responsibility for his earlier lapses, acknowledging the real harm they have done, he instead qualifies at every step of the way, first with historical/scenic context, then with dissociation, and finally by suggesting the earlier mishaps were not so bad after all. By 1983, Burke’s deflections of his anti-Semitism had evolved.

## II. 1983: Burke’s Vexing Anti-Semitism and the “Letter from a Gentile”

In May, a month before Burke wrote the 1983 “Letter,” he had been in touch with Paul Jay about the “Cowley/Burke correspondence project” (Paul Jay to Kenneth Burke, Letter, 19 May 1983) which was later published by UC Press in 1988. What the correspondence with Jay demonstrates is that in the month preceding his authorship of the “Letter from a Gentile,” Burke had been revisiting his earlier correspondence with Malcolm Cowley and confronting his earlier self, whose self-styled “stylistic groove” engaged in slurs a whole lot more often than the Burke of 1983 had remembered. His continued correspondence with Jay and Cowley concerning the collection and the “Letter from a Gentile” convey that Burke is both “vexed” and “stumped” by this discovery of his earlier anti-Semitic self (respectively, Letter to Cowley 15 Dec. 1983, 1; Letter to Jay 5 December 1983, 3 [though it is actually page 4 of the letter]).

In December of 1983, after Burke authored and published the “Letter from a Gentile,” he again writes to both Jay and Cowley to discuss his use of the slurs. His December 5, 1983, letter to Jay expresses great concern over their place in the in-process collected letters. Explaining that he had been in a car accident which thankfully “did no personal damage except to my self-esteem (which, as you can well imagine, *suffered humiliating injury in re the slurs* that marked some of my old letters—and though they’re dated more than sixty years ago, they make me feel *as dirty* as though I were still

<sup>10</sup> Burke repeatedly mentions the “Negro spirituals” in the apologies, *RM*, and his private correspondence. In the 1983 “Letter,” he mentions the spirituals on page 164.

<sup>11</sup> See Pauley and Selzer and George (201-203) on the formation of *RHB*.

caught in that *stylistic groove*)” (Kenneth Burke to Paul Jay, Letter, 5 December 1983, emphasis mine), Burke underscores the discomfort he feels around his earlier usage; he bluntly proclaims they cause him to suffer “humiliating injury” and “they make me feel dirty.” Given the stereotypes of “dirty Jews” that Burke perpetuates in the public letter, this admission of feeling dirty in the private correspondence is an interesting choice. Burke declares that he is no longer caught in “that stylistic groove,” though his selected examples in the “Letter from a Gentile” belie the depth of the anti-Jewish attitudes that gird the “stylistic groove.” Burke then describes his “Letter from a Gentile” as his “one solace on that score.”

Having enclosed a copy of the 1983 “Letter” in his letter to Jay, Burke remarks, “The comments which I have marked in red on p. 164 clearly indicate the source of the *stylistic obscenity*. The ‘great democratic melting pot’ in which I grew up divided the population into the many racial or religious sectors (both local and attitudinal) which invariably had epithetical slurs for referring to each of the others. And a sense of ‘togetherness’ was most spontaneously confirmed by conversing with someone who used the same slurs.” In this December letter, he more bluntly and directly launches into the scenic explanation. At the same time, the page 164 he highlights refers to the portion of “Letter from a Gentile” where he attempts to repudiate his earlier use of the epithet “Jew bastard” in a 1935 *New Masses* review of *Goethe and the Jews*. In the private letter to Jay, he upgrades the severity of the condemnation he issues for this earlier word choice. In contrast to his other “indelicacies,” at this point in December 1983, he considers the 1935 usage a “stylistic obscenity.”

Although Burke upgrades the condemnation of the epithet in his private correspondence, the context in which his apology and condemnation appear in the published “Letter from a Gentile” not only underscores his attempts to offer “scenic explanations” but also reveals the anti-Israelism he slips into while making such scenic justifications. This slip reveals a more deep-seated and unacknowledged anti-Judaism.

