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**Abstract:** This essay interprets two long Burke poems from the late 1960s, testing the value of accessing Burke's thought through his poetry rather than his theoretical writing. These poems articulate Burke's apprehension, while spending time in the West (Sinkership) and in New York (Eye 'Crossing'), about technology's effects on nature and human relations. But poetry, unlike theory, enables readers to share this apprehension at an attitudinal level that encompasses all levels of identity. Through these poems, readers can become consubstantial with Burke, and in this new consubstantiality they take a step, however small, from apprehension to hope.

I'M A LITTLE SLOW SOMETIMES. I finally got around to meeting Kenneth Burke when it was almost too late, and after I did finally talk with him I ignored, until recently, the most important thing he told me.

He was 92 when I met him—bent and prone to mumble, but animated by surprising bursts of energy. We talked in his kitchen for a couple of hours on a summer Saturday. I was trying to understand his *Grammar* and *Rhetoric* and he responded to my questions by pushing copies of his *Complete White Oxen* and his *Collected Poems* across the table to me and saying, “Haven’t you read this?” I hadn’t. And I didn’t for years after that, even though he told me that day that he’d only started writing theory because people weren’t getting his point in his fiction and poetry.

I started this essay still thinking mostly about Burke's theory. But I also started reading in what he had been writing since his better-known theoretical books—his “late” writing, both theoretical and poetic. And that reading brought back the memory of the man I had talked with and walked with in Andover, of what had been on his mind that day in 1989, and of his repeated statement that I could find answers to my theoretical questions in his poetic work. So I decided, finally, to take him at his word.

I write this essay to continue a project begun in my book, *Rhetorical Landscapes of America*, of understanding implications of the expanded conception of rhetoric that are implicit in Burke's definition of the rhetorical as an experience of identification. There I used that concept of the rhetorical to examine ways that the environments we live in—specifically, the landscapes we inhabit—shape, if not create, our individual and collective identities.<sup>1</sup> Here I want to look again at that rhetorical interaction of landscape and human identity, but this time at the power of our identities—and, specifically, the attitudes that constitute them—to create landscapes that speak back to us of who we are with persistent rhetorical power. I do this in order to make two amends to Kenneth Burke. The first is for writing a book on Burke and landscape that does not deal directly with the concern that dominated his late work: our willful ignorance obsessed as we are with the apparent promise of our imagination and the technology it creates of our absolute dependence on a natural world that technology is displacing and destroying. The second amend is for ignoring his poetic work for so long.

Burke's concerns about technology appear with special ironic and dramatic clarity in his two essays devoted to Helhaven: “Towards Helhaven: Three Stages of a Vision” (1971) and “Why Satire, with a Plan for Writing One” (1974). Helhaven is a culture bubble on the moon that technologically reproduces simulacra of natural wonders that once existed on earth before their destruction at the hands of technology. One important connection between the Helhaven essays and the two landscape poems I wish to examine is Walt Whitman.

These two poems are both late poems—rhetorical poems that record and respond to the rhetorical power of two quintessential American landscapes. The first, “Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership: A Diaristic Fragment,” was written in the summer of 1967 and appears in *Complete Poems*, 1915–1967, published in 1968. This poem—he described it as he was writing it as a “muddle of sensation and ideation”—reads as meditations of a “Wandering Scholar” who is driving across his nation's continent toward a temporary teaching post in the West (*Letters* 113).<sup>2</sup> Burke is aware as he drives that he is reenacting the archetypal American experience of discovering the possibilities of the future in trajectory of a journey west:

go go going West, the wife and I—  
I told the Selph I'd say again  
them resonant words of Horace Greeley,  
“Go West, elderly couple.” (289)

But the landscape he encounters on this journey is not promising, teeming as it is with technological and commercial development—industrial, agricultural, touristic—and its attendant refuse, and populated by people who live together isolated as he is by their own automobiles and itineraries. The only insight into the future that he can discover along the way is the possibility that he and his nation both are living on “floodtides of sinkership.” The second poem appeared in 1969 with the title “Eye Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan” and was later expanded with Burke's reflections and explanations, appearing with this prose commentary under different titles in 1973, 2003, and 2005.<sup>3</sup> Here the poet's meditations are those of a man who finds himself nearly immobile in his nation's most famous city—the second essential American landscape. Late in 1968, Burke brought his wife, Libbie, to an apartment hotel in Brooklyn Heights; she had suffered a stroke in September 1968 that made moving to the city “advisable” (Jay 365; *Letters* 141). In May 1969, Libbie “left in her sleep,” as Burke put it in a note to Malcolm Cowley (Jay 368). During her final months, Burke cared for her day and night in a room with a window allowing “eye crossings” across the East River to lower Manhattan. The landscape he

encounters in these crossings seems more ominous than the one he had encountered on the road driving across the continent a few years earlier:

