Romancing the Difference

Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism

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PREFACE

> The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.
>
> ⌘James Madison, *Federalist Paper* #10

Fear of religious talk in the public sphere is not new to American politics. The orthodox have always made the pundits uncomfortable. Zeal does not a good law make, we assume. The private should not be public. Faction versus Reason, Whitefield versus Madison, passionate religious zealots versus rational liberal democrats—the original founders as well as contemporary scholars predictably frame ardent religion as the most defiant rival to Enlightened goals. When scholars theorize public discourse, this most divisive and, thus, most private of interests is frequently ignored, often bracketed out, rarely accommodated, and habitually misunderstood. Even those social theorists who imagine ideal speaking situations still define religious talk as too cantankerous to promote a healthy public sphere. Those attempting to embrace agonism in public discourse usually cannot help but resist including certain religious voices. Even religious scholars themselves are baffled by those disruptive fundamentalists who seem to defy cultural norms.

Yet if we are to take the goals of robust democratic practice seriously, we must include even the most resistant religious separatist in our visions of the public sphere. In the spirit of Kenneth Burke's comic critique, we must be students of the zealots in order to be students of ourselves. We must frame the separatist as not a vicious enemy to be feared and expunged, but as a mistaken adversary to be countered and included. Understanding this differing political style or mysterious prophetic voice will enrich political discourse and further strengthen our democratic practice. Imagining how to include the most irritating, secures our own place in the political conversation.

Since religious separatists are at best overlooked or misinterpreted and at worst maligned or removed from our notions of public discourse, we must create a new workable vocabulary to understand religious sectarian rhetoric. My goal in this book is to craft that vocabulary building on Kenneth's Burke's notions of tragedy and comedy. I argue that religious sectarian discourse falls outside the tragic or comic frames of acceptance, operating instead within a third frame—romance. Although neither tragically goaded by nor comically amused by the dream, the religious separatist seeks to embody "whatsoever things are lovely" in order to woo their lonely Other.

While this metaphor of romance may be potentially applicable to other separatist groups, I focus on one representative anecdote in evangelical fundamentalism: Bob Jones University. Called "ultraseparatist" by historians,[1] Bob Jones University, seventy-three years after its founding and nearly two decades after its infamous Supreme Court trial, was thrust into the center of national presidential politics, media derision, and even an unsuccessful congressional censure.[2] A cursory look at the university's discourse might prompt a hasty conclusion that this group of separatists is simply tragic. But a deeper probing into their public texts reveals that Bob Jones University is fully operating within the third frame of romantic acceptance. This book maps the trajectory of the university's public discourse in order to more fully expand the vocabulary of sectarian romance by examining its histories, its art collection, its community outreaches, its talk within Campaign 2000, and its response to the tragedies of September 11th.

Chapter 1
IMAGINING TRAGEDY, COMEDY, AND ROMANCE

When our frames of acceptance become brittle enough to shatter, Kenneth Burke would not have us reify them but relax and expand them. When we stiffen our necks, Burke wants to massage the tension away. Idealizing only leads to guilt and eventually to victimage—an idyllic but tragic cycle. Burke resists this impulse which he labels "tragic" with his notion of the "comic" corrective. From his definition of (hu)man to his distinction between identification and division, Burke continually urges the critic to stop the conventional tragedy through an unconventional comedy.

For Kenneth Burke, a human being is "the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal, inventor of the negative, separated from our natural condition by instruments of our own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, acquiring foreknowledge of death and rotten with perfection."[1] Burke argues, then, that human beings are unique from animals since they name, act, divide, imagine the negative, classify, organize, privilege, and prod each other toward an ideal. We can act (as opposed to mere visceral movement), recognize absence (as opposed to mere presence), order (as opposed to mere experience), and feel guilty. These human habits are "natural," to Burke, and even inevitable.

Burke's definition may be as much a metanarrative on the impulse to define as it is a definition. He calls this definition more descriptive than prescriptive but insists that the prescription is inherent. By acknowledging what is "natural" to human beings, Burke hopes to offer what is unnatural, incongruent, or "comic," since the "natural" promises violence. Burke never assumes that we can reverse the "normal"—only resist it. We can "muddle through," cobble together, sew "bits of political patchwork here and there" to stop conventional victimage.

