In *Attitudes Toward History*, Kenneth Burke begins the chapter "Medieval Synthesis" with one of those typical Burkean sentences that so often have the force of an aphorism. As part of the introduction to his narrative of the Thomist synthesis, Burke remarks, "There is no unearned increment in living" (124). He then goes on to round out this statement, explaining that life requires exertion and that, unless one learns to discount privilege, the very thing that makes a life more comfortable can make that life empty. Burke claims that one of the peculiar and disguised pitfalls of modern technological existence occurs when people take over and use the inventions of others without appreciating the human achievement embodied in those inventions. Why this is a pitfall may not be immediately clear. For most of us, our interest in an invention is limited to the immediacy of its utility. But for Burke, invention is entangled in paradox. In contrast to the commonplace understanding that values inventions because of the labor they save, Burke argues that the value of an invention resides in the amount of labor that it costs. For Burke, inventions arise as complex responses to particular problems, and their value is tied inextricably to their nature as creative actions. But when we simply use an invention, the originating problem becomes of little consequence, and we can inadvertently reduce a creative and complex individual act to an agency independent of and detached from its original purpose. In this reduction, purpose and creativity reify into a commodity, as the invention is transformed into an object without a history. Burke goes on to say, "In using such contrivances, without having 'earned' them as their inventor did, we may become much like barbarians among monuments of a culture to which they are alien" (125). He proposes a solution: "There is but one way of avoiding such impoverishment, such
We must **earn** an inheritance by taking it as the basis for a new problem. Confronting it as the 'goes before,' we must train ourselves to develop a new 'comes after'” (125). If we fail to take our inheritance as a basis for a new problem, we become alienated, estranged from the very creations that could and should attach us to the complicated process of being those peculiar creatures who live in worlds that they have, in part, invented.

Burke’s analysis of the dangers of unreflective appropriation of the creative acts of others can stand as a caution as to how to engage in intellectual work. He makes the caution explicit:

A new idea is a new invention. As such, like an invention it is full of its inventor, it is “earned” by him, since it is the “comes after” for his own “goes before.” Others must earn it anew. Insofar as they don’t, they fall into the dessications of psittacism (academicism): alienation is under way. (213)

This is an important caution. At the very least, it should cause us to reflect upon the ways in which we engage in the fundamental scholarly labor of reading and writing. If Burke’s analysis of innovation is correct, then the unreflective use of another’s ideas, insights, theories, or methods will spawn its own barbarisms. Further, these barbarisms will be tied to values that express the genius of our culture. Since, as Burke frequently asserts, ours is a technological culture, our barbarism will, in part, manifest itself in those values that embody the spirit of technology—namely, efficiency and productivity.

To read Burke is to confront the problem of labor and especially of intellectual labor in a culture determined by an allegiance to technology. Our lot is tied inescapably to capitalism and to its technological practices that increase productivity often at the cost of the intrinsic satisfaction that should inhere within meaningful labor. So in what way, does Burke’s writing make the activity of reading into meaningful labor? How does a writer, alert to the ways in which technology can create a new form of drudgery, write so that writing constitutes an alternative form of labor, and how does he invite the reader to engage in an equally meaningful work? Finally, in what way does Burke’s writing enact a resistance to the dominant form of labor in our culture, and how can we read him so that we do not fall into the trap of appropriation?

On the one hand, Burke was unquestionably a productive writer: he produced a large and compelling body of intellectual work. But no one has
ever accused Burke of being an efficient writer. His prose style is the antithesis of the efficient. He is Strunk and White's worst nightmare. Anyone hoping to read quickly through Burke to get the gist of his ideas is certain to be frustrated. And his prose style induces an equally inefficient reading. My own reading of Burke has always struck me as particularly uneconomical. Despite my serious engagement with his ideas, I find my mind drifting, or I find a need to take breaks, or I find myself getting wildly excited about some ideas and can’t read fast enough, or at other times I grow impatient with Burke and can’t believe that he is taking so long to get to his point. What Burke’s style has managed to do is disrupt my reading process. He forces or enables me (I am not sure which) to find a different rhythm to my reading. My reading becomes rereading, and, as I reread, I keep finding out how poorly I had read Burke previously. Early on, I realized that I could not read Burke in a straightforward fashion. What I want to argue now is that his disruption of the rhythm of my reading is purposeful (and salutary), for what is at stake in reading Burke is the possibility of recovering an intellectual labor not driven by the norm of efficiency. Burke’s style, in its cheerful disregard of efficiency, creates a set of conditions that can help us to earn our understanding by transforming the “goes before” from which we read into a genuine problem.