A jumble of towering tombstones  
hollowed, not hallowed,  
and in the night incandescent  
striving ever to outstretch one another  
like stalks of weeds dried brittle in the fall. (16)

Both poems assume familiarity with Whitman poems. “Sinkership” re-evaluates Whitman’s limitless vision of westering progress articulated in “Song of the Open Road”; “Eye-Crossing,” his confident concept of national community expressed in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

The Helhaven satire, evidently conceived not long after the writing of these poems, retrospectively articulates an additional Whitmanesque context for them, one that spotlights in particular Burke’s concerns in these poems with environmental destruction. The 2003 version of “Eye Crossing” appears with a brief introduction by William H. Rueckert, who groups it with “Sinkership,” indicating that both poems are “anti Whitmanian and antitechnology and are part of Burke’s sustained attack on the creative genius of hypertechnology during his later years” (Burke, *On Human Nature* 305). In “Why Satire,” Burke points to Whitman to explain the genesis of his strategy in his Helhaven satire:

the task of the satirist is to set up a fiction whereby our difficulties can be treated in the accents of the promissory. Whitman, in his accents of gladness, had given us the clue:

I know not where they go,  
But I know that they go toward the best--toward  
Something great. (75)

These lines from Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” (section 13) reappear in “Sinkership,” where Burke quotes the complete verse paragraph in which they appear and adds, “Whitman whistling in the dark” (280). In Burke’s Helhaven vision, Whitman’s whistling satirically celebrates the darkness of our worst fears coming to pass. Burke’s “vision” of Helhaven needed a “visionary,” and Whitman provided Burke the perfect model. “Why Satire” even ends with a few poems modeled on Whitman, in which Burke’s Helhaven visionary speaks. Years before, Burke observed that “much of Whitman’s appeal resides in this poetic alchemy, whereby the dangerous destruction of our natural resources could be exaltedly interpreted as an ‘advance’” (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 118). This “alchemy” appears in satiric form in Helhaven.<sup>4</sup>

I think that Burke wrote “Sinkership” and “Eye-Crossing” to counter what the landscapes we have made for ourselves—land we have made over in the image of what we have imagined ourselves to be (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 281)—are telling us about our individual and collective identity, about who we are and what we became in the twentieth century. He wrote them perhaps lacking confidence that resistance to that identity can have much effect. Writing in the late twentieth century, Burke couldn’t reaffirm Whitman’s nineteenth-century optimism about America’s future. Still, I think he wrote them in the hope that we might attend to the stories of his experience in those landscapes and come to share with him his wariness and anxiety about the way we have come to live. That hope acknowledges the possibility that we might begin to change the attitudes that we have made material in the landscapes we have built. He tried to persuade his readers to do that in his late theoretical writing, but I believe that these intense, intimate, painful and personal poems have a chance of doing that to greater effect. I now need to rehearse some of his theory to help us understand why this is so.

## Attitudes and Identification

In the gloss titled “After-Words” that he added to “Eye-Crossing,” Burke wrote, as he has written elsewhere, that “if I were now to write my *Grammar* over again, I’d turn the pentad into a hexad, the sixth term being *attitude*” (24). Each element of that hexad can be used to describe the primary rhetorical tool available in each form of poetic literature: act is the rhetorical focus of drama, agent that of the novel, purpose of the epic, and so on. And attitude is what lyric poetry works to communicate. Burke asserts here that this poem, despite its rambling length, is indeed a lyric because, as every lyric does, it most emphatically “*strikes an attitude*” (25). Specifically, “the lyric attitude implies some kind of situation” and while “a lyric may be, on its face, but a list of descriptive details specifying a scene . . . these images are all manifestations of a single attitude” (26). What a lyric does rhetorically, then, is say to its reader, “Come attitudinize with me” (26). In other words, it invites readers to identify themselves with the poet by adopting as their own the attitude the poem expresses toward circumstances that they share.

