

Burke, Literary Critic, Is Feisty at 79

By PAUL WILNERThe New York Times/Lonny Kalfus

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KENNETH BURKE, the 79-year-old literary critic and philosopher of language, talked about his work. "I've decided that I'm not going to do any more straight teaching," he said. "I've got books to finish." His forehead furrowed as Mr. Burke explained his ideas. His white hair was combed back in long shocks, and his eyes danced with delight.

When he and his first wife moved to their house here around 1920, Mr. Burke recalled, one of his sisters-in-law had a place in Newton.

"They kept getting these letters from real-estate people," he said. "We came out to see her one weekend — we were living in New York — and she had this little ad about a place up here. So we drove over and looked at it."

First impressions were not auspicious. "It was just two rooms," Mr. Burke went on. "It's all built up now, but it

was just two rooms then. You looked in the windows, and they were papered with newspapers.

"The man who was renting it had a chicken hung up there by its legs. He'd cut its throat, and it was bleeding on the floor. Right outside the window, there was the greatest pile of tin cans as old as the building."

The Burkes decided to take the place anyhow and, although he has taught at Rutgers University, Bennington, the University of Chicago, the University of Seattle and many other colleges, he has always returned to his home here.

Sitting in the backyard of his secluded book-cluttered home, Mr. Burke seems at once protected from the intrusive demands of metropolitan intellectual life and sheltered, by the rural landscape, from distraction to his work.

Now, even though his second wife has passed away, he continues to live here, in a sort of extended family. His daughter has a house across the road, and his grandson, Harry Chapin, the folksinger, is rebuilding a home further

up the hill.

"I was born in Pittsburgh, but on the wrong side of the tracks," Mr. Burke recounted. "We were broke and always lived in poor suburbs. My father was one of the people who were under the cloud of Westinghouse. He had clerical jobs there, but at the time there were periodic depressions. Everytime they let people go, he lost his job."

Asked if he had been a bookworm at an early age, Mr. Burke, whose dense, theoretical works include "Language and Symbolic Action" (now considered a landmark in the philosophy

of language), "A Grammar of Motives," "Attitudes Towards History" and the novel, "Towards A Better Life," replied: "I read a lot."

Then he qualified his remark. "Most of my early reading wasn't really good," Mr. Burke explained. "My real education in literature started in high school. Malcom [Malcolm Cowley, the literary biographer] has told about that in 'Exiles Return.' We were the first class at Peabody High School."

Mr. Cowley, who is best known for chronicling the lives of the Lost Generation writers, was a schoolmate, and

has been a lifelong friend, of Mr. Burke.

"We had two years of Greek in high school," Mr. Burke said. "My God, you can't get two years of Greek in a lot of colleges now!"

Mr. Burke has won a seemingly endless string of honors for his academic achievements, and his views on education are anything but conventional.

"I was a dropout," he explained, "but not the usual reasons. I dropped out of college because they wouldn't let me take the courses I wanted, I wanted to take things like medieval latin, but you weren't allowed to until you were in graduate school."

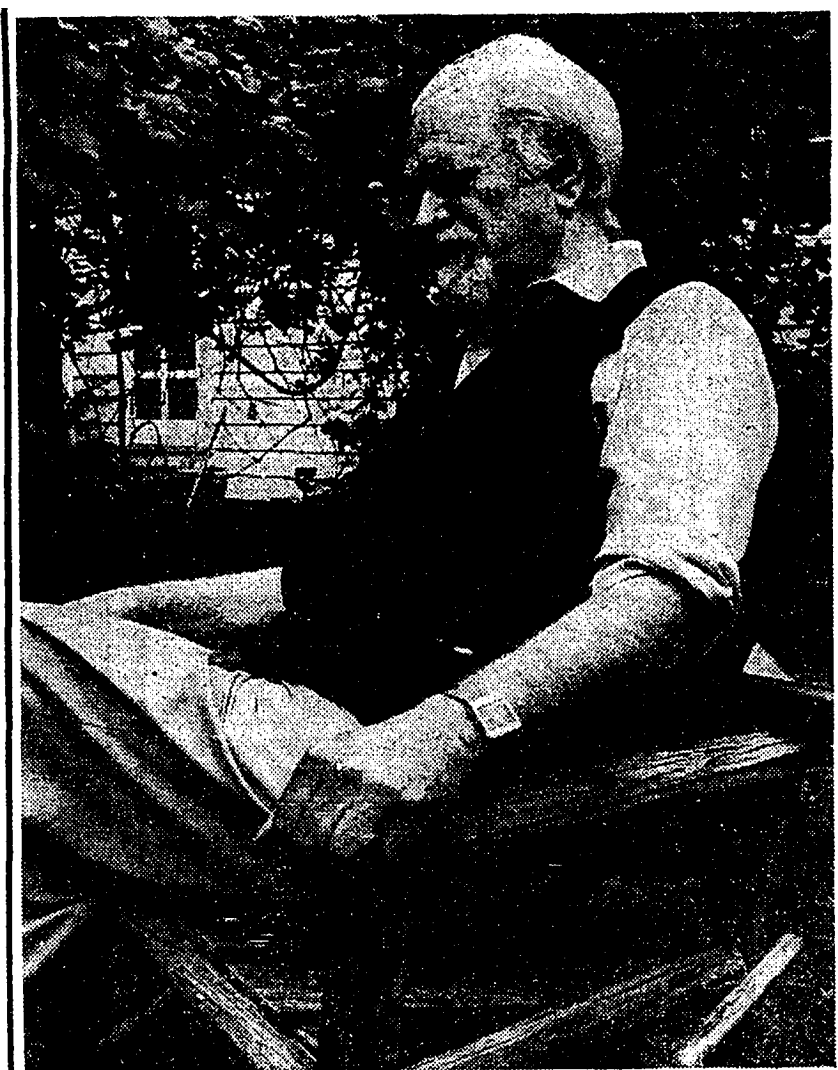
So the young man, who already had transferred from Ohio State University

