

# Defining Rhetoric—and Us

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As others have before, Paul Hunter chided us at the 1989 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication for honoring North America's greatest rhetorician, Kenneth Burke, more than we use him. Though many composition textbooks make an honorific bow in Burke's direction by including a simplified version of his Pentad in their treatment of heuristics, few composition texts or courses are informed by Burke's insights into language and rhetoric. Especially in advanced composition, a Burkean approach has much to offer.

Though Burke gets upset every time I suggest this, many composition instructors have difficulty reading his work. If we understood Burke better, we could better devise approaches to composition that embodied his insights. In hope of engendering such understanding, I will here meditate on a text Burke presented at the 1989 CCCC, about a half an hour after hearing Hunter's complaint.

Burke begins (and ends) with a definition of *humanity*. Not of *rhetoric*, *language*, *literature*, *culture*, or *discourse*, but of *humanness*. The first of the "five summarizing essays" in *Language as Symbolic Action* is "Definition of Man"—and it was a revised, expanded version of this definition that Burke presented at CCCC. Any comments on matters cultural, Burke asserts, must embody assumptions about the nature of the human beings who compose culture—and who compose themselves socially, rhetorically, in terms cultural (*Language 2*). One key to understanding Burke is understanding his conception of what makes us human.

If our purpose were merely to distinguish human beings from other beings, we might define people as animals that laugh, or as animals that use tools to make tools, or as erect, bipedal mammals with opposable thumbs, or in a variety of other ways. Though all these definitions can be derived from Burke's, he chooses none of them. Instead, he defines us like this:

*Being bodies that learn language  
thereby becoming wordlings.  
humans are*

*the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal  
inventor of the negative  
separated from our natural condition  
by instruments of our own making  
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy  
acquiring foreknowledge of death  
and rotten with perfection*

From the fullness of this definition, we could, in principle, derive the totality of Burke's insights into the species that uses language (though probably no one but Burke would in actuality).

Though Burke does cite the standard rule that a definition should have "just enough clauses [to define] and no more," his is not a standard definition. The rule usually means to use only as many distinctions (*differentia*) as necessary to distinguish what is being defined from the rest of the universe. But any one of Burke's clauses, even the last, which he calls a "wry codicil" (*Language* 16), suffices to distinguish us.

A definition, Burke asserts, "sums things up." Definition may well be what comes last in a writer's discovery process, "the last thing a writer hits upon," for it is hard to "sum up" what has not yet been observed or invented. In retrospect, however, it should logically be possible to derive the properties of whatever is being defined from the definition. And, indeed, Burke's definition is finally summed up in the word *wordling*. From the implications of this pun—human wordlings are wordlings, bodies that, of their nature, learn words (thus becoming more than mere bodies)—the rest follows.

The clauses of Burke's definition are not "just enough" to define; they are, rather, "just enough" to serve as chapter headings, titles for categories under which his observations of human beings can "be assembled, as though derived from." Burke's aim is "to get as essential a set of clauses as possible, and to meditate on each of them" (*Language* 3).

### **Symbolic**

For Burke, everything essentially human derives from our being symbol-making animals. This derivation is logical, not biological or historical; it is a statement about the present, about the structure (*logos*) of human reality, not about first causes or origins. Our very perceptions—as well as our interpretations, attitudes, judgments, choices and the actions that follow—are all mediated by the symbols we make, use, abuse and are, in this sense, used by.

We are, to be sure, not alone in our use of symbols. Burke himself notes that any animal, insofar as it learns from experience—one of his more famous

examples is a trout that learns to distinguish bait from food (*Permanence* 5)—must generalize, and hence must come to perceive individual events as signifiers for categories of events. But our use of symbols is qualitatively beyond that of any other animal. We not only use language and other semiotic systems, we make them and are made by them. As Noam Chomsky emphasizes, human individuals are born with special abilities to learn language; and we are made human, interinanimated as social individuals, through our interaction with cultural semiotic systems that are essentially linguistic, semiotic, rhetorical.

