

BOOKS AND ISSUES

*Kenneth Burke's Element of Grace*

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*Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931*, by Jack Selzer, University of Wisconsin Press.

WHEN Kenneth Burke received the Dial Award for 1928, his poem "From Outside" accompanied the announcement of the prize in *The Dial*. At the time, Burke was the author of one book, a collection of experimental stories called *The White Oxen*; he had published fifteen poems, twelve essays, and several dozen reviews, most of which remain uncollected. His first book of criticism, *Counter-Statement*, would not be published for three years. Joining the company of Anderson, Eliot, Moore, and Williams (all previous winners of the award), Burke chose to represent his achievement with a poem—his first poem written in blank verse. Who was this Kenneth Burke?

"I get the impression of myself as a little round hard rock," wrote Burke to Malcolm Cowley; "it is rained on, snowed on, sunned on, thrown, kicked, and yet it retains its identity as a rock, little, hard, and round." If there was a part of Burke that could seem assertively itself (he lived on a farm without electricity or running water at the same time that he remained close to the center of the New York avant-garde), there was a larger part that refused ever to take itself completely seriously—even or especially when Burke was deeply serious. Such a person publishes "From Outside" with the announcement of the Dial Award not because he needs to confound expectations or because he cannot judge the merits of his own work. Burke seems to have been more or less immune to the lure of ceremony, and while Eliot negotiated with the editors of *The Dial* to receive the award in exchange for the American rights to *The Waste Land*, Burke offered a minor work in a genre to which he was not particularly committed.

Rather than consolidating Burke's reputation, the award reflected Burke's scattered but unflappably brilliant sensibility.

No one has yet written a full-scale biography of Burke, but Jack Selzer offers a view of Burke's life and work until 1931 in *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns*. Though it contains a fair amount of biographical material, the book is really about the culture of modernism—the particular kinds of modernism that intersected in New York between 1915 and 1931. Selzer describes Burke's interactions with a variety of literary and artistic groups: Leftists, Nationalists, Humanists, and Dadaists. He characterizes Burke's relationship with the variety of periodicals associated with these groups: *The Masses*, *Others*, *Broom*, *Secession*, and *The Dial*. Most enticingly, he lets us glimpse Burke's friendships with Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, Jean Toomer, William Carlos Williams, and a host of lesser-known moderns. As Selzer shows, Burke "was widely, perhaps uniquely, attuned to a variety of schools of modernist ideology, from the political left, right, and center, from radical artistic experimentalists to those who wished to keep in touch with some literary past, from nationalists to internationalists, from artists to dramatists, musicians to poets, storytellers to critics." Through these conversations, says Selzer, Burke "became one of the best informed students and practitioners of modernist art in the world."

This is a large claim, and I would not argue with it: Selzer has a wonderful story to tell—a story begging to be told. But while Selzer is probably right to insist that the idiosyncrasy of Burke's mind has been exaggerated, I couldn't help wishing, the more I read, that Selzer's narrative had included more of Kenneth Burke and fewer of Burke's contemporaries. Ultimately, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village* tells us less about Burke than it does about an artistic sensibility familiar from *A Homemade World*, Hugh Kenner's account of American modernism.

Selzer does offer interesting accounts of Burke's early poetry and fiction, and he is especially good at demonstrating the ways in which Burke's stories embody the dynamic notions of form and eloquence he would describe in *Counter-Statement*. More often than not, however,

Burke's stories and poems are made to seem like period pieces—the product of a milieu rather than a mind. They probably *are* period pieces. But Burke's writing is often powerful because it deviates just slightly—though crucially—from received wisdom. In an early essay called “Dada, Dead or Alive,” Burke was adamant that an “artist does not run counter to his age” but rather “defines the propensities of his age.” He was also adamant that the artist's work is not distinguished by those historical propensities alone: “The artist, as artist, is not a prophet; he does not change the mould of our lives; his moral contribution consists in the element of grace which he adds to the conditions of life wherein he finds himself.” Selzer illuminates Burke's interactions with his age, but the “element of grace” remains elusive.