Thus, Burke's foundational definition of humanity implies his critical definitions of tragedy and comedy. Human beings are trapped in a cycle of tragedy, a series of divisions and conflicts "wherein millions

of co-operative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act . . . war."[2] Burke describes the tragic cycle as follows:

> Here are the steps
> In the Iron Law of History
> That weld Order to Sacrifice:
>
> Order leads to Guilt
> (for who can keep the commandments!)
> Guilt needs Redemption
> (for who would not be cleansed)
> Redemption needs a Redeemer
> (which is to say, a Victim!).
>
> Order
> through Guilt
> To Victimage
> (hence: Cult of the Kill)[3]

That is, since human beings are motivated to perfect moral order, they are necessarily obligated to feel guilty. The christological reference in Burke's tragedy is prominent. For Burke, Christian theology is the premier archetype in Western culture and shapes his view of all human action. "With the evidence of the Crucifixion before us, we cannot deny that consubstantiality *is* established by common involvement in a killing."[4] Although particularly religious, the tragic cycle, according to Burke is inherent in all human interaction. "When someone is straining to do something, look for evidence of the tragic mechanism."[5] Goaded by perfect unity, human beings must expunge the unruly element, the Other, and heroically purify the community. From "orthodoxy," then, proceeds "dispossession," "rejection," all toward "transcendence"—order, guilt, purification, redemption. This victimage cycle is heroic, tragic, and inevitable.[6]

This tragic cycle begins with the human need to identify with an ideal order. This "identification is compensatory to division." That is, to identify with someone or something essentially means to dissociate from an Other. Within every attempt of identification is an ironic and contrary division. "If men [*sic*] were not apart from one another, there

would be no need for the rhetoric to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man's very essence."[7]

Thus, the goal of the tragic cycle is to purify the culture of the Evil Enemy. While operating within a rigid frame of acceptance, the tragic's proverb is "Kick the bums out!" Since this flawless ideal irritates or goads humanity rather than comforts, the tragic dreams of this ideal slip uncontrollably into victimage. By assuming that everyone can participate in the reach towards perfection, the tragic can justify expunging its Evil Other. To use Burke's dramatistic pentad, the central tragic act is to kill; the primary agent is the hero whose purpose is to cleanse by defining someone as evil within the scene of a rigid frame of acceptance.

The tragic hero looks *up* to transcend his situation and then *around* to expel any Other obstacles. Burke's comic critic, however, looks *inward* at its own humanity and laughs, poking fun at the foolishness we all share. The comic frame of acceptance "transcends" by admitting its own flaws, making it pliant enough to contain opposing elements. While the tragic is continual and "natural," Burke hopes to resist its inescapability at periodic moments through a comic frame of reference. Humor, in Burke's view, is the opposite of the tragically heroic. While the hero glorifies and puffs up in order to strengthen the nonhero, comedy inverts the progression. Humor "takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation." While the heroic "converts upwards," the humorous "converts downwards."[8]

Rather than define its Other as evil, the comic frames its Other as mistaken. This comic frame "relieves the pressure" for perfection. It foregrounds the imperfections in all humanity and laughs. Enemies are redeemed from viciousness to mistakenness. "When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy."[9] That is, the Other's maladies are not necessarily cause for expulsion, but rather a reminder to look inward for the same flaw.

Burke sees this comedy as an avenue for social criticism since it exhorts us to be self-reflexive scholars of human behavior:

> 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?
>
> In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness.* One would "transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the nonrational.[10]

Rather than expunge, the comic critic jokes and includes, but without losing this corrective edge. That is, the critic may passionately critique but will never utterly destroy.

Thus, reframing the Other and critiquing the self are the comic critic's method. Instead of purification, the comedian seeks correction. The prominent proverb is "Heads I win, tails you lose" since the comedian temporarily juggles the cultural books to create a win-win situation. The evil enemy is refashioned into a mistaken opponent. The rigid frame is relaxed until it is supple. The comedian will overturn the aggravating ideal to poke fun and to include all with the hopes of momentarily pushing humanity away from the precipice of victimage. While the tragic assumes that all worthy people can participate in the culture, the comic assumes that everyone *wants* to participate. Within Burke's dramatistic pentad, the comic critic acts to overturn in order to correct by making fun within a supple frame of reference.

Burke's comedians, then, are reflexive while being active, manipulating the cultural "books" to interpret losses as "assets." Every attempt is made to prevent violence.[11] Chantal Mouffe offers a complementary metaphor that expands Burke's comic corrective. Together, Burke and Mouffe offer a grand picture for including even the peskiest citizens in our notions of public discourse. By welcoming agonism (rather than dialogism), privileging flexibility (rather than universalism), and featuring a rhetorical creativity, the scholar may be able to craft a vocabulary to understand religious sectarians.

