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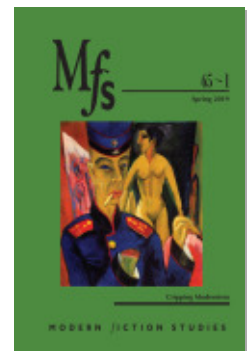
Antinomian Remedies: Rehabilitative Futurism, *Towards a Better Life*, and Kenneth Burke's Modernist Equipment for Living

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**Antinomian Remedies:
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Jesse Miller

In her essay “Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive,” Anna Mollow discusses the modern cultural fantasy of a hygienic future in which all illness and disability have been eradicated. “Futurity,” she points out, “is habitually imagined in terms that fantasize the eradication of disability, a recovery of a crippled (or hobbled) economy, a cure for society’s ills, an end to suffering and disease” (288). She calls this fantasy—which is shaped by ideologies of health, ability, optimization, and fitness—“rehabilitative futurism.” Within the paradigm of rehabilitative futurism, the healthy subject is defined as an autonomous, productive, and rational decision maker. By contrast, physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral disability figures as what troubles the domain of healthy citizenship, including dependency, unproductivity, and irrationality. Rehabilitative futurism thus ascribes a fundamental negativity to the disabled

individual, who, standing outside the horizon of the so-called good life, is structurally defined in opposition to the normal, able-bodied and -minded subject.

Such a fantasy of a future free of disability was embodied in the early twentieth-century eugenicist practices of sterilization, incarceration, and euthanasia, which were carried out in the name of social and racial health. And it continues, often in less obvious forms, in recent neo-eugenicist practices such as prenatal screening. Rather than challenging rehabilitative futurism by proudly claiming an autonomous disabled identity, Mollow argues for the tactical value of embracing the negativity ascribed to disability. Drawing on and extending the queer theory of Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, Mollow proposes an inextricable link between the ways sexuality and disability are similarly “*fantasized* in terms of a loss of self, of mastery, integrity, and control” (297). Mollow uses this connection to theorize the radical potential of desiring rather than resisting disabled negativity. Such a desire, she argues, makes it possible to unsettle the rehabilitative fantasies that structure the social order and subtend violence done to the disabled in the name of that order’s perpetuation. What results from the embracing of disabled negativity are alternative visions of the future. As Alison Kafer similarly theorizes, when responding to rehabilitative futurism, “the task . . . is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future” (34).

Recent studies of disability and modernism have explored the degree to which modernist authors disrupted the disabling cultural imaginaries of rehabilitative futurism in the early decades of the twentieth century. While modernist authors’ preference for representing the grotesque, the singular, and the exceptional would suggest their antipathy toward the fantasy of rehabilitation, as Donald J. Childs has shown in tracing “the voice of eugenical discourse” in the work of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats (15), this aesthetic tendency often existed in conflict with many modernists’ political commitments to the eugenics movement. Madelyn Detloff describes how modernist writers ambivalently “respond[ed] to and contribute[d] to biopolitical social formations such as eugenics, scientific racism, sexuality, psychology, and gender normativity.”

Studies of modernism have thus begun to explore the formal and thematic work of disability. Nevertheless, few scholars have discussed the role that the ideology of rehabilitative futurism has played in shaping modern reading practices and discourse about modernist

art and literature.¹ The clearest example of the rhetoric of disability being used to describe modernist literature would be Max Nordau's application, in his 1892 study *Degeneration*, of degenerationist theory to artistic production and consumption. If the theory of degeneration argued that overcivilization was resulting in racial decline and threatening the health of future society, for Nordau the paradigmatically degenerate subject was the decadent artist. Disputing the aestheticist art for art's sake slogan of the decadents, Nordau argues, "the work of art is not its own aim, but it has a specially organic, and a social task" (336). Such an organic understanding of art's social task entails that one must approach artistic work not just from a moral or aesthetic angle but a biopolitical one as well. For Nordau, this meant evaluating both the healthiness of the impulse through which works of literature were produced and the potentially degenerating effects that literary works might have on readers and society. Thus, Nordau claims that, just as pathological expressions of violence or sexual perversion should be disciplined by institutions of the state to maintain social order, so too should pathological expressions of art be monitored and handled with an eye toward social health. As Joseph Valente points out, "more than an exemplary symptom, or rather precisely in being an exemplary symptom, contemporary arts and letters function for Nordau to communicate (in every sense) degeneracy throughout the social body" (386). In this manner, Nordau understands modernist writing not just as a repository for representations of disability and illness but as itself a threat to a future free of disability and illness.

While often dismissed as a literary critic, Nordau, in his reading of the decadents, offers a fundamental insight about the modern linkages between art and biopower from which scholars of modernism and disability can benefit. I am referring here to how ideologies of individual and collective health have shaped literature's production, distribution, and reception since the late nineteenth century. This much can be seen in the cultural discourse of reading that, drawing on what I call the "trope of the literary clinic" (Miller 19), equates books with medicine and readers with patients to be rehabilitated. This discourse has shaped the use of literature in modern institutions from the school to the prison to the military barrack to the hospital.

Nordau was not the only literary critic to recognize these linkages between art and biopower. At the historical moment when literary biopolitical practices were attaining cultural prominence in the United States, the writer and rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke was developing a theory of literature capable of making sense of them. Burke's notion of the artist as "medicine man" ("Philosophy" 64) and

literature as “medicine” (61) or “equipment for living” (“Literature” 293) provided an important early twentieth-century account of not only how literature affects the reader physiologically and psychologically but also the significance of these effects within larger social contexts. Carly Woods goes as far as to suggest that medicine served as a “master metaphor” for Burke, guiding his theories of human communication. Woods writes that Burke used “the medical language of cures and doses” to prompt investigation into “literature’s wider significance in curing society.” But for Burke, the equation of literature and medicine was not merely metaphorical.²

In this essay, I turn to Kenneth Burke’s theoretical and creative writings of the 1920s and 1930s to show how he interprets the tradition of modernist self-reflexive, formal experimentation as a particular kind of symbolic action, a medicine for its readers. But in describing modernist literature as medicine, Burke did not simply enact a reversal of Nordau’s interpretation of modernist art as potentially disabling by applying to it the Aristotelian or Freudian concept of curative catharsis.³ Rather, I argue that in his early essay collection *Counter-Statement* and his first and only novel *Towards a Better Life*, Burke embraces the negative rhetoric of disability to describe modernist writing as a particular subcategory of literary medicine.⁴ For Burke, these antinomian remedies do not heal readers by purging them of unhealthy excesses or strengthening their egos. Instead, they disable readers’ sense of sovereign selfhood. In doing so, he argues, modernist literature has the transgressive capacity to alter readers’ orientation toward the good life and the horizon of what is possible for acting toward the creation of a better future society, one in which disability (understood as the transgression of physical, psychological, behavioral, and social norms) can flourish.