Attitude seems to be what links Burke’s grammar and rhetoric of motives. Burke begins his *Grammar* with the question, “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (xv). His method of using the pentad or hexad to answer that question involves attending carefully to the full context in which people operate, accounting for the full spectrum of experience within which they find themselves motivated. In his *Rhetoric* Burke notes that this context has rhetorical effects and that these effects are essential elements of any such experience, for “rhetoric seeks to have formative effect on *attitude*” (50). Moreover, the idea that the rhetorical does the work of “persuasion to *attitude*”—that what rhetoric does is prompt and shape and invite and provoke particular attitudes—“permits the application of rhetorical terms to purely *poetic* structures” (50). The term “poetic” here refers to the sort of experiences that we consider aesthetic. As Burke puts it in “Poetics, Dramatistically Considered,” “the word, ‘poetry,’ is essentially an action word, coming from a word meaning ‘to make.’” The “word ‘aesthetic,’” he continues, “comes from a word meaning ‘to perceive’” (“Watchful” 36). What is made is then perceived, and perception is an experience. As he had put it at the beginning of his career in

*Counter-Statement*, when we perceive the aesthetic we engage in an encounter with form, with form as “a way of experiencing” (143). For him, then, from the beginning of his career to the end, the aesthetic is, primarily, an experience—a transformative, rhetorical experience. It is an “arousing and fulfillment of desires” (*Counter-Statement* 124), an encounter with the “creation and gratification of needs” (138). And when that experience is shared, as the aesthetic is always intended to be, the result is powerfully rhetorical because it renders people conscious of what he called their “consubstantiality” with another (*Rhetoric* 21).

Identification, then, is experienced as consubstantiality, and people feel consubstantial when they experience a sharing of attitudes. Indeed, as his choice of the term *consubstantial* suggests, what Burke sees them sharing is nothing less than the same *substance*. As he defined it in the *Grammar*, moreover, substance includes “a thing’s *context*, since that which supports or underlies a thing would be a part of a thing’s context” (23). In another word he used, people who share the same complex of attitudes share the same “*placement*” as they identify themselves in relation to their common environment in the same way (*Grammar* 24-28). And it is identity, finally, that wields the rhetorical power to exert, as he put it in his “After-Words” to “Eye Crossing,” a sort of “unifying force” that “‘sums up’ the conglomerate of particulars.” Identity pulls the elements of our perceptions and thoughts and feelings together, rendering coherent “the ‘sentiments’ implicit in the ‘sensations,’ and the ‘thoughts’ implicit in the ‘sentiments,’” and, finally, it “express[es] and evok[es] a unified attitude . . .” (25). The rhetorical, then, is always, finally, a matter of identity—of shared identity, and identity is always a matter of shared attitude.

In all of his late writings about ecology, about technology, about the ominous entelechy of our symbolic capacity, Burke’s primary concern seems to be about attitude. He is concerned that as symbolic animals, and particularly as symbolic animals living in America, we share attitudes that exclude from that unified conglomerate of particulars that comprises our shared experience the physical fact of our permanent placement in, and final dependence upon, the natural world. In all his later work, whether poetic or critical or theoretical, his rhetorical project is to change those attitudes and that involves nothing less than changing the individual and collective identity of those Americans to whom he writes. Since attitudes and identity are embedded in experience, Burke is at his most passionate when he tries to render that experience poetically but, practical man that he always was, he also always backs himself up by making the same point in his criticism and theory. Indeed, because early on he focused in his own life-long project of writing not on “self-expression,” a motive he says he abandoned while writing his first book, but on constructive and productive “communication” (“*Rhetoric and Poetics*,” 305-07), he moves readily back and forth between poetic and theoretical forms in order to convey his message. But the intensity of his concern is most apparent, most immediate, and, I think, best communicated in the intimate imagery and immediate emotion of the painful personal experiences that he voices in his poetry. Though Burke was, to the end, “apprehensive” (“*Doing*” 119) about whether his communication would or could do any good in the world, he persisted in writing and publishing (in his phrase used to subtitle his *Late Poems*) his “attitudinizing verse-wise, while fending for one’s selph.”

This is the theoretical context, the rhetorical “placement” of these two poems. They function rhetorically as enactments of his own attitude, one with which he hopes we might identify. More specifically, they are presented as a remedial attitude that is motivated by a corrective intent. They are attempts to correct an identity, a national identity, that he knows is not sustainable. He wrote to correct that identity by changing attitudes toward the American landscapes where he and his readers together must make their home. These poems would do that both poetically and rhetorically—indeed, both at once, as art always does—by bringing others into a mediate experience of sensation, feeling, and thought that would transform their attitudes and, so, their concept of common identity. Burke wrote to all those who share the situation of inhabiting these landscapes to enable them to understand that they can be together there, “*substantially one*” (*Rhetoric* 21), and that this identity of people who share a common “placement” (*Grammar* 28) in *this* place may be the one, right now, that matters most.