Rejecting the Enlightenment creation of a separate public sphere, Mouffe wants to broaden the political into a ubiquitous dimension of the social. Arguing that the political is a necessary element in all human relationships, Mouffe assumes that agonism is equally essential. She describes a conflicted world in which our "opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated." Expunging an Other, then, is forgotten, and arguing against the Other is assumed. We learn to fight with our words and not our hands.[12]

Mouffe dismisses the idea that conflict resolution is our goal. She claims: "to believe that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible—even if it is seen as an asymptotic approach to the regulative idea of a rational consensus—far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk."[13] Like Burke, she sees any attempt at a permanent, stable peace tragically doomed to fail. Instead she embraces the *agon* and encourages its creativity.

Caught between identity and difference, a robust democracy must welcome Mouffe's adversarial forces (rather than squelch them). The political, then, is not neat and ordered, but messy—multiple, conflicted, and contested—and far from any dream of unity. Mouffe reminds us that idealizing uniformity only hinders democracy since an absence of conflict is only a disguise for a "disquieting apathy."[14]

By privileging the *agon*, the comic critic must welcome the Other—even the religious separatist—into the argument. Mouffe continues to theorize the Other as particular, universal, and internal. That is, Others are malleable and ubiquitous even within ourselves. Every identity is contingent, complex and correlative—the "constituted outside" of multiple Other identities. Healthy competition can remain comic. Nevertheless, when the Other "begins to be perceived as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence," tragedy is eminent.[15]

Mouffe reminds us that every citizen is already a set of paradoxical and complex constructions, residents in a range of communities, "precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions." Every singular identity must be awkwardly pieced together with conflicting identities that later will be cut and resewn. Democracy, therefore, must allow for retailoring identities in order to be "truly plural."[16]

Only by refusing homogeneous visions as tragic fictions that require expulsion can democracy thrive. Only by remembering that our Other reflects our own humanity can the critic restore democracy. Only by reframing our enemies as adversarial but symbiotic, only by revising the tension between identification and division can we stop victimage. While being agonistic, the comic critic must also be flexible. Within a historical frame of acceptance, casuistic stretching is the introduction of new ideas while still holding the old. Burke urges us to have as "well-rounded" and as supple a frame as possible. This would require perpetual critique.[17] Mouffe points out that "since the constituted outside is present within the inside as its always real possibility, every identity becomes purely contingent." Rather than seeing splintering and homogenizing forces within cultures as unfortunate, Mouffe identifies them as inevitable and sites for comic critique.[18] The mutability of identities, then, would complicate them and forestall destruction. The more complex the connections, the more broadly they extend and the less likely will we expunge them.

If democracy is to be contested and contingent, the critic must also be rhetorically creative. To make identification possible when division is inescapable, "you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric."[19] Burke's comic critic, then, creates a web of ambiguous and temporary linguistic bridges to make the connections. Mouffe also foregrounds rhetorical strategies or "metaphoric redescriptions" as the social theorist's primary focus. Most social theories merely galvanize hegemony or explore wilderness. If democracy, however, is so complex and conflicted, cemented ideologies will only crack with the on-the-bias tensions. Instead, we need varying articulations of democratic principles to broaden and deepen "the range of democratic practices to the creation of new subject positions within a democratic matrix."[20]

To the democratic theorist and comic critic, then, Mouffe would join Burke in urging us to be agonistic, flexible, and rhetorically creative. All three themes suggest a democratic solution. Within *agon*, the critic resists admiring unity for the sake of unity—an easier and more comfortable position—but strives for continuously oppositional and necessarily creative positions. Within flexibility, the critic shuns a lazy stability and exercises to maintain those agile and robustly democratic muscles. Within rhetorical creativity, the critic can shine at creating newly ambiguous and humorous linguistic turns to push us away from the precipice of victimage.

Despite the comic's antagonism, agility, and cunning, however, the religious remains a fearful mystery. Perhaps because separatist narratives are so unfamiliar, Mouffe and Burke reject religious sectarians as easily as James Madison. Mouffe will not tolerate "those who do not accept the democratic 'rules of the game' and thereby exclude themselves from a political community."[21] Being willing to participate is a prerequisite to being heard and engaged. Playing by the presumed rules, then, is the only hope to be heard. Leaving the field means you forfeit.

