Increasing Response-ability through Mortification: A Burkean Perspective on Teaching Writing

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One of my colleagues recently attempted to order Kenneth Burke's *Grammar of Motives*, only to be told that it could take as long as three months to get a copy. Burke's death seems to be leading more people, both teachers and theorists, to discover or re-discover his powerful conceptions of rhetoric, language, and communication; as a result, his influence on composition and rhetoric may actually increase with his passing. As people, especially composition teachers, read Burke, they discover that one of the more difficult aspects of his work lies in turning his very complex theoretical positions into pedagogical applications. One of the ways Burke can help us as teachers of rhetoric, and particularly as teachers of composition, is to give us a new direction for our teaching. Rather than simply teaching the power of writing (of language or of rhetoric in general) as something to be harnessed, used, even gloried in, Burke helps us to see that our goal might be just the opposite. Through Burke we can approach writing, and the teaching of writing, as something to be feared, something to approach with trembling trepidation.

This fearful approach to writing is developed in Burke's discussion of *mortification* or sacrifice. In this view, language (or symbolicity) develops its own goads, which are numerous and far-ranging drives toward particular behavior or action. In a Burkean sense, "goads" refers to those aspects of our language that prod us, inspire us, drive us to perform particular linguistic behaviors. Those goads are such that they would preclude response if they could. Increasing the ability of others to respond to us as language users, what we might call increasing the *response-ability* of our symbolic interactions, is central to a Burkean perspective toward writing, a perspective focused on decreasing the antagonism with which writers and readers relate to each other. Response-ability seems a particularly useful notion for writers who hope to converse with postmodern readers. (For a more thorough discussion of a Burkean approach to response, responsibility, and response-ability, see Hassett, "Constructing an Ethical Writer for the Post-modern Scene."
Those readers will be looking for places to insert themselves into the text. Writers can attempt to fight that insertion, and thus risk ending the conversation, or they can try to create texts that actually invite response.

As writers for postmodern readers, we might benefit from attempting to mortify, to slay and sacrifice, those goads which would provoke us to close down rather than extend the conversations in which we become engaged. As teachers of writing in a postmodern world, we must attempt to find methodologies that will help our students understand the importance of and methods for mortifying their language. In this article, I will first examine Burke's notion of how language goads us to eliminate the response of others. Next, I will identify a Burkean answer to the goads of language in terms of "mortification." Finally, I will examine some contemporary and Burkean approaches to writing and teaching writing that might allow us to help students mortify their own language. Throughout, I will intersperse some of my own teaching and writing experiences in an effort to show how Burke has changed my thinking about my own practices.

Terministic Goads: How Language Tries to Use Us
To understand Burkean "mortification," it is useful to examine some of the many goads with which language prods us to attempt to decrease responses to our writing. In Burkean terms, I am beginning with an agency-agent ratio. As instrument, our language allows us to interact with one another. But in doing so, our instrument, or agency, works to construct us as agents, implicating itself in all of our actions. By the same token, I can reverse the ratio and view the interaction from the agent-agency perspective, which I will do later in discussing mortification. But to fully understand how the agent might "control" agency, we should first reach some understanding of the way in which agency, in this case our language, seeks to manipulate us as agents, as language users.

Language as Motivation and Blindness
Our symbolicity brings with it purposes and motivations of its own, as Burke explains in *A Rhetoric of Religion*: "And insofar as men 'cannot live by bread alone,' they are moved by doctrine, which is to say, they derive purposes from language, which tells them what they 'ought' to want to do, tells them how to do it, and in the telling goads them with great threats and promises, even unto the gates of heaven and hell" (274). Terminologies become goads for all human endeavors carried out through terminology, whether public or private. And our terms become goads because "they suggest all sorts of further possibilities, a logic of future development beyond the present situation" ("Motion, Action"245). As humans, we have a symbolically-derived inclination to carry out all of the implications of our terminologies (*Language* 19).

While teaching an advanced composition course recently, I was explaining the thesis statement in terms of its being a "contract," an agreement
created between the writer and reader about the nature of the essay. As I presented this view of this particular aspect of the composing process, I found “economic” terminology creeping into my presentation. I began talking about the “investment of the author” and the “vested interest of the reader.” After using these phrases a few times, it occurred to me that they had been prompted by the term “contract” and the associations embodied in that term. And as I thought about this “economic” metaphor for writing, I began to envision a number of similar metaphorical maneuvers that I might make. Only then did I begin to realize how my approach to composition was being goaded by my terminology.

