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Empathy and Abjection after Burke (2): Embodied Narrative and the Resistance against Persuasion

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Abstract | This present essay continues a two-part survey devoted to Kenneth Burke's agonistic model of rhetoric—specifically, its binary of identification/division among speakers and audiences—and its permutations throughout late-20th century theory.[1] Like Part 1, Part 2 of this double essay asks, *What is it in rhetoric that leads it to succeed, or fail, as an instrument of persuasion?*

The latest advances in cognitive science have rhetorical implications, in that the neurophysiological effects of language (written as well as spoken) can be mapped with seeming precision via the brain's "mirror neuron system." This discovery reinforces the role of empathy in contemporary models of "embodied narrative." Yet a further discovery, the neurophysiological basis of abjection—that is, of visceral responses of rejection, expulsion, and disgust (Kristeva)—reinforces, *in some audiences on some occasions*, one's strength of resistance to opposing discourses. It seems that we must learn to speak of persuasion, not as a change of mind, but as a change of brain chemistry. One's politics, it turns out, often correlates to specific personality traits, which are themselves "hardwired" into individuals' brain functions where cognitive-affective "triggers" of empathy dominate in some, of abjection in others. It's not an empathetic "listening-rhetoric" (Booth) so much as a rhetoric-of-resistance that dominates in American popular/political culture. This insight undergirds the political philosophy of "agonistic pluralism" (Mouffe), an emerging theory in politics and the social sciences; Burkean in implication, it's a theory custom-made for contemporary models of rhetoric.

Returning to ethical/ethotic themes introduced in Part 1, this present essay ends with a meditation on public discourse in the United States today.

Key Words: Abjection, Embodied Narrative, Empathy, Ethos, Identification, Mirror Neurons, "Listening-Rhetoric," Neurorhetoric, Rogerian Argument, Wayne C. Booth, Kenneth Burke, Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen, Julia Kristeva, Carl Rogers

[1]See my essay, "Empathy and Abjection After Burke (1): On the Rise and Fall of 'Listening-Rhetorics,' 1936–2023," included in this issue of *LLIDS*.

> By declaring narrative—mythos, *not* logos—the foundational activity of human social discourse, we seek to ground postmodern ethos in storytelling. There are more components to ethos than one's storytelling; [Aristotle's] *Rhetoric* convinces us of that. But story is the glue that holds them all together.
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> Action, agency, time, and place—the stuff of narrative—are ethotic building blocks. A singular moment in time, often one of trauma or tragedy, can come to dominate the narrative—hence, the identity—of a person, or of a people. When a specific marker of identity is embedded within an action or event-in-time, one's storytelling is reshaped accordingly: A speaker can affirm and commemorate, defend and advocate, repair and seek justice, or seek transcendence (seek, that is, to move beyond the self-defining marker). A psychosocial model of ethos as "self in process" assumes that ethos can, in fact, evolve or change over time. In this sense, ethotic discourse rests in telling and retelling, in making appeals to the future as well as in acknowledging the past.
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> —James S. Baumlin and Craig A. Meyer, "Positioning Ethos in/for the Twenty-First Century" (16)

By focusing on the logos-aspect of argument, the classical-Aristotelian model largely ignores the fact that persuasion affects, not a change of mind merely, but a change in self-image: that is, in ethos. The epigraph quoted above presents a hopeful picture of the healing, reconciling powers of narrative; I still place some hope in that possibility. Still, recent research suggests a greater complexity within the inner workings of narrative, particularly in its isomorphism with brain structures. Immersed in time, place, and culture, our actions-in-the-world (in effect, our "worldliness") bind ethos strongly to narrative, and *vice versa*. That said, it's the neurophysiological triggers of *embodied* narrative—affects tied not to cultural immersion simply, but to evolutionary biology more deeply—that account for the hold ethotic discourse has on our species, to a considerable extent governing our social-political behaviors.

Whereas Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) drew on Freud for its group psychology, later writers—including Wayne C. Booth and the trio of Richard Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike—turned to the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers. By translating Burkean identification into "empathetic understanding" (Rogers), Anglo-American theorists from the 1960s through the 1990s sought to fashion a "new" rhetoric, premised not in persuasion but in "mutual assent." It was to be a "listening-rhetoric" (Booth), one that sought to reduce conflict and induce cooperation among speakers and audiences. By the 1990s, however, Rogerian modes of argument had fallen under criticism precisely for their inability (or failure) to confront the agonistic cultural/political/ideological *differences* separating speakers and audiences. As Burke declared, "identification" entails "division," and *vice versa* (*Rhetoric* 22): From a

Burkean perspective, the varieties of Rogerian argument erred in downplaying or ignoring half of rhetoric's terrain.

By the first decade of the 21st century, rhetorical theory had evolved yet further in its understanding of both audience psychology and "embodied cognition." To the humanist models of Freud and Rogers, rhetoric could now add the material-behaviorist models grounded in neuroscience. It's here in contemporary theory that this present essay begins, picking up where the previous survey had left off. In turning to cognitive science, this present essay offers further proof of the Burkean binary. "Empathetic understanding" remains an aim of 21st century rhetoric, but its workings will be explained in terms of brain chemistry. And the failure of this "understanding"—which marks the failure of rhetoric as an instrument of social cohesion—will be charted within brain chemistry, as well.

The cross-fertilizing of such disciplines as cognitive science and rhetorical narratology is teaching us ways to observe—and, important for rhetorical theory, to predict—the real (if largely unconscious) effects that narrated action, gesture, and affect have on audiences. I would argue that this hybridization of disciplines is already transforming ethos studies. Whereas the postmodern self-in-process is, by definition, open to change, current models of psychology point to mechanisms of defense that work to resist change—in effect, to resist persuasion.[2] This is not to say that persuasion—ethotically, the effecting of a change of mind leading to change in self-image (which alters the unfolding narrative of one's self-making)—has become impossible. But paragraphs following will point to several of the challenges (and the causes thereof). Empathy can tell only part of the story, though it's the part we begin with.