But even in this freeing up there lurks another insidious problem. Burke’s account of alienation suggests that we should be leery of appropriating someone else’s ideas or methods, for unless we can turn these ideas or methods into the basis of a new set of problems, we will end up using them in ways that seem to be innovative but only end up emptying them of their power to advance the critical community’s insight. This is, of course, one of the problems of reading Burke. His ideas are so compelling and fecund and so enable criticism and theorizing that they seem to offer themselves as paradigms that explain all sorts of literary and social acts and situations. The danger is that we will, with the best of intentions, begin to apply these ideas enthusiastically. Since Burke has invented the critical paradigms, we can now do the work. But unless we figure out how to make Burke’s work our own, we can, in our application of Burke’s ideas, easily become theoretical or scholarly barbarians, operating in the midst of cultural or intellectual monuments that we do not truly appreciate or understand. Burke was aware of the temptation that his work offered readers and realized that people could misread his writing as offering a set of terms whose value lay in their application. To counter this, he explicitly denied that he was providing
resources for writers to produce texts but instead insisted that he was exemplifying a mode of reading that opened up texts by switching the perspectives through which they were read (Wess 177).

This imperative to discover our own “goes before” if we are to read Burke takes on a special importance once we see the dangers that inhere in the way that we labor. Burke borrowed from John Dewey the notion of occupational psychosis. According to Burke, Dewey’s use of the term “corresponds to the Marxian doctrine that a society’s environment in the historical sense is synonymous with the society’s methods of production” (Permanence 38). Dewey argued that the ways in which a tribe hunted or gathered food fostered the growth of certain “patterns of thought.” For example, tribes that hunted could be expected to have evolved certain cultural practices that reflected the importance of the hunt. Tracing the connection between culture and labor practices, Burke argues that there is a special relation between occupation and morality: “We ethicize something when we act toward it as though it were an intrinsic good. And since the tests of goodness ultimately involve our welfare in some form or another, spiritual or material, present or future, we can be said to ethicize the serviceable” (238). In this way, things and practices that in themselves might be off-putting become desirable because they are instrumental for promoting our welfare. This transference leads to one of Burke’s favorite examples of rational irrationality:

If food, comfort, and pleasant intercourse are desirable, and if money procures them, and if some dismal, unmuscular, unimaginative, and unbalanced kind of drudgery will procure the money, one may actually see a person’s eyes light up with hope when told that the drudgery is to be permitted him. He “got the job.” Eventually, he rounds out his values in keeping with such contingencies: He develops the emphases, standards, desires, kinds of observation, expression, and repression, that will equip him for his task. This is his occupational psychosis, a moral network, complex beyond all possibilities of charting. (238)

The way that one thinks and feels is, in part, a product of the labor practices that are central to culture into which one is born and which, in turn, conceives of these practices as natural and valuable.

Since our particular historical fate is to labor and think within the complex technological and abstract culture of capitalism, the mechanical and technical become pervasive and support cultural values (240). If Burke is right, part of the capitalist occupational psychosis will be a tendency to formulate our understandings in terms of the metaphor of the
machine. Just as important, the values of the machine will, through a process that Burke labels “peripheral charging,” come to structure other values (238). Values such as efficiency will come to be goods in themselves, occupying a position of cultural and intellectual authority. To be born into this culture is to inherit this language, so much so that even when we critique it we will employ the very values that are generated by the capitalist psychosis to challenge that psychosis. This leads to an unfortunate paradox: our opposition to the symbols of authority often has the unintended consequence of strengthening that authority. Whatever our intent, we can end up challenging capitalism in terms of alternative utopias that are as committed to and determined by a technological and abstract idiom rooted in practices of a capitalist economy conjoined with a fascination with technical invention. Hence, Burke’s repeated claim that the workers’ paradise envisioned in Marxian thought would be unable to eliminate the technological genius. The technological is our counter-nature, and one of our most important tasks is to work through the implications of this insight. As an important cultural authority, technology claims our allegiance and becomes one of the most significant parts of the inherited “goes before” that we need to challenge.