In the public “Letter from a Gentile” Burke introduces this so-called apology “circumspectly” by means of a “modulation” which recalls the ethnic slurs his father used:

In his early years, in a typical ‘melting pot’ city marked by its distinct ethnic neighborhoods and their mean words for one another, my father’s mode of livelihood cut across this German-Irish division. And given his liking for the fun of things, speaking from the German side, he never said (I never heard him say) ‘that’s a dirty trick.’ He always said, ‘That’s a dirty Irish trick (164).<sup>12</sup>

The discourse here sounds familiar because it follows the same rhetorical moves of his 1968 revised preface, where Burke displaces the responsibility for the slur in the scene, instead of squarely on the agent responsible for making them—in this case his father. From this modulation, Burke then turns specifically to what he terms the “Jew-Gentile relationship” a section to which I will give greater attention in a moment, and then to an explanation of his own earlier “ethnic embarrassment,” which he attributes to the “delicacies of parlance.” Attempting to account for his 1935 use of the epithet “Jew

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<sup>12</sup> See also Crable on Burke’s specific identifications vis-à-vis his familial heritage, 14-15.

bastard” in his *New Masses* review of *Goethe and the Jews*, in the “Letter from a Gentile,” Burke writes:

But I should say: when introducing the anecdote of my German-Irish father’s invariably saying not ‘that was a dirty trick,’ but ‘that was a dirty Irish trick,’ I had in mind an *ethnic embarrassment that must be confronted with regard to (let’s call it) ‘the delicacies of parlance’* as they bear upon matters of dispersion. My anecdote was designed as a modulation into an otherwise blunt concern with these contrasting situations:

‘One guy gets sore at another guy. In a case of that sort, the stylistic proprieties are such that the one guy refers to the other guy as a ‘bastard.’ But if the grouchy guy is a goy and the grouched-at guy is Jewish, in that case, the proper appellative is not just ‘bastard’ but ‘Jew bastard.’ And the ‘delicacies of parlance’ are here a wry reflection of the term ‘Judeo-Christian’, which in itself is a quite reasonable hyphenation, and does reflect the identity, not just individual, but ‘tribal’ in terms of which the grouched-at guy himself had asked to be identified.” (164)

Here Burke uses juxtaposition to suggest his slurs like his father’s were a product of the historic moment and the attempt to “fit in.” As such, they are “a wry reflection of the term ‘Judeo-Christian’ which in itself is a quite reasonable hyphenation.” Again, using juxtaposition, this time, by pointing to the hyphen between “Judeo–Christian” and underscoring how it is “reasonable,” it seems that Burke hopes his readers will deem his earlier usage of “Jew bastard” as “reasonable” as well. Although the private correspondence with Jay suggests Burke found this particular “indelicacy” to be a “stylistic obscenity,” here in the public letter, Burke attempts to temper the severity of the stylistic mishap by suggesting it is “merely” a stylistic choice. Yet, for a critic who pays so much attention to the power of style and form, it is odd to see Burke engage in this type of dissociative acrobatics that fail to acknowledge that the stylistics shape and reinforce attitudes, which are in and of themselves reflective of and responsible for “incipient actions.” He concludes this section of the letter with a simple “So much for that *embarrassing pleasantry*. And at this point, for reasons that the remaining pages should make clear, we must proceed in another dimension” (164, emphasis mine), and quickly changes topic.

While Burke may quickly change topic in the public letter, suggesting he is ready to move on, his private correspondence shows that the earlier uses haunt him, and in fact, he is unable to move on. A week later, in his private correspondence with Jay of December that same year, Burke is “stumped” by his own use of ethnic slurs. (Kenneth Burke to Paul Jay, 5 December 1983, 3 [though it is actually page four of the letter]). He is *still* thinking about his use of the slurs two days after he sent a follow-up December letter to Jay when he writes Malcolm Cowley on December 7, 1983. He writes, “The enclosed copy of the ‘Gentile’ letter is selections from a much longer *batch of stuff on and around the subject*. I dare hope that these pages will absolve me of my slurs exuded over 60 years ago. I also enclose a copy of my letter to Paul Jay, and a copy of a related passage in my preface to *The Complete White Oxen* volume” (Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, Letter, 7 December 1983). In this letter to Cowley, he connects the revised preface to the “Letter from a Gentile” in purpose and explicitly claims that he hopes that the later letter will provide absolution for the “slurs” of his youth.

A week later on December 15, 1983, Burke again writes to Malcolm Cowley, “vexed beyond measure” by these “embarrassments” (Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, 15 December 1983). He writes:

Damn! I glanced at some more pages of the correspondence. That *filthy slur* does keep turning up. I had almost totally forgot how recurr {sic} it was. I am *vexed* beyond measure.