The Value of Literature: Bourgeois versus Bohemian

Although most well-known as a rhetorical theorist, Burke was an important participant in the bohemian milieu of Greenwich Village in the 1920s. During this vital decade for literary modernism, Burke befriended writers and literary critics such as Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, Katherine Ann Porter, Malcolm Cowley, Gorham Munson, Waldo Frank, Djuna Barnes, Jean Toomer, and William Carlos Williams. He was a frequent contributor to avant-garde literary magazines, publishing poetry and fiction as well as criticism. He served as an editor of *The Dial* in 1923 and as its music critic from 1927–29. *Counter-Statement*, published in 1931, was Burke’s first book of liter-

ary criticism and the one that most clearly exhibits his engagements with the questions of literary modernism. Over the course of the essays that make up this collection, Burke writes on modernists and protomodernists such as Remy de Gourmont, Walter Pater, Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Mann, and André Gide. Further, he attempts to articulate the relationship between art and society by navigating between the poles of aestheticism and utilitarianism. At the heart of this discussion is the figure of disability.

In the essay “The Status of Art,” Burke describes the modern debate about the value of literature in terms of a conflict between a bourgeois and a bohemian ethos. By the late nineteenth century, Burke explains, art was being judged according to a new criterion, one shaped by the increasingly industrial tenor of society: usefulness. Reflecting the general values of optimism, efficiency, patriotism, and social evolutionism, this bourgeois perspective was that art ought to be a tool of socialization and moral education. Against such utilitarianism, proponents of the bohemian ethos embraced art for art’s sake aestheticism. They claimed that art had no social relevance; it was useless and amoral. For Burke, the following quote from French decadent writer Remy de Gourmont captures this position: “To admit art because it can uplift the masses or the individual, is like admitting the rose because we can extract from roses a medicine for the eyes” (qtd. in “Status” 16).

This tension between a utilitarian interest in the social role of art and an aesthetic attitude that says that art need not be useful continues over the course of *Counter-Statement*. Although “The Status of Art” concludes with the claim that “the criterion of ‘usefulness’ has enjoyed much more prestige than its underlying logic merited” (90), Burke does not thus praise aestheticism. Rather, he attempts to modify the terms of the debate by placing aestheticism in its historical context and considering its antisocial stance as a rhetorical strategy for responding to that situation.⁵ Thus, as Frank Lentricchia argues, in *Counter-Statement* “Burke takes his stand within modernism . . . but only in order to drive modernism toward political and social consequences that he regards as inherent in its project though not often intended and certainly not often wanted” (88).

While a rejection of the medicinal qualities of beauty was part of the bohemians’ socially antagonistic position, Burke argues that this stance ignored two crucial aspects of art: its creation by embodied individuals and its communicative, or rhetorical, function. Thus, he argues that De Gourmont’s focus on individualism, aesthetic autonomy, and the ideals of physical perfection in his writing was

a “denial of his own disease” (“Three Adepts” 18), leprosy, and of the role that bodily experience and psychological “maladjustments” (75) play in influencing one’s experience of the world and the act of creation.⁶ Further, in contrast to De Gourmont’s assertion of aesthetic autonomy, Burke argues that art’s primary function is in “exerting influence upon the minds and emotions of others” by arousing and eventually satisfying desire (“Status” 74). Rather than drawing a clear distinction between aestheticism and utilitarianism, then, Burke interprets the work of writers like De Gourmont, Pater, and Flaubert as analogous to propaganda and advertising. Like these obviously socially oriented forms, and against the stated intentions of its authors, this bohemian literature functioned rhetorically to persuade readers into transforming their attitudes toward reality and thus their social conduct.

However, despite the similarities in social function between propaganda and modernist literature, there remained for Burke an important difference. At its best, Burke shows, the work of these social outsiders did more than just *épater la bourgeoisie* (shock the bourgeoisie); it participated in the transvaluation of cultural values. That is, it used art’s “expressiveness as a means of making people seek what they customarily fled and flee what they customarily sought” (67). In this age of “applied literature” (90), advertising and media were functioning to establish a national ideal of the good life that adapted people to modern consumer capitalism. However, Burke claimed that literature could also lead readers to question the network of values that linked individualism, efficient work, accumulation of goods, health, and happiness—in short, the values that constitute the ideology of rehabilitative futurism.

At the heart of Burke’s understanding of modernist writing’s capacity to transvalue cultural values is the figure of disability, which he identifies as a common modernist symbol for the rejection of social norms and which he draws on to describe the effects these texts can have on readers. In the essay “Thomas Mann and André Gide,” Burke elaborates on how literature that is transgressive in content and innovative in form can accomplish the important social function of refiguring notions of the good life, thus challenging the ideology of rehabilitative futurism. He describes how these two modernist writers, despite their claims of aesthetic autonomy, offered readers an antinomian remedy. As opposed to a model of literature as a tool for therapeutic identification and catharsis that strengthens the healthy ego and confirms social norms, Burke locates in the work of these writers a model of therapy that is homeopathic and operates dialecti-

cally to discover in illness the foundations of new norms (and thus new modes of social health). For Burke, Mann and Gide are exemplary bohemian writers whose work focuses on the artist as outsider, whose social nonconformity is both epitomized and exacerbated by sexual deviancy and physical illness. Thus, he analyzes the ways in which these writers celebrate the insight and sensitivity of characters whose “divergency from their neighbors” (92) and from the “healthy” is symbolized by the “ill,” the “perverted” (94), the “morbid,” and the “physically extravagant” (92), in mental “deformations” and the “non-conforming mind” (93), and more generally in the language of “sickness and sexual vagary” (95), “plague,” and “decay” (94).

