Kenneth Burke’s influence on various academic disciplines is clear in the number of books and articles published annually on his thought. It is also clear insofar as academics continue to turn to his work for insights on handling scholarly problems. That is to say, not only do we explore the dimensions of his work, we also bring it to bear on current disputes in the hopes of clarifying or moving past the issues we face. His thought, in short, has a currency that transcends its historical period. “As we meet new challenges that echo the past,” writes Ross Wolin, “Burke’s inquiries into meaning, orientation, faction, communication, and rhetoric are as urgent today as when Burke raised them long ago and for decades after.”

By bringing the terms of Burke’s work to bear on current disputes, we connect him to the vocabularies and discourses that surround us. His thought becomes familiar through the lenses we employ, as we intermix his ideas with our own terminology and see his work through the language of our discussions. One example of this phenomenon is the way scholars have been describing Burke’s philosophical outlook. Burke’s thought, we are told, is that of a social constructionist. Edward Schiappa, for example, concludes that Burke gives us a view of the world as intersubjectively created: “Our understanding is social in the sense that our concepts are human-made and are part of a shared language. Our understanding is

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Paul Stob
"terministic screens"

constructed in the sense that our claims, interpretations, and orientations constitute ‘conceptual fabrics’ that weave together contingent sets of beliefs and social practices. Paul Jay turns the sentiment into a more explicitly epistemological point: “The most radical aspect of Burke’s evolving theory of language at this time is his recognition that language—inherently metaphoric—constructs rather than reflects knowledge.” James Chesebro highlights social constructionism as one of the hallmarks of Burke’s dramatism: “For Burke, the realm of symbol-using is unique to the human being. Symbol-using is a solely conventional, arbitrary, and social process. It allows human beings to become self-conscious, create motives independently of physical phenomena, and ultimately to create social constructions of reality.” Dennis Ciesielski argues that Burke’s “terministic screens” define “base reality into truth-systems unique to each respective discourse community and imply[...] a neo-pragmatic, social constructionist pattern for the making of meaning.” Finally, Robert Wess characterizes Burke’s entire career as the evolution from a materialist, biological-essentialist view of the human self to a social constructionist view.

Generally speaking, “social constructionism” is a metaphor that attempts to capture the way Burke viewed the nature of the world and the function of language therein. It suggests that symbols, terms, and language form the building blocks, the bricks and mortar, of the structures of our collective life. We employ symbols that construct our social realities, similar to the way a contractor employs the materials and labor that construct a house. Consequently, the realities we face are not inherent in nature but are built up discursively and can therefore be reconstructed as we alter our discursive practices.

The social construction metaphor positions Burke’s philosophical outlook in terms that are familiar to us, though not necessarily familiar to him. That is to say, the label of social constructionist is recent, and it comes not from Burke’s work but from intellectual developments after he wrote the bulk of his corpus. We apply it to him retroactively, meshing together his intellectual milieu with our own. And as Ian Hacking reminds us, “The phrase has become code. If you use it favorably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable, and respectable.”

Labeling Burke a social constructionist wraps his thought in a current metaphor, merging his perspective with a vocabulary that was not part of his project. While such a merger is not necessarily a bad thing—to some degree the process is inevitable—a certain danger accompanies it:
Applying the label runs the risk of unmooring Burke from the vocabularies he found compelling, appropriate, and effective. While it may illuminate certain aspects of his thinking, it may also conceal other aspects, particularly the language of the sociohistorical context that shaped his own intellectual development.

As I hope to show in this essay, there is reason to rethink the appropriateness of the social constructionist label insofar as it is applied to Burke. More specifically, my project is to reassess that label by returning Burke to one of the philosophical vocabularies he embraced, reconnecting him to a conceptual orientation he found particularly compelling. Though such a project of contextualization could take many forms, this essay will trace Burke’s connection to the “American philosopher he probably admired most”: William James. If James was indeed the American philosopher he most admired, then exploring Burke’s indebtedness to James will give us a better sense of Burke’s philosophical orientation.

Tracing Burke’s connection to James is a fitting task. For, as Ross Posnock summarizes, “it was James whom the first self-conscious American cultural avant-garde—the young intellectuals of the generation of 1910—adopted as a hero in their revolt against Victorian and Puritan culture.” Burke was part of this generation of young intellectuals, and to varying degrees scholars have recognized his connection to James. My project in this essay is to further explore Burke’s indebtedness to James by showing how he utilized key elements of James’s psychology and philosophy, particularly in characterizing the function of language. His utilization of James’s psychological and philosophical vocabulary, I will suggest, renders the Burke-as-social-constructionist label problematic or at least in need of refinement.

Though we can see Burke’s indebtedness to James throughout his writings, we can do so most clearly in one of his most celebrated and influential essays: “Terministic Screens.” Not only is “Terministic Screens” central to Burke’s philosophical and linguistic outlook, scholars have also pointed to it as part of the reason for labeling him a social constructionist. By understanding his utilization of James’s thought in crafting the essay, however, we open a space for reconsidering his reputation as a social constructionist.

I will begin by tracing Burke’s interest in James generally, showing how he positions James as one of the most influential and original thinkers in American history. I will then undertake a close reading of “Terministic Screens,” showing how its Jamesian voice bears on Burke’s understanding of the function of language. I will conclude by reconsidering the appropriateness
of the social constructionist label. As I will suggest, an experiential vocabulary grounded in Jamesian psychology and philosophy better illuminates Burke’s thoughts on language and the human predicament than the vocabulary that accompanies the social constructionist project.

