

1987

## Kenneth Burke: A Personal Retrospective

J. Clarke Rountree III

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Rountree, J. Clarke III. "Kenneth Burke: A Personal Retrospective." *The Iowa Review* 17.3 (1987): 15-23. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3537>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# Kenneth Burke: A Personal Retrospective

## *J. Clarke Rountree III*

AS RICHARD KOSTELANETZ was conducting the interview included in this volume, I was plowing through Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* for the first time as required reading in a persuasion class. A political science major planning to go to law school, I thought a course in persuasion would be useful. But reading Burke, I decided the course must be more theoretical than practical and hence of questionable value to me. Nevertheless, I was determined to stick it out.

Two things struck me about Burke's *Rhetoric*: First, it seemed to be missing something, or at least that was my rationalization, confused by his discussions of killing, persuasion, identification, consubstantiality, grammatical terms, and the texts of dead Greeks and Romans. Second, Burke seemed to be drawing his evidence and arguments from a plethora of disciplines in a most unorganized fashion.

Fortunately, I was working in the university library and, rather than buy Burke's book, I had checked out an edition of *Rhetoric* that was bound with his *Grammar of Motives*. Since the *Grammar* was published earlier, I decided to glance through it to see if there was anything I needed to know before I could decipher the *Rhetoric*. I discovered in the introduction to the *Grammar* that the *Rhetoric* was to be the second of Burke's "trilogy of motives" and the *Grammar of Motives* provided the foundations for his *Rhetoric* and his later book, *A Symbolic of Motives*.

A quick, selective reading of the *Grammar* introduced me to Burke's dramatic theory and to his basic rhetorical perspective. In fact, I found that my discovering the *Grammar* put me ahead of my classmates, who were still trying to figure out what killing, dead Greeks and Romans, and consubstantiality had to do with persuasion.

Reading the *Grammar*, though, left me uneasy. The flashes of brilliance I discerned in Burke's cryptic prose intrigued me; his easy movement among works in philosophy, literature, politics, economics, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines appealed to the Renaissance man (or dilettante) in me (as a student who had changed majors often). However, I felt that there were many more insights that I could not understand be-

cause a pre-requisite to understanding the *Grammar* is a strong, liberal education, which I lacked.

The following summer I decided to take an independent study of “Burkology,” reading whatever was necessary to reach an adequate appreciation of the *Grammar*. I tracked down a number of Burke’s informal references to Korzybski on semantics, Mead on the philosophy of action, Parsons on sociology, Aristotle on rhetoric, Coleridge on criticism, Hume on human understanding, Kant on reason, and Skinner on behaviorism. Additionally, I read some of Burke’s other books including *Counter-Statement*, *Permanence and Change*, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, and especially *Language as Symbolic Action*. The short paper required for the independent study turned into a fifty-four-page exploration of human symbol using.

Burke’s appreciation of the way humans use symbols and symbols use humans underlies his ironic attitude towards those who foster division along political, ideological, and ethnographic lines—they are at once the users and the used, the leaders and the misled. Burke is skeptical of any political system or movement that purports to be completely fair, objective, or non-ideological since human symbol systems carry motives of their own which cannot be extricated from the most “scientific” ideologies. Ultimately, I saw in Burke’s perspective a place for the critical scholar to stand, above the ideological name-calling of the right and left, beyond the cynicism of mere power politics, and outside the confines of any particular disciplinary perspective.

The following spring, as a member of a campus lecture series committee, I helped bring Harry Chapin’s brother Tom to campus. I remembered Tom from my childhood as the host of the television show *Make a Wish*; now Tom was doing a laid-back show on the lecture circuit that included folksy, Chapinish music interspersed with concerns over the environment and the world political situation in the face of Reagan’s victory. More important to me though was the fact that the Chapins were Kenneth Burke’s grandsons and I would have a chance to learn something about this unusual scholar who had captured my imagination.

Tom told me he had tried to read Burke’s books, though with little success. He asked me about my interest in Burke and I told him about my summer conversation culminating in my voluminous “confessions.” To my delight, Tom asked for a copy of my paper, certain that K.B. would like to see it.

