DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 699 CS 213 992

AUTHOR Siebert, Bradley G.
TITLE Burke for Freshman and Advanced Composition Students: Two Perspectives.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Models; *Rhetorical Criticism; Teaching Methods; Textbook Evaluation; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Burke (Kenneth); Composition Theory; *Process Approach (Writing)

ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke has continued to exert a profound influence on recent theories of composition and rhetoric, specifically on how writing might be taught in the classroom. Two recent composition textbooks, "Process, Form, and Substance: A Rhetoric for Advanced Writers" by Richard Coe and "Writing Is Critical Action" by Tilly Warnock, demonstrate Burke's continuing influence. Both texts focus on the process of composition, or the notion of writing as action. Warnock develops terms for Burke's three principle ratios, and also develops questions associated with the five basic terms of the Burkean pentad. She reveals the difficulty she encountered trying to write an introduction to her volume, suggesting her own process of writing. Warnock begins the book with a strong plea for students to think of themselves as writers. Burkean thinking is integrated into Coe's book as well. Again, a central emphasis is on writing as process, as the title implies. Coe considers writing as a forming process, another reflection of Burkean thought. In two chapters, process and form meet, followed by a consideration of form in discourse, specifically narration and description. Coe situates his discussion of narration and description in the context of the linguistic constitution of perception. To conclude, both Coe and Warnock integrate Burkean theory into their texts, both in ways that should prove beneficial to the writers who use them. (HB)

BURKE FOR FRESHMAN AND ADVANCED COMPOSITION STUDENTS:

TWO PERSPECTIVES

by

Bradley G. Siebert

In Seattle, at the 1989 4C's, Kenneth Burke charged the audience of rhetoric and writing teachers at the session where he spoke to "stop chasing the man" and to start teaching him, his thought, to our students. The charge was reiterated two years later in Boston, at the session sponsored by the KB Society. Those of us excited by the humanity and optimism of Burke's thought are eager to comply and have, no doubt, taken it up in one way or another.

Two of the speakers at the session in Boston, I noted at the time, had recently published textbooks which could be agencies of such action. Tilly Warnock, through Scott, Foresman, published her freshman composition text, Writing Is Critical Action, in 1989. Richard Coe reissued his advanced composition text, Process, Form, and Substance, with Prentice-Hall in 1990. In this paper, I will discuss what I see as the central ways in which these texts teach Kenneth Burke to their audiences of student writers.

What I'll discuss, more than two perspectives, as my subtitle states, is my one perspective on the Burkean features of these texts. I won't pretend to be able to do any more here than suggest what Warnock's and Coe's own perspectives might be.

Since I seem duty bound to make some distinctions (so that there can be two of something in my paper), I will make a

sweeping generalization--and at the same time split hairs--and say that their approaches are different. This difference is more one of degree than of kind, however: Burkean theory is integral to Warnock's text, whereas it is integrated into Coe's.

Both texts focus primarily, as up-to-date rhetorics do, on process, as is explicit in Coe's title, Process, Form, and Substance. As is explicit in Warnock's, writing as a process is action, "the human body in conscious or purposive motion," as Burke defines it (Grammar 14). Both these texts focus significantly on raising student-writers' consciousnesses (to levels appropriate to freshman and advanced composition) of how they might engage in this act and of what is potentially at stake when they do. Imbued with purpose, writing is critical action, as Warnock suggests when discussing her primary meaning for critical, because writing, like all symbolic action, reflects and affects our ways of seeing self, others, and the world and, thus affects our social relations. Writing is an ethical act and is, therefore, a crucial and vital act. Warnock impresses this idea upon her readers in the first pages of her text; in Coe's, the idea is more pervasive but is particularly emphatic for me in his discussions of "Persona, Style, and Voice," of "Seeing and Writing," and of "Rogerian Persuasion."

Of course, our students probably wouldn't catch the allusion to Burke's Language as Symbolic Action in Warnock's title, Writing Is Critical Action. But the allusion does suggest the primacy of Burkean thought in the text. And we only have to look into the Table of Contents for further indication that Burkean principles inform Warnock's approach to teaching the

processes of writing. Starting, sustaining, revising, and stopping, as the fundamental processes, are Tilly Warnock's developments of John Warnock's summation of what we know of the general writing process: "Writing* [sic] begins. Writing* [sic] ends" (John Warnock 9). In her text, Warnock develops each of these processes through attitudes, actions, and situations, which (as terms) are accessible synonyms for agent (attitude being a state of the agent's mind [Grammar 20]), act, and scene. In these three terms and their permutations as ratios (scene-act, scene-agent, and agent-act), we see the three principle ratios Burke brings within the possible range of the "Container and Thing Contained" in the first chapter of his Grammar of Motives (3-20, agent-act being mentioned only on 20). In the sequence of the three terms in each of Warnock's major chapters, we move from a "state of mind" or "incipient action" (Burke's definitions of attitude [Grammar 20]) to actions that conform to the situations of starting, sustaining, revising, and stopping.