To extend this insight further, the practices of criticism and theorizing that arise within a capitalist psychosis should also be influenced deeply by the core values of utility. A critical system or theory will prove its worth by its applicability. Indeed, even as I write these words, their truth seems self-evident. How else would you judge the value of a critical system or theory except by determining its productivity or utility? Possibly, we can take the path of late nineteenth-century esthetes and argue for a theory’s elegance, but, given the centrality of the technological, the aesthetic will be seen not as a category in its own right but as a reaction against a dominant theory of utility. It will thus feel a little suspect. Although we may never use the word “efficiency” to indicate the directing value, it is at the core of our utilitarian standards as to what counts as good work. Burke comments on this pervasive influence when he complains that we now value art as a commodity and not for its ability to enrich social life:

More of the artistic should be expressed in vital social relationships. Otherwise it becomes “efficient” in the compensatory, antithetical sense. So completely do we now accept capitalist standards that we test everything as a commodity for sale. Hence we feel that a “mere artist at living” has “wasted his talents.” Rather let him “release” his artistry through a
Cary Nelson has suggested that Burke’s work resists easy application. His style does not offer concepts or methods that can be readily taken over and applied as a productive terminology with which to analyze our rhetoricity. In place of the efficiency of a method or the order of a system, Burke offers moves that interfere with a mechanical progress of thought. According to Nelson, “rapid moves to the end of a sentence, sudden perspectives by incongruity, a patchwork structure of dislocations is more his style. Burke often leaps to the logical end of an argument half a sentence after introducing it” (161). I would add that he is always rounding out insights, musing over embarrassments, debunking positions and then moving beyond debunking, sloganizing, coining words (my spellcheck often does not know what to do with a passage of Burke’s), offering sentences that function as aphorisms, repeating examples, offering insights that are simultaneously essential and provisional, providing examples that work as comic asides, and the list could go on. As William Rueckert has remarked: “Criticism as a way of life, rather than system building, is what accounts for the logic and integrity of Burke’s career” (239). Borrowing a term that Burke coined to describe one of his own impasses, Rueckert then goes on to describe a condition familiar to most readers of Burke: countergridlock—a confusion produced by being overwhelmed by the sheer number of possibilities opened up through reading or rereading Burke. Burke’s style of theorizing does not facilitate a move to some straightforward application. The condition produced by Burke’s writing closely resembles the confusion that Socrates’ interlocutors often experienced. One no longer seems to be in control of his or her language. This is the intellectual position most diametrically opposed to positivism. It is a (I almost slipped and wrote “productive”) generative negativity.

But my choice of the term generative is equally problematic. It could easily suggest that Burke offers us the possibility of escaping from the technological and capitalist induced values of efficiency and productivity by providing us with a more organic critical vocabulary. But Burke would be profoundly skeptical of any such possibility, unless, of course, it was sufficiently rounded out and its embarrassments pursued. In the absence of such additional work, he would see an organic vocabulary leading to a nostalgia that he saw at the heart of the Southern agrarian school of criticism. For Burke, a simpler, more organic view of life is no longer a “goes before” that can allow us to make the languages that we inherit into
a proper problem that can lead to a "comes after" in which our inherited critical practices and theories become truly ours. To discover how we might read Burke, it is helpful to return to his anecdote about the trout that opens *Permanence and Change*. Burke uses the anecdote to argue that all living things are critics. As Burke's trout wiggles free from the hook that is lodged in his mouth, he undergoes a kind of education. He is now in a position to become more critical. In effect, he has been offered a theory that allows him to read more effectively the signs of his universe. Thanks to his accidental education, he can now discriminate more accurately between food and bait, between nature and a rudimentary counter-nature. So far, so good. But Burke cannot resist complicating his anecdote by mentioning that his education might also be a miseducation as the trout now may forego "many a morsel of genuine food simply because it happens to have characters which he, as the result of his informing experience, has learned to take as a sign of bait" (5). This possibility leads him to Veblen's concept of trained incapacity: "Unfortunately, as Thorstein Veblen has pointed out, invention is the mother of necessity: the very power of criticism has enabled man to build up cultural structures so complex that still greater powers of criticism are needed before he can distinguish between the food-processes and bait-processes concealed beneath his cultural tangles" (5-6). In the case of the trout, an educational advance had led to its own form of culturally induced blindness. One unreflective "goes before" has simply been replaced by another. The dualism of food and bait can easily lure the trout into a critical complacency because it offers the comfort of a coherence rooted in a productive binary. The binary is easily applied and efficiently divides the world into two clearly distinct classes: the natural and the counternatural. The critically educated trout has a method that he can apply. What he cannot do is go beyond the method to discover a methodology. He cannot become creative, only productive, for the efficiency of method precludes an openness that would occasion new invention. The "goes before" has become fixed; the "comes after" can only iterate any already foregone conclusions.