I am following Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen's summary of research in *With Bodies: Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition* (2021). Though narrative fiction—specifically, a reader's identification with literary characters—remains their primary focus, Caracciolo and Kukkonen assert that "all narratives—including stories as trivial as an account of an ordinary day at work—are deeply embodied in that they tap into a repertoire of embodied interactions with the world (through situation models, motor resonance, and so on)" (15). By "embodiment," they refer "primarily to the way

[2]As a starting point for this outline of neurorhetoric, I give the older, Freudian-humanist model informing previous discussions: "We assume that self-concepts, like the stories that undergird them, require some stability (that is, some predictability and replicability in behavior)," which makes them at the same time "self-protective and inherently resistant to change" (Baumlin and Meyer, "Positioning" 18). With reason, then, Marshal C. Alcorn defines rhetoric as a "strategy for changing self-organization" (14). And, due to "the inner dynamics of self-division—the ability to liberate repressed voices, to activate self-conflict, to reshape the linguistic form of self-components" (Alcorn 26)—the most potent force of change comes as a mode of *self-persuasion*. As Alcorn notes, "Self-persuasion comes not from the outside, as an external authority goading people to accept certain values, *but from the inside*, as an internal voice (both an agent and an expression of self-change) reorganizing relationships among self-components" (26; emphasis added).

It's the "inside" of self-persuasion (and of its cognitive-affective opposite, self-protective resistance) that paragraphs following will explore; and, demonstrably, it's an "inside" that's embedded more deeply within the nervous system than Burke, or Booth, or Rogers—or I myself (or any of my previous co-authors) could have anticipated. (See Baumlin, "Ethos"; Baumlin and Baumlin, "Psyche/Logos"; Baumlin and Scisco, "Ethos and its Constitutive Role"; and Baumlin and Meyer, "Positioning.")

in which cognitive processes are shaped by the makeup and sensorimotor possibilities of human bodies" (4). By "situation models," they refer to "unconscious cognitive construals of the situations evoked by a narrative" (6): These, Caracciolo and Kukkonen note, "are created and updated on the fly, as we parse language, and encode features such as the characters' spatial whereabouts, relevant objects in the characters' vicinity, and the nature of the described space (for instance, enclosed vs. open, urban vs. rural, etc.)" (6). In sum, the linguistic comprehension of texts "relies on our bodies through situation models" (34), and the situation models that direct our reading experience "are constructed from 'experiential traces' left by prior embodied interactions with the world" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 6–7).

In layman's terms, what does all this mean?

We begin with the simplest of definitions, distinguishing empathy from sympathy. Within the classical-Aristotelian vocabulary, both are expressions of pathos, though with different effects. In sympathy, one "feels for" another person or group (or species), as one might experience compassion for another's suffering; in empathy, one "feels with" another, mirroring that person's specific emotional state (joy meeting with joy, grief with grief, and so on). "Mirroring" is the key term here. And more than feeling can be mirrored: Another's actions as well, whether observed visually or constructed/interpreted textually, can create "motor resonances." As a rather obtuse personal example, I find it hard to sit still when watching American football. (My wife finds it harder to sit next to me, given my arm-flailing gyrations.) When the quarterback hands the ball off to a running back, I "run" with him, parts of my body contorting as the runner changes direction, evading tacklers. I can't help it: My body mirrors what the eye sees unfolding on the playing field. Caracciolo and Kukkonen explain: "[W]hen we observe another individual perform a physical action, our own bodies become attuned to, or resonate with, the movement—as the activation of the mirror neuron system suggests" (129). Citing Rolf A. Zwaan and Lawrence J. Taylor, they ascribe this same "resonance effect" to "language understanding as well" (129). That is, "reading action sentences about the movement of specific body parts activates the corresponding areas of the brain" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 129).[3]

Discovered in the mid-1980s and explored in depth since, the system of mirror neurons is implicated in this ethical/experiential/physiological/phenomenological/psychological/aesthetic "mirroring" effect (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia; Gallese and Keysers). Located in the brain's premotor cortex (a.k.a. "Broca's Brain"), the system "become[s] activated both when a subject *performs* a physical action and when he or she *observes* another individual perform the same action—hence the apparent 'mirroring'" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 128; emphasis added). In *Neurorhetoric and the Dynamism of the Neurosciences* (2012), David Robert Gruber elaborates on mirror neurons, their

[3]See Zwaan and Taylor, "Seeing, Acting, Understanding: Motor Resonance in Language Comprehension" (2006). In situations less frenetic than American football, "motor resonance is, normally, an unconscious response" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 130). But even texts, when action-driven, can bring motor resonances into our conscious, aesthetic experience of literature: "When a character's embodied actions become foregrounded in a narrative and the focus of readers' attention, motor resonance may tip over into embodied simulation, which is more likely to be experienced at a conscious level" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 7). See also Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese, "How Stories Make Us Feel: Toward an Embodied Narratology" (2011).

location in brain anatomy, and their functioning within "object-understanding": "Although similar mirror-like neurons may exist in other areas of the brain […], mirror neurons have been most extensively studied within the F5 area of the brain, also called Broca's area" (56). He continues:

> By the mid-1990s, it became clear that F5 motor neurons were considered to be a link between hand and eye. Mirror neuron research, for example, seemed to establish that the eye saw what the hand could grasp but that the hand was, in turn, equally involved in the act of seeing since what was seen was, in terms of object-understanding, that which held the capability to be grasped in this way or that way. In other words, these [mirror] neurons appear to respond to the meaning the stimulus conveys to the individual, rather than its sensory aspect, and reacting to a meaning is precisely what one means by understanding (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 50). (Gruber 58–59)

Combining "object-" and "action-understanding," the mirror neuron system provides a model of imitation (and, hence, of learning) in virtually all human activity, since "watching another individual do a never-before-seen action—such as a conductor directing an orchestra in a new way—prepare[s] the viewer to repeat that action, to imitate it" (Gruber 60). And emotions—the stuff of empathy—are implicated in mirroring, as well.

