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Kenneth Burke's Shakespearean Anthropology

Scott L. Newstok, editor. *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007. 368 pp.

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I

Scott Newstok's handsome new collection of Kenneth Burke's writings on Shakespeare is a true labor of love. Everything is here, from recognized classics such as the essays on *Othello*, *Coriolanus*, and *King Lear* to previously unpublished lectures and notes. With the exception of the lead chapter (Burke's 1964 lecture "Shakespeare Was What?"), Newstok has assembled these pieces in chronological order. The annotations are scrupulous. In the case of the lectures, for example, Newstok faithfully reproduces in the footnotes text Burke had crossed out in the original typescript. And there is even a 66-page appendix in which Newstok has painstakingly collected from Burke's *other* critical works all remarks, however brief, on Shakespeare. This is no small feat considering Burke wrote and published prodigiously during his long career. Reading these pieces reminds us how seamlessly Shakespeare was woven into Burke's general theory of culture.

How are we to respond to such a treasure trove of Burkean Shakespeariana? Should we read it, as it seems intended to be read, as the definitive edition of Burke's Shakespeare criticism for Shakespeare scholars? How you answer this question depends on your expectations. If you are looking for insights on Shakespeare's plays, then you will probably agree that this is primarily an example of Shakespeare scholarship. You may disagree with Burke's particular interpretations, but your allegiance to the discipline will prevent you from denying that the book is indeed "about" Shakespeare. Thus you may note that Burke says some interesting things about Shakespeare, and you may even store one or two of his remarks for future reference (perhaps in a footnote to one of your own writings on Shakespeare). But in the end the point is to see how Burke can advance the discipline itself, which is to say, the work of Shakespeare scholars in literature departments. This is the *eclecticism* of literary studies. Rival interpretations are ultimately trumped by the untranscendable aesthetic work. This asymmetry between critic and poet guarantees the continuity of the discipline, which reproduces itself by competing for a piece of the immortal poet, the "greatest of all writers ever," as Harold Bloom enthusiastically puts it in his back-cover blurb endorsing Newstok's collection.

But there is another way to read "Burke on Shakespeare." This is to see his work in the context of an overall anthropology. If you read Burke this way, you will be less inclined to stop at the circumference of Shakespeare studies. Instead, you will want to draw your circle more widely until

you have passed beyond Shakespeare to an anthropology of dramatic and cultural form. This is in fact how Burke wanted to be read. Since I don't think it is possible to make full sense of Burke's pronouncements on Shakespeare without first having a sense of this background or "terministic screen" (to use one of Burke's phrases), I will begin by discussing this anthropology. I will then move on to discuss some of his more specific remarks on Shakespeare.

II

Burke's word for anthropology is *dramatism*. Humans, Burke says, are symbol-using animals. Symbols are distinct from indexical signs in that they are *acts* which include reference to a "dramatic" scene or background. Acts are distinguished from mere motion in the sense that whereas physical and biological things move, people act intentionally not just toward the physical world (for many other higher animals act intentionally in this sense) but also toward the intentions of others. People adjust their actions self-consciously by "syncing" them with the intentions of those around them. Moreover, this awareness comes with a conscious desire to participate collectively in the sharing of another's intentions, as when the child strives to follow its mother's gaze and participate in her admiring attention toward the flowers on the table. In short, human actions come laden with moral and aesthetic significance. Asked why Othello killed his wife, we will not be satisfied with a scientific account of how the neurons firing in Othello's brain caused him to smother Desdemona with a pillow. And we will not be satisfied because the "terministic screen" or theory we seek assumes the presence of humanly significant actions over and above the "motions" of the physical and biological world. This connection between symbolic action ("dramatism") and moral judgment leads Burke to make the interesting suggestion that the first word must have been a negative, "No! [Don't take it!]" The object is present to perception but forbidden to appropriation. The prohibition is implicit in the use of the word, which assumes the formal separation between word and thing, or, as Burke puts it, "the self-evident distinction between symbol and *symbolized*." [\(1\)](#) In comprehending the word, the subject implicitly agrees to forgo, for the time being, the thing it refers to. Burke therefore asserts that language is fundamentally "hortatory" (SS 63). Before propositional negation ("The cat is not [here]"), there is moral negation ("Thou *shalt* not!").

