



## NEWSLETTER

# *The Kenneth Burke Society*

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### AIRLIE IN '93

Airlie House in Airlie, Virginia has been selected as the site of the May 6-9, 1993 Kenneth Burke Society Convention. Conveniently located a short distance from Dulles and National airports, and just off the interstate highway, Airlie House combines the charm and grace of a stately mansion with a relaxing atmosphere appropriate to an academic gathering. The unique overnight accommodations and lovely meeting facilities set in the rolling hunt country hills have provided an "Island of Thought" that has served well for many groups. Airlie is also a natural habitat, promoting biological diversity for the enrichment of human life.

Airlie House offers superb accommodations at reasonable prices in a picturesque environment. Seminar and meeting rooms are plentiful, private, and range from the traditional classroom with chalkboard to the meeting room of the rustic tavern. Leisure activities include swimming, bicycling, fishing, croquet, hiking, and shuffleboard. Meals and cocktails can be served in a variety of indoor and outdoor locations, from the fashionable ballroom to the patio barbeque. Airlie House provides the kind of setting that assures the continuation of the conversation and the New Harmony tradition.

Chief Convention Planner James W. Chesebro reports that Airlie House was selected by a vote of the seventeen member planning committee. The committee chose Airlie House from a list of ten possible convention sites throughout the United States. Chesebro is currently entertaining suggestions for seminar topics and Bernard Brock will issue a call for papers in the near future.

The convention theme is "Operation Benchmark," in the spirit articulated by Kenneth Burke at the New Harmony convention. New points of view that go beyond Burke, and a broader base of the Society across disciplines and across cultural orientations are primary goals of "Operation Benchmark." Additional information regarding rates and reservations will be forthcoming as negotiations are finalized. In the meantime, mark your calendar and make plans to meet at Airlie in '93!

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### SYNOPSIS OF THE 1990 NATIONAL KENNETH BURKE SOCIETY CONVENTION

Dale A. Bertelsen

The Kenneth Burke Society's first national convention was held at the New Harmony Inn in New Harmony, IN on May 4-7, 1990. Attracting an international body of scholars, the convention celebrated Kenneth Burke through "A Kenneth Burke Convivium." A series of seminars, programs, study sessions, performance hours, speeches, banquets, and cocktail parties provided a variety of forums for the consideration of works about and by Kenneth Burke. Because there were so many firsts at this convention, it might appropriately be viewed as an act of legitimation. Correspondingly, Burke's presence and participation throughout the convention served to confirm the proceedings.

Summarizing the New Harmony convention is much like examining the world through the prism of Kenneth Burke's corpus: each facet presents a different lens that transforms events and the conclusions drawn from them. Nevertheless, for those who were unable to attend the convention there are several items worthy of mention here. We might profitably summarize the New Harmony convention by reviewing general proceedings, seminar reports, and an interview with Kenneth Burke. To all who I overlook and to those whose words I don't get quite right, my sincere apologies.

#### General Proceedings

Trevor Mella opened the convention with an address that traced the origins of the Kenneth Burke Society and that outlined Burke's contributions to critical scholarship. The following morning, William Rueckert presented the keynote address of the convention, "Criticism as a Way of Life or Criticism as Equipment for Living." Rueckert's stated purpose was to "characterize Burke's kind of criticism and to track the changes which have occurred in it since he first committed himself to criticism as a way of life in the thirties." (Rueckert's address is reprinted in this

issue of the *Newsletter* with permission of the author.)

On Saturday, May 5, Kenneth Burke celebrated his 93rd birthday in the company of family, friends, and colleagues. Poet laureate of the United States, Howard Nemerov, acted as "chief conviviator" on this occasion and highlighted Burke's career through sensitive poetic reminiscences and irreverent humor. "Never Twice the Same: A Portrait of Kenneth Burke" by Michael J. Mino was one of the many gifts Burke received at his "Burke-Day" party.

Sunday evening's entertainment was provided by Ron Frederickson and his Emporia State University students. The Performance Hour, held in the Opera House, featured the oral interpretation of many of Burke's poems and moved the audience from tears to laughter—both cathartic experiences.

At the business meeting a slate of officers for the national Kenneth Burke Society was elected (William Rueckert—President, Donn Parson—Vice-President, Bruce Gronbeck—Secretary, James W. Chesebro—Treasurer, and Dale A. Bertelsen—Editor of Publications). In addition, preliminary plans for the 1993 Kenneth Burke Society Convention were discussed.

A variety of programs were presented which emphasized a broad scope of interests and applications of Burkeian interpretations. Several of the papers presented during these programs will form the text of a forthcoming anthology.

Two noteworthy awards were presented at the convention. Sheron Dailey, Chief Convention Planner, received the Distinguished Service Award and Leland Griffin received the Lifetime Achievement Award.

### Seminar Reports

The seminars presented the individual Scholar with an intensive exploration in one facet of Burke's work. Designed to help participants formulate research questions and scholarly agendas, the seminars were a rich resource of discussion throughout the convention. Indeed, many of the conversations begun in the seminars spilled over into general sessions and continued at late night informal gatherings. The seminar reports presented here were prepared by the seminar coordinators who are to be commended for their efforts and for their contributions to this convention summary.

#### Kenneth Burke and Postmodernism

Dale Bertelsen, Thomas Carmichael, James W. Chesebro (Coordinator), Michael G. Feehan, Rosalind Gabin, Greig Henderson, James Mullican, Robert V. Wess, David C. Williams, and Kenneth Burke at two of the four sessions.

Diversity characterized the "Kenneth Burke and Postmodernism" seminar. Formal and final conclusions were not an explicit goal of the seminar. More directly, we sought to share our different levels and kinds of under-

standings of and experiences with postmodern and poststructuralist doctrines and documents.

However, nine propositions seemed to create a sense of agreement among several of the participants. These nine propositions reflect the interactions during the seminar itself, not the position papers of each participant submitted prior to the convention. These nine propositions included:

1. A postmodern analysis focuses upon and can be characterized by its attention to the multiple and contradictory meanings conveyed by a rhetorical act.

2. A postmodern analysis focuses upon and can be characterized by its attention to the ideological and political dimensions of a rhetorical act.

3. A postmodern analysis focuses upon and can be characterized by its view of communication as a series of ongoing and continuous confrontations between a dominant rhetorical system and emerging, alternative, competing, and/or declining rhetorical systems.

4. It is useful to distinguish *postmodernism* and *poststructuralism*. As a concept, postmodernism identifies a specific cultural, time-bound system in which particular lifestyles constitute the distinguishing and characteristic feature of the system. As a concept, poststructuralism identifies a methodological approach to the study of all forms of communication. Accordingly, a postmodernist may not necessarily be a poststructuralist, and a poststructuralist may not necessarily be a postmodernist.

5. A goal of postmodern criticism is the "liberation of the oppressed." Particularly, for minorities, the symbols of a dominant rhetorical system may be inappropriate, if not self-destructive, as methods for characterizing the self, others, and how the environment should be identified and utilized. One objective of poststructuralist criticism is to identify how dominant rhetorical systems restrict communicative options and to propose alternative systems which increase the kinds and range of communicative choices available to the individual.

6. Another feature of postmodern criticism is its preoccupation with power and the redistribution of power. At one level, the redistribution of power is part of the process of liberating the oppressed. In this context, postmodern criticism is explicitly deliberative in end or pointedly political. Accordingly, the postmodern critic deconstructs existing power structures. At a more abstract level, postmodern critics hold various definitions of power and diverse conceptions of how power and symbol-using are related.

7. From a communicative perspective, the silence of a group can reflect an absence of power. A group is silent because it cannot use the symbols of a dominant rhetoric. A group is silent because it feels its own idiom will not be respected, understood, or function effectively. At the same time, silence can function dialectically, for silence can function as an opposition strategy by a dominant rhetorical system.

8. Postmodern and poststructural perspectives can increase the flexibility and utility of Burkeian concepts and

analyses. A modern orientation provides but one approach for using Burkean methods. A postmodern orientation provides a second, thereby increasing the number of orientations available to rhetoricians. For example, a modern orientation is likely to view the pentad as a set of predetermined equations in which agent=people, scene=environment, agency=tools and machinery, purpose=stated intentions, and act=human behavior in thought, word, or deed. In contrast, because it holds that multiple and contradictory meanings are conveyed by every communicative act, a postmodern orientation must allow for the possibility that any phenomena can be understood in terms of all of the pentad terms. Hence, technology can be treated as an agency but also agent (e.g., artificial intelligence), scene (e.g., the Information Society), act (e.g., computing as knowledge generation), or purpose (e.g., Star Wars was structurally designed to destroy non-Western nations and potentially even the environment, the ecological system, and the entire planet).