A JAMESIAN PERSPECTIVE FOR KENNETH BURKE

From 1890, when he published his masterpiece *The Principles of Psychology*, until well after his death in 1910, William James was perhaps the most influential academic in America. At the very least, he was America’s most “public” philosopher. He sold more books than any other American philosopher at the time, and his public lectures were oftentimes standing-room-only events. He was one of America’s few intellectual “rock stars.”

Given that Burke grew up when James’s popularity was still going strong, it is not surprising that he was familiar with James’s thought. And a survey of Burke’s writings reveals the extent to which he knew and appreciated James’s work. In *Permanence and Change*, for example, he cites the “James-Lange” theory of emotion. In *A Grammar of Motives*, he playfully links James’s “stream of consciousness” to the “Demonic Trinity”—the “erotic, urinary, and excremental.” In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, he dwells on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and in particular James’s thoughts on mysticism and order and the rhetorical nature of James’s testimonial method. Also in the *Grammar*, he notes how James’s thoughts on creation highlight the centrality of the symbolic act. And he references James’s chapter on the “sick soul” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the most personal chapter of the book, containing James’s characterization of his own “sick soul.” In *Permanence and Change*, furthermore, he turns very tellingly and eloquently to “The Will to Believe.” Following James’s lead, Burke insists that communication and cooperation come down to an act of faith: “Every system of exhortation hinges about some definite act of faith, a deliberate selection of alternatives. When this crucial act is not specifically stated, it merely lies hidden beneath the ramifications of the system. . . . Here, in all its nudity, is the Jamesian ‘will to believe.’ It amounts in the end to the assumption that good, rather than evil, lies at the roots of human purpose. And as for those who would suggest that this is merely a verbal solution, I would answer that by no other fiction can men truly cooperate in historic processes, hence the fiction itself is universally grounded.”
While Burke shows that he was well versed in James's psychology and philosophy of religion, he also displays a thorough understanding of pragmatism. James, of course, was the father of American pragmatism. And in the Grammar, Burke spends almost fifty pages showing how pragmatism highlights two of the pentad’s key terms: agency and purpose. By focusing on James’s insights, his hope is to reveal the power of the pragmatic orientation: “Once Agency has been brought to the fore, the other terms readily accommodate themselves to its rule. Scenic materials become means which the organism employs in the process of growth and adaptation. The organism itself is a confluence of means, each part being at the service of other parts. . . Indeed, we seem to be confronting a principle of entropy, as with the second law of thermodynamics, with the distinctions of the various philosophic schools leveling off towards their ‘heat-death’ in Pragmatism (which would be but another way of saying what James had in mind when borrowing Papini’s figure of the corridor).” This valuation of the pragmatic method also appears in Burke’s chapter “The Virtues and Limitations of Debunking” in The Philosophy of Literary Form, a chapter that adroitly explains the key differences among Peirce’s, James’s, and Dewey’s versions of pragmatism.

Burke’s appreciation of James’s work is perhaps most apparent in the opening chapter of Attitudes Toward History, where he explores the “three most well-rounded, or at least the most picturesque, frames of acceptance in American literature”—James, Whitman, and Emerson. His somewhat brief summary of James’s thought is in fact a very telling characterization of James’s place in the American intellectual tradition, at least as Burke saw it. Titled “William James, Whitman, and Emerson,” the chapter proceeds in that order, and it begins with James’s own words: “To ‘accept the universe’ or to ‘protest against it.’ William James puts them side by side, as ‘voluntary alternatives’ between which ‘in a given case of evil the mind seesaws.’ And: ‘The second not being resorted to till the first has failed, it would seem either that the second were an insincere pis aller, or the first a superfluous vanity.’ Characteristically, James looks for a way of avoiding both. He will be neither an optimist nor a pessimist, but a ‘meliorist’” (3). From these opening words Burke proceeds to sort out American intellectual history and show what he believes to be the proper approach for handling the human situation.

Highlighting James’s “melioristic” attitude helps Burke dwell on the power of naming. As he muses, “We must name the friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something
about them. In naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior” (4). This is an intimately Jamesian portrait of language, which also foreshadows Burke’s thoughts in “Terministic Screens.” It reveals how James viewed language’s role in creating and sustaining relations with the world. James’s thought, Burke insists, equipped “him and others for living” (5).

Burke goes on to deal with what commentators have long noted of James: his style—“James was a stylist, in a family of stylists, and surrounded by stylists” (7). He offered a philosophical approach wherein the aesthetic and the ethical are intertwined, living “very close to an awareness of the emotional overtones associated with his ideas” (11). The result was an “unusual artistic sensitivity, forcing him to a concern with wayward manifestations that are, in their extreme aspects, called ‘mystical’” (11). James also showed the importance of analogy and metaphor in the process of rehabilitating the world, offering a comparative pattern of thought and pluralistic attitude “extremely helpful for the moral juggling we must manage in this imperfect world” (13). In short, he mastered “his own brand of terminological proficiency” (10).