In "Mirror Neurons and the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity" (2006), Dieter Lohmar describes the mirroring of cognitive/emotional states, whereby "we co-feel others' feelings and co-enact their bodily actions without acting" (15). In this manner, "we experience an unavoidable proximity and a cognitively immediate bodily equality" (15). Gruber states the implications:

> These discursive moves to bridge phenomenology and the neurosciences allow, nearly request, the humanities—a set of fields dedicated to understanding human experience—to enter into an exploration of neurobiology, while they simultaneously position the neurosciences as a key explanatory gatekeeper of human experience, integral to a complete knowledge of the human. (74)

It's nothing less than a new field, a neurohumanities, that Gruber projects as the hybrid theoretical/discursive container for ethos studies today.

In "The New 'New': Making a case for Critical Affect Studies" (2008), Jenny Edbauer Rice argues that "non-conscious processes of the human affect may advance rhetorical theory" (Rice, qtd. In Gruber 16). By means of neuroscience, rhetoricians "can consider the way affect transfers back-and-forth in a room through bodily chemicals and brain signals" (Rice, qtd. in Gruber 16). In "Identification: Burke and Freud on Who You Are" (2008), Diane Davis goes further, suggesting that neuroscience gives reason "to completely undo or overturn existing rhetorical theory" (Gruber 17). Summarizing Davis, Gruber writes: "Rhetorical identification should be reconsidered in view of Sigmund Freud's non-representationalist primary identification and in view of new neuroscience

research into mirror neurons, [which] seem to pre-consciously allow direct access to the mind of others by enacting a direct simulation of the observed event" (17).[4]

In applying mirror neurons to ethos studies, I must revisit a point made by Caracciolo and Kukkonen: specifically, the ways that readers imagine or mentally construct the fictive worlds of texts. As Ruth Ronen writes in *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1995), "the world reconstructed from a text *always includes more than what is explicitly indicated by the author*" (95; emphasis added). Elaborating on this point, Caracciolo and Kukkonen note that "the reconstruction of an extratextual world is performed by readers, who have a crucial role in bringing narratives to imaginary life. Possible worlds thereby became psychological, rather than logical, constructs" (33). That is, the text supplies linguistic cues that, in turn, create "the mental space into which readers can 'immerse' themselves" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 26). Such worlds, they add, describe "imaginary constructs *that readers create from the verbal structures* of the literary text, but *that are ultimately independent of these verbal structures*" (26; emphasis added). Hence, "while readers imagine, in a way, the embodied experience of [a literary] character, the mental imagery evoked [in a text] is embodied and not visual, gappy and not complete" (17).

"Gappy and not complete": Let's assume that the ethotic power of all worldly-referential discourse (whether fictive or rhetorical, empathetic or abjected) derives from a cognitive/affective process of embodiment where affect-terms and action verbs provide cues that audiences then expand, imaginatively and emotively, into narrative frames. It wouldn't take much; merely a word or phrase (however abstract) could provide cues that expand into a micronarrative. In Burkean terms, one might say that discourse triggers identification by mirror-imitation, which is cued by language primarily (though visual cues come increasingly to dominate in popular media). With every exhortation, every gestural act of persuasion or dissuasion, every "Do this, don't do that," a speaker projects affect-terms and action verbs that invoke mirror-neuron responses in an audience. These micronarrative effects are (to borrow from Caracciolo and Kukkonen) "gappy and not complete," a mere scattering across texts. But their power, perhaps paradoxically, would lie precisely in the gaps that audiences are habituated to complete by brain activity.[5] By

[4]As Gruber notes, "Davis [144] seeks to make what Burke termed identification into an always existent physiological condition that the body itself fails to uphold in the conscious withdrawal of identity" (34). He elaborates: "Identification, then, is no longer compensatory to a necessary condition of division between people who are dependent upon a rhetorician to proclaim their unity [Burke, *Rhetoric* 22]; identification is, instead, an underlying reality of the functioning of the human organism" (Gruber 34–35).

As I read her work, Davis's critique of Burke rests in the mirror neuron system's predominantly automatic/unconscious functioning. I accept Davis's analysis as an expansion of Burkean identification, and not as its refutation in any absolute sense. As we've seen, Burke anticipated the role psychology plays in his system. As he writes in "Rhetoric—Old and New," "the key term for the 'new' rhetoric would be 'identification,' which can include a partially 'unconscious' factor in appeal" (203). More specifically, Burke sees identification through the lens of Freudian depth psychology (and, hence, as a production of mind—that is, of "imagination"—rather than brain function). To quote Davis directly, "This is why Burke can write in the *Rhetoric* that empathy and sympathy are "'imaginative' identifications" with another's state of mind [Burke 130], that they are affects that one 'individual' *has* in regard to another, imaginative projections based on comparison or analogy" (Davis 132; emphasis in original).

[5]Our identifications are themselves "gappy," as Caracciolo and Kukkonen note: "In empathizing with others, we tend to imagine only some aspects of their overall experience" (76). They continue:

"situation models" and "motor resemblances," an audience fills in the gaps *that lead, albeit unconsciously, to identification*. Such, I would argue, is the Burkean implication of neurorhetoric (or, alternatively, the neurorhetorical implication of Burke).