One important Burkean “goad” is the role of terminology as “deflector”—“any given terminology . . . by its very nature as a terminology . . . must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (Language 45). This recognition gives rise to Burke’s numerous discussions of language as “terministic screens” through which we view, or more accurately construct, our reality. Every terminology “functions as a ‘perspective,’ or ‘point of view’;” to examine any issue through that terminology “is to consider the problem from that special angle of approach” (Language 415). As our terminology selects and deflects, we achieve what Burke discusses as Veblen’s “trained incapacity . . . that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses” (Permanence 7).

As I examine my teaching of composition in light of this notion of terministic blindnesses, I become concerned about the techniques I use. I now see that what I normally teach as “prewriting” activities are designed to take advantage of, and thus perpetuate, these terministic screens. For example, when I teach brainstorming or clustering, two popular prewriting techniques, what I am teaching my students to do is to follow the pathway their terminologies establish. And in doing so, it seems that I run the risk of allowing the students to become more and more enmeshed in particularly narrow terministic screens. Similarly, when I teach “free writing” or when I emphasize the idea that as we write we come to know, I encourage students to see their own terminologies as their “real” selves, rather than teaching them that what they write can create their “selves” and then teaching them to be wary of that aspect of their writing. I seem to enhance the deflective terministic goads in teaching these composing techniques.

Language and Naive Verbal Realism
One of the most dangerous aspects of the deflective nature of terminologies is found in Burke’s concern with “is not” versus “shall not.” The concept of the negative is critical for Burke’s work with symbol-using. And for Burke, the negative is first taught to humans in the form of “thou shalt not” (Religion 279). This “shalt not” is the moralistic functioning of language as admonition, the creation of “moral” thinking in terms of what actions are right or wrong. The danger of deflection evolves from the substitution of the “is not”
for the "shalt not" (279). As we lose the distinction between language and reality, as we accept the naive verbal realism that would have us believe that our language truly describes reality rather than acts as a selector of reality, then we give in to our terminologies.

A relatively simple example of the way in which "shall nots" can become "is nots" can be seen in the moral teaching of children. Consider what happens when we teach a young child that people should not use illegal drugs. The child soon realizes, whether told explicitly or not, that "good people do not use drugs" (notice how the "should not" has now become a "do not," whose function in this case seems closer to a form of "is not" than "should not"). The child then extrapolates that if good people do not use drugs, then bad people do, or by its inverse, that "people who use drugs are not good/are evil." Here the child has arrived completely at an "is" from what began as a fairly useful "should not." We could trace similar patterns in many "should nots" that are not carefully and consciously maintained as such.

As we use our terminologies with (or upon) others, this deflection of "shall not" into "is not" becomes very important. It takes on a masking function that allows the symbol-using animal to become cunning and devious, whether intentionally or unintentionally. As we use our terminologies with other symbol-using animals, we present our "shall nots" as "is nots," allowing "the negative principle in morals" to hide "behind a realm of quasi-positives" (Language 11). This allows us to mask our underlying terministic screens, to mask our assumptions as "fact" or "reality." Burke quotes Bentham in establishing that "the sort of allegation [our terministic assumptions] in question, how ill-grounded soever, is, when thus masked, apt to be more persuasive than when expressed simply and in its own proper form" (qtd. in Motives 94). Having ourselves succumbed to our verbal realism, to the confusion of a shall not with an is not, we are then better able to persuade others to also give in to our terminology (and its implications).

Again, as I think back to the way I have taught students to write, I see myself perpetuating rather than recognizing this goad toward the "is" or "is not." When I teach students to write argument papers, I teach them to recognize their assumptions, but only so they can "support" them with "authoritative evidence." Rarely do I teach my students to analyze the ethical implications of their assumptions in a way that might encourage them to see the effects of their assumptions on others. Instead, I might actually help them mask the assumptions by teaching them persuasive techniques that allow them to present their assumptions in the most authoritative, objective, "reasoned" manner possible, in essence, to better present them in "is" form.

We do not have a choice about whether our terminologies function as deflections—doing so is an inherent characteristic of socially-derived symbols. But, as we shall see later, we do choose what we do with these terminologies once we recognize this deflecting function.
Language and Subjection
The drive for subjection is another goad deeply imbedded in our language. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke defines Man as the “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal/inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)/separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making/goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)/and rotten with perfection” (emphasis added 3-16). (Later in this essay, I will discuss some of the implications of Burke’s use of the term “Man” in this definition.) In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, he indicates that we are driven by a “rage for order” (283). Whenever we seek to achieve or maintain order, we become involved in matters of rule, subjection, and servitude: “In their [human] societies, they will seek to keep order. If order, then a need to repress the tendencies of disorder” (*Religion* 314). Whenever we attempt to induce identification in (or, in more traditional terms, whenever we seek to persuade) someone on the merits of our terminologies, we are seeking their subjection (307). It is our very symbolicity which goads us to attempt this subjection, and because we are “prone . . . to the temptations of passivity” (*Language* 58), we are willing to accept the terminologies of others (with all of their implications). In this way, we “use language to rule over one another—for persuasion implies governance” (*Religion* 287). This is one more goad, then, to be aware of if we seek to avoid falling victim to “naive verbal realism.”

