

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 688

CS 215 864

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 TITLE Drooping Methodically: Burke's Argument for a Negative Education.
 PUB DATE Mar 97
 NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
 PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; *Language Role; Metaphors; *Student Needs
 IDENTIFIERS *Burke (Kenneth); *Symbolicity

ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke's essay, "Linguistic Approach to the Problem of Education," argues for tempering a positive attitude toward education--"drooping" should be the norm. "Drooping" would be the antithesis of an education designed primarily to facilitate students' uncritical movement into the workforce. Burke explores how a rhetor might teach responsibly in a culture determined by the growing presence of global capitalism and an exponentially increasing technology. The view of the world as a place for combat and conquest (i.e., the metaphor of economic competition) displays, for Burke, a central and dangerous irony that inheres within symbolicity. A Burkean education would help students understand symbolicity's irony and become wary of its consequences. In today's corporate and university downsizing in which an individual's present skills are always in danger of becoming a trained incapacity, such an approach to education might allow people to improvise the good life by better understanding how the material conditions of production and the formal conditions of symbolicity have cooperated to make a world that can be, and often is, inhospitable. A Burkean education would begin by insisting that language is best understood as a mode of action rather than as a problem of knowledge, and then proceed by analyzing the forms and consequences of such action. The thrust of this education would be negative in two ways: First it would teach linguistic skepticism, and second, it would be negative in that it would not teach any particular doctrine nor be committed to any particular social philosophy.

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Drooping Methodically: Burke's Argument for a Negative Education

In his essay, "Linguistic Approach to the Problem of Education," Kenneth Burke argues for an understanding of education that seems to run counter to all that Americans hold dear. In a claim almost sure to raise an oppositional cry from most educational reformers, he perversely suggests that we need to temper the positive attitude in our approach to education and become considerably more negative. In effect, we need to disregard that proverbial advice to stand up straight; instead, we need to learn to droop. Such drooping would be the antithesis of an education designed primarily to facilitate students uncritical movement into the workforce. Burke's education would oppose a more overtly pragmatic education not because he is unaware of or indifferent to the fundamental problem of people's need to earn a living but because he is seeking an approach to education that will further our on-going improvisation of the good life within a economic and cultural situation in which we are prone to the "exorbitant goads and false exaltations" (289) that follow from an unreflective endorsement of competition.

"Linguistic Approach to the Problem of Education" is Burke's most explicit statement of how a rhetor might teach responsibly in a culture determined, in a large part, by the increasing presence of a global capitalism and an exponentially increasing technology. Burke's plan is to borrow from the past and to

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secularize the religious practice of mortification. What we need to mortify is not our flesh but our propensity to view the world primarily as a place for combat and conquest. This propensity needs to be mortified because in our symbolism we project motives into nature, which we then read back as providing an account of how the world naturally is and consequently of how we naturally are. In particular, we consciously or, more often, unconsciously view nature through a metaphor of economic competition and hence see struggle and domination as the normal course of nature. Given that nature is struggle for individual advantage, ambition then becomes both a necessity and a virtue. In a world seen as inherently competitive, ambition becomes a register of our health because it is a natural expression of who we are.

For Burke, our uncritical embrace of ambition unwittingly displays a central and dangerous irony that inheres within symbolism: symbolic creature forget the symbolic origins of their understanding and read their metaphors as transcriptions of facts of nature. As Nietzsche remarked in "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," humans forget "that the original intuitive metaphors are indeed metaphors and take them for the things themselves" (252). We thus read nature through a metaphorical frame that we don't see as a projection of a set of motives but treat rather as the discovery of certain facts about human beings. A Burkean education would demystify such a reading by helping students understand the irony of symbolism's self-

forgetting and by helping them become wary of its consequences. Such an education would contribute to its students mortification by contesting the effects of the lost origin of ambition.

For Burke, a contemporary education should call into question the normal and natural and train students to doubt that which they are not inclined to doubt. In particular, we need to see how our ambition is the consequence of "the malaise of a given property structure" (275), and we need especially to understand the symbolic operations that reenforce this property structure and to realize how the nature of symbolicity moves easily to support the sacredness of property. Burke would have us dwell on and continually return to a key insight. The negative, which is the genius of language, is deeply and essentially connected to the "thou shalt nots" that protect property. Language and economic justice or injustice are intertwined. A Burkean education would examine our language, which seems to be and feels as if it were only a natural expression of who we are, and show how it reflects the structure of property relations into which we are born and hence how it implicates us within the injustice that such a set of relations engenders and perpetuates. Such a recognition should be mortifying. And although Burke's secular mortification would not put us on a path to salvation, it might allow us a way to live responsibly as teachers and rhetors in a world that we experience as unjust and contradictory.