Almost a year later, as I was engaged in graduate study and fighting off the frigid Iowa winter, I received a short note from a classics professor in Indiana who said that Burke had enjoyed my paper and asked him to send me an invitation to the “Kenneth Burke Conference” scheduled for March 1984 in Philadelphia. I already had a paper accepted for that conference and had planned to attend; nevertheless, I was elated.

The Philadelphia conference was an amazing, interdisciplinary event sponsored by the communication studies people at Temple University and the Speech Communication Association. An eighty-six-year-old Burke listened intently from the front row of a convention room filled with one hundred-fifty scholars from a number of disciplines. Among these speakers were W. Lance Bennett and Dan Nimmo from political science, Joseph Gusfield from sociology, Charles Dyke from philosophy, Robert Wess and Cary Nelson from English, David Damrosch from comparative literature, Donald McCloskey from economics, Herb Simons, Trevor Melia, James Chesebro, Michael Leff, and Jane Blankenship from communications studies, and William Rueckert who has written and edited several books on Burke’s life and work.

Those of us who submitted papers met in small groups to discuss our particular understandings of selected parts of Burke’s corpus. In addition to all this scholarly activity, there were performances of Burke’s musical compositions (some of which were performed by Tom Chapin and his brothers), readings from his poetry, a first meeting of the newly formed Kenneth Burke Society, and a final “Gala Luncheon” where toast upon toast was made to the guest of honor. At the close of the luncheon, Burke himself got up to speak, delivering a few “flowerishes” similar to those printed in the conference program:

“Even humility can go to one’s head.”

“We moderns are not head-hunters; but we like to collect the heads that head-hunters hunted.”

“He had learned how to be one of those simple, wholesome people who stay sane by driving other people crazy.”

“Why leave of your own accord when you can contrive to be thrown out?”

I felt like a participant in a grand historical event, celebrating the triumph of the ideal American scholar-hero. Before me, standing in a modest five-foot-four-inch, aging frame was a twentieth-century Emerson, a man of sweeping knowledge, “the Einstein of the human sciences.” And yet, after praising the praisers, thanking the organizers, and concluding the event, Burke descended the stage shaking his finger at those in his general vicinity, continuing the three-day scholarly conversation, noting, “But, you know, the trick with that theory is. . . .” Burke never stopped inquiring!

At Iowa I became the resident Burkean among the graduate students; that title compelled me to be prepared to quote chapter and verse from Burke’s corpus when called upon to explain how Burke’s theory would address particular problems. Fortunately for me, the application of Burke’s insights to problems in rhetorical studies is simplified by his enormous influence in this field—few scholars can afford to ignore his work and a great number have built critical theories largely upon his insights.

Then in the fall of 1985 we learned that Burke would be a visiting professor at the University of Iowa the following spring. During his visit, Burke would participate in a series of videotaped interviews conducted completely by graduate students. Professor Michael Calvin McGee asked me to head a research team to study Burke’s life and work, to come up with a list of questions to be asked in the interviews, and to prepare students to conduct the interviews. I would have the opportunity to direct nearly twelve hours of interviews!

I enlisted the help of twenty graduate students from various departments including Communication Studies, Comparative Literature, English, the Writers’ Workshop, American Studies, Mass Communication, and History. The research team read and reread all of Burke’s books, dozens of his essays, and much of his fiction. Additionally, the committee reviewed a number of books and essays about Burke, and every major published interview with Burke. The research work was divided into what have become recognized “phases” of Burke’s life: the “literary” period (c. 1897–1935), covering his early life, the publication of *The White Oxen*, *Counter-Statement*, *Towards a Better Life*, and his translations, and his work on *The Dial*; the “social criticism” period (c. 1935–45) covering the publication of *Permanence and Change*, *Attitudes Towards History*, and *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, and his association with the Communist Party

of America; the “dramatism” period (c. 1945–61), covering the publication of *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Religion*, *Language as Symbolic Action*, and *Dramatism and Development*, his late teaching career, and his most recent work.

