ABOUT KENNETH BURKE A Mind That Cannot Stop Exploding
By RICHARD KOSTELANETZ
New York Times (1857-Current file); Mar 15, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times
pg. BR3

ABOUT KENNETH BURKE

A Mind That Cannot Stop Exploding

By RICHARD KOSTELANETZ

For me, his life is a design, gives me satisfaction enough, always from the viewpoint of an interest in writing. He is one of the rarest things in America: He lives here, he is married, has a family, a house, lives directly by writing without having much sold out.

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, "Kenneth Burke" (1929)

OF the founders of the New Criticism in America — John Crowe Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke — only the last is still alive, and only he remains freshly influential, not just in his initial field of literary analysis but in sociology and other fields as well. As early as 1941, W. H. Auden identified Burke as "unquestionably the most brilliant and suggestive critic now writing in America." To Harold Bloom, perhaps the most prominent literary theorist of the generation born around 1930, "Kenneth Burke seems . . . the strongest living representative of the American critical tradition, and perhaps the largest single source of that tradition since its founder, Ralph Waldo Emerson."

For all of Burke's reputation and influence within the intellectual professions, his name is scarcely known outside of it, in part because his work is original and difficult. Although he has published a single novel, nearly a score of stories and numerous poems, his reputation rests on three books of literary criticism, "Counter-Statement" (1931), "The Philosophy of Literary Form" (1941) and "Language as Symbolic Action" (1966), in addition to six more titles that are about something else — sociology a bit, the theory of language a bit less, the contemplation of life a bit more: "Permanence and Change" (1935), "Attitudes toward History" (1937), "A Grammar of Motives" (1945), "A Rhetoric of Motives" (1950), "A Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology" (1961) and "Dramatism and Development" (1972). These last books are so diffuse, so unsystematic that they are not "philosophy" in any formal sense but something thoroughly idiosyncratic: Burkology.

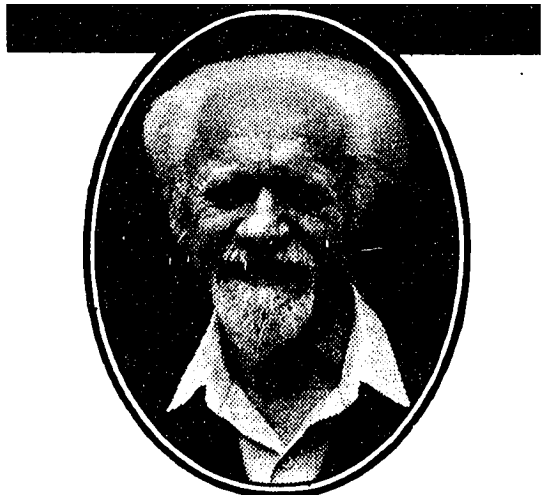
Born Kenneth Duva Burke in Pittsburgh on May 5, 1897, he went to public high school (where one classmate was the literary critic Malcolm Cowley) and then to Ohio State for a semester. Since his father had meanwhile taken a job in Hoboken, he went to live with his parents in nearby Weehawken and commuted by ferry (3 cents) and subway (5 cents) to Columbia University for a few years before dropping out of college, not because he disliked it but because academic rigmarole kept him from taking the advanced courses he wanted. He settled in Greenwich Village in a house that was filled with artists and writers, among them Stuart Davis and Djuna Barnes; and within a few years, his poems and essays were appearing regularly in literary journals.

Married in 1919, he had his first child in 1922, the year he moved to a farm on Amity Road in Andover, N.J., and he has lived there ever since. Initially he commuted by bicycle, train, ferry and trolley to New York City and its literary scene, working for spells as an editorial assistant at The Dial, the most consequential literary magazine of the period, and then as the ghostwriter of a book on drug addiction for the Rockefeller Foundation. Malcolm Cowley remembers his friend with "his janitor's mop of blue-black hair":

He can outquibble and outcavil,
laugh at himself, then speak once more
with wild illogic for the sake
of logic pure and medieval;
but that night will lie awake
to argue with his personal devil.

