SOME IMPLICATIONS OF KENNETH BURKE'S "WAY OF KNOWING" FOR COMPOSITION THEORY

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It was probably close to the time of the French Revolution that it became physically impossible for any one person—however industrious a scholar—to attain universal knowledge, to read all of the books available, to know all that could be known. A similar problem presents itself when one attempts to discover with certainty what Kenneth Burke means or says he means or says he meant. The scope of his knowledge is so great and his references to other philosophers, literary critics, historians, psychologists, and linguists so numerous that to read everything he has published since 1924, everything he refers to in passing, and everything that has been written about him—like the pursuit of universal knowledge—would involve one in a lifetime of study that would leave room for little else. This, however, is only one of the problems that confronts the would-be adaptor of Burkean philosophy for pedagogical purposes.

In offering an explication of Burke's rhetorical theory in 1968, Bryant Fillion focuses on another theory. He notes that Burke's writing is "sufficiently difficult to read, for several reasons, [so] that it is unlikely to ever be completely 'available' for most readers without the aid of explications and well-edited books of readings."¹ William Rueckert also comments on Burkean difficulty:

... Burke's mind is such that he is almost incapable of resisting the temptation of the many side roads which he comes on in all his intellectual journeys; a corresponding...
temptation is set up for everyone who writes about Burke, for he moves forward by multiple side excursions. Purification is not only a matter of hacking through the stylistic and terminological underbrush, but of finding and then mapping the main route.\textsuperscript{2}

The "Terminological underbrush" is more than an obstacle, however; it is the subject matter as well. His primary concern is with the impact of symbols on human activity, the relationship between symbolic action and what is perceived as reality. Like the boring speech about boredom or the sad essay on sadness, reading Burke is an experience in as well as an exploration of the topic at hand.

For example, he uses the phrase "terministic screens" to describe the terminologies and verbal contexts through which we view the world, but his screen metaphor is, perhaps deliberately, ambiguous. His terminology forces the visually oriented reader back and forth in an effort to understand. At times, the metaphorical screen blocks aspects of reality as the screen in a dressing room conceals the torso of the person changing costume. At other times, the screen focuses reality as the screen in a theatre contains within its boundaries the sum total of present reality for the viewer absorbed in the action of the film. And finally, Burke says that he has "particularly in mind" different photographs of the same object taken with different color filters. In the midst of this terministic ambiguity, Burke makes his major epistemological assertion: "Much that we take as observation about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms."\textsuperscript{3}

It is virtually impossible to deal with Burke at all without engaging in some form of reductionism, and adapting his discussion of literary criticism to composition pedagogy increases the difficulty. Burke has, however, captured the imagination of many writers in composition studies during the last decade, but in the enthusiasm to make applications from his theory to their pedagogy as rapidly as possible, he has proved all too easy to misinterpret. Particularly troublesome has been the rhetorical implications of Burke's epistemology. Allow me to digress about some matters that may help us with Burke.
There is an obvious connection between what is knowable or true and rhetoric, and that connection has always existed, either explicitly or implicitly, in rhetorical theories. Classical rhetoric was divided into five components: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Invention—the means and methods for the discovery of arguments, evidence, or truths to be used in discourse—is the most sensitive to epistemological shifts. In classical times, when the best argument was regarded as the one most probable, invention was a vital concern. In the middle ages, when rhetoricians were, as Janice Lauer describes it, "secure in the possession of truth," invention was relegated to logic and rhetoric became style. The rejection of invention as an important part of rhetoric was reaffirmed in the nineteenth-century when it was argued that "the methods of investigation are different in the various departments of thought." Since the propositions of the lawyer, the theologian, the scientist, or the critic depend upon "the facts of law, theology, science, and criticism... no truly useful rules" could be given.