After establishing the effectiveness of James’s outlook, Burke goes on to discuss Whitman and Emerson, and it is immediately apparent that his lavish praise of James has greatly colored his characterization of them both. He calls Whitman “the poetic replica of James” (14), someone who “matched James’s pluralism” through verse (14). Whitman’s attitude toward life was James’s attitude of meliorism, which underscored the “bad–good tangle” and transcended that “contradiction by a synthesizing attitude, whereby the good element is taken as the essence of the pair” (15). Whitman’s frame of acceptance, in short, was Jamesian at its core. So was Emerson’s: “By affirming a doctrine of ‘polarity,’ he is able to confront evil with good cheer” (18). “Hence,” Burke concludes, “we arrive at the meliorist emphasis, in a project for living by the extending of cosmos farther into the realm of chaos, the reclaiming of chaos for cosmic purposes. His device prepares him for new and better things” (19).

In establishing the notion of frames of acceptance in the opening chapter of Attitudes Toward History, Burke spends considerably more time on James than he does on Whitman and Emerson, and he frames both Whitman and Emerson as extensions of James. To be sure, the intellectual and historical influence was just the opposite; it was Emerson and Whitman who influenced James, a fact Burke surely would have known from reading Ralph Barton Perry’s biography of James.28 Yet, by positioning James as
the intellectual father of Whitman and Emerson, he makes it clear that it is James who stands above the other intellectual pioneers, giving voice to their attitudes and perspectives.

By playing with the chronological progression of history, Burke makes a point about the “synthesizing function,” attitudinal unity, and pervasive spirit of James’s thought. James’s vocabulary, he suggests, organizes Emerson and Whitman into a community of discourse, which shares “characteristic responses” in the “forming and reforming of congregations.” In turn, Burke places himself in that same community, lauding James’s melioristic frame as superior to other ways of handling the world—for example, the frame of rejection found in Machiavelli’s realism (21–25) and the frame of unyielding optimism found in Marinetti’s “cult of yea” (30–33). To put it simply, Burke begins with James’s meliorism, weighs the alternatives, and rejects the non-Jamesian perspectives as less than effective for managing human affairs. James’s orientation, his meliorism and pluralism, his spirit of faith and hope, his belief in the power of experimentation and rational action—these form what Burke recognizes as the basic philosophy of America: “The resistances of our countrymen, who were long trained in the Emerson–Whitman–James mode of emphasis, . . . constructed their notions of sociality upon” the moral possibility of symbols of authority (22).

In characterizing Whitman and Emerson as extensions of James, Burke breaks historical linearity and organizes history not by dates but by spirits and attitudes. In leaving behind the chronological influence of Emerson to Whitman to James, and by reconstructing their similarities according to James’s terminology, Burke gives James intellectual priority over the others. At the same time, he acknowledges his own indebtedness, using James’s thought to facilitate his vocabulary of frames and attitudes. He puts himself in line with the Jamesian tradition that came before and extends it to his own orientation. As I hope to show in the next section, this Jamesian line of influence continued throughout Burke’s career, culminating in his utilization of James’s psychological and philosophical vocabulary to craft “Terministic Screens.”

THE JAMESIAN VOICE IN “TERMINISTIC SCREENS”

Scholars have pointed to “Terministic Screens” as representative of Burke’s view of the function of symbols and language. Burke himself refers to the essay as indicative of his mature thinking on language as symbolic action. What scholars have failed to notice, however, is the extent to which
“Terministic Screens” relies on James’s psychological and philosophical vocabulary to paint a picture of the function of language.

At the most general level, “Terministic Screens” works to explain the role of symbols in directing attention in certain directions rather than others. Terms, Burke says, help us notice certain parts of our experience while encouraging us to neglect others. The goal is to reveal “how fantastically much of our ‘Reality’ could not exist for us, were it not for our profound and inveterate involvement in symbol systems.”33 But the point goes further than that: While “reality” depends on the involvement of symbol systems, Burke insists that the quality and character of our experience are an extension of the quality and character of our symbol systems. Because different terminologies direct attention differently, they lead to a “correspondingly different quality of observations” (49). The conclusion is strikingly Jamesian, but to understand that we must start at the beginning.

Burke opens “Terministic Screens” by laying out the differences and similarities between “scientistic” and “dramatistic” understandings of language. Though the scientistic and dramatistic perspectives develop symbol systems in their own way, he is quick to point out the enigma at hand: “I say ‘developed’; I do not say ‘originating.’ The ultimate origins of language seem to me as mysterious as the origins of the universe itself. One must view it, I feel, simply as a ‘given’” (44). This is a pragmatic appeal. By embracing the mystery of language as a given, Burke lets the enigma lie and moves forward, interested more in the function of language than in its cosmological beginnings. Such an appeal is also characteristic of James’s writings on pragmatism, which he describes as “a program for more work, and particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed. Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest. We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid.”34 For both Burke and James, the important issue is how theories, symbols, beliefs, and attitudes operate in the world around us. They are content to leave the enigma of origins simply as a given.

Burke continues along pragmatic lines by employing two of James’s best-known philosophical characterizations—the “tough-minded” and the “tender-minded.” As Burke sees it, Jeremy Bentham’s outlook is tough-minded, stressing the realm of the empirical, whereas Emerson’s outlook is tender-minded, stressing the theological realm of spirit. Not only do the terms tough-minded and tender-minded characterize different philosophical perspectives, they encapsulate different attitudes and implications. By directing attention
toward different realms, the “tough-minded” and the “tender-minded” illuminate the primary function of “terministic screens” (46–47).