As historical and social groups, we make language (and other semiotic systems). As individuals, we are to a significant degree, made by language—a fact that has important implications for composition as both a social and an individual process. The limited literature on feral children makes suggestively clear that human beings raised outside of human language and culture do not develop the ability to think abstractly (for example, if integrated in human society as adolescents, they can learn arithmetic, but not mathematics) and *perhaps consequently* never develop the human ability to love or act morally (at least not beyond the sense in which dogs can love and act morally). An erect, bipedal, mammal with opposable thumbs that cannot think abstractly or love or act morally may be biologically human; but it is precisely such abilities that really define our humanness. For Burke, these abilities all follow logically from our ability to abstract, which follows from our use of language. Taken together, these abilities make our behavior symbolic action, motives mediated by symbols, not mere motion (see, for example, Burke's "(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action").

Our errors, too, are mediated by our terms and other symbols. Indeed, our errors are often motivated by erroneous terms and tropes. We misuse our symbols not only immorally to gain advantage over others (as in machiavelian rhetoric), but also in self-abuse, blinding ourselves to our deepest fears, hopes and insights. Our naming (and misnaming) not only helps individuals evade personally (as per Freud), misnaming also keeps ordinary scientists from the sort of breakthrough insights that mark the great scientists (see Gould, for example).

Everything we do is mediated by our symbols. And it is we (historically, socially, ecologically) who created these systems of symbols. They guide us to relevant insights but blind us to more radical insights. They conserve our traditions and lock us into those traditions. They help us evade what we wish not to see or understand. They function epistemically—and ideologically—to make us social as well as individual human beings.

### Negativity

Language is the crux of our symbolicity. Human language is distinguished from various animal semiotics by the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. That is to say, among the various clauses used in

defining language, the crucial one distinguishes semiotic systems where there is an analogy between signifier and signified from language where that relationship is arbitrary.

To use a currently popular metaphor, human semantics is primarily a left-brain function because of properties that follow logically from the use of arbitrary signifiers (but cf. Gardner 267 ff.). Another way to articulate the same distinction is to say that all animal communications are analog, but human semantics is digital. Analog systems can say “no” to what is present (can refuse what is offered), but only digital systems have the logical capacity to say “not” (as in “I am not writing now”).

Thus, Burke’s second clause is not a new defining feature; it is implicit in his first clause: it can be derived logically from the nature of the human symbolic, from our nature as “wordlings”; thus, it is technically redundant. Still, Burke is right to add this clause, for many crucial features of language, culture and humanness fall under the heading of “the power of negative thinking,” which Burke calls “my positive negative.”

Our culture—Burke’s too—is in so many ways positive. We are for the most part logical positivists—even those of us (the vast majority) who don’t know what the term means. We built our country by “thinking positively” to overcome obstacles to greatness. As inheritors of British empiricism (rather than French rationalism or German dialectics), we believe in the positive facts of practical realism and can grasp the virtues of negativity only with difficulty (often only with the aid of Asian spiritualism or Hegelian philosophy).

Burke thinks of the “positive negative” in terms of Greek drama, especially *Oedipus* and the *Oresteia*, juxtaposing Aristotle’s *Poetics* with his *Rhetoric*. *Antigone* is Hegelian, he says. Pain is a “positive negative,” as in catharsis—“a message, not an error,” as when it tells us to remove our fingers from a hot stove (personal communication, 31 August 1989).

Part of what Burke has to offer is insight into the powers of negative thinking, which we lost (one time) when we accepted Plato’s reactionary slanders against sophists and rhetoricians; which we lost another time when we reduced Aristotle’s logic to his analytic logic (which includes the law against contradiction), thus deleting dialectic (which is founded on contradiction); and which we continue to lose because of our (anti-intellectual) mistrust of theory that cannot *immediately* demonstrate practical applications.

Having defined us in terms of our symbolic uses of language, Burke is absolutely right to define us next as “inventor of the negative.” Linguistically, he is correct because what defines language, what separates human language from all other natural semiotic systems is its negative capacity. Other natural semiotic systems include a primitive, behavioristic *no*. A lion cub swatted across the head learns not to chew its mother’s ears. After sufficient repetition of stern *no*’s, a puppy learns not to shit on the carpet (though it is the sternness, not the word, that embodies the primitive negative for the puppy). Even rats learn from psychologists’ shocking negatives.