So I turn now to these two poems of American landscape and what they have to teach us about the reach and power of Burke’s rhetoric of identification. I believe they offer us two crucial lessons. The first is that if rhetoric is a matter of identity, of identification, then it is at its most powerful when it works to prompt attitudes (which Burke considers to be “incipient action” [“(Nonsymbolic) Motion” 147]) rather than particular actions. That is because attitudes are the very matter of identity in a way that actions, which are its localized consequence, are not. Attitudes, in a word, possess us. The second lesson is that attitudes are acquired through experience and that is because experiences function rhetorically as attitudes embodied, as enactments of the very substance of identity.<sup>5</sup> When experience is rendered aesthetically it is encountered by others as vivid, imagery-laden metaphors that invite in others, and that implicitly assert, an identity of consubstantiality. “*Dancing various attitudes*” is one of Burke’s descriptions of the work of the rhetorical (“[Nonsymbolic] Motion” 169), and that is precisely what these two late poems of American landscape do. Whether the dance is choreographed as poetry, criticism, theory, or even as image or music, it invites and entices those who witness it to inhabit the attitude that it proposes as ground for a better identity.

### “Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership”

In its plot, this is a poem about a rhetorical problem. Burke subtitles it “a diaristic fragment” that recounts his meditations on solving that problem as he drove west across the continent toward the state of Washington where he was to lecture and teach. Here is his statement of the problem:

“Hurrying westward with a message,  
soon now we’ll be arriving.  
What tell ‘em when we get there?” (281)

Burke’s problem, worked on in the context of a period of great national turmoil (the 1960s), is what he might say at the college, what he might teach the people there. His various false starts at solution are inflected by his experiences of the American landscape that he encountered as he sped along the highway.

What he encounters most immediately is the landscape of that highway itself—the scene of “the Traffic War” with “each driver going somewhere, the whole thing nowhere” (277). It is a place of congested alienation, of isolation in a shared space of intense individual purpose, of physical risk. Inhabiting that landscape at such high velocity prompts him to “untoward thoughts”:

“What if that oncomer veered into our lane?”  
“What if a tire blew exactly now,  
amidst this racing automotive tangle?”  
(at times cars bunch up, moving along together,  
like houses clustered in a village)  
“What if, for no damned reason,  
I gave a twist and sent us pitching  
into that cataclysmic chasm,  
that psychological gerundive,  
that to-be-tumbled-into?” (278)

Maybe, he thinks, that’s what he can tell them at the college—about what cars, and our dependence on them as one of our primary habitations might be doing to us and to our nation, how cars have changed our shared experience, our common attitudes, our identities. Maybe he can talk about that:

How walk faster, except by working harder?  
Likewise, how run, or speed up a bike,  
except by greater effort? . . .  
Ever so lightly press the pedal down a fraction farther  
And your massive technological demon  
Spurts forward like a fiend.

Tell them that.  
Talk of such brutal disproportion  
between decision and the consequences.  
“Might we not here, my friends,  
confront the makings of a madness,  
an unacknowledged leap  
from *This is mine*  
to *By God, This is ME!* . . .?(282)

Maybe he can use this representative anecdote of the automobile, and his experiences driving one in the traffic of the continent, to make the problem of a technological identity immediate. He also can talk about how, driving in our cars, identified with them rather than with the others with whom we share the road, and not with the landscape itself that makes our lives possible, we are living at high risk, individually and collectively. Repeatedly in these poems, the technological displacement of nature is accompanied by a distancing of humans from one another.

Or maybe he can talk about that landscape as he sees it from the car, and about the national identity he finds expressed by “the Inroads of Destruction” (278) that he follows in his car:

Ruins and pride of empire  
In peaceful coexistence—  
ugliness and power  
weeds struggling to make an honest living  
in slag heaps, among iron skeletons,  
machines dead in use or disuse.  
This is our gospel for all mankind?  
This we will bring to Vietnam? (279)

It’s 1967. Vietnam is on his mind—it is on everyone’s mind. Maybe he can talk about that, about what we are doing to that landscape and the people who inhabit it, about how it repeats the sort of exploitation we visit upon our own, on ourselves, but so grossly and violently magnified:

Cook them with napalm in the name of freedom  
tear up their way of life  
herd them  
let their girls get work as whores. . .  
then tell yourselves  
how you can buy those people off  
once you have loaded them with U.S. gadgets,  
gifts from our technologic Christmas tree.

I can’t speak for you, my friend,  
but if that’s what an invader from halfway around the world

with schemes for my deliverance  
did for me and my ways,  
I can't speak for you, my friend,  
but with my country torn to pieces  
by such expert squandering,  
I can't speak for you, friend,  
but I'd just bide my time . . .

Gad! I couldn't tell them that!