If we can assume that Burke's example of the trout is a representative anecdote, then it can show us two competing dangers that reside in the activity of reading Burke. Such a reading is beset by a dilemma: either we assume that our understanding of life and literature is basically sound and we assimilate what we read to the understanding that we already possess; or, as is more often the case, if we escape this danger, we assume that our understanding is incomplete and that reading Burke will provide us with
insights that allow us to break free from our dire critical containment. In our state of enlightenment, we will embrace Burke as an authority and impose a new containment on ourselves—our "goes before" will become now fixed by our allegiance to Burke as an authority and prevent us from inhabiting a critical practice or theory in a way that can become ours. Ironically, the very success of our Burkean education may make it more difficult to read Burke.

To escape this dilemma we need to learn how to read so that we don't stand as disciples seeking to take over the wisdom of the master but as dialecticians who can appropriately question it. Such dialectical questioning is difficult work, but it is an intellectual labor that can allow us to deal with the alienation that is an inherent part of any labor. The issue is not readings that are right or wrong, but ones that are either full or empty, vital or alienated; or maybe the emphasis should be put less on the actions and more on the agents. A dialectical reader creates the possibility for himself or herself of creative intellectual life. For such a reader, ideas will have meaning and not simply utility.

Burke writes in such a way as to invite dialectical engagement. He emphasizes the fluidity and partial arbitrariness of his terms. In his introduction to A Grammar of Motives, he celebrates the "pliancy" of his terms, pointing out their malleability: "Hence, no great dialectical enterprise is necessary if you would merge the terms, reducing them even to as few as one; and then, treating this as the 'essential' term, the 'causal ancestor' of the lot, you can proceed in the reverse direction across the margins of overlap, 'deducing' the other terms from it as its logical descendants" (xxii). For Burke, the point is not to apply dramatism or logology as a theoretical concept that discloses a preexisting structure but to take it provisionally as a perspective that in its incongruity creates a new place from which to see the world. This is the place of criticism. Disclosing possibilities for action and not uncovering knowledge guides Burke's writing. Once you play with the terms, what embarrassments do you discover? In what places do you need to round out or discount Burke's thought? Such a perspective makes incongruous readers who have the chance to move from reading Burke to being provoked by Burke's writing to examine more critically both their own and Burke's presuppositions. Through this criticism will come the possibility of doing creative intellectual work.

The occupational psychosis of a writer, even within the historical inheritances bequeathed by a capitalist and technologically determined mode of production, is creation. What the writer engenders is something
that is alive; in Burke’s terms, the writer’s work operates under the aegis of supernature rather than counter-nature. To write is to be on the side of the angels or, at least, on the side of their boss.

If the occupation of the writer is creation, the occupational psychosis of a reader is response. Reading is tied intimately to responsibility. As readers we should stand toward such a creation not as if it were a thing or system to be known but as if it were a set of demands that require an appropriate response from us. This is simply bumping once again into Burke’s insight that there is a deep connection between morality and occupation. The particular challenge for a reader who is a member of a capitalist and technological culture is to resist the movement of translating the imperative to respond into the unreflective and socially sanctioned impulse to put an emerging understanding immediately to use. As readers, our task is not to take over Burke’s terms or to systematize them but to open ourselves to be displaced by them.

Being open to the potentially disrupting effects of another’s words requires us to figure out how we are to stand toward authority. In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke takes seriously the natural allegiance symbol-using creatures feel toward symbols of authority and sees this allegiance as healthy. He argues that the powerful secular critique that first arose in the Enlightenment harmed us by contributing significantly to the weakening of people’s allegiance to symbols of authority. However productive and necessary the debunking of a theologically grounded culture was for the rise of science and commerce, the process took a heavy emotional toll. Burke sees this process continuing into the present and producing the crisis of legitimacy that *Attitudes Toward History* was written to address, as he sought ways to live in a world in which our allegiance to authority had become increasingly attenuated.

The most reasonable but mistaken response to this crisis is to look for new authorities to which one could offer allegiance. Again, it is tempting to see Burke (comic and self-deprecating—the antithesis of authoritarianism) as one of these authorities, as an attractive alternative to a capitalistic and technologically influenced rationality. His remarkable intellectual integrity throughout a career that saw him dismissed, ignored, and ultimately vindicated as an original and powerful thinker provides him with credentials that any such authority would require. But, as Burke would be the first to attest, the problem of the legitimacy of authority cannot be adequately addressed by seeking a new authority. Rather, authority needs to develop in part as a consequence of our undertaking new labor practices, and it needs to be dialectically incorpo-
rated into our culture. For authority to be stable and emotionally sustaining, it needs to be grounded practically as well as symbolically. Further, we need to realize that any such new authority will only be partial, that it will not undo the hegemony of the technological because the genius of technology (as the spirit of counternature) presents an authority to which we offer allegiance even as we are moved to resist it. It is here to stay, so the issue is: how do we live with it while not allowing it to wholly determine us?