But the true propositional *negative* is uniquely linguistic. Only digital semiotic systems have true negatives, and the only natural digital semiotic systems on this planet are human languages. The logical negative allows human beings to conceive and communicate about what is not present. This means we can abstract and theorize—whatever else an abstract idea may be, it is not the concrete, positive reality it conceptually encompasses. This negative relationship—between positive reality and abstraction—is crucial to Burke’s movement of mind.

Negativity also gives language its tenses, hence our ability to conceive and talk about what is *not* present because it is past or future. In a sense this is a form of abstraction, especially when, utopian, we speak of what does not, never has, and perhaps never will exist. Even to talk of the past is to negate the present (as various mystics have pointed out). Other animals are “just animals” in part because they lack this ability to communicate past and future. A dog, for example, can threaten—but only in the present perfect: a dog’s raised hackles and snarl say, “*I am going to bite you*” (because they are the beginning of the process that actualizes as biting); but a dog cannot communicate, “*I will bite you next week.*”

In addition to abstraction and tense, the negative allows basic logical functions that animals are incapable of communicating: *if . . . , then . . .* and *either/or*. A dog can communicate desire (“I want to be fed”) but not conditional action, not “If you don’t feed me, I will bite you.” Our ability to hypothesize about the future conceptually (instead of relying on trial and error) and our highly developed ability to conceive and make choices turn on these logical functions.

Without our ability to abstract, theorize, consider the distant past (historicize) and not-yet-existent future (plan), to hypothesize and to weigh alternatives, we are not human. And all these cognitive abilities are part and parcel of our linguistic abilities.

Though he discusses this aspect of the negative, which he calls the “propositional negative,” Burke emphasizes the “hortatory negative,” the “Thou shalt *not*.”<sup>1</sup> In the 1966 version of his definition, he added parenthetically that we are “moralized by the negative,” for our morality turns on our ability to conceive abstract commandments. So again there is no real distinction: our nature as moral beings depends on our intellectual ability to abstract, which depends on the propositional negative we acquire with language. When people behave with extreme immorality—such as in Nazi extermination camps—we say they are inhumane, their actions inhuman. Upon moral imperatives, formally negative, we found our positive humanness.

### Nature/Culture

Our experience is mediated by language, our actions moralized by the negative; thus we are removed from nature into culture. Indeed, “Thou shalt

not commit incest” is the minimal definition of culture. As Anthony Wilden asserts, “In every human society there is a rule about kinship that has no parallel in nature, a rule so universally accepted that it is not even mentioned in the Ten Commandments: the prohibition of incest” (102). Though exact definitions of incest (that is, precisely which relatives are forbidden) vary considerably from one society to another, no society, no human culture exists without an incest taboo. “Like language,” Wilden emphasizes, “kinship is a revolution rather than an invention” (102)—a revolution that separated us from nature, a revolution that created culture.

Incest is not literally an “unnatural act”; the prohibition of incest is a social, not natural law. The prohibition of incest is “a *spoken* rule hemmed about by social sanctions” (Wilden 102; emphasis added). Contrary to popular belief and royal hemophilia, moreover, a moderate amount of incest would more likely help than harm the gene pool; indeed, such mating is common among farm animals. Incest is socially, not biologically harmful.

Though it appears to be a rule about who not to marry, the incest taboo is more importantly a rule about who to marry. Naturally, one is likely to mate with those who are nearest, hence most available. If the incest rule redefines those nearest as unavailable, people “marry out.” By marrying out of the nuclear family, out of the extended family, even out of the band or clan, people create links of kinship over geographical and ecological space. These links encourage trade and mutual aid among neighbors. They ease movement of people from one group to another. They also diminish the probability, hence decrease the quantity, of wars. As a positive mandate for exogamy, the incest prohibition engenders cooperation, encourages social and cultural development (Wilden 107).