When I taught an advanced composition course for humanities majors, my students wrote “consequence” issue papers. These papers developed a cause-effect relationship between two occurrences. I taught my students, who often wanted to write papers that told people what they should or should not do, that the consequence approach could be a much more effective way to get people to do things the way you wanted them to. Once the reader accepted your way of seeing the cause-effect relationship (seeing an “is” to use the terms of my previous discussion), they would be much more inclined to follow the course of action you might then go on to propose. In fact, I would tell them, if you built the consequence discussion correctly, you might not even have to tell them what to do since the appropriate reaction would be self-evident.

Language and the Universal
There are many other goads to which we as symbol-using animals risk falling victim in our language use. We might label a group of them as “absolutes,” “universals,” or “abstractions.” Any ideology “can be shown to represent the particular perspective of some more or less limited group, to sanction special interests in terms of universal validity” (*Motives* 203). Every ideology is another “terministic screen,” and as such has no choice but to represent only one particular, narrow approach to “reality.” But our language goads us to represent our ideologies as something more universal. If we, as teachers, seek
to help our students avoid the “fall” into a naive verbal realism, we must help them search out the goads in language that drive us toward universality, objectivity, and abstraction.

A colleague who was reading an early draft of this paper, mentioned that I was, perhaps, attempting to shut down responses to my work by mystifying the reader through Burkean abstractions. As I read back through the piece, I could see that I was (and perhaps still am) building a very abstract notion of language, writing, and human relationships, an abstraction to which I was becoming more and more committed as “the” way to see things (once again, seeing the “is” show up in my experience with writing). In an effort to combat somewhat that abstract nature, I have attempted to add in more of these anecdotes, not so much as proof of my position as descriptions of my position and of how I have arrived at it.

Language, Perfection, and Silencing Others
All of these goads, the goad to narrow our terministic vision, the goad to mask our assumptions, the goad to replace “shall nots” with “is nots,” the goad to derive universal or objective ideologies, are little more than reflections of what we might call the ultimate Burkean goad—“perfection.” Burke notes, immediately after completing his definition of humans in “Definition of Man” that “the principle of perfection is central to the nature of language as motive. The desire to name something by its ‘proper’ name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically ‘perfectionist’” (Language 16). One result of the goad to perfection in language is the drive for completion or premature closure, a drive to “end the conversation.” We seek in our use of terms to have the final say, to present a “winning” argument, or to take our terminology to “the end of the line” as Burke might say. David C. Williams notes the connection between closure and perfection, and then goes on to link both to the danger of violent conflict: “Entelechial perfection suggests that closure is a motivation for enactment. This perfectionist tendency of language is what transforms national difference into international conflict” (208). Our terminologies, in pushing us toward their perfect completion, goad us to eliminate competing terminologies. This may happen intentionally, as when some political or national group seeks to silence its opposition through some sort of violent oppression, or it might happen unintentionally as we seek to persuade others to accept our terminology as their own, and thus to give up other terminologies.

As a high school debate coach, I saw this drive to eliminate competing terminologies often, and taught it more than once. I still remember the excitement with which my debaters would relate how they had left their opponents speechless during a competition. Arriving at the point at which an argument was so complete, so overwhelming, and so devastating that the other speaker had nothing to say in response was the crowning achievement of competitive (read antagonistic) debate. I have since decided that competitive debate can actually
serve as the quintessential representative of traditional argumentative discourse. Perhaps my current work with the notion of response-ability is my attempt at penance for the work I've done as a debate coach.

Each time we persuade or force someone to abandon their terministic screen for ours, we are reducing the number of screens available. The results can be the tragically violent suppression of a group of people, or they might be the adoption of one stagnant consensual viewpoint (or we might optimistically imagine the elimination of competing screens resulting in one harmonious acceptance of some ethical position, but that seems unlikely given our nature as symbol-using animals). Olivia Frey discusses this aspect of our terminologies when she describes “closed” writing:

“Closed” writing is, well, closed. Closed for repairs. You can't come in. The door is shut. It closes in on itself. The small world of its discourse is what matters most. It seeks to be invulnerable. Its personal stories are devices only, rhetorical tricks. It manipulates the reader. Readers are invited in only on its terms. (840)

Cathy Popkin examines a similar discourse in what she calls “Dis(of)course.” This terminology is “fully established; it admits no uncertainty, invites no discussion; it invokes only to dismiss from debate or explanation; it implies that we all agree and especially that we all know; . . . hence, it silences both forceful dissent and timid questions” (174). The goad, then, is toward the ending of dialogue by the completion of one particular terminology. We cannot choose whether or not this goad to closure or completion will exist, as it is derived from language itself, but we can decide how we will react to this goad.