9. A Burkeian perspective can provide important understandings of postmodernism and poststructuralism. For example, a central axiom of poststructuralism is that a communicative act can generate multiple and contradictory responses or meanings. The Burkeian notion that human beings are "bodies that learn language" informs the poststructuralist paradoxical view of communication. In our seminar, Kenneth Burke elaborated. Burke argued that both the terms *bodies* and *language* are intimately connected, co-equal, mutually and simultaneously interactive, and co-influential upon each other. Accordingly, noted Burke, "The way we live changes our bodies and therefore how we communicate." Because we each live differently, experience and understand differently, the same message can mean different things. Pornography, for example, offends some and excites others. Burke's proposition that human beings are bodies that learn language thus becomes one explanation for the postmodern and poststructuralist paradoxical view of communication.

In concluding, members of the seminar sought to emphasize that Burkeians need not be threatened by postmodernists, and that postmodernists need not be threatened by Burkeians. Burkeians and postmodernists provide schemes which are likely to be of mutual utility for each other thereby increasing the range of options available to both for the study and analysis of communication. There are ways in which Burke himself confirmed this perspective. Burke reported that he found Jacques Derrida's position in his interview with Gary Olson (*Journal of Advanced Composition*, Volume 10, Number 1) "sensible." Additionally, Burke has found the *Wilson Review's* recent classification of himself as a poststructuralist "fascinating." Certainly, one is hesitant to overstate a commonality between Burkeian and postmodern systems. (For example, in the interview with Kenneth Burke at the close of the 1990 Kenneth Burke Society Convention, when asked if he was a postmodernist, Burke replied, "I hope not"). At the same time, it does seem that

several theoretical and methodological potentials exist for the mutual and beneficial exploration of the two systems.

#### **Pedagogical Approaches to the Study of Kenneth Burke**

Elvera Berry, Mary Evelyn Collins, Phillip Dillman, Andrew King (Coordinator), Harriet McNeal, Robert S. Quinn, and Diane Smith.

During its four days of sessions the seminar concentrated on three topics: (1) assessing the nature of Burke's difficulty for undergraduate and graduate students; (2) making students producers rather than mere consumers of Burkeian scholarship; and (3) discovering imaginative uses of Burke in the classroom.

Mary Evelyn Collins reported on the comprehension levels needed for Burke. Surprisingly, they were lower than his interpreters and disciples, notably Hugh Duncan. Burke's conceptual demands were also assessed.

The second topic, turning consumers of scholarship into producers, was discussed. Teachers reported having greatest success by introducing students to essays in which Burke shows how he developed a critical method. Our consensus was that "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" is Burke's paradigmatic essay in this regard.

The third topic, imaginative uses of Burke, provided the richest experience for the seminar. Robert Quinn presented an analysis of early German propaganda films using the representative anecdote as a means of analysis. He discovered an Ur-plot intended as a model for viewer's political behavior.

#### **Theological Implications of the Theories of Kenneth Burke**

Richard Thames (Coordinator)

The Theological Implication seminar concentrated on Burke's relationship to Christianity. While there was agreement on Burke's considerable debt to Christianity, there was disagreement on his system's compatibility with it. Some contended no essential conflict exists between the two; others contended conflict is inherent in Burke's secularization of Christianity. According to the latter view, Burke's Christ is closer to James Frazier's scapegoat than the New Testament's Jesus. When Christianity is separated from its historical base, it ceases to be Christianity and comes to resemble Oriental philosophies such as Zen.

#### **Feminist Critiques of Kenneth Burke**

Joan Disburg, Randy Fallows, Sonja Foss (Coordinator), Cindy Griffin, and Helen Warren.

In the seminar on feminist critiques of Kenneth Burke, the discussion centered around three major topics. One area concerned Burke's explicit references to women in his writings and to the implications of those references

for his rhetorical theory. Two significant references seem to be Burke's equation of agency with the maternal in his discussion of agency and the distinction he makes between feminine and masculine writing in his review of *The Correspondence of Flaubert*. He sees feminine writing as concerned with the bringing forth of symbolic or artistic life to be conveyed to an audience and masculine writing as celebrating artistic technique for its own sake. The possible role Burke's wife, Libbie, played in the development of his ideas also was raised; he has written no books since her death and allegedly has said she had "everything" to do with his work.

Critiques of some of Burke's basic notions from a feminist perspective constituted a second topic of discussion in the seminar. The notion of identification was suggested to be an inaccurate description of women's communicative experiences and also to have negative consequences for women who do not identify with or speak from within the dominant culture. The suggestion was made that the notions of identification, persuasion, and communication be replaced by the notions of interconnection, responsibility, and communication to reflect more accurately women's experiences. Other Burkean notions assessed were separation from the natural condition (which ignores women's connection with nature); Burke's focus on persuasion (which differs from the rhetorical intent of many women—coming to know rather than convincing others); and hierarchy (women tend to see relationships as peer, not hierarchical, and the very nature of hierarchies tends to devalue women).

A third area of discussion was the use that might be made of Burke by feminist rhetoricians. Many of Burke's basic rhetorical constructs are useful to feminists as tools for the analysis of the negative construction of the feminine gender. Among the constructs useful for this purpose are mystery (which suggests how the mystification of women serves to keep them in their place and obedient) and the negative (which suggests the process by which women are constructed as other, non-standard, and inferior). If feminists transcend the content of Burke's theory and focus on its constructs as tools that can be used to analyze how rhetoric is used to construct gender, they can discover ideas for understanding women's oppression and various options for escaping it.

#### Unknown (Relatively) Essays by Kenneth Burke

Marcia Godich, Ellen Quandahl (Coordinator)

The seminar on neglected and little known work by Kenneth Burke had four participants, who contributed widely various pieces. Marcia Godich (East Stroudsburg University) brought four stories from KB's high school literary magazine, *The Peabody*, dated 1913-1914. She is working on a collection of juvenilia, and would like to be in contact with others interested in collaborating on the volume or contributing critical essays. The seminar also looked at some of Burke's early essays on the topic of "Americanism," and pieces concerning psychoanalysis.

#### Kenneth Burke and Political Communication

##### "Considering Political Behavior Dramatically"

Grace Boggs, Jim Combs (Coordinator), Dan Dunn, Charles Elkins, Lind Krug, David Ling, and Pat McKercher.

Blessed as we were with a political activist, we spent much of our time discussing how Burke might be used in political movements, and the reasons why so few academics have become political activists (as Burke would want us to become). As a result, at the end of the seminar we developed a five plank political manifesto which we shared with the larger group on the last day of the conference.

We hereby challenge the scholarly community:

1. To see the community as a way of knowing; to expand, understand, criticize, and create symbol systems—metaphors—on both a local and national level;

2. To ask if we are doing enough as critics; to realize that we are doing much to describe and interpret, but we're not inviting action—as Burke would have us do; to realize that we are not offering our expertise to construct symbols in such a way that will get people to identify and participate with communities;

3. To ask if the symbolic grounds of our resistance are legitimate; to ask what stands in our way of offering our expertise; to ask why more of us are not activists;

4. To ask if we have reached a point where the political players in the electoral process cannot tell rhetorical truths; to ask what does this tell us about the electoral process; and

5. To consider the importance of reclaiming—the role of critic, the community, our passion.

#### A Critic's Workshop

Robert L. Scott (Coordinator)

Those who participated in the seminar on criticism at the Burke conference were of two opinions: those who believe that the work of Kenneth Burke exhibits a unity such that critics should be able to create a system that would account for the apparent variety of his work and be readily, if not equally, applicable to any critical task. The other party of opinion believed that such a goal is not only impossible of achievement but masked the glory of Kenneth Burke which lies precisely in his variety: that is to say that critics may draw both inspiration and ideas from the plenty that is Burke adapting to the tasks of the moment, perhaps systematically, but without striving after the system of systems.

These two parties were unable to negotiate their different starting points but were able to talk amicably with one another by agreeing to listen to the projects each person wanted to discuss and responding vigorously and perhaps helpfully to the individuals. Some of these projects were well along—finished papers that their

authors intended to submit or had promised to specific enterprises. Other projects were quite preliminary, glints and gleams. All drew from Kenneth Burke.

### **Kenneth Burke and the Critique of Contemporary Culture**

Bernard Brock, Steve Depoe, Sharon Howell, Phyllis Japp, James Klumpp (Coordinator), Keisuke Kurata, Star Muir, Ron Primmeau, and Sarah Sinopoli.

This seminar began with the diversity that a title such as ours would suggest and ended with a series of perplexing questions which returned us to the job at hand: turning the critic toward communication in the moments which constitute culture.

The papers submitted to our fellow seminarists fell into three basic themes. The first group began with the sense that the Burkean method provided the critical power to illuminate communication as cultural expression. These treatments typically considered the power of the critic to interpret communication (broadly considered) as expression of culture and, through this power, to interpret culture. The second group highlighted Burke's direct commentary on the character of our culture. They viewed the critic and rhetor as located within a cultural reality toward which s/he rhetorically orients. The critic's art turns toward the rhetor searching for strategies to cope with the culture, but strategies of critic and rhetor are clearly nested within rhetorical problems defined by the character of contemporary culture. The third group empowered the critic more than the second group. The orientation that forged their thinking was the critic, alive in the world, continually coming to terms with it. They asked: Given the critic's active involvement in constructing his/her culture, how are we to construct such involvement?