The *genus* of Burke’s definition, “animal,” is both true and false. We are, biologically, animals; but we are defined, distinguished from other animals, by our use of symbols (instruments of our own making), especially language (the tool that is more than a tool), which allows us to develop culture, to think abstractly and morally about our experience past, present and future. Our culture separates us from nature, creates the nature/culture boundary. It frees us—but in the process alienates us (from our natural condition). Our condition becomes more social than natural, shaped by culture within only very broad biological and ecological parameters.

Culture in this sense *negates* nature, though *negates* must be understood dialectically, for nature is not destroyed by our transcendence, and we remain in nature as we go beyond it. *Beyond* is a key word for Burke, who talks about “beyonding” (in part to evade the technical philosophical term, *sublate*.) Thus, separation does not mean we are not connected, just that a boundary has been drawn (hence the need for connection). The social is, in at least one crucial sense, natural, derived from nature, from the evolutionary process. We are “*bodies* that learn language/thereby becoming wordlings.”

Since our connection-separation from nature is made by our symbolicity, Burke's third clause, too, is technically redundant—not a new defining feature but an additional heading for organizing our discussion of language, culture, and humanness. Indeed, the connection (between symbolicity, negative thinking, and the nature/culture boundary) is the insight. Not that we are social animals, separated from nature by our culture; but that this separation is a logical consequence of our languaging.

### Order, Hierarchy, Levels

“Goaded by the spirit of hierarchy” is a rich metaphor, but it too is a logical consequence of our languaging, specifically of our language-based ability to abstract and sublimate. For every abstraction is a sublation, which both conserves and transcends the concrete reality from which it is abstracted. As an abstraction, the term *love* in one sense is beyond the concrete experience of mother's love; yet, in another sense it encompasses that experience (note the well worn metaphor of drawing a circle around). So any abstraction “beyonds” (to use Burke's verb) experience, puts my experience in relation with yours (which can be titled with the same word), thus makes it not only mine. But that abstraction is also grounded in experience, in reality, in nature.

Among the most important hierarchies, for Burke, are ladders of abstraction, hierarchies of even more encompassing titles, of abstractions that point at what disparate events share. Thus, Samson's suicide in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (see Burke's *Rhetoric* 3-19) is a unique and concrete event. But naming it “suicide” puts it in a circle with all other suicides (hence the need for the modifier, “Samson's”). And suicide is a form of death, so a larger circle is drawn, another level of abstraction established. And death is a form of transformation. And so on, up the ladder of abstraction, in principle *ad infinitum*.<sup>2</sup>

Samson's suicide does not, of course, cease to be Samson's suicide just because we have reconceived it. It is conserved as his unique suicide; we do not forget that when we rename it. But we do not understand Samson's suicide in its uniqueness until we understand it also as a transformation, as a transcendence which makes Samson's ur-sainthood. That is Milton's point; we do not understand Milton until we understand how Samson's suicide both is and is not a suicide—that is, how it both breaks and, more importantly, does not break the commandment against suicide, how it is both death (an ending) and transcendence (a beginning). Explicitly or implicitly, articulately or inarticulately, we must read Samson's act on at least these two levels before we understand it; if we read it only on the level of suicide, we do not understand Milton's play.

For Burke, such hierarchies are in the very nature of human understanding. This is why he added parenthetically in the 1966 version of the definition that being goaded by the spirit of hierarchy means being “moved by the sense of order.” We are moved by the sense of order every time we expect a

concrete event to conform to our abstract conception of that type of event, every time we expect a student to act like a student, a professional to act like a professional, a civil servant to serve civic purposes. When we use words, we title events; and when we title events we understand them not only in their concrete particularity but also in relation to the abstract concept that is signified by the title. This is a *both-and* upon which Burke insists. It is also an important fact that belongs at the center of our teaching of diction.

Burke's insistence on thinking *both-and* rather than *either/or*, on thinking at once on several levels, is part of what makes him hard to read—at least for readers who were raised with the linear, analytic, *either/or* logic Aristotle articulated in his Law of [Non]Contradiction. So it is important to note that Aristotle said there were two types of logic, analytic and dialectic; but philosophers opted to formalize only analytic logic, thereby debasing both rhetoricians and dialecticians (Perelman 1-4).