Many critics of the time believed that in treating deviance as attractive, writers like Mann and Gide were creating immoral literature. However, Burke argues that in fact it was in their focus on the diseased, disabled, and degenerate that these bohemian writers located their version of the ethical. According to Burke, the modernist investment in representing disability symbolizes a more general attitude he describes as “antinomian” (*Counter-Statement* viii). The term comes from the prefix “anti,” meaning against, and “nomos,” or law. It suggests a penchant for the transgressive gesture, a critical rejection of disciplinary social norms. In a society where the healthy body serves as a symbol of and locus for such norms, the modernist representation of disability can be seen as a way of resisting the expansion of biopower by returning to the body, revealing difference and abnormality (rather than fixed norms) at the heart of the biological.

Beyond the utilitarian, genteel insistence that art stimulates civic virtue, such literature cultivates in the reader a critical, questioning attitude toward society. Burke explains, “their parallel in life would not be the enacting of similar events, but the exercising of the complex state of mind which arises from the contemplation of such events with sympathy” (“Thomas Mann” 104). Figuring the bourgeois tendency toward moral certainty in terms of the supposedly fixed norms of the healthy body, Burke argues that, in Mann’s and Gide’s writing, disability is a symbol that offers to “make us at home in indecision” (105) and “humanize the state of doubt.” He explains:

Since the body is dogmatic, a generator of belief, society might well be benefited by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibility of ready hierarchies, which concerns itself with the problematical, the experimental, and thus by implication works corrosively upon those expansionistic certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms. An art may be of value purely through preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly, itself.

Here, Burke adopts the language of disability to articulate not just what modernist literature is about, but what it can do. While admitting that biological needs (such as food, sex, and sleep) establish certain fundamental rhythms of human life, Burke emphasizes the danger inherent in projecting biological norms and hierarchies onto the psychological, social, and political realms. Modernist literature has the potential to subvert these “expansionistic certainties” by engaging readers in experiences of uncertainty that he figures as disabling, a “disintegrating” of bodily norms. They do so by subverting ideological norms (treating socially undesirable traits as desirable) and experimenting with formal norms. While in Burke’s account “form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (“Psychology and Form” 31), antinomian texts involve readers by thwarting expectation and desire, thus leading them to confront their relationship to such civic virtues as mastery, autonomy, and control. In doing so, these texts produce and make pleasurable those very states that, in the rehabilitative fantasy of a hygienic future, are negatively associated with disability.

Burke returns once again to the connections between disability and art in the following essay, “Program.” There he provides his most detailed discussion of how a bohemian aesthetic might translate into a system of politics. In this politics, disability functions not just as a symbol but as concrete, lived experience that requires social accommodation. All aesthetics, he argues, imply a politics in stressing certain attitudes toward social conditions. He identifies the emergent dominant attitude of early twentieth-century America as practicality, a response to the processes of mechanization and industrialization reshaping political institutions and ways of living. The practical attitude is aligned with the ideology of rehabilitative futurism, associated as it is with efficiency, prosperity, consumption, and optimism, “manners of thinking which reinforce the natural dogmatism of the body” (112). By contrast, the aesthetic attitude reflects its antagonism to bourgeois forms of life through associations with disabling states of “inefficiency, indolence, dissipation, vacillation, mockery, distrust, ‘hypochondria,’ non-conformity, bad sportsmanship, in short, negativism.” The value of such seemingly unattractive qualities is, Burke explains, “keeping the practical from becoming too hopelessly itself.” Where the practical attitude at its extreme risks promoting an authoritarian politics of fascism, the critical mode of aestheticism draws on the symbol of disability to point toward an uncertain and dialogical democracy.⁷

To defend the seemingly unattractive qualities of the aesthetic attitude, Burke likens bohemian artists to indolent schoolchildren.

Within the disciplinary space of the school, the children's indolence is seen as a form of disobedience to be corrected through punishment. But Burke posits the cause of this indolence instead to be structural: faulty ventilation, tepid curricula, and outdated modes of instruction. Far from a personal, moral failing, the schoolchildren's indolence is thus revealed to be "symptomatic of a virtue" (112). Because of their attunement to contemporary cultural conditions, Burke suggests, "the most receptive children might be the ones most depressed by a faulty system." And in this sense, rather than requiring punishment, "a pandemic of indolent school children might indicate that something is wrong with the school." Here again, Burke associates disability with a sensitivity to faulty social norms, requiring not rehabilitative or normalizing therapy but the creation of alternative forms of life. Anticipating arguments about the social, rather than simply personal or medical, origins of disability, Burke suggests that the children's depression is not merely individualized deviance from a norm but instead is symptomatic of faulty social structures and institutions, which ascribe negativity to difference. By analogy, Burke suggests bohemian artists are valuable because, like indolent schoolchildren, their formal and thematic innovation indicates sensitivity to contemporary conditions of existence. By attending to what is excluded from dominant representations of reality, their work transvalues cultural values, making what was once seen as grotesque desirable.

Despite their claims of antisociality, in their very celebration of aesthetic leisure and the autonomy of art, the bohemians contest dominant constructions of social reality and indicate alternative attitudes toward social circumstances. In particular, this analysis of the schoolchildren's antinomian indolence and the artist's antiefficient celebration of leisure leads Burke to identify an incipient critique of the capitalist virtue of productivity.⁸ Thus, he shows that the artist, like the disabled individual, is productively situated to identify faulty norms and envision new modes of health rooted in new forms of living. In this sense, Burke sees the artist as both doctor and patient, and he understands literature as serving both a clinical and a critical function, mapping the symptoms of social forces as they impinge on the body and mind and pointing toward healthier social configurations by refiguring what it means to be healthy.⁹

In his only novel, *Towards a Better Life*, Burke attempts to enact this antinomian remedy himself. Like the work of Mann and Gide, Burke's novel foregrounds the association between bohemianism, deviance, and disability to challenge entrenched social norms. The disabled, abnormal, and socially alienated individual thus serves for

Burke as a symbol and subject of an ethics of critical uncertainty, a counter-statement to the oppressive pieties of consumer capitalism symbolized by the oppressive certainties of health.

