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Professor Burke's "Bennington Project"

Scott Wible

Kenneth Burke claimed in 1952 that he viewed his rhetorical theory and critical method as a "Bennington Project," a sign that he attributed a measure of his intellectual success to teaching at pragmatist-inspired Bennington College. Studying Burke's teaching at Bennington can help scholars to better understand his theory and method because Burke taught undergraduates his own critical reading practices, ones that he believed heightened students' awareness of terministic screens and deepened their appreciation for the consequences of human symbol-use. Burke's teaching practices and his comments on student essays reveal that he taught indexing and charting to his undergraduates because he believed everyone can and should use them throughout their lives to examine—and, when necessary, revise—the often unexpressed assumptions that propel so much human activity toward competition and, ultimately, physical and social destruction.

I happen to believe that the series of books on which I am now working will in time be recognized as the account of a full-blown educational theory and method. And in any case, if the books have any virtues, they owe these largely to the advantages I got from my opportunity to work with classes and special students at Bennington. For such reasons, I have been living in some kind of idiotic fiction according to which I have always furtively thought of my theory and method as a "Bennington Project."

—Kenneth Burke to Frederick Burkhardt, 22 January 1952

In this portion of a letter to his boss, Bennington College President Frederick Burkhardt, Kenneth Burke attributed a fair measure of his intellectual success to his writing and teaching at the progressive liberal arts college in southwestern Vermont. In fact, Burke concluded the letter by claiming it was important for his own scholarly production "to keep somewhat of the pedagogy going" at the college, because he felt that he had a "quid pro

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quo whereby I profited by Bennington and Bennington profited by me.”¹ Burke elaborates more fully on this relationship between his writing and his teaching in a 21 February 1959 letter to economist George Soule, a colleague of Burke’s at Bennington: “For all during the time of my ‘tenure,’ I have been working on a project; and I brought my findings to the classroom as the project developed; and it was so much better to address those charming students than to be looking at myself in the mirror” (4). Burke publicly expressed his belief that he “profited by Bennington” in his acknowledgments for *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, and *Language as Symbolic Action*. In each case Burke thanks the Bennington College students who participated “with charming patience” in “the working-out of the ideas” in his published texts (*Grammar* viii).

Studying Burke’s teaching at Bennington can help scholars to better understand his work on symbolic action as a “full-blown educational theory and method” because while at the college, Burke taught undergraduates the same methods that he used to analyze the linguistic operations of texts, the methods that he called indexing and charting. Burke’s conversations with students about their writing projects show him working to translate his ideas about these analytical methods into terms his students could understand. Moreover, for Burke, teaching indexing and charting served as his means for heightening students’ awareness of terministic screens and deepening their appreciation for the consequences of human symbol-use. Indeed, Professor Burke’s Bennington Project reflects his belief that the methods for studying language were just as important as the theories such analysis helped to generate and the attitudes toward language and life they helped to cultivate.

The intricacies of Burke’s thought make one wonder whether a pedagogical frame would actually help to elucidate Burke’s theory and method. Accentuating this concern is the fact that Burke’s pupils sometimes left his courses feeling more confused than when they entered, as the following student’s comments suggest: “I find the material covered to be stimulating—

¹As Burke explained later in this letter, a “kindly and helpful person” had recently pointed out to him that “the glad tidings of [his] course had already been dropped from the College Bulletin” for the upcoming academic year. The news came at a bad time for Burke because he recently had turned down John Crowe Ransom’s invitation to teach a six-week summer course at Indiana University. Burkhardt explained in a follow-up letter that the mistake had been Bennington’s, for the school thought Burke had already accepted the teaching position at Indiana for the 1952–1953 academic year. He tells Burke, “Consider the whole erased. We want you to come back.” Also of interest in this letter is Burkhardt’s note about Burke’s self-assessment of his work: “I thoroughly agree with your notion of your relation to Bennington and I’m proud that you feel that way about it. So I take you at your word that the project would get some help and inspiration from teaching and this seems to me to be a good and sufficient reason for you to keep to the schedule” (Burkhardt to Burke, 17 February 1952).

if I could understand more of the material. You have the feeling that if only you could, everything would be so exciting, because of the personality of the instructor and his method" (Anonymous). Even as the student acknowledges her confusion, the genuine interest in her response to Burke's courses suggests that the record of Burke's Bennington College classroom might be tapped in order to invigorate the study of his work. As Jessica Enoch has demonstrated, it is important to consider how Burke's teaching influenced his critical writings because "the lines he drew to divide the two were often blurred," especially as Burke "often brought pedagogical situations into his scholarship" (275). The opposite might also be said: Burke's scholarly methods were so fundamental to his pedagogy that we might better understand his work by considering how and why he conveyed these complex analytical practices to students, not just to his peers in the field of literary and rhetorical studies.

Materials recently acquired for the Kenneth Burke Papers housed at the Pennsylvania State University can help us to view his theory and method through this pedagogical lens. In addition to several letters that he wrote to Bennington administrators and faculty members such as Burkhardt and Soule, Burke left three folders filled with materials gathered from his years at Bennington College in the early-to mid-1950s. The bulk of these papers comprise Burke's typed comments on student essays written for two courses Burke offered while at Bennington: "Principles of Literary Criticism," which he taught every other year from 1943 to 1951, and "Language as Symbolic Action," which he offered every other year between 1951 and 1961. These materials reveal the kinds of critical reading practices and theoretical perspectives Burke tried to teach to his students, ones that Burke saw as reflecting a pragmatist approach to understanding human life. As David Blakesley explains, Burke's particular understanding of pragmatism focused on "investigat[ing] how interpretive frames exploit the resources of terminology to direct the attention and form the attitudes that motivate action" (71). Specifically, Burke's teaching materials, as they help us to read his work as a "Bennington Project," bring into sharper focus the relationship Burke perceived between methods and attitude, for he taught his students how to index and chart texts as a means to "encourag[e] tolerance by speculation" (*Grammar* 442). Indeed, while Burke's theories of symbolic action suggest why one should practice tolerance, given "the foibles and antics" of "the Human Barnyard" (*Grammar* xvii), his teaching shows that he believed this attitude could be cultivated only through practicing a critical method of speculation on human symbol use and misuse. Burke taught his methods of indexing and charting to his undergraduate students because he believed

they could use them in their daily lives to examine—and, when necessary, revise—the often unexpressed assumptions that propelled so much human activity toward competition and, ultimately, physical and social destruction.

