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978-0-521-42258-1 - Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism

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Kenneth Burke, arguably the most important American literary theorist of the twentieth century, helped define the theoretical terrain for contemporary cultural studies. His perspectives were literary and linguistic, but his influences ranged across history, philosophy and the social sciences. In this important and original study Robert Wess traces the trajectory of Burke's long career and situates his work in relation to postmodernity. His study is both an examination of contemporary theories of rhetoric, ideology and the subject, and an explanation of why Burke failed to complete his *Motives* trilogy. Burke's own critique of the "isolated unique individual" led him to question the possibility of unique individualism, a strategy which anticipated important elements of postmodern concepts of subjectivity. Robert Wess's study is both a timely and judicious exposition of Burke's massive *œuvre*, and a crucial intervention in current debates on rhetoric and human agency.

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# Kenneth Burke

Rhetoric, subjectivity, postmodernism



**ROBERT WESS**

*Oregon State University*



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*For Sandra*

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Anybody can do anything for any reason.

Burke, SO

[Humans] build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious,  
at the edge of an abyss.

Burke, PC

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## Preface

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In the narrative in these pages of Kenneth Burke's career, the themes of rhetoric, subjectivity, and postmodernism are concentrated in the term "a rhetoric of the subject." Our term rather than Burke's, "a rhetoric of the subject" designates, as it were, the position of the narrator in this narrative.

Offering glimpses of the overall structure of the narrative in passing, chapter 1 introduces a rhetoric of the human subject, placing it in the context of contemporary theory, particularly contemporary theorizing of ideology, here construed as a rhetoricizing of ideology. Chapter 1's argument, in a nutshell, is that contemporary theory needs Burke's rhetorical realism of the act to preserve the theoretical gains of recent decades by warding off the rhetorical idealism that sometimes threatens to undermine them.

A rhetoric of the subject is apart from and a part of Burke's career: a part of it in the sense that we extrapolate this rhetoric from *GM* and *RM*, considered here as constituting a completed rhetorical theory of the subject<sup>1</sup>; apart from it in the sense that Burke seems always to have seen these two books as two parts of a trilogy needing *SM* to be complete. Further, during the final phase of his career, he tends to shy away from the full implications of a rhetoric of the subject, although near the end of his life, there may be one last change in direction. A rhetoric of the subject is thus – as the theoretical point Burke paradoxically both moves toward and resists – the source of the principal tension in our narrative of his preternaturally long career.

1 Our extrapolation may be considered an "extension" in the sense designated by the title *Extensions of the Burkeian System*, a volume growing out of the 1990 convention of the Kenneth Burke Society. "Extension" here refers to the practice, encouraged by Burke himself, of using Burke and simultaneously departing from his work in some new direction (Chesebro vii–viii).

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Acknowledging my debts upon completing this book became more difficult as I became more aware in the process of writing it of just how overdetermined a book is. I'm responsible for the words on these pages, but for whatever merit they may possess I'm indebted to many others, too many to acknowledge or perhaps even fully comprehend. But I cannot let this opportunity pass without thanking Richard McKeon for starting my education in rhetoric and Kenneth Burke for continuing it; no doubt they would consider me a sometimes wayward student. The Center for the Humanities at Oregon State University provided invaluable time for part of my research and writing; I and my colleagues at Oregon State are indebted to its director, Peter Copek, whose vision and energy brought this Center to our campus. To the reader commissioned by Cambridge University Press, Steven Mailloux, I'm indebted for a critical assessment that helped me make this a better book. Michael Sprinker – all that I could hope for in a reader and more – meticulously read through two complete drafts; I'm indebted to him for innumerable suggestions that saved me from many errors and undoubtedly would have saved me from even more had I been able to heed them all. Finally, for all her support during all our years together, I dedicate this book to Sandra.

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## Acknowledgments



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Special acknowledgment is also due, for permission to quote from all these letters, to Michael Burke and the KB Literary Trust.