Maybe I can't say anything . . . (290-91)<sup>6</sup>

But there is some respite from this rhetorical problem. A notable island in the landscape offers him that and reminds him of other such islands encountered in previous trips across the continent ("eight times" in all [277]), protected places of retreat and momentary hope. That respite is Glacier National Park he calls it "the glorious *Savings*" (278) where "you stand in the sign of Conservation" (281), a place that this "speed-drugged driver" (280) experiences as a welcome "mystery maybe / a reflex counterpart of all the plunder / that had been flowing beneath our wheels" (281). And this prompts memories of counterpart landscapes in America:

Snatches of other trips, remembered piecemeal,  
Keep crowding in:

. . .

Above the canyon at Yellowstone  
after having taken in the sights all day  
chasm-cringingly  
I plunged all night

. . .

but at Zion, at the bottom of a canyon, looking up—  
and all night I heard the deep convulsive intake of the desert  
through the gulches. (285-86)

But even in protected places there is always the highway:

In the Big Horns

Around many a squirming, wriggling  
Squiggle-curve

...

Leaving Gila Bend  
numerous saguaros  
signaling  
but what?

. . .

The driving was so easy,  
though we started late  
we came to the Canyon early  
got a place but a few yards from a drop-off. (286-87)

There are other places of more marginal respite, but they, more consistently a part of the modern American landscape he is encountering, bring him back to his rhetorical problem. There's "the motel / where the mountain rose / right out of the back yard,"

or a stretch of beach on the Pacific  
with kelp, shells, pebbles, oil slick  
and a rusty empty can  
of Chicken of the Sea.

. . .

What tell them?

. . .

Only this can I say in full authority:  
"To be safe in striking at the powerful  
make sure that your blows are powerless." (288, 292)

That's a lot of quoting, but immersion in the flow of his words is the way a reader comes to inhabit Burke's experience of, and so his attitude toward, this landscape. As we inhabit his images we can begin to feel for ourselves his concern about our technology-driven way of life and its seemingly inevitable consequences. That is how these vicarious experiences that he prepared for his readers can do the powerful rhetorical work he described in *Counter-Statement* when he noted that "we think in universals but we feel particulars" (47), and again, much later, in his essay, "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision," when he wrote that experience, encountered imaginatively as metaphor, "gives substance to our feeling..." (144). Attitudes, finally, are felt. And feeling, finally, is where we live.

**"Eye-Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan"**

This one, too, is a poem about a rhetorical problem, one the poet has trouble finding words to address. Indeed, he has such trouble that he can't get to the problem, he doesn't find himself able even to articulate it, until the 13th stanza:

As with an aging literary man who, knowing  
that words see but within  
yet finding himself impelled to build a poem  
that takes for generating core a startling View,  
a novel visual Spaciousness

(he asks himself: "Those who have not witnessed it,  
*how* tell them? —and *why* tell those who have?  
Can you do more than say 'remember'?") (15-16)

This second poem identifies the second of the two representative American landscapes that Whitman memorialized in "Song of the Open Road" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." One is the vast continent itself; the other essential landscape is the city—particularly America's primary city, New York. "Eye-Crossing" is Burke's poem about this urban landscape, about this "startling View" that he sees and finds he doesn't know how to express to his compatriots. Whitman wrote about finding himself and an American community in the present and the future while riding the ferry across the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan. But now, as Burke notes, there is no more ferry, there is hardly a community, and the experience of crossing that river is something else entirely. That is how he begins the poem's ending:

Crossing?  
Just as the roads get jammed that lead  
each week-day morning from Long Island to Manhattan,  
so the roads get jammed that lead that evening  
from Manhattan to Long Island.  
And many's the driver that curses crossing. (22)

Burke's "Sinkership" is about the frantic mobility of the American nation and the alienating experience of inhabiting it: "the ever-changing signature of empire, / proud, with its ruins" that "flows past our wheels" (278). His "Eye-Crossing" poem is about another alienating experience in America, this of the exhausting immobility—"a restlessness unending, back and forth" (7)—of life for so many, especially for him, in the city. Here an aging Burke—now in his seventies—is facing his losses: of friends, of freedom to walk and wander, and the imminent death of his wife. The two poems recount the equally isolating experiences of mobility and immobility in America, expressing his anxiety about both the present and the future. In "Sinkership," the continent is encountered at high velocity, from behind the windows of a private car. In "Eye-Crossing," the city is encountered from behind an apartment window by a lonely man about to become more lonely. Even when Burke is able to go out for an errand, or for a late night walk, he is alone and so are the people he encounters: "eight or ten lone wandering shapes, / and all as afraid of me as I of them? / We kept a wholesome distance from one another" (11). For him, for the voice with which his readers are invited to identify, both landscapes afford experiences of alienation and risk.