(The last line refers to the insomnia that has plagued Burke his entire life.)

His metaphors are outrageous — who else in an essay about John Keats and his Grecian urn would compare a literary critic to "a radio commentator broadcasting a blow-by-blow description of a prizefight?"



Above, Kenneth Burke in 1946 and, below, in 1976.

The 1930's were considerably tougher for him. He divorced his first wife, the mother of his three daughters, and then married her younger sister, Elizabeth ("Libby") Batterham. Having nowhere else to go, they moved into the next farmhouse down Amity Road; two sons were born in the late 1930's. He taught semesters at the New School and at the University of Chicago, wrote music criticism for The Nation, published his first books of literary criticism and collected a Guggenheim. Nonetheless, the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman once told me that when he first met Burke, around 1937, "he was in bad shape," mostly from excessive drinking.

Unlike so many other writers of his "lost generation," Burke never went to Europe in those years. He remembers that he had planned to go since the late 1920's, but a crisis always got in the way. "A kid was born, or something around here had to be fixed. Suddenly I discovered that everyone was coming back here" — which is to say that World War II had begun. Not until the 1970's, after Libby Burke's death, did Kenneth Burke finally get to Europe, visiting Italy, France, England and Spain, mostly to lecture. This may explain why so little of his writing has been translated into other languages, and why so few European intellectuals know his name. A second reason is that, in his style of writing and thinking, Burke has always been implacably American.

Not until 1943, at the age of 46, did he get his first permanent job — teaching English alternate weeks at Bennington College, where he stayed until 1961. An alumna from the early 1950's remembers: "He was the most perfect example of an absentminded genius, so involved in what he was thinking. He would lean back against the blackboard, eyes glaring off into space. He would talk and talk and talk, free-associating, making great leaps that had connections in his head but were far above the comprehension of his audience. He did not play to anybody; he enjoyed himself immensely." Since retiring from Bennington, he has collected a number of honorary doctorates and has spent periods of varying duration as a university visitor — at Harvard, Penn State, the University of California at Santa Barbara and Wesleyan, among other places. Once his commitments elsewhere are fulfilled, he returns to his beloved Andover farmhouse.

Though Burke lives alone, his home is often full of people. Two of his wives' surviving sisters live nearby and visit often. (One of their brothers, Forster Batterham, Burke describes as "the common-law husband of a saint," the late Dorothy Day, who was the founder of the Catholic Worker movement.) Four of his five children live in New York City, and they visit often, sometimes with their own children. Eleanor Burke Leacock Haughton is a professor of anthropology at the City University of New York and the mother of four children who themselves have children (who are thus Burke's great-grandchildren). Elspeth Burke Chapin Hart has six boys, including the pop singer Harry Chapin, who in turn has several children of his own. The youngest daughter, France Burke, is a poet; the youngest son, K. Michael Burke, an artist. Even the fifth child, Anthony Burke, a professor of astrophysics at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, is often in Andover. Kenneth Burke is the patri-

Continued on Page 24

Richard Kostelanetz is the editor of "The Yale Gertrude Stein." His collected essays on poetry, "The Old Poetries and the New," will appear this season.

Burke

Continued from Page 11

arch of this tight clan.

Just after the New Year I went to visit him in Andover, which is, its classy name notwithstanding, not an affluent suburb of New York City or even Philadelphia but a small town in New Jersey's northernmost county. "Rustic" is scarcely the word for his compound of renovated barns, small farmhouses, garages and outhouses. Electricity and telephones were not brought here until the late 1950's, and running water only came to his own house a decade later. Central heating has not yet been discovered. Burke is probably the last major American writer to have read mostly by kerosene light.

Since K.B., as he is known to all, planned to head south a few days later, he had bolted shut his front door; I had to go around back and knock loudly to overcome his deafness. A short, compactly built man, he greeted me with a ready smile and a booming, profoundly American voice, and invited me into his kitchen, which is the warmest room in the house. Amid cans of food and liquor bottles were the books that he planned to take with him; in one corner was a telephone and in another a large-screen black-and-white television.