The major epistemologic contention affecting rhetoric has been between rationalism and empiricism. The seventeenth-century rationalists, stimulated by the emergence of the exact sciences, sought a strictly mechanical (or rule-governed) interconnection between Nature, the material universe, and human cognition. What they hoped to develop was a pure and true method which would be applicable to all problems. They endeavored to deduce the fundamental governing principles of the universe and, starting there, by pure reason to bind together all Nature and all knowledge. The true method, Descartes believed, begins with immediate perceptions, those which are clear and distinct (Cogito, ergo sum), and by means of deduction arrives at universal propositions.

The empiricists pointed out the difficulty with Descartes’s epistemology is that it leaves out matters of fact. While pure deduction can provide logical consistency, his criterion of truth—clearness and distinctness of conception—is patently inadequate. In the words of the American empiricist, Charles Peirce, clearness means "nothing more than familiarity with an idea."

Susanne Langer points out the cogency of the rationalist methodology when she reminds us that "the ancient science of
mathematics” has continued its purely rationalistic methods free from metaphysical associations and charges of mentalism. She then articulates “a new generative idea” in epistemology: “The power of symbolism is its cue, as the finality of sense-data was the cue of a former epoch.” Whereas epistemologists have tended to regard symbolization as “an instrument” rather than as “an end” in itself, she believes that it “did not originate in the service of other activities.” She says instead that symbolization is “a primary interest and may require a sacrifice of other ends, just as the imperative demand for food or sex-life may necessitate sacrifices under difficult conditions.” She suggests that Kant’s question, “What can I know?” is really dependent on a prior question, “What can I ask?” And, she says, Carnap provides an answer which is clear and direct: “I can ask whatever language will express; I can know whatever experiment will answer.”

Research into the composing process has benefited from this series of insight. In 1969 William F. Nelson summarized a presumption that underlies much of the theorizing in composition since the “revival of rhetoric” in the mid-nineteen-sixties: “It would seem that there is a finiteness characterizing man’s ability to categorize which, largely transcending the barriers of time, space, and cultural influence, renders a kind of stability and predictability to the patterns of human conceptual behavior.” W. Ross Winterowd states the case more emphatically; he asserts that “it is impossible that formal relationships regarding any level of discourse can be infinite in number.”

In the same way that the rationalists posited a rule-governed universe and tried to build a model of inquiry based on their understanding of how the universe operates, contemporary methodologists are seeking constants in conceptual behavior. The ideal “heuristic” (or problem-solving strategy) of invention would be based on rhetorical universals, a direct product of a necessary and sufficient epistemological position. Invention—the means used to discover knowledge—is the epistemology of a rhetorical theory, and the heuristic is the tool or device used to carry out the operation.

For the strict empiricist, truth is inherent in the nature of the world. Thus, Robert Zoellner, the most well-known behaviorist in composition theory, relies on description as the
fundamental rhetorical activity. The process of rhetorical development (arrangement) is the act of exploiting and articulating relationships inherent in a topic.\textsuperscript{10} For the romantic, truth is highly subjective; it is individually discovered or felt. Thus, for D. Gordon Rohman, the existentialist and romantic whose Pre-Writing project marks the beginning of the revival of rhetoric, invention involves stimulating a sense of self, and the primary reason to teach students to write is so that they may live more fully. The controlling metaphor in Rohman's course is the analogy, which represents not simply a combining of diverse elements but a creative discovery of new and unexpected relationships. Analogy refers, he says, "to that principle of human knowing whereby we are enabled to know anything in our present experience because we relate it to something already known (categorized) in our past."\textsuperscript{11} End of my excursis.

Composition theorists who have examined the usefulness of Burke for composition pedagogy fall into two general classes: those who focus on semantic resources implicit in terminologies and those who focus on his pentad (the five key terms of dramatism: act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose) as an inventional strategy. While the semanticists tend to be on surer epistemological ground in their interpretations, the pentad has received much greater currency. Divorced from its context, the pentad has often been reduced to an information-retrieval probe, not just comparable with but identical to the strategy commonly utilized by the newspaper journalist—who? what? when? where? why? and how? When the press expresses a concern for the public's "right to know," knowledge or truth is defined as information. To say that the pentad can be used to retrieve information in this manner is certainly true, but it is also trivial.