In this poem the rhetorical problem is not what to say but how to say it. And perhaps even whether to try. In "Sinkership" he needs to decide what to say. Here he knows but doubts the efficacy of saying it. That is part of his immobility. His first attempt to say it breaks down in his preoccupation with risk and fragility—his own, and his wife's. His second is frozen by "a saddeningly vexing letter / from a dear friend gone sour" (5). His third begins to find a way to say what he needs to say as he describes the landscape of the city directly:

The architectural piles, erections, impositions,  
monsters of high-powered real estate promotion—  
from a room high on Brooklyn Heights  
the gaze is across and UP, to those things' peak,  
their arrogance!  
When measured by this scale of views from Brooklyn  
they are as though deserted. (6)

But then he is stalled again by a brief meditation on the immobility of the Cold War and so, emboldened by "alky," tries a late night walk but is chased back in by "the teeth of the biting wind" (8).

He starts again with a story of an encounter at a supermarket where he tries to help another manage traffic at the checkout line and finds himself accessory to a confrontation that ends with customers shouting at him and one expelled from the store. Having tried to help, he pays and leaves "feel[ing] all about his head / a glowering anti-glowing counter-halo . . ." (10). Then he starts again by walking again, alone and cold; then again by contemplating the awkward work of the tugs maneuvering freight ships at the dock. Then he starts by stopping at a nearly empty bar. Then walking again, finding himself feared by a passing woman jogging. Then he contemplates strategies for getting a seat on the crowded subway that crosses under the river. Then, back at the window, he starts again:

Problems pile up, like the buildings,  
Even as I write, the highest to the left  
soars higher day by day.

Now but the skeleton of itself  
(these things begin as people end!)  
all night its network of naked bulbs keeps flickering  
towards us here in Brooklyn . . .  
then dying into our dawn . . .  
or are our . . . are our what? (15)

That may be a description of the north tower of the World Trade Center, under construction toward its completion in 1970. And then a few lines later (more ominously for us, even, than for him):

Do I foresee that day, while gazing across, as though that realm was alien  
Forfend forfending of my prayer  
that if and when and as such things should be  
those (from here) silent monsters (over there)  
will have by then gone crumbled into rubble,  
and nothing all abroad  
but ancient Egypt's pyramidal piles of empire-building hierarchal stylized  
dung remains. (18)

In the gloss that follows that stanza, Burke notes that he did not intend to offer “prophecy” here—only a projection of the dark promise of entelechy: given the direction we are going showing where we might be heading (18). And we, reading after 9/11/2001, are left wondering if perhaps entelechy does explain some of it.

All in all, he describes here neither problem nor solution. What he does do is show us, with the images of his experience, an attitude. So what is that attitude? In his “After-Words”—where he defines the project of lyric poetry as enacting an attitude—he portrays us, his readers, asking him that. After offering us a set of unsatisfactory answers he has us challenge him with this: “could you at least give us a first rough approximate, by selecting one word or another that at least points vaguely in the right direction (for instance, like pointing with the sweep of the arm rather than with the index finger)?” His answer, somewhat reluctant: “So, for a first rough approximate, I’d propose that the summarizing lyric attitude be called ‘apprehensive’” (26). Burke is apprehensive because he sees around corners, to where the landscapes we have made for ourselves are leading us, a vision enabled by his use of the Aristotelian principle of entelechy. As he put it elsewhere, “by ‘entelechy,’ I refer to such use of symbolic resources that potentialities can be said to attain their *perfect fulfillment*” (“Archetype” 123). Further, this “culminative aspect of the entelechial principle . . . can also come to a focus in the symbolizing of an attitude, since attitudes possess a summarizing quality.” And, still further, “an attitude towards a situation can be developed in terms of a narrative that sums up a situation not by discussing the situation as such, but by depicting a thoroughgoing response to it” (“Archetype” 131). This, quite precisely, is what Burke has to say, and how he says it, in his “Eye-Crossing” poem—indeed, in both of these poems of the American landscape. They express, and in doing so identify in us if we are paying attention, the apprehensiveness that follows from powerlessness, from knowing what is happening—to himself, to his wife, to his nation—and being unable to do anything about it but offer the unwieldy wielding of words:

(My own words tangle like our entangled ways,  
of hoping to stave off destruction  
by piling up magic mountains of destructiveness.) (17)

## Landscapes: Whitmanesque and Burke

In his *Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke characterized the “Whitmanesque” as a strategy that “focuses attention upon the ‘human’ element in our patterns of sociality, the typical situations of home life, farming, manufacture, etc.” The problem with that sort of appeal is that it can “come to function as little more than a promiscuous flattering of the status quo, in its bad aspects as well as its good ones” (224). Consequently, the Whitmanesque is in perpetual need of correction and critique, and that is a large part of Burke’s project in these two poems about late twentieth century American landscapes. They are Whitmanesque in two senses: in their content as they describe the experiences of daily life in those landscapes, and in their context as explicit responses to particular Whitman poems. For Burke, the landscapes that Whitman found so promising promise only problems for the nation’s future.