It's a vulgar kind of snobbery, a *reflect of my considerable insecurity*. Somehow or other *my confronting of it gets all mixed up with my car accident, which I go on reliving*. And *my need to clear up so much Unfinished Biz* also keeps me so much 'indispersion,' I can't even decide what to take with me for GA or even where to find it. (KB to MC, 15 December 1983).

In this letter to Cowley, one of his closest friends for more than 60 years, Burke shows just how ashamed and vulnerable he feels by this discovery of the “filthy slur” and its seeming ubiquity in his early writing. And yet, even when he expresses shock at just how often “[t]hat filthy slur does keep turning up”, Burke continues to try to justify his use of it. Burke’s explanation can *still* be read as an attempt to make these slurs innocent. In fact, the need to make them innocent seems all the more pressing given Burke’s desire to “absolve” himself of his earlier record with his growing awareness of his own mortality reflected in his continual reference to the “car accident” and “Unfinished Biz.” There is an urgency in both his need and desire to make these slurs seem *innocent*, given their potential impact on the legacy that he will leave behind when he dies. In this later letter to Cowley, he explains that “it’s a vulgar kind of snobbery, a reflect of my considerable insecurity,” casting light on the way that using these derogatory terms helped Burke to soothe his own self-esteem, for in lashing out in insecurity, he helped to secure more stable ground for his own place in the racial/social hierarchy. As Burke himself notes in *RM*, “hierarchy is as good an indication as any of the way in which the ‘naturalness’ of grades rhetorically reinforces the protection of privilege” (Burke *RM* 141).

Burke’s tendency to make a rather unapologetic apology for his anti-Semitism is most bluntly revealed in his 1983 “Letter” published in a special issue of *Dialectical Anthropology* dedicated to none other than “The Jewish Question.”<sup>13</sup> Careful analysis of this letter shows that Burke did not fully escape the anti-Jewish ideas he encountered in his youth. Worse still, he slips from unacknowledged anti-Judaism to anti-Israelism throughout the “Letter.” These slips suggest that while Burke may have become ever more embarrassed by and ashamed of his anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic sentiments, he did not provide a thorough repudiation of them. Although, he did admit to Cahill at age 92 that he had been “very anti-Semitic” for a long period in his life, this letter suggests he could not fully get over it.

Like his earlier apologia in the 1968 Preface, Burke begins “Letter from a Gentile” by identifying with a minority group, in this case, specifically Jews. He writes, “Ever since I learned the word, ‘Diaspora,’ and that was a long time ago, *I have inclined*

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<sup>13</sup> Burke’s letter is addressed to the issue’s editor, Stanley Diamond, the American poet and anthropologist who was also the journal’s founder. The issue included nine longer essays, two interviews, and one case study in addition to Burke’s letter. At the time Burke authored his letter, Burke’s daughter Eleanore Leacock (aka “Happy”) was on the journal’s editorial board.

to class myself as 'in dispersion.' In this respect I have sometimes referred to myself (to myself) as an 'honorary Semite.' Accordingly, never at a loss for a low pun, when I say 'What's the program?' I hear Echo answer, 'What's the pogrom?'" (161, emphasis added). Burke both identifies as "honorary Semite" to himself, and then goes on to trouble this very identification. It is important to note that the way he troubles this identification is to slip into anti-Israelism. He continues:

But this very issue is in dispersion with me. *For I'm never quite sure that this goy's ways of feeling in dispersion entitle him to feel as close to his Jewish brethren of Diaspora cast as he does* (when he does feel that close, for often, even before the new motivation takes problematic form in Israel, this goy had urgent inducement to play down any sense of sympathy with one or another antagonist, though even in those cases he felt a sneaking bond, as though we glimpsed a common strand of understanding within and despite the dastardy of some particular local contest). (161, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Burke's identifications follow several oscillating twists and turns. First, he takes issue with his own decision to identify as "an honorary Semite" because he is "never quite sure that...[his].. ways of feeling in dispersion entitle him to feel as close to his Jewish brethren of Diaspora cast as he does" (161). Then he notes that he does not always feel that close, in part because he tries to "play down any sense of sympathy with one or another antagonist" and in part because of the way the "new motivation takes problematic form in Israel" (161). He dissociates his identification with Jews in the dispersion from those who are living in Israel. Instead, he groups all Israelis together, and in classic Burkean critique offers his own way of "sizing it up": "The Israelis, Begin-style, are in a quite different groove. *Maybe I got it wrong, but here's how I size it up: Skilled statecraft acting in behalf of the British Empire had put liberalism to expansionistic use by favoring, among the Arabs, a Jewish homeland that would complicate the hegemony of that area*" (161, emphasis added). Burke's use of the term "groove" here to mean the choices of Israelis, suggests how his earlier anti-Semitism is explicitly linked to his current anti-Israelism by the very "stylistic" choices he makes. Earlier the "groove" is meant to excuse the severity of his use of anti-Semitic slurs, here it functions as an imaginative and stylistic link to the anti-Israelism that grows out of the anti-Judaism that girds the earlier anti-Semitism.