From our initial work with this contributed material, we ranged across many topics with far more concrete discussion of events and discourse around us than this initial list of topics might indicate. This tone to our discussions led to a fascinating working through of the theory and praxis of criticism. Three major ideas formed to challenge our seminarists.

*What is the stance of the critic?* Is the critic interpreter (observer) or participant (activist)? This is, of course, a classic question in criticism. We discussed this question in some guise again and again. Certainly we had no one who was prepared to defend the extremist "interpreter" position, and those who articulated the "participant" position always seemed to praise the powers which the interpretive character gave the participant-critic. The resulting discussion seemed to drive us to answer "both . . . and . . ."—a consideration of the character of the critic forged in the merger of interpreter and participant.

This led us naturally to ask: What voice characterizes the involvement of this critic? Is it a rejective voice? A voice which defines the terms of acceptance? A voice responsible for interpretation? Once again our discussion tended to take us to find the stance of the critic in a

merger of seemingly contradictory ideas. "Reorientation" involves the voice of change, but with a grace note of the sacred. The note of persuasion in the critic's voice carries the construction of a plety or sacredness which would be an orientation.

Perhaps the final paradox in the stance of the critic which marked our discussion was the dialectical relationship between the voice of the critic and the voice of the theorist. Perhaps this relationship was best typified by the actual emergence of a much more practical consideration of communication within culture from the abstract positions which our preliminary papers presented. The result was a vision of a stance in which the character of the critic and the character of the theorist could both be perceived in the critical act. The critic would manifest each with a fluidity of capability, but with the expression of each being fullest in the expression of the other.

*How do we orient ourselves to Kenneth Burke?* Suppose we asked the question: do we need to go beyond Kenneth Burke? Our initial answer was an obvious "Yes" tempered only by the realization of the paradox created by the fact that no one goes beyond Burke quite as often as Kenneth Burke. In the end, however, the simple answer to the question turned out to be not as important as what a reflexive consideration of our discussion revealed. We would go for extended periods of time in deep discussion of ideas without mentioning Burke's work and in retrospect realizing that we had developed voices of our own which carried the tenor of Burkean starting points. We noted that our turning to the praxis of communication transformed our voice time and again. Some saw evidence of the relationship between Burkean "theory" and criticism in our own turn. In the end, we agreed the seminar seemed to be less "about Burke" than about critics in our moment. We often found an inspiration in Burkean concepts, but these concepts were transformed even as they were posed. The consubstantial expression of the voices of theory and criticism seemed to describe the orientation with which we conducted our seminars. Needless to say, we did not fully resolve questions such as these, but they will certainly constitute a legacy of the seminar in each of our thinking.

*Seizing the moment for communication and culture.* Overlying our discussion was an often tacit, but occasionally explicit, realization that we were meeting in this seminar at a moment when the work we were doing had never been more vital. As one seminarist put it: There may have been no previous time when our sense of public place is as up for grabs as today. The peoples of Eastern Europe are constructing their sense of the public in new ways in an intricate web of communication largely hidden from American view, but with potential for innovation. That technology is out of control and robbing humans of control over their lives in subtle—and some not so subtle—ways is becoming increasingly evident. With the isolation of American politics from popular relevance, the loss of the sense of the public place in America is an increasing focus of critical inquiry. The emergence of global awareness—not simply inter-nationalism but

alternative senses of global definition of experience—calls for new languages of expression to articulate transformed understanding.

The critical voice in the public sphere acquires vitality from this moment. Communication, which creates the public moment in the encounter with experience, reorients understanding through a vital dialogue of critique, enables new languages which adapt ways of encounter, reconstructs the sacred from the critique of the old piety, and transforms the culture in the babel. The critic's moment lies connected to the past and future, to theory and experience, to the work of Burke (and others) and the demands of the new, and the critic who transforms that moment vitally defines the importance of communication and culture.

Thus, we ended with an elevated sense of the urgency in our task—the critic's merger of interpretation and participation places his/her voice at the vital center of the process of the transformation of the moment—but with a humble realization that this task opened a series of questions which we only began to address in our brief time together.

### An Interview With Kenneth Burke

For many in attendance, the interview with Kenneth Burke at the conclusion of the convention was a memorable experience—an opportunity to sit and talk with the master—what James W. Chesebro called: "A final word from K.B." Indeed, Burke's responses did serve to summarize our time in New Harmony. Throughout the interview Burke was delightfully entertaining and, as always, charmingly insightful.

Chesebro began the interview by asking Burke what he meant by "Operation Benchmark." Burke replied that he wanted: "to make a scheme whereby you meet the test of being in the Kenneth Burke Society. . . . Anything you say [about his work should be tempered with the statement] Burke said it's this way—I say it's this. There has to be some leeway in this business. I see no reason for being authoritative." Accordingly, Burke objected to Derrida because of his "guru stuff."

Chesebro followed by asking: "Do you think you are a postmodernist?" To which Burke replied: "I hope not. . . . The way ideas emerge . . . the whole thing becomes irrelevant. Nobody wins in the unending conversation—it moves on."

Here Burke paused for a moment and asked for the audience's patience. He noted that as one gets older certain bodily constraints manifest themselves. For example, Burke observed that he had two sets of teeth, one for eating and one for speaking. Begging the audience's indulgence, Burke stated that: "I've got my eating teeth in and don't want to eat my words." He artfully employed this humorous diversion to move to a discussion of his notions about language, the body, and how the two combine to illustrate a theory of language use that Burke labeled "psychogenic illness." Burke noted that: "We learn language differently. More and more I've

got to the notion that your body lends a different medium. . . . I believe psychogenic illnesses are all . . . people using language in different ways. . . . The man who has a disease has a vision . . . every disease has its own way of looking at things. I think if your language is built around your disease, you just have certain things going on. . . . Humor started out almost like a psychogenic disease. Everyone has humor." In other words, symbol usage determines situations and strategically emphasizes motive (disease).

Dale A. Bertelsen then asked Burke to speculate on what system might follow magic, religion, and science. Burke replied that: "Science fiction can be used as a system for rhetoric." As an example, Burke offered: "on this matter of the Amazon area, where we're trying to get them to save the rainforests . . . make the Amazon rainforest a true zoo . . . we made the Indians somewhat a zoo with their reservations . . . we could make it completely" if we "let them have their own society" within the confines of the rainforest.

The interview concluded with Burke responding to questions from the audience about feminism, Christian Science influences in his work, and the "anecdotalism" of an anecdotalist in his 90s.

### Conclusion

Of all the shared experiences at New Harmony, none is quite as lasting as the opportunity to witness the twentieth century's finest critic engaging in the art that for so many years has offered others a foundation and impetus for their own work. In the privacy of his room, the shared conversation of the seminar, and the forum of the plenary and program sessions, Burke engaged in the "co-haggling" that has been his trademark. Gently guiding beginners and deftly provoking seasoned scholars, Burke reminded all that Rueckert has the right idea: criticism is a way of life. It is the critic who has the power to cast the form of and for the future, thus controlling the present of that future. For critics, such an act is a weighty responsibility. As Burkean critics, it is a responsibility that we should attend to with dispatch and conviction.

The final testament to the 1990 national Kenneth Burke Society Convention rests in the philosophical orientation Kenneth Burke provides. His dramatism and logology offer ontological and epistemological systems that articulate a viable conception of reality and the necessary equipment for resolving human crises. Burke's comprehensive investigation of symbol-using arguably casts him as the "word man." Indeed, the 1990s may become the period where Kenneth Burke is celebrated as an eponym of twentieth century social criticism and thought.

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## Criticism as a Way of Life or Criticism as Equipment for Living

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William H. Rueckert

### Mottos

"Criticism generically is not derivative or secondary activity. It is a primal and natural expression of language and thought." *Poetics*, p. 306

"Whatever poetry may be, criticism had best be comic."  
ATH

"Any terminology is suspect that does not allow for the progressive criticism of itself." RR, 303

"Criticism is important because people are entities capable of symbolic action and to varying degrees they can be addressed, reasoned with, petitioned, persuaded. Things can but move or be moved. One does not negotiate with nature." RR, p. 40 (with additions)

"Smiling Hypochondriasis: the attitude of the patient/critic who makes peace with his symptoms by becoming interested in them—and in this way learns to appreciate them."  
GM, 443

"Criticism is written to purify war, to promote tolerance by speculation, to foster the principles of wonder, resignation and sympathy, and to widen our powers of meditation."  
GM

### By Way of Introduction

My original plan for this talk was to take up *Attitudes Toward History*, *A Grammar of Motives*, and *The Rhetoric of Religion* so that I could discuss comic criticism, dramatic criticism, logological criticism, and their relationship to each other. After writing more than a hundred pages in an attempt to get all of this worked out, I realized the futility of my plan in relation to the time available and, when the end of March approached and I was still writing, I succumbed to hysteria, quit writing, and took inventory of my options. I had a whole talk on the third edition of *Attitudes Toward History*, half a talk on *A Grammar of Motives*, which could easily be expanded, and three quite different talks on *The Rhetoric of Religion*, plus many meandering pages of tentative conclusions about the continuities of comic criticism over a fifty year period.