For Burke, the answer lies in understanding the nature of action. Through the magic that inheres within action, our labor brings something new into existence. As we labor creatively, we earn our increment. To do this, we must become not Burkeans but critics. Criticism as a practice is inherently agonistic: we begin identifying our insights by defining what or whom we oppose—this construction of identity is another form of the paradox of substance. But to identify criticism as agonistic does not require us to see this agon as inherently aggressive, although such is the most available reading in a culture that gives preference to competition over cooperation. Rather, Burke argues for a criticism that is comic (or dialectical), one that cashes in on the technologically driven world we inherit:

The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to "transcend" occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his "assets" column, under the head of "experience." Thus we "win" by subtly changing the rules of the game—and by a mere trick of bookkeeping, like the accountants for big utility corporations, we make "assets" out of "liabilities." And can we, in our humbleness, do better than apply in our own way the wise devices of these leviathans, thereby "democratizing" a salvation device as we encourage it to filter from the top down? (Attitudes 171)

Through our criticism, we can make a comic attitude viable. This attitude will play an essential role in establishing new labor practices. We will not labor as drones in the service of the technological nor as dispossessed opponents, emotionally poisoned by a knowledge of injustice that allows us to exist only as participants locked in combat with a foe that is irredeemably evil. Instead, we will subversively cooperate with the technological as a way of partially transcending it by learning how to use its symbolic dodges and by learning how to rename its sanctioned entities and practices.
At the heart of Burke's comedy is his felt obligation to round things out. Aware of the legitimate impulse to debunk, he is sensitive to its appeal to those who find capitalism a paradoxical perfecting of the inhuman by an over stressing of the efficient, and he is alert to the ways that a writing that gives the place of honor to debunking can become a neurotic activity unable to break free of the trauma that has helped produce it. To move beyond a simple cultural containment, a writer must move from debunking to rounding out.

The condition that requires this task Burke labels the "bureaucratization of the imaginative," and it is the central concern of Attitudes Toward History. Indeed, we can read Attitudes as an extended meditation that works through the implications of Burke's insight into the unintended consequences inhering in any action. "Bureaucratization of the imaginative" offers a "formula... designed to name the vexing things that happen when men try to translate some pure aim or vision into terms of its corresponding material embodiment, thus necessarily involving elements alien to the original, 'spiritual' ('imaginative') motive." Although we may eternally or formally strive for perfection, our fate is to always come up short or different. Our bodies or our worlds prove recalcitrant—always giving us too much, or too little, or just something different. Inescapably frustrating and disappointing, this situation sets us the task of figuring out how we are to view our prospects. Are we to assume that our failure is only temporary and that we are making progress? The narrative of the Enlightenment, a narrative that held sway until very recently, claimed the more that we know the world, the closer we will come to making it a reflection of our purposes. This is the path to counternature, a path that we are on, and on which we will remain. Or we can strike a different attitude. We can look charitably upon ourselves and others, understanding the foolishness that inheres in any of our lives and then develop an ability to appreciate our situation in its full comic possibility. Or in a formulation truer to Burke, since we are inescapably on a path of counter-nature that is evolving out of the genius of technology and since this path cannot be eliminated, the best that we can do is to adopt a comic attitude, which offers us the possibility to channel this technological genius into a less harmful direction.

The bureaucratization of the imaginative brings into play two aspects of language that are fundamental in determining the necessary instability of any insight. First, Burke is quite clear that language as a medium cannot completely map thought onto symbol. Any thought will prove too protean to be embodied definitively in a single symbolic expression. Ideas just
have too many associations to permit one exact transcription. This leads to the second aspect: any bureaucratization of the imaginative will involve an overstressing and understressing. We are fated to say both more and less than we mean. This aspect becomes particularly important in a technological culture, for the technological is made possible, in part, by such stressing. The term that Burke uses to designate the stressing within a technological culture is *efficiency*. The technological as a mode of explanation acquired its hegemony by its ability to produce efficient accounts of the world, accounts that work to the extent that they succeed in eliminating the over and under stresses that are a necessary part of any individual perspective. Indeed, inquirers achieve the vantage point of science by emptying themselves radically of historical content. The ideal efficient prose for such inquiries contains no distractions, is shorn of any rhetorical flourishes, and embodies an economy of presentation.

