

Seminar: Kenneth Burke

Communication 758B

Spring Semester 2013

Class Website:

<http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~jklumpp/comm758b/home.html>

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I am really looking forward to this semester, to having all of you to read Burke with me and to discuss the things we are reading. The activity of rereading Burke – struggling to free myself of preconceptions about what is there and reading him afresh – is something that I have engaged in multiple times, with great joy of discovery each time. It is always gratifying to let the stimulation of a seminar frame a new reading. I urge you to enter the fray with the same suspension of preconceptions and to experience Burke “in the raw” being surprised at every sitting.

Who was Kenneth Burke? When Burke died two decades ago, there were many obituaries that assessed his contributions to American life. Certain themes were common. One was that he was arguably the greatest humanist of the 20th Century. That case is based on his development of the notion that language – with its flexibility, its vitality, its utility – lies at the heart of human potential and its promise. Burke was among many who developed this idea in the early twentieth century. In a time when the dominant metaphor of human study was that humans were [the most developed of] animals, Burke and his colleagues reasserted that symbolic language was the unique capacity that made human behavior different in kind, not just degree, from other animals. If this seems less than astounding to you now, that is because of the success of Burke and his fellow humanists in setting the basis for what has been referred to as “the linguistic turn.”

A second theme of those considering Burke’s impact was that he is difficult to read. This is because his writing is erudite and non-expository. You will discover this, if you have not already. I do not always understand what I read in Burke, especially on the first reading. I am easily left with guilt about how little I have read that serves as a background upon which Burke plays. But that is one of the reasons he is one of the greatest humanists of the 20th Century. The trick is to realize that he is neither a clear nor a concise writer. You are right. So, we have to mine a bit and it will be hard. But it will still be rewarding.

The third theme was that Burke was more important than famous during his life and today. We live in a culture where these two notions – importance and fame – are often equated and when not, confounded. We should turn this to our advantage. We want to see Burke as a human being working to bring his mind to bear on important problems. We want to quickly get beyond him as an icon. We want to see his errors, his triumphs, his false starts and corrections. In short, we want to treat him with the critical depth that someone of importance deserves and that someone who is famous cannot survive.

In rhetorical studies, Burke is probably the most important figure of the 20th Century. In a special issue of *Southern Communication Journal*, I wrote that he defined “the air that we breath.” He replaced the notion that speech was a tool, like a hammer or saw or needle or pan, with the notion that communication was the context within which humans interact with each other. That shift is the starting point for Communication Studies in the early 21st century. Even

as we have moved to attention on additional theorists, the moves that he authorized are the basis for our deeper exploration. But, alas, we discover that in our discipline's eagerness to adapt Burke we have left some useful things untapped and have altered perspective from his view to our own. So, there is much to revise.

Who is the course for?

I do not intend to conduct a seminar where only advanced Burkean experts are at home. Interest is more important than previous knowledge. I think that Burke is a bit like a cubist painting: he is best viewed from many angles that provide different readings. I consider many viewpoints and many levels of previous exposure an advantage to us all.

Please, if you are new to Burke, do not get intimidated by those who know him inside and out. Instead, learn from them. Relish their presence. Talk to them. Ask them questions. Above all, if they make no sense, force them to explain clearly. And, to our advanced Burkeans, remember, a good Burkean has *no* friend as worthy as the one who forces clarity in explanation.

What should you know and/or be able to do after completing the course?

Well, I am not certain that question fully captures what I want. I hope these things happen:

- I want you to just understand an intelligent human thinking through ideas and his relationship to his times. The point here is to understand knowledge seated in a historical moment.
- And yes, I also want you to improve your understanding of Burke's theory of human language as an abstract theory.
- But, perhaps most importantly, I want you to make Burke more usable for you. If you are a critic, I want you to learn more how to use Burke's understanding of rhetoric in your own work. If you are a theorist, I want you to be able to use Burke as a light to illuminate your theoretical understanding.
- Secrets to reading Burke, or How does he write? How should you read? At another layer, I want you to be conscious of reading strategies in the things you read. Tillie Warnock argues that different parts of Burke need to be read differently. I want to try that hypothesis out. Think about different strategies of reading. See what works best.

What will the course be like?

Lots of reading and thinking in between stimulating discussions. That is my objective. There will be a project in conjunction with the course, but I really do want this course to be a reading experience rather than a writing one. That differs from most seminars I teach. Let's see how it works.

How should you prepare for class sessions?