Symptoms of Bohemianism

Late in his career, in 1969, Burke contributed an essay to the collection *Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders*. Edited by psychiatrist Dr. Jack J. Leedy, one of the first self-described poetry therapists, *Poetry Therapy* helped to establish the psychologically curative function of reading and writing literature. In his contribution, Burke engaged ambivalently with this developing field. Returning to ideas first articulated in *Counter-Statement*, he challenged the utilitarian notion of art as a tool for therapeutic self-expression that confirms and strengthens the ego and the social order. Instead, he suggested that art can engage writer and reader in ways that threaten the individualistic ideal of the able, autonomous self, the figure at the heart of the ideology of rehabilitative futurism. It was on these antinomian ideals that he designed his novel.

In the essay “Principles of Poetry Therapy,” Leedy introduces the therapeutic use of literature and provides some guidelines for using poetry to treat the emotionally ill. Through reading, studying, memorizing, reciting, and creating poetry, Leedy suggests, patients are encouraged to explore and express feelings that had been unrecognized or inarticulable. Proper selection of reading material is of utmost importance for this practice to succeed. And the key to selection is what Leedy calls the “isoprinciple” (67). This term, which he borrows from music therapy, suggests that the poems selected by the poetry therapist should be similar in mood to that of the patient. For example, if the patient is depressed, the poem should similarly express its author’s depression. Nevertheless, Leedy warns the aspiring poetry therapist to avoid poems that 1) are defeatist, pessimistic, vulgar, or otherwise offer no hope to the reader; 2) might increase the reader’s sense of guilt about their emotional state; 3) glorify, or even mention, suicide; and 4) emphasize silence, which he interprets as a symbol for the repression of emotions.

Burke’s contribution to *Poetry Therapy* begins with a claim that would seem to align him with Leedy’s model. “All other things being equal,” he states, “there’s relief in expressing the repressed” (104). However, Burke proceeds throughout the rest of his essay to discuss a variety of exceptions to this expressivist model of therapy. One of the complicating factors to the simple good of cathartic expression,

he argues, is the overdetermination of expression. That is, far from free and spontaneous, creative expression always involves deflections and acts of self-censorship. These include, for example, the unconscious tactics of condensation and displacement that Freud discusses as operative in dreams. Even more importantly, the theory of poetry as a curative, spontaneous expression ignores the complex, communicative aspects of poetry. As in *Counter-Statement*, here Burke argues that literature is rhetorical and that writing and reading are always socially embedded activities. They involve the use of conventional forms to arouse and fulfill the audience's desire. This process requires for its effects the use of ideological assumptions. In rhetorically manipulating the reader, art can confirm strongly held beliefs and values about what constitutes the good life, strengthening one's sense of self and society. But, by thwarting expectation, it can also endanger the coherence of one's sense of self. Burke uses his own experience writing his novel *Towards a Better Life* as an example of the latter. In composing this "novel about a word-man's cracking up," he claims, "he had got himself so greatly entangled in his plot's development, he barely did escape ending in an asylum himself" ("On 'Creativity'" 49).

Indeed, despite its title, which suggests self-help, *Towards a Better Life* breaks all of Leedy's rules about what makes a text good, therapeutic material: its narrator, John Neal, is avowedly pessimistic, antisocial, and prone to failure; the narrative prominently features, and perhaps even glorifies, madness and suicide; and, following John Neal's grotesque depiction of himself as a dying wasp, the novel stutters to a close with a series of stray aphorisms and sentence fragments before ending on the exhortation to the reader, "Henceforth silence" (*Towards* 219). One interpretation, which Burke himself encourages in some of his later commentary on the novel, is that *Towards a Better Life* is so negative because its protagonist John Neal functioned as a scapegoat on which Burke loaded all of his negative traits and emotions to be externalized and sacrificed. As Ben Yagoda reports, Burke claimed that "I couldn't go to a psychoanalyst . . . because I was too pigheaded. So I used my novel" (67). From this perspective, the novel's defeatist conclusion is a prelude to the author's and reader's curative transformations. However, the significance for Burke of the title phrase "towards a better life" is left ambiguous. In his preface to the second edition of the novel, published in 1966, Burke writes, "I have found that the title of this work can be misleading, if the words are read without ironic discount" (vi). Burke increases the ambiguity of the title's meaning by embedding it in the text in the form of an

ironic quotation: John Neal's rival Anthony claims to have interest in starting a utopian colony that will lead its members "towards a better life" (37), but John Neal sees through this lofty rhetoric and reveals the whole project to readers as self-interested subterfuge. Later in the preface, Burke follows his discounting of the title with the modification that "there is also a sense in which an ironic discounting of the title must in turn be discounted" (vi). But while the reader is left uncertain about Burke's attitude toward the meaning of his novel's title, Burke's use of counter-statement—his discounting of discounting—enacts the antinomianism that his novel plays out on a larger scale. By combining transgressive content and unconventional form, Burke stages *Towards a Better Life* as an antinomian remedy, an attempt to test modernist literature's capacity to challenge society's rehabilitative ideals as he had outlined in *Counter-Statement*.