Examining how Burke perceived his work on symbolic action as “a full-blown educational theory and method” first requires an analysis of Burke’s explicit reflections on education, such as his 1955 essay “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education.” These texts reflect Burke’s repeated efforts to draw educators’ attention to how terministic screens shape efforts at knowledge building. Meanwhile, Burke’s writing assignments, teaching practices, and comments on student essays from his 1955 “Language as Symbolic Action” course illustrate his efforts to teach students his methods of indexing and charting—terms often ignored in favor of dramatism when Burke is considered in rhetorical scholarship. These critical methods were at the heart of Burke’s Bennington Project because he believed it simply was not good enough to tell students to be patient or tolerant of others’ experiences and worldviews. Instead, students needed to practice a method for studying symbolic action by which they would habituate themselves, as Burke himself did, to “cultivat[ing] alternative perspectives by shifting the vocabulary of approach” (Blakesley 71). Only such methodical practice, Burke’s teaching suggests, could foster an attitude of tolerance in students who had “become so zealous in [their] attempt to destroy” the ideas and perspectives of others (Burke, Response to Louise Carty’s essay on realism, 1955).²

Professor Burke’s “‘Synoptic’ Project for ‘Unifying the Curriculum’”

When Kenneth Burke joined the Bennington faculty in 1943, he began working in an academic environment that, since the college’s founding in the

²In its 2001 “Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies,” the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) explained the need for researchers both to obtain students’ permission to use their writing in published research (486–487) and to avoid identifying students by name when quoting or paraphrasing their writing (488). To address the former concern, I contacted the Bennington College Alumni Relations Office to search for the students whose work I refer to in this article; at the time I resubmitted this article, I had received permission from eight of Burke’s former students to refer to their work. Having been unsuccessful in contacting the remaining four students, while nevertheless being aware of the CCCC’s latter concern, I have decided to include all of the students’ names in this article for two specific reasons. First, I quote Burke’s comments on student essays rather than the students’ writing itself. Second, I believe using students’ names, rather than pseudonyms, will aid scholars who study these archival materials, as Burke labeled his comments with the respective student’s name at the top of each typewritten page. For further details on the CCCC’s research guidelines, see “Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies,” *College Composition and Communication* 52.3 (2001): 485–490.

1930s, had been shaped by several key principles of the progressive education movement.³ Indeed, the college's first president, Robert Devore Leigh, adopted the movement's pragmatic orientation as he crafted his initial 1929 prospective, "The Educational Plan for Bennington College." Following John Dewey's experimentalist method, teaching at Bennington was to be centered on "the concrete approach" (Jones 23), one that favored problem-solving over book-learning and engaged students in projects "involving continuous periods in the laboratory, library, or field" under the supervision of a professor (qtd. in Brockway 36). As George Soule and Barbara Jones would later write in their respective assessments of Bennington's education plan, Leigh advocated students' "learning by doing" (Soule 54) rather than "merely learning *about* [a topic]" (Jones 24).

Bennington's early leaders saw this "learning by doing" as the means through which students could best become "acquainted with the nature of problems of 'the outside world'" (Soule 117). College administrators called for education that prompted students to actively engage their social and cultural worlds, stating this idea as one of the school's aims:

that the College, jointly with other educational agencies, should accept responsibility for cultivating in its students by all available means attitudes of social responsibility, social participation and cooperation rather than aloofness; that it should promote [...] an attitude of suspended judgment towards the strange and the new, and tolerance towards persons and customs alien to the student's own experience. (qtd. in Soule 16)

This emphasis on "social participation and cooperation" meshed nicely with school administrators' preference for problem-solving approaches to education. Teachers and students were to approach each discipline as a lens through which to understand the physical and cultural environments in which people live, all the while continuing the practice of testing each discipline's received knowledge traditions against contemporary phenomena.

Given Bennington College's educational experimentation relative to traditional academic institutions, one can see why Kenneth Burke would be a good fit at the school and in its literature department. Leigh set a precedent of deemphasizing the Ph.D. as a criteria for faculty positions (Brockway 91), and Burke could therefore be appointed even though he lacked a college degree, leaving Ohio State as he did after only one semester and

³Through the revision process, a detailed discussion of the history and educational philosophy of Bennington College has come to be beyond the scope of the present article. For a history of the school's founding, see Brockway, who was a professor of history at Bennington College in the 1960s and 1970s. Jones and Soule, meanwhile, report on the ways in which the college was and was not fulfilling its educational mission 15 and 30 years, respectively, after its founding.

Columbia after one year to find more stimulating intellectual nourishment among the aesthetes and politically committed writers in Greenwich Village of the 1920s. As far as Bennington was concerned, however, an even more attractive quality than Burke's informal academic pedigree was his continuing career as a literary and cultural critic. Two years before Burke joined the faculty at Bennington in 1943 he had published his fifth book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*; he was a prolific contributor to important critical magazines such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*; and his presence as a major critic on the national level was acknowledged when he won a Guggenheim Fellowship in April 1935, awarded for "the writing of a book [*Attitudes Toward History*] studying the effect which ideas and social values have had upon the practical and material aspect of different cultures" throughout history (qtd. in George and Selzer 10). Moreover, he came to Bennington with another extensive critical project underway, as *A Grammar of Motives* would be published in 1945 during his second full year of teaching at the school.