With so many options open to me after my mid winter logomania, it was hard to make an intelligent choice—even after reading everything over many times. So I decided to follow the pleasure principle and pick the piece of work which had given me the greatest amount of satisfaction.

That clearly was the new thinking I did on *Attitudes Toward History*, beginning with the 1937 edition and then working my way through the additions Burke made to it between 1955 and 1984. This allowed me to sort of achieve my original goal, which was to move from comedy to dramatism to logology—and beyond—and to clearly establish the continuities of comic criticism from its origins in *Attitudes Toward History* to its continuation and culmination as the main perspective of both dramatism and logology.

What follows is an account of my most recent encounter with *Attitudes Toward History*, a text that has been with us now for fifty-three years and seems as fresh, exhilarating, and applicable as ever after all this time. Most of my talk is devoted to it and to the nature of comic criticism. The last part deals with the additions Burke made to the original text: three for the second Hermes edition in 1959, and the long Afterward he added to the 1984 University of California Press third edition. The first group of additions connect comic criticism to dramatism and its vision of the drama of human relations; and the second, final addition connects comic criticism to Burke's later logological vision of the human condition and the drama of human relations.

My original title for this talk was *Criticism As A Way of Life*. It is/was the working title of a projected final short book I was planning to write on Burke's career. I've stuck with that title because it indicates the central, somewhat monomaniacal concern in all of the work I did getting ready for this conference—which was to accurately characterize Burke's kind of criticism and to track the changes which have occurred in it since he first committed himself to criticism as his way of life in the thirties.

### I.

*Attitudes Toward History—1937—The Comic Perspective*

"Whatever poetry may be, criticism had best be comic."

Without casting any aspersions on the four books that preceded *Attitudes Toward History*—two of fiction, one of literary and one of social criticism—I think we can accurately say that *Attitudes Toward History* is the first true flowering of Burke's genius as a critic. In the structure of *Attitudes Toward History* we have a map of Burke's mind. The book is in three parts and has many apparently digressive footnotes which allow Burke to radiate out from, or range out from, any particular point into a wide variety of examples and ramifications. This radiating out from is one of the most characteristic actions of Burke's mind, which is a mind that seldom moves in a straight line in the manner of a philosophical argument or a regular, orderly expository mode. It is a mind that likes detours and has a very unusual, original, and sometimes baffling way of putting this together. The three parts of this book have a repetitive structure in the sense that each section ends with a discussion of the comic frame of acceptance which is, Burke argues, the corrective frame the social critic should adopt and apply at that particular point in history if both the critic



and our sick society are to be restored to sanity and health.

In trying to think about the function of criticism for Burke, we should not forget that every one of Burke's books and major essays also functioned for him as symbolic action in rather complex ways. In a letter to Cowley after his wife Libbie died, Burke says that he wrote all of his books after they met in order to keep proving to her that he was worthy of her. He has not published a new book since she died. Of *Permanence and Change*, Burke says that it was a book which he put together in order to keep himself from falling apart. He also says of *Permanence and Change* that, not knowing who he was or where he was in his head, he wrote the book in order to discover some answers to these questions. Of his novel, *Towards a Better Life*, he says, among other things, that it names his number and that by writing it he was able to purge himself of many of his negative and destructive character traits and prepare himself for a better life. He also says that if we but knew how to read this novel as symbolic action, we would discover that it is really all about his relationship to Libbie. It seems obvious now that *Attitudes Toward History* was as much addressed to Burke himself as it was to his readers and that he was clearly trying to make himself over in the positive, affirmative image of the book he was writing. He was never to abandon the comic perspective he first developed in this book.

The book begins with a consideration of universal frames of acceptance and rejection as they are embodied in the written word. (And we should always remember that Burke is primarily a critic of the written word.) These frames—that is, these attitudes toward history—may be embodied in poems (Whitman), in essays (Emerson), philosophical texts (James), and other kinds of written texts—including works in all of the different poetic categories, such as comedy, tragedy, and satire. Comedy is singled out in the first section of the book as the best of all possible frames of acceptance, as exemplified in the works of those great 19th century American affirmers, Emerson, Whitman, and James. We are also told that the best of Marx, Bentham, and Veblen is "high comedy." Prophesying after the fact, we can certainly say the same of the best of Burke. Criticism and comedy are later joined up in Burke's assertion that "whatever poetry may be, criticism had best be comic." The whole book is an extended definition and demonstration of what comic criticism is and a highly persuasive argument as to why the comic perspective should be adopted by the social critic.

Part II shifts from the universal to the historical, which is another characteristic movement of Burke's mind, whether he does it by going from the logical to the temporal, from the timeless cycle of terms implicit in the idea of order to the rectilinear narrative of Genesis 1-3, or from the particulars of a specific text to the philosophy of literary form (or the reverse—say from the essence of tragedy to *Othello*). More specifically, in Part Two Burke traces the curve of Western history from its beginnings to the 1930s in America—that is, to his own particular time, place, and society—using the rather startling metaphor of the five act play to organize and enliven his presentation. Burke's conclusion is that the comic frame of acceptance and comic

criticism—what he calls comic correctives—are what is needed to cure the ills from which America and Western Society are now suffering. Thus, the movement of Part I is repeated in Part II, but quite different material is used and the comic perspective is explained at much greater length almost at the very center of the book. Again, it is very characteristic of Burke to always address specific historical problems (what is happening at his point in history) and to also address the larger, timeless, universal problems. In this way, he can consider the extent to which the *Now* is a deviation from some ideal norm of the good life which he has in his head and speculate on what could or should be done to correct this deviation.

Part III is the most radical section of the book and the one that tells us the most about Burke's genius and his methods as a critic. The corrective comic frame has been laid out in some detail at the end of Part II. We expect it to be applied in Part III. But there is an abrupt shift in Part III, Chapter One, to the analysis of symbolic structures and the "general nature of ritual." Most of what is in this chapter consists of the analysis of symbolism in literary works, especially covert private symbolism of the kind that was to figure so prominently in Burke's theory of literature as symbolic action, with its obsessive interest in the ways in which symbolic verbal structures function as purgative-redemptive rituals of rebirth for those who enacted them. In a sense we are back where the book began with its brief analyses of the ways in which the symbolic structures of Emerson, Whitman, James, and others functioned as rituals of acceptance and rejection by locating and taking a position in relation to symbols of authority. We are back to the way in which texts function as part of our equipment for living and, more specifically, to the ways in which the critic, by making use of a comic critique of social relations as he finds them presented in various texts, can develop poetic symbols and critical formulations that help us size up the important factors of reality and to adopt workable attitudes toward them. It is in this sense that criticism also functions as part of our equipment for living—something that it most certainly did for Burke during his long and varied critical life. The critic is a mediator between the symbolic structures and us readers; he shares his knowledge with us, not because he thinks we are stupid but because he sees things in these texts that we don't and he is convinced that his knowledge will be useful to us. It is in this way that the mediating function of criticism becomes creative and justifies its existence.

In Part III, Chapter Two, there is another abrupt shift when Burke turns to the "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms," which forms the real conclusion to the book—insofar as any book by Burke has a conclusion. These are called pivotal terms because taken together they constitute the terminological cluster which the comic critic needs for his analysis of society and the symbolic structures, or texts, that shape and guide our lives in society. Since the advent of writing, we have lived by the ideas expressed in the *written word*, and this has always been Burke's special domain. He is not an anthropologist and does not really do field work. He seldom works without a specific written text, sometimes



even creating his own texts, or stories as in the "Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven" and the Helhaven satire, and sometimes analyzing his own texts, as in "Stress, Its Seeking," where he uses his own novel *Towards a Better Life*, or in the commentary on his Eye Crossing poem; and sometimes, he even uses himself as text.

It was certainly an act of genius on Burke's part to arrange the conclusion to this book in accordance with a scheme that does not follow logic or any kind of orderly principle of exposition, but follows a purely arbitrary alphabetical scheme which has the effect of making all the terms equal and equally implicated in each other. It also allows Burke to do what he does best, which is to make unexpected and new connections between the terms as he goes along. To arrange the terms in this way is to arrange them in a timeless order rather than a narrative or logical order, so that each term implies the other and all terms imply each other. Most of the terms in the dictionary have been used over and over, often in quotes, in the preceding parts of the book. The one major omission in the dictionary is the term comic or any variations thereof. The whole book defines comic and all the terms in the dictionary belong to the terminological cluster which the comic critic needs for his social criticism. The brief "Conclusion" which follows the dictionary does return to comedy, thus completing, by reaffirming, the repetitive structural symmetry of the book as a whole.