At this point, would it be too self-reflective to ask if my anecdotes are operating, as Frey says, as “devices only, rhetorical tricks”? If so, what should be my response as writer to that realization—should I remove them? Alter them? Have I closed my text even while supposedly attempting to open it? It was only after reading my article for perhaps the twentieth time that I first applied Frey's statement to it.

Language and Criticism
Burke discusses another goad toward perfection that is particularly troublesome for me as a composition theorist and teacher. Burke explains that there are two kinds of criticism, “parliamentary” and “unified.” Parliamentary criticism is criticism “in the sense of doubt, of hearkening to the opposition and attempting to mature a policy in the light of counterpolicies” (“Rhetorical Analysis” 225). Parliamentary criticism seems very much like the kind of response orientation that response-ability entails, and it will inform the methodologies which I explore later. The other kind of criticism, “unified” criticism, is the “kind of criticism that simply seeks for conscious ways of making one's position more ‘efficient,’ more thoroughly itself” (225).
It seems useful for me to examine my traditional goals in teaching composition in light of this drive toward fixity and unity—the attempt to create writing in which stability and unity in order to be more persuasive is valued more than any attempts at inviting doubt and criticism. As I read Burke's definition of this kind of criticism, I cannot help but think about the way I teach revision to my composition students. My goal in teaching them to revise has always been to teach them to make their writing more unified, to help them eliminate the gaps and contradictions that arise in the texts of "immature" or "less-than-proficient" writers. This view of revision seems to buy completely into the goad to unify our writing, which in Burkean terms can be very negative.

Our failure to recognize the goads that infuse our symbols and terms creates what Burke refers to as "a kind of naive verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in [our] notions of reality" (Language 5). Postmodern theories of language would seem to be reactions against this very notion of verbal realism, the idea that our language is simply a tool that we use to reveal accurately our reality, in which "the linguistic usage itself can be confused with a state of nature" (Language 421). Burke explains that "there is a brand of naive verbal realism, always ready to permeate any terminology" (Language 421). Our failure to deal with this drive toward a linguistic naivete is what allows our language to control us, to push us on toward the final implications of our terminologies; in so doing, our failure to discount our own language allows us to use our terms in a way that disables our audience (or at least attempts to disable them in such a way that their only method for achieving equal participation in the making of meaning is to wrest our writing from us). But by recognizing the goads that drive our terminologies, and acting to discount those goads through mortification, we can work to enact an attitude of response-ability, thereby inviting our readers to participate with us rather than against us in constructing meaning.

Mortification: How We Can Use Language
At this point, Burke might ask, "So, where are we now?" That seems as good a question as any. I have established, as a response to the problems inherent in pre-postmodern writers writing for postmodern readers, an attitude toward writing in which the writer might appropriately attempt to invite response as she writes. But Burke has identified a series of goads, inherent in our very language, that would provoke her to do otherwise. We can now go back and reverse the agency-agent ratio with which we began. Examining our relationship with language through an agent-agency ratio, in which we can influence our language rather than only being influenced by it, begins to open up a space in which we can combat the goads. So what can we, as teachers of composition, do to help our students move toward "response-able" writing, to work as agents of their own language?
Burke provides the beginnings of an answer in his discussion of *mortification* which runs through many of his works. In *A Rhetoric of Religion* he begins to work toward a theory of mortification that can be applied to symbol-users generally, and our response-enabling postmodern writer specifically: “the sense of ‘mortification’ that goes with any scrupulous (‘essential’) attempt at the voluntary suppression of unruly appetites” (emphasis added 211). I have examined goads as “unruly appetites” inherent in the symbol-systems which we use. Mortification, when applied symbolically, would be the attempt to control, or slay or sacrifice, those goads.

Burke links mortification to language in his “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education” when he calls for “the discovery of methods that would be a technical equivalent of such uneasiness as, in religious terms, has been called the ‘fear of God.’ And we would seek for a technical equivalent of ‘mortification,’ thereby hoping to make active and mundane a kind of scruples now too often confined to the separate realm of the cloister” (272).