I have specific things that I want you to do in preparation for the seminar sessions:

- Quote of the week. Burkeans are fond of finding quotations that are important to using Burke. “Criticism requires that you use all that is there to use.” So, let’s play the game. Each week find a favorite quotation and bring it in.
- A contribution of the week. I suspect these will be based on your journal entry. Be prepared to present an idea in about 10 minutes.
- Questions and confusions. When I read Burke there are always passages that I just simply do not understand. You will encounter the same thing. Bring them to class. Maybe we will understand them maybe we will not.
- I also urge you to read at least one item that goes beyond the assigned reading for the week. This does not need to be long, and it will probably be related to the reading. Maybe it is something that Burke refers to that you haven't read or need to reread. Maybe it is a review of the book that we are reading that week (the Rueckert book listed below has many of these). Maybe it is letters that Burke is writing to your chosen correspondent at that time. Maybe it is a chapter in Seltzer or Seltzer and George dealing with the time. Maybe it is some criticism that uses the Burkean concept. I just urge you to set aside some time to read 5-20 pages beyond the required.

Learning Resources

Books by Burke we will read:

Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-statement*. (1931; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968). ISBN: 9780520001961

Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change*. 3rd ed. (1935; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984). ISBN: 9780520041462.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. 3rd ed. (1937; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984). ISBN: 9780520041486.

Burke, Kenneth. *Philosophy of Literary Form*. 3rd ed. (1941; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973). ISBN: 9780520024830.

Burke, Kenneth. *Grammar of Motives*. (1945; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969). ISBN: 9780520015449.

Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Motives*. (1950; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969). ISBN: 9780520015463.

Other books that you will consult and dabble in:

Histories

Please buy one of the following:

Selzer, Jack. *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1997). ISBN: 9780299151843

George, Ann, and Jack Selzer. *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007). ISBN: 9781570037009.

Correspondence

Please buy one of the following:

Jay, Paul, ed. *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). ISBN: 9780520068995

Rueckert, William, ed. *Letters from Kenneth Burke to William H. Rueckert, 1959-1987* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2002). ISBN: 9780972477215.

East, James, ed. *The Humane Particulars: The Collected Letters of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2003). ISBN: 9781570035074.

Articles

Late in the class we may select some things to put on our reading list. There may be others as we go through the semester. Keep track of things you encounter that we should read.

In addition, I hope you will each week plan to read some article beyond our reading as I indicated above.

Electronic

You should be familiar with and keep your nose in the *KB Journal*. It is available online and free (an open source journal).

<http://www.kbjournal.org/>

You should also sign up for the Kenneth Burke listserv.

<https://lists.purdue.edu/mailman/listinfo/kb>

Overviews of Burke

There are a few short comprehensive statements of Burke's project. In my humble judgement the best are:

Combs, James E., and Michael W. Mansfield. "The Perspective of Life as Theatre." in *Drama in Life : the Uses of Communication in Society* (New York : Hastings House, 1976). xix-xxx. (on reserve)

Gusfield, Joseph. "Introduction." in *Permanence and Change*. xiii-xliv.

Other Useful Burkean Sources

I have not ordered these into the bookstores (most are out of print), but they are on reserve in the library for your use:

Rueckert, William. *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966). Contains many excellent reviews of Burke's books written as they were released.

Seltzer, Jack, and Robert Wess, eds. *Kenneth Burke and His Circles* (Clemson, SC: Parlor Press, 2008). ISBN: 9781602350663. A collection of essays on Burke and other humanists of the 20th century.

Burke, Kenneth. "Counter-Gridlock: An Interview with Kenneth Burke." *All Area* 2(Spring 1983): 4-32. This is a fascinating interview that gives you real insight into Burke, the man, but also includes his commentary on what he was trying to do in many pieces of your readings.

Brock, Bernard, ed. *Kenneth Burke and Contemporary European Thought* (University Park: University of Alabama Press, 1995). ISBN: 9780817353346

Settle, Peter. *An index to the major works of Kenneth Burke* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983). This is an index of terms used by Burke in his major works. In the reference section of McKeldin.

Assignments

Journal. I would like for you to keep a journal as you are reading. React to your reading. You may wonder about the passage (or *wander* as the case may be). You may think out loud about how you might find the insight useful. You may criticize Burke, agree with him, or disagree with him. Be sure you develop an argument for your position. These are mostly for you. You should prepare an idea from them each week for the seminar session. And I will take them up at the end of the semester to look them over. I will be grading on your inquisitiveness and activity, not on whether you are right or wrong.

Paper. I want a paper at the end of the semester. I do not really care what you decide to do in the paper. You might do a criticism trying to use a Burkean insight. You might take a lacuna in Burke and fill it in. You might trace the development of some idea through Burke's writing. You might set Burke into his historical time. You might make an argument that Burke is wrong about something. You might compare him to some other theorists. And this is not an exhaustive list. Match something with your ongoing interests. I want you to produce a paper of 2500-3000 words (10-12 pages) suitable for submission to the Kenneth Burke Society or some other organization building on your reading. Due May 1.

Grading and Assignment Instructions

Weight for assignments: Paper, 40%; Journal, 30%; Discussion in Seminar, 30%.

Papers will be graded on: (1) insight or significance of claim; (2) cogency and clarity in explanation and argument; (3) quality of writing; and (4) following of proper form. An "A" paper will be superior in all ways. I recommend Chicago (Turabian), although APA is acceptable.