Burke's oscillating identifications continue to move back and forth between Jews and Israelis throughout the Letter. Though he seems to dissociate Begin-style Israelis from other Israelis in later parts of the "Letter" (162), in this passage he moves away from this dissociation and instead collapses distinctions between Israel and British imperialism. He "sizes" Israel up as an agent of the British Empire, which "complicate[s] the hegemony of that area" (161). Rather than recognizing Israel's legitimacy to exist as a sovereign nation, he too easily writes over the historical circumstances that gave birth to Israel as a modern state and ignores the religious significance and historical claims Jews have to the land. He then employs comparison by analogy to liken Israel's expansionist actions to the genocide committed by the U.S. against Native Americans. He also associates Israel's expansion with the undermining of its democratic ideals because "the more territory they include, the greater the 'democratic' problem of the vote" (161, emphasis in original). It is unclear whether he makes this genocidal comparison because he is writing in 1983, just one year after the horrific events of Sabra and Shatilia, or because he believes that Israel as a nation-state

should be “sized up” by such genocidal crimes. Later in the letter, he returns to this analogy, this time referring to the Palestinians as the “present ‘natives,’” thus likening Palestinians to indigenous people with unquestionable rights to be in the land and suggesting that Jewish people by extension are neither indigenous (thus denying the continuous presence of Jewish people in “Zion”) nor legitimate in their aspirations for nationhood. Burke writes:

They [Israel] are expansionistic, as nation-states usually are (ours having been almost fabulous in that respect, aided greatly by the fact that we were also importing new modes of production wholly different, an advantage the Israelis have slightly over the present ‘natives’ in the biblical homeland, but it will become ‘progressively more precarious’). It’s a *mean situation*, made *meaner* by the inability of USA and USSR politicians to agree on rational ways of resolving our conflicts. (162, emphasis by quotation in original, emphasis by italicization mine)

In this passage he repeats several times it is a “mean situation,” but in Burke’s mind, “Israel” is the “opposite of true Diasporism.” As Burke “sees it”: “the only diaspora kind of people would be those here or elsewhere who wince at the kind of militaristic policies that go by the name of patriotism.” And here it seems Burke attempts to both “outJew” and replace the “Jews.” For him, *true* Jews or diaspora people are only those who would be opposed to Israel’s expansionism. So he engages in dissociation once again, though this time he dissociates between the true Jews, which he defines as diaspora Jews, Jews of the book and intellect, which in his private correspondence he values highly and seeks as a resource to transcend none other than ethnic prejudice,<sup>14</sup> and the “bad Israelis,” in other words, Jews who are not of the diaspora, Jews who are territorially expansionist and by his analogical extension genocidal.

Here in the “Letter from a Gentile,” it is as if he has taken an anti-Israel activist’s playbook and adopted the argument unquestioningly or unwittingly. The warrants girding his Letter’s “stylistic groove” seem to be as follows: Jews have no historical presence in and therefore no legitimate right to the land, Jews have engaged in genocidal actions to expand militarily and ethnically cleanse the land of the “Palestinian natives,” and although Israel professes to be a democracy, the more territorial expanding it does the less democratic it becomes.

These anti-Israel and anti-Jewish attitudes are ironically underscored by the letter’s self-declared purpose as an attempt to “forestall misrepresentations” (167). The letter characterizes some of the “unfinished biz” as dealing with the earlier slurs and confesses both Burke’s “inability to move on” and his regret/shame/disappointment at being unable to do so. Then Burke moves back to the place of Jews in the development of capitalism and commerce: “But there was the sense that my whole concern with the role of Jews in making investment possible (within the orthodox canons which required roundabout fictions for such enterprise) threw things out of proportion. How to get the proportions right?” (168). Burke is aware that his own

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<sup>14</sup> There was another side to Burke’s view of Jews: “I was fascinated by Jews, who did seem to me a ‘peculiar’ people. And they taught me liberalism in racial matters. Their teaching was not just ‘out of the blue.’ It was to their interests—but also it was a good contribution to us all” (Kenneth Burke to Paul Jay, Letter, 5 December 1983, 2).

obsession with Jews and money is “out of proportion” but he is left with the question of “how to get the proportions right.”