Burke defines the sectarian impulse as an inevitable result of rigid frames of acceptance. Pliant comic frames would broaden and disarm separatist tendencies. Perhaps, then, inflexible hegemony unavoidably leads to fragmentation. Burke theorizes sectarianism as a defensive "splintering" within a tragic frame that seeks more unity, but breeds more resistance. Separatist groups feel "driven into a corner" and resist by constructing a new community or "colony." "Their cooperation gives them a new positive campaign base, from which they may sally forth to steal the recognized symbols of authority from their opponents." When separation is their primary trope, fracturing will continue since, according to Burke, they constitute their frame as purely rigid.[22]

ROMANCING THE SPHERE: A THIRD FRAME OF ACCEPTANCE

While Kenneth Burke's notion of comic corrective allows the critic to wrestle out of the grip of the deliberative hegemony that excludes certain religious voices, the metanarrative itself provides few specifics to help map the trajectory of religious sectarian discourse. That is, Burke, as well as Mouffe, gives the rhetorical scholar the "go ahead" to resist the dominant's tragedy, but construct no precise vocabularies to understand particular publics such as religious sectarians. Neither the notion of the tragic nor of the comic seems to explain satisfactorily the separatist motive in public discourse.

However, in *The Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke describes a "courtier" as a persuasive rhetor who seeks to "transcend" "social estrangement." Within this courtly metaphor, a possibility does exist to supplement Burke's usual tragic and comic dichotomy. Wooing is one way to fashion identification out of undeniable division. Even communication itself is a "generalized form of love," and love is a "communion of

estranged entities." "Courtship" is only possible "insofar as there is division. Hence only through interference could one court continually."[23] Implicit in this courting is a sense of mystery when "'different kinds of beings' communicate with each other." Courtship is implicitly "dialectical" (not absolute) and ambiguous as imagined in Socratic education. In Burke's view, this courting position is neither necessarily tragic nor comic but is one way to negotiate estrangement.

For the scholar searching for ways to include religious sectarians in public discourse, both Burke and Mouffe lack the agonism, flexibility, and creativity necessary to imagine these pesky citizens as part of the public sphere. For Mouffe, a citizen can either play by the "democratic 'rules of the game'" or get off the field. For Burke, a group can be either tragic or comic—either purify through scapegoating or correct through humor. Burke aptly pictures the sectarian as driven into a corner within a rigid frame but fails to theorize the zealot's next move. Since Mouffe and Burke encourage conflicted, contingent, and rhetorical moves for the sake of a more robust democratic practice and since Burke does include a courtier as one means of persuasion, a third frame of acceptance can be theorized to accommodate the religious sectarian motive—the romantic suitor.

After being "cornered," the sectarian creates a new tactic—separation. But the separatist never moves very far, making sure to be in full view of the dominant frame. Burke mentions courtship as a mysterious "transcending of social estrangement."[24] To woo, the courtier need not purify or necessarily correct the Other. Instead, s/he attracts. What the tragic kills and the comic critiques, the lover charms. The tragic's proverb is "Kick the bums out!"; the comic's proverb is "Heads I win, tails you lose";[25] but the romantic claims "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." What the hero defines as an evil enemy and the critic as a mistaken adversary, the suitor defines as a lonely but potential mate. To begin the wooing cycle, courtiers must first separate. They work to earn the gaze of the forsaken by making the idealistic dream a reality. While the dream goads the tragic and is overturned by the comic, the romantic embodies it. They seek identification not through victimage or comedy, but through consummation—a physical union that joins the Other to themselves and pushes the Other away from the dominant.

This third position aptly describes the religious sectarian's motive. Religious separatism is not simply concerned with identifying with the divine—if it were, it would completely remove itself from the view

of the dominant. Instead separatists leave the field but remain within the gaze of the mainstream. Their position is tenuous since they must continually negotiate their separateness while still appearing attractive. They prove their worth by mastering the cultural ideals.

The religious sectarians then tease the mainstream. When they leave the field and refuse to play by the customary rules, they start their own game and make it look more exhilarating than the original. When the dominant frame of reference rigidly restricts *them*, they step just outside of it, or place another tangent to it. The sectarian leaves the frame, but steps up on a pedestal so that the dominant can get a good look when glancing toward the transcendent ideal.

This romantic position is a Burkean frame of acceptance rather than a frame of rejection. To Burke, a frame of acceptance must be a "well-rounded" but sufficiently "organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it." On the other hand, a frame of rejection is "partial"—both in the sense of "partisan" and unfinished. In other words, it is singular and simplistic. The distinction between frames of acceptance and rejection are not clear since all identification is a division or "the 'acceptance' of A involving the 'rejection' of non-A." Burke does describe the tragic and comic frames as leaning more toward acceptance while the burlesque, the satire, and the grotesque tilt more toward rejection. The more predominantly rejecting frame is "preponderantly transitional" and less developed.[26] Yet the former frames of acceptance can be stretched, critiqued, amplified, and even transcended.