An education that took seriously this problem of the necessary implication of symbolistic understanding within a set of property relations would have three goals: admonition, appreciation, and productivity. These goals would be technical analogues to the trinitarian ends of wisdom, love, and power, as Burke's education would be the secular equivalent of a spiritual discipline. The stress in this secular education would be on admonition, but through this stress we would learn appreciation, and this would have consequences for our and our students' productivity. Burke is quite clear that his proposed educational approach would not neglect the pragmatic needs of its students, for as he remarks: before we can live well, we must first be able to live. His approach, however, would oppose a predominantly vocational training because Burke seeks to make actors who could stay the course for a long term. To borrow a title of another Burke essay, his education would provide equipment for living, which would allow both individuals and society at large to negotiate more successfully the tensions that persist within an increasingly competitive and technological capitalism. In our current world of corporate and university downsizing in which one's present skills are always in danger of becoming a trained incapacity, such an approach to education may allow people to improvise the good life by better understanding how the material conditions of production and the formal conditions of symbolicity have cooperated to make a world that can be, and often is, inhospitable to us. In such a situation, a key task of education

is to make it possible for people to live good lives in a world in which many are no longer at home.

Burke sees the educational paradigm that he offers as returning to an emphasis on language, which until the modern era had been a central concern for education. But Burke's return is a return with a difference. His defining purpose is not the positive one of helping the student to acquire a new fluency but the negative one of admonishing students that language, which is one of the glories of our species, is also one of the most significant sources of the problems that haunt the species. A Burkean education would begin by insisting that language is best understood as a mode of action rather than as a problem of knowledge. His education would then proceed by analyzing the forms and consequences of such action.

For the materials of his education Burke looks initially to great works of dramatic literature. He does so because he is looking for symbolic actions that are both representative and sufficiently stable that they are good subjects for an intensive and repeated examination. Burke's notion of representative is tied to his notion of complexity, and it is helpful to read these ideas against the project of behaviorism. Burke adamantly opposed behavioristic accounts of human activity because such accounts worked from a radically reduced and simplified understanding of human motivation, one that, in effect, collapsed action into motion. Thus, for Burke, the conclusions of behaviorism were uninformative because they did not investigate

representative instances of human behavior. In contrast, works of imagination do offer such representative examples because they are formal embodiments of symbolic creatures attempting to resolve symbolically problems arising from particular material conditions.

So the initial technical exercise that would function analogously to a spiritual discipline would be textual criticism. And it would be a formal textual criticism. Through this practice we would learn how to drop methodically, as the impulse to straightforward assertion would be subordinated in an effort to understand why a particular symbolic action possesses a particular form. To achieve this understanding we would need to learn how to yield to a text. Two points need to be made immediately. Although Burke suggests starting a formal dramatistic criticism by investigating canonical drama, there is nothing that restricts his method to such texts. Burke certainly did not limit himself to these texts. Rather, any text, understood as the formal embodiment of a symbolic action, is a candidate for formal dramatistic criticism, for all such texts are attempts by symbolic creature to use symbolic resources to solve problems that occupy them. The second point is that such criticism is not intended initially as aesthetic appreciation, although it can and does lead to such appreciation as teachers and students appreciate the elegance of the formal symbolic solutions.

The first task of a Burkean textual criticism is to chart equations, to determine what in a text is equal to what, and then to group these equations in clusters and ask what follows from these equations. What such criticism seeks is the form that an author has arrived at by attempting to use the resource of symbolicity to resolve particular material problems. The equations and what follows from them ought to reveal the problems that occupied the writer and the solution that the writer effected. Burke mentions charting the grotesque forms and consequences of ambition in Macbeth or the complex and entangled anxieties of ownership and passion in Othello as two examples of how the formal grouping of equivalences might reveal an underlying formal structure that seeks to resolve particular problems of diseased ambition and of a set of property relations that induce certain forms of illness.

