Instructor: A. King, 136 b Coates

Time: 10:30-12    Tuesday, Thursday

Place: 103 Coates Hall (a moral arena in which we shall seek out, and struggle with Burke’s questions about a better life)

First Assignment: Read “Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle” in Philosophy of Literary Form. Please have it read by Thursday.

Objectives: To discover what Kenneth Burke was up to and then to extend those insights for a bold odyssey of our own. Burke said two things were necessary for a scholar. The first was intellectual curiosity. The second was a sense mission. Burke was fond of pointing out that this scholarly formulation came to us from classical times. The first echoed Aristotle’s “We all desire to know things but there are those who desire to know deeply” and the second was Cicero’s famous dictum: “Following the life of the mind must not be mere self indulgence, but should strive even in small ways to make our world better.”

A Word of Caution: Burke has become such a towering figure in the area of criticism and very lately a cult figure in Language Therapy that he has been called “The Master” by some of his more abject followers. When he was alive Burke urged us to see his work as a point of departure or as a platform to build upon.

Books: The Books are some of the canonical works of Burke and about Burke. Burke’s clearest work is actually in The Philosophy of Literary Form and the clearest piece is “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle” in that
volume. We shall refer to these but unfortunately some of Burke’s greatest work is his most obscure. Some of the best Burke scholars started out by denouncing him as a “confused, convoluted thinker” (Klumpp) and “a writer who irritates without informing (Miriam Clark). Be patient in your reading. Burke is like the medieval “cloud of unknowing” in that it best to surrender to its mystery for a little while in order to arrive at some level of understanding.


Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Cal Press)

Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* (U of Wisc. Press)

Smudde, Peter, *Humanistic Critique of Education* (Parlor Press)

**OUR GOAL:** To make a series of articles that might be published in a guest editor Edition of the *KB Journal* or in other journals such as *Rhetoric Review* or that occasionally great journal *Rhetoric Society Quarterly.*

**Burke’s Mission:**

In an interview with Burke I was surprised to hear that he called himself “a failed poet.” He noted that his novel had fallen dead born at the press and that he couldn’t get his life long friend, William Carlos Williams, to include even a single one of his poems in his numerous collections. But he also noted that he had tried to make lemonade out of lemons by using his failure to become both a critic of the arts and an advocate for the arts. He told me sadly, “Like most failed poets I have an exaggerated view of the power and nobility of the arts. I go on believing in the nobility of the artist even though many of the artists I have met have been the most awful charlatans. Early on I read the works of Matthew Arnold and Ivor Armstrong Richards and you know what they believed in? They had read their Nietzsche and Nietzsche had warned over and over that he and his kind were killing religion when they only wanted to kill Nihilism and Dogmatism. They remembered that Nietzsche had warned that the withering of orthodoxy would bring tyrants
and ideologues to fill the God-shaped hole in people’s minds.” In the next century, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Mao filled the God-shaped hole with secular ideologies. Nietzsche feared that growing secularism would reap a whirlwind. He predicted that new revolutionary doctrines would use the rhetoric and the logic of religion. Thus Hitler’s Munich as ‘the new Rome’ and himself as prophet with the thousand year Reich as the new transcendent order.

Burke also worried about the God-shaped hole. As a young man he embraced Marxism but was part of “The God That Failed Experience.” “Marxism gave us a way making sense of the world, but it also gave us Stalin killing twenty million kulaks to satisfy his rage for order,” Burke expostulated. After that I believed again in Matthew Arnold and Ivor Armstrong Richards and preached that the solution to our difficulties was the cultivation of a poetic way of life. I felt that we had increasingly adopted a systematic instrumentalism in dealing with the material and the social world. Burke felt that we had gone too far toward this ‘techno-scientific’ view of nature and (like Derrida) that we need to return to a mythopoeia view of nature and society.

**Burke’s Perspective**

1. **Experience as Dramatistic**

2. **The Pentad**
   - **Act**
   - **Agency**
   - **Agent**
   - **Scene**
   - **Purpose**

**The Ratios**

Scene-Act = “Given a brutal upbringing like mine I could only be a soldier”

“Slums produce angry criminals like me.”

“Given the present partisanship in Congress, nothing of
any substance can be done.”

Agent-Act= given a crook like Nixon you could only expect Watergate! Only Ronald Reagan could have ended the Cold War. Only Obama can transcend our past limitations. “Only Angelina and Brad could play these vital roles.”

Agency-Act= Give me a hammer and everything becomes a nail. A great new method must be taken to the limits of its use. “LSU’s team will execute the plays that brought them to the bowl” “Only the Weider System can produce the level of fitness you need.” “The application of scientific method to American Law will solve its present deficiencies.”

Purpose-Act “We have marched in defiance of the ordinance, in order to heed the command of a higher law.” “Nature must sometimes be very cruel, in order that it is ultimately kind to the ascendant life forms.” “Out of this terrible war we will bring an enduring peace, stronger and more highly valued because we must buy it at such a terrible price.”

Act-Act They hit me so I hit them. “Mutually assured destruction is the most mindless doctrine ever proposed.” “All life on earth is a violent bubbling of the yeast. It is eat or be eaten and thus the largest and most piggish life survives.” Alfred Toynbee: “History is mysterious and not rational. The Great Twitch Theory of History teaches us that if things go too far in one direction they will snap back in the other direction.”

3. The Concept of the Ratio and Perspective

4. The Motive as Name of the Act

5. Burke’s Concept of a Vocabulary of Motive
6. Burke’s Definition of what it means to be human

Human Beings are symbol producing, symbol abusing creatures, scapegoating creatures, tormented by hierarchical guilt, rotten with perfection, and alienated from nature by structures of their own making

7. The nature of symbolic action

8. The Riddle of Identification and Division

How identification differs from persuasion

Why it is never complete

Why Division is involved in all acts of identification.