By mortifying our symbolic goads, and by teaching this as a goal of composing, we seek to make symbol-using animals consubstantial, intimately identified with one another, through a common sacrifice in a manner reminiscent of ritual religious sacrifices (*Motives* 266). Burke explains the demands that this kind of religious orientation places upon its adherents: “The ‘categories of morality and religion’ here seem to work quite well together. Religion demands of the devout the willingness to sacrifice even the most precious thing” (253).

What has traditionally been seen as the power of language, its ability to persuade others to see things our way, would seem to be one of the “most precious things” of people who work and theorize in the world of composition. Rather than sacrificing others to our terministic goads, however, I would have us sacrifice something from ourselves, and in so doing provide for other people to live with us. The goal of mortification as applied to composition and communication is that we free up a discursive space in which writer and reader can work together by voluntarily giving up the aspects of our terminologies which would close off that space for the reader.

*Upon reading an earlier version of this article, an anonymous JAC reviewer said this about my use of mortification: “Take another look at mortification in Burke and its connection with being ruly and unruly. The ‘well made’ essay—the one you confess to teaching—is actually highly ‘mortifying,’ a disciplining of the flesh, and you need to recognize this. When you do, the false dichotomy that plagues your essay will dissipate. You are actually talking about two kinds of mortification—one at the ‘low level’ of acquiescing to the norms of written composition, the other at the ‘high level’ of becoming aware of symbol-driven ambitions. Argumentation is not a bad thing and not adequately represented in debate—but the point is that there is more to learn than how to make a*
compelling case. You need to think in terms of 'language games' rather than in terms of one ideal Platonic kind of 'open discourse.'"

In composition pedagogy, especially in teaching argumentative writing, we can see the attempt to promote many of the goads running through our use of language. By teaching composition from a Burkean, or mortifying, perspective—encouraging students to mortify the goads within their own terminologies—we can help our students move toward an approach to composition that allows us to invite response, that emphasizes "parliamentary" criticism rather than unification, that sees discussion, instability, and disorder as important elements of discourse rather than as immature writing techniques. In the following section, I will attempt to describe a number of loose "methodologies" for accomplishing a mortifying pedagogy of composition derived from this Burkean perspective on language.

Representative Strategies of Mortification

The mortifying strategies that might be employed by a particular writer at a particular moment in a particular situation are too numerous to describe, or even to envision. An important aspect of the Burkean approach I've developed above is that all of our communication depends upon the context in which it occurs. For this reason, I cannot offer any universal methodologies of mortification—as soon as I do, the demographic, political, discursive, and personal contexts of the writers will change and the methodologies I offered would become useless at best, dangerous at worst.

More importantly, were I to list a number of "how-to's" I would run the risk of eliminating the reader's space for response, the very space I am attempting to open in both theory and practice. So, instead of offering any kind of "10 Steps to Mortification," I have chosen to present from a number of sources a selection of strategies that I see as getting at the kind of mortification that I feel might be necessary for the situation our students will encounter as writers in a postmodern world. The point of these strategies is to open up discursive space in which the reader and the writer can work together to create a new, communal meaning by recognizing, illuminating, combatting, and slaying the goads that drive us to end the conversations in which we are involved.

Contemporary Mortifying Approaches to Teaching Writing

Let me begin by citing a few examples of contemporary pedagogical practice that might be used to great advantage in different kinds of mortification strategies.

First, an example of actual mortification occurring in contemporary composition is the movement to eliminate sexist language. We have been driven (by our nature as "entitlers") to find shortcuts to universals, to find one word that we can say encompasses all of the variations of a given object, idea, or experience. The attempt to use male terms as "titles" for human beings seems to be a part of this "entitlement" process. The movement to
eliminate these masculine terms as representatives of both male and female seems to be an attempt at mortification—to slay the impulse to use only one set of terms to describe or label a great variety of beings and experiences. Furthermore, the attempt to eliminate sexist language seems mortifying in its emphasis on the implications of our terminologies. We have finally recognized that when we refer to these objects, ideas, or experiences in the masculine form we imply certain attitudes and behaviors. And it is precisely against those implications that the nonsexist language movement is fighting.

At this point, it is probably important that I remark on Burke's use of masculine titles and pronouns throughout his writing. It would be too simplistic to excuse his usage by pointing to his time period. Instead, I would say that his usage does indeed serve as a "terministic screen," deflecting attention away from a more generalized sense of human beings. I would also suggest that his view of language may be heavily bound up in his "masculine" deflection since feminist theory has shown us that there might be an approach to language that is not "principled" and perfection-oriented in the way Burke views language. If feminine writing has always had the characteristics of openness, instability, and flux that some feminist theorists claim, then Burke's use of "Man" in his analysis of language may have indeed kept him from discovering practical examples of the kind of "mortifying" approach to language that he develops theoretically.