On any one level, the Law of [Non]Contradiction holds: *either/or* is the correct procedure; *A* cannot be *not-A*. But as Bertrand Russell noted, certain paradoxes (some of which go back to Greek pre-Socratics and the sophists) can be resolved only by realizing what their apparently contradictory assertions mean on distinct levels. If *A* is Samson's suicide, then *A* (suicide) can also be *not-A* (transformation). This *A* and this *not-A* are not exclusive; rather, the *not-A* encompasses the *A*. Similarly, a horse can be both a horse and a symbol (of sexuality, for example, in a D.H. Lawrence short story).

Though we have no difficulty reading Lawrence on several levels (literal and symbolic), we who have been raised in a culture that stresses analytic logic are not very skillful when it comes to advanced thinking in terms of levels, hierarchical orderings. But one thing we can learn from Burke is how better to think about order, hierarchy, levels. Burke's value here is precisely that he negates one of the shortcomings of the dominant culture, teaches us another, fuller way to read reality.<sup>3</sup>

### **Rotten with Fore-Knowledge and Perfection**

Burke explains that the clause "acquiring foreknowledge of death" was added from the perspective of his 90th birthday. In a sense, it too is redundant, for the ability to imagine our own deaths follows from the same propositional negative that allows us to abstract and to articulate the future tense. But Burke asserts that this clause

reveals notable synergistic powers. Recall how zestfully Marx and Engels took to Henry Morgan's work on the development of the Greek clans. And recall Alban Winspear's *The Genesis of Plato's Thought*, which advises us that Plato was a member of the landed gentry, whose ancestors bequeathed them this particular acreage, and were honored by their descendants as tutelary deities. Death, immortality, and private ownership were thus all of the same parcel. (personal communication, 31 August 1989)



To say we are rotten with perfection not only evokes eternity and immortality, it is a particularly suggestive and powerful way to repeat that we are moved (motivated, goaded/go-ed/god-ed) by the sense of order, the spirit of hierarchy. For our abstractions become our ideals. At least in the abstract, we can conceive perfection, despite its being literally no-place (*u-topia*). Having conceived it, we strive for it, are moved toward it. Almost teleologically, the conception becomes the goad toward what is conceived. We conceive a potential and strive to actualize it.<sup>4</sup>

But this separates us from nature, from the here-and-now, makes us part of the fallen world, where things die and rot, leads us into all kinds of confusions and misapprehensions, this rotting within us, this dissatisfaction with what is, this humanness, our downfall and our wonder, our specialness, our potential to be more than what we are.

### Rhetoric

For Burke defining humanness and defining rhetoric are hardly distinct tasks. What makes us human is our culture, which is founded in our unique form of symbolizing, our languaging, which is in its very nature rhetorical as it goads/gods us, moves/motivates us, makes us social, cultural (non-)animals, allows us to compose ourselves humanly. The study of language, culture, discourse, rhetoric, and humanity is one.

Burke's *Grammar of Motives*, *Rhetoric of Motives* and his unfinished *Symbolic of Motives* (studies toward which were collected in *Language as Symbolic Action*) were written because Burke had planned a book on human ethics, then decided he could not approach that subject except through a discussion of human motives, which for Burke necessarily meant a study of how our motives are mediated by our discourses. For Burke *Homo sapiens* is synonymous with *Homo rhetorica*; human wisdom is a discursive process.

Burke offers at least two types of definition for rhetoric. They are, of course, really two perspectives of one definition. One seems familiar: rhetoric as *addressed* (the traditional category of *audience*). Rhetoric is language used to have an effect on an audience, persuasive language. Thus, Burke begins by distinguishing *communication* from *expression* (etymologically, mere breathing out). But Burke, the dialectician, is never happy with the stasis of a dichotomous pair; his method is always to seek a third term. Consequently, the movement from *expression* to *communication* leads to *communion*, the state of identification with the community that is the logical outcome of persuasive communication. When an audience is convinced, they atone for their differences, stand at-one with the rhetor and with each other—in their agreement on how Athens should respond to the Persian fleet or in their agreement on how writing abilities should be developed.