Burkean textual criticism is inescapably a mode of social criticism, designed to alert its practitioners to the peculiar cooperation of the formal imperatives of symbolicity and pressures of a particular set of property relations. This criticism would be admonitory, for it would seek to lead students from a naive and uncritical understanding of language as an instrument of communication and to replace it with a "sophisticated and methodized set of parables or fables" (271) that warns them about the ways in which we are imprisoned within symbolic equations that entangle us in the maintenance of a certain set of property relations that unjustly distribute

material and symbolic goods. To realize that one is inevitably caught up in such unconscious justification simply by virtue of being a symbolic creature ought to be humbling. Further, it ought to shift one away from a moralistic division of people into those who are good and those who are evil and lead instead to a more complex appreciation of human foibles and to an aesthetic appreciation of the symbolic forms that have sought creative resolutions to the tensions produced by an unjust set of property relations.

But despite this positive consequence the thrust of this education would be decidedly negative in two ways. First, what this education would teach would be linguistic skepticism. It would teach students to be on the lookout for equations in which the natural disguised forms of social privilege. Second, it would be negative in that it would not teach any particular doctrine nor would it be committed to any particular social philosophy. Burke sees it as within the tradition of Deweyite liberalism, which operates methodically by cultivating doubt. The point of this education would not be to make up students' minds for them but to equip them to question for themselves the their own symbolic acts and those of others.

Burke believes that such questioning has a particular role to play in a contemporary democracy. On the one hand, such an education would seek to engage and analyze all positions within a democracy. Hence it would be seek an inclusive curriculum that responded to social and cultural diversity. On the other hand,

it would seek to transform students into the type of critical audience necessary for a democracy deeply influenced by mass media. In developing this aspect of education, Burke makes an interesting turn to Plato's critique of democracy. He cites Plato's discussion in Book 9 of the Republic, in which Plato argues that democracies degenerate into tyrannies when they produce "an unmanageable excess of liberty" (285). Burke applies this critique to the operation of mass media. What particularly interests him is the way in which the unreflective narratives of mass media have an enormous impact on policy decisions within our democracy. Again, it is not a problem of conscious corruption but of unwitting duplicity. The excessive focus in mass media on crime and its concomitant and on-going plot in which minorities are portrayed as violent or as morally depraved serves to confirm repressive policies that seek to police and punish these minorities. The middle class fear of crime is simply one example of a consequence of a symbolic resolution of anxieties about the structure of our property relationships that a Burkean education would seek to make visible to its students. As many have pointed out, the very naturalness of televised news disguises the constructedness of stories it presents, for these stories are not presented as material that has been worked to fit several standard plots but as simply a recording of what occurred. In their familiarity, these plots have the authority of the natural and the normal, and as such they help determine a citizenry marked by a peculiar paranoia. A Burkean education would

reconstitute this citizenry by giving students the skills to appreciate the symbolic constructions of the media.

In addition to developing a sophisticated stance toward the contemporary productions of the media, Burke would also have students study past symbolic constructions of various religions. He would have students study theology, not as a system of religious dogma but as a repository of human strategies for dealing with human action and passion. In particular, Burke would have us look to problems of categorical guilt, since such guilt must inform any set of property relations in which there is an unjust distribution. Again, such study would be cautionary, warning us of the ways in which symbolic creatures seek to rid themselves of guilt through devices such as the scapegoat.

In offering a study of theology as set of linguistic practices, Burke seeks a curriculum that would resituate traditional religious concerns within a secular context. He fully realizes the difficulty of such resituation and the likely objections that it will raise. That is why he ends "Linguistic Approach to Education" by turning to a clearly secular study of persuasion as the principle that informs his education. For if we are continually beset by those who seek consciously or unconsciously to get us to do something or to take a particular attitude toward something, and if we ourselves inevitably engage in such actions, then if our education is not simply to be admonitory and appreciative but also productive, we need to study persuasion. Such study ideally would provide us with resources

as both consumers and producers of discourse that would allow us to respect the genuine differences that distinguish us and to locate areas of common interest so that we could negotiate the complex and overdetermined situations in which we will always find ourselves. As a global capitalism and ubiquitous technology threaten to eradicate local differences and to persuade us that these differences themselves are merely accidents, an education that allowed us to appreciate the achievements of capitalism and technology while warning us of the danger inherent in any overly successful symbolic understanding might help shape us so that we could respond creatively to positives and negatives of our situation and in a series of continual revisions improvise good lives that dealt responsibly with the worlds that they inherit, modify, and pass on.



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