Much of this book—most of Burke, really—is about the need to have an adequate, pliant range of terms for discussing a given text or situation. As Burke later pointed out in one of his most notable phases, every term is simultaneously a reflection, selection, and deflection of and from reality. What is needed is a full, pliant terminological cluster such as Burke tries to generate here, and most certainly does generate in the great terminological diversity of *A Grammar of Motives* and *Dramatism* in general. This master at analyzing and dismantling other's terminological clusters and screens in deconstructive critical actions that preceded deconstruction itself (without the powerful negative bias or starting point of deconstruction) begins here what was to be a lifelong attempt to develop or generate a variety of pliant, "liquid" terminological clusters for his comic criticism, an endeavor that came to its first real fruition in the conflation of *dramatism* and *logology*. We should note here that once he named and characterized it, in *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke insisted ever after in calling his criticism comic, even, as he says, when the subject of it is tragedy, or his own later tragic logotechnological vision for the word-using species. The informing spirit of his criticism is always comic, right up to 1985, and it is good to always remember this.

The whole of the "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms" is Burke at his best, at his wittiest, most inventive and freewheeling (to borrow an automotive term from the thirties), most comic, most aphoristic and formulaic. It is like the Burke we find in the "Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven," which forms the ironic, witty, comic conclusion to *The Rhetoric of Religion*, and has the same kind of certainty and assurance that the "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms" does. In fact, we

could compile a later and equally definitive dictionary of pivotal Burkean terms from the "Epilogue" and *The Rhetoric of Religion* as a whole. And a dictionary of pivotal terms for Burke as a whole would be a wonderful way to do Burke in his own fashion.

In order to illustrate his own point about terminological clusters, Burke starts the dictionary with Alienation and ends it with Transcendence. Start with Transcendence and you are going to get to Alienation at some point, not by logic in the usual sense, but because, as Burke is so fond of demonstrating in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, if transcendence, then something that needs to be transcended, and hence alienation. If alienation, then something that is causing it, and so forth. Turn to "Lexicological," where the dictionary is used to define itself: "An argument (as in a lawyer's brief)," Burke writes, "is nothing but a set of interrelated terms and one's real job as a critic is to disclose and discuss these interrelationships, thereupon testing their relevance by applying them to the interpretation of events" (ATH, 293). Any set of interrelated terms can be taken and arranged arbitrarily on a sheet of paper so that you can start anywhere and will have moved through the set of terms by the time you finish, but never in any prescribed order. As such, these terms do not constitute an argument, but a range of terms necessary to discuss a subject.

Let us, for example, generate the terminological cluster from *Attitudes Toward History* that defines comedy, the comic, the comic critic, the comic corrective, the comic perspective and frame of acceptance. We'll do this from the text as a whole rather than from just the "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms." Burke begins constructing the comic cluster on page 39 when he first discusses comedy as a frame of acceptance and the most civilized form of art. Burke is not really interested in comedy as a dramatic form, but as an attitude toward history, a habit of mind, a perspective, a critical/analytic way of looking at and examining the drama of human relations as it unfolds in history.

The motto of this book might be: Everyman a comic critic, for like all of Burke's other books, this one is addressed directly to each individual reader and urges him, tries to persuade him to make himself—his mind—over in the image of the comic critic. Burke knows very well that society does not read books, individuals do, and it is the inside of the head of these individuals that you want to try to change with your criticism—rather than, say, the institutions, which is what politicians try to change. Though he was always a highly idealistic thinker and critic, Burke was always a political realist and certainly knew who he was writing for and what sort of effect his books would have. The uneducated do not read Burke and only a small, elite segment of the highly educated read him and take him seriously. It is hard—impossible, really—to imagine Burke on the political circuit, or out trying to organize the workers. Though he never really abandoned some of the important things he learned from Marx, Burke did flirt briefly with communism (which is always dedicated to institutional changes), but soon abandoned it and its party line to pursue his own highly individual and original program of social

thought. Burke was never going to take orders from anyone. As he said in one of his wonderful offhand remarks to one of his adversaries: "Well, you don't *have* to think the way the Pope does." Criticism has to be free to be itself and no established orthodoxy would ever appeal very much to, or be able to restrain Burke's ever ironic and always questioning mind. This is the critic, we should remember, whose comic inspiration it was to put his own words into the mouth of The Lord.

Comedy, Burke says, in this oft quoted passage, is the most civilized form of art because it depicts people not as vicious or criminal, but as mistaken and foolish. Anyone can be mistaken and foolish at times. If mistaken or ignorant, you can be corrected by being brought to knowledge; if foolish, you can be taught the manners necessary to be less foolish. Shaw's *Pygmalion* is one of our archetypal comedies. Comedy shows us, Burke says, that every insight contains its own blindness, and so works against arrogance and pride, against believing that one is always right and has the right to be right and impose it on others. Comedy teaches humility (we are all sometimes mistaken, foolish, wrong, wrong headed) because in realizing our errors (and correcting them) and in being able to laugh at ourselves we realize that we are not better than everyone else, but just like everyone else in some ways. Comedy promotes integrative, socializing knowledge. Why is comedy so civilized? Well, for one thing, people do not kill and victimize each other or commit suicide in comedies, as they do in tragedies; people are not punished in comedy, but corrected by dialogue and dialectic.

One comedy in which people are punished (forever) because they are beyond being corrected is Dante's *Divine Comedy*; but Burke makes the point over and over in *Attitudes Toward History* (in all his work, really) that the comic frame (like logology) is secular and deals with people in society, not with humans in their relationship to God and divine justice. In fact, *The Divine Comedy* would be just about the furthest away from Burke's comic perspective that one could imagine. The idea of the unforgivable, eternally punished sin is certainly foreign to the comic perspective; it is a frame of acceptance dedicated to the amelioration of individual lives in society, largely by means of knowledge of human error and a whole series of salvation and transcendence devices which stress a both/and rather than an absolutist either/or, US vs. THEM attitude. It is a mind set committed to negotiation, education, and peace; one that is always opposed to the closed confrontational mind-set which so often leads to violence, killing, and war. In fact, Burke even says that war and the comic perspective are incompatible, which may be why he dedicated *A Grammar of Motives* to the purification of war.

Against the comic frame, Burke consistently and repeatedly sets the euphemistic, the debunking, and the polemical. Euphemistic is Burke's euphemism for the Church or any frame that is based upon a supernatural scheme that hides or covers up or misnames the real ills of life in society and promises a better life in the next world. As Burke points out here and elsewhere, this promise may make people feel

better, but it does nothing to change the causes of their poverty, misery, enslavement; their alienation and their rejection, their inability to be a significant part of society. By debunking, Burke means any frame or attitude that is consistently negative and simply attacks things in order to discredit or destroy them without putting anything better or positive in their place. To understand Burke's dislike of debunking, one should remember his two long essays on this tactic in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. By polemical, Burke means any absolutist frame that allows for only one point of view which is always defended as the only correct or true frame or doctrine. As *The Rhetoric of Religion* makes clear, Burke has not really changed his mind about the euphemistic frame, in spite of his great admiration for its formal beauty and symmetry; but it is the debunking/negative and the polemical/absolutist frames that are Burke's real enemies because the first simply destroys without offering constructive or creative alternatives; and the second tends to eliminate freedom of thought and action. Without freedom of thought there can be no criticism and hence no mavericks like Burke to stir up our minds with his many perspectives by incongruity and ironic examples of the bureaucratization of the imagination. And Burke has always insisted that without freedom there can be no authentic action. Working within a closed value system, as the debunker always does, eliminates alternatives, just as the absolutist/polemicist does, whether the doctrine is religious, political, ethnic, or philosophical. Burke found both of these approaches to words and reality intolerable and unacceptable and strenuously opposed both all of his critical life.

The comic frame tells the mind that it must equip itself to accurately name and confront its situation. It cannot oversimplify (give only one name) or misname the situation, nor can it assume that it will always be able to change the situation or eliminate what caused it. It is just as likely that the mind will have to change its attitudes in order to confront and learn to live with the situation. We must sometimes learn to change or perish, Burke reminds us, and we cannot act in 1937 in America as if it were the 14th century in Europe; nor can we try to keep on using a frame that has died out of history even though it is being kept alive by a well established bureaucracy even after history has clearly contradicted it.