To stand together with others is to be *consubstantial* with them: *stance* = stand; hence *substance* = that upon which one's stance is based, grounded; *con* = with; hence *consubstantial* = to stand on the same ground with. Thus,

Burke's definition of rhetoric as *identification*—the result of communally shared assumptions that allow us to work together, to cooperate, to identify even though we are not identical—is an implication of his definition of rhetoric as *addressed*.

Burke's most famous definition of rhetoric intertwines definitions of *language*, *symbolic*, *rhetoric*, and *humanness* to the point where all these terms define each other:

For rhetoric as such . . . is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; it is the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols. (*Rhetoric* 43)

In its final phrase, this definition of rhetoric is grounded in Burke's definition of humanity: our essence is not that we have a particular essence but that we respond to symbols, define our own variable essences through discourse, language, rhetoric, culture. We are not, as capitalist ideology would have it, naturally selfish and aggrandizing; nor are we, as anarchist ideology would have it, naturally cooperative and sharing; we are, rather, beings who continually define and redefine ourselves through the symbolic processes of language, discourse, rhetoric, culture.

Burke's is an operational definition; rhetoric is defined by what it does. The key phrase in this definition declares rhetoric "a symbolic means of inducing cooperation." In his important but difficult essay on the origins of language, Burke founds language in the need of our ancestors to cooperate in order to survive (*Language* 419-79). Language allowed our relatively slow, weak, vulnerable ancestors to coordinate hunting and gathering, childcare, and protection from predators. Theories about the origins of language are inevitably speculative, but Burke is less interested in his theory's historical truth than in its mythic validity as a representative anecdote which captures the functional essence of our languaging.

Burke emphasizes that the phrase "inducing cooperation" presumes that cooperation must be induced, that we are not genetically, instinctively cooperative, that at best we may be said to have an inborn capacity to cooperate (including a capacity to learn language, which facilitates cooperation). Thus, for Burke, cooperation arises from division. We must persuade, must induce cooperation, must socialize our children into our communities because we are individuals—"in-divide-you-alls," as one schizophrenic pronounced the word for R.D. Laing, a "joycing" Burke would appreciate.

We are, in various ways, divided, alienated—from nature, from each other, from other cultures, even from ourselves. As there are levels of division, so there are levels of rhetoric. In Burke's reading of Freud, we are divided within ourselves, contain a parliament of voices which must be harmonized into an identity, an individual who acts in the world with some

consistency (which we call the individual's personality or character). Socially, on various overlapping levels, we are divided from other people. And by our nature separated from nature, we must talk ourselves into patterns of action that embody ecologically valid strategies for survival—for if a culture talks itself into ecologically invalid strategies, its people fail to survive and that is the end of the culture; its discourse, its symbols disappear with the people who spoke them. (In the same sense that, biologically, all organisms, including people, can be interpreted as DNA's way of evolving and reproducing itself, so, rhetorically, people can be interpreted as cultures' ways of evolving and reproducing themselves.)

This dialectic of division and cooperation, individual and social, underlies Burke's definition of rhetoric—and us. When we convince an audience (or a subculture or a whole society) to share a perspective, we create at-oneness, togetherness, the basis of cooperation in action. Shared attitudes lead to cooperative actions, for attitudes are leanings, “incipient actions.” In the nature of the rhetorical situation, however, we inevitably divide those we persuade from those who remain unpersuaded. When we socialize our children to share the broad values of our culture, we divide them from other children socialized in other cultures. When we teach our students to adopt the discourse of a professional community, we divide them from other communities. And then rhetoric is needed to bridge those divisions, to enable cooperation between people of distinct cultures.

If rhetoric is language used persuasively, then argumentation is just the tip of the iceberg. How language brings a community to share assumptions and perspectives is a much larger and more important rhetorical question. And one of Burke's major contributions to rhetoric, a contribution that virtually creates the New Rhetoric, is his broadening the subject of rhetoric by emphasizing the submerged seven-eighths of the iceberg.

