

The Transformation of Semantics

***The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in
Logology***, by Kenneth Burke. Boston:
Beacon Press, 1961. 316 pp. \$6.95.

SEMANTICISTS HAVE for the most part been hard on religion and theology. It is not only the popularizers of semantics who have played the game of reading "blah" for all general or abstract religious terms, on the grounds that they have no concrete referents and are therefore meaningless. The result is, of course, that what the semanticists have to say is often irrelevant to anyone interested in religion.

Now Kenneth Burke has performed a brilliant transformation of the semantic enterprise. What will we find if, instead of asking, "Do words like *God* and *Trinity* and *sin* and *grace* have any positive reference?" we ask ourselves, "What can be said about religious language whether it

refers to anything outside the natural realm or not?" If *theology* is "words about God," there should be room for "*logology*"—words about words, or the study of theological meanings. So far his inquiry resembles that of some of the linguistic analysts who have recently begun to take theological language seriously. But his method of studying the ideal relationships among key religious terms is, as anyone who knows his other works would expect, uniquely Burkean. His elaborate dialectic between the everyday, time-bound natural world and the timeless world figured by religious language gives the subtlest analysis I have seen of man's ambiguous position between the two worlds: man, the symbol-using animal, cannot refer to the supernatural directly, since all of his discourse is time-bound, sequential, based on terms that originally have a naturalistic designation; even "eternity" is essentially a negative concept: the timeless. Yet whenever man speaks he presupposes a world of essences in which his meanings exist, untouched by time; the meaning of any sentence both precedes and outlives the actual speaking of the sentence. In this linguistic analogy to the eternal realms dealt with by religion, Burke finds an exciting range of novel ideas that should challenge every reader, whether he approaches the book as a believer or non-believer.

It is impossible to give more than a hint of its richness—the fresh and astonishingly illuminating readings of Augustine and of *Genesis*; the delightful hints of original readings of a wide variety of other works, from the *Leviathan* to *Murder in the Cathedral*. Burke is the only dialectician I know whom one can imagine talking with Plato on equal terms. The heart of the matter is in him: the natural habit of mind that achieves a genuinely Platonic subtlety and range of meanings, complexity piled on complexity but never for the sake of com-

plexity. In the delightful dialogue between The Lord and Satan which concludes the book, The Lord says at least twelve times, "but it's more complicated than that." To any true disciple of Burke, oversimplification is Satan, and God is to be found only within the labyrinthine intricacies of The Word.

There is, in fact, only one flaw: Burke's style is even more complicated than his complicated ideas require, and it is likely that many readers who could profit from the book will never get through it. Some of the difficulty could not be avoided; if it is true that only those who can read Augustine in the original Latin will be able fully to understand one-third of the book, and only those who can read Hebrew will get all that is being said in another third, this is not Burke's fault. But he can be blamed for writing things like "Sheerly logogically," "from the standpoint sheerly of imagery," "from the strictly logological point of view, the proposition that man necessarily conceives of God in accordance with the personal principle of the verbal would be *statable* in narrative style as the *statement* that God is. . . ." [my italics].

The book is hard work. It is regrettable that the best sustained discussion of the semantics of time and eternity should give the unfriendly reader so many excuses to stop reading. But the reward of reading to the end is more than worth the trouble.

Reviewed by WAYNE BOOTH