To understand Burke's epistemology, it is useful to understand that he began as a behaviorist, strongly influenced by the general semantics of Alfred Korzybski. Attempting to explain the abstract language behavior of a highly developed organism in scientific (non-mentalistic) terms, the general semanticists established that the rudiments of generalization, specification, classification, and abstraction are available to nonlinguistic organisms. Following this lead, I. A. Richards maintained that all thinking was essentially sorting behavior, and he fit all responses ultimately into two categories: acceptance and re-
Burke discusses at some length Henri Bergson's similar observation that "negative" conditions do not exist in nature:

We may say, "The ground is not damp." But the corresponding actual conditions in nature are those whereby the ground is dry. We may say that something "is not" in such and such a place. But so far as nature is concerned, whatever else "is not" here is positively someplace else; or if it does not exist, then other things actually occupy all places where it "is not."  

Burke reasons that it is the capacity to conceive of negatives that is uniquely human, and it is in the negative that he places the origin of language. First, "gruntlike sounds" were used for calling attention to something, but the breakthrough into symbolic activity, he speculates, occurred when these sounds took on "admonitory connotations." He does not mean to imply that human language was derived by what he calls a "graded-series" from "behaviorist pre-language." Rather, he says, "there is a 'qualitative leap' between the motives of pre-language and those of language." It is failing to recognize the qualitative leap from animal to true linguistic behavior or reading it as a metaphor that results in misinterpreting Burke's epistemological position. He posits two motives for human behavior: animality (explainable by behaviorism) and symbolicity.

He coins a new word, logology, for the new concept; it is, he says, "a purely empirical study of symbolic action." The general semanticists discussed how the nature of the terms chosen to explain or describe a phenomenon could affect the nature of the explanation or description; however, Burke goes further when he suggests that, "... many of the observations are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms."

Langer reminds us that modern philosophers rightly criticize metaphysical propositions because they are "usually pseudo-answers to pseudo-questions." The distinction between most metaphysical statements and mathematical propositions is that the latter do not make statements about reality or existence:
"Mathematical constructions are only symbols; they have meaning in terms of relationships, not of substance; something in reality answers to them, but they are not supposed to be items in that reality."17

Likewise, Burke does not claim that terminologies have material existence, but he does claim that they have something like ontological reality. Just as the ontological existence of God is implicit in the very concept of God (this is the ontological "proof" for the existence of God), so is the perfection or completeness of every terminology implicit in individual terms. The "principle of perfection" is described as a kind of "terministic compulsion" which is implicit in the nature of symbol systems that drives the symbol-user "to carry out the implications of one's terminology."18 This is the poetic motive, the urge to completeness or perfection.

A strict empiricist must reject most questions concerning truth and falsity as unverifiable, as a retreat to mentalism, or simply as metaphysical nonsense. Zoellner, the rhetorical behaviorist, describes "truth" as being inherent in the nature of the world (empirically verifiable); therefore, to arrive at "truth," one should learn to describe the world as accurately as possible, including any psychological or attitudinal revisions of reality. Terministic obscurity is an evil (though Zoellner would not use that term) to be resisted through careful description, and invention in the rhetorical sense is the exploitation and exploration of relationships that make up logical, psychological, and biological reality. To these usual dimensions of reality, Burke adds another: the logological, inherent in the nature of the word.

A positive/negative ambiguity is implicit within the nature of symbolicity. As symbolicity itself was born of the fusion of positive (calling attention to something) and negative (as admonition), it sustains itself on the integration of opposites, and the ultimate goal of any process of inquiry, it appears, is to derive the "God term" or "supreme perfection" that prevails within the domain of interest. Questions of truth and falsity do not apply; as words all terminologies are equally true. Burke avoids solipsism—a completely subjective definition of reality—by emphasizing the verifiability of symbolism itself.
The common theological espistemology is summarized in the expression, "Believe, that you may understand." Applied to the problems of terministic interference in reality, the logical counterpart of "Believe," Burke says, "would be: 'Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen.' And for 'That you may understand,' the counterpart would be: 'That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observations implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice was deliberate or spontaneous'." For Zoellner, the avowed behaviorist, invention is description; for Burke, the empirical symbolicist, invention is speculative etymology.