Otherwise, it is a literary bachelor's pad in the shell of a farmhouse. All over the other ground-floor rooms were piles of books and papers. "Everything gets lost around this place about 10 minutes after I get it," he exclaimed. "If you can't find something right away, it is ridiculous to look for it." Bookcases fill most of the walls. At one end of the space is a manual typewriter; at the other end is a piano with handwritten scores of melodies that have recently been coming into K.B.'s head. On the mantelpiece is a 1975 certificate for the Gold Medal for Belles Lettres and Criticism from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The medal itself is in a vault.

His hair is white, and around his mouth is a trim Van Dyke beard. The day we met he wore farm-boy clothes — corduroys, a gray sweater over a flannel shirt that was open at the neck, a jacket with pens in the handkerchief pocket and sensible walking shoes. He puts on his glasses only to read. To go outside in the snow, he merely donned an overcoat and cap, no gloves or earmuffs for him. He has scarcely aged in the 15 years I have known him. He speaks in vigorous bursts, punctuated by pauses for breath, in a style I would characterize as "informal, slangy American." He likes to talk, to tell stories and jokes, and to laugh heartily at his own humor. Often brilliant by the sentence, his talk can become confusing over larger units.

Since the January sun would soon be setting, I asked for a tour of his domain. His property stretches behind his house through the trees as far up the hill as the eye can see; beyond our sight is a little house that his second wife had built for herself. The trees are the descendants of those he chopped down to heat his houses. Some 50 yards down Amity Road is a garage that his daughter France recently had renovated into a small house. Across the road is a barn that another daughter, Eleanor, had renovated into a still larger house, and next to it is a house that an adult grandchild recently fixed up.

Further on down the road, now renovated and enlarged, is the house that K.B. purchased in 1921. "It wasn't like it is now," he told me. "We had two rooms then. There was newspaper on the walls, and when we walked into it for the first time, the man who was renting it was butchering a live chicken." A safe distance from each house are the little sheds that still function, in K.B.'s phrase, as "Garden of Eden plumbing." Across the road, down in the meadow, is the artificial lake that K.B. made by constructing a dam with the proceeds from a 1929 Dial literary prize: "I used to wisecrack that the money all the other people got from The Dial went over the dam; ours went into the dam." The lake was now drained for winter. Why doesn't he live in New York City, I asked, perhaps with one of his children? "The place is polluted," he replied without a pause. "All cities are polluted today. In New York City, however, the water is better than most."

As usual, he has been working on books, arising at dawn and working through the afternoon, cooking his own meals and then doing household chores and watching television in the evening. There are four books near completion: one on Shakespeare, another on "devices" ("the things we do to outwit ourselves and one another"), a third based on lectures he gave at SUNY-Buffalo, and "A Symbolic of Motives" that completes the trilogy begun with "A Grammar." He has also been working on his memoirs, not the memoirs that some people think he should write — his memory is keen and his anecdotes vivid — but on an intellectual autobiography that he hopes will summarize his thinking. And he continues to write essays for the American cultural magazines that have always been his principal forum. Within the past few years some have appeared in Kenyon Review, American Imago and The Journal of the American Academy of Religion, among others. Nearly all of his books are collections of previously published essays rather than sustained expositions.

He likes alcohol, sipping vodka and vermouth through our afternoon together ("pour your own"), and even attested to its psychological and medicinal benefits, though he also noted that he drinks much less than before and never drinks while writing. Indeed, he characterized both William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe as suffering from too much "alcoholic prose."

As he talks, he confirms an impression gleaned from his books: that for all his learning in areas other than literature, for all his research and for all his conceptual apparatus, his characteristic mode of explanation is essentially poetic, which is to say more insightful than systematic, more metaphorical than empirical, more intuitive than obvious.

•

He is a critic for the adventurous; you take from him what you can get, and only later realize how much it was.

