Aio

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Reading (with) Kenneth Burke

A Primer

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To Andrzej

Neque Instantia, Neque Futura

Turris stat eburnea
onychī parata
Opus hominis trepidat
ut super navis latus
robur undīs
Latissimum
agitat vehemēns ventus
domus lūcet, septigera
jubilant ergo famulī
ianua hac pertransitur
numquam noxās paventes
advocatis omnium

(Anon, IX c.)

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Introduction

In western academia, the humanities are in a state of crisis. It is, we are often reminded, a lingering crisis of identity, to do with the scope, the aim, and the means of what sixty years ago seemed to have established itself as a respectably solid field of inquiry[1]. Long under the siege of specialised "human" disciplines flying the bright banners of rigour and scientific exactitude (linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis), the humanities (especially literature, philosophy, history, religion and art, but also law and politics) struggle to retain a reputable epistemological, social, or ethical role while safeguarding the supple objectivity, the soft focus required by the hazy contours of its

[1] Diarmaid MacCulloch from the *British Academy* argues for a shared view of the humanities as «scholarly expertise in subjects like law, philosophy, the history of art and music, religions, language and its meanings, literature and all forms of human history, right back to the unwritten history that can only be approached through archaeology». He provocatively suggests that the humanities stand for the «wise end of human wisdom» and briefly touches on the idea that «without hard and creative thinking in the humanities, the human society in which you and I find ourselves may well go mad». At https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what–are–humanities? Last accessed February 18, 2020. The academy devoted a lengthy blog to the issue, summoning six distinguished fellows to make the case for the importance of the humanities: Mary Beard, Ian Diamond, Anne Salmond, Genevra Richardson, Dominic Abrams, Conor Gearty. At: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/six–fellows–british–academy–importance–humanities–social–sciences. Last accessed February 18, 2020. In a much more articulate treatment of the issue also reposted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Justin Stover starts with the widespread view that «There is no case for the humanities» and addresses what the study of the humanities entails and whether it can survive its current crisis. He thinks there is «deep conceptual confusion about what the humanities are and the reason for studying them in the first place» and that «this ambiguity has led to the disciplines' being squeezed on both sides» of the right/left ideological divide. (Justin Stover, "There Is No Case for the Humanities," *American Affairs*, 1, 4, (Winter 2017): 210–24; also reposted at https://www.chronicle.com/article/There–Is–No–Case–for–the/242724).

equally contentious subject — "the human"[2]. For a while, the newly outlined domain of *Cultural Studies* seemed to have come to the rescue, but in its pressing shift from dubiously placed human agents to material products, from modes of being and acting as humans to the seemingly impersonal products of culture, cultural studies may well be said to have hastened the field's demise[3]. Their assertive coalescence around issues of identity may have served to exacerbate divisions, to deepen fault lines between the broad cultural horizon of the humanities and similar disciplines that would rather be grouped and seen instead under the starker authority of "social sciences". This short book is written partly in response to the even sorer predicament of literary criticism and literary studies within the larger scope of the humanities. It looks back at the eclectic work of American rhetorician Kenneth Duva Burke (1897–1993) to reflect on its enduring significance, on the brilliance of its unorthodox methods and the breadth of its speculations. As it brings the much–maligned category of "the human" back to the critical spotlight, Burke offers a variegated — if at times perhaps baffling — palette of words and concepts, which readers can use for addressing the multiple demands of sustained and self–conscious reading. To read critically one certainly needs specific methods and tools: alternative "terminological" lenses and fresh sets of criteria for interpretation. But that is not all. One would need also more general, fuzzier patterns of critical orientation, for building what I would not hesitate to call a critical sensibility: both an awareness of the issues (political, ideological, aesthetic, ethical, philosophical, epistemological) involved in reading and a susceptibility or sensitivity to the form in which these are inscribed. Set against the

[2] It comes as no surprise that Burke should be "summoned" to take part in the ongoing debate around *the human* and *the posthuman*. See Chris Mays, Nathaniel A. Rivers, and Kellie Sharp–Hoskins, eds., *Kenneth Burke + the Posthuman* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

[3] Stover (2017) has built a very convincing case after he notes that «left defenders of the humanities have defended their value in the face of an increasingly corporate and crudely economic world, and yet they have also worked to gut some of the core areas of humanistic inquiry — 'Western civ and all that' — as indelibly tainted by patriarchy, racism, and colonialism».

sprawling edifice of its subject — the monumental published and unpublished work of Burke — this book must remain narrow in scope: what is asked here it not so much how Burke's immense *opus* measures up to other critics or schools in Western academia in the last century, but what Burke can do for us as current readers of literary or non–literary texts. This is then, primarily, a book on reading and readers, starting with the multiple senses and roles that reading and readers have in the practice of everyday life, but especially in academia.

