Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) is one of the most versatile, widely respected and influential “men of letters” of the 20th century. As you will quickly discover, there are many Burkes: the poet, the literary and music critic, the social and political theorist, the journalist, the unconventional communist, and--of course--the rhetorical theorist and critic. He is widely read and cited by scholars in numerous fields including literature, linguistics, sociology, political science and anthropology. In communication (at least in rhetoric), I think it fair to say that Burke has been the single most influential theorist of this century. As one sign, consider that no one else’s admirers/adherents have formed a society (some might say “cabal”) that hosts scholarly conferences for the express purpose of promoting continued study of the person and her/his ideas.

Reading Burke is truly an adventure, sometimes frustrating and humbling, sometimes exhilarating. Systematic exegesis is not his strong suit; instead, his train of thought often seems stream-of-consciousness, even haphazard or chaotic (a “blooming, buzzing confusion,” to appropriate one of Burke’s own phrases). Too, the rigor of his thinking is uneven; a few pages away from what you consider an absolutely brilliant insight you undoubtedly will find an idea that strikes you as utter rubbish. So expect surprises. Just when you think you’ve finally grasped an idea, Burke will charge off in an unexpected direction that will leave you bewildered and doubting whether you really ever understood anything at all. Yet, just when you are ready to throw in the towel, the pattern and import of his thinking will emerge with startling, almost revelatory clarity (although my malpractice attorney advises the disclaimer that revelation may take more than a semester!)

One of the most apt characterizations of these qualities comes from an interview in the New York Times Review of Books, which describes Burke’s as a “mind that cannot stop exploding.” Explosions, remember, are always helter-skelter, and can be both awe-inspiring and frightening! More than any other author I’ve ever read, I know that I learn something new every time I encounter Burke, and I expect to learn some more this semester.

These qualities have implications for the way in which we will conduct this seminar. First, because Burke means so many different things to so many different people, it is absolutely vital that we read Burke himself rather than rely upon the Burkes that secondary sources have constructed; only then can we decide for ourselves what Burke is up to. Second, despite the number of times that I have read and re-read Burke, there will be times when you will ask questions I cannot answer; conversely, I will pose some questions that you cannot answer, either. Encountering Burke is like that. Third, the seminar will be most rewarding and enjoyable if
approached in a spirit of high adventure, perhaps with a little trepidation and healthy doses of curiosity and courage. Let us explore the terrain that lays before our eyes, but let us also remember that much lays beyond the horizon. Definitive maps of the Burkeian landscape are notoriously suspect and incomplete, much like the ancient maps of the so-called “known world.”

**Required Readings:**

Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (1931, rpt. 1968)


__________, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945, rpt. 1969)

__________, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950, rpt. 1969)


Greig Henderson and David Cratis Williams, eds., *Unending Conversations: New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke* (2001)

Other readings will be assigned as we go.

**Other Books by Burke:**

*The White Oxen and Other Stories* (1924)
*Book of Moments, Poems 1915-1954* (1955)
*Dramatism and Development* (1972)
*Perspectives by Incongruity*, S.E. Hyman & B. Karmiller, eds. (1965)
*Terms for Order*, S.E. Hyman & B. Karmiller, eds. (1965)
Here and Elsewhere: The Collected Fiction of Kenneth Burke (2005)
Late Poems, 1968-1993: Attitudinizing Verse-wise, While Fending for One's Selph, and in a Style Somewhat Artificially Colloquial, Julie Whitaker & David Blakesley, eds. (2005)
Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare, Scott L. Newstok, ed. (2007)

Other Books About Burke:


__________. *Kenneth Burke: Portrait of the “Genius” as a Young Man*. Manuscript in progress.


See also the two special issues of *Pre/Text* devoted to Burke (Vol. 6, Nos. 3-4, 1985; and Vol. 12, Nos. 1-2, 1991)
Kenneth Burke Society:

http://kbjournal.org/

Assignments:

1. Discussion, OF COURSE. I do not intend to lecture in this seminar; rather, it is essential that you read each week’s material thoroughly and carefully, reflect upon it, and be prepared for substantive, high-level discussion. To this end, you should bring with you to each class session answers to the following two questions: (1) what is the best or most important idea contained in the week’s readings? and (2) what is the week’s worst or most confusing or unclear idea? Your answers are not intended to be the weekly reaction papers that I traditionally assign; you will not turn them in and do not need to make copies for the rest of us. I will not grade them per se. However, you should be prepared to lead a discussion about them when called upon; thus, they should be thoughtful and reflect seriousness of purpose.

2. Participation (at least as a lurker) in the KB discussion list. Go to the society website (above) and follow the links to join.

3. Reports as assigned. Please prepare handouts as appropriate to supplement your oral presentation.

4. A major project of your own design and execution. You may wish to critique, organize, illuminate, elaborate on, and/or apply one or more of Burke’s concepts/ideas. Grades will be based on demonstrated understanding of Burke, originality and quality of thought, and clarity and quality of writing (including adherence to scholarly conventions). An “A” project will be superior in every respect. You should strive for a publishable product; certainly it should be suitable for presentation at a professional conference, such as the triennial Kenneth Burke Society conference, or NCA or WSCA, where the Society also sponsors panels (hint, hint). In lieu of a final exam, you will present your project to the class on December 13.