My directing the interview project gave me an excuse for corresponding with Burke. I asked what we might cover and received the first of a number of scintillating blasts of typewritten prose, blotched with crossed-out words, dipped-in corrections, and page-long paragraphs. His letters sound much like his scholarship, only more “Burkean,” with fewer references and larger leaps between ideas, yet as heuristic, ironic, and determined to induce understanding (in the reader) as his books. And, as is common to his work of the last fifteen years or so, constant themes emerge and re-emerge, like his theory of analogy’s relation to language:

Analogy is built-in to the nature of language itself. For one can learn language only because one can use the same words to characterize situations that are different in their particulars. As Eliot says somewhere, “All cases are unique, but similar to others.” It may take a good poet to make a good metaphor, but merely to use words at all is to apply them analogically; for every time you use them to entitle a situation you are applying them to any other situation you apply them to, as the characterization (entitling) of them. E’en words for particular “things” are titles for *manifolds*. [Letter of 5 March 1986]

When Burke arrived, I became his personal aide, fetching books for him, keeping him up to date on the interview topics, and seeing that he got to and from the sessions. During the afternoon, I would follow him on his walks, feeling quite peripatetic. In person, Burke is even more “Burkean” than he is in his letters: when Burke discusses his work, his blue-eyed gaze and coarse, rhapsodic voice reflect an intense interest. Burke never tires of analyzing, rehashing, looking through new “terministic” perspectives, or justifying, explaining, restating, or paraphrasing what he has said at some time in his nearly seventy years of remarkable scholarship.

Through my work with the research team, my dialogues with Burke, and my participation in the interviews, I accumulated a huge amount of

information on Burke's life and work. And, although characterizing Burke remains difficult, I can extract a strong thread that runs the gamut of Burke's life and work—he has experienced, developed, maintained, and theorized a “realistic” relationship between himself and language, and that relationship informs his theory of human symbol using. In Burkean terms, one may “prophesize after the event” and note how Burke's unique experiences led to his “realistic” conception of symbol systems.

Burke's early life was unusual in a number of ways. At the age of two, Burke tumbled down a staircase and broke his neck. The doctor said that he should have died, but the boy defied that diagnosis. Burke reports that the nerve endings in his neck seemed to regrow around the break area, adapting to the injury, though not without consequences. By applying pressure to the nape of his neck, Burke could make his heart palpitate. As he reached school age, Burke experienced terrible “sinking” spells, where he felt as if the earth would swallow him up. During these spells Burke would cry until his father returned from work, often in the middle of the day, to calm him. Burke's parents became wary of upsetting him for fear of inducing these fits.

One may see in this early malady the foundation for a number of Burke's theoretical interests. First, the impetus for Burke's spells might be found in his illness or in the attention-seeking impulses of a small boy; such is the rhetoric of motives. Second, the close relationship between psychology and physiology, attitude and experience, and impression and expression, which informs the psychoanalytic strain in much of Burke's literary criticism, Burke experienced first-hand. Finally, his very survival affords an appreciation of the adaptability of the human organism and questions the value of a science that cannot account for one's survival.

Although Burke did not begin school until the age of eight, he soon made up for his late start. Burke was in the first class to attend Pittsburgh's Peabody High School, which was staffed with a number of Ivy League teachers who left their college jobs for Peabody's better pay. By the time Burke graduated in 1916, he had taken six years of Latin, two years of Greek, and had begun studying French and German. Such study provided him with a number of cultural and linguistic perspectives from which to understand the world in addition to providing him access to the original works of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Marx, Thomas Mann, Schnitzler, and Baumann, to name a few.

Burke's brief experience in college left him with a distaste for bureaucracies. Burke complains that, despite his six years of Latin, Columbia would not allow him to take Medieval Latin as a freshman, since this and most of the other courses that interested Burke, were "post-graduate" courses. Burke's decision to quit college after a year saved him from the socialization into academic systems that breeds disciplinary thought and stifles the interdisciplinary creativity that is the hallmark of his work. Then Burke could more readily question attempts to draw boundaries in defense of scholarly territories and discount what those in a particular discipline took for granted about, say, the line between rhetoric and poetics.

Burke's education continued instead in one of the most fertile schools in New York—the Village. Surrounded by the likes of Matty Josephson, James Light, Berenice Abbott, Djuna Barnes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and a host of others, Burke could learn from and with those who were producing that which literature, theater, art, and other departments would later study. He saw the biographies behind the bibliographies of some of the greatest artists of the "lost generation." He could note the way literature became "equipment for living," how an alcoholic writer's story could become his "first drink," or how poetry could become symptomatic of the poet's illness.