And what of *division*, the Burkean "other" of empathy and identification? For a personal example, I turn to George Stephanopoulos's 2012 television interview of Rick Santorum, then a Republican candidate for U.S. President. A quick web search led me to an ABC TV News article of February 26, 2012, titled "Rick Santorum: JFK's 1960 Speech Made Me Want to Throw Up." The article begins: **"**2012 GOP presidential hopeful Rick Santorum said today that watching John F. Kennedy's speech to the Baptist ministers in Houston in 1960 made him want to 'throw up.'" Within this one "gappy" sentence, the affect-terms and action verbs ("said," "watching," "made," "want," "throw up") create a striking (if, to me, offensive) mental image. In this micronarrative, relatively few details are given; still, out of verbal cues, the audience constructs the scene and responds affectively—perhaps even physiologically—in turn. Santorum continues, "That makes me throw up *and it should make every American* who [differs] from the president, someone who is now trying to tell people of faith that you will do what the government says, we are going to impose our values on you, not that you can't come to the public square and argue against it" (qtd. in Stephanopoulos; emphasis added). Santorum doubles and triples down on this public declaration of disgust: "To say that people of faith have no role in the public square? *You bet that makes you throw up*," to which Stephanopoulos adds, "Santorum also said he does not believe in an America where the separation of church and state is 'absolute'" (emphasis added).

Some context might help. Had Santorum been elected, he would have become the second Roman Catholic president, John F. Kennedy being the first. Political concerns over JFK's Catholicism—whether he'd place an allegiance to Rome over his duty to the American people—led him to reaffirm the "separation of church and state" enshrined in the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Seemingly more pious, Santorum held no such scruple. I remember the TV interview: I saw it live, and it appalled me, frankly, that he would use such language in describing a president whom I personally admired. I remember thinking something to this effect: "How could another man's reasonable words make him want to puke? Surely he must be trying to score points with his religiously-conservative political base. He must have been joking—exaggerating." Apparently, he was not joking, though I didn't know this at the time. In the light of cognitive science I know better now, since much of the same brain chemistry that is operant in empathy can be implicated in Santorum's expression of disgust—the topic to which I now turn.

> There is no need to consider, in our imagination, everything about a person's mental life—and indeed this might be quite difficult. Usually, we only take on the mental states that seem important or relevant in a given context. [There are] several aspects of a person's perspective that we may empathize with: perceptual, when we imagine another's exteroceptive experience of the surrounding environment; somatic, when we share another person's bodily feelings and sensations (e.g., pain, proprioception, or other interoceptive states); emotional, when we bring our emotional responses in line with those of another person; epistemic, when we entertain another person's beliefs about the world; axiological, when we consider another person's values and goals. (76)

On Abjection and "Rhetoric as Resistance"

> In the final analysis, oppressors must be reduced [in number] to sovereignty in its individual form: on the contrary, the oppressed are formed out of the amorphous and immense mass of the wretched population.
>
> —Georges Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms" (9)

> Distaste for a particular food, of dirt, of refuse of rubbish. Spasms and vomiting which protect me, repulsion and nausea which separate and turn me away from the impure, from the cloaca, from filth. Ignominy of compromise, the in-between of treachery. Shudder of fascination which both leads me there and separates me from it.
>
> —Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection" (126)

In her "meditation on the dynamics of disgust" (Irish 52), Lacanian psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva returns to a topic first explored by French philosopher, sociologist, and art historian Georges Bataille (1896–1962): abjection—the exclusion (often violent) of all things and conditions antithetical to human life, including material waste, putridity, and necrosis. As Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond describe the Kristevan developmental model, "the child, as it learns to identify as a sovereign subject, regards the products of its own body (and the bodies of others)—blood, snot, piss, shit, mucus, sperm, rotting flesh—as vile, disgusting, and in need of suppression, rejection, and regulation" (2). In their loathsomeness, such rejected objects must be "forcefully cast from sight" (Irish 52). This learned self-regulatory behavior will reach deeply into the social-symbolic order, affecting adult attitudes toward ethics, law, economics, and power-relations. As Kristeva writes,

> It is not then an absence of health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules. It is the in-between, the ambiguous, the mixed. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the rapist without scruple, the killer who claims to save […]. All crime, because it indicates the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, sly murder, hypocritical vengeance are still more so because they emphasise this exhibition of legal fragility. (127–28)

The human victim of crime—of physical assault, of political or economic or religious or racial violence or oppression—is themself rendered abject, declared loathsome and deserving of destruction. For strong evidence, Kristeva peers into "the obscure rooms of the museum which is what remains of Auschwitz" (128). She continues: "I see a pile of children's shoes, or something similar, that I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree for example, some dolls I think they were. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apogee when death […] is mixed with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood and science, amongst other things" (128). Published in 1982, Kristeva's reflection on the Nazi death camp casts a backward glance at Bataille, whose "Abjection and Miserable Forms" (1934) charts the early progress of European fascism. In their assumption of absolute "sovereignty," the authoritarian excludes the ethnically, economically, politically, sexually marginalized, declaring them unclean and removing them from sight.

"The latency of such infantile abhorrence," write Hennefeld and Sammond, "has an irresistible political influence" (2) both in Bataille's time and in our own. In homespun terms, Tracy Dennis-Tiwary explains:

> Evolutionary psychology has long argued that we evolved to experience disgust towards things that could make us sick (rotten meat) or harm us (poisonous plants), *and that we then transformed this physical disgust into the moral and ethical domain*. […] Moral disgust leads us to "expel" the offenders. We want nothing to do with these disgraceful human beings—they are reprehensible, beyond the pale, and beyond our ability to reach an understanding. They are not part of our group, our society, our tribe. They are outsiders or "those people." ("Politics"; emphasis added)

It was a "moral disgust" that Rick Santorum declared in the example given above. We note a double movement in the workings of abjection, its inward expression marked by visceral nausea and disgust, its outward expression by acts (verbal-symbolic, but potentially physically violent) of condemnation, rejection, and expulsion. Objects, images, people, and principles can be condemned and abjected in this way (as Santorum abjected the Constitutional principle of the separation of church and state, which JFK had affirmed).