Grading:

Approximately one-half of your course grade will be based on seminar participation, including both discussion and reports; the other half will be based on your project.

Academic Integrity:

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University’s
academic integrity code as detailed in the SCampus guide. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violation or pattern of violations of the academic integrity code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication major or minor.

If you have any doubts about what is and is not an academic integrity violation, please check with me. The University presumes that you are familiar with its standards and policies; should you be found to have committed a violation, ignorance of these standards and policies will not be accepted as an excuse.

**Utopian Syllabus** (to be refined as needed, in due time):

**August 30** Dramatism: The Nature of the Beast

For background on Burke and the early years (through the Twenties), I recommend: (a) David Cratis Williams, *Kenneth Burke: Portrait of the “Genius” as a Young Man*, Chs. 1-3 [I have a draft of Ch. 1]; and (b) Jack Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931*, Chs. 1-5.


**September 6** Language as Symbolic Action


**September 13** Counter-Statement


For discussions of this work, I recommend: (a) William H. Rueckert, “Both/And: The Aesthetic of Counter-Statement,” Ch. 1 of *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, pp. 8-33; (b) Richard B. Gregg, “Kenneth Burke’s Prolegomena to the Study of the Rhetoric of Form,” Ch. 6 of Barry Brummett, ed., *Landmark Essays on Kenneth
September 20 Permanence and Change

READ the entire work; concentrate on Hugh Dalziel Duncan’s introduction, Parts I (all), II (all), III (chs. 4-5), and the appendix. Also read Denise M. Bostdorff, “Making Light of James Watt: A Burkean Approach to the Form and Attitude of Political Cartoons,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 73 (1987): 43-59.

For discussions of this work, I recommend: (a) William H. Rueckert, “Towards a Better Life Through Symbolic Action,” Ch. 2 of Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations, pp. 34-63; (b) Robert Wess, “Permanence and Change: A Biological Subject of History,” Ch. 3 of Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism, pp. 55-83; (c) David Cratis Williams, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” Ch. 5 of Kenneth Burke: Portrait of the “Genius” as a Young Man; and (d) reviews by Austin Warren and Louis Wirth, reprinted in William H. Rueckert, ed., Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, pp. 38-60 and 102-105, respectively.

September 27 Attitudes Toward History


For discussions of this work, I recommend: (a) William H. Rueckert, “Towards a Better Life Through Symbolic Action,” Ch. 2 of Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations, pp. 34-63; (b) Robert Wess, “Attitudes Toward History: The Agon of History,” Ch. 4 of Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism, pp. 84-107; (c) William H. Rueckert, “Comic Criticism: Attitudes Toward History, 1937-84,” Ch. 5 of Encounters with Kenneth Burke, pp. 110-131; and (d) reviews by Arthur E. DuBois, Sidney Hook, Margaret Schlauch, and Henry Bamford Parkes, reprinted in William H. Rueckert, ed., Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, pp. 80-89, 89-101, 105-109, and 109-122, respectively.

October 4 Independent work on projects

October 11 The Philosophy of Literary Form

READ the entire work. Also read Carol A. Berthold, “Kenneth Burke’s Cluster-Agon

For discussions of this work, I recommend: (a) Robert Wess, “The Philosophy of Literary Form: History Without Origin or Telos,” Ch. 5 of Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism, pp. 108-135; and (b) reviews by William S. Knickerbocker, Harry Slochower, Helmut Kuhn, and John Crowe Ransom, reprinted in William H. Rueckert, ed., Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, pp. 122-130, 130-136, 136-141, and 141-159, respectively.

October 18 A Grammar of Motives


October 25 A Grammar of Motives, continued

READ Parts 1-2: “Ways of Placement” and “The Philosophical Schools.”

November 1 A Rhetoric of Motives

READ Parts 1-2: “The Range of Rhetoric” and “Traditional Principles of Rhetoric”

For discussions of this work, I recommend: (a) Robert Wess, “A Rhetoric of Motives: Ideological and Utopian Rhetoric,” Ch. 7 of Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism, pp. 186-216; (b) Frank Lentricchia, “Part Five,” Criticism and Social Change, pp. 145-163; (c) Michael Leff, “Burke’s Ciceronianism,” Ch. 5 of The Legacy of Kenneth Burke, pp. 115-127; and (d) reviews by Malcolm Cowley, Richard Chase, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, Kermit Lansner, and Marie Hochmuth Nichols, reprinted in William H.
Rueckert, ed., *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke*, pp. 247-251, 251-255, 256-260, 261-270, and 270-287, respectively.

**November 8** *A Rhetoric of Motives*, continued

READ Part 3: “Order”

**November 15** NCA (no class)

**November 22** Thanksgiving (no class)

**November 29** *The Rhetoric of Religion*


**December 6** *The Rhetoric of Religion*, continued

**December 13** 2:00-4:00 Project presentations