Burke's own bureaucratization of his imagination could not be more different. As Angus Fletcher remarks in one of the most perceptive discussions of Burke's style, "Surely, all this [the authorial intrusions, summarizing sections, comments, and inclusions of his poems] shows a wild refusal to be verbally economical. Surely the procedure is bound to inhibit understanding of its author" (156). Fletcher analyzes both the stylistic and formal obstacles that Burke's writing puts in the way of the reader's understanding. He begins by distinguishing two types of writers: those whose stylistic felicity invites further consideration of the elegance and reach of their arguments and those whose style creates a difficult surface but whose underlying form can be comprehended in a relatively straightforward fashion. Northrop Frye is an example of the first type of stylist and William Empson of the second. However, this nice dichotomy is interrupted by Burke, who represents a third possibility: a style that resists easy assimilation and that leads to a form that seems about to implode because of the "sheer mass and complexity of his human interests" (157). This feature of Burke's writing leads to the reader's feeling of countergridlock that Reuckert had mentioned. Burke's style arrests the reader and demands rereading. Rather than efficiently overstressing or understressing some aspect of the situation, Burke stresses many aspects simultaneously. It is a style that is to be expected from a writer who is concerned with the scope of the examples used to think through a situation. As any writer must, Burke reduces the complexity of the world, but he does so in such a way that his reader must still confront complexity and resistance as an integral part of any situation. Burke's writing creates conditions for readers to earn their insights rather than one
that offers those insights as so many portable ideas that can then be applied in some sort of straightforward and productive scholarship. His style challenges any easy notion of the progress of understanding.

Fletcher suggests that the writer we use to understand Burke is Montaigne:

Anyone who has trouble reading Montaigne will have trouble with Burke. Finding himself always on a bridge of exposition will upset a certain kind of reader. This reader hurries to get to the point. He rarely pauses to reflect. His criticism is usually geared, as we say, to reach an externally required standard (not to a poetic standard). He associates integrity with efficiency, instead of the other way round. (171)

The two writers demand that we pay attention to the immediacy of the writing, that we encounter the mind of the writer at work rather than survey the products of the thought. Again, the ideas are not portable, at least in any simplistic way. Rather, to earn them one must be willing to spend time with them. Appreciation and understanding are deeply connected, and the role of the individual intelligence in all of its personal and historical particularity needs to be taken into account. The labor of this reading requires an artistry that involves patience and imagination. To read Burke well, one needs time. I am continually struck by how much I miss when I read Burke. Sometimes I will read a passage and when I finish, I can't immediately say what his point was. I need to reread. Or I will be struggling through a long rambling discussion, when all of sudden a sentence will leap out at me with the wonderful economy of an aphorism, and I will stop and admire how well that sentence sums up something or how it abruptly shifts my perspective so that I see freshly. I don't think that I am simply narrating my reading habits but am describing what many readers experience. And I assume that this experience is a consequence of the writing. Burke forces me to slow down, and his writing offers me a frustrating richness by reminding me that the labor of reading an intellectually challenging text is an activity that has value in itself, for it is labor that enriches and extends my capacity to engage in the symbolic actions that are peculiar to us as bodies that are moved by language. Burke has argued:

The soundest reward for a service (in either practical activities or art) is an improvement in one's human relations. Money enables us to buy only a fraction of this improvement, and even often militates against it (as when an employer can by wages make his employees function as loyal, regardless of their attitudes). (Attitudes 316)
Reading Burke's writing offers the same reward.

Fletcher argues that readers who are moved by simplistic ideas of efficiency will only find Burke frustrating:

To such critics and readers of criticism Burke will have little to say, although even they may pick up good ideas here and there, especially from his many incisive analyses of dramatic plot and poetic structure. However, his larger concerns will elude them, because they allow insufficient time for thought to addict their minds. (171)

Burke's writing demands of its readers a willingness to structure their time differently. This is another way of saying that the labor of reading has value in itself and need not be justified with respect to some subsequent standard of productivity. Nor should Burke's demanding prose be mistakenly equated with prose that is inaccessible to the common reader. Theoretical essays like "Definition of Man" are remarkably lucid, and Burke's essays on Shakespeare, Goethe, Forster, and Coleridge are exemplary efforts in tight critical reading. As Fletcher rightly remarks, it is not that Burke's work cannot be appropriated as an aid to the exploration of literature, theory, or life, for his writing abounds in insights that do have immediate practical application, but that such reading will fail to understand Burke's larger project. Burke wrote not simply as a professional scholar but as a poet-critic who sought to allow his readers to equip themselves with the imaginative and critical habits necessary to negotiate the technologically defined world that they inherited. To negotiate such a world requires that, among other things, we learn how to labor in a way that human relations are improved rather than constricted.