Reaching beyond Burke's social psychology of scapegoating and Kristeva's Freudian/Lacanian analysis, Peter Hatemi and Rose McDermott turn to neuroscience in their essay, "Disgust and Purity in Democratic Debate" (2012)—published the year of Santorum's failed candidacy for president. Though their argument remains controversial, they work from the thesis that moral judgments are themselves "hardwired" in the brain in ways that "harden" people's value systems, making political preferences (as well as people's responses to moral/social issues) consistent *and predictable*. Before exploring the political implications of Hatemi and McDermott's essay—what we might call, for the nonce, its neuropolitics—we should glance briefly at Gruber's discussion (published too, coincidentally, in 2012):

> In the realm of neuroscientific research, Plailly et al. (2007) showed that the insula—a small nodule tucked deep in the center of the brain—activated with taste and smell, and Krolak-Salmon et al. (2003) showed that the insula activated in monkeys and in humans when the subject felt nauseated. When these observations were coupled with additional studies (Phillips et al. 1997 […]), which previously showed that pictures of disgust on the faces of people could activate the insula, the rationale for theorizing an emotional mirror mechanism was in place. […] Consequently, disgust was theorized to be not so much a rational activity based on inferential or associative cognitive processes (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2008, p. 182) but was better explained as a process of simulating or mirroring the environment in terms of what a viewing body was coding—or had already experienced—as disgust. (68)

It doesn't surprise that mirror mechanisms of embodiment are engaged in abjection equally as in empathy, nor does it surprise that such mechanisms have a specific brain-mapping.[6]

What I do find surprising, and unsettling, is the way that mirror mechanisms of empathy/abjection provide a map of the current American political divide.[7] Here, typologies of personality impinge upon value systems:

> [W]hile liberals tend to focus on two main aspects of morality—those related to harm/care and fairness/reciprocity—conservatives rely on three additional factors to make judgments, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity, to those which liberals espouse […]. Specifically, conservatives focus on issues of sanctity and purity, whereas liberals stress the importance of values such as fairness. (Hatemi and McDermott 680)

Intuitively, I can agree with the notion that values of "sanctity and purity" underlay Santorum's declaration of disgust. But Hatemi and McDermott go further, in declaring that "disgust encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and physical properties that are predictably divergent across ideological positions and infuses evaluations of morality along dimensions of purity and sanctity *in conservatives but not in liberals*" (677; emphasis added). They offer, in fact, to measure levels of "disgust sensitivity" (681) in individuals, levels that are regulated not rationally or consciously but neurophysiologically (though, of course, *they can be rationalized* within public debate, popular media, and other forums of moral/political theater). For individuals who self-identify as politically/religiously conservative, high levels of disgust sensitivity are "activated around precisely those issues that [have] evoked purity and sanctity concerns, such as abortion, homosexuality, and gay marriage" (Inbar et al., qtd. in Hatemi and McDermott 681).

If the full implications of Hatemi and McDermott's argument prove valid, then our politics, similarly, are not chosen but are *lived through*—bound to our brain chemistries and embodiments. Given our varying levels of "disgust sensitivity," Hatemi and McDermott write:

> This phenomenon does not result from different preferences or derive from diverse childhood socialization, but represents a truly inherent difference in psychophysiological experience. These physiological differences are similar to those reported by Oxley et al. (2008) in their study showing that conservatives demonstrated a greater physiological response to threat than liberals, *while*

[6]As Hatemi and McDermott write (citing the same source as Gruber), "research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) located the origin of disgust in the anterior insular cortex (Phillips et al. 1997)" (678).

[7]Among other sources, Hatemi and McDermott cite Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek's essay, "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations" (2009).

There is, coincidentally, a further significance in the year 2012, when Barak Obama was reelected as the first African American president. His election and reelection came, despite attempts (spearheaded by future GOP candidate, Donald J. Trump) to dispute Obama's citizenship. The divisive rhetoric of abjection—aimed specifically at persons of color—intensified with Obama's presidency and hasn't let up since.

> *leaving open the question of whether ideology or physiology leads the charge.* (678; emphasis added)

In sum, "it is not simply that conservatives are more easily disgusted, but rather *people with greater disgust sensitivity*, showing greater neurological and physiological activation when confronting disgusting stimuli, *tend to be more politically conservative*" (Hatemi and McDermott 681; emphasis added). Of a sudden, the rhetorical binary of identification/division collapses into differences in neurophysiology.[8] The Burkean binary holds, but the capacity of rhetoric to negotiate between parties is cast into doubt. What power can empathy wield when abjection proves so powerful, so irrational a force in so large a portion of the electorate? Must we now speak of persuasion, not as a change of mind, but as a change of brain chemistry? More likely, we're discovering the strength of our species' hardwired *resistance* to change and, hence, to rhetoric.[9] What hope is there for democratic process when culturally situated argument, however well-intentioned, *increases* an audience's rage, aggression, and disgust?

Ethos and the Authoritarian Personality

> "I'm tired of this separation of church and state junk."
>
> —U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.), as reported in the *Washington Post* (June 28, 2022)

[8]In "Empathy and the Liberal-Conservative Political Divide in the U.S." (2020), Stephen G. Morris argues that empathy, much like abjection, is expressed on a sliding scale. Morris elaborates:

> Iyer's (2010) research is consistent with other studies conducted on voter patterns in the U.S. For instance, the Pew Research Center (2014) observes that those with the strongest liberal and conservative attitudes are the ones most actively involved in politics […]. If the patterns identified by the Pew Research Center hold true for the general U.S. population, therefore, we should expect exactly what Iyer found—namely, that the empathy divide among liberals and conservatives grows in relation to group members' interest in politics. And this finding could help explain the growing political divide among the U.S. electorate insofar as it appears that those with the most empathy (i.e., the far left) and those with the least empathy (i.e., the far right) have increasingly comprised a greater proportion of the U.S. voting population (Pew Research Center, 2014). (11)

Note that Ravi Iyer's psychometric study makes use of the Emotion Reactivity Scale (ERS), "a 21-item self-report measure designed to assess individuals' experience of emotion reactivity" (Nock et al.). Similar self-reporting questionnaires have proliferated in recent years, becoming widely used in clinical settings. (See, e.g., Becerra et al. for the 30-item Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale). Despite the widespread use of such instruments, I confess to some reluctance regarding Morris's claims. His work—like that of Hatemi and McDermott, Hennefeld and Sammond, Caracciolo and Kukkonen, and Gruber—has been peer-reviewed and has its advocates (see Edsall). Lacking expertise in interpreting voter patterns, I leave it to readers to work out their own responses.