I don't mean merely to complain that Selzer chose to write one kind of book about Burke instead of another: his contextual method has repercussions that range from the inconvenient to the misleading. Because Selzer's account of these contexts often takes the form of lists, he cannot stop to characterize the relationships he mentions in passing; it is simply wrong to say that Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore (who did not meet until 1943) “traded ideas” in the early twenties. More seriously, because the shape of Selzer's account of Burke's development is determined by Burke's interactions with people he knew, some of the most crucial alliances are left undiscussed. I yearned to know something about the fact (listed in an elaborate chronology that rounds out the book) that Burke encountered “the work of William James” in 1917; instead, I learned about Burke's (admittedly interesting) interactions with Matthew Josephson and Gorham Munson. I yearned to consider the relationship of Burke and Stevens, whom Burke did not know well but whose manner of thought often resembles Burke's; instead, I learned much more about Williams, whom Burke did know well but about whom Burke said, “His moi and my moi are irreconcilable.” Burke had no patience for Williams's literary nationalism, and he dismissed the notion of an essentially American art with his characteristic sensitivity to art's endlessly equivocal relationship to history: “The characteristic fallacy which our nationalists have made is their confusion between the pioneer spirit and the

promise of a distinct national entity. That is, they have taken the unmistakably un-European qualities of a passing phase of our national life as the evidence of a unique contribution which we shall offer as a completely ripe nation.”

Sentences like these, whenever Selzer quotes them, stand out like beacons from the intellectual contexts Selzer describes. When I say that there is not enough Kenneth Burke in *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, I mean something as simple as the fact that Burke is not quoted often enough. While Selzer organizes his book through various debates and oppositions, Burke’s characteristic manner of analysis was to show the ways in which each side of an opposition collapses into the other: he seems oddly to have more critical distance on the material of the book than Selzer does. Given Burke’s keen analysis of American literary nationalism, it is difficult to know what to do with Selzer’s somewhat defensive contention that “there has always been more interest in the European, particularly Parisian versions of modernism than in the American ones that sustained Burke.”

As sentences like this one suggest, an old-fashioned idea of modernism lies at the root of Selzer’s inability to account for Burke’s distance as well as Burke’s debt to his “age.” I’ve compared Selzer’s notion of the American modernist sensibility to Hugh Kenner’s account of that sensibility in *A Homemade World*, and while Kenner’s book is still well worth reading, it is the product of a time when its author could still think of himself as a kind of modernist writer. Since then, our sense of modernism has changed, and while an older generation of critics needed to wonder whether the age belonged to Pound or to Stevens, recent scholarship has stressed a more inclusive point of view. At its best (I’m thinking of Michael Levenson’s *Genealogy of Modernism* or Louis Menand’s *Discovering Modernism*), this scholarship does not ask us to choose between competing notions of modernism but encourages us to see modernism itself as an arena in which various and contradictory points of view existed side by side.

Selzer is aware of this scholarship; he begins his book by saying that “while it was once conventional to describe modernism as a fairly

coherent, even monolithic movement," it "now seems more fitting to think not so much of Modernism but of modernisms." But as soon as his argument is up and running, the old clichés come tumbling out: "modernism amounted to a dialogue on how people might appropriately respond to the civic and artistic stresses created when various nineteenth-century certitudes about nature and human nature eroded or collapsed. Post-Emersonian confidence in a God-animated nature, in a predictable universe presided over by a benevolent deity, for example, deteriorated when Darwinians turned up evidence of a vicious and hostile environment indifferent to human endeavor." Similar comments are made about the erosion of nineteenth-century "absolutes" about law, progress, morality, sexuality, and conduct: all these "certitudes of the past" were "rendered relative" by modernism. The moderns were smart, in other words, because Emerson was dumb.

Kenneth Burke was smarter than that. Along with Laura Riding and Robert Graves's *Survey of Modernist Poetry* and Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, Burke's *Counter-Statement* is one of the first books about modernism written out of what Riding and Graves called "historical [as opposed to contemporary] sympathy." That is, these books represent the first attempts to stand back from modernist debates, accounting for them rather than participating in them. Today, *Counter-Statement* is the only one of these books that retains more than an historical interest: it still has something to teach us about modernism, and as an account of the political ramifications of certain notions of modernist aesthetics, it is unsurpassed.

Although Burke wrote many of the essays in *Counter-Statement* during the 1920s, the book feels more like a product of the thirties, the decade in which straw-man versions of modernist aestheticism were often debunked in the name of political and economic realities. In *Axel's Castle*, for instance, Wilson chided the moderns for preferring "absurdist chimeras" to the "most astonishing contemporary realities." In contrast, while Burke recognized that "doctrines have come into prominence which seemed to make art questionable," he set out in *Counter-Statement* to "make these doctrines questionable."