A Grammar of Motives—indeed Burke's entire critical project—was driven by an aim not unlike that of Bennington College's founders, namely, to develop the will to scrutinize "accepted beliefs" (Fishman and McCarthy 26) and to understand "the nature of problems of the outside world" (Soule 117). Burke saw Bennington, in the "purest" form of its educational aims, cultivating in students the analytical ability and the sense of responsibility needed to test received knowledge. Moreover, Burke shared in Bennington College's belief that students should connect their study of specific disciplines to the social, cultural, or economic world.

However, Burke added his personal nuance to this definition of Bennington's educational project, as he called for the study of language to serve as the core of students' learning. His educational philosophy was grounded in his belief that "Man *literally* is a symbol-using animal" and "*really does* approach the world symbol-wise (and symbol-foolish)" ("Linguistic" 260). He saw the classroom as a space for teaching students analytical methods—indexing and charting—they could use both to explore how habitual ways of using and understanding language "mak[e] us in effect somnambulists" (270) and to create unique responses to key terms that shape our physical and social worlds.

Burke's educational aims are grounded on his ideas about the relationship between one's experience of reality and the creation of knowledge. Burke felt that people needed to recognize "just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by 'reality' has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems" (*Language* 5). Even though each of us experiences a "tiny sliver

of reality [...] firsthand," "the whole overall 'picture' is but a construct of our symbol systems" (5). Burke obviously understood that this attention to language was at the heart of a Deweyan pragmatist philosophy, as evidenced in Burke's 1930 essay "Intelligence as a Good," in which he reviewed Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty*: "The pragmatist [...] will recognize that one discovers 'reality' in accordance with one's terminology, that a shift in the vocabulary of approach will entail new classifications for the same events" (*Philosophy* 382). That said, Burke felt Bennington's pragmatist-inspired curriculum did not give adequate stress to the study of how language shaped what each discipline took as its "knowledge." For Burke, the study of symbol systems should be the centerpiece of education, "a kind of 'central' or 'over-all' course, a 'synoptic' project for 'unifying the curriculum' by asking the students themselves to think of their various courses in terms of a single distinctive human trait (the linguistic) that imposes its genius upon all particular studies" ("Linguistic" 274).

Burke believed this "synoptic" project would encourage faculty and students to see the causes and consequences of human beings' "symbol-foolish" approach to the world. Symbol-foolishness, he suggests, had resulted in "the basic motives of human effort [being] concealed behind the clutter of the machinery, both technological and administrative, which civilization has amassed in the attempts to live well" ("Linguistic" 269). Burke contends in "Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education" that education had come to contribute to this "clutter" in serving "merely as a means of preparing students for market" (273). Students were narrowing their academic focus to the technical aspects of a single discipline and learning how to acquire and apply information faster and more efficiently within these specialized fields. While doing so, however, students were not taking time "to meditate upon the tangle of symbolism in which all men are by their very nature caught" (288).

Burke saw promise in education precisely because classrooms are not corporate boardrooms, government offices, or military laboratories. Academic exercises, he believed, afford students the opportunity to "temporarily risk being *stopped*" ("Linguistic" 273) in their efforts to gain information as quickly as possible. Echoing Dewey's call for beliefs "to be entertained tentatively" (*Democracy* 338), Burke argued that education ideally aims at "the institutionalizing of an attitude" committed to "preparatory withdrawal" from "the human scramble" in an increasingly technical society ("Linguistic" 273). In other words, Burke believed "the best function of education is in giving [students] a free approach" to analyzing those relationships between key terms, tropes, and metaphors that people otherwise emotionally and physically respond to

in automatic, unreflective ways (270). Directing the curriculum toward the ends of institutionalizing this attitude would give students the means of becoming more conscious of how symbol-use conceals human motives. Burke wanted students to learn to analyze how language shapes their perceptions of “reality” so they could be free to respond to symbolic action in new, more “wise” ways, rather than being unthinkingly propelled to act or move “foolishly.”

Burke proposed “indexing” and “charting” as methods students could use to analyze how the internal relations within a text or discourse create a “terministic screen” and how, in turn, this screen shapes one’s perception of “reality.” The next section describes how Burke taught his students to index and chart texts, but I will briefly clarify these methods here. The first step in building an index entails locating the key terms within a text and assessing which terms “cluster” together to address a similar idea or concern within the text; Burke explains this latter task as one of identifying “equations,” or determining “what goes with what,” among the key terms in a text (*Philosophy* 22). The reader then begins to “chart” a text by analyzing how a writer uses these key terms “not merely to nam[e]” a situation or idea but rather to “name” the situation or idea in a way that reveals the writer’s attitude toward it (*Philosophy* 283). Here a reader attends to the ways a writer, “by reason of certain ambiguities or overlaps among the terms,” “manipulate[s] them as to derive many important changes of emphasis or conclusion from them” (*Philosophy* xviii). Indeed, Burke contends that a writer’s selection of specific terms instead of others, and the imbuing of these terms with particular attitudes instead of others, sets up the conclusions that the writer will make in a text. Charting, then, involves “mak[ing] explicit the conclusions implicit in [these] key terms or propositions used as generating principles” (*Grammar* 403).

One should note here that Burke taught indexing and charting as a means of “institutionalizing” the attitude of “preparatory withdrawal.” In “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education,” in fact, Burke gives primary agency to the method itself in cultivating this attitude in students:

We proceed by systematically “suffering” a given text, in the hope of discovering more about the symbolic activity in its particular kinds of sufferance. “Formal discipline” is identical with the carrying out of such an investigation. Truth is [. . .] highly problematical, as regards the question that ultimately concerns us most: What is the nature of a symbol-using animal? Here, at least ideally, however emphatic we may become on the spur of the moment, we adopt as our primary slogan: “All the returns aren’t in yet.” And we should continue to keep alive this attitude (the “Deweyite”

emphasis) by embodying it in methods that practically *compel* one to be tentative, at least during the preparatory stage when one is trying to locate all the significant correlations in a book, without deciding whether they are "good" or "bad," but trying rather simply to find out exactly what they *are*. (276)

Just as Dewey would ask students to "[regard] the decision reached as hypothetical and tentative" (*Reconstruction* 94), Burke reminds students to be open to the possibility that each new text they explore can add important clarifications, contradictions, and nuances to their ideas about how humans build up "reality" "through [...] our symbol systems" (*Language* 5). Burke also expresses confidence that this experimental method of analyzing texts, when approached with a belief that knowledge-creation is an open-ended process, can actually "compel" one to develop this attitude of patience and responsibility for free inquiry.