Appealing to the tough-minded and tender-minded as indicative of different philosophical orientations borrows directly from the opening chapter of James’s *Pragmatism*. The “tough-minded” and the “tender-minded” are James’s characterizations for empiricist and rationalist philosophers, respectively. Similar to Burke, James uses the terms less to show the gulf that exists between them and more to show how pragmatism embraces the best of both. Pragmatism, James says, “preserves as cordial a relation with facts, and, unlike Spencer’s philosophy, it neither begins nor ends by turning positive religious constructions out of doors—it treats them cordially as well.” In other words, pragmatism is a way of embracing both Emerson’s romantic, transcendental perspective and Bentham’s calculative, fact-based perspective.

In much the same way that James derives the pragmatic outlook from a grounding in spiritual and empirical concerns, Burke derives the notion of terministic screens from Emerson and Bentham. The tender-minded and the tough-minded, for both Burke and James, lead to the “god-terms” of their respective projects—to *pragmatism* for James and to *terministic screens* for Burke. Their appeals to the tender-minded and tough-minded are thus functionally the same; they reveal an underlying commonality between two seemingly opposed intellectual outlooks.

Employing tender-minded and tough-minded philosophies to reach their god-terms points to another rhetorical technique common to Burke and James: arguing by the example of materialists and spiritualists. For Burke, there are essentially two kinds of terms, defined by their respective functions: “terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart” (49). Both are equally real in crafting symbol systems, yet some “stress the principle of continuity, some the principle of discontinuity” (49). As a result, the world becomes a world of “composition” and of “division” (50), a fact we can see most clearly in the terministic screens of the Darwinists and the theologians. Consider, Burke says, that “Darwin sees only a difference of degree between man and other animals.” But “the theologian sees a difference in kind. That is, where Darwin views man as continuous with other animals, the theologian would stress the principle of discontinuity in this regard. But the theologian’s screen also posits a certain kind of continuity between man and God that is not ascribed to the relation between God and other animals” (50).
Burke's appeal harkens back to James's work in radical empiricism. Generally speaking, radical empiricism claims that experience is the bedding of life, composed of continually unfolding “conjunctive” and “disjunctive” relations, which render the world pluralistic and malleable. To illustrate how both “conjunctive” and “disjunctive” relations unfold in experience, James offers the example of materialists and spiritualists, whose seemingly opposed outlooks reveal the role of continuity and discontinuity in a world of radically empirical development: “In the vast driftings of the cosmic weather . . . when these transient products are gone, nothing, absolutely nothing remains, to represent those particular qualities, those elements of preciousness which they may have enshrined. . . . This utter final wreck and tragedy is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present understood. . . .

The notion of God, on the other hand, however inferior it may be in clearness to those mathematical notions so current in mechanical philosophy, has at least this practical superiority over them, that it guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. A world with a God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition.”

In a world of conjunctive and disjunctive relations, a world shot through with experience and terminology, Burke and James find materialists and spiritualists as philosophical exemplars. In that way Burke and James not only conceive of the world in the same terms of coming together and moving apart but also look to the scientists and the theologians for help in understanding the possibilities of cohesion and separation. Rhetorically speaking, they employ the same examples to illustrate a world of composition and division, a world of conjunctive and disjunctive relations.

Given Burke's reiteration of key elements of James's philosophy—pragmatism and radical empiricism in particular—it is not surprising that he ends up employing strikingly Jamesian phraseology. The most famous sentence of “Terministic Screens,” in fact, the one that best explains its insight, is Burke’s insistence that “even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (45). These three key terms—reflection, selection, and deflection—capture Burke's basic point about the function of language. For Burke, terms direct our attention, goading us to notice some things at the expense of other things. Language reflects, selects, and deflects as a way of shaping the symbol systems that allow us to cope with the world. And because we could never
grasp *all* of reality in our terminological schemas, we must necessarily reflect, select, and deflect.

As I have already pointed out, Burke was taken with James’s notion of the “stream of consciousness.” Consider, moreover, the way James develops the concept of the stream. For James, the stream comes through most clearly in the “five characters in thought.” First, James says, “Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness.” Second, “within each personal consciousness thought is always changing.” Third, “within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous.” Fourth, “it always appears to deal with objects independent of itself.” Fifth, “it is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—chooses from among them, in a word—all the while.” It is the final character of thought that is telling. Consciousness, James says, actively divides and joins together different aspects of the world at hand; it moves in a “primordial chaos of sensations.” Despite the chaos of sensations, however, we take the world into our care, forming and deforming relations as we proceed: “The world we feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff.”

Because we cannot deal with all that comes to us, “we actually ignore most of the things before us.” James reiterates, “Out of what is in itself an undistinguishable swarming continuum, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this notion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade.”

For James, the welcoming and rejecting function of consciousness entails terminological implications. As active participants in the development of the world, we draw from the flux the terms that serve as “flights and perchings” from which we move forward in the stream of experience. Because the world in toto is beyond the tiny sliver of reality each of us experiences firsthand, we rely on our capacity to formulate flights and perchings to make our way in the world.