Rhetoric becomes primarily the process whereby a community comes to share a symbolic discourse—or whereby a communally shared discourse creates consubstantiality, subliminally persuades individuals to identify with the community, even to sacrifice their lives for their country and flag (and what it stands for). Or to refuse to listen to, understand or publish nonstandard discourse. How do human individuals, with their “unique” perceptions, come to agree so often and so profoundly? Consider how much two people must agree upon in order to argue about whether a base runner was out at second base. Consider what leads millions of individuals to choose to wear their skirts at mid-thigh in 1927, at mid-shin in 1933, to wear their hair long and natural in 1969, clipped and greased into purple parody in 1989. These are all unique individuals with free will; surely the remarkable levels of agreement and conformity need more explanation than occasional differences.

In revising his definition of human beings, Burke has added to it. The second part (or verse) now reads,

*From within or  
from out of  
the vast expanses of the  
infinite wordless universe  
we wordy human bodies have carved  
many overlapping universes of discourse  
which add up to a  
pluriverse of discourses  
local dialects of dialectic*

Thus, rhetoric, as a study of how wordlings word, becomes also a study of discourse communities and how they commune.

For Burke, the discourse of any community, in addition to whatever else it may do, represents strategies for encompassing situations: “These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude toward them” (*Philosophy* 3). The situations are real; a discourse is “an adjustment to a particular cluster of conditions” (*Counter-Statement* 107). Like Nietzsche or Derrida, Burke often uses a nihilistic perspective to work ideas, but Burke is no nihilist. A discourse must represent strategies that work, at least to such an extent that the community survives. The discourse must also work socially, must be persuasive and rhetorical, must produce consubstantial identification, must bring people into community—or it will be like a manuscript that no one but its author wants to read (or publish).

The third part of Burke’s expanded definition, not yet fully formed (or versed) is about how wordlings are constituted. Burke has long been fascinated by constitution, the process of how we constitute ourselves. At the far end of his life (and his definition) he is looking at how we constitute ourselves both by masterpieces of verbal process—he cites both the U.S. Constitution and the “Communist Manifesto”—and by what he calls technological constitution, nowadays “fittingly defining itself by a mode of Artificial Intelligence.”

I could continue—and I intend to elsewhere. But the point here is not to sum Burke up (or down—summaries really are down, reductive), just to provide a basis for reading Burke and for grounding our teaching of composition in some understanding of his critical insights into beings constituted as rhetorical animals.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See “A Dramatic View of the Origins of Language” (*Language* 419-79). Commenting on a draft of this article, Burke said, “I feel uneasy [about the discussion of analog/digital] without reference to Gestalt psychology, computers, etc.” See, therefore, my “Dracula” (236-40) and Burke’s comment thereon. Burke also referred me to *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*, specifically to “synergy”: “This concept reflects the classical opinion that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’ . . . Synergy is formally studied as a property of systems by cybernetics. . . . More generally still, the term is applied to the generation of unplanned social benefits among people who consciously cooperate in the pursuit of their own interests and goals.”

<sup>2</sup>For an important distinction between abstraction and generalization, see my *Grammar* 22-25, 79-82, and works cited therein.

<sup>3</sup>Though this may seem difficult, it is pragmatically powerful; I have tried to suggest some implications for composition in the section on “negative invention” in the second chapter of my textbook. Also see Elbow, Part IV, “Contraries and Inquiry.”

<sup>4</sup>See the Utopian U heuristic in Shor 155-80.

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### **Kinneavy Award Winners Announced**

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay of 1988 published in *JAC* was awarded to Reed Way Dasenbrock at the CCCC meeting in Seattle. Professor Dasenbrock received a cash award and handsome plaque generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor of English at the University of Texas. The award is presented each year at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC convention. Dasenbrock's article, "Becoming Aware of the Myth of Presence," applies Derrida's concept of presence/absence to the teaching of writing at all levels.

William A. Covino received the award of honorable mention for his essay, "Defining Advanced Composition: Contributions from the History of Rhetoric." His essay articulates the classical emphasis on "the open intellectual play of multiple perspectives" as characteristic of successful advanced writing.