I, for one, deplore the divisiveness in political discourse today and—nodding to Booth—wish there were ways to bring all parties to the table as equal discussants. As preeminent values, I affirm diversity, inclusivity, social justice, and enfranchisement. Though I stand center-left in the American political spectrum, I respect "principled conservatism" and believe that democracy thrives in dialogue. I am also aware that the "preeminent values" aforementioned, being expressive of fairness/reciprocity (Hatemi and McDermott 680), place high on an empathy scale and would subject me to abjection—to being named (and scorned as) a "bleeding-heart liberal."

[9]Let me stress a point made earlier, which is that persuasion over such heated topics as abortion-access, LGBTQ rights, and gay marriage cannot hope to succeed by "good reasons" alone: A person deeply committed to "the right to life" has their own self-image invested in that anti-abortion stance. The discursive battleground may begin in logos, but it proceeds through pathos and rests in ethos. Indeed, the "resistance to rhetoric" that I'm describing here reinforces (from a psychological perspective) the self-protective function of ethos (Alcorn; Baumlin and Baumlin).

Returning to the historic moment of Burke's *Attitudes Toward History*, the great political threat to world order was fascism; it was so in 1937, and it remains so in 2023, though its resources have evolved with media technologies and, in the context of American politics, its points of attack now come from within the nation itself. As an Enlightenment, logos-driven mustering of "good reasons," the practices of rhetoric failed back then, just as they are failing now. Divisiveness reigns, with the rituals of identification—of Burkean courtship and consubstantiation—put in service of factionalism. (Perhaps more accurately, we can say that the neuropsychology of divisiveness, being bred in the bone, is now fully awake and empowered.) As research in neuroscience implies, we are more than taught our politics: Apparently, we are born as much as made MAGA, born as much as made Antifa.[10] Much like Burke and Bataille and others who, more than a half-century ago, glimpsed war over the horizon, we must learn to call fascism by its name and bear witness to its abjected victims. We may not persuade those who are resistant, resolved, or simply unconvinced, but we need to tell the story of our own historical moment, to be our own witnesses.

During the Second World War and in its aftermath, a series of books by the likes of Eric Fromm (1900–1980), Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), and Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) offered to profile fascism, not as an ideology simply but as a set of personality traits.[11] Narcissism ("my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart"), delusions of grandeur ("… not smart, but genius, … and a very stable genius at that!"), personality-cultism ("I alone can fix this …"), and paranoia ("witch hunt!") are qualities of the fascist leader irrespective of year or nationality. But the leader's mass of followers needs studying, too. As "a major landmark in political psychology," Adorno's *Authoritarian Personality* (1950) "represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to explore the origins of fascism not merely as a political phenomenon, but as the manifestation of dispositions that lie at the very core of the modern psyche" (Peters 26). As Gordon E. Peters notes, Adorno's team of social psychologists "set out to demonstrate that fascism is something far deeper than a political

[10]Welcome to the American "culture wars" of 2023. For those unfamiliar with the terms, MAGA—"Make America great Again"—was Trump's 2016 presidential campaign slogan. It has since come to name his most fervent followers (as in the phrase, "extreme MAGA wing of the Republican party"). In the U.S., Antifa names a set of loosely organized, largely autonomous groups committed to resisting fascism (Antifa=anti-fascism), racism, and far-right extremism. The two groups have come to blows, meeting each other's street-protests with counterprotests of their own.

[11]See, e.g., Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). In 1950—the publication date of Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives*—Adorno co-authored *The Authoritarian Personality*, which includes the so-called F-Scale ("F" for Fascist), a questionnaire aiming to measure an individual's conformist tendencies and attitudes toward authority. Though its methodology and conclusions have come under question, the F-Scale remains of historical interest. Several abridged/updated versions are available online (see "F-Scale Study," IDRLabs.com). According to the Anesi.com website, the F-Scale seeks to measure the following traits:

> Conventionalism: Conformity to the traditional societal norms and values.
> Authoritarian submission: Passive acceptance of conventional norms and obedience to authorities.
> Authoritarian aggression: Inclination to condemn and punish individuals who refuse to conform.
> Religion and superstition: Inclination to ascribe events to "higher powers."
> Power and "toughness": Admiration of strongmen and of their willingness to use force.
> Anti-intraception: Intraception being a tendency to process external events through feelings and emotion, and anti-intraception is marked by "rejection of all inwardness, of the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded, and of self-criticism." (Anesi.com)

form: it correlates with psychological patterns of domination and submission that take shape in earliest childhood and later harden into a syndrome of attitudes regarding hierarchy, power, sexuality, and tradition" (26). He continues:

> [F]ascism appears as the political manifestation of a pre-political disposition. The authoritarian personality does not always turn explicitly fascist; *its politics may remain dormant, only to emerge under certain social-historical conditions*. This thesis offers an important corrective to those who prefer to see fascism as discontinuous with liberal-democratic political culture: fascism is not mysterious, and it is not something otherworldly or rare; it is the modern symptom of a psychopathology that is astonishingly widespread and threatens modern society from within. (Peters 27; emphasis added)

In the passage above, I've highlighted that crucial feature of the fascist personality that is roiling American popular culture today. The campaigning and leadership style of the 45th president of the United States has helped awaken a once dormant but now powerfully influential faction—as much as one third of the electorate—to support a populist, protectionist, anti-globalist political, economic, and religious conservatism. Its enemies (there are many, real and imagined) are atheists, queers, communists—*les Misérables* in Bataille's vocabulary, the raft of immigrants, welfare moms, blacks, Jews, … the usual suspects. Anyone familiar with American politics today knows the rest of this part of the story. It's a hardened *attitude*, resistant to change.[12] It's also a *rhetoric* that I'm describing here, a rhetoric of abjection, one that imposes its divisiveness upon a nation.