Interestingly, in the never-ending quest for perfection of theories and generalizations about human symbol-use, Burke sees great significance in examining the texts that bring "traditional" knowledge to those who pursue new ideas about the world. He writes in "Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education,"

Education, as so conceived, would brood [...]. But in its attempts to perfect a technique of brooding, it would learn to cherish the documents as never before. No expunging of records here. All must be kept, and faithfully examined; and not just that it may be approved or disapproved, but also that it be considered as a challenge to our prowess in placing it within the unending human dialogue as a whole. (273)

Burke contends that one would do well to examine as many texts as one could, all in a spirit of openness to the fact that other texts might challenge one's current understandings of and attempts to theorize human symbol use.

Although Bennington seemed to be a place that welcomed such scrutiny, the school, in Burke's mind, was failing to create enough opportunities for students to connect their learning to their personal, professional, civic, and communal lives. This insight comes from a 1959 letter Burke wrote to Soule, who at the time was conducting a Carnegie Foundation-supported study of Bennington's "educational experiment." Soule solicited faculty feedback on how well the school was carrying out key aspects of the school's mission. In one specific question, Soule asked whether pedagogical practices and curriculum at Bennington fostered "concern with conditions and problems in the 'outside world'" (Soule 153). Burke offered this response:

Frankly, my field is literature. And, frankly, I think that literature is vibrantly concerned with every problem. And frankly, I have again and

again been horrified to see evidence that, in being taught literature, the student is taught something quite different from the concern phrased in your question. (Letter to Soule, 21 February 1959)

This assertion suggests that Burke did not see the college in general and the Literature department in particular pushing students to connect their specific disciplinary studies to their understanding of culture and society as a whole.

In a follow-up letter to Soule, Burke elaborated on the problems he saw in the Literature department's narrow approach to teaching literary texts merely in terms of aesthetic principles:

In any case, it all adds up to my firm conviction, (1) that creative writing should be studied not just as a craft but as a way into the contemplation of man in all his complexity; (2) that such contemplation requires an explicit, systematic concern with the ways in which political and economic factors help shape the nature of imagination and secretly participate in our imagery, no matter how "pure" of such elements it may seem to be on its face; [...] (3) that the current esthetic, with its norms of taste uncritically taken for granted, automatically blocks such an approach. (Letter to Soule, 16 May 1959)

Through this critique, Burke's hopes for the "Bennington Project" become clear. He conceives of this project in a way that would direct the Literature department's pedagogical efforts more coherently and strongly toward analyzing and resolving the "tangle of symbolism," particularly how political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics shape the "taken for granted norms" that guide everyday life.

For Burke, then, the ideal education would focus students' attention on how language affects the creation of knowledge. Burke taught in ways he believed could sharpen students' abilities to analyze the complex problems of civilization through the lens of symbolic action. Just as important, Burke committed himself to enacting an educational philosophy that habituated students to approaching this critical task with a humbleness that comes from understanding how symbol use and misuse has created the clutter in "civilized" society that keeps humans from understanding their own basic motivations.

Professor Burke's "Technique of Note-Taking"

As he clarifies the "means and ends" of *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke makes a telling statement on the relationship between the means for studying language and the development of an attitude of linguistic skepticism: "This work (which would have as its motto *Ad Bellum Purificandum*, or Towards the Purification of War) is constructed on the belief that, whereas an *attitude*

of humanistic contemplation is in itself more important by far than any *method*, only by method could it be given the body necessary for its existence even as an attitude" (319).⁴ Burke maintains that while adopting this attitude is the best result that could follow from observing linguistic operations, one must methodically study language in all its forms, generating insights on symbol use in many different situations, in order to cultivate this attitude. The record of Burke's teaching at Bennington College reveals that he saw indexing and charting as methods for studying "conditions and problems in the 'outside world'" (Soule 153), as students would learn to analyze language in ways that temper the "competitive ambition" he believed too often motivated human symbol-use and led to human conflict (Burke, *Grammar* xvii).

Burke emphasized the need to develop this analytic method as he wrote the course description for "Language as Symbolic Action." Burke portrays the course as one in which students will practice the two-step intellectual move of building an ever-expanding archive of textual analyses and then, on the basis of these analyses, composing a theory of symbol use. He accentuates his emphasis on teaching a critical method for analysis when he explains to students that "[t]heoretical generalizing will be grounded in the particulars of a technique of note-taking" ("Language" 56–57). He then elaborates on this goal of linking an analytical method to the practice of theory-building. Burke notes that the course will aim at "a summarized account of linguistic operations" while it also "lays stress upon detailed methods for spotting the key terms of a literary work and for charting the transformations that the work undergoes in its movement towards completion" (56). Significantly, Burke also expresses his hope that these "detailed methods" (indexing and charting) will help to cultivate an attitude of linguistic appreciation, as students should expect to "sharpen awareness of the ways in which terms are related to one another, and of the momentous role that terminology plays in human thought and conduct" (57). In this last sense, Burke saw the course as a means for encouraging students to adopt a perspective toward literary study whereby they see all texts—even novels, poems, and plays—as tools for "study[ing] the problem of language in its bearing upon human relations generally" (56).

⁴For a recent attempt to understand the origin and meaning of the phrase "Ad bellum purificandum," see James P. Zappen, S. Michael Halloran, and Scott A. Wible, "Some Notes on 'Ad bellum purificandum,'" *KB Journal* 3.2 (Spring 2007): <<http://kbjournal.org/node/201>>. M. Elizabeth Weiser has also offered an answer to the question of why the purpose of Burke's critical project would be "the purification of war." See "Burke and War: Rethorizing the Theory of Dramatism," *Rhetoric Review* 26.3 (2007): 286–302.