Burke's writing continues to exercise critics. Not only for its breath–taking scope, which straddles rhetoric, philosophy, poetry, aesthetics, literary criticism, and the social sciences, but also for its difficult style, in the eyes of many scholars often haphazard and jargon–ridden[4]. Burke, common sense would have it, makes up his own jargon when he could have simply used what was already there, for instance in the mid–20the century currents of American and European New Criticism (the former of which Burke is, rather misleadingly, said to have established with John Crowe Ransom)[5]. But the whole thrust of Burke's enterprise is precisely a rethinking of terms and terminologies, in view of an alternative model (dramatism) which by definition is not coterminous with established practices of reading or critiquing. That does not mean Burke ignores contemporary debates in self–absorbed and eccentric experiments with language. Quite the contrary. Burke borrows and quotes liberally. Unfortunately, that is another habit many critics will resent, in the (unstated) conviction that roaming freely across disciplines contaminates the

[4] Tilly Warnock, 'Reading Kenneth Burke: Ways in, Ways out, Ways Roundabout', *College English* 48, no. 1 (January 1986): 64. A self–taught scholar, Burke never completed university studies at Ohio and Columbia, preferring instead to nourish his keen literary and aesthetic interests in the energetic setting of the Greenwich Village avant–garde. He did lecture at the University of Chicago (in 1938 and 1949) among others, but his teaching career gravitated almost exclusively around Bennington College, Vermont, where he taught for nearly 20 years, from 1943 to 1961. At https://www.chronicle.com/article/There–Is–No–Case–for–the/242724. Last accessed February 18, 2020.

[5] John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1941; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979). Burke and Ransom regularly exchanged correspondence between 1939 and 1942. See David Tell, 'Burke's Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in "Four Master Tropes"', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (September 2004): 33–54.

methodological purity and relevance of separate fields, promoting a muddle where clarity of method and intent should reign. The opaqueness of Burke's prose, for William Rueckert a "terminological underbrush"[6] that needs to be hacked away, is counterbalanced by the insights the reader finds in the sudden clearings, when Burke's "forest", his sprawling way of arguing, as he says, "by radiations", opens up to illuminating examples and aphorisms, often in the form of paradox. That forces readers to a never–ending reassessment, a metalinguistic rethinking, of their own readings[7]. Certainly a hard read in many respects, Burke can on occasion be exceptionally nimble and light–hearted. His light–heartedness is what perhaps sets him immediately apart from sombre champions of deconstruction, even as their reading strategies are said in many respects to have been anticipated by Burke himself[8]. *Attitudes toward History* (1937) one of the books this primer discusses, is supposed to have inspired De Man's

[6] William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 5. The forest metaphor seems especially apt to describe the experience of reading Burke, as evidenced for instance by Ben Alpers:' Blogging Kenneth Burke's Attitudes Toward History: An Introductory Post', 10 November 2014, http://s–usih.org/2014/11/blogging–kenneth–burkes–attitudes–toward–history–an–introductory–post.html. Last accessed February 18, 2020.

[7] Burke mentions the «radiations» of his argument with reference to the «labyrinthine way in which one term involves others» in a note on page vi of his *Attitudes To-ward History* (1937). All quotations in this paper are from the 3rd revised edition (Burke 1984), henceforth ATH.

[8] Even the humble Wikipedia entry on Burke cannot avoid including a long list of thinkers who «have acknowledged Burke's influence» among whom are «Harold Bloom, Stanley Cavell, J. Hillis Miller, Susan Sontag […], Erving Goffman, Geoffrey Hartman, Edward Said, René Girard, Fredric Jameson, Michael Calvin McGee, Dell Hymes and Clifford Geertz». And this is by no means an exhaustive list. (Wikipedia contributors, "Kenneth Burke," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipe-dia.org/w/index-.php?title=Kenneth_Burke&oldid=957046111 (last accessed May 27, 2020). To consider some of these influences in the vast critical literature on Burke once could start with: Hayden White and Margaret Brose, *Representing Kenneth Burke*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), with its impressive array of contributions by Jameson, Lentricchia, Freccero, Rueckert, Fletcher and Jennermann; Wess (1996); Brock (1999); Ross Wolin, *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Mays and Rivers (2017); Ann George, *Kenneth Burke's Permanence and Change: A Critical Companion*, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2018); Jason Maxwell, *The Two Cultures of English: Literature, Composition, and the Moment of Rhetoric*, First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