Poetry that is Whitmanesque gathers its rhetorical power from the familiarity of its images, from our comfortable residence in the typical situations that it presents. We readily identify with the experiences such poetry recounts—with the places it describes and with the people who populate those places. We know them well. The places are ours and the people are us. By contrast, with Burke’s deliberate effort to be careful about not flattering the status quo in which we are comfortable, we have the opportunity to identify ourselves with the anxiety that follows from Burke’s “apprehensive” attitude. And so our very familiarity with the images, and with our traditional attitude toward those images—the attitude canonized by Whitman’s great poems can provoke a change in us if we identify with Burke’s experience of encountering those images without the filters of our familiarity, and then seeing farther around their corners.

But these two poems suggest that the most powerful instances of a Whitmanesque rhetorical art are our landscapes themselves—the material enactments of our “patterns of sociality” that are our placement, our context for understanding who, individually and collectively, we are. Inhabited in their empirical reality, the landscapes we create claim wordlessly what is and what must be. Burke uses words in these poems to challenge such claims, and words can do that—they can articulate alternative identities for us to imagine. He often wrote such words, quite polemically, such as: “it would be better for us, in the long run, if we ‘identified ourselves’ rather with the natural things that we are progressively *destroying*—our trees, our rivers, our land, even our air, all of which we are but

a lowly ecological part of" ("Poetics" 414). But in these poems, facing up against the evidence of everyday experience in the landscape, where Burke finds no opportunity for such identification beyond a few brief passages in "Sinkership," his words lack that kind of confidence and express instead, and vividly, his grave apprehension.

It's in identification itself that the distance between Whitmanesque and Burkean landscapes are most marked. Whitman is typically uplifted by virtue of identifying with everyone he encounters and with the encompassing landscape itself. In Burke, it's just the opposite: the landscape is the product of technological displacement of nature and the humans within it feel isolated from one another. To some extent this difference no doubt results from the contrast between Whitmanesque flattering of the status quo and Burkean realism, but one suspects it is also equally a sign of the difference between Whitman's century and Burke's.

With words, it seems, consubstantiality is possible. But when the greatest rhetorical power we encounter takes the irrefutable form of a landscape that we must inhabit in crowded isolation, there seems to be little to hope for. That is what I see in these two late poems of the American landscape, and more so in the later of the two. What both seem most apprehensive about is not only our failure to care for the natural world that enables our existence but also the way this failure seems to go hand-in-hand with our increasing failure to connect with each other, to care for each other, a failure he presents as a product of the landscapes we have created. This, in my reading of these poems, may be the greatest environmental damage we have done.

These poems recount experiences of profound alienation. Certainly, Burke was not the first to complain that cities can be alienating—and his own sense of that experience is intensified by his circumstance of writing "Eye-Crossing" while his wife was dying. But a bracketed anecdote in "Sinkership" tells a tale of how the technological American way of life changes simultaneously both nature and human relations. The anecdote tells the tale of a couple who has put their savings into a motel by the side of highway so they could make their way through trade. The plan works though, of course, it's no utopia:

True, even the thoughtlessness of customers brings pain.  
Things that should be pulled, they twist—  
things that should be twisted, they first try abruptly pulling.  
So there is a steady drain of minor technologic mayhem  
to cut the earnest aging couple's income over outgo. (284)

These kinds of problems, following from practical and self-interested human relations, are a part of the life that the highway had provided. The exchange of money brings more people into contact while simultaneously rendering human relations more and more superficial and instrumental, leaving us with the irony that

strangers minister to strangers  
in self-willed strife with one another  
striving to give the best years of their lives  
towards answering a motorist's demands (284)

Furthermore, "progress" can be ruthless in bringing to an end the days when a couple could build or buy a motel by the side of the road and have at least commercial relations with others, face-to-face, voice-to-voice:

A by-pass (aided by infloonce)  
cuts through the region at a distance,  
leaving the neo-hostelry far from shore,  
to be ignored, or found by penny-pinching Wandering  
Scholars,  
in search of bargains,  
though ready to weep in principle  
at such victimage. (285)

The technological way of life that brings the modern highway system brings with it new strains in human relations. The farther we get from nature, it seems, the farther we get from one another as well.