This book reveals how the romantic frame of acceptance is like the tragic and comic in its thoroughness, organization, and flexibility. That is, the romantic does more than merely reject the dominant. It does not simply construct a hard-shelled carapace to resist the winds of change. The romantic adapts and stretches, always seeking to be separate and chaste and yet trying to be beautiful and attractive. This conflicted position prompts the romantic to craft a wide range of rhetorical options.

Thus, the religious separatist is not merely the irrational zealot—fracturing and destroying democracy—or the irritatingly rigid conservative who lazily rests on the comfortable structure of liberalism. As a romantic suitor, religious sectarianism has found another way to express difference while attempting identification—to participate by withdrawing.

SEPARATING WHILE ATTRACTING: BOB JONES UNIVERSITY

Thus, this text explores this vocabulary of romance as a way to interpret religious sectarian rhetoric specifically demonstrated in the public discourse of Bob Jones University. Chapter 2 centers on romantic memory-making. In their museums, Bob Jones University resists politicized histories that persist throughout modernity and offers an alternative history that seems peculiar to the dominant. As opposed to Benedict Anderson's cenotaph, this romantic history is more like a photograph—painfully detailed and naïvely unframed with political baggage. While its romantic histories stand in direct contrast to the dominant's tragic memory, imagining a Burkean comic solution to either romance or tragedy is difficult.

Burke might, however, find comic relief to memory-making in art's naturally resistant polyvocality. In chapter 3, I argue that the Bob Jones University Museum and Gallery articulates a Burkean hybrid of romantic comedy. Like Burke's pied piper, the museum and gallery pipes a beautiful albeit separatist tune to woo their secular Other away from their vermin-infested lives. Yet the tune changes its players as well, and this collection of sacred art "prevents" these sectarians "from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly" themselves.[27]

As an aesthetic argument, the museum and gallery aptly presents an attractive picture of sectarianism. But when these romantics leave the idyllic and enter the social, their beauty seems passé. In chapter 4, I critique the university's community outreaches. According to Burke, tragedy is a homeopathic medic, prescribing cures that resemble the malady they hope to solve. Burke imagines the comic alternative as allopathic, curing with dramatic opposites to social troubles. The romantic sectarians see both approaches as negligent and offer communion as therapy. While tragedy offers homeopathy and comedy offers allopathy to cure a sickened culture, romance simply offers sympathy.

The university's sympathetic talk in community affairs seems euphemistic when viewed through a Burkean lens. But in chapter 5, I consider Bob Jones University's reaction to the media and political firestorm in Campaign 2000. While on the surface these romantics may seem to talk like Burke's euphemistic mystics, a full mapping of their rhetoric reveals a different path. While political and media voices are speaking fully within the tragic dominant, the romantics talk dif-

ferently, worrying that their beauty has faded and struggling to appear attractively timely. All the voices in Campaign 2000 seem "unfitted by being fit in unfit fitness." Within the conflicts between tragic passivity and scapegoating and romantic inopportunity, Burke's comedy may provide a timely relief.

Identifying the romantic motive in the rhetoric of Bob Jones University is useful to rhetorical and religious scholars because it nuances an understanding of these seemingly divisive separatists. The romantic's lure may become tedious and slide into a dysfunctional relationship. Like the tragic hero, the romantic suitor needs the comic critic to correct fatalistic behavior. While Burke's comic corrective does not sufficiently describe the religious sectarian, the comic critic is still the best hope for prescribing to the tragic and romantic a way to laugh at our humanity. The comic frame alone can ease the friction between and within the tragic and romantic frames. If critics understand the motive behind the religious romantic, they can more successfully prevent scapegoating this Other and more likely include it in a robust democratic practice.

This text does not aspire to be a mere apologia for Bob Jones University or a sheer deconstruction of its talk. Nor will it seek to uncover nonpublic documents or reiterate standard outsider criticisms. In the Burkean spirit of agonistic pluralism, radical flexibility, and rhetorical creativity, I hope to shake off hasty generalizations and resist hackneyed dismissals of anything sectarian. Since my audience is not religious separatists per se but scholars in rhetorical and religious fields, my goal is to take seriously the values of robust democratic practice and to test their limits by including even these most divisive voices. If we scholars reaching for a more egalitarian public sphere can imagine a way to include even the religious separatist, then hope remains to include other frequently silenced voices.