Many of the modifiers for comic are terms that stress the need for a wider frame, a need to broaden ones terminology, a need for a well rounded frame, one that is an amplifying device rather than a diminishing or reductive one; there is a need for a perspective that includes an awareness of ambivalence and irony, that promotes the ability to see double, to use and recognize metaphor, to see around corners, to take multiple approaches. In other words, the comic perspective must acknowledge the fact that life—reality—is not static but is always in process, and that we must adopt a frame that accounts for the true complexity of the human situation and resists the mind's compulsion to reduce this complexity to an oversimplified, orderly set of terms. Over and over again in *Attitudes Toward History*

(and right on up to the present), Burke reminds us that all the returns are not in yet, and probably never will be. As Burke The Lord says at the end of the "Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven" it is always more complicated than that. The work of the critic is never done, can never be finished: there are no final solutions. The main solace for the critic is to know that one is not condemned to have to live forever. The irreversible flow of time always contains a promise of freedom. Others will come after to continue the work of criticism.

In trying to characterize the comic perspective, Burke says that it should be a frame that is charitable but not gullible, and thus promotes humility; it is a frame that stresses maximum awareness of the forensic (the public dialogue, debate, discussion, criticism itself); it should promote a realistic sense of one's limitations. The comic frame should acknowledge the basic truth of ecology, which is that everything is related to everything else; applying this to social relations, Burke says that one should strive for a balance or symbiosis of the material and transcendental in human affairs, a point that later will be basic to the whole conception and argument of *The Rhetoric of Religion*. The comic frame takes nothing at face value—it is not a literal minded view of things and is not subject to naive verbal realism, but assumes that there is always some symbolic content, that some covert motive may be lurking in even the most overt and explicit of statements and actions.

A comic perspective must be admonitory and should treat the so-called lore of errors as an aspect of truth, as corrective errors. A comic critic must know how to discount, must realize that things are not as they seem. One has to learn how to see double, recognize and use irony and ambivalence, read symbols, and recognize the deceptions of literal mindedness. The comic perspective disregards categories and aims at a perspective of totality, using perspective by incongruity to transcend categorical, logical barriers. As Burke argued in *Permanence and Change*, the comic critic must turn metaphor into perspective. The comic critic considers human life as a *project in composition*, hence it is always subject to revision and correction, depending upon the findings of the critic. The comic perspective stresses the maximum opportunity for the resources of criticism as equipment for living, and is committed to using all that is there to use. It does not believe in absolutes, in categorical Nos, in logic as an absolute criterion for truth, in any kind of rigidified doctrine or in the kind of fanaticism that supports terrorism around the world, whether it is ecoterrorism, anti-abortion terrorism, Marxist terrorism, Islamic terrorism, fundamentalist Christian terrorism, democratic terrorism, fascist terrorism, or racial terrorism.

Comic criticism is a social instrument; it allows one to both act and observe one's actions. It heightens self awareness and social responsibility at the same time. The comic critic must be analytical (rather than, say, purely evaluative) so that he can speculatively reassemble in a new way what he has taken apart as he works with the documents (texts) left by other people's perspectives. The comic critic must

develop a diagnostic technique Burke calls a tempered form of hypochondriasis.

Hypochondriasis is another medical metaphor which Burke used to characterize one of the essential attitudes and activities of the comic critic. It is similar to the ascultation metaphor he used in his abandoned manuscript of the early thirties when he was making his shift from literary to social criticism. Hypochondriasis is also a good example of Burke's tendency to coin terms that carry his own special meaning. This mouth full of harsh sounds means that one should study the symptoms and causes of one's own illness in order to better understand it so that one can learn how to treat it and live with it. Much of Burke's writing consists of the application of this diagnostic form of criticism to himself and to his own times. It is an essential feature of all dramatic criticism, especially in *A Grammar of Motives* and in the third part of *A Rhetoric of Motives* where Burke diagnoses and discusses the hierarchic psychosis. His story "The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell" is a classic example of his application of hypochondriasis to himself, as are many of his poems and many analyses of his own dreams.

The comic critic must develop critical formulations that enable him to size up the important factors of reality by means of a comic critique of social relations and to adopt workable attitudes toward them. Our times—Burke says in 1937—require maximum analytic and critical efforts because terminology itself has produced an analytic world—hence no other instrument but analysis can confront it with the necessary precision. This is the main reason why Burke became a comic social critic rather than, say, a poet or a fiction writer or even a purely literary critic. Comic criticism should be integrative and stress synthesizing attitudes. It tries to make one at home in the complexities of modern relativism and pluralism. One needs "liquid" attitudes, by which Burke means, ones that go with the flow. "While Everything Flows" was a title Burke contemplated using for *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and the title he would use, he says, for a collection of his essays since 1970.

The thirty-three pivotal devices or terms of comic criticism all stress the fact that getting along with people—rather than hating or vilifying or excluding or victimizing or killing them—is a primary object or goal of the good life. Later, Burke will add getting along with nature as part of the good life, especially in his later work. Picking up one of the main themes of *Permanence and Change*, Burke says that comic criticism stresses the fact that more of the artistic or poetic (creative) should be expressed in vital social relations so that we can cultivate an art of living well. The obverse of this, and of just about everything Burke proposes in *Attitudes Toward History* and in his later books, is killing, victimizing and destroying those you can't get along with, whether human or animal. We have seen a lot of this in our time, not just because there is a lot of it, but because the media makes it all so readily available to us. Even as Burke was writing this book, the purges were going on in Russia and the prelude to WWII (the Spanish Civil war) was in progress. Though radical in his thought and in the way he thought, Burke was never a revolutionary writer and never a

proponent of actual revolutionary action. Peaceful social change—the way of democracy—was always Burke's goal. You do not have to completely destroy an old order—which is the goal of most revolutions—in order to construct a new one. Even in the thirties, Burke was trying to devise ways of purifying war. Burke saw with great clarity what the real threats of Nazi fascism and Hitler were, and refers to both often in this book, and warns us at length about these dangers in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'."

This classic Burke text will perhaps help get us to the crux of the dilemma that is central to comic criticism and really to all of Burke's criticism and his conception of the role of the critic and the function of criticism in a democratic society.

Burke is a specialist in admonitory, preventive knowledge. In his analysis of Hitler's text, Burke shows that one of Hitler's major rhetorical political strategies was to unify a defeated and depressed Germany around hatred and fear of a common enemy. The Jews became this enemy of the state and were victimized by being turned into human scapegoats who were literally sacrificed in the name of national purity and unity. Burke shows how Hitler and the Nazi party skillfully manipulated a variety of deep, recurrent needs, fears, and tendencies to their own totalitarian political ends. Among these are guilt, with the corresponding need to purge it; alienation, and the corresponding need to find some way to unify the self; fear of contamination and the need to find a way to destroy or control the contaminant; and the always powerful desire for racial, ethnic, and national coherence and power. Guilt and the need to purge it; alienation and the desire for unity; the desire to act in the name of and believe in some higher purpose are among the deepest and most urgent of human needs. Religion and art normally minister to and satisfy these needs, usually in benign ways, making use of symbolic rather than real living scapegoats. Burke's argument is that the Nazis perverted these normal psychological and religious needs and desires by directing them against real humans as opposed to symbolic victims and using them to totalitarian political ends—a strategy that eventually resulted in the death of six million Jews as well as millions of other enemies of the state. Burke wrote this essay before the holocaust. We read it after that terrifying event, and many other genocidal actions that were also taken in the "name of the state" and might also be "explained" as rhetorical strategies which serve political ends. Here is Burke's conclusion to his essay: "Our job, then, our anti-Hitler battle, is to find all available ways of making the Hitlerite *distortions* apparent, in order that politicians of his kind in America be unable to perform a similar *swindle*" (PLF, 219). Burke's brilliant analysis and diagnosis of the rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle' is as persuasive an admonition now as it was in the thirties. However, the word "swindle" brings us up with a start in any Post World War II reading of this passage. What Hitler and the Nazis did, and what numerous politicians here and elsewhere have done, is more than a swindle—more than just the actions of con men. No amount of hypochondriasis can ever explain away or justify this event. It is not an illness. The problem of evil may often be met and dealt with by transcendence, as

Burke says in *Attitudes Toward History*, but this is an event that cannot be transcended: we acknowledge it, even though we don't really want to, because we have so thoroughly documented the horrifying reality of it. And similar events continue to happen all around the human world. Comic criticism can call this a *distortion* and a *swindle*, but in so doing it only identifies a problem that Burke, like St. Augustine, has always had trouble with—which is the problem of evil itself. Burke's problem was not with the origin of evil, as it was with St. Augustine, who had God to deal with, but what to do about it beyond warning us about it and how it works—especially in the organized killing and victimization of other human beings. Like Freud, Burke is an implacable dualist and has always known that evil originates within humans. The devil did not make Hitler and those who ran the death camps do what they did, nor did any abstract Manichean principle of evil do it. Burke has perhaps always believed too much in the power of words in the sense of believing that the constructive/reconstructive and destructive powers of words are equal. This does not always seem to be the case. It was a problem that also troubled Freud, who was never really certain that eros could or would triumph over thanatos.