Simply put, James’s point about consciousness is Burke’s point about terms. The three terms that characterize the function of language in the swarming continuum are, for Burke, reflection, selection, and deflection; for James, they are welcome, reject, and choose. These triviums capture the precariousness of the human situation but also human potential. The selective nature of our language and cognitions allows us to forge instruments capable of coping with the diverse pulses of experience always at hand.
As a rhetorical appeal, “reflecting, selecting, and deflecting” is functionally the same as “welcoming, rejecting, and choosing.” In both phrases, the subject of the sentence performs the action. For Burke, it is terminology that does the reflecting, selecting, and deflecting; for James, it is thought that does the welcoming, rejecting, and choosing. The work of terminology and thought is part of their very development. And they continually remind us of the human predicament. Because of the reflecting, selecting, and deflecting function of terminology and thought, we can never fully rest in the stream of experience. It is a torrent around us that provides the opportunity only for flights and perchings.

At the heart of “Terministic Screens,” then, is a phrase strikingly reminiscent of James’s *Principles of Psychology*. Yet the connection goes deeper, as Burke repeatedly utilizes James’s psychological characterization of attention. Burke is interested, he says, in “discussing the ways in which ‘terministic screens’ direct the attention. Here the kind of deflection I have in mind concerns simply the fact that any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (45). Our attention, in other words, extends from our terminological orientations and directs us into certain channels. *Channel*, of course, can refer to many things, but given Burke’s play with reflection, selection, and deflection, and given his focus on attention, “channel” is reminiscent of the Jamesian “stream” of consciousness. Because our attention can never account for the entire “stream,” we necessarily select certain emphases and move into different “channels.”

The water metaphor of stream and channel links Burke and James in a common vision of our place in the world. James’s point about the aptness of such a metaphor, furthermore, is one to which Burke would readily assent: “Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*” Burke appears to have heeded James’s call, picking up on the image of the stream and emphasizing the channels that make up the larger river.

Burke further utilizes the language of attention by underscoring the fact that the nature of terms affects “the nature of our observations, in the sense that terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another”: “Many of the ‘observations,’” he continues, “are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out
of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (46). In further exploring the function of attention, Burke extends it from the water metaphor of channel to the image of the field. “Field” here pictures land and ground, which means that attention moves into different channels and into different fields—“to one field rather than to another.” Attention performs both functions simultaneously, as it shapes the conjunctive and disjunctive relations of experience.

For James, attention functions under the guise of the same language. In fact, his discussion of the “stream” of consciousness turns quickly into a land, ground, or field metaphor similar to the one Burke employs. In minds that learn to cope with the selectivity of attention, James says, “subjects bud and sprout and grow. At every moment, they please by a new consequence and rivet the attention afresh. . . . Their ideas coruscate, every subject branches infinitely before their fertile minds, and so for hours they may be rapt. . . . The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.” According to James, the stream nourishes the field, helping the intellect to take root, grow, and sprout. Thus the land and water are not distinct but feed into each other; they create the conditions for coping effectively with the world. As metaphors, they capture the dynamic, ever-unfolding character of human experience.

Relying on the words and metaphors of James’s psychology, Burke extends James’s work further into the realm of symbol systems. A “terministic screen” is, essentially, a linguistic turn on James’s Principles of Psychology. Symbols function for Burke in the same way that the attention functions for James. “The practical and theoretical life of whole species, as well as of individual beings,” James writes, “results from the selection which the habitual direction of their attention involves. . . . Each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.” Thus as James emphasizes the various “ways of attending to things” that shape experience, Burke specifies one of these ways—the way of symbols. “Terministic Screens” extends James’s point that we fashion the worlds we inhabit through our welcomings and rejectings, our reflections, selections, and deflections. The fundamental point is that the quality and character of our attention and the quality and character of our discourse shape the quality and character of our experience.

For both Burke and James, the selective nature of symbol systems has important consequences for the attitudes we adopt. In fact, both insist that the selective function of attention necessitates a leap of faith in the process
of decision making. Burke insists that because terminologies both select and deflect the world, and because we form the paths of our experience through our vocabularies, faith becomes necessary for human development. As he sees it, the theological terminology surrounding the concept of faith provides the most fruitful perspective. He writes, “By its very thoroughness theology does have a formula that we can adapt, for purely secular purposes of analysis. I have in mind the injunction, at once pious and methodological, ‘Believe, that you may understand (crede, ut intelligas).’ In its theological application, this formula served to define the relation between faith and reason. That is, if one begins with ‘faith,’ which must be taken on authority, one can work out a rationale based on this faith. But the faith must ‘precede’ the rationale” (47). The “faith” of this passage appears as a necessary part of the human outlook. It provides the ground from which we leap forward, taking risks while seeking to ameliorate our predicament. Faith, in other words, initiates action.

Those familiar with James’s “The Will to Believe” will see the parallel here immediately. In that essay, James speaks of the “preliminary faith” that exists before the “fact” can come.47 At bottom, the will to believe refers to the “right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will.” With faith, James says, “we act, taking our life in our hands.”48 And the unending moment of choice of what particular selections and deflections are to direct our lives presents the quintessential moment of faith. “Our passional nature,” James insists, “not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.”49 Like Burke, James concludes that “live options” continue to swirl around us, yet to proceed we need to take a leap of faith; the rationale can come later.