Finally, the movement against sexist language is a useful representative anecdote for the purposes of "response-ability" since the point of the movement has been to mortify our sexist language in an effort to free space for female readers. On a very pragmatic level, our abandonment of terms such as "fireman," "policeman," or "chairman" has had the effect of freeing space for women to envision themselves in the positions of authority that these terms represent. The drive for nonsexist language seems to suitably depict the effects at which mortification aims.

A second contemporary movement that is useful for our discussion of mortifying strategies is the movement in writing pedagogy toward process rather than product (in many areas, this is no longer so much a movement as an entrenched idea). Mortification is essentially a process orientation, in which the writer's attempts to invoke a more response-able position is emphasized. Process orientation is important in that mortified writing may not match what we normally consider "clear, concise prose," and an emphasis on a refined, "perfect" product would seem to undermine our ability to utilize effectively the mortifying process. The process orientation's emphasis on revision allows us a place in which to practice mortification (so long as we allow our revision to follow the parliamentary rather than unifying form). This does not mean that process, itself, is mortifying. What it does mean is that our adoption of process approaches gives us more points at which we, as both teachers and writers, can intervene and interfere, more points at which we can mortify our writing and teach our students to mortify their own.
The increasing emphasis on collaboration in writing is critical to the development of all mortifying strategies. It would seem that one of the best methods by which students can learn to mortify their own writing is to mortify each other's writing, to identify those places where the student writers have apparently attempted to close off room for response. Only as students learn the value of listening to an "other" that is immediately present can they learn to value the voice of an "other" that is removed in both space and time. Process and collaboration emphases are very important, even crucial, to my idea of an effective use of mortification in the writing classroom. But these are movements that have by this time become readily accepted in most writing classrooms. There are other movements and ideas, some already afoot, some not, that can provide potential strategies of mortification.

Earlier I critiqued the use of prewriting, particularly freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering. Those invention methods, I explained, seem to perpetuate the role of language as a terministic screen. Certainly, though, these prewriting approaches have tremendous benefits for writers. At the same time, they carry with them particular dangers that if unrecognized can lead us to fall victim to the ever-present terministic goads. However, there might be approaches to using these prewriting activities that might undermine the goad embedded in these particular techniques. For example, a freewriting assignment is given to students to allow them to, as Kristine Hansen, an instructor at Brigham Young University, put it, "come to terms" with their subject matter. The teacher who would have her students recognize the way our terms goad us might then, after the students have completed the freewriting exercise, examine how one idea led them to another, which led them to another, and so on. This begins to get at the goad. Then the teacher might have the students create a kind of "freewriting in negative" by examining what the freewriting led the student away from, the terms and ideas that were excluded. In this way, students can see how their terminologies guide, shape, and direct their perspectives.

Burke's Mortifying Strategies

One potentially useful strategy of mortification can be developed out of Kenneth Burke's own writing practices. Tilly Warnock explains that Burke's "meaning is not only in what he says but in what he does" (72). One of the things Burke does is mortify the goads in his own writing by self-reflexively discounting what he says. Burke's emphasis on dramatism involves self-critique in that "action implies assessment of situations and the people with whom the person interacts. It implies reflection upon one's interests, sentiments, purposes, and those of others" (Gusfield 9). Burke suggests a method for getting students to do this with their own writing in "Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education": have students analyze and critique the "modes of utterance" and the implications of those modes in their own previously written essays (287). Burke's own writing can be seen as one
continual self-reflection, a deeper and deeper analysis of his own modes of utterance. William Rueckert notes this aspect of Burke's writing in discussing Language as Symbolic Action. Rueckert describes the manner in which Burke "comments on himself, corrects himself (and others), doubles back on himself," all of which allows Burke the kind of self-reflexivity that can lead to mortification (255).

One of the ways in which Burke utilizes this self-reflexivity to mortify his own utterances is in his use of metadiscursive discounting of his own terms. "Metadiscourse," the bane of many composition teachers, is talk about talk, the practice of commenting on what I am doing as I write a text. To say, "It seems to me at this point" is to use metadiscourse. Burke uses this technique often to call attention to his own terms, to their implications, and to his own struggles to make sense of what his terms are doing. In his "Prologue" to Permanence and Change, Burke establishes his need for this technique when he says, "The necessary discount is implicit in this book at many points. But it is not as explicit as the author would now have it" (li). He goes on to make it more explicit in his later works through his use of metadiscourse. In The Rhetoric of Religion, for example, Burke begins to evaluate his own terminologies when he says, "[N]ote that we substitute for "rational" the neutral, less honorific differentia, 'symbol-using'" (40). When Burke chooses to create his own term (thus allowing him to create a new terministic screen for himself and for his readers) he calls our attention to it: "(and here I thought I found myself compelled to make up a word), the 'symbolicity' of the symbolic" (Religion 37). Burke further undermines the effectiveness of his own rhetoric: "The fourth clause has been given a rhetorical flourish related to current exigencies. It could be protectively neutralized thus: 'moved by a sense of order'" (42).