I don't mean to cast a pall over comic criticism here, or even to discredit it; I only want to identify a problem that seems intrinsic to it and persists right on through dramatism and logology and what Burke has to say about the hierarchic psychosis and technology. Knowledge may be able to correct errors and dispel ignorance; it may prevent swindles and correct distortions, but it cannot make evil go away. Hitler and the Nazis knew exactly what they were doing. Nothing could have been more rational, more carefully thought out than their plans for the extermination of the European Jews. The same can be said of Stalin, of Mao, of the Khmer Rouge, of the drug barons, or of the Muslim terrorists.

But enough of this. Comedies always have happy endings so let us return to the comic perspective of *Attitudes Toward History*, which tells us, with characteristic Burkean irony, that our stupidities are ever born anew and that even the most accurate, astute, and comprehensive of sciences would not be foolproof. Hence, there must be in comic criticism a constant stress on the knowledge of limitations—as for example, the fact that any structure develops self-defeating emphases (inner contradictions) and unintended byproducts. Burke often refers to this as a neo-Malthusian admonition and gives as an example the question of how much longer the concept of progress, or limitless growth, can continue to engross mankind. Another example he gives is the comic perception that all bureaucratizations and bureaucracies such as the Kenneth Burke Society—say—eventually reach their Malthusian limits. Other examples are the comic critic's admonition that we must learn how to "socialize our losses" by saying to ourselves, not: I'm guilty; but *all* men are guilty. The comic critic should devise ways of putting things together by establishing modes of convertibility (perspectives by incongruity) between economic, religious, and esthetic vocabularies of

motives—or between material, transcendental, and imaginative or creative terminologies so that one can show that they are not so different as they might seem. The major emphasis in comic criticism is always reconciliatory and constructive.

The comic perspective, Burke says, is half way between the extremes of iconoclasm and hagiography which is a nice way of characterizing what he is doing in *Attitudes Toward History*. An iconoclast is basically a *debunker* like H.L. Mencken, bent on destroying cherished beliefs by showing that they are based on error or superstition or absurdities; and a hagiographer is an unquestioning venerator of saints and the miracles and orthodoxies that are usually a part of the church and transcendental sainthood. Following Emerson, the comic critic should try to make these extremes meet in some middle ground where neither would have to be completely denied. As Burke's satiric poems and essays show, he might have been a great debunker and iconoclast; but as his many critical books show, he was also a great idealist of the intellect and the powers of knowledge and a moralist whose most basic, often transcendental, values were ones he shared with many great Western religious and ethical thinkers. Terms like love, charity, humility, the good life, the way, peace, goodness, and truth appear all through Burke. Faith and hope are operative terms everywhere in Burke, but they are always to be understood in secular terms, as faith in the power of truth and knowledge (of dialogue, dialectics, and criticism); and hope, always, that we can move toward the better life and achieve the good life—not through the descent of the godhead into our world, but through the good offices of the critic, that dispenser of truth and knowledge, who keeps the dialogue going.

In this respect, Burke resembles other great humanistic thinkers. This is especially obvious when one comes on some of Burke's many "comic" aphorisms in *Attitudes Toward History*—such as the following one near the end of the book: the ideal of the comic frame is to continue to search for a vocabulary that could provide humility without humiliation, which is actually a quote from Gide, but might have come from any humanistic thinker. Humility is one of the many anti-pride, anti-self-aggrandizing, anti-capitalistic, knowledge of one's limitations, terms one finds in Burke. It is what John Neal acquires at the end of Burke's novel, *Towards a Better Life*. It is a term born of irony and self-knowledge in Burke, whose formidable intellect and verbal powers must always have tempted him away from humility toward humiliation. Humility defines the condition which all tragic protagonists must achieve after they have suffered their losses and come to knowledge of their death dealing pride, arrogance, and error of judgement. Oedipus, Creon, and Lear are perhaps the classic examples.

Humiliation is one of the many victimization terms one finds in Burke. Humiliating another person is a function of power, as is all victimization, whether of a minor variety, as in putting someone down, or of a major variety, as in the holocaust. The Nazis were always careful to humiliate—to degrade—the Jews they exterminated before the actual extermination, in any way that they could. It was part of the reduction to zero—from humans to nothing—process

the Nazis put them through. It is one reason people are tortured before they are killed.

In polarizing humility and humiliation, Burke, ever the dualist, even sometimes, as he says, a schizoid dualist—has given us creative and destructive terms and in so doing has clearly identified the major emphasis of comic criticism, which is always creative and cooperative, always upbeat, no matter how negative the knowledge it conveys may be. If ever there was a heads I win, tails you lose kind of attitude and approach, comic criticism has to be it. Just look how long it has kept Burke going.

## II.

So much for *Attitudes Toward History* and 1937. Now, I want to look at the additions Burke made between 1955 and 1984 to the second and third editions of this text. They show very clearly that Burke has remained true to the basic terms and values of comic criticism right up to the present.

In 1955 Burke added a brief "Introduction" to *Attitudes Toward History* as part of the second Hermes edition. In it he says that if comedy is his attitude of attitudes then the process of processes that it mediates upon is the bureaucratization of the imagination which is, he says, what happens universally when humans try to translate a pure, transcendental vision or aim into material terms. The pure vision is necessarily corrupted in its material embodiment. A classic example of this is what happened to Christ's vision when it was progressively bureaucratized by Paul and the church. Burke does not use the term corrupted: he says, more mildly and comically, as is his practice, that "vexing things happen when humans try to translate vision into action." Comic criticism, he says, *meditates* on this process. Later in the Introduction, Burke addresses the historical changes that have occurred since he wrote *Attitudes Toward History*, most notably the invention or discovery and use of the atom bomb and the awesome destructive potentialities in the event of a nuclear war between the super powers—or any nuclear powers. Burke says that this has brought about a "truly new situation which makes it all the more imperative that we learn to cherish the mildly charitable ways of comic discount. For by nothing less than such humanistic allowances can we hope to forestall (it it can be forestalled) the most idiotic tragedy imaginable: the willful ultimate poisoning of this lovely planet, in conformity with the mistaken heroics of war...." At the end of this remarkable passage, every key term of which could be examined at great length, if we but had the time, Burke says that he equates tragedy with war and comedy with peace. We can certainly conclude from this passage that one of the main functions of comic criticism is the purification of war and the promotion of peace.

Burke's second addition to *Attitudes Toward History* is a brief "Afterward to the Second Edition," which was presumably written at the same time as the "Introduction." The most significant point, for our purposes, is the following: In his later books, Burke writes, the problem which is



here discussed in terms of bureaucratic order is treated in terms of the socio-political pyramid, with its corresponding "hierarchical psychosis." This motive bears an important relation to tragedy. Thus, it might even be said to call for a "tragic" frame of interpretation rather than for a "comic" perspective. But as the issue looks from a comic point of view, however tragic tragedy may be in itself, the critical analysis of tragic motives is in essence comic. First of all, the socio-political pyramid, the hierarchical psychosis, and socio-anagogic criticism are introduced into dramatism in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Part III and dominate much of Burke's work from that point on through many of the essays in *Language as Symbolic Action*. The major theoretical essay in *The Rhetoric of Religion*—"The First Three Chapters of Genesis"—is centrally concerned with the socio-political order and the timeless cycle of terms intrinsic to it. Furthermore, the hierarchic psychosis—Burke calls it the tragic tension—is central to Burke's theory of tragedy and catharsis as he developed it in the early fifties in the various essays that were to be part of his *Symbolic of Motives*. Even as Burke's perception of things became more and more "tragic" after *A Rhetoric of Motives*, his criticism always remained, as he says, in essence comic. To understand this remark, one should read Burke's great critical essay on *Othello*, in which he uses the tragic tension of possession, as it is imitated and purged in that play, to do what comic criticism always does, whatever kind of text is being used: to bring us to knowledge and to warn us, not just about the tragic potentialities inherent in over-possessive love, but about the possession of every kind of property in any kind of socio-political order. Admonition is one of the most fundamental duties of comic criticism, as the next two additions will make clear.

Burke's third addition to *Attitudes Toward History* is his essay on the "Seven Offices," which was originally published in 1958. Comic criticism and the comic perspective are never mentioned in this essay, but the comic attitude that was born and named in *Attitudes Toward History* is simply renamed and prevails here, as it does everywhere in Burke. Burke's term for this attitude in the essay is "Neo-Stoic," a term he used frequently in *A Grammar of Motives*. Burke sometimes also calls this the neo-liberal ideal or attitude (354). The same kind of historically urgent question that is posed for the critic in *Attitudes Toward History* is posed here for the educator as follows: The ideal question for education today (as distinct from education always) would be: How adapt man to the needs of worldwide empire progressively made necessary by the conditions of technology. This question is answered in the essay entirely in dramatistic terms, which go far beyond the pivotal terms of *Attitudes Toward History*, with the whole discussion now being based in the dramatistic definition of man as the symbol-using or word-using animal, with all that goes with it in Burke, including, especially victimization by two of man's major creations: the socio-political order and technology. By 1958, when dramatism was pretty well completely formulated and written out and he was working on logology, Burke had begun to think in global rather than purely national or Western terms, which is one of the

notable differences between his work of the thirties and his later work.