In American politics during and since the 2016 presidential campaign, declarations of disgust have filled the airwaves and news media. As Dennis-Tiwary notes, the 45th president "used the word disgust […] referring to Hillary Clinton, Rosie O'Donnell, a lawyer taking a break to pump breast milk for her three-month-old baby, Barney Frank, Madonna, the failure to repeal the Affordable Care Act, and the list goes on" ("Politics"). For more graphic instances of abjection, there's Trump's comparison of illegal immigrants to "Mexican rapists" (Walker) and his description of news anchor Megyn Kelly "bleeding from her wherever" (Addady). In the heat of campaigning, abjection backfired when Hilary Clinton named Trump's MAGA faithful "the deplorables." Affronted, both sides went off to lick their wounds.

Ironically, those who have fallen prey to the seductions of fascism claim victimhood *for themselves*. As Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond write,

> While some of us are always already abjected—marginalized because of our race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, nationality—other self-styled minorities, such as men's rights groups and white supremacists, have attempted to co-opt the rallying cries of the truly oppressed, claiming the status of the outcast. Every genuine liberation protest is now echoed by its scandalous inversion, exemplified by perverse chants such as "Blue Lives Matter," "Affirmative Action for White

[12]As Peters notes, the authors of *Authoritarian Personality* "were hardly confident regarding the prospects for any straightforward 'cure' for those who scored highest on the F-scale. 'Therapeutic possibilities of individual psychology,' they wrote, 'are severely limited'" (Peters 38). Here, too, we can invoke the insights of neuroscience, since we're dealing with an extreme (and, as noted, "hardened") expression *of personality type*.

> Applicants," or "Men's Rights Are Human Rights." If social authenticity is a currency that derives from a wounded identity, abjection is its lingua franca. In other words, many people normally associated with the dominant culture are increasingly claiming an abject status in order to adopt, ironize, and undermine the markers of marginalization by which damaging social and power hierarchies have traditionally been administered and enforced. (1–2)

The implications are clear: In our time, "abjection has become central to the negotiation of social identity" (Hennefeld and Sammond 4). So the immediate task, as Hennefeld and Sammond note, is "to distinguish between who gets to be a sovereign ego and who has to be abjected for that ego to feel (temporarily) secure in its own sense of self. Who is being sacrificed on behalf of the nostalgic, ethno-nationalist wager to 'Make America Great Again'?" (4). Much of our ethos-making—that is, our storytelling—will bear witness to abjection, even as it seeks an empathetic response. Still, our higher aim in speaking remains "to open a space" through language "that allows the self to be heard and, saliently, *to be seen*" (Baumlin and Meyer, "Positioning" 17; emphasis in original). Call it self- and community-building through storytelling.

An Ending Without a Conclusion

> Classical rhetoric with its modern manifestations and modifications has served and still serves well. We did not, however, persuade ourselves to study war no more; we did not learn how to say love and generosity to others so that they might be realized. We may not get a new rhetoric until there is a new kind of creature. Some risk waits, and we may find that undesirable or unthinkable. We go on.
>
> —Jim W. Corder, "On the Way, Perhaps, to a New Rhetoric, but Not There Yet, and If We Do Get There, There Won't Be There Anymore" (170)

> Obviously, the rhetoric of the political world, more complex than ever before, cannot be fully cleaned […]. Conflict will never be totally escaped. Even threats of violent alternatives to LR [listening-rhetoric] will perhaps never disappear, *homo sapiens* being what you and I are. For all we know, the horrors of World War III *will* arrive.
>
> —Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (128; emphasis in original)

> I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country.
>
> —George W. Bush, speaking in June, 2001 of "Putin's 'soul'" (Flashback, NBC News)

I circle back to a point made in Part 1 of this double essay: "The progress of human enlightenment," Burke declared in 1937, "can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*" (*Attitudes* 41; emphasis in original). To give its broader context, Burke is seeking to interpret history through modes of Western literature. Here, he's writing of the lessons taught traditionally by comedy, which, "like tragedy," "warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime* to *stupidity*" (41; emphasis in original). The passage continues:

> When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. (41; emphasis in original)

Such a passage begs the question of whether there "is" progress in history, of whether there "is" an enlightenment evolving within human society. There is little of Hegel's philosophical idealism here, which defines history as "the progress of reason in the world." Rather, "by 'history' is meant primarily man's life in political communities": So writes Burke in the Introduction (unpaginated) to the book's 2nd edition (1959). He declares,

> The book deals with characteristic responses of people in forming and reforming their congregations. You might call it "Attitudes Toward the Incessant Intermingling of Conservatism and Progress." Or, translating it into expressions now often encountered, we could entitle it "Statements of Policy on Problems of Organizational Behavior." […]
>
> It operates on the miso-philanthropic assumption that getting along with people is one devil of a difficult task, but that, in the last analysis, we should all want to get along with people (and do want to). (Introduction)

I'd like to make similar claims for the "attitudes" and "statements" explored throughout this double essay.

By 2023, one wonders if civil dialogue and public debate remain possible. When one side so thoroughly demonizes the other as to make them into an existential threat, the nation's politics loses its civility. The American culture wars cannot be dismissed as a moral equivalency between competing perspectives, equally compelling. An ethotics of (cultural) difference rests in (cultural) diversity, whereas an identity-politics rests in hegemony and privilege. For many on the alt-right, the very fact of diversity in race, ethnicity, and sexuality raises an abhorrence felt viscerally and deemed intolerable; if democratic process and majority rule need to be sacrificed in its relief, "so be it." On so-called mainstream news media, we hear of looming threats to democracy. Anticipating the 2024 U.S. elections, we need to look coldly at the current state of politics, which no rhetoric now available can repair: One side at least of the American electorate seeks not to outvote so much as to make outcasts of its morally/spiritually abhorrent opposition. Talk of secession in "red states" like Texas and Georgia enacts a fantasy of expulsion—of removing people whose color or culture or sexuality or belief "makes you want to throw up." It's a fantasy fueled by abjection.