Since the body is dogmatic, a generator of belief, society might well be benefitted by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibility of ready hierarchies, which concerns itself with the problematical, the experimental, and thus by implication works corrosively upon those expansionistic certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms. An art may be of value purely through preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly, itself.

Here, as on almost every page of *Counter-Statement*, is Burke's "element of grace": his most instructive moments of argument are always his most delightful moments of stylistic panache. Burke could not, of course, distinguish argument from style: like Wilson, he was interested in reading modernism historically, but unlike Wilson, he could not understand one kind of writing (call it modernist) to be less historical than any other kind. "No categorical distinction can possibly be made," Burke insisted, "between 'effective' and 'ineffective' art. The most fanciful, 'unreal,' romance may stimulate by implication the same attitudes towards our environment as a piece of withering satire attempts explicitly." If Burke occasionally seems to prefer the fanciful to the plain, it is only because the plain is too easily associated with what he calls "the seasoned stocks and bonds of set beliefs." Burke advocates nothing but "a return to inconclusiveness," a critical point of view that does not take for granted the cultural associations that have accumulated around different formal and stylistic choices. And if Burke is willing to champion the power of an art that, rather than courting certainty, turns "against itself and its own best discoveries," he is unwilling to suggest that such an art will save us: "One cannot advocate art as a cure for toothache without disclosing the superiority of dentistry."

This is a crucial point, for Burke did not want to be understood merely to oppose those critics who "seemed to make art questionable." Selzer emphasizes the order in which Burke wrote—and later revised—the essays of *Counter-Statement*, moving from essays focusing on aestheticism to essays exploring the social relevance of art. But Burke's

ultimate goal was not, like Wilson's, to describe or even to dissipate the tension between aestheticism and social relevance but to show that the tension is illusory—to stake out a middle ground that is in no way a compromise between extremes. That Burke succeeded in doing so is suggested by the fact that *Counter-Statement* pleased nobody. The formalist Allen Tate thought that Burke should have ignored the social effect of literature, emphasizing that art is a “re-creation of the Very Thing-in-Itself.” But the leftist Granville Hicks thought that Burke was doing exactly that: he argued that by being “principally concerned with eloquence,” Burke was keeping art “as far removed as possible from the controversial and important issues of the day.”

Both Tate and Hicks continued to take sides in a debate that Burke had already dismantled; as Selzer rightly points out, Burke reconceives form in *Counter-Statement* as “a dynamic cooperation among writer, reader, and text that is more broadly rhetorical and social than purely aesthetic.” Still, by maintaining that the “experience of reading *Counter-Statement*” reminds us that “a central tension within modernism is the one between two kinds of avant-garde, the aesthetes and the social activists,” Selzer makes *Counter-Statement* sound more like the work of Edmund Wilson than of Kenneth Burke. It is misleading to say that Burke was “seeking to heal the modernist alienation between artist and society” because Burke was more profoundly interested in demonstrating that there never was a breach between them in the first place. No matter how strenuously a writer might lament (or celebrate) his uselessness, the work of that writer may nonetheless “have more influence upon the shaping of society than a work read by millions.”

The difference between Wilson and Burke—or between Selzer's reading of *Counter-Statement* and my own—is the difference between two ways of thinking about modernism. Selzer maintains that *Counter-Statement* is “both a modernist and counter-modernist text,” and the statement belies his insistence that modernism must be seen as “a dynamic polyphony, a protean heteroglot.” What does it mean to stand counter to a polyphony? Ultimately, modernism is for Selzer aesthetically and politically coherent. For while he does maintain that the

“moderns fall variously on the political spectrum between the leftist socialist activism of John Reed . . . and the aesthetic avoidance of politics (itself political of course) of Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot,” he continues to believe that Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot were writers who avoided politics simply because they sometimes *said* that they avoided politics. Unlike Burke, he accepts the notion (often perpetuated by champions and detractors of modernism alike) that the style of certain kinds of modernist writing stands in the way of social relevance.

Allen Tate's and Granville Hicks's criticisms of *Counter-Statement* troubled Burke temporarily, but in the longer run, Burke was interested not in responding to his opposition but in distinguishing himself from writers whose position might be confused with his own. He began his second critical book, *Auscultation, Creation, and Revision*, by emphasizing his distance from Edmund Wilson, whom he quotes but does not name.