Both Burke and James embrace the will to believe as the representative anecdote of human experience, as that which sums up the essential human moment. Moreover, both embrace the will to believe through a rather poetic blend of theological and scientific terminology. Notice that Burke calls the phrase “Believe, that you may understand” a “formula” that can be “adapted” for “secular purposes.” This characterization casts a biblical perspective in the language of modern science, as “belief” is paired with what is both “pious” and “methodological” and “faith” is linked to a “rationale.” Such a vocabulary emphasizes the complementary roles of science and religion in helping
us move forward in the stream of experience. Similarly, James employs a vocabulary that gives science and religion common footing, blending the scientific method with the development of our passional nature in the project of amelioration. “The Will to Believe,” for example, culminates in a ringing endorsement of faith and science’s mutually reinforcing work: “Faith acts on the powers above [the individual] as a claim, and creates its own verification.” Both the empiricists and the spiritualists “have the right to believe at [their] own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt [their] will.” In the realms of science and religion, we stick to our beliefs “with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results.” Faith thus works as an instrument of human evolution: “A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precurious faith in one another of those immediately concerned.”

The rhetorical strategies for framing the value of faith are the same for Burke and James. They embrace the will to believe through a vocabulary that blends the best of science and religion, offering an argument about the human predicament that underlies the apparently disparate approaches of the empirical and the spiritual. They terminologically summarize the progressive function of science and religion by offering the “titular terms” that encompass both perspectives.

The necessity of faith in a world of selective attention and terminologies puts us, Burke insists, in a world of ethical choice, which opens the door for human cooperation in ameliorating our collective predicament. He is quick to point out that “each of us shares with all other members of our kind (the often-inhuman human species) the fatal fact that, however the situation came to be, all members of our species conceive of reality somewhat roundabout, through various media of symbolism.” And because of the “roundabout” nature of symbolism, we have the chance to leap over the gap of our unique experiences, forging commonality with some while pushing away from others. Symbolism introduces “a way of dividing us from the ‘immediate’ . . . or it can be viewed as a paradoxical way of ‘uniting’ us with things on a ‘higher level of awareness,’ or some such” (52). So despite the irreducible pluralism of our experiences, we nevertheless move forward with the faith that we can rectify our differences, at least to a certain degree. Burke calls this attitude, in a very telling description, a “pragmatic recognition” of the “collective revelation” of the human predicament (53).
The same “pragmatic recognition” is at the heart of James’s project. He insists that we must “respect one another’s mental freedom—then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism’s glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.” Respecting the spirit of inner tolerance opens us to larger patterns of collective action. The pluralist, he declares, becomes “continuous with a more of the same quality which is operative in the universe outside of him and which he can keep in working touch with. . . . In a word, the believer is continuous, to his own consciousness, at any rate, with a wider self from which saving experiences flow in.” The point is about the function of an attitude. Pluralism opens us to a wider sense of possibility; it entails a respect for the essential humanness of each person and the chance for cooperation that accompanies it.

The pluralistic, ethical vision common to Burke and James represents their attempt to deal pragmatically with the precariousness of human experience. Their “pragmatic recognition” of our place in a world of radically empirical relations extends from their shared philosophical orientation and embrace of a vocabulary grounded in the organic development of experience. The point is that the world that Burke describes in the end sounds a lot like the world James laid out decades before. The “tender-minded” and the “tough-minded”; the examples of materialists and spiritualists; the phraseology of reflection, selection, and deflection; the metaphors of steams and fields; the embrace of the will to believe; the “pragmatic” recognition of our common predicament—these mark “Terministic Screens” as a strikingly Jamesian picture of the world. By utilizing James’s psychological and philosophical vocabulary, Burke places himself in the community of discourse, and the attitudes and orientations that accompany it, that James bequeathed to the American intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

In the style and content of its presentation, “Terministic Screens” offers a strikingly Jamesian picture of the world and the place of language therein. Burke speaks of terms as directing the attention into channels and fields, of the spinning out of possibilities, of adapting theological formulas for secular purposes, of working out rationales based on faith, and of symbolism dividing and uniting for collective action. These characterizations, which are rooted in James’s philosophical orientation, convey the progressive, dynamic,
organic movement of language in the flux of experience. For Burke and James, the world is not a finished place; it is, rather, a place of ceaseless addition and subtraction, of conjunctive and disjunctive relations, of composition and division. It is a place where we notice certain phenomena at the expense of other phenomena, and the selectivity of our perception shapes our subsequent response. Our project, they insist, is to speak in a way that can effectively manage and profitably direct the perpetual flux of our interconnected world. To convey that project, they speak in a vocabulary that emphasizes the novelty and possibility, the danger and precariousness, the richness of human experience.

To position “Terministic Screens” as an extension of Jamesian philosophy and psychology is to highlight Burke’s interest in the way language and experience interact. In fact, it is the language of experience that truly links Burke’s and James’s thought. The vocabulary of fields and streams, of coming together and moving apart, of growth as well as decay, is the vocabulary they found compelling in characterizing the human predicament. They insist that relations evolve in a tissue of experience, an endless stream, with countless channels and currents moving us forward. The world thus appears progressive and problematic, pushing and pulling us as we try to direct it in accord with our beliefs and desires. The point, as Burke puts it, is that “we must use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology” (50). Terministic screens speak to the point at which language and experience move together. They emphasize the way that terms push us into various channels and fields, which continually shape and reshape our vision and expression. Terministic screens are thus always screening—progressively unfoldling, moving, and intersecting. They are active, dynamic, and progressive, a result of their movement in experience.