— ROBERT MARTIN ADAMS, The New York Review of Books (1966)

One reason why Burke is not better known is that his books are as uncompromising as his speech and way of life. There is no way that anyone, even an aggressive publisher, can sell them (or him) to a large audience. His books are disorganized; they are filled with unfamiliar words, at times of his own invention (e.g., "logology," "socioanagogic"). They abound in explanations that do not explain, elucidations that do not elucidate, clarifications that do not clarify. His characteristic structural device is the digression. As the poet Howard Nemerov put it, "His mind cannot stop exploding."

Some of his sentences are brilliant, even aphoristic: Literature is "equipment for living." "Nothing can more effectively set people at odds than the demand that they think alike." "Form in literature is the arousing and fulfillment of

desires." His metaphors are outrageous — who else in an essay about John Keats and his Grecian urn would compare a literary critic to "a radio commentator broadcasting a blow-by-blow description of a prize-fight" or the Teutonic prose of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel to "the shifting of cars in a freight yard." Burke loves to refer familiarly to earlier works of his, and even to quote at length from them, but he is self-referential less out of egomania than out of impatience to get on to his next urgent point. He is intellectually unpredictable, even to those who think they know him well, while his use of evidence is at times capricious. In truth, K.B.'s eccentric style is profoundly American; no European thinker could write like this, even if he tried.

Wayne Booth, a University of Chicago professor who is one of K.B.'s closest readers, warns that he "invents problems that are essentially beyond solution and then claims to solve them by using principles that can be assumed only as part of his invention. His whole enterprise is impossibly, shockingly ambitious; yet it finally frustrates intellectual ambition by undermining all solutions." In truth, his ideas cannot be completely summarized in an article; a monograph is scarcely spacious enough. Moreover, no summary can substitute for the experience of reading the Burkean text itself; in that sense, his work is closer than most expository writing to the art of poetry. Still, it is possible to identify certain themes.

One is that a work of art is an organic collection of "strategies" or rhetorical devices that "aim" to affect readers in certain discernible ways, so that the first task of literary criticism is identifying "a generating principle, in terms of which you can account for all the work's most important developments." A second theme is that narrative usually functions as a "symbolic action" for a mythic base. In literature, the principal ritual ("the arousing and fulfilling of an audience's expectations") enacts various forms of rebirth.

A third related idea is that, in creating a literary work, the writer suffers a ritual of personal purification through the articulation of subconscious conflicts. Thus, on one hand, the analysis of a writer's language can be understood as revealing his deepest psychology; on the other, Burke echoes the Aristotelian idea of poetry as cathartic to its audience, the work thus requiring the "completion" or fulfillment of the expectation it creates.

As a critic of literature, Burke believes that it is better to trust the tale than the teller, and the following passage offers a glimpse of his analytic style:

"By charting clusters, we get our clues to the important ingredients subsumed in 'symbolic mergers.' We reveal, beneath an author's 'official front,' the level at which a lie is impossible. If a man's virtuous characters are dull, and his wicked characters are done vigorously, his *art* has voted for the wicked ones, regardless of his 'official front.' If a man talks of glory but employs the imagery of *desolation*, his *true subject* is desolation."

The central texts in Burke's literary criticism are his extended essays, many of them over 10,000 words in length, on such classic texts as Shakespeare's plays, Goethe's "Faust," Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," St. Augustine's "Confessions" and even Hitler's "Mein Kampf." It is in these essays that he demonstrates his capacity for spectacularly attentive reading of a verbal text. When I asked him how this was done, he went to his kitchen counter and produced his copy of a book he had once reviewed, Harold Bloom's "Wallace Stevens" (1977). On every page are perhaps 20 inked annotations. Key words are underlined, vertical lines trace connections. In the blank pages in the back of the book and even on the flyleaves are more extensive notes, some of them referring to the book in general and others to particular passages. This is the kind of critical artifact that should be on permanent display in every university library.