Often, composition teachers attempt to discourage students from using metadiscourse. The use of the word "I" has been "banned" altogether from many composition classrooms. This kind of metadiscourse is normally discouraged because it makes for "redundant" writing: "The reader already knows that you are doing the thinking, so you don't need to say that." Or it is discouraged because it makes papers "messy": "All of these little comments about yourself interrupt the flow of the paper; the reader can't move through it smoothly." But in Burke's mortifying discourse, metadiscursive comments are very important because they call extra attention to the fact that he is, indeed, the one doing the thinking, that the words are his; therefore, they do not necessarily impose an obligation of acceptance on us as readers. In terms of opening space for the reader, this metadiscursive highlighting seems an important and useful strategy.

The necessity of metadiscourse is emphasized for me as I discuss the use of "I" with students in Freshman English classes. My students tell me, "When you use 'I' in your paper it makes it sound more like it's your own opinion, and that makes it a weaker argument." Given the unethical (in the "response-able" sense of the
term) nature of "strong" argumentation, it seems we could do worse than to encourage our students to weaken their arguments by emphasizing their own role in creating those arguments.

Burke goes much farther in his self-reflexivity than just recognizing his own role in the construction of his terminology through metadiscourse. He actually builds into his writing his own dialogue, his own conversation with imaginary "others." Cary Nelson describes how Burke is able "to treat his own system as a fractured and multiply available totality, summarizing it and mocking it, playing with its implications and its intimidations" (164). In doing so, Burke creates "a self-preserving dialectical muddle—enough self-cancellation to prevent perfection" (Language 21). Burke explains that part of his strategy in creating his own dialogue lies in his subscription "to the yes-no-maybe approach" (Language 65).

At the end of "Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy," Burke problematizes the argument he had spent most of the article building when he says, "Yet, hold! We must never forget that, however social the nature of symbolic action is, the life of the individual as defined by the centrality of his nervous system is grounded empirically in the realm of sheer motion" (31). In footnotes throughout his work, Burke also undermines his own arguments, as exemplified in a footnote early on in The Rhetoric of Religion in which Burke recognizes that his "positive" dramatistic terms are actually "questions" (26). Even the general format of his books allows Burke to write an ongoing dialogue as seen in the third edition of Permanence and Change, which includes the text written in 1935, a "Prologue" written in 1953 (for the second edition), and an "Afterword" written in 1983. Rather than simply revising the work for each edition, Burke responds to it. By example, the reader is given ample space to respond since even the writer acknowledges the flaws and shortcomings of the work. This seems an important strategy in enhancing the "response-ability" of a text.

But Burke's self-dialogue seems a far cry from the kind of texts I normally encourage my composition students to write. The very last thing I want them to do is to problematize their own argument in their conclusion. Neither do I want them to include contradictions or paradoxical positions. Instead, I want them to write a nice, coherent statement of their positions, preferably a statement that will answer any objections that might be raised to it. And I want them to finish with a strong statement of that position, a statement designed to induce the reader's consent.

Feminist Approaches to Mortification
Burke's strategy provides a very different view of the purpose of writing, a view that is beginning to be echoed in contemporary feminist theories of writing. In "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition," for example,
Catherine Lamb suggests that rather than teaching our students to construct essays designed to win an argument, we would be better served teaching them to write as a means to enhance negotiation.

When two of my colleagues at Brigham Young University put Lamb's theory into practice, they derived a method that is very reminiscent of Burke. They had their students prepare a traditional argument, but at the end of the argument the students were required to analyze it and raise any contradictions, problems, or objections to it that they could find, not in an effort to answer the issues raised, but in an effort to recognize the limitations of their own position. This approach seems drastically to undermine traditional argumentative writing by mortifying its very strength, its ability to persuade others by virtue of its logical "impregnability."

One of the effects of this kind of writing, in which the writer critiques her own writing, is that the reader is not allowed to remain a passive consumer of the writer's text. Because the text lacks "coherence" and "invincibility," the reader is encouraged to participate in the construction of meaning from that text. Tilly Warnock describes how Burke uses his self-reflexive problematizing of his own arguments to create an active reader: "the reader learns through Burke's writing and revising to question what is said, to bring the negative to bear. The reader does not simply find knowledge, but participates in a process of knowing through 'no-ing'" (70). In Burke's and Lamb's approaches to argumentation, the reader is encouraged to dissent by virtue of the writer's own dissent. This would seem to mortify effectively the goads toward subjection, rule, and order that seem to be involved with our traditional use of persuasion and identification. And it dramatically increases the "response-ability" of texts by encouraging the reader to dissent, to resist the meaning that the writer has been constructing.