Warnock's cyclic reiteration of the development of attitudes and the enactment of actions in this sequence of situations is a clever rendition of recursivity, one enriched by the dialectical interaction of the attitudes, actions, and situations as ratios. And from one situation to the next, particularly from starting to sustaining, many activities are redeveloped, including the use of the full pentad as a heuristic. Warnock develops questions associated with the five basic terms--act, agent, scene, agency, purpose--only suggesting that students ask these questions in relation to each other, hinting at the ratios, a reduction perhaps appropriate to freshmen. Otherwise, Warnock draws on a

wide range of sources other than Burke for the activities developed in each chapter.

But Warnock also puts Burkean thinking to good use in preparing students to engage the process, making his thought integral in yet another way. In her second set of prefatory remarks called "Instead of an Introduction," Warnock discusses the process she went through trying to write an introduction. She describes some of the false starts which finally led her to abandon the project. She presents several catchy first sentences she considered. Then she shows her readers drafts of two personal introductions. In the first, she introduces herself as a writer, describing the "messy" processes of her writing. In the second, she introduces herself as an academic, discussing how she became familiar with Burke during her graduate studies and introducing some Burkean ideas she finds compelling as a writing teacher. This second piece of supposedly abandoned draftwork (5-6) ends with Burke's famous image of an on-going parlor conversation from Philosophy of Literary Form:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in you oar. Someone answers; you answer him;

> another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (Burke, Philosophy 110-11)

In the end, however, she says (in an act of tongue-in-cheek subterfuge) that she decided against bothering students with a discussion of Burke.

All of this reveals to students how Warnock works as a writer, which is a significant act. But Warnock's final and most critical act of her un-introduction, is to turn it, in its final words, into "an open invitation to writing and to the community of writers," an invitation to enter the on-going conversations partially conducted through writing and to enter the course conversation about writing. This invitation ushers us neatly into the first chapter and to the first action Warnock prompts students to take in accepting--however grudgingly--her invitation: to identify themselves as writers. She defines writers realistically but simply as "people who write" (15). "Anyone who writes is a writer," she writes (15). In doing so, Warnock creates a powerful terministic screen that allows students to know themselves as writers. Such identification creates an attitudinal ground from which these students-become-writers can reduce their distance, their estrangement, Burke might say (Rhetoric 108), from the work of a writing course.

This may seem to go without saying: it seems so basic, implicit in any writing course. Using a Burkean motive, however, Warnock makes it explicitly the primary issue of the writing course that Writing Is Critical Action implies.

Burkean thinking is obviously integrated into Coe's Process, Form, and Substance: A Rhetoric for Advanced Writers. "Kenneth Burke, the great North American rhetorical theorist," is one of the people Coe dedicates his book to (iii). And many of the epigrams for the chapters and chapter sections are drawn from Burke's works. So at many turns, Coe contextualizes his discussions in such a way that teachers may recognize Burke's influence. But as Coe says in his introduction "To the Instructor" (and using other words in "To the Student"), he has tried to write a book that is "a distillation of a 2500-year tradition [of humanism and rhetoric] informed by contemporary research" (x). That tradition has provided many other sources to draw upon, of course. Many have also contributed to the contemporary research that has focused our pedagogical attention in composition courses on the processes of writing Coe makes primary in the organization of his text too. Apparently these and, perhaps, other reasons keep Burke from leaping off the pages of Coe's Table of Contents and from taking center-stage in the form of his book as Burke does in Warnock's. But this is no fault in itself.

Coe call writing "a process of forming substance" (xi) and ways that, when he teaches using his text, he teaches the process chapters "more or less in order" (ix), applying them to and referring his students to the "form" chapters that pertain to

"particular writing tasks" (ix), though he does discuss other ways his text can be used. In certain respects, then, Coe's text can be viewed as two: one on process, the other on modes of discourse. And viewing it this way, if a person doesn't look beyond the Table of Contents, a person could see Process, Form, and Substance as Michael Carter seems to when he characterizes the text as "nearly indistinguishable from most freshman rhetorics, differing in degree rather than in kind" (60), the same old stuff for a harder class. But it is decidedly not the same old stuff, as it seems to me. It teaches a smidgen of rhetorical theory and a bit of history quite accessibly. And as I said before, it lets students know what's at stake in writing and in language use in general. So in important ways, it prepares advanced composition students like mine for their lives as writers and for the teaching many of them will soon be doing.