Late papers? This course will stack up on you very rapidly if you get behind. The guidelines of "The Great Klumpp Incomplete Memo" will be followed.

Provenance of your work. Scholars working on projects, your paper for this course being an example, always see their work within a broader frame of reference than a single iteration. Projects inevitably balance novelty with long periods of development. I expect that your work in this seminar will be both original and a part of your ongoing program of research. To facilitate your thinking on this relationship I offer the following observations:

- Rewriting is a part of any quality project. I expect that the final product you hand in to me will be the culmination of a process of research that includes multiple rewritings of the document I receive.
- I expect that most of you will frame your project beyond the end of this course. After receiving my comments, you will revise for presentation at a convention, conference, or symposium, and eventually you will be rewrite again for submission to publication. There is an ethical dimension to this process that you should become familiar with. In later iterations, you should credit this course as an important moment in the work.

Similarly, if you present the material orally at a scholarly venue you should credit that in a journal submission. This is called the “provenance” or “acknowledgment” note for an essay.

- You may well want to work in this course with an idea or even an essay that you have written in the past. If you choose to do this, ethics (and academic integrity) dictate that you discuss the plan with me, identifying the advances that you plan for the project. In addition, your provenance for the paper should identify its earlier iterations. The key to such a process is to use the scholarship of this course to *advance* the project. In this course I expect the project to have original content added that makes the paper you hand to me substantively advanced from its earlier iteration.
- Having said this, I understand that some papers ought to die in the seminar for which they were originally prepared. Let them die. They may do so because they are not directly relevant to where you wish to devote your energies in your research program (you have taken the seminar to expand the breadth of your understanding), or they did not result in a vision of further work on your part. Developing the judgement to place particular projects into the overall plan for one's research involves making this judgement. Such a judgement does not necessarily say that a paper lacks quality (it better not lack quality), but that it serves its purposes best standing alone without further pursuit.

Attendance

The benefit of a seminar is marginal without your attendance. If your schedule will require frequent absences, take some course besides a seminar.

Study Syllabus

COMM 758B: Seminar: Kenneth Burke

Spring 2013

The pace of our reading will emerge from how rapidly we can move through the readings in Burke.

Week 1: Introduction to Course

- Thinking about Burke
- Thinking about reading Burke
- Thinking about you

Weeks 2-3: In the Beginning: Burke, his friends, his times

Reading: *Counterstatement*

Blankenship, Jane, Edward Murphy, and Marie Rosenwasser. "Pivotal Terms in the Early Works of Kenneth Burke." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 7 (1974): 1-24.

In this book Burke is explaining how he views art. In doing so, he is putting himself into dialogue with major literary figures of his day. Among the good readings for this unit are Seltzer's history of Burke in the 1920s.

Among the questions to answer:

- Does Burke read a text a particular way?
- Who is he responding to? What is his program in response?
- What is criticism to Burke? Or, What is a critic? Or, Why is a critic?
- How are we to read this book?

Week 4-6: Language as Equipment for Living

Reading: *Permanence and Change*.

Attitudes Toward History.

Burke, Kenneth. "Revolutionary Symbolism in America." in *American Writer's Congress*. Ed. Harry Hart. New York: International Publishers, 1935. 87-94.

Burke, Kenneth. "War and Cultural Life." *American Journal of Sociology* 48 (November 1942): 404-10.

Burke is moving during the period of these writings away from more purely literary problems to being a social critic. This is the time of the Great Depression and the growing struggle over whether the future of American democracy is with capitalism or communism.

- Is Burke the activist a rhetorical critic? A social critic? Why do you say so? Why not? What does it mean for an activist to be a rhetorical critic? A social critic? What are the commitments involved?
- Would you call Burke a critic or a theorist from these writings? What does that mean?

- Develop a cogent statement of Burke's view of the relationship between words and action during this time?
- Should an inquisitive mind read Burke differently in this work than in his formative period? How?

Weeks 7-10: Systematizing Method

Reading: *Philosophy of Literary Form*.

Grammar of Motives.

Burke, Kenneth. "Questions and Answers About the Pentad." *College Composition and Communication* 29 (December 1978): 330-35.

During this period, Burke has decided that he wants to move beyond involvement in his time to lay out a lasting legacy that transcends a particular time. This turns him to trying to think through his method and toward developing something more theoretical.

- Is Burke moving beyond a social agenda here? Sharpening a social agenda? Does his notion of rhetoric change?
- Would you call what Burke is doing here a *method*?
- Does Burke have anything to contribute to the micro/macro problem (how to get from the examination of single text to grand sweeps of history) in these readings? What? How does he get from the narrow topics of *PLF* to the grand topics of *ATH*?
- What is the Burkean sense of proof demonstrated in these readings?

Week 11-13: Your interests

Reading: Your selections. Or, *Rhetoric of Motives*.