The texts Burke selected for his 1955 “Language as Symbolic Action” course were particularly effective ones for addressing these course goals, as Burke could teach them in a way that highlighted how terminology shapes human thought and conduct. Burke created a reading list for the course composed almost entirely of philosophical essays. The bulk of the readings were essays from *Modern Philosophies and Education* (Henry), which was published in 1955 by the National Society for the Study of Education and included Burke’s essay “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education.” Among its many aims, the collection sought to deepen understanding of how social anxieties concerning education (e.g., “Are our educational aims too numerous, too vague, too conflicting, too few?”; “How can education better serve democracy?”) are grounded on different conceptions of “the nature of knowledge, of value, of man, of society” (Brubacher 16). Each author in the volume addressed this guiding concern by explaining how one philosophical perspective—from existentialism, experimentalism (pragmatism), and naturalism to Thomism, Marxism, and Burke’s own “linguistic approach”—defined these key terms and how these definitions shaped an educational plan to meet society’s needs and resolve its anxieties.

Burke focused his students’ attention on this set of texts because by reading each essay alongside the others, one might better appreciate the concept of a “terministic perspective.” Students learned how each writer built the foundation for his particular philosophy on key terms that, as he explains elsewhere, “name” a situation in a way that reveals the writer’s attitude toward it (*Philosophy* 283). By viewing the texts from this angle, Burke explained to one student, “[Y]ou might call the various approaches to [educational problems] ‘one of terms rather than of ideas’” (Response to Uli Beigel’s essay on existentialism, 1955). Students pursued this linguistically slanted analysis by identifying the key terms in each text, noting how the definition emphasized some particular aspect of human motivation, and then tracing how each philosopher’s selection and definition of key terms had a “bearing upon human relations” (to quote’s Burke’s course description), as these terms gave purpose and direction to a specific set of educational activities.

By teaching students to analyze each philosophical writer’s terms rather than the theories, Burke worked to cultivate students’ appreciation for the fact that each and every text had something to teach them about human symbol use. Burke acknowledges in *A Grammar of Motives* that “[i]t is even likely that, whereas one philosophic idiom offers the best calculus for one case, another case answers best to a totally different calculus” (xvii). Burke expressed a similar sentiment when he explained to one student that he saw the writing assignment sequence as a chance to analyze the “virtues

and vices" of each philosophy's terminology and then let each terminology "compete in a Socratic dialogue designed to show what all each could place with greatest 'elegance'" (Response to Louise Carty's essay on realism, 1955). Significantly, though, while they analyzed these texts, students were not to quarrel with each writer's philosophical ideas. Rather, they were to attend to how different clusters of key terms created the foundation for each writer's characterization of human motivation. Burke cautions one student in this regard:

Incidentally, as regards your reservations at the end: Wouldn't you at least allow experimentalism as one voice in our motivational dialogue? Is there not something of basic importance to be seen, if we approach life *in terms* of it? If you were making up an ideal dialogue, would it not have a role?" (Response to Uli Beigel's essay on experimentalism, 1955)

Such a comment shows Burke reminding students to take the step of situating each philosophical perspective within the motivational dialogue; from this step, he hoped students would develop an appreciation for temporary withdrawal. More specifically, students would analyze each text with the aim of understanding what each writer's set of terms reflected or deflected about a particular "case" as well as considering what this terminology contributes to the larger dialogue about human symbol-use.

Burke pushed his students to do more than merely "spotting the key terms" of each philosophic essay, as he also encouraged them to chart how these key terms give particular momentum and direction to the text "in its movement towards completion" ("Language" 56). Burke wanted students to produce textual analyses that reflect one of his definitions for "dialectics": "the employment of the possibilities of linguistic transformation" (*Grammar* 402). To track this "linguistic transformation," students would attend to those "strategic spots at which ambiguities [within and among terms] necessarily arise" (xviii). Burke explains that ambiguity arises when one tries to apply the same term to different acts or situations (xix). This ambiguity becomes more pronounced when writers, such as philosophers, use terms to speak about motivation across a vast range of human actions and social contexts and then "manipulat[e] the possibilities of emphasis in one way rather than another" (*Philosophy* xix). Burke expected students in his course to learn why these resources of ambiguity are inherent in symbol use and how writers' exploitation of these resources of ambiguity leads readers to attend to certain aspects of a particular idea or action and not to others.

In his 1955 "Language as Symbolic Action" course, Burke used an initial essay assignment centered on four readings dealing with "association" and

“dissociation” in order to emphasize this attention to “movement” in texts. Students read Burke’s “Psychology and Form” essay from *Counter-Statement* as well as selections from Remy De Gourmont’s “*La Dissociation des Idées*”; Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*; and Part II of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, which discusses “ways of producing assent by such appeals to character and emotion as [to] arouse the audience’s confidence in the speaker and his cause” (Burke, Response to Helen Goodwin’s first paper, 1955). Burke assigned these readings in order to introduce his argument, following De Gourmont, that human beings create new ideas through a process moving from “unnoticed association,” to “deliberate dissociation,” and culminating in “re-association (either new or a reaffirmation of the old)” (Burke, Response to Marya Bednerik’s first paper, 1955).⁵

Burke believed this first assignment would draw students’ attention to how “the mind builds up certain fixed categories of association (a feeling that certain things ‘properly’ go together)” while also encouraging them to remain attentive to ways in which writers “give us a flash of new insight by leaping across these categories, and bringing together in new association elements that were previously in complete dissociation” (Burke, Response to Suzanne Stern’s first paper, 1955). Significantly, Burke believed that introducing this concept of “dissociation” could also help students to appreciate the connection between method and attitude. Echoing his description of “the best function of education” in “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education” (270), Burke explained to one student that he saw his classroom as a space in which they could practice “shopping around among ideas by tentatively dissociating” (Response to Helen Goodwin’s first paper, 1955), all toward the end of creating new insights about ideas they had been conditioned to respond to in one particular way.