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## Abbreviations

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- ACR "Auscultation, Creation, and Revision: The Rout of the Esthetes – Literature, Marxism, and Beyond." *Extensions of the Burkeian System*. Ed. James W. Chesebro. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993. 42–172.
- ATH<sub>1</sub> *Attitudes toward History*. 2 vols. New York: New Republic, 1937.
- ATH *Attitudes toward History*. 1937. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- CP *Collected Poems 1915–1967*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.
- CS *Counter-Statement*. 1931. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.
- DD *Dramatism and Development*. Barre: Clark University Press, 1972.
- GM *A Grammar of Motives*. 1945. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- "LR" "Lexicon Rhetoricæ." 1931. CS 123–83.
- LSA *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- PC<sub>1</sub> *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. New York: New Republic Books, 1935.
- PC *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. 1935. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- PDC *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered*. Unpublished typescript.
- PLF *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. 1941. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- "PLF" "The Philosophy of Literary Form." PLF 1–137.
- RM *A Rhetoric of Motives*. 1950. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- RR *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. 1961. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.
- SCBC *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm*

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- Cowley: 1915–1981*. Ed. Paul Jay. New York: Viking, 1988.
- SM *A Symbolic of Motives*. Projected but not completed.
- TBL *Towards a Better Life: Being a Series of Epistles, or Declamations*. 1932. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- WO *The Complete White Oxen: Collected Short Fiction*. 1924. Rev. and enl. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.

The same abbreviations appear in parenthetical page references when necessary. Parenthetical page references to other Burke texts use the following:

- AHC "Art and the Hope Chest." Rev. of *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, by Van Wyck Brooks. *Vanity Fair* Dec. 1922: 59, 102.
- AIWS "As I Was Saying." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 11 (1972): 9–27.
- ARG "Approaches to Remy de Gourmont." *The Dial* 70 (1921): 125–38.
- BCC "Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley: A Conversation." *Pre/Text* 6 (1985): 181–200.
- CDF "*Coriolanus* – and the Delights of Faction." 1966. *LSA* 81–97.
- CF "The Correspondence of Flaubert." *The Dial* 72 (1922): 147–55.
- CR "On Catharsis, or Resolution." *Kenyon Review* 21 (1959): 337–75.
- CSV "Catharsis – Second View." *Centennial Review* 5 (1961): 107–32.
- D67 "Dramatism." *Communication: Concepts and Perspectives*. Ed. Lee Thayer. Second International Symposium on Communication Theory and Research, March 1966. Washington, DC: Spartan Books, 1967. 327–60.
- D68 "Dramatism." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Ed. David L. Sills. New York: Macmillan, 1968. 445–51.
- DL83 "Dramatism and Logology." *TLS* Aug. 12, 1983: 859.
- DL85 "Dramatism and Logology." *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 89–93.
- DM "Definition of Man." 1963–64. *LSA* 3–24.
- DOES "Dramatism as Ontology or Epistemology: A Symposium." With Bernard L. Brock, Parke G. Burgess, and Herbert W. Simons. *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 17–33.
- DVI "A 'Dramatistic' View of 'Imitation.'" *Accent* 12 (1952): 229–41.
- DVOL "A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language." 1952–53. *LSA* 419–79.
- EW "Engineering with Words." Rev. of *Geography and Plays*, by Gertrude Stein. *The Dial* 74 (1923): 408–12.
- FAP "Freud – and the Analysis of Poetry." 1939. *PLF* 258–92.

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- FIP "Fact, Inference, and Proof in the Analysis of Literary Symbolism." *Symbols and Values: An Initial Study*. Thirteenth Symposium of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion. Ed. Lyman Bryson *et al.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954. 283–306. Reprinted *Terms for Order*. Ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964. 145–72.
- FMT "Four Master Tropes." 1941. *GM* 503–17.
- FPO "Form and Persecution in the *Oresteia*." 1952. *LSA* 125–38.
- FTCG "On the First Three Chapters of Genesis." *Dædalus* 87.3 (1958): 37–64.
- IH "In Haste." *Pre/Text* 6 (1985): 329–77.
- IMHS "Is Mr. Hook a Socialist?" *Partisan Review* 4 (1938): 40–44.
- L1 Letter to Alyse Gregory. 20 Nov. 1924. Yale Collection of American Literature. Yale University Library.
- L2 Letter to Malcolm Cowley. 22 Sept. 1932. Kenneth Burke Collection. Pennsylvania State University Library.
- L3 Letter to Malcolm Cowley. 28 Sept. 1932. Kenneth Burke Collection. Pennsylvania State University Library.
- L4 Letter to Malcolm Cowley. 3 Oct. 1932. Kenneth Burke Collection. Pennsylvania State University Library.
- LAPE "Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education." *Modern Philosophies and Education*. Ed. Nelson B. Henry. University of Chicago Press, 1955. 259–303.
- LAR "Love among the Ruins." Rev. of *Maria Capponi*, by René Schickele. *New York Herald Tribune Books* Mar. 4, 1928: 7.
- LWE "Last Word on the Ephebe." *The Literary Review of the New York Evening Post* Aug. 26, 1922: 897–98.
- M/A "(Nonsymbolic) Motion / (Symbolic) Action." *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978): 809–38.
- MAC "My Approach to Communism." *New Masses* Mar. 20, 1934: 16, 18–20.
- MBU "Mind, Body and the Unconscious." *LSA* 63–80.
- MP "Methodological Repression and/or Strategies of Containment." *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 401–16.
- NAC "The Nature of Art under Capitalism." 1933. *PLF* 314–22.
- OI "On Interpretation." *The Plowshare: A Literary Periodical of One-Man Exhibits* 10.1 (1934): 1–79.
- OSIS "On Stress, Its Seeking." *Bennington Review* 1 (1967): 32–49.
- PAC "Poetics and Communication." *Perspectives in Education, Religion, and the Arts*. Eds. Howard E. Kiefer and Milton K. Munitz.