On the level of the sentence, it is easy to see how Burke's style resists an economy of statement. I want us to look at one sentence (that I think is representative of Burke's writing) that occurs in his wonderfully and convolutedly entitled, "AFTERWORD: In Retrospective Prospect" that he wrote for the 3rd edition of Attitudes Toward History:

When referring to speech (in comparison with other humanly developed mediums of expression and communication such as painting, sculpture, and music)—and in this connection calling it "the medium that can 'most comprehensively' discuss itself, all other mediums, and the realm of nonsymbolic motion (as per the terminologies of geology, biology, archaeology, etc.)"—I thought we might linger on the terms thus: "The situation allows for a cosmic pun, as we try to comprehend (in the sense
of "understand") the vast speechless infinitude which comprehends us (in the sense of 'including' us, being all about us)." (384)

The structure of the sentence prohibits an efficient reading. We need to traverse the fifty-three words of the compound introductory clause, which interrupts itself twice to add parenthetical clarifications, before we reach the subject and main predicate, which turns out to be the pedestrian "I thought." A large build up for a little payoff—the momentum deflates itself. Just as frustrating are the clarifications themselves, which are unnecessary, for anyone who has read any Burke would know full well that his focus is on speech and that one of the aspects of speech that most interests Burke is speech's capacity for self-reflection. The sentence's structure works initially not so much to support the communication of an insight but to disrupt any straightforward progress of a thought and instead to make the reader pause. The structure enacts Burke's need for a full statement, one in which elements are appropriately stressed. The key verb in the sentence, located in the subordinate clause, is "linger." That is what Burke wants his readers to do, and it is action that most naturally occurs because of the structure of the sentence. We are to linger in this sentence. Burke wants his readers to spend some time contemplating the pun inhering in the word "comprehend." Only if we are willing to linger in the pun can we comprehend comprehension and understand the underlying issue. As Burke points out, "comprehend" can mean both understand and encompass. Thus, this one word in its two meanings sums up the relationship of language to nature. We understand nature; it, more or less encompasses us. If we linger in this sentence, we come to appreciate both the entanglement of language and nature and their distinct spheres. As we linger, we not only intellectually comprehend this relationship of language and nature but also appreciate its complexity. At the crux of our existence is a cosmic pun.

This activity of lingering in and with a cosmic pun constitutes the labor of reading Burke (at least in this sentence). Neither the writing nor the reading is efficient or utilitarian. In offering his readers a sentence that reshapes the time of reading, Burke redefines the labor of reading and allows different consequences to follow from these labor practices. The critic who best helps us understand what Burke's writing has opened up is Paul de Man. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man uses Baudelaire's essay, "De l'essence du rire," for its example of a person tripping and falling as an instance of ironic consciousness. De Man analyzes this situation as comic, inducing a humility that Burke takes to be at the heart
of comedy. To trip and fall is to undergo a humbling, for in that moment of falling one is aware of being ridiculous, as a straightforward and efficient process of walking is now interrupted. In the fall, one is brought into a fuller consciousness of both oneself and the forces of nature. De Man argues:

The element of falling introduces the specifically comical and ultimately ironical ingredient. At the moment that the artistic or philosophical, that is the language-determined, man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself. In a false feeling of pride the self has substituted, in its relationship to nature, an intersubjective feeling (of superiority) for the knowledge of a difference. As a being that stands upright (as in the passage at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to which Baudelaire alludes elsewhere), man comes to believe that he dominates nature, just as he can, at times, dominate others or watch others dominate him. This is, of course, a major mystification. (213–14)

So when we stumble, either in our walking or in our reading, we are appropriately humbled and reminded of the constraints that make either walking or reading possible. Activities that had, by the force of everyday practice, become automatic are opened up for fresh reflection.