To begin with the pentad as an epistemological heuristic of invention is to fail to perceive that the key terms are the basic forms of thought for a symbol-using, symbol-abusing animal who is impelled in one direction by the "principle of perfection" and pulled back "from the abyss" by the power of the negative.

Korzybski used the term identification reaction to describe the "semantic malfunctioning" that underlies stereotyping, assuming all blacks, Mexicans, Harvard men, and women drivers to be identical. For Korzybski, the identification reaction was something that happened within the nervous system, interfering with the capacity for differentiated behavior. The goal of a Burkean rhetoric is often, and rightly recognized to be "identification," but identification is not a matter of displaying an attitude of open-mindedness and acceptance to one's opponent in a debate, although Burke would not disagree with the desirability, even the necessity, of such behavior. A complex joke is built into the fact that, failing to recognize Burke's roots in general semantics, composition theorists familiar with Rogerian (I'm-okay-you're-okay) psychology have redefined identification with a positive connotation. Identification for Burke is exploring the terminological limits of opposing positions and searching out the term at a higher level of abstraction which will allow the opposing views to be reconciled. As Burke says: "One confronts contradictions. Insofar as they are resolvable contradictions he acts to resolve them. Insofar as they are not resolvable, he symbolically erects a 'higher synthesis,' in poetic and conceptual imagery, that helps him to 'accept' them."

In his 1969 dissertation, fully cognizant of Burke's
epistemology, Bryant Fillion explores the implications of a Burkean rhetoric. Fillion recognizes as central to Burke’s thinking the exploration of existence and reality through the means of symbols, and he would encourage that same tentativeness toward and speculativeness about terminologies by students. “When students realize that ‘things’ such as ‘the Congress,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘the Constitution,’ or ‘morality’ exist only through symbolicity, they begin to recognize and appreciate the importance of language and symbols to their own existence.” Fillion sees as the central concern of a Burkean pedagogical rhetoric the development of a “comic” attitude that has definite political implications, for it necessitates pursuing all viewpoints methodically to their logological conclusions. The ideological danger, he remarks, is that “the opposition may prove less erroneous than an indoctrination course would have students believe.” The object of the instruction is to encourage students to recognize the extent to which they accept and reject opinions because of what they are associated with and the extent to which they adopt “the habits and values” of people with whom they want to be identified.²¹

Burke himself proposes an alternative to the classical training of debators which would require that they write two debates, “upholding first one position and then the other.” As a third assignment students would be required to do a paper “designed to be a formal transcending of the whole issue, by analyzing the sheerly verbal maneuvers.”²² Fillion summarizes the concept of identification by pointing out that until students can “see that every situation is potentially misnamed by a given [terministic] screen, including their own, they cannot appreciate the procedure whereby situations may be peacefully renamed.”²³

The pentad fits into the grammatical system of motives as nodes on a tree diagram fit into the grammatical system that is used to describe the language. Burke’s adaptors depart epistemologically from him when they view the pentad as a static set of terms to be superimposed over a subject, much as Latinate grammar once tried to force English syntax into the Procrustean bed of eight parts of speech and seven sentence types.

Burke admonishes composition theorists and teachers: “Not just the pentad. But the ratios and circumference.”²⁴ The ratios
are analogous to the phrase structure rules of the grammar: SCENE + ACT → Given the circumstances, what happened was inevitable. AGENT + ACT → Given the person involved, what happened was to be expected. AGENCY + ACT → To use the instrument given, the result was predictable. (As Charles Kneupper describes it, "Give a child a hammer, and everything will be treated like a nail."²⁵) PURPOSE + ACT → To accomplish the end given, what had to be done was avoidable. Et cetera, through all the possible combinations of single terms (he does not pair ACT + ACT, SCENE + SCENE, etc.). Those writers of composition texts who ignore the ratios, and use only the terms of the pentad as an invention strategy, do not recognize that the purpose of the pentad is to explore human motivation. Winterowd and William Irmscher have corrected this omission in the latest editions of their texts, but both still fail to include circumference.²⁶ The consequence of this omission is that they are still continuing to impose their particular circumference onto Burke's global epistemology.