The seven offices of the title need not concern us much here except to point out that the comic critic and comic criticism are mainly concerned with teaching, curing, and consoling. If I could add an eighth office, it would be admonishing. However, the end of this essay does require our careful attention since it restates the aims of comic, dramatistic criticism in terms of education. Burke's three part conclusion is as follows: (1) The overall aim of secular education would be to discover just what it means to be a symbol-using animal. Such would be the grand aim of education, Burke says—and, we might add, of dramatism, logology, and comic criticism in general. (2) The basic educational problem at this stage of history would be: How best adapt the symbol-using animal to the conditions of world empire that are being forced upon us by the irresistible 'progress' of technology. (Such would be the global aim of education.) And (3) Finally beginning with either of these propositions: to locate the typical source of individual anxiety, in not more than three moves, we should get to Neo-Stoic contemplation of the Hierarchic Psychosis (or Rat Race), that is the reflex of the need for a pyramidal or ladder-like order in human "offices."

First of all, we should note the ironic determinism and fatalism that are present here, as elsewhere in Burke: the conditions of world empire are being forced upon us by the irresistible "progress" of technology; the hierarchic psychosis and individual angst are the reflex of the need for order in human life. We must learn to adapt to the first and can only contemplate the second with neo-stoic resignation. We should also note the focus of criticism here: in (1), where the overall aim of secular education is stated, the emphasis is clearly on discovery and the acquisition of knowledge, for its own sake, pure and simple. We should know who and what we are, in empirical terms. In (2), the emphasis is still upon knowledge, but this time on the kind of knowledge that will enable us to best adapt to worldwide conditions that are of our own making but probably not to everybody's liking. If there is one thing you can count on in Burke, it is an insistence upon the fact that we are the cause of our own problems. In the passage about adapting to what is inevitable and cannot be changed, the job of criticism is to teach people what can't be changed or cured and to console them in whatever way one can. We should also note here that the ingredients of tragedy are implicit in the conditions of world empire being forced on us by the irresistible progress of technology. This point became Burke's primary concern after 1970. And finally, in (3), we should again note the stress on knowledge: individual anxiety is inevitable and we can only deal with it by means of neo-stoic contemplation. Contemplation is such a key Burkean term, so central to what comic criticism is all about, we should dwell on it a bit. Contemplation does not necessarily lead to action, so that once again we come on the great modern disjunction between knowledge, action, and power. Neo-stoic contemplation takes us back to adapting (in 2) and to the sheer knowledge gathering in (1). There is no Marxian dialectic and idealism here, no movement from thesis, to



antithesis, to final synthesis: there is learning about, adapting to, and contemplating what is, what has been, and what will be. We might say that there is, finally, only the comic contemplation of the tragic global human situation. Remember that this was in 1958, after Burke had worked out dramatism and while he was working out logology. And not that the occasion for this essay is a conference on education and that the whole thrust of the essay is what we should be teaching our young people to equip them for living and prepare them for the future.

The final addition to *Attitudes Toward History* is Burke's "In Retrospective Prospect" which he wrote in the early 1980s for the third edition of *Attitudes Toward History*, forty-seven years after the first edition in 1937. We might say of this new and final afterward, that it is post-everything, and that it is typical of Burke and comic criticism to still be looking forward even as one looks back after all those years of critical endeavor. Like all the rest of Burke's late or post 1970 work, this long "Afterward" is centrally concerned with symbol-using, high technology and counter-nature, or what we might call the logology-technology cluster. Always admonitory, comic criticism here warns us, not about the hierarchic psychosis and the suicidal and homicidal threats posed by life in any socio-political order as *The Rhetoric of Religion* does, but about the dangers inherent in another of man's creations: high technology, the Technologic Edifice, counter-nature, all of which are made possible by man's symbol-using genius, just as all socio-political orders, with their Laws, are made possible by this same symbol-using genius. The question Burke raises—he is always asking these hard questions—is whether any worldwide political system can be contrived which will be adequate to control the uses and misuses of High Technology and the Technologic Edifice, which Burke likens to a vast grotesque cathedral (like the church in *Attitudes Toward History*) composed of nothing but gargoyles which spurt, not rain water, but a constant downpour of electronic and chemical pollutants which will go on as our bequest to the future, insofar as the human race lets itself have one.

Burke does not answer his own question, but true to the spirit of comic criticism, which has been admonishing us since 1937, just as Freud did, earlier, about our innate divided nature and our apparently equally powerful and paradoxical potential for creation and destruction, peace and war, eros and thanatos, Burke, ever the comic critic, says at the very end of this darksome look into our future, that "technology has a kind of built-in hopefulness, not just with regard to the resources and resourcefulness of Technology itself, but even to hoping that a worldwide political system adequate to control its uses and misuses can somehow be contrived" (339-340). The point of comic criticism (and Burke has never been anything but a comic critic, no matter how dark and tragic his vision)—is that if we can create the problem, we can also solve it, or find ways to control it, as with contriving a worldwide political system adequate to control the uses and misuses of our monstrous Technology—always capitalized by Burke, as if it were a God. Uncontrolled or unwisely used, it will surely destroy its creators, whether by accident or design. Never a doomsday

critic or a debunker—for that would be antithetical to the spirit of comic criticism—Burke has pointed out that by using our rationality (our symbol-using genius) to create our high technology, we have arrived at the outer limits of rationality and at an ironic and potentially tragic point where rationality is in conflict with itself. The instruments invented and created by humans threaten, now, to destroy the persons who created them. That is what Burke means when he says we are now polarized by the conflict between personality and instrumentality, whether we think of it in terms of computers, recombinant DNA, thermonuclear warheads, the fantastic resources of medical technology (which can keep even the technically dead alive for years) or the wonders of modern chemistry. Burke, of course, votes for personality, comic criticism, neo-stoicism, smiling hypochondriasis, neo-humanism, dramatism, logology, and all those other views which subscribe to the basic view of *life as an education*. We learn by suffering, Burke says, and surely the kind of knowledge he arrives at and shares with us is a form of creative suffering, functioning as it does, in an admonitory way, as all pain does. Preventive, admonitory, knowledge and creative suffering. Pain, Burke says, is the sharpest of admonitions any organism learns to choose and thus live by. Freud said much the same thing in explaining the conflict between eros and thanatos in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. If we bring Freud and Burke together here at the end, we have left him in good company, for we can say of Burke, as he said of Freud, that a mind like Burke's deserves "the eternal respect of mankind because of the profound imaginativeness and methodical skill by which he widened our powers of meditation."

## NEWS AND NOTES

### Increased Mailing Costs Alter Policy

This will be the last free issue of the *Newsletter* for those who have not renewed their membership in the Kenneth Burke Society. If you wish to renew your membership and continue receiving the *Newsletter*, please contact James W. Chesebro, Membership Chair.

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### Directory of Officers

Enclosed in this issue of the *Newsletter* you will find a directory of officers for the Kenneth Burke Society. If you know of any chapters we have omitted, new chapters we don't know about, or have any additions or corrections please contact the Editor.

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### KB Portrait Available

A limited edition print of the painting "Never Twice the Same: A Portrait of Kenneth Burke," presented to Burke at his "Burke-Day" celebration, is available for a limited time. A percentage of the proceeds will benefit the Burke Society. Order forms are included in this issue of the *Newsletter*.

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### Newsletter Contributors

Those interested in publishing their work in the *Newsletter* please note our continued interest in your labors. To encourage diversity for our readers, future issues will contain: feature articles, book reviews, news and notes, poetry, and a forum. If you have items of interest, please send them along.

### Kostelanetz: Profile of KB

Richard Kostelanetz published an updated profile of Kenneth Burke in the April issue of *American Poetry Review*. The profile will also appear in Kostelanetz's new book of essays on poetry, *The New Poetries and Some Old*, due by the end of this year from Southern Illinois University Press.

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### Thank You

The Editor wishes to thank his graduate students for their helpful suggestions and diligent efforts in making this *Newsletter* possible. Paula Miller, Bryan Schaffer, Kate Smith, Ying Fan Zhang, and Shakuntala Rao have contributed much and deserve a heartfelt thank you!



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Editor—Dale A. Bertelsen, Bloomsburg University  
Assistant Editors—Mary Mino, Penn State University,  
DuBois, Howard Schreier, Bloomsburg University.  
Production—Jo A. DeMarco, Bloomsburg University.

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