⁵In his response to Uli Beigel’s first essay, Burke explains how he saw this collection of readings working together:

I was saddened that you thought my “Psychology and Form” essay “almost a contradiction” of De Gourmont. Here’s how I thought they might fit together: “Psychology and Form” discusses the arousing of expectations (attitudes) on the part of the audience. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* lists kinds of associations that could be exploited to this purpose. De Gourmont’s essay deals with such altered kinds of attitude as might go with acts of dissociation. I shall consider this matter further when on the subject of “perspective by incongruity.” (1955)

Burke asked students to read Coleridge’s piece, meanwhile, to observe how he “prepar[es] the grounds for a dissociation that will distinguish between ‘fancy’ and ‘imagination’ (whereas they were originally thought of as synonyms, *phantasia* being the Greek equivalent of the Latin *imaginatio*)” (Burke, Response to Shelia Solomon’s first essay, 1955).

Whereas the first writing assignment asked students to consider how "dissociation" helps people to create new insights, the remaining four essay assignments gave students the opportunity to practice indexing and charting and, through such analysis, to track how terministic associations and re-associations played out in a group of texts in dialogue within one another. Students read and wrote on five essays from *Modern Philosophies and Education*:

Assignment Two: George R. Geiger, "An Experimentalist Approach to Education"

Assignment Three: Ralph Harper, "Significance of Existence and Recognition for Education"

Assignment Four: John Wild, "Education and Human Society: A Realistic View"

Assignment Five: Jacques Maritain, "Thomist Views on Education"; and Robert S. Cohen, "On the Marxist Philosophy of Education"

Burke structured this sequence of reading and writing assignments to allow students to practice "dialectic" according to another definition Burke offered for the term: "any development got by the interplay of various factors that mutually modify one another, and may be thought of as voices in a dialogue or roles in a play, with each voice or role in its particularity contributing to the development of the whole" (*Grammar* 403). In this particular instance, the "dialogue" would take place among the various philosophic writers, and students would assess what each "voice" "contribut[es] to the development" of a general theory of human symbol use (as opposed to the development of an educational theory).

Burke's feedback on his students' writing aimed to sharpen their analytical techniques for identifying and charting the terms that gave shape to each writer's ideas. His instructions for each essay were for students first to create indexes that "line up the materials succinctly and accurately" (Burke, Response to Diana Garfield's first essay, 1955). In other words, students were to identify the key terms in an essay and then to explain relationships and equated meanings among these terms. Burke applauded students when they made interesting connections between terms in a text. For example, Burke told Uli Beigel he was "glad [she] brought out the passage whereby [Harper] advances from *longing* to *knowing* to *existing*" in his essay on existentialism (emphasis added). Beigel also did fine work in analyzing Geiger's essay on pragmatism, as Burke wrote, "Excellent, in pointing up the terministic tactics of the terms 'continuity' and 'contextual.'" Where necessary, Burke also explained his reasons when he

disagreed with their statements about the significance of alignments they perceived in a reading. For example, Burke noted one term that Helen Allentuck overlooked in her comparative analysis of Maritain's essay on Thomism and Cohen's essay on Marxism, an aspect that several students obviously failed to address: "I was repeatedly delighted by noting your concern with terministic unfoldings. Major omission seems to me an analysis of 'ideology' (and its relation to 'illusion'). Have wearied myself with discussing this in connection with various papers, so shall leave it for class."

Burke's comments on student essays show him trying to emphasize how indexing and charting serve as a means for capturing the dynamism within any text, as students would learn to sharpen their perception of how a text's "titular terms" move the work toward completion and lead readers toward specific logical and emotional conclusions. His students were to index the cluster of terms that created the foundation for the writer's philosophy. Students were also to chart new insights the writer generated through re-associations as these clusters drew out particular meanings or "attitudes" of a term. Burke's comments on one student's analysis of Harper's existentialism essay reveal how, for Burke, viewing a text's internal linguistic operations involved understanding the way a writer—whether consciously or not—used key terms to create dissociations and new re-associations as a means for generating a specific argument on human motivation:

My main suggestion would be that you approach [the text's unresolved problems] from a more specifically terministic angle, somewhat along these lines: You'd pick out the places where Harper notes that Existentialism began as a religious philosophy (in Kierkegaard). You'd next note Harper's ways of dissociating existentialism and religion so that there can also be purely secular existentialists. Then you'd note how, by this dissociation, the specifically religious kinds of solace are dropped from the scheme, or made more problematical (more dubious). The stress upon mortality has one meaning if placed in a setting of terms which surely promise immortality, and another meaning if placed in a setting of terms which make the idea of "eternity" quite different. And the difference is particularly important since the philosophy places so much stress upon the *individual*. (Response to Patricia Ayres's essay on existentialism, 1955)

Here we see an example of the particular "terministic angle" from which Burke wanted his students to approach the course readings. Students were to attend to how writers marshaled the resources of ambiguity to define their particular philosophical perspective in relation to others. A text's internal operations, Burke repeatedly explained, construct a terministic screen that

influences how the writer views reality and understands ideas such as (in this case) "eternity."

Burke's comments on student essays suggest that as an educator he was far more interested in having students work through difficult problems in understanding how each critic develops and employs a terministic screen rather than parsing out the nuances of each philosophy in and of itself. Toward these ends, Burke introduced what he called the "*therefore, however, and and* procedures," which he felt would help students chart more precisely how particular key terms move a writer's argument toward completion (Response to Uli Beigel's essay on realism, 1955). Burke explains that these procedures would allow students to "spin" all of a work's interrelated terms from one logically prior term that serves as the basis for any given philosophic terminology.