Yet, belying his inability to “move on” or “out of” his anti-Judaism, in his attempt to “get the proportions right,” he tells several anecdotes in rapid succession, all “ordered” around the theme of anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews and money, hoarding, miserliness, and filth. It is significant that Burke ends this line of thought with the positive encounters he had with an actual Jewish person, Matthew Josephson, as it reflects the fact that though deeply ingrained, Burke’s anti-Jewish attitudes were not impervious to change, especially when he encountered actual Jews.<sup>15</sup> Although he may not have “fully recovered from them,” he seems to have at least mildly revised (or at the very least mitigated) some of his anti-Jewish ideas. As Dale Bertelsen points out, “a few years after meeting Matthew Josephson at Columbia University, Burke’s derogatory references to Jews seem to disappear from his letters to Cowley” (84–85).<sup>16</sup>

Burke then returns to recounting his experiences in high school, this time at Peabody High in Pittsburgh, where he claims to have had “another ‘Judeo-Christian’ imagining, also with the bleat (the ‘goating’),” this time with his experience of reading aloud *The Merchant of Venice* (169). Burke was assigned to read the role of Shylock and explains:

I got into the role enough to feel very sorry for the *poor wealthy* Jew. He seemed so damned lonesome, *and I felt like him in that respect*. And in exploiting the ‘anti-Semitic psychosis’ of his audience so bluntly, along with his humanizing subtleties. . . . Shakespeare knew why both dramaturgy in general and his Christian drama in particular called for a victim that called for a touch of compassion. (169, emphasis mine)

In recalling the sympathy he felt for Shylock’s lonesomeness, Burke contrasts the function of the Jew in “Hitlerite *rhetoric*” with the “treatment of Shylock in Shakespearean *drama*” (emphasis in original, 169): “Hitler’s job was to so dehumanize the Jew that ‘Aryans’ owed him nothing. Shakespeare’s job was to so humanize the Jew Shylock’s [sic] situation that the text could come into such a beautiful focus from with the details of the story. . .” (169).

Burke spends most of the final pages of the “Letter from a Gentile” circling around his analysis of *Merchant of Venice*. He asks his audience to consider “what the play touches upon, in its way of entertaining a Christian audience (of those times) by its variations on the theme of anti-Semitism...” (170). Then he returns to his identification with Shylock and admits:

I, feeling so sorry for Shylock’s lonesomeness when I was ‘goating’ during my reading of his lines, I couldn’t have said so then what I say now; but I felt something along this line: The Playwright *indulged* Jessica. Abandon her father to become a Christian that would fit the pattern. But she shouldn’t, without signs of regret, have squandered his funds” (170, italics in original, underlined emphasis added).

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<sup>15</sup> Crable notes that Burke’s encounters with Ellison were also powerful in pushing Burke to think about, if not ultimately revise, his ideas about race.

<sup>16</sup> As Burke points out and Bertelsen underscores “Burke himself has acknowledged that Josephson ‘helped me greatly’ to deal with the anti-Semitic psychosis and to thus bridge the Judeo-Christian divide (1983, p. 169)” (85).



Even here in the very moment when Burke seems to identify most strongly with Shylock, he is only able to identify with the stereotype of money-loving Jews that Shylock called forth for Burke. For it is not the loss of the daughter, or her conversion to Christianity which plagues Burke, rather it the loss of the “Jew’s money.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout these “scrambled together” notes (Burke, “Letter”, 168), Burke perpetuates a slew of negative images about Jews having to do with hoarding, scavenging, “filth,” and money. For a man attempting to “absolve” himself of the hurt caused by slurs he issued earlier in life, these anecdotes betray the depth to which these derogatory ideas about Jewish people were ingrained in Burke’s thinking. Interestingly, he points out his own position in the matter by calling attention to the ways “we probably all inherit to some degree vestiges of the ambivalent situation which Nietzsche’s ingenious forms of anti-Semitism pointed up” (162), acknowledging that his ideas inherit vestiges of anti-Semitism.