They shut themselves up in their own private world—a contemporary critic has warned us, when speaking of certain poets—they cultivate their own private fantasies, encouraging their private manias, ultimately preferring their “absurdist chimeras” to the “most astonishing contemporary realities,” and even ultimately “mistaking these chimeras for realities.”

Burke's characteristic element of grace kicks in immediately after this precis: “There might be grounds,” he conjectures, “for considering many a headline in the daily press more chimerical than the elaborate cosmogony of a Plotinus.” Wilson ended *Axel's Castle* by suggesting that we need to choose between reality and the palace of art; Burke began *Auscultation* with the presupposition that reality and the palace of art are—thank goodness—difficult to distinguish.

*Auscultation, Creation, and Revision* remained unpublished until 1993 (the book was rejected by one editor and Burke moved on quickly to *Permanence and Change*), and since *Auscultation* was written in the early thirties, it lies outside the scope of *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*. Yet it is telling that when Selzer brings up *Auscultation* at all, he mentions that one of its subtitles is “The Rout of the



Aesthetes,” commenting that Burke never wants “to rout the aesthetes entirely.” But throughout *Auscultation*, Burke does not support the “rout of the aesthetes” at all: he mocks it. He uses the phrase to describe the trajectory of the careers of critics like Wilson and Cowley—critics who began in the twenties as champions of aestheticism but turned against it in the early years of the Depression: “It was as though,” quips Burke, “one could not properly start the Revolution without first killing off a few poets.” This conversion from aestheticism to social activism, Burke maintains, is a “Saul-Paul” reversal: “I re-examine the nature of the ‘romantic, individualist protest,’ ‘obscurantism,’ the ‘Ivory Tower,’ and ‘leisure class’ thinking, since such are considered essentially candidates for the discard—and I try to show that the present ‘collectivistic,’ ‘conformist’ tendencies do not differ in psychological fundamentals from the earlier tendencies which they are supposed to replace.”

Burke had done much the same thing in *Counter-Statement*, but throughout *Auscultation*, his reading of Marx and Freud (often implicit in the earlier book) is brought to the foreground. The problem with the “rout of the aesthetes” is the problem with dialectical thinking—the drive to counter a position with its antithesis. While this drive forces a critic to wonder “what should be the proletarian opposite of a sonnet,” Burke wants to develop “an explanation of history which can merely say that thinking becomes *different* from what it was, rather than *antithetical* to what it was.” A similar intolerance for mere difference may be found in psychoanalytic accounts of “evasion”: “Thanks to this pliable concept, whatever the critic finds a reader taking interest in (be it love, metaphysics, tennis, chess, pictures of mountains, fishing, stories of geographical explorations, or investigations in child psychology) can be described by the critic as an evasion of what the critic has decided the reader *ought* to take an interest in (as, let us say, a comprehensive economic explanation of his quota-troubles and of the political moves by which he might remedy them).” Burke’s quarrel is not with Marxism and psychoanalysis but with literary critics who need antagonisms to justify their enthusiasms—however noble their enthusiasms might be. “I have granted that there is a time for everything,”

Burke admits; “but it never occurred to a person until a few years ago that each time he goes to eat, or to shave, he must formally renounce all poetry.”

Sentences like these would please neither an Allen Tate nor a Granville Hicks. For me, their power is enhanced by the suspicion that they would please almost nobody invested either in defending or debunking a political reading of literature today. There is a peculiar sense in which Burke, despite his devotion to literature and language, finally considered them to be more dispensable than either Tate or Hicks did. He not only refused to bolster his enthusiasms with antagonisms; he had fun at the expense of his enthusiasms. So if Burke reminds us that reality and the palace of art are sometimes difficult to distinguish, he never leads us to believe that they’re the same thing. However important literature was to Burke, it was not more important (or less important) than eating or shaving. However crucial language was to Burke’s account of psychic and political health, it never obviated the need for dentistry.

This is why Burke’s account of art as a cultural discourse, an expression of the propensities of a writer’s age, is only as powerful as his account of art as an expression of genius—a writer’s particular element of grace. I have quoted many of my favorite passages, but I have saved the best, from *Auscultation, Creation, and Revision*, for last.

All that I mean is this: If literature could keep us closed, then we should be fools not to stay closed with the aid of literature—but literature which closes us for a few hours, only to expose us all the more brutally a few hours later as the imperatives of non-literature and anti-literature again crowd upon us, is like that early day of spring I recall, when I opened myself to spring too soon, and so, when the snow came at evening, I shivered as I had never shivered in January.

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