Towards a Better Life tells the story of John Neal, a "somewhat quarrelsome fellow who was ingenious in the cultivation of an illness not yet completely catalogued" (203). In his attempt to describe John Neal's "not yet completely catalogued" illness, Burke takes on the role of symptomatologist. Jack Selzer suggests that Burke uses his protagonist to "interrogate the conflict between the bohemian and bourgeois ethos" (90): through John Neal, Selzer claims, *Towards a Better Life* presents a "portrait of a bohemian artist-figure" (174). However, according to Selzer, this portrait is primarily dismissive. He writes that, though drawing inspiration from modernist writers like Mann, "Burke mounts from within a sharp criticism of the artistic stance of moderns who conceived of themselves and their work as autonomous and radically alienated from society." Selzer thus reads this diagnostic effort as Burke's attempt to distinguish himself from the "psychosis of modernism" (176), "a perspective on the world that makes [the modernist] see it only partially, and as diseased." But as we have already seen, for Burke, analogies between artist and disability serve an ethically productive function. It is therefore incorrect to say that Burke sought to distance himself from the psychosis of modernism. In the work of Mann and Gide, as Burke analyzes it, disability symbolizes a democratic acceptance of uncertainty, and sensitivity to the contingent, as contrasted with the totalitarian certainty of the healthy body. And in the case of the indolent schoolchildren, symptoms point not just to the individual to be rehabilitated but to the limits of present social organizations and the creative flight toward future social forms. If *Towards a Better Life*, written in the form of a series of unsent letters, takes as its primary material the confessional language of an individual lamenting his romantic failures, it does so to discover

something that exceeds this individual, expressive self. Rather than a tool for psychological catharsis, a purging of the destructive qualities of the self, the novel must instead be seen as a model for a ritual of social transformation. I suggest that in diagnosing bohemianism as a modern pathology, Burke reveals the artist's critical function in response to contemporary social conditions and points toward the new forms of social organization such critique implies.

Towards a Better Life's transformative function is symbolized in the grotesque sculptures that John Neal makes in the wake of one of his romantic failures. He begins "chipping crude, unfinished shapes out of stone—dream-figures, obscene at times, or funny, or with various kinds of malformation which made them more detestable than pitiful" (133). These sculptural works remain incomplete and fail to elicit the pity that precedes cathartic release. Rather than revising, fixing, and completing these works, he moves on to a new project and then another. Art here is presented in its antinomian state, malformed and unfinished. As "drafts" (134) and "jottings of a note-book," the sculptural works symbolize not only John Neal's artistry and capacity for creation but also the "towards" of the novel's title, or the ideal of the transitional captured in the aesthetic understood as a process.

Over the course of the novel, three key characteristics of John Neal's bohemianism are emphasized: his affinity for experiences of unfulfilled desire such as pain, dependency, and loss of self (states he often symbolizes through figures of disability); his antinomian social attitude; and his transvaluation of cultural values. Of his tendency to seek out negative experiences, first among them a consistent self-thwarting of his own romantic desires, John Neal asserts at the novel's end that "I chose unerringly" (202). Such experiences, he attempts to convince readers (and perhaps himself), serve as a form of ascetic training, a way of "learn[ing] the mode of thinking, feeling, and acting best suited to cope with difficulty." "It is possible," John Neal explains, "that by a constant living with torment, we may grow immune to it, and disintegration will fall only upon those whom adversity can overwhelm as a surprise, making little headway against those others who would accept even prosperity with bitterness" (4). This is an apt summary of the homeopathic (and ultimately dialectical) aesthetic strategy Burke describes in "The Philosophy of Literary Form" as "a technique for transforming poisons into medicines" (65). Tragic drama is the primary exemplar of this technique. However, the experiences that John Neal describes suggest tragedy without catharsis. John Neal associates his use of this homeopathic strategy with his youthful enthusiasm for art and literature: "Art, letters, the

subtleties of affections and longing, the sole factors by which some whit of human dignity might have been made accessible, were surely the foremost causes of my decay" (*Towards* 35). Literature's function here is not therapeutic in the sense of purging excess and thus rehabilitating the reader to a previous norm. Instead, it is a form of exacerbation. By submitting himself to painful art and painful experiences, John Neal has the opportunity to experience these tensions under controlled conditions. Burke associates such homeopathic exposure to decay with the development of aesthetic sensitivity, a process that enables one to open oneself to contemporary conditions rather than indulging in and accepting compensatory fantasies without necessarily acquiescing to them. Burke describes this process in "The Status of Art":

Under extremely distasteful conditions one builds a wall of anesthesia and forgetfulness, contrives mental ways of leaving pain unregistered. Yet a man may, in undergoing stress, meet it without safeguards of this sort. He may accept its full impact, may let it pour down upon him, as though he were putting his face up into a thundershower. If he survives, the period of stress is not a period of blankness, but a period of great intricacy and subtlety which lives on in the memory and can be drawn upon. The artist's technique of articulation often enables him to admit what other men, by emotional subterfuges, deny. (76)

John Neal's homeopathic regimen, which enables him to develop sensitivity to social conditions, is coupled with an antinomian attitude. The course of the novel's plot demonstrates John Neal's tendency to distance himself from the society of others, from the opening, in which he describes how his "converse became a monologue" (5), to the novel's end, in which he is described alone on a hill in the middle of a raging storm. John Neal positions himself and his ideas as apart from societal norms. "When finding that people held the same views as I," he attests, "I persuaded myself that I held them differently" (3). Moreover, this antinomianism is reflected in *Towards a Better Life's* style. Burke uses the form of the maxim to express paradoxical truths and contradict statements with counter-statements. In a description that constitutes a kind of *ars poetica* for the novel, John Neal writes: "I would . . . deem it enough to place antinomies upon the page, to add up that which is subtracted by another, to reduce every statement by some counter-claim to zero. Did each assertion endow with life, and each denial cause destruction, at the close the message would be non-existent; but, by the nature of words, after this mutual cancellation is complete, the document remains" (12). Like the grotesque sculptures that John Neal drafts and abandons, the

novel is shaped by a process of negation and destruction. By utilizing maxims that transgress common sense and by juxtaposing competing statements of fact, Burke stylistically performs the antinomianism that John Neal dramatizes through his actions. Through their diachronic interplay, such statements perform the ideals of moral uncertainty and transformation that Burke symbolizes in terms of disability.