At this point, I want to return to a section of the letter analyzed earlier in this article where Burke sandwiches his cryptic and coded apology for his use of the term “Jew bastard” in the 1935 *New Masses* review in between two scenic explanations for ethnocentric prejudice—that of his father and that of his earlier self. In the middle of his “modulation” about his father’s slurs, Burke slips once again from a description of Jewish-Gentile relations into anti-Israel attitudes, and for the third time in this letter alone, he compares Israel’s actions to the genocidal actions of the US against Native Americans. He begins by highlighting that Jews are a race:

In any case, turning now to the Jew-Gentile relationship specifically, it begins this way for sure: As far back as the tribe’s great book, *the members of the race*, beginning as God’s ‘peculiar’ people (the translation says) *survive not simply as individuals, but as Jews*. The Jews themselves impress it upon the goyim that they are Jews, and that they are surviving as Jews. (164)

This is the third time in the relatively brief “Letter” that Burke compares Israel’s actions to the genocidal actions of the US and collapses Israel’s national desires and goals with the British Empire’s imperial, colonial aspirations. And if earlier in the letter he attempts to distinguish between those who support Beginism and those Israelis who do not, here all Israelis are grouped together. In a variation of chiasmus, Burke underscores the proportions of Israel’s actions given the “tiny territory” it calls its own: “whereby the Israelis’ ways of expanding so little in so tiny a territory are correspondingly as tiny as our nation’s ways of dispossessing the native population were grandiose” (164).

Burke’s ideas about nation-states from *Rhetoric of Motives* shed light on the complicated interrelations between Burke’s own anti-Jewish influences, anti-Semitic slurs, and anti-Israel attitudes. Burke writes, “Once a national identity is built up, it can be treated as an individual; hence like an individual its condition can be presented in sacrificial terms” (Burke RM 165). To the extent that Burke treats Israel as something that can metonymically be represented by “Begin” and all the negative connotations of his expansionist political policies, Burke paves the way for Israel to “be presented in

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<sup>17</sup> In his introduction to the special issue in which Burke’s letter appears, “The State of Being Jewish,” Diamond offers a contrasting interpretation of *Merchant of Venice*. “Shakespeare makes it clear that the tragedy of Shylock was not in the loss of his money, but in the loss of his daughter; i. e., of his family and religion, the two being linked, and therefore—the loss of his self respect” (2).

sacrificial terms.” Perhaps Burke’s anti-Semitism is transformed, not out of his system in a way but rather into a reflection and representation of his deep-seated anti-Judaism “expressed with a difference” (RM 314). Burke writes: “A motive, when genuinely transcended, is not dropped, but transformed. It is redeemed not by subtraction, but by inclusion in a new fellowship. It is thus not repressed, but expressed, yet expressed with a difference: for its ‘nature’ has been ‘graced”” (Burke RM 314). While “graced” would not be the word I would choose to describe Burke’s anti-Israel sentiments, his understanding of the way motives are never fully “dropped” even when “transformed” suggests that his putatively “transformed” anti-Semitism merely reappears in the “new fellowship” of anti-Israelism which grows out of his anti-Judaism.

A significant portion of Burke’s 1983 “Letter” focuses on his discussion of Jews in the Middle Ages, their role in transforming the economy by virtue of the role they play as money lenders, and his own experiences with and discussion of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. At one moment he considers what might be the “Next Step,” the transcendence that comes from moving beyond the New/Old Testament dialectic (165). Imagining a transformative moment beyond the Judeo-Christian dialectic, Burke contends that in order to reach it, we must first better understand the “past developments in Western history that contributed to any current scars of anti-Semitism” and for him (165), those past developments all have to do with the role of Jews in financial transactions, specifically the role of money lending. From here, he launches into an analysis of the biblical passages that relate to dispersion and the stipulations under which “usury” is acceptable, offering a lengthy discussion of Jews in the Middle Ages. In an unclosed parenthetical aside, Burke remarks, “It may begin to dawn on the reader that this self-stylized ‘honorary Semite’ is becoming evangelical, is now turning things around, and wants a whole further band of others to join a New Diaspora. . .” (“Letter” 166). Burke is trying to imagine such a “New Diaspora” that would replace the current problems associated with the Judeo-Christian dialectic, and the anti-Semitism that grows out of it. Yet in so doing, he moves from the specific representations of Jews as a “peculiar people” to a universalizing move, claiming that humans (substituted here for Jews) are “nature’s ‘peculiar’ people among the various biologic organisms on this earth” (“Letter” 166). This substitution seems connected with his earlier over-identification with/as a minority in the Preface and with diasporic Jews here in the Letter. While this substitution works to eliminate Jews by writing over them, just a few sentences later Burke displaces these eliminationist ideas onto John Calvin.

