

ENGL 4670
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13 Nov 2014

“FIVE MASTER TERMS”:
AN INTRODUCTION TO KENNETH BURKE’S “MOTIVORUM” PROJECT

Read for Tuesday, 18 Nov

K. Burke, “Five Master Terms” (photocopy attached)

We have read several pieces by Kenneth Burke this semester, but our main reading of his contribution to rhetorical theory is *A Rhetoric of Motives*, which is arguably the most important contribution to rhetoric studies since Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*. However, we will need a bit of context before we read Burke’s *Rhetoric*, especially since that book is the second of what he conceived as a three-part study of human relations, which he referred to as the *motivorum*, a Latin word meaning “regarding motives.” The first volume of the *motivorum* is *A Grammar of Motives* (1945); and a third, unpublished volume was to be titled *A Symbolic of Motives*. In order to get some sense of Burke’s larger project, here are passages from several of Burke’s texts in which he talks about the *motivorum*, including the relationship among its three parts, the “grammar,” “rhetoric,” and “symbolic.”

A Grammar of Motives (1945)

We began with a theory of comedy, applied to a treatise on human relations. Feeling that competitive ambition is a drastically over-developed motive in the modern world, we thought this motive might be transcended if men devoted themselves not so much to “excoriating” it as to “appreciating” it. Accordingly, we began taking notes on the foibles and antics of what we tended to think of as “the Human Barnyard” (xvii).

“Curriculum Criticum” (1953; 1967)

Meanwhile, the early notes on corporate devices had gradually been resumed, but in a much more general form. They now concerned all sorts of tactics whereby people sought to outwit themselves and one another in social intercourse (tactics ranging from world-shaking diplomatic maneuvers down to the minutiae of drawing-room repartee, social “cat-fights,” bland insults, and the like). The notion was that this “post-Machiavellian” lore should be treated in a book “On Human Relations” designed to round out the concerns of *P&C* [*Permanence and Change* 1935] and *ATH* [*Attitudes Toward History* 1937]. However, when the author sought to write his notes, more preparatory ground-work was found necessary; and *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) resulted. *A Rhetoric of Motives* followed in 1950. *A Symbolic of Motives* is now in progress. These three *Motivorum* books deal with linguistic structures in their logical, rhetorical, and poetic dimensions respectively. And they will require a fourth volume, probably specifically entitled “On Human Relations,” stressing the ethical dimension of language. (217-18)

The whole project aims to round out an analysis of language in keeping with the author’s favorite notion that, man being the specifically language-using animal, an approach to human motivations should be made through the analysis of language. It seeks for observations that, while central to the study of any given expression in its internality, also have reference to human quandaries and human foibles generally. The project begins in and never far departs from (since it never wants far to depart from) the Aristotelian notion of poetry as cathartic. (218-19)

“Curriculum Criticum, addendum” (1967)

The publication of this book [i.e., *Language as Symbolic Action* 1966] has once again modified the *Motivorum* project as a whole. I had first planned a trilogy: (1) universal relationships, as in my *Grammar of Motives*; (2) partisan relationships, and their modes of real or apparent transcending, as in my *Rhetoric of Motives*; and (3) a *Symbolic of Motives*, the study of individual identity. This third volume would include both poetic and ethical dimensions, inasmuch as both the character of the

individual poem and the character of the individual person embody “equations” (explicit or implicit assumptions as to what fits with what). At some stages along the way, I saw this third volume splitting into two. But now that so many of my speculations about Poetics have been treated in the theoretical and analytical pieces of which *Language as Symbolic Action* is comprised, I dare believe that I can revert to my original plan and finish the project in one more book. (222)

I know these passages are a bit dense; and I'll spend some of our time on Thursday explaining them. Also, before we jump into the *Rhetoric*, it is important to have some idea of what Burke did in the first volume of the *Motivorum*, *A Grammar of Motives*. So, we will read an essay he wrote upon the publication of the *Grammar*, in which he summarizes many of his main ideas, notably what has become known as “the pentad,” or what Burke refers to in this article as “the five master terms.”

Informal Writing Assignment: To a significant degree, “Five Master Terms” is Burke's attempt to systematize the method he began to develop in his rhetorical reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. So let's make some connections between these two articles by looking at how the theory in “Five Master Terms” was used in “The Rhetoric of Hitler's ‘Battle.’” To help us make these connections, I would like you to select *one* of Burke's five master terms and brief describe how he used this concept of his reading of Hitler.