But the injunction not to do something implies its opposite. Obedience or adherence to a moral law implies disobedience. And disobedience in turn implies guilt. The response to guilt is victimage, which is the attempt to redeem the sin of disobedience via the scapegoat. This narrative from prohibition to disobedience to redemption defines humanity and leads Burke to assert, in a characteristic oxymoron, that humanity is "*rotten with perfection*" (SS 70). Burke links the "substitutions" of the symbol system with the "substitutions" of the scapegoat principle. Just as the sign substitutes for the thing, so too the scapegoat is a substitute for the sins of the community: "a dramatic analysis shows how the negativistic principle of guilt implicit in the nature of order combines with the principles of thoroughness (or 'perfection') and substitution that are characteristic of symbol systems in such a way that the sacrificial principle of victimage (the 'scapegoat') is intrinsic to human congregation" (SS 280).

I have summarized very briefly Burke's notion of victimage. However, I have to say that Burke's explanation of the origin of victimage is not as clear as one might hope. What Burke appears to be saying is that the human capacity for language, which philosophers tend to idealize as a purely abstract relation between "ideas" or "propositions," also manifests itself in the human propensity for ritual sacrifice or victimage. The scapegoat is an arbitrary substitution for the sins of the community just as the symbol is an arbitrary substitution for the thing. If this paraphrase is

accurate, it puts Burke quite close to generative anthropology. (2) Unlike René Girard, who sees scapegoating as the foundation of all culture, including the transformation of the thing (the first victim) into a sign (the first symbol), Burke sees it the other way around. The symbolic prohibition of the thing (the negative) gives rise to the notion of disobedience (sin) which gives rise to the need for expiation (victimage). Prohibition and victimage are "scenic" phenomena, in the sense that they are "intrinsic to human congregation."

In his 1978 *Diacritics* interview, Girard criticized Burke for committing the poststructuralist sin of linguistic idealism. (3) But rather than lump Burke with the worst excesses of poststructuralist thought (which, in 1978, was admittedly the main focus of the debate between Girard and his original *Diacritics* audience), it seems more fruitful to see Burke as following Durkheim in his understanding of the symbolic form of culture. The capacity to see the central figure as a victim or scapegoat assumes the prior capacity for symbolic representation. With Burke, we can therefore affirm that what precedes the designation of the victim is the emission of the "negative" symbolic sign. In the terminology of generative anthropology, the sacralization of the central figure is preceded by the "aborted gesture of appropriation," which severs the indexical relation between gesture and appetitive object. Burke's originary symbol is "negative" in the same sense that the originary ostensive sign is a "negation" of the preexisting indexical relation to perceptual objects. The fundamental separation between words and things assumed by all language can be traced to this "originary" scene. Within the context of this scene, the separation is not "metaphysical" (i.e., given à la Chomsky by an unexplained language "instinct" or "module"), but seen to be a consequence of the configuration of the scene itself. The originary sign defers the mimetic conflict of multiple converging appetites by transforming the central object from an object of appetitive or indexical perception into a figure of "tragic" symbolic identification.

In this "dramatistic" theory of human origin, the sign designates the object by situating it at the center of a collective scene of attention. Attention to the object is reinforced not merely by the individual's own (biologically given) appetitive interest in the object, but by the presence of the other symbol user(s). As Michael Tomasello has shown, the child acquires language by being initiated into these "scenes of joint attention." (4) The exemplary case is the pointing gesture, in which the child is encouraged to pay attention to the object while also attending to the parent's utterance that "names" it. As in the deictic "There!" the object is singled out as the central focus of attention against which everything else becomes background. In designating the object as significant, the parent may be said to sacralize—or, more minimally, designate as significant—the object for the child.