immensely influential *Blindness and Insight* (1971)[9]. This primer probes Burke's works for practical cues to a broader understanding of what is involved in reading literature, reading history and practicing translation. In other words, it starts with the assumption that Burke's wide–ranging approach to reading and interpreting enhances our awareness of how language, as a symbolic strategy, operates through and across practices of discourse (in literature and history first but also, for our purposes, in the field of translation and possibly sociology as well). My goal is to reassess Burke's method (or lack thereof) for liberal academic studies today, in a cultural climate where some scholars seem more willing to engage in reading across the disciplines, what Burke would have called a "forensic" dimension[10]. A thorough reading of even one volume by Burke is virtually impossible, if only because part of his task lies precisely in addressing the shortcomings and the rigidity of 'method' against the pliancy of what he calls, with keen foresight of what was to come in literary theory after him, "the imaginative"[11]. As my line of argument unfolds in each chapter of this primer, a reader may find that I also mimic some of the digressive "radiations" I find in Burke; or that my argument perhaps falls short of the "scientific" stringency academics are trained to expect. To this, Burke would reply that what such reading loses in ostensible clarity and formal cohesion, it gains in speculative scope and heuristic value. One way these Burkean "radiations" crop up is evidently in my choice

[9] The passage in question is on page 41 of *Attitudes Toward History*, where Burke notes that «every insight contains its own special kind of blindness». De Man's articulate use of the blindness/insight metaphor is in the chapter "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau", in Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 102–141. Among many others, Stephen Greenblatt, Fredric Jameson and Hillis Miller have acknowledged their indebtedness to Burke, as pointed out by Remo Ceserani in his 'Kenneth Burke', *Belfagor: Rassegna Di Varia Umanità* 58, no. 1 (Gennaio 2003): 43–57.

[10] Burke (ATH 254) broadly defines «forensic» as any «material supplied by the forum, the market place. The materials of law, parliamentary procedure, traffic regulation, scientific–causal relationships evolved by complex and sophisticated commerce (of both the material and spiritual sorts)». See Chapter V, under FORENSIC.

[11] The intriguing analogies between Burke's «imaginative» and Lacan's «imaginary» deserve an in–depth treatment which is beyond the practical scope of this primer.

of rather long notes to reference the main text of this primer. One may rightly object that more seems to turn up in the notes than in the body of the book. That is intentional, at least to a large extent. Long notes are there to assist readers who may not be content with just surfing blithely along the crests of Burke's expanse but would rather dive at every turn, at least into some of its theoretical depths.

Given the span of Burke's production, selection was mandatory. The volumes, articles, poems and letters he published over sixty years defy categorisation: they reach far and wide along many a path — of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, or psychoanalysis — through the shortcuts and digressions that only his kind of comprehensive exploration affords. Hence the drastic choice of a primer, as a somewhat leaner frame that scans Burke for practical ways of reading, while also probing at least some of the theoretical depths that lie under his work. I should warn from the start that lean does not necessarily mean simple. Especially when moving through the theoretical meanders of the first chapters, a reader may soon find that "primer" is a bit of misnomer when applied to Burke. Yet a primer it must be; for, when it is applied to the complex layering of Burke's writing, this book barely scratches the surface. That is the kind of paradox one learns to expect from Burke. Be that as it may, as the title suggests, the primer reads disciplinary fields by applying Burke's cues (*Reading with Burke*) while also reading, or trying to make sense of, Burke's text itself (*Reading Burke*). Critics have noted that one may start pretty much anywhere in Burke. To read with him one needs not stick to a fixed curve of development. Burke's recursive style addresses its methodological assumptions and lays bare its theoretical footings. Language may be dense and at times tangled. Yet one generally knows what is at stake and is repeatedly reminded of what the main line of argument is. Nonetheless, the layout of this primer does reflect somewhat tangentially the chronology of Burke's works, as attention is drawn primarily to Burke's planned trilogy on the topic of motivation (*A*

Grammar of Motives; *A Rhetoric of Motives*; and *A Symbolic of Motives*)[12].

The first chapters address issues of theory and call for more sustained focus. Chapter 1 deals with Burke's initial experiment in what he calls *dramatism* and his adoption of the interpretive scheme of the *pentad* (the group of five keywords) for tracing all sorts of symbolic permutations and transformations that in his view characterise human interactions in language. This roughly matches Burke's pursuits in *A Grammar of Motives* (1946) and reflects his primary interest in the stratagems made possible by the combinatorial potential of terms. Misgivings have been expressed by those — especially of poststructuralist leanings — who have eyed the pentad as yet another essentializing variant of the "universal matrix" myth: the elusive philosopher's stone for deciphering all linguistic interactions. The chapter also addresses a number of objections in this respect, to reflect instead on Burke's long–acknowledged penchant for a kind of open–ended reading that anticipates and occasionally surpasses the qualms and the dilemmas of postmodernity[13].