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- New York: State University of New York Press, 1970. 401–18.
- PM “The Poetic Motive.” *Hudson Review* 11 (1958): 54–63.
- QAP “Questions and Answers about the Pentad.” *College Composition and Communication* 19 (1978): 330–35.
- RHB “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle.’” 1939. *PLF* 191–220.
- RLS “The Relation between Literature and Science.” *The Writer in a Changing World*. Second American Writers’ Congress. New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937. 158–71.
- RON “Rhetoric – Old and New.” *Journal of General Education* 5 (1951): 202–09.
- RPP “Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy.” *Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration*. Ed. Don M. Burks. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1978. 15–33, 111–13.
- RSA “Revolutionary Symbolism in America.” *American Writers’ Congress*. Ed. Henry Hart. New York: International Publishers, 1935. 87–94, 167–71. Reprinted Simons 267–80.
- SAK “Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats.” 1943. *GM* 447–63.
- SAU “*Somnia ad Urinandum*: More Thoughts on Motion and Action.” 1965. *LSA* 344–58.
- SO “The Seven Offices.” 1958. *ATH* 353–75.
- SPM “Semantic and Poetic Meaning.” 1938. *PLF* 138–67.
- SPP “Self-Portrait of a Person.” Rev. of *Particulars of a Life*, by B. F. Skinner. *Behaviorism* 4 (1976): 257–71.
- SRM “Symbolism as a Realistic Mode: ‘De-Psychoanalyzing’ Logologized.” *Psychocultural Review* 3 (1979): 25–37.
- SSA “The Study of Symbolic Action.” *Chimera* 1 (1942): 7–16.
- SW “Symbolic War.” *Southern Review* 2 (1936): 134–47.
- TB “The Thinking of the Body: Comments on the Imagery of Catharsis in Literature.” 1963. *LSA* 308–43.
- TH “Toward Helhaven: Three Stages of a Vision.” *Sewanee Review* 79 (1971): 151–85.
- TP1 “Twelve Propositions on the Relation between Economics and Psychology.” *Science and Society* 2 (1938): 242–49.
- TP “Twelve Propositions on the Relation between Economics and Psychology.” 1938. *PLF* 305–13.
- TS “Terministic Screens.” 1965. *LSA* 44–62.
- TYL “Thirty Years Later: Memories of the First American Writers’ Congress.” Symposium; with Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and William Phillips; moderated by Daniel Aaron. *The*

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- American Scholar* 35 (1966): 495–516.
- UB “The Unburned Bridges of Poetics, or, How Keep Poetry Pure?” *Centennial Review* 8 (1964): 391–97.
- VLD “The Virtues and Limitations of Debunking.” 1938. *PLF* 168–90.
- WC “The Writers’ Congress.” *The Nation* May 15, 1935: 571.
- WD “Words as Deeds.” *Centrum* 3 (1975): 147–68.
- WRC “War, Response, and Contradiction.” 1933. *PLF* 234–57.
- WS “Why Satire, with a Plan for Writing One.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 13 (1974): 307–37.
- WW “What Are the Signs of What? (A Theory of ‘Entitlement’).” 1962. *LSA* 359–79.

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Addendum: Unfortunately, Stephen Bygrave's *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1993) came to my attention too late to incorporate into the present study.