Feminist theory can help us understand another of Burke's disruptions. There is in contemporary feminist theories of composing a very strong element of disunity, an attempt to disrupt textual coherence. Rachel Blau DuPlessis examines the manner in which "the 'female aesthetic' will produce artworks [and we might here read all compositions as "artworks" in this sense] that incorporate contradiction and nonlinear movement into the heart of the text" (8). DuPlessis describes "feminist writing" as an attempt "to articulate critical leverage in form or language, to cite and transpose, to encircle and enter wedgewise, to parody, to exaggerate, to slow up, to offer gestures inappropriate to genre, and genre riddled with its own gestures" (66). Her discussion, both implicit and explicit, of appropriateness can take us back into Burke's strategies. Both Burke and DuPlessis seem interested in finding ways to interfere with strong, univocal readings of texts.

These attempts by Burke, Lamb, and DuPlessis to disrupt texts all focus on the same symbolic act—the "correction" of one terministic screen by the
juxtaposing of an opposite screen. Burke suggests that "we deliberately cultivate the use of contradictory concepts" (Permanence 94) in order to break the "linkages" that form between symbols, meanings, and identifications. Burke describes how Spengler is able to develop an historical "perspective by incongruity" in this way: "These are historical perspectives, which Spengler acquires by taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring its use to another setting. It is a 'perspective by incongruity,' since he established it by violating the 'properties' of the word in its previous linkages" (Permanence 90). Burke wants "not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise" (Grammar xviii). The result of this kind of planned incongruity on the reader seems twofold: one, it makes reading difficult, which in traditional views of writing would be a flaw; and two, it gives the reader much more room in which to operate with the writer, since incongruities, contradictions, and ironies are already highlighted. The overall effect, in terms of "response-ability," is that the reader is not working against the writer to find the contradictions that postmodern theories of language tell us occur in every text; instead, the writer has freed up the space, has opened herself to the reader, has acknowledged that contradictions and paradoxes exist, and has embarked on a common search to acknowledge them, thus taking away the competitive project of the reader. Burke and DuPlessis both provide a method of incongruity, of impiety and impropriety, that mortifies our goad to unity, to efficiency, even to perfection.

I have provided only a very few representative examples of the kind of mortifying strategies that could be adopted by writers in a postmodern world. My goal is not to present "perfect" strategies; rather, I hope that by providing a few strategies, my readers will be able to develop multiple strategies. The caution I would invoke here is that none of the strategies I've described are "sure-fire mortifiers." They are contextual strategies, developed and used by particular people at particular moments for particular purposes. To the extent that my aims in a writing situation were similar to the aims of DuPlessis, I might be able to imitate her stylistic, structural, and semantic incongruities and successfully mortify the goads toward perfection that arise in my symbolicity. But simply to imitate her at any time would probably be insufficient. In some ways, I have provided these strategies "against my will," more because I know that readers who get through my description of the postmodern context and the corresponding ethical attitude of "response-ability" will want to see some way to achieve such an attitude. To that extent, at least, I have fallen victim to my own symbolicity.

So Where Are We Now?

So where are we now? Where in the postmodern scene do we now find ourselves? Are we sufficiently mortified? I doubt it. As I examine mortification, it seems less a technique or series of methods than it is an attitude, an incipient act, an introduction that can compel us to approach our writing
with fear and trepidation. As composition teachers and theorists, we can allow our own attitude to influence what we ask (or require) our students to do. If we search for ways to mortify our own writing and then search for ways to encourage our students to mortify their own, then we might reach the point at which we can, as readers and writers, work together within the framework of our differences to decrease those tendencies toward violence, subjection, the kill, that arise from our nature as symbol-using animals. As teachers of composition, it appears that the best we can do is to see, and to help our students see, the writer as an actor, not in the sense of a person pretending to be something he or she is not, but in the sense of a person seeking to act ethically upon the symbolic world in which we both write and live. And from a Burkean perspective, that means a writer who is seeking to increase the response-ability of the texts she writes.¹

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Notes

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Works Cited

—. “Motion, Action, Words.” Teachers College Record 62 (1960-61): 244-49.


New Book in Composition Theory

*JAC* is pleased to announce that SUNY Press has just published *Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom*, a collection of the most outstanding scholarly articles published in the *Journal of Advanced Composition* over the last decade. These twenty-one essays represent the breadth and strength of composition scholarship that has engaged fruitfully with critical theory.

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