Take, for instance, Burke's response to one student's paper on John Wild's realism essay. The student, Uli Beigel, wrote that Wild's logic "seems to be based not on a series of causes and results, or statements followed through to their particular conclusions, but instead on a series of equations" (qtd. in Burke's response to Uli Beigel's essay on realism, 1955). Burke pushes Beigel to do more with her analysis than simply making an index. Here he explains one way in which a reader might chart how the key terms move the logic of Wild's educational philosophy:

A terminology will always be found to have such relationships [equations]. But there seem to be plenty of *therefores*. For instance, men are flexible by nature; such flexibility is both valuable and a danger; therefore education is needed to guide this flexibility; and therefore such education should stress the priority of pure theory, since it best equips us to question presuppositions (hence, to avoid loss of flexibility).

Burke provides a similar analysis in response to one student's paper on Geiger's pragmatism essay. Burke's explanation highlights a key point where Geiger makes use of the "resources of ambiguity," creating a seeming "fixity" when naming "temporal processes." More significantly, Burke's comments draw his student's attention to logical relationships that follow from titular terms in the text, relationships characterized in terms of "therefore" and that help to move the author's argument to its conclusion:

"Growth" and "evolution" are *names* for temporal processes; but the relation between them, as terms, is not *temporal*, but is one of equivalence, a kind of logical or terministic *fixity*. If "experimentalism" as a titular term, *therefore* the stress upon "evolution," as a *term* for the sort of ever-changing condition that would make an experimental attitude advisable. And *therefore* the setting up of "intelligence" as "key word"

for the *quality of act* that should be implicit in this attitude. Thus, the terministic relations *just are*. In this sense, they are “non-temporal.” But they are names for temporal processes. And we discuss their relationship to one another by unfolding them in a sequential order. (Response to Marcia Mary Morgan’s paper on experimentalism, 1955)

Burke does acknowledge that “there is *not just one* way in which to note the interrelationships among the terms” (Response to Rivi Magaril’s essay on realism, 1955). However, as he suggests in *A Grammar of Motives* (404), using these “*therefore, however, and and* procedures” leads to stronger analyses of how writers transform the relationships between terms, whether through merger or division, in order to shape a particular perspective on human motivation.

As his course description suggests, Burke taught methods such as indexing and charting not merely as tools for analyzing individual texts but rather as the “ground” for “theoretical generalizing.” In this regard, Burke reinforced his conception of a “Bennington Project” as a pedagogy that emphasizes continuous experimentation as a means of testing current ideas about language use and creating new insights about symbolic action. Burke encouraged students to see that their general conclusions about symbol-use were always open to being re-shaped through analysis of specific texts. The overarching critical question in Professor Burke’s courses, then, was not whether any particular philosophic position was correct but rather, as he explained to one student, “whether a *theory of terminology* is relevant to the lot” (Response to John Starkweather’s essay on realism, 1955).⁶

Significantly, Burke situated his own “terministic” perspective within this dialogue, asking students to read “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education” alongside the other essays from *Modern Philosophies and Education*. (While students did *read* Burke’s “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education” at a point late in the semester, no archival materials indicate that students ever *wrote* terministic analyses of their professor’s essay.) This particular move demonstrated to Burke’s students his willingness to analyze his own essays as symbolic action and to consider whether juxtaposing his texts in relation to other essays adds depth to his theories. As he encouraged students to move similarly from specific texts to general theories, Burke sought to cultivate their critical reading practices such that they would become more attentive to how all language—not just academic discourse—shapes what they understand to be “reality,” what they take to be problems in that reality, and what they propose as solutions to those problems.

⁶Bennington College did not become fully co-educational until 1969. In 1935, however, it did begin to admit men to the Bennington Theater Studio Program (“A Bennington Timeline”).

Most important for Burke, he saw his students' development of an analytical method, one that continually generated re-associations in terms of their ideas about language use, as a means to cultivate an appreciation for patient critical reflection. Burke's students indexed each and every text, comparing the ways in which the philosophies tracked different paths on the basis of their different titular terms, as a means of becoming more aware of the fact that the next case could reshape ideas one holds to be "true" about symbol use. In many of his comments on student essays, Burke pushed students to follow the method of setting up that dialogue—a dialogue focused on linguistic operations and terministic screens—among the various philosophies. The following example, from Burke's comments on a student's analysis of the existentialism essay, shows him pushing students to practice his critical method as a means toward developing humility and awareness of one's own limited knowledge. The methods, Burke contends, help one to gain new insights that come from considering a wider range of evidence and perspectives:

Bristling essay. You at least paid the author the compliment of a vigorous reaction. I wonder how you'd feel if you looked at Existentialism, not as the Ideal Philosophy, but as One Voice in a Dialogue, one character among many, each of them bringing out some notable strand that deserves consideration and expression. Might your wrath then be tempered somewhat? That is, where you say that "Mr. Harper's essay and the cult of Existentialism seem to me weighted on the side of ingrowth," I wonder how you'd feel if you thought of it this way: "Let's put in Harper and Existentialism, for the voice that is on the side of ingrowth." (That is, the assumption would be that "ingrowth" is one aspect of our personality, and should get its share in total representation.) Vive the Dialectic. (Response to Helen Allentuck's essay on Existentialism, 1955)

Burke used his course not only to teach students how to index and chart texts but also to develop in them a habitual turn to such methods as a means for gaining greater "consciousness of linguistic action" and "temper[ing] the absurd ambitions that have their source in faulty terminologies" (*Grammar* 317).

Burke taught indexing and charting as important critical practices, then, because they demanded careful reflection from students who had "become so zealous in [their] attempt to destroy" the various philosophic positions (Burke, Response to Louise Carty's essay on realism, 1955). For this same reason, Burke encouraged students to re-discover the possibilities that get dismissed in writers' preemptive critiques of opposing views. He wanted students to see themselves as reading and writing alongside him in a collaborative effort to understand how language shapes human motivations. This

critical practice at the heart of Professor Burke's Bennington Project created the conditions for opening students' minds and hearts to analyzing problems not only in literary texts but also in the larger culture and society.