By recognizing the symbolic action of literature, the way literature may serve and embody the motives of the writer, Burke gained a new critical perspective and moved toward a "realistic" appreciation of human symbolizing. An early dividend of this perspective came when Burke was simultaneously working as a ghostwriter on a drug book and teaching a seminar on Coleridge. Burke realized that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* could be seen to embody stages in Coleridge's drug addiction.

Burke's insights into the workings of symbolic action carries over to his own work. Burke has admitted that writing *Towards a Better Life* was a substitute for psychoanalysis in getting him through what he calls "the trouble." "The trouble" came when Burke fell in love with his first wife's sister. The protagonist of the novel, John Neal, attempts to drive away Genevieve as Burke might profit psychologically from driving away Libby. In the end, Burke married Libby, after divorcing his first wife, Lily. Now he claims he can never write another novel; it calls for too much investment of himself.

Burke's most unusual brush with the symbolic action of his own work



came when he attended the First American Writers' Congress in 1935. Burke delivered a paper, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," arguing against the use of "the worker" by the Communist Party of America as a rallying symbol. Burke believed the Party should abandon the traditional Marxist terminology in favor of the more acceptable image of "the people." Burke's understanding of what it meant to be a "worker" in America was tied to his recollections of the summer he worked in a shipyard inside the hull of a ship's body where a metal lathe ran in oil all day, clouding the room with a film that made breathing difficult and penetrated his skin and hair with its odor. Riding home on the bus at the end of the day, Burke found that passengers moved away from him. Burke argued that most American "workers" hoped to rise above their position and become managers, owners, or wealthy retirees.

Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman attacked Burke and made him look insincere. As Burke left the meeting room he overheard a woman say: "But he seemed so honest!" He went home that afternoon to catch up on some overdue sleep, but he simply drifted in and out of consciousness hearing his name called again and again like a curse, "Burke! Burke!" When he thought he had pulled himself out of a slumber, he believed he had feces dripping from his tongue!

Later, Burke admitted that this must have been an hallucination, though he claims that it was very realistic. On reflection, he remembered that a character from one of his early stories had the same problem. Burke concludes that the power of suggestion in his own story had come back to haunt him.

Burke has had other difficulties with the impact of his writing upon his experience. After theorizing about perspectives in *Permanence and Change*, Burke found that he could not talk to others without feeling there was a wall between him and the interlocuter; his recognition of the necessarily perspectival nature of each individual's perception made it difficult for him to believe in communication at all. Around the same time, Burke temporarily developed double-vision, which he notes is a pathological counterpart of his concept of "perspective by incongruity" (whereby two incongruous words are put together to obtain a new perspective, e.g., Veblen's "trained incapacity").

If Burke's terms lead him to suffer from the perspectives they implicate in his experience of the world, the process also may be productively re-

versed—his experience of the world may lead him to particular terms. This was the case in his Greenwich Village experience as he was shown how individual lives and writing can intertwine. A clearer and more emphatic example comes from the impetus he cites for discovering the dramatic terms of his *Grammar of Motives*. The dramatic pentad consists of five terms: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Burke claims that these five terms reflect the diverse *attitudes* of his five children (e.g., one a pragmatist, concerned with the *agencies* of action, another a materialist, concerned with the *scenes* within which actions occur, and so forth). Burke suggests that he embodied conceptions of his children within his dramatic theory of action.

The most recent phase of Burke's work began with a "secular conversion" he experienced while attending a theological seminar with Richard McKeon. From the theologian's assertion that one must begin with faith in seeking an understanding of God, Burke found a secular analogue—that in using terms, one must have faith in them (despite their necessary perspectivism) if one is to follow out their implications and discover the understanding they offer. Burke calls this new meta-perspective "logology," or "words about words" which draws upon theology's "words about The Word."

There is something fittingly complete about Burke's symbolic realism, starting as it does with Burke's first-hand experience in the uses and misuses of the human symbolizing capacity and ending in a tautology that self-consciously examines "words about words." In teasing out the dimensions of human symbol using, Burke ranges from the depths of human pathophysiology to the heights of God's ethereal being; from nature (and the counternature of technology) to supernature. Such is the territory of this simple, though famous, "word man," who must consider all that can be said.