If there were a convenient synonym for circumference as Burke uses it, the recurrent epistemological problem would perhaps disappear, but straining our analogy to its limit, we might say the circumference is the S node (the term at the highest level in each hierarchical analysis of a sentence diagram that specifies the particular sentence under examination) in each statement about motives. It is the perspective from which, by which, or through which each situation is to be considered. It is the varying scope implicit in a set of terms. Given behaviorism as the circumference, SCENE becomes "controlled laboratory conditions"; ACT is a response to a particular stimulus; in fact, all human motivation is reduced to the terms of stimuli and responses to stimuli.

In discussing the impact of scene on human conduct and relations, Burke gives further illustrations of circumference:

The "human condition" has been conceived against a background of many gods quarreling among themselves, in terms of a contract with one god, or of godless nature, or of different periods in history, etc. Acquinas formulated as circumference of widest scope a God who moves all creatures, but each according to its particular nature.²⁷
And finally, he notes that determining the "ultimate circumference" is a philosophic rather than an empirical issue. However, unless one chooses "a slung-together terminology that contains a muddle of different circumferences," whether it is implicit or explicit, a choice of circumference is inevitable. Burke allows that the pentad, properly modified by the ratios and circumference, may indeed be useful "for the analysis of both literary texts and human relations in general," but he himself usually begins "with more direct ways of sizing up a text." The nomenclature of every text, he says, embodies "equations"; within the "equations" are "implications"; and finally, "whereas 'equations' and 'implications' are nontemporally related, there are 'transformations' whereby a narrative goes from one to another. . . . Or polar terms can be reversed."²⁸

Invention for Burke, however intriguing the digressions prove to be, is ultimately speculative etymology. While it may do no harm to impose Burke's pentad upon Alexander Bain's Forms of Discourse, as Irmscher does, the result is not in any meaningful sense Burkean dramatism. It is rather "a slung-together muddle." Burke suggests that the poet "unfolds" or "makes progressively manifest" what he refers to as "the set of timeless relationships that prevails" within the notion which impelled the initiation of the composing process in the first place.²⁹ Irmscher reduces those "timeless relationships" to exposition, "setting forth facts"; to description and narration, speaking of those facts "in terms of space, time, and action"; and to argumentation, "resolving the conflict of facts." In order for Burke's rhetorical theory to have a positive impact on the production of discourse (and consequently on composition pedagogy) and to maintain its epistemological integrity at the same time, prospective adaptors must necessarily begin with a semantic or "terminological" circumference.

Composition theory has had a prolonged academic infancy. As we learn to examine theories as theories and not just as pedagogical tools, we must begin by recognizing the relationship between the epistemology which underlines each of the theories we examine and the implications of the epistemology for the production of discourse. If there is a key question to guide the analysis of theories of composition, it may best be stated as "What is the nature of the problem posed by the theorist which
the theory sets out to solve?" A useful analogy can be found in the problem posed by Young, Becker, and Pike in their text *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. How to build a house with four southern exposures presents us with a baffling problem in design; *where* to build such a house presents us with a fairly simple problem in geography: just build a conventional house at the North Pole. Trying to impose Burkean rhetoric over the conventional forms of discourse is like trying to solve a problem in geography with a design solution, and the implications go well beyond the applicability of Burke's pentad to traditional composition. Discovering the relationship between epistemology and invention is basic to rhetorical analysis.

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NOTES


21 Fillon, "Rhetoric as Symbolic Action: An Explication," p. 188.

22 Burke, Attitudes Toward History, p. 92.


27 Burke, "Questions and Answers," p. 333.

28 Burke, "Questions and Answers," p. 335.

29 Ibid.