Tomasello's research corroborates Burke's "dramatistic" theory of language origin, but it does not explain it. On the contrary, Burke's "dramatism" constitutes a minimal anthropology that explains all subsequent uses of symbolic representation, including the "representative anecdotes" of traditional literary forms such as tragedy. In order for human ontogeny to recapitulate human phylogeny, the scene of joint attention must already exist as a general *anthropological* phenomenon. This anthropology is assumed by Burke in his theory of dramatism. In Burke's originary narrative, the symbol originates in a negative ("No!"), which in turn yields disorder or disobedience, which in turn yields the need for expiation (victimage). Translating Burke's terms into those of generative anthropology, we can say that appetite is transformed into desire, which is then unleashed in the *sparagmos*, the collective "desecration" of the sacred object in the sacrificial feast. It is here, in the aftermath of the *sparagmos*, that we can situate the experience of guilt that Burke associates with this destruction of the "order" given by the negative, "No!"

III

How does Burke's dramatistic anthropology help us read Shakespeare? Burke sees dramatic content as a function of form. Thus tragedy comes with a "formal" expectation of victimage. But whence comes the "form" of victimage? As we have seen, Burke explains victimage as a potential of language which separates words from things. This separation, far from being a metaphysical given of language, is originally an ethical injunction to refrain from doing something. But this injunction ("No! [Don't possess this object!]") paradoxically encourages the individual to imagine its transgression. This is the source of the aesthetic response, which capitalizes on the ethical tension between sign and referent inaugurated by the negative. The aesthetic response shapes the audience's "arrows of expectation" by pointing to the object as *an imaginary object of transgression*. In tragedy, the protagonist suffers for his crime of transgression. As Burke puts it, "Any ethical 'thou shalt not' sets up the conditions for an author to engage an audience by depicting characters that variously violate or threaten to violate the 'thou shalt not.'" [\(5\)](#)

Since Aristotle, critics have devoted their energies to explaining the tragic hero's suffering in terms of the work's content. Oedipus suffers not merely because he has committed the crimes of incest and parricide but because of his "tragic flaw" or excessive hubris. But as Burke's analyses make clear, these "crimes" are themselves a function of the audience's formal expectation, which is the need for expiation through victimage. Hence Burke asserts that literary or dramatic *form* is but another word for the audience's *psychology*: "form would be the psychology of the audience. Or, seen from another angle, form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (*KBS* 22).

This relationship between the form of victimage and the form of dramatic tragedy is apparent in many of the essays collected by Newstok. But perhaps the clearest exposition of the idea comes in Burke's discussion of Antony's function in *Julius Caesar* ("Antony in Behalf of the Play"). In this critical tour de force, Burke imagines Antony turning from the Roman mob (in his "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech) to address the offstage audience in the theater. The point of this exercise is to imagine Antony in the role of theoretician of drama. In a deft replication of the insider/outsider problem of cultural anthropology, Burke straddles the gap between form and content, anthropology and aesthetic work, author and audience, critic and text, present and past. "Thus," Burke writes, "we have a tale from Shakespeare, retold, not as a plot but from the standpoint of the rhetorician, who is concerned with a work's process of appeal." Instead of being "a dramatic character *within* the play, [Antony] is here made to speak as a critical commentator *upon* the play, explaining its mechanism and its virtues" (*KBS* 38).

The first point Burke makes is that from the viewpoint of the author there is little difference between the offstage audience and the Roman mob. Thus Burke imagines Antony saying to the offstage audience, "your author has kept you in as vacillating a condition as this very Roman mob you have been watching with so little respect. I doubt if he distinguishes between the two of you. All that I as Antony do to this play-mob, as a character-recipe I do to you" (*KBS* 39). Antony serves a "double purpose" (*KBS* 40). While Caesar is still alive, Antony's loyalty and charismatic expansiveness let "Caesar shine a bit warmly" (*KBS* 40). After Caesar is murdered, Antony takes over Caesar's function, which is to maintain the paradoxical attentions of the audience upon the central victim. Caesar is dead but the "Caesar-principle" lives on. Antony's function has been to cultivate our identification with Caesar. But against this identification stands our tragic awareness that Caesar must die. This awareness is not something that is internal to the play. It is given by the general *form of symbolic action*, an account of which Burke has given in his theory of