Furthermore, by talking of writing as a forming process, Coe reflects Burke's idea of form as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires" (Counter-Statement 131)). Coe says in his introduction to students that at some time in the process it is "useful" for writers to understand the various forms writing has taken. These forms, Coe says, "represent tried and true strategies for achieving particular communicative goals" (xiv). Rather than being stifling, the forms are enabling, customary agencies. And the forming processes become linked to communicative processes, as he notes in his fourth chapter, "The Communicative Process" (148).

In the chapters where process and form meet, Chapter Five ("Persona, Style, and Voice") and Chapter Six ("Seeing and

Writing"), at this pivotal point, Coe develops some thinking clearly associated with Burke's theory of terministic screens and with Burke's rhetoric of identification. Of style, Coe writes:

> Style can be substantive, especially the choice of words and metaphors for key concepts: the decision to use one word rather than another may modify a concept in a significant say. Style is, to some extent, both substantive and social, an adaptation to both the requirements of subject matter and norms of a discourse community, the expectations of readers. (208)

Likewise, he writes that "The substance you are trying to communicate can be subtly distorted by an inaccurate word choice . . ." (208). Pursuing the relation between words and ideas further, Coe says, ". . . as your vocabulary grows, you are likely to be able to perceive, think, and feel more precisely and subtly" (210). And saying this leads Coe shortly to borrow Sapir's language concerning the "interpenetration" of language and experience (Sapir 157), which blends easily Burke's language concerning terministic screens as filters of reality: "Language and thought interpenetrate; they animate each other. Our terms to some extent determine our ideas" (210, emphasis in original). Such Burkean thinking sets the context for and colors Coe's discussion of style.

And this discussion leads next to the chapter "Seeing and Writing," the first in the section of the text devoted to form in discourse. Specifically, this chapter deals with narration and description. It is at this very point where we turn our attention to form that we find Burke's words on terministic

screens used as an epigram:

> Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must also function as a deflection of reality. (Language 45)

Coe goes on to discuss the complexity of human perception, and in the chapter section "Perception and Re-presentation," Coe comments further on the power of our terms: ". . . [H]ow we name things when we verbalize our observations can significantly influence how we--and our readers--will perceive them" (260). Also, "The terms we use to name things and events create conceptual contexts that influence, even shape our perceptions" (261).

Situating his discussion of narration and description in the context of the linguistic constitution of perception transforms them from seemingly objective modes of reporting into rhetorical discourse reflecting point-of-view and viewpoint. And this situation reflects further on the other traditional modes of discourse, transforming the expository and persuasive as well. None of them remains simply the same old stuff.

Two other features of Coe's text are clearly Burkean. Coe spends the better part of five pages developing the dramatistic pentad, including five act ratios, as a heuristic for investigating human behavior. Coe also presents Rogerian persuasive arrangement and ethic, as others have, as particularly well-suited to Burke's rhetoric of identification, a rhetoric that posits that we "persuade [others] only insofar as [we] talk

[their] language," only "as [we yield] to [an] audience's opinions in [certain] respects" (Rhetoric 55).

To conclude, then, I'll remind you and myself that the distinction I've made between a text into which Burkean theory is integrated and one in which it is integral is a fine distinction, a distinction I'd just as soon abandon. What seems most significant is that they present us with fine ways to teach rather than chase the man, ways that would be beneficial to the writers we meet as students.

WORKS CITED

Burke, Kenneth. Counter-Statement. Berkeley: U of California P, 1968.

---. A Grammar of Motives. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952.

---. Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method. Berkeley: U of California P, 1966.

---. Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action. 3rd ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973.

---. A Rhetoric of Motives. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952.

Carter, Michael. "What Is Advanced About Advanced Composition?: A Theory of Expertise in Writing." In The Teaching of Advanced Composition: Why and How. Adams, Katherine H., and John L. Adams, eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 59-70.

Coe, Richard M. Process, Form, and Substance: A Rhetoric for Advanced Writers. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990.

Sapir, Edward. "Language." In Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences. Vol. 9. Seligman, Edwin R. A. et al., eds. New York: Macmillan, 1933. 155-69.

Warnock, John. "The Writing Process." In Research in Composition and Rhetoric: A Bibliographical Sourcebook. Moran, Michael G., and Ronald F. Lunsford, eds. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984.

Warnock, Tilly. Writing Is Critical Action. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989.