to Columbia, decided to leave school altogether. "I said to my dad, 'Pop, I'll save you some money; I'll go out and do this stuff I want to do. I took the books and read!'"

Mr. Burke possesses the sort of brilliance that enables him to master in months disciplines that it takes others a lifetime of study to understand. At the same time, he is anything but pompous and quick to poke fun at himself.

After leaving school, he got a job "ghosting" for Col. Arthur Woods, who was the head of the Rockefeller Foundation. His first responsibility was to research drugs.

"For about a year," he recalled, "I studied at the American Medical As-



The New York Times/Lonny Kalfus

Kenneth Burke at home

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sociation's libraries with endocrinologists and so on. Everywhere I went, the magic name of Rockefeller opened the door."

Mr. Burke talks more seriously about his theories of language.

"Symbolic action is not just a matter of understanding literature, it's a matter of understanding human beings," he observed. "Language is arbitrary and conventional, arbitrary in the sense that, if you live in one section, there'll be one word for tree [and] if you live in another, there'll be another word."

"Wherever you go in the world, that's the language you learn."

In developing his idea further, Mr. Burke asserted:

"The trick about language as against innate signaling systems is that language can talk about itself. One of my wisecracks is that Cicero can write a tract on oratory; a dog can bark, but he can't write a tract on barking."

As people grow up and acquire the ability to use language, Mr. Burke contends, man is "born into some tribal idiom, my family has a name, my tribe has a name. All these relations are completely tied in with language."

Mr. Burke sets himself against popular, quasi-mystical figures of the present era.

"Some bright imbeciles like Norman O. Brown [the author of "Life Against

Death" and "Love's Body"] boast about not having a participle of individuation," he said, snorting with amusement.

"Imagine boasting about it. It's almost as dumb as when Truman boasted about having a good night's sleep after he sent those guys off to drop that first atom bomb. It's bad enough to have a good night's sleep, but then to be so damn dumb he even boasted about it. . . .

"It's the same thing about Brown. To actually glow about throwing out the principle of individuation is . . ." He searches for an anathema. "It's methodologically demoralized. He's a pedagogic curse to the world." In

addition to his long tenure as a professor at Bennington, Mr. Burke also taught at Drew University.

"I would drive down to Madison every Friday and give my seminar," he said. "Drew was originally a theological seminary, and though the graduate school was secularized, a lot of people who took the course were actually practicing ministers."

Looking mischievous, he added: "When the final papers came around, I gave them 'Milton's God,' by Empson, to write on. Have you ever read it?"

According to Empson, Mr. Burke explained, God is "a blow-hard, a sadist," and there must have been

something pretty damn lousy about the way that guy ran his business up in Heaven if one-third of his angels wanted to rebel!"

Mr. Burke was not struck by lightning for his daring, but his classroom was changed to a smaller one. The department head stood by him, though, he remembers.

"He said, 'After all you fellows are supposed to be practicing ministers; you ought to be able to take care of these objections.'"

These days, Kenneth Burke works, as he has for most of his life, almost from dawn to dusk—polishing off articles, revising his theories, answering letters from academic journals and

corresponding with authorities in various fields.

Sitting on a plain wooden chair in his backyard, he commented:

"When you're a writer, you always have in back of your head the notion that you're getting ahead. I've suddenly discovered in the last several months that what I've been trying to do now is get everything finished."

Mr. Burke is not being sentimental, just trying to describe a human phenomenon, as he has done all his life.

"That's a terrific change; it's an aspect of dying, I guess. All of a sudden, you realize you've got all these things you want to get cleared up before you move on." ■

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