So where are we now? I wrote this essay to continue my project of understanding ways that the landscapes we create and inhabit work rhetorically to shape and create our identities. And what I found in Burke's two long poems of the American landscape as he encountered it late in his life is the suggestion that our landscapes speak back to us, with considerable rhetorical power, to deliver an unsettling message. In the "typical situations" of our landscapes, Whitmanesque identification in "the 'human' element in our patterns of sociality" is now displaced by environments of our own making, by ways of life that limit our possibilities for meaningful identification with one another. It is as if Burke's poems of our landscape leave us inhabiting, with him, a place within it (a car crossing I-90 perhaps, or an apartment in Brooklyn Heights) where we share his "apprehensive" recognition of the end of rhetorical identification around us, both among people and with nature. But in becoming consubstantial with Burke in acknowledging and exploring in the landscape the causes of that apprehension, we might take a step, however small, toward a new identity in which apprehension can give way to hope.

\*\*The author is indebted to Robert Wess whose invitation prompted this essay and whose thorough understanding of Burke and eloquent editorial eye enriched and clarified the work he was able to do here. *KB Journal* would like to thank the Kenneth Burke Literary Trust for permission to cite extensively from "Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership: A Diaristic Fragment," which appeared in Burke's *Collected Poems* in 1968.



## Notes

1. Landscapes are, by definition, created by the interaction of humans and the land. Landscapes are what we make of the land: they emerge from our perceptions of the land as documented in the landscape art that we use to decorate the walls of our buildings and they emerge from our habitations of the land, from our placement of those buildings, and the other structures we create, on the land.
2. This poem probably describes a trip late in the summer of 1966 west to Ellensburg, Washington, where he taught from September through December of that year at Central Washington State College (*Letters* 90-91).
3. The version of the poem used here and listed in the "works cited" is the most recent, appearing in 2005 in *Late Poems, 1968-1993* under the title "An Eye Poem for the Ear, with Prose Introduction, Glosses, and After Words ('Eye Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan')." As Burke explains in this version, the poem originally appeared in *The Nation* on June 2, 1969 (3). In this 1969 version, there is no prose, that is, no introduction, glosses, or after words. These prose additions first appear in the version with the title "An Eye-Poem for the Ear (With Prose Introduction, Glosses, and After-Words)," published in *Directions in Literary Criticism: Contemporary Approaches to Literature*, ed. Stanley Weintraub and Philip Young (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1973), 228-51. Burke described this volume as a festschrift for his friend Henry Sams, chair of English at Penn State, who had used the poem in a graduate course and sent Burke his students' responses; Burke told William H. Rueckert that he added the prose commentary to the poem published in *The Nation* to "fit the pattern" of that book (*Letters* 180; see also 145). This 1973 version reappears in 2003 in *Burke, On Human Nature*, with the title "Eye Crossing From Brooklyn to Manhattan: An Eye Poem for the Ear (With Prose Introduction, Glosses, and After-Words)," where Rueckert adds a brief introduction (305-07). *Late Poems* reprints the 1973 version again, with another modified title, and privileges it as the first of the late poems.
4. For an astute discussion of Whitman's connection to the Helhaven satire in the context of a thorough chronicle of Burke's varying responses to Whitman from the 1930s to the 1970s, see Rueckert, "Kenneth Burke's Encounters with Walt Whitman."
5. Burke doesn't say exactly that in "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision," but he says enough to lead me to say it. What he says is this: That in the "new esthetic frame"—one in which the functions of "criticism and poetry" are "merging" and become the "obverse and reverse of the same coin" (145)—the images and metaphors of art "give[s] substance to our feeling of what it might be like to know" the sort of truth about our circumstances that religionists and metaphysicians promise to tell us (144). Indeed, as Bernard Brock argues, the late Burke essentially does the work of "substituting attitudes for substance" (324).
6. Although many in America were saying just such things in 1966 and 1967 as public opposition to the war in Vietnam was intensifying, many of us can remember places and circumstances in which, indeed, you couldn't "tell them that." Driving west toward Central Washington State College, Burke might have been remembering a situation at the University of Washington some 15 years before when the English Department tried to offer him a visiting appointment but the administration denied it citing concerns that, given some of his activities of the thirties, he might, as he wrote to Cowley, "be a subversive influence in the classroom" (Jay 308). Burke and his supporters worked to appeal the decision but without success and the episode seems to have cut deep. "I'm a guilt-ridden man," he wrote to Cowley as it was winding down, "but I do dare feel that I am pious as those reactionary, unregal among the Regents are not . . . I love my country with a fury that facts cannot deny me" (Jay 309; Burke's ellipsis). For a list of the sources that document this episode see Wess 56, note 3; I am indebted to Wess for suggesting to me that this might explain Burke's statement in the poem that "Maybe I can't say anything."

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