As Robert L. Ivie writes, "politics in a healthy, pluralistic democracy is necessarily agonistic, and thus the principal challenge of agonistic democracy is to address the 'other' as a legitimate adversary rather than as an evil enemy" (277)—the aim being "to keep agonistic relations between adversaries from degenerating into antagonistic battles between enemies" (Ivie 284). Ivie cites Chantal Mouffe as his precursor in political philosophy; he could as well have cited Burke.[13] Is there in rhetoric,

[13]In her essay, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" Mouffe writes, "It is only when we acknowledge [that] 'politics' consists in domesticating hostility, only in trying to defuse the potential

Ivie asks, a "comic corrective to the tragic inclinations" (283–84) that lead us time and again into conflict, both at home and abroad? Here, Ivie is invoking Burke directly, specifically the latter's view of history: What makes Burke's assertion pertinent still—that "human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*"—is its hope that the "comedy" of human error can be corrected and cured without spilling over into that ultimate of tragedies, war. (This last sentence comes *verbatim* from Part 1 of this double essay; it is worth repeating here.)

In the introduction to Part 1, I cited my own youthful struggle to judge "Hitler's soul" in Burkean terms. *Could* the hatred and violence that Hitler unleashed upon the world be judged as, say, "the most deadly instance to date of the human 'comedy of error'"? Or were his words and actions the height (depth, rather) of human viciousness—of soul-sickness? As I was writing the final paragraph of this second essay, I was reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), the German Protestant theologian whose *Letters and Papers from Prison* was assigned reading in my 1973 freshman-year theology class (a required course at the Catholic university that I attended). Arrested in 1943 for his underground seminary-work, Bonhoeffer was held at Buchenwald for a time, while awaiting trial; on April 9, 1945, he was executed by hanging. I imagine that his brief essay, "On Stupidity," informed my debates with fellow students over the fascist Hitler's soul-sickness, since Bonhoeffer was writing of the Führer and his followers:

> Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease. Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgment simply need not be believed—in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical—and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for when dealing with a stupid person than with a

antagonism that exists in human relations, that we can pose the fundamental question for democratic politics" (754). In terms strikingly Burkean, she continues:

> This question, *pace* the rationalists, is not how to arrive at a rational consensus reached without exclusion, that is, indeed, an impossibility. Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them." The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them distinction—which is what a consensus without exclusion pretends to achieve—but the different way in which this is established. What is at stake is how to establish the us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy. (754–55)

There is, additionally, work for rhetoricians to do in bringing argument—its theorizing, teaching, and practice—into the 21st century. Logos-centric models having proved inadequate against divisiveness, resistance, and abjection, it's to research in "the human sciences"—sociology, psychology, neurobiology, anthropology—that we must turn for further insight. Until we acknowledge that persuasion is largely extra-rational in its workings and proceed accordingly, the profession of English studies will have precious little impact upon the conduct/direction of public discourse. For a textbook in English studies, I'd consider Robert B. Cialdini's *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (2021)—Cialdini being a social scientist and business consultant, not a writing teacher *per se*.

> malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous. (Bonhoeffer 49)

(If Bonhoeffer is right, does the Burkean distinction between error and evil collapse?) *Letters and Papers* was published posthumously in 1951. Here as with the writings of Fromm, Arendt, and Adorno, I find that the most telling analyses of partisan politics today were written some seven decades prior, in the aftermath of World War II.[14]

I still don't know if Hitler's in heaven or hell—or if there is a heaven or hell. I know there's much evil in the world; there's even more human stupidity. Rhetoric cannot solve most of the world's problems, especially when attitudes are "hardened," bred in the bone. We fail in negotiating with "our dearest foes," to paraphrase Shakespeare's Hamlet. But that doesn't mean that we don't try. At the least, we tell our stories. I do agree with Burke that, in the last analysis, "we should all want to get along with people (and do want to)." We go on. On that vaguely hopeful note, I've reached an end.

[14]Yet the question—admittedly unanswered by this present essay—remains: Can one negotiate "in good faith" with any and all opposing factions, including Hitlerian fascism? In his *Rhetoric of Rhetoric* (2004)—the last book published in his lifetime—Booth reaffirms his commitment to listening-rhetoric (LR), even in times when political rhetoric (or P-Rhet) spills over into "Rhetrickery":

> We must train ourselves to judge P-Rhet fairly, by really listening to the enemy and imagining ourselves into the enemy's true motives. We must judge no piece of P-Rhet according to whether the judge and rhetor share the same "side," or whether a given audience was won over. […] Like a genuinely admirable legal judge, the critic should consider the "evidence for and against the case." (127)

Were Wayne Booth in Prime Minister Chamberlain's shoes back in 1938, would he have pursued his "listening-rhetoric" with the German Chancellor, hopeful of finding common ground? Would he have sacrificed the Czech Sudetenland, trading "land for peace"? And what of the 43rd U.S. president, George W. Bush? As he listened attentively, empathetically even, to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, was it the Russian president's "soul" that he had sensed back in 2001? Or was it all mere projection, an American president's desire to find his own plain-dealing personality mirrored in his rival? Was it all, in the end, mere Rhetrickery?

"George W. Bush: 'Putin changed' since I looked into his eyes and saw his soul," reads a web headline of the April 18, 2018 *Washington Examiner*: "When I looked into his eyes and saw his soul, Russia was broke. […] And ah, the price of oil goes up and Putin changed" (Giaritelli), Bush had told a TV interviewer. Did it not occur to Bush that he had been fantasizing all along, and that his original claim was foolish to begin with?

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