John Neal's antinomianism reflects a negative attitude toward dominant cultural myths and vocabularies, an attitude made possible by his sensitivity to contemporary social conditions. Transvaluing values is the constructive counterpart of this process; it is the homeopathic transformation of poison into medicine. This transformative process is evident, for example, in the following quotation, in which he explains how maladaptation can be understood as strength:

I have realized that men beneath the same sky, with the same readings of thermometer and the same averages of rainfall, are bred to vastly differing environments, so that frailty may be but the outward aspect of exceptional vigour and tenacity. The apparently weak are merely schooled to other strength and may be easily enduring hardships which are intense and even still unnamed, while the man who triumphs has done so by acting in accordance with other rules, like one who would win at tennis by shooting his opponent. (15)

Here, echoing Burke's later vocabulary of strategies and situations, John Neal treats binaries such as frailty and vigor, weakness and strength, as contingent on context. Despite certain natural constants, the maps by which we orient ourselves to the world determine cultural values such that what is abnormal from one point of view appears from another to be a superior adaptation. As he puts it in one pithy, subjectless statement: "became bat-blind, that he might have bat-vision" (217). That which within one social structure might be considered a negative trait—a disability-as-lack—points toward other possible situations, guided by a completely different vocabulary and set of rules, in which such traits can be considered difference-as-value. In this way, Burke points to a more sensitive model of norms, noting, "nothing is blunter than a wise rule of conduct obeyed in situations which it was not designed to handle; that the builders of a new continent will learn ways of thinking which serve them well, but which become obstructive once the continent is peopled" (15).

These three features (John Neal's search for experiences that thwart his sense of sovereign selfhood as a strategy for developing sensitivity to the contemporary situation, his antinomian critique of social pieties, and his constructive transvaluation of values) come

together in the novel's second-to-last chapter. This ostensible "recapitulation" of the plot (195), and of the narrator's life, begins with a history of antinomianism:

There are, underlying the Church, many ingenious heresies so thoroughly silenced by the sword that they survive only in the refutations of the faithful. There are subtle schemes deriving the best of human insight from Cain, or centering salvation upon the snake, or lauding the act of Judas Iscariot which procured for uneasy mankind a God as scapegoat. To look back upon them is to consider a wealth of antinomian enterprise expended in ways which seem excessive, troublesome, and unnecessary, their gratuity being surpassed only by the same qualities among the orthodox.

This "antinomian enterprise" consists of deriving ethical insight by refuting moral pieties. Importantly, antinomian heretics are not historical relics. Like antiorthodox doubles for the resurrected Jesus, "they rise anew, changing their terms each time, to stand against the new terms of the Faith, squarely."

What follows is an apostrophe, this time not addressed to John's rival Anthony, as most other apostrophes in the novel have been. Instead, here he addresses the outcasts of society, those who, according to the ideology of rehabilitative futurism, must be cured, eliminated, or superseded in order to achieve a healthy future: "lepers of mankind" (196), "gutter rats," "the worthless," "the insidious promoters of subversive doctrines which would allow the starved to nibble somewhat at the world's plethoric stores." He declares: "Oh, you in every manner unequipped, you the deprived of logic, the improvident, the indolent who cannot strive for such crooked kinds of happiness as those in authority would force upon you—all you disheartened, discountenanced, disorganized—I salute you, for if there is to be a remedy, this remedy will come because you have made it imperative" (196–97). John Neal calls on the plethora of figures that subsist at society's edges—the sick, the unhappy, the indolent, the politically subversive, the poor—to reject the pursuit of "crooked kinds of happiness" (197), or the good life promised by consumer capitalism, and to take up the antinomian enterprise instead. It is only then that contemporary social conditions can be accurately described and remedied and new futures can be imagined.

Continuing the shift away from the primarily confessional, individualistic mode of earlier portions of the novel, at the chapter's end, the narration switches to the third person. It turns to the "hypothetical case" (203) of John Neal, who turns to prayer after having

severed himself from his intimates and society to live alone in a hut on a hilltop. The narrator here provides a religious explanation for John Neal's suffering: "It is good that some men are scorned by their fellows and made to feel homeless among them, since these outcasts are, through their sheer worldly disabilities, vowed to graver matters and could not, even if they would, prevent themselves from pouring forth their neglected love upon a formidable Father" (206). This section provides the suggestion of redemption, a rehabilitation of "worldly disabilities" through transcendence. It is one version of the explanation of suffering, but it is the version that relies on faith, which John Neal had earlier claimed is too blunt in its rituals of purification: "I will not yield to the irresponsibilities of the Faith, which comforts by dismissing all variety of problems in the lump. For each particular difficulty, let there be a new statement. Let us not allow the evasiveness of one reply, worded in advance, for everything" (169). As the reader soon discovers, this moment of earnest prayer is a fiction. Although John Neal "constructed for himself a story" in which he could make sense of his suffering (208), he ultimately continues to embody the skeptical attitude of the bohemian. The chapter ends by emphasizing that "the sanction of no vast mythology was permitted him."

The chapter thus closes, suggesting the destruction of both religious and capitalist mythologies. The capitalist mythology of individualism, which describes desire in terms of ability, productivity, and willful ambition, is faced with the challenge of those relegated to the social margins. Their antinomian remedy consists in revealing this mythology's failure to address the ills created by a capitalist social structure. The religious mythology, which describes the rehabilitation of worldly disability through the submission to a transcendent purpose, is faced with the challenge of John Neal's transvaluation of values, which redefines suffering as pointing toward material change. For Burke, both the interdiction-laden myths of religion and the self-oriented myths of modern consumer capitalism provide faulty maps for contemporary social welfare. The required remedy is a new vocabulary, one rooted in the perspectives of social outcasts.

The novel's final chapter consists of "jottings" (209). These are maxims and sentence fragments, some of which refer back to moments earlier in the novel while others expand on the novel's themes in new ways. Significantly, what is missing from many of these fragments is the pronoun "I." The majority of the novel, by highlighting rhetorical rather than narrative qualities, both mimics and parodies the confessional mode. This epistolary novel embodies the expressive individualism privileged within a therapeutic culture. However,

through the conceit of the unsent letter, Burke draws attention to rhetorical form deracinated from communicative function and foregrounds the gap between expression and its fulfillment. The jottings take this further. They are impersonal utterances. Without a clear speaker or occasion, they draw attention to text as text.