dramatism. In order for the drama to work, the characters must ultimately serve this "dramatistic" function. Hence Burke talks of a "Caesar-principle" that is opposed to a "Brutus-principle" (*KBS* 40). That is, Brutus's function in the play is to cultivate our extra-literary resentment by channeling it on Caesar. There are multiple devices the playwright uses to achieve this. For example, Cassius describes Caesar's weakness (he has the falling sickness). Moreover, Cassius claims he has easily defeated this would-be emperor in a swimming contest. Flattered by Cassius, Brutus sees himself as a heroic republican fighting against Caesar's tyranny. And if this is not enough, Shakespeare provides us with a host of special effects or portents. The night before Caesar's murder there is a terrible storm. Casca sees a lion in the Capitol and a slave whose hand is miraculously on fire. Calpurnia dreams of the graves yielding up their dead and of Caesar's statue spouting blood. Finally, Caesar invites his own victimization when he appears "on the stage in his nightgown" (*KBS* 40) while all the world around him whirls in a sea of dangerous portents. This man is doomed to die. And we "have been made conspirators" in the murder (*KBS* 41).

But our vicarious involvement in Caesar's death leaves us with a burden of guilt. "For this transgression," Burke says, "there must be some expiative beast brought up for sacrifice" (*KBS* 41). This is the point of Antony's involvement. He is the agent of a reversal that sees the victimizer become the victim: "Brutus must die to absolve you of your stabbing an emperor who was deaf in one ear and whose wife was sterile" (*KBS* 41). Now the same ambivalence the audience held toward Caesar is turned toward Brutus. On the one hand, Brutus is an "honorable man" because he fights for the Republic, reminding his countrymen of the good old days when Rome freed itself from the tyranny of the last Tarquin king. But on the other, he is a conspirator who hides his "monstrous visage" in "smiles and affability." (6) As Burke points out, Brutus shrinks from the affections of his wife because "he is sinisterly engaged" (*KBS* 42). He cannot tolerate the love and fidelity she represents. All this makes Brutus "a fit expiative offering for our offense of murder" (*KBS* 42). Brutus is both noble and base. In his role as spokesman for Rome he is noble, but in his role as conspirator he is base. This paradox in Brutus's character mirrors the tragic paradox of the stage, in which the protagonist is both an object of identification *and* a victim to be vilified. Burke goes on to show how Antony's great speech is shot through with this same paradox. Antony can say Brutus is "an honorable man" in order to show he is dishonorable. He can say he comes "to bury Caesar, not to praise him" in order to praise him and bring "him to life again" (*KBS* 44). And he claims he will not stir the mob's heart "to mutiny and rage" but then proceeds to do exactly that. In other words, he participates in the same paradox that Burke attributes to language. The first symbol is a negation, but this negation implies its own negation, which is the transgression of the injunction.

IV

I began this review by saying that in order to understand Burke's remarks on Shakespeare, one needs to understand his anthropology. I hope I have managed to give a sense of how the larger anthropological picture fits in with Burke's reading of Shakespeare. There is, however, a historical question concerning the "end of literature" that I have not addressed. Is Burke's analysis of Shakespeare intended as a historical deconstruction of the sacrificial function of the aesthetic work? For example, in showing us how Antony manipulates the audience, does Burke undermine the very practices the playwright depends on for his dramatic success?

Sometimes Burke writes as though this is indeed the case. For example, when he declares that Shakespeare probably made little distinction between the Roman mob and the mob in the pit, Burke seems to be implying that Shakespeare was more interested in writing for the modern critic

who could appreciate the excellence of his manipulations of a crowd hungry for victims. I have some sympathy for this view, and Burke certainly wouldn't be the first to suggest it. Critics as diverse as Harold Goddard, John Vyvyan, and René Girard have all presented some version of this hypothesis. Basically it takes the following form. As a writer Shakespeare resented the demands of the theater, which required him to satisfy the audience's appetite for victims. But Shakespeare was much too intelligent simply to pander to this audience. He therefore wrote for two audiences, the "play-mob" (*KBS* 39) or crowd *and* a discerning auditor who was also ideally a reader. Goddard's *The Meaning of Shakespeare* is peppered with remarks about how the reader alone can appreciate Shakespeare's textual subtleties. Furthermore, these subtleties are explicitly designed to go against the grain of the theatrical reception of the play. Vyvyan's sense of Shakespeare as a Neoplatonist is based on a version of the two-audience theory when he says that Shakespeare solved the problem of tragic conflict by depicting in the later romances the protagonist's turn to "creative mercy." Finally, Girard uses the two-audience theory to explain Shakespeare's refusal to abandon the theater despite his abhorrence of the sacrificial practices it demanded. For Girard, Shakespeare is a follower of the Gospels who used his medium to spread the word to those who could hear him. This is not simply a matter of bad faith. Girard's "deconstruction" of the sacrificial practice of revenge fits with Shakespeare's own criticism of the genre of revenge tragedy. (7)