Conclusion: "A Chance to Escape the Automatism of Terminology"

During his final year at Bennington, Burke delivered the commencement address to the graduating class of 1961, a speech he titled "De Beginnibus." Burke's speech reads in many ways like an extension of his classroom teaching, as he extols and exemplifies the value of indexing and charting. Early in "De Beginnibus," for example, he assures smokers in the audience that they could cure themselves by means of "a systematic scrutiny of the inferior advertising techniques employed in the attempts of pushers to develop addicts as early in life as possible" (6). A short time later, he discusses the critics' job to "gradually disclose" the "conclusions" that are "implicit in any [text's] nomenclature" (4). And further along in the speech, Burke briefly analyzes how "Spinoza's basic equating of God and Nature automatically sets things up for a pantheistic philosophy," an analysis he used to illustrate his own argument about how key terms serve as generating principles: "Since [. . .] you can never get out of a vocabulary anything other than what you put into it, any principle you derive from it must be there *from the start*." (4).

It might seem that commencement was an odd occasion for Burke to teach the graduating class his critical method. On the other hand, his use of the speech in this way underscores Burke's belief that all human beings can and should attend to the ways terministic screens shape their thoughts and actions. Indeed, at its core, Burke's "De Beginnibus" meets the key criterion for a commencement address. He offers his analytical tools of indexing and charting as his gift to Bennington College graduates, promising that these tools could help them to generate insights on the world that might usefully guide their professional, civic, and personal lives. "Advice is as easy to give as it is hard to take," Burke admits, "[b]ut I do believe I can reasonably ask you to keep on the look-out for such equations, implicit or explicit, in all forms of expression" (5).

Burke uses the following passage, though, to underscore the considerable "real-world" implications of choosing to "keep on the look-out" for equations:

Only insofar as you inquire into such equational structures do you have a chance to escape the automatism of terminology (as we seek to find our way between the dangers of automatism and the ingenuities of

automation). It's for you to decide which equations you should accept or reject—but I do feel justified, for my part of the deal, in saying that you should always be on the look-out for such equations, particularly when they are implicit in our thinking, there merely as unexpressed assumptions. Such unobserved equations in our thinking set up the kind of "beginnings," or motivating principles, that can transform us into automata. Demagogues, headlines, the advertising in the mass media, and the like, line you up by the use of associative linkages that are ultimately reducible to such equations. The same observation applies to the best works, too. The point is: Don't expect to avoid it—but *watch* it. (5)

Burke's advice here reflects his vision of the "Bennington Project," particularly as he infuses the definition of this pedagogical project with a belief that guided his own critical work: "encouraging tolerance by speculation" (*Grammar* 442). Burke uses his commencement address to encourage students to practice a method of critical speculation through which they might cultivate an attitude of tolerance. "De Beginnibus," then, introduces to a wider audience the arguments that Burke makes in his writings and in his classrooms. He asks all Bennington graduates to keep "watch" over their daily lives by practicing a critical method that will deepen their appreciation for and help them to gain greater control over how "unexpressed assumptions" guide their lives.

Both Burke's teaching and his commencement address reflect his understanding that this critical method serves as more than a purely intellectual exercise. His "Bennington Project" was grounded on continuous experimentation aimed at testing how language shapes the knowledge human beings create. This experimentation involved a student's movement from indexing and charting specific texts to building and refining her general theories of symbol use, and it enabled the student to create "the body" of analyses and insights "necessary for [the] existence" of an "attitude of humanistic contemplation" (*Grammar* 319). Burke wanted Bennington students "to see [their] own lives as a kind of rough first draft that lends itself at least somewhat to revision" (442). This process of revision begins by enacting a critical method through which we "become aware of the ways in which we are the victims of our own and one another's magic"; this revision then moves toward completion as the method prompts us to "temper the extreme rawness of our ambitions" (442). In this way, then, Burke's "Bennington Project" should be seen as a distinct educational theory and method aimed at instructing readers and students in this process of revising how discourses and texts propel their actions in the world.

One can see from Burke's 1955 "Language as Symbolic Action" course that he viewed his own texts as "a kind of rough first draft" lent "to

revision.” That semester he situated his “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education” essay alongside five other essays from *Modern Philosophies and Education*. As Blakesley has noted, “Burke perceives his own work as a dialectic of many voices” (93). We see Professor Burke at Bennington actually performing this idea for his students. The reading list for his course highlights the intellectual value Burke saw in placing his theories in dialogue with other writers’ statements on human motivation, giving each “voice” an equal place in the “dialogue” with the sincere belief that we can learn something “if we approach life *in terms of it*” (Response to Uli Beigel’s paper on experimentalism, 1955). By prompting students to set up this dialogue, Burke believed they would learn “to cherish the documents as never before,” never ignoring or refuting texts that complicated their thinking but rather considering each one “as a challenge to [their] process in placing it within the unending human dialogue as a whole” (“Linguistic” 273).

This particular arrangement of texts for Burke’s course, as well as his approach to teaching these texts, should draw our attention to a similar aspect in *A Grammar of Motives*, in which Burke places the various philosophic schools in a dialogue on human motivations toward the ends of “clarify[ing] the resources of ambiguity” (xix). He approaches these various texts in such a way as to demonstrate how “an attitude of methodical quizzicality towards language may best equip us to perceive the full scope of its resourcefulness” (441–442). Burke’s teaching at Bennington, through which he instructed students how to use indexing and charting toward the ends of cultivating such an attitude, should compel us to read *A Grammar of Motives*, along with *A Rhetoric of Motives* and *Language as Symbolic Action*, not simply as a collective theory of human symbol use but rather, in Burke’s own words, as “a full-blown educational theory and method.” These texts should be considered as an extended lesson on how to apply his analytic method—what he calls elsewhere “techniques for doubting” (“Linguistic” 272)—as we live our daily lives. Indeed, Burke’s “Bennington Project” underscores the pedagogical nature of so much of Burke’s abstract theorizing. Burke’s writing and teaching exhibits his belief that the study of language and literature can allow us to do productive work toward improving our lives and the world.

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