In the title essay in "The Philosophy of Literary Form," for instance, Burke studies not only "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" but Samuel Taylor Coleridge's letters to show how the poem reflected the author's opium addiction. "I could tell just exactly when that Ancient Mariner's boat was suffering from drug withdrawal and when it had a new fix," he says. "You didn't have to do any translating, because Coleridge himself, in his own letters, when he was talking about his addiction, used the same imagery that he used in the poems. He represented his own feelings in the boat. All the symptoms of drug addiction were right there." In other words, entwined in "The Rime" Burke found a subtext that charts its author's running bout with drug addiction.

In a long pioneering essay on the poetry of Theodore Roethke, Burke focuses upon a single book, "The Lost Son" (1948), and contrasts its characteristic vocabulary with T. S. Eliot's, concluding that Roethke epitomizes "a minimum of 'ideas,' a maximum of 'intuitions.'" In one group of poems, Burke finds "an alternating of two motives: regression, and a nearly lost, but never quite relinquished, expectancy that leads to varying degrees of fulfillment." At another point he discovers a supposed typo — "preverse" instead of perverse — and then speculates about its possible significance. By reading closely, sensitively and thoroughly, the critic perceives that "Roethke has dealt always with very concrete things [yet] there is a sense in which these very concretions are abstractions."

One quality that these major essays have in common is the use of several sorts of critical tools, most of them drawn from intellectual domains outside literature; for within the profession of literary criticism, Burke has exemplified the principle of "all there is to use." Conversely, the critical tools he developed in literary analysis can also be applied to nonliterary expository texts to reveal their imaginative organization. As Stanley Edgar Hyman put it, "Anyone reading him for the first time has the sudden sense of a newly discovered country in his own backyard."

Because of his emphasis upon reading a literary text in a complex and thorough way, Burke was regarded as a principal figure of the New Criticism that was dominant in the 1950's, while his interest in psychology made him an exemplary Freudian critic as well. Moreover, his longstanding concern with the encompassing structural elements in literature connects him with contemporary fashions in literary criticism. One reason why Burke has survived professionally is that fashions keep abreast of him. Incidentally, the best guide to his literary thinking remains the penultimate chapter of Stanley Edgar Hyman's "The Armed Vision" (1949); the fullest reviews of his work appear in William H. Rueckert's annotated anthology "Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke" (1969). The closest thing to an intellectual biography is Armin Paul Frank's "Kenneth Burke" (1969).

Perhaps the surest index of the variousness and richness of K.B.'s writings is the richness and variousness of the works that they have clearly influenced — not only literary criticism but sociology and pedagogy as well. Burke's "perspective by incongruity" ("a method for gauging situations") has visibly informed Erving Goffman's books, beginning with "The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life" (1959), while Hugh D. Duncan wrote several books, including "Communication and Social Order" (1962), on the Burkean theme that art is the basis of all communication (in contrast to Durkheim, among others, who defined religion as the basis). Marvin Scott, a professor of sociology at Hunter College, claims that Burke's work has "touched a dozen major sociologists who have picked and chosen ideas that they have formalized into well-known sociological theories." Burke is cited at the beginning of Robert K. Merton's work on bureaucratic personality and C. Wright Mills's on the vocabulary of motives ("for several leads which are systematized into the present statement").

K.B. is also the major influence behind Hyman's "The Tangled Bank" (1961), a brilliant and monumental analysis of artistic strategies in the writings of Karl Marx, James G. Fraser, Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. Burke's notions of myth inform his friend Ralph Ellison's classic novel, "Invisible Man" (1951). "K.B.'s analysis of how language operates in society has been very important to me," Ellison said recently. "He remains one of the most useful authors for the writer, or for anyone interested in how language shapes, directs and achieves human motives."

Nonetheless, precisely because K.B.'s writings cannot be reduced to a few accessible doctrines, there has never been a school, let alone a class, of Burkites. "What I am proudest of," he recently told an interviewer, "is that I do the only thing I ever wanted to do. I just want to go on with the goddamn stuff as long as I can." ■