But Girard's ambivalence to the literary work can be taken as an index of the larger historical question. That is, how are we to explain the critic's own historical relationship to the aesthetic work? In Girard's case, Shakespeare is to be admired because he undermines the sacrificial practices of drama itself, thereby putting the playwright himself out of business. "The logical implication of Girard's critique of tragedy," Eric Gans writes, "would be to follow Racine after *Phèdre* in rejecting not only tragic form but esthetic culture in general as a *divertissement* from the antisacrificial truth revealed by Christianity." (8) This conclusion is in fact what Vyvyan recommends in his account of "the Shakespearean ethic." After the late romances have staged the primacy of forgiveness over revenge, there is little for Shakespeare to do except retire to Stratford. But a theory that explains the aesthetic only by banishing it can hardly be said to be an explanation.

Burke's account of the "psychology and form" of the dramatic work, which amplifies the ethical tension wrought by the negative symbol, gives to the aesthetic a function that is not merely supplemental to his anthropology. In this regard, Burke's dramatism sits much closer to Gans than to Girard. Whereas Girard ultimately has no place for the aesthetic in his anthropology, for Gans the aesthetic is an element of the originary scene itself. (9) What enables Girard ultimately to abandon the literary work is his sense that all art is necessarily a mythologization of the anthropological truth of mimetic violence. Shakespeare's power as an author thus lies in his unprecedented undermining of the mythology upon which the literary work's representation of violence is founded. But even Shakespeare must eventually capitulate to the truth of the Gospels.

Girard's suspicion of the artwork is a consequence of his suspicion of language, which is made to follow rather than precede the *sparagmos* of the originary scene. In Gans's reformulation of this scene, language emerges as an "aborted gesture of appropriation" that precedes and therefore can never ultimately be closed within the scapegoat scenario. Humanity may be compelled to mimetic violence, but this compulsion is preceded by a hesitation that, if only for a moment, gives us the awareness that this compulsion is generated from within the scene itself. Burke shares with generative anthropology the belief that humanity has the historical capacity to understand itself sufficiently to defer the apocalyptic "end of history" that would also be its demise.

Notes

1. Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, ed. Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 53 (hereafter cited in text as *SS*). [\(back\)](#)
2. See William Mishler, who has also noticed this similarity between Burke and generative anthropology, in "The Question of the Origin of Language in René Girard, Eric Gans, and Kenneth Burke," *Anthropoetics* 5, no. 1 (1999), <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0501/mishler.htm>. [\(back\)](#)
3. See René Girard, "Interview," *Diacritics* 8, no. 1 (1978): 31-54. [\(back\)](#)
4. See Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also Tomasello's recent refinement of the idea of joint attention in "Why Don't Apes Point?" in *Roots of Human Sociality: Culture, Cognition and Interaction*, ed. N. J. Enfield and Stephen C. Levinson (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 506-24. [\(back\)](#)
5. Kenneth Burke, *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, ed. Scott L. Newstok (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007), 129-30 (hereafter cited in text as *KBS*). [\(back\)](#)
6. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson, 2004), 2.1.81-82. [\(back\)](#)
7. See Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); John Vyvyan, *The Shakespearean Ethic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959); and René Girard, *A Theater of Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). [\(back\)](#)
8. Eric Gans, "Form Against Content: René Girard's Theory of Tragedy," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 56, no. 1-2 (2000): 59. [\(back\)](#)
9. See, in particular, Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). [\(back\)](#)

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