After focusing on Jewish people’s and metics’ role in financial dealings that “were beneath the dignity of the free citizen to be directly associated with” (169), Burke concludes his letter with these final remarks on *Merchant of Venice*:

Moving on up to my problematic wind up... I should add one notion, be it right or wrong. It seems to me that the offshoots of Calvinism, whatever their reservations against Judaism, performed in their way the *transitional function* that the Jewish kind of metic performed elsewhere by *introducing motives needed for the Next Phase*. A significant step is involved here; namely, the distinction between ‘interest’ and ‘usury.’ Contemporary ‘progress’ has so confused that distinction, you wouldn’t know the old place now.

Calvinism succeeds Judaism; the old merchant is  
forced off the stage. And his offspring are obliterated. (171,  
emphasis added)

In these final lines, Burke casts Calvin as the scapegoat responsible for the connections between Jews and usury<sup>18</sup> and attempts to absolve himself finally of eliminationist anti-Semitism. Calvin, using anti-Judaism as a foundation, condemned Jewish usury, Jews as materialist, and “saw little value in the continuing presence of Jews and Judaism” (Brayme). Like the *Merchant of Venice*, which concludes with “obliterated offspring” in that Rebecca has married out of the faith and thus ends the line of Jewish continuity, Burke ends his letter with a similarly bleak future for Jewish peoplehood.

Over the course of his life, Burke continually wrestled with the “discomfiture of his own making” that resulted from his attempts to confront his anti-Semitism and the deep-seated anti-Jewish attitudes that girded it (167).<sup>19</sup> At different periods in his life, Burke wrestled differently with his increasing shame. Early in his life, he engaged in anti-Semitic slurs, shifting the focus from his own loneliness and outsider status to those of the Jews he read about as an insecure, teenage youth. Perhaps recognizing parts of his insecure and uncomfortable self while reading Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, Burke crafted “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” as an attempt to wrestle with and rid himself of the type of anti-Semitism he analyzed so insightfully. Later in his life, when reflecting on the writing created by his younger, more insecure self, he attempted to make his earlier “indiscretions” innocent by displacing accountability in his historical scene. Even at the moments when he attempts to confront his attitudes head on, finally accepting some agency by declaring that he was once “very anti-Semitic,” he continues to use dissociation to make his earlier “indiscretions” innocent, dissociating the language from the content, his stylistic choices from his anti-Jewish beliefs, and his earlier, younger self from his current one.

My attention to Burke’s anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Israelism complicates the hagiography the field engages in around him. As Sharon Crowley once said of Richard Weaver: “I find it hard to understand why his work has for so long been so uncritically received and why it is presented so abstractly in textbooks meant for students. If I had my way, certainly, it would appear there no longer” (90). Just as Crable points out Burke’s complicated relations with Ellison and race, this article has raised enough questions to trouble the easy-hagiography. I do not mean to suggest that we should eliminate Burke from the canon, but we absolutely must raise awareness of his troubling attitudes and actions; revise and redraw the “scope” of the “representative anecdotes” we use to introduce Burke to graduate students, undergraduate students, and one another; and trouble the way we rhetoric scholars so easily and uncritically embrace the theoretical apparatus he developed under such deeply entrenched anti-Jewish attitudes. As Crable points out, “Biography aside, Burke

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<sup>18</sup> I thank David Frank for inviting me to write this essay and offering tremendous encouragement and insight in mulling over the interpretation of these difficult and disturbing ideas.

<sup>19</sup> In the middle of the 1983 “Letter” Burke reflects on his own act of writing by discussing his character in *Towards a Better Life*: “He was in for much discomfiture, largely of his own making—and his author thinks of him now, when squirming about in this present effort” (“Letter” 167). The very use of the word “squirming” suggests the duality of Burke’s discomfort and his wriggling about to relieve himself of that discomfort, specifically with regard to the repeated and continual embarrassment he felt from his earlier use of “that filthy slur.”

is simply not known for his writings on issues of race” (10), and I might rejoin, neither is he known for his anti-Semitism. But it is high time that we begin to teach this important scene along with “representative anecdotes” about *RHB*.

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