Given Burke’s dedication to James’s language of experience, the question remains: Is this a sort of philosophical orientation best characterized as a “social constructionist” position? For many scholars, the social constructionist label is wholly fitting. Consider Dennis Ciesielski’s essay on Burke’s “secular pragmatism.” Through a reading of “Terministic Screens,” Ciesielski concludes that “Burke anticipates the postmodern concept of the transcendent signifier in his observation that all action is symbolic
of other action; all signs hold further implications." He writes further that Burke moves toward "postmodern dialogue through interdisciplinary tactics and a multitheoretical approach to answer for the social as well as the literary validity of an object-text." Thus Burke offers a "social constructionist" prefiguring of "poststructuralist deconstructive patterns." Such "social constructionist" moves position Burke as both a pragmatist and a poststructuralist: "Burke's incipient deconstructive tactics combined with his pragmatic tendencies place him in a position to apply a poststructuralist grid in a pragmatic approach to text; in other words, by employing deconstructive strategies, the critic can expose the binary oppositions in a text in order to pragmatically dismantle and reassemble them according to his own immediate needs—deconstruction, on Burkean terms, becomes a sort of reconstruction, and truth/meaning is altered rather than defrayed. Thus, a text's cultural/textual building blocks are tumbled and restacked in a reassessment of text, author, reader, and the world in which they presently operate."

What emerges in Ciesielski's social constructionist account of "Terministic Screens" is an emphasis on the language of the text, on discursive building blocks and terminological constructs. To grasp Burke's thought, Ciesielski employs such phrases as "transcendent signifier," "object-text," "poststructuralist deconstructive patterns," "binary oppositions," "deconstruction" and "reconstruction," and "cultural/textual building blocks [that] are tumbled and restacked."

Although such a vocabulary may be helpful in some ways—for instance, it reminds us of our power as language users and points us to the implications of our terminologies—it sends us far afield from the Jamesian language of experience at the heart of Burke's philosophical outlook. Recall James's reason for characterizing consciousness as a stream: "Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described." The idiom of "construction" suffers from the same problems as the idioms of "chains" and "trains" to which James objected. What James proposes—a suggestion Burke embraced by utilizing James's psychological and philosophical vocabulary—is to describe the world in terms of its organic tissue, in terms of its ceaseless flux and flowing waters. As an extension of James's vocabulary, "Terministic Screens" points less to structures and building blocks that are "tumbled" and "restacked," as Ciesielski puts it, and more to the channels, streams, and paths of experiential development.
To emphasize the Jamesian perspective that pervades “Terministic Screens” is thus to emphasize an experiential vocabulary over a textual vocabulary. This is not to say that an experiential vocabulary is adamantly opposed to a textual vocabulary or that experience itself is somehow non-textual. The point is only to say that at the heart of Burke and James’s shared perspective is a concern for how language and experience interpenetrate and develop together in a fluid, organic, ever-unfolding environment. The problem with the social constructionist perspective is that it seems to leave behind the fluidity of experience central to Jamesian psychology. Construction is too rigid a word for grasping our place in what James calls the “blooming, buzzing confusion” and what Burke calls the “Eternal Enigma” that stretches “outward to interstellar infinity and inward to the depths of the mind.”

Some may say that the language of experience that Burke and James shared harkens back to an antiquated philosophical vocabulary. Richard Rorty, for example, who identifies with the pragmatic tradition common to Burke and James, deems the experiential vocabulary outmoded when compared with the textualist vocabulary of the linguistic turn. Philosophers, he says, have rightly begun talking “about sentences a lot” while saying little “about ideas or experiences.” Rorty’s own project, as he puts it, is to “separate out what I think is living and what I think is dead” in the philosophical language James and the early pragmatists bequeathed to the twentieth century. As a result, Rorty sides with contemporary philosophers who “have dropped the term ‘experience,’” and he embraces “the increasing prominence of Language as a topic, accompanied by an increasing recognition that one can describe the same thing in different ways for different purposes.” By dropping the experiential vocabulary, the hope is to make James’s antiquated, modernist language “more palatable.”

While I agree with Rorty that many scholars privilege the language of the text over the language of experience, I disagree with his insistence that we drop the language of experience. On the contrary, Burke and James’s embrace of the stream and flux as a way of understanding the function of language testifies to the relevancy of the experiential vocabulary. Positioning “Terministic Screens” in terms of its Jamesian psychology and recognizing the connection between Burke’s and James’s vocabularies emphasizes the way experience and language move together, with attention flowing into different channels based on the terms we employ. The Jamesian language Burke uses to describe the function of terministic screens reasserts the

148
importance of the language of experience for highlighting our place in an
ever-unfolding, constantly shifting, blooming, buzzing confusion.