De Man, however, quickly moves to discuss the readily available error in this apparent advance in our understanding. He argues that

at the very moment that irony is thought of as a knowledge able to order and to cure the world, the source of its invention immediately runs dry. The instant that it construes the fall of the self as an event that could somehow benefit the self, it discovers that it has in fact substituted death for madness. (218)

For de Man, there is the continual temptation to read such falling as the beginning of a new empirical understanding—the person who falls now knows something more about the empirical world, and this knowledge is what de Man wants to deny as possible. In Burke's terms, the temptation is to read the fall using the same old "goes before" so that the "comes after" is a done deal: having been educated that we can be taken unaware by obstacles that can trip us up, we learn to walk or read more carefully. In contrast to this reasonable but unexciting insight, de Man suggests that the interest in the fall resides in the moment of falling, in the awareness of the comicness of one's situation, in the awareness of our doubleness as natural and symbol-using creatures, in our inescapable heterogeneity.
The understanding gained in that moment is not portable; it does not constitute a progress in our understanding. The time of falling parallels Burke’s lingering. The pun inhereing within comprehension—the competing ways in which humans encompass nature and nature encompasses humans—exists in the back and forth movement between two senses of the term. To understand the situation of a symbol-using creature, one needs to hold both meanings in the pun simultaneously. That is what it means to read as mode of lingering.

In this comic entanglement, Burke offers a place to labor that is both personally and socially more healthy. The writer and reader neither accept nor reject the reigning symbols of authority; rather, they engage the complex and compromised understanding and social arrangements that compromise our culture and authorize our current practices. It helps to understand what Burke is offering us by looking at his brief discussion of the familiar scenario of young American writers in the early twentieth century who, disaffected with the small towns in which they grew up, wrote withering accounts of the vapidness of that life. Burke complains that such acts of writing allowed their authors to achieve personal salvation at the expense of the larger quality of life of the community. Burke lays the blame on the writer’s efficiency:

For has not his work contributed more to the blunting of human relationships than to their refinement? By “cashing in on” the resources of mobility and abstraction, he has not had to remain among his group. Hence he has not had to release his message slowly, strategically, with the maturity of gradations, placations, concern for sensitivities. Whatever his work’s “forcefulness,” imaginative richness is made impossible. It is an aspect of reporting (with the genius of headlines in mind), lacking the pliancy that would go with fear of embarrassment (such embarrassment, that is, as would arise if his product were an integral part of his life in his community—so that an insult on the page would be the same as an insult to a man’s face). It has the bluntness of efficiency, and it repossesses by vengeance, by antithesis, rather than by the subtler modifications of one’s social role. (Attitudes 317)

The problem at the heart of efficiency is that of a productive but false stressing—things are made too simple.

The valuing of efficiency thus disguises the situation of creatures who happen to be bodies moved by language. It is not that efficiency is in itself a vice, but that unless it is rounded out through a dialectic that places concerns such as scope against it, it will participate within the
psychosis of technology and make our complex ethical and political problems into fairly simple instances that can be dealt with technically. In effect, it is to assume that there are no genuine ethical and political dilemmas but only problems of efficient and appropriate management. This is the bluntness that Burke opposes.

The importance of an inefficient reading and writing is that they create the possibility for a richer comprehension. They become part of a necessarily ongoing education. Burke is clear about the goal of that education:

The ideal question for education today (as distinct for education "always") would be: "How adapt man to the needs of worldwide empire progressively made necessary by the conditions of technology?" (356)

This education is imperiled. As standardized testing and arguments for accountability within education become arguments for a more cost effective education, the drive for efficiency would seek to eliminate lingering. In fact, such an approach would make no distinction between lingering and malingering—two words that name one problem: the inefficient use of time. But given recent events in the world in which issues of empire and the security promised by technological superiority have become real ethical and political issues, we need very much the kind of education for which Burke argued. His writing becomes a good place to begin to recover such an education because his writing requires that we read differently.

To return to my beginning, what Burke offers us is a way to earn our increment. In his disregard for a prose that is efficient, Burke frustrates any effort to read him straightforwardly. Reading becomes work, and in so doing, it offers us an opportunity to recover the value of intellectual work not as a means to some other end, such as the advancement of a career or the enhancement of a reputation, but as an end in itself. For as we labor as readers of Burke, we encounter the rhythms of a mind at work as it seeks to do justice to complexity and free itself and others from those inherited perspectives with their already formed conclusions. In place of engaging in the drudgery that often passes as intellectual work, Burke requires that we challenge how we would proceed. He requires that we make our critical inheritance into a problem. That is, he requires that we historicize our labor practices and see them as consequences of larger cultural movements. What he offers us is a new way of laboring. He sees us beginning as poets who need to learn criticism, not so that we can
become critics but so that we can become critic-poets. As readers and writers, one of our central tasks is innovation. In this labor of innovation we invent or disclose our identity as historical and earn our understanding of human creativity. Through this labor we escape the barbarism of those who are moved by an inheritance that both confines and alienates them. And we are reminded that the labor of scholarship should be in service of enriching human relations.

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Works Cited