As William H. Rueckert argues in his attempt to apply Burke's notion of symbolic action to this novel, this final chapter enacts a transformation. It is, as one of the fragments reads, a space of "lapsing into the unformed" (*Towards* 214). But who or what is lapsing? And into what? In this fragment, we see the importance of the lack of pronoun, which suggests a transformation that exceeds the personal. While some of the jottings refer to the individual desires of John Neal, others return to the alienated masses described in the previous chapter: "if enough men could be brought to realize their plight, then we could at their instigation have a reshuffling." In this way, Burke emphasizes the collective aspect of this transformation as well.¹⁰

If the previous chapter ends by evoking the destruction of the dominant social mythologies provided by religion and capitalism, this final section represents an effort to discover a new vocabulary—a new equipment—for living. One jotting explains, "there comes a time when one must abandon his vocabulary. For the rigidity of words, by discovering a little, prevents us from discovering more" (216). Burke's jottings dramatize the process of abandoning form and vocabulary. What is left out—the space that separates these narrative shards—is as significant as what is said. These gaps suggest that to abandon one's old vocabulary requires a temporary space of silence. It is this state of receptivity to the contemporary situation that makes it possible to develop new symbolic strategies for encompassing that situation. "What voices would one hear," a fragment asks, "were the mind to be plunged into total silence? . . . Could he hear the cells of his body speaking? Might he distinguish the songs of the myriad little tenants in his blood?" (218). Here we see, on a microscale, the thematics of becoming collective. In mapping a multiplicity of "cells" over the singularity of the individual, Burke represents the potential emergence of a collective enunciation that exceeds the novelistic expressive self. Echoing Burke's description in "The Status of Art" of the bohemian artist who, facing the difficulties of the contemporary situation "let[s] it pour down upon him, as though he were putting his face up into a thundershower" (76), the novel ends receptive to this collective, undecipherable enunciation. Out of this noise, it suggests, a new vocabulary might differentiate itself: "Henceforth silence, that the torrent may be heard descending in all its fulness" (*Towards* 219).

Burke's early writings present a drastically different image of modernism than we are used to entertaining. Burke draws on medical analogies to describe what literature does. In doing so, he challenges the New Critics' tendency to treat literature as an autonomous aesthetic object—an organic whole—and instead directs attention to literature's active, social nature and its relationship to nonliterary forms of purposeful symbolic action. And by applying the rhetoric of disability, he articulates his understanding of modernist texts—like his own novel *Towards a Better Life*—as part of a special category of literary medicine. These antinomian remedies challenge the fantasy of rehabilitative futurism by drawing on figures of disability and offering an alternative model of the good life. Disability serves as an important antinomian symbol for Burke because it is structurally antagonistic to the healthy body and the ideals of certainty, autonomy, efficiency, productivity, and usefulness that cluster around it. Sensitive to the contradictions and failures of the dominant social code through which modern capitalism operates, modernist texts symbolically challenge readers' understanding of the good life by representing individuals who fall astray of norms (physical, cognitive, behavioral, and moral). Further, by challenging conventional forms, they involve readers in experiences of confusion, uncertainty, unproductivity, loss of mastery, and thwarted desire. These disruptions of the fantasy of a sovereign ego, which are negatively associated with and commonly figured in terms of disability, provide readers with a kind of social training that develops in them an openness to and pleasure in the exceptional. While these texts might not explicitly valorize or even focus on disability, Burke nevertheless suggests that their antinomian stance implies a politics that “serves to undermine any one rigid scheme of living” (*Counter-Statement* viii). This challenge to norms is necessary for building a society that, in contrast to the ideology of rehabilitative futurism, desires disability in the sense that Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson outline: “a world of multiple (desiring and desirable) corporealities interacting in nonexploitative ways . . . in which an incredible variety of bodies and minds are valued and identities are shaped” (14).

Two paths for future research suggest themselves in light of the preceding discussion. First, as a complement to the question of the representation of disability in literary modernism, one could pursue the way in which the trope of the literary clinic and the rhetoric of disability shape discourses and practices of literary production, organization, distribution, and consumption within the context of biopolitical modernity. Second, Burke's theory of modernist equip-

ment for living as antinomian remedy may be productively brought to bear on the work of other writers of the period. Doing so would allow us to understand more fully the relationship between modernism and disability beyond the focus on the representation of disabled characters. For pursuing this line of inquiry, it is instructive to compare Burke's model with Lennard Davis's disability studies-informed account of narrative. Davis argues that the novel "emerges as an ideological form of symbolic production whose central binary is normal-abnormal" ("Who Put" 95) and whose central "narrative technique" (98) is "cure." To read a novel is, in this account, to learn to distinguish—in others and in oneself—between what is normal and what is not, to apply moral valences to such a distinction, and through the temporal process of reading, to trace the paths by which abnormalities are cured. Through this tendency toward normalization, novels conform to rehabilitative futurism. In them, the social fantasy of a future in which all forms of disability, pathology, or deviance have been repaired or eliminated is narratively enacted and socially reproduced.¹¹ But if cure is a crucial narrative technique and narrative effect of novels, it is, Davis argues, a faulty strategy for addressing the social context:

All these cures are placebos for the basic problem presented to capitalism and its ideological productions in the form of modern subjectivity, which dons the form of the normal, average, citizen protagonist—that bell curve-generated, fantastic being who reconciles the promise of equal rights with the reality of an unequal distribution of wealth. But the quick fix, the cure, has to be repeated endlessly, like a patent medicine, because it actually cures nothing. Novels have to tell this story over and over again, as do films and television, since the patient never stays cured and the disabled, cured individually, refuse to stop reappearing as a group. Indeed, modern subjectivity is a wounded identity that cannot cure itself without recourse to cure narratives, which means that it cannot cure itself at all, since the disability of modern subjectivity is inherent in the environment, not in the subject. (99)

Like Burke, Davis here draws on the language of medicine to describe how literature functions.¹² But as he elaborates in the above passage, this bibliotherapy necessarily fails because its fantasy of cure does nothing to address the social conditions that give rise to disability. Davis's account, however, imagines only one kind of literary medicine, the "patent medicine" that attempts to cover disabling reality like a prosthesis. As such, it fails to do justice to those modernist works that are sensitive to the contradictions of modern subjectivity, challenge

dominant ideals of the good life by representing the transgression of social norms, subvert conventional forms, and engage readers in experiences that disable their sense of autonomy and self-mastery. Such works can function as equipment for imagining and creating alternatives to the future that the ideology of rehabilitation sets out for us.