What I am proposing is thus a shift in the language we use to charac-
terize Burke’s philosophical orientation and the function of terministic
screens. James balked at the rigidity of the language of “chains” and “trains”
because it seems too structured, too immobile, too complete. Applying the
label of social construction to Burke seems to be a step back, as it rein-
troduces the structure and rigidity to which James objected—an objec-
tion Burke shared in his appropriation of Jamesian terminology. The label
belyes the fluctuating environment in which we speak and act, which the
language of experience asserts as fundamental to appreciating the human
predicament. If “Terministic Screens” is central to Burke’s understanding
of the function of language and our predicament in the world, as many have
suggested, and if it relies on a utilization of James’s vocabulary, as I have sug-
gested, then understanding Burke’s indebtedness to James is important for
understanding his philosophical outlook in general. In a world of endlessly
evolving relations, Burke and James insisted that the quality and character
of our symbols shape the quality and character of our experience. To grasp
that insight through the experiential language of life seems wholly fitting.

NOTES

I would like to thank Gerard Hauser and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful
suggestions.

1. Ross Wolin, The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke (Columbia: University of
South Carolina Press, 2001), x–xi.

2. Edward Schiappa, “Burkean Tropes and Kuhnian Science: A Social Construction-

3. Paul Jay, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Critical Style: The Case of Burke and

4. James W. Chesebro, “Epistemology and Ontology as Dialectical Modes in the

5. Dennis J. Ciesielski, “Secular Pragmatism: Kenneth Burke and the (Re)Socializa-
tion of Literature and Theory,” in Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century, ed. Bernard L. Brock

6. Robert Wess, Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism (Cambridge: Cam-
7. For summaries of the relationship among symbols, discourse, communication, and
social constructionism, see Jonathan Potter, Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and

8. For a nice history of the term and the debates around it, see Ian Hacking, The Social

9. Ibid., vii.

10. Indeed, this is one of the central points of Burke’s “Terministic Screens,” which I
will deal with in the bulk of this essay.

11. Timothy W. Crusius, Kenneth Burke and the Conversation After Philosophy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 169. For examples of the recontextualization
of Burke’s thought, see Jack Selzer, Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with
the Moderns, 1915–1932 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); Ann George and
Jordynn Jack, “The Piety of Degradation: Kenneth Burke, the Bureau of Social Hygiene,
and Permanence and Change,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 90 (2004): 446–68; David Tell,
“Burke’s Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in Four Master Tropes,”
‘Identification,’ and the Birth of Sociolinguistics,” Rhetoric Review 24 (2005): 264–79; and
Bryan Crable, “Race and A Rhetoric of Motives: Kenneth Burke’s Dialogue with Ralph

12. Ross Posnock, “The Influence of William James on American Culture,” in The
Cambridge Companion to William James, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1997), 325.

13. For example, see Wess, Kenneth Burke; Ciesielski, “Secular Pragmatism”; and
David Blakesley, “Kenneth Burke’s Pragmatism—Old and New,” in Kenneth Burke and
the 21st Century, 71–95.

telling in this regard is Ciesielski’s “Secular Pragmatism,” which I will return to at the
end of this essay.

15. For an excellent exploration of James the “public philosopher,” see George Cotkin,

16. For example, James made approximately $10,000 from The Varieties of Religious
Experience during the first nine months of its publication. In today’s values, that would translate
into approximately $200,000. See James’s letter to his son William James Jr., January
26, 1903, in The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 10: 1902–March 1905, ed. Ignas K.
Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002),
184–86. The lectures on which the book was based were also the best-attended lectures in
the history of the Gifford Lecture Series at the University of Edinburgh. See William
James to Frances Rollins Morse, May 30, 1901, in The Correspondence of William James,

17. Aside from Ralph Barton Perry’s The Thought and Character of William James
(New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1933), the most well-known and penetrating


22. For whatever reason, James said his own religious testimony was that of a French correspondent. In subsequent letters, James revealed that the testimony was in fact his own. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 134–35. For a discussion of this passage, see John Smith’s introduction to James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, xvi–xvii.


24. Charles Sanders Peirce, of course, was the one to borrow that word from Kant and employ it the context of American philosophy. But it was James who, as Peirce himself said, “kidnapped” the word and popularized it. For a wonderful treatment of the development of pragmatic philosophy in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).


28. Again, see Burke, “William James.”

29. The quotation appears in the unpaginated introduction to *Attitudes Toward History*.

30. The quotations appear in the unpaginated introduction to *Attitudes Toward History*.

31. For example, see Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 180–85.

32. Burke includes “Terministic Screens” and four other essays at the beginning of *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966) because, as he puts it, these essays “best convey the gist of the collection as a whole. The remainder could be viewed as developing one or another aspect of the same position, with more arguments or evidence, and wider application” (*Language as Symbolic Action*, 2).

33. Kenneth Burke, “Terministic Screens,” in *Language as Symbolic Action*, 48. Hereafter all references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

35. Ibid., 26.
39. Ibid., 220.
40. Ibid., 277.
41. Ibid., 273.
42. Ibid., 274.
43. Ibid., 236.
44. Ibid., 233.
45. Ibid., 400–401.
46. Ibid., 401.
48. Ibid., 32–33.
49. Ibid., 20.
50. Ibid., 28–29.
51. Ibid., 32.
52. Ibid., 28.
53. Ibid., 29.
54. Ibid., 33.
57. Ibid., 260.
58. Ibid., 262.
60. This is the point James makes in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), see in particular “Percept and Concept,” 31–60.
63. Ibid., 292.
64. Ibid., 297, 306.
65. Ibid., 306.