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[12] In his biographical "portrait", Cesarani (2003) offers a terse reconstruction of Burke's career along three productive phases: 1) The 1930s, when the encounter with the Greenwich village avant–garde inspired works such as *Counter–Statement* (1931), *Toward a Better Life* (1932), *Permanence and Change* (1935); and *Attitudes Toward History* (1937); 2) a central period between 1944 and 1966, which saw the publication of influential works. First the *Motivorum* trilogy (in the 1940s), at a time when Burke was a victim of McCarthyism. Later, the *Rhetoric of Religion* (1961) and *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966); 3) a final period of intense travelling and academic debate, devoid of major theoretical works (*His Collected Poems* appeared in 1968). Ceserani's contribution matters because it tackles the unsolved issue of Burke's patchy reception in Italy. He laments that Burke should continue to be neglected even in recent Italian works on American literature and mentions one of the few existing Italian essays (an early 1950s piece by sociologist Luciano Gallino), whose animus against Burke Ceserani keenly locates within the cultural limitations of Idealist criticism. He concludes on a hopeful note (so far regrettably unfulfilled): a possible rediscovery of Burke in Italian translation.

[13] The issue of Burke's ontologising and of a possible "essentialist drift" is still a matter of controversy. See for instance Stephen Bygrave, *Kenneth Burke Rhetoric and Ideology* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993); David L. Hildebrand, 'Was Kenneth Burke a Pragmatist?', Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 31, no. 3 (Summer 1995): Robert Wess, Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996);632–58; Timothy W. Crusius's Kenneth Burke and the Conversation After Philosophy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999).

The meta–critical quality which Burke's work has from the start is discussed at more length as we turn to the *Rhetoric of Motives* in chapter 2, which underlies the prominent critical role Burke entrusts to rhetorical form and its tropes, well beyond the demands of literary refinement (or *belle–lettres*). Harold Bloom's inclusion of the *Rhetoric of Motives* in his Western Canon bears witness to the importance Burke's work still has for a (long–overdue) reappraisal of rhetoric in literary and social criticism. Chapter 3 traces some of the links rhetoric offers to a fully rounded evaluation of the symbolic dimension of language as envisioned in Burke's never completed third volume of the *Motivorum* trilogy. Later chapters provide samples of Burkean readings in the fields of literature, history and translation, while also offering general suggestions for applying further Burkean principles of analysis to each. Chapters 4 and 5 interrogate the practices of history and translation, with more sampling of Burke's reading for each. Chapter 6 sketches a lexicon of key Burkean concepts partly addressed also in previous chapters, now in the form of a "commonplace book" of Burkean "curated" quotes arranged alphabetically. The idea is to provide a readily browsable collection of Burkean *topoi* to be used both for brainstorming or systematic interpretation. Appendix A provides an analytical break–down of Burke's famous (or notorious) definition of humans a "symbol–using animals" and its many corollaries. If surely not indispensable for understanding Burke, the formula makes for a welcome mnemonic prop. Appendix B charts key biographical data on Burke, while Appendix C lists major works by Burke and mentions useful online and offline resources. There are of course many things this book has chosen not to be. For one, no attempt is made to provide a reasoned assessment of Burke's contribution to the ongoing philosophical debate on the ontology of reading and writing with respect to language. Similarly, no sustained or systematic effort is undertaken to historicise Burke's work or contextualise its oeuvre within the literary critical tradition, except for a concise

biographical appendix[14]. The overall purpose of this book being more practical than theoretical, I would rather resist systematisation for the sake of insight, an undoubtedly Burkean bias that I would embrace with relish. Also, it has been noted that it might be more appropriate to speak of the many Burkes than of one Burke, since the facets that his work has are many and what one reveals at one point the other may mask out elsewhere. There is a sense, however, in which I think Burke is undoubtedly one: and that is his style. The threads he spins out may be many, and the tangles he builds in his endless crossings and re–crossings as thick as they are numerous: but they all partake of the same stylistic form. And if there is one lesson Burke is at pains to teach us is that style and form matter. The stylistic implications of any given term reach far across disparate fields to question the assertions and the objective pretensions of disciplines.

[14] Attempts to contextualize and historicize Burke do make up a significant portion of criticism on his work. As a result, Burke's reading practices are addressed often tangentially. This might have to do with Burke's uncomfortable straddling of ontologising and literary practice, which critics would "rein in" by overstressing, I think, Burke's historical situatedness. To situate Burke historically is of course entirely laudable. It becomes an obstacle when it turns into "labelling". Burke's ontological or essentialist leanings are inseparable from his literary practice and will not be warded off by sweeping categorisations. Burke would remind us that historizing and "situating" are themselves rhetorical exercises. For a comprehensive and balanced collection of critical responses to Burke (both positive and negative) William Rueckert's *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, 1924–1966* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969) remains invaluable. But the debate is ongoing. See for instance Bernard L. Brock and Kenneth Burke Society, eds., *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Crusius (1999); Beth Eddy, *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003); Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).