Burke provides one example of how his theory of modernist equipment for living might be applied in an essay on Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood*.¹³ Contrary to the narrative process of normalization that Davis posits at the heart of the modern novel, *Nightwood* privileges representations of abject social outsiders who bear the stigmas of perversion, disability, and degeneracy. Burke suggestively links this focus on the narrative's miserable *miserables* to the rhetorical mode of lamentation, which foregrounds the gap between desire and its fulfillment. Thus, he proposes to "approach the work as a set of devices ultimately designed to make lamentation a source of pleasure for the reader" ("Version" 241). Although Burke ultimately takes up this approach only in a limited sense in his essay, this way of reading might help us see how modernist novels like *Nightwood* not only represent people with disabilities but, further, critically respond to biopolitical social formations by acting on the reader to make the undesirable desirable. Such a reading would illuminate how *Nightwood* involves readers in the experience of "disqualification" (Barnes 12), which Barnes suggests is also operative in the spectacle of the circus. Just as watching the acrobat's monstrous presentation of ability evokes a "longing and disquiet" for a state the spectator "could never touch, therefore never know," reading Barnes's novel—its testimony of bohemians "who are full to the gorge with misery" relayed in dense, nested analogies (83)—constantly evokes and frustrates readers' expectations and desires. In doing so, it invites readers to consider their own relationship to mastery, efficiency, and autonomy as a crucial step toward revising conventional notions of happiness, normality, health, and care. If in "Lexicon Rhetoricae" Burke proposes a theory of literary form as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires" (124), modernist texts like *Nightwood* and *Towards a Better Life* might be seen as antinomian medicine that frustrates desire in order to discredit the tight linkages among health, happiness, efficiency, productivity, and the good life on which the fantasy of rehabilitative futurism depends.

Notes

1. A notable exception is Tobin Siebers's discussion of the Nazi's application of disability rhetoric to modernist art. See especially Siebers 21–56.
2. As scholars of Burke's work have shown, his interest in the intersections of literature and medicine had many roots. See Bremen 3–8 on Burke's friendship and prolonged correspondence with poet-doctor William Carlos Williams; Hawhee and Jack on his work as a ghostwriter for the Bureau for Social Hygiene; and Feehan on his early exposure to Christian Science as a child.
3. One might contrast this with Bernard Shaw's response to Nordau, *The Sanity of Art* (1908), in which he denies modern art's disabling effects by defending its sanity.
4. In this essay, I treat the rhetoric of disability broadly to include instances where Burke draws on figures of physical disability, but also mental illness and disease. As Garland-Thomson points out, "disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity" (13). Despite the critical lived distinctions between these kinds of disability, in this context what is significant is the way they all function symbolically to indicate deviance from the norm.
5. To put it in terms of Burke's later vocabulary, he treats aestheticism as "symbolic action" ("Philosophy" 8). Fluck writes of Burke's theory of literature as symbolic action, "literature, as a deliberately tentative, playful mode of action, offers specific possibilities for testing and supplementing our social constructions of reality" (361).
6. Burke further develops this idea in "The Philosophy of Literary Form," where he argues that "nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his *burdens*, including those of a physical nature, such as disease" (17) and that "style grows out of a disease," such that it might be possible to identify "dropsical," "asthmatic," "phthisic," "apoplectic," and "blind" styles. However, rejecting simple determinism, he clarifies that, while such an approach potentially "leads to a Max Nordau mode of equating genius with degeneracy" (18), it is necessary to remind oneself that "the true locus of assertion is not in the *disease*, but in the *structural powers* by which the poet encompasses it."
7. In "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" Burke suggests that Hitler's rhetorical "medicine" functions the opposite way (191): the Jew—associated with "capitalism, democracy, pacifism, journalism, poor housing, modernism, big cities, loss of religion, half measures, ill health, and the

- weakness of the monarch” (205)—is treated as a scapegoat, distinguished from and treated as a threat to a healthy, unified Germany.
8. Describing the deep imbrication of indolence, disability, unproductivity, and moral failure in the modern American imagination, Garland-Thomson points out that “as modernization proceeded, the disabled figure shouldered in new ways society’s anxiety about its inability to retain the status and old meanings of labor in the face of industrialization and increasing economic and social chaos” (47).
 9. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze, emphasizing the function rather than the meaning of literature, writes of the author as “the physician of himself and of the world” (3) and literature as “an enterprise of health” that “consists in inventing a people who are missing” (4).
 10. Betts Van Dyk usefully applies Burke’s concept of perspective by incongruity to the fragments of this final section. However, as for Rueckert, for her, the function of this strategy is a rebirth whose “success depends upon the *individual* in whom it works” (48; emphasis added).
 11. Mitchell and Snyder make a very similar argument about the normalizing function of narrative in *Narrative Prosthesis*. There, they suggest that all narratives enact “a process of explanatory compensation wherein perceived ‘aberrancies’ can be rescued from ignorance, neglect, or misunderstanding for their readerships” (53).
 12. Davis has suggested that novels are analogous to individual psychic defenses in that “their function is to help humans adapt to the fragmentation and isolation of the modern world” (*Resisting* 12). In this sense, overly simplistic from a Burkean perspective, novel reading operates as a quasitherapeutic practice, but one which must be resisted in the name of politics.
 13. In his essay “On Stress, Its Seeking,” Burke suggests that Barnes pursues an aesthetic project in *Nightwood* similar to the one he had attempted with *Towards a Better Life*.

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