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REVIEW

Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare. Edited by Scott L. Newstok. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2007. Pp. l, 308.

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This book, published in 2007, has already gained wide recognition and praise coming from such luminaries of American literary criticism as Harold Bloom and Stephen Greenblatt. It is the result of the editor's, that is Scott L. Newstok's, work consisting in bringing together and editing Kenneth Burke's numerous and important contributions to Shakespeare criticism. Burke wanted apparently to produce a volume of this kind himself, but died without achieving this purpose. Thus the book may be thought of as a fulfillment of Kenneth Burke's intention, and a volume that all students of Burke's thought will have to take into account because Shakespeare criticism is an important part of the legacy he has left behind. Kenneth Duva Burke (1897-1993)[1] was an important American philosopher and critic much influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Siegmund Freud, and Karl Marx, but, at the same time, very original.

The book in question contains all of the Shakespeare criticism by Kenneth Burke, both published and previously unpublished, together with even short notes and passing remarks, and provides all this material with carefully formulated and very useful notes, comments, and cross-references. Burke's life and ideas, particularly those relating to Shakespeare, are lucidly exposed in the very handy and informative "Editor's introduction". Altogether, we shall find here

[1] It is remarkable (although some people might call it somewhat scandalous) that there is quite a lot of disagreement in the available sources concerning the date of Burke's death. *The Oxford companion to English literature* (see Drabble 2000: 151), and *The Cambridge guide to literature in English* (see Ousby 1989: 144) both claim that he died in 1986, while David Macey's *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory* insists that he died already in 1973 (see 2001: 268), whereas the Internet site entitled "Introduction to Kenneth Burke" (available at http://bradley.bradley.edu/~ell/burke.html) opts for 1995. But Scott L. Newstok in the book in question says that this sad event happened in 1993, and there are reasons to believe that he is right.

many thought-provoking comments, by this slightly neglected American thinker, which concern the following works and topics: *Hamlet*, *Twelfth night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Othello*, *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *King Lear, Troilus and Cressida*, *A midsummer night's dream*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The tempest,* the character of Falstaff, the *Sonnets*, and Shakespeare's imagery.

Kenneth Burke is often classified as belonging to the so called New Criticism, together with such well known American critics and writers as J. C. Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, W. K. Wimsatt, or Robert Penn Warren. At the same time, it is already an established tradition to emphasize the differences between Burke's approach to literature and what might be called the mainstream of New Criticism.[2] This is why we should not be surprised seeing that Newstok (2007: xxiii) talks about Burke as "mistakenly grouped among more solidly formalist New Critics". If anybody associates the New Criticism with a rather dogmatic and blinkered concentration on the "text itself" or "the verbal icon", then he or she should not shy away from reading Kenneth Burke, since he, while appreciating the value of the so called "close reading", never avoids taking into account a broader cultural, social, historical, or biographical context whenever he feels like doing so, or the occasion arises, and this happens often enough. Indeed, in *The Norton anthology of theory of criticism*, we read about Burke's "Whitmanesque embrace of everything" (Leitch 2001: 1271), which may sound a note of warning for those who do not like very eclectic approaches to literature, and who might appreciate the narrowing of both the subject matter and methods of criticism put forward by the American New Critics, or by the Russian Formalists (who, in a sense, foreshadowed the New Criticism), or for those who simply have bad associations with Walt Whitman.

Such people might indeed be sometimes put off by Burke's characteristic style of writing in which the focus of the author's attention changes constantly, which, however, does not prevent him from observing the high standards of logical rigorousness. As a result, one is going to find in Burke a lot of the abstract, but also a lot of the concrete, a lot of textual (which Burke calls "intrinsic"), and a lot of contextual criticism (called by Burke "extrinsic"), even though these various elements may not be always convincingly integrated. Burke's style, generally speaking, is at times highly emotional, direct, and succinct, at times it approaches the characteristic professional language of philosophers. As Newstok puts it: "Because Burke donned such varied critical hats,

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[2] The reader may find some information on this problem in Vincent B. Leitch (ed.) *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (2001: 1269-1271), and in Richard Harland's *Literary theory from Plato to Barthes* (1999: 184-187).

reading him both exhilarates and exhausts" (2007: xxiii).

The effect of exhilaration is certainly there because Burke writes with great zest, and has this, unmistakably New Critical, good eye for the textual detail. Thus, for example, in Burke's [1964] lecture entitled: "Introduction: Shakespeare was what?", we find interesting remarks concerning Shakespeare's graphic use of words the aim of which was, according to Burke, to compensate for the poverty of Elizabethan stage scenery:

> Whatever Shakespeare was or wasn't as a man, we know this about him for certain as a playwright: If the writer of the scenario for a modern movie "spectacular" wants a scene with a thousand horsemen, the appropriate experts are called in, an allowance is made in the budget for an outlay of funds mounting into the millions, and the vast enterprise is staged and filmed. But if Shakespeare wanted such an effect, he had to rely primarily on his resources as a poet. He had to talk of horses in such a way that you would see them, "printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth"
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> (Burke 2007a: 10).

The phrase "printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth" comes from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and it certainly is very suggestive and has a great visualizing potential.

The above observation concerning the horses in *Henry V* may seem a relatively small point, but, I think, we may connect it with the sentence, in fact the only sentence, or rather half a sentence, that Terry Eagleton devotes to Burke in his *Literary theory. An introduction*, he talks there about "... Kenneth Burke, who eclectically blends Freud, Marx and linguistics to produce his own suggestive view of the literary work as a form of symbolic action ..." (1997: 159). This seems to be, in fact, the main point about Burke's thinking about literature, he is not satisfied, unlike most of the New Critics, with literature as a purely linguistic product, even though he is often inspired by linguistics. Burke thinks of a literary fact as an action that changes something in the relationship between the author and the reader, or even sometimes changes the world, or at least constructs an artificial world which the reader is invited to inhabit:

> Thus, when inquiring into the structure of Shakespeare's plays, we are well advised to begin ... asking ourselves just how the dramatist is shaping the patterns of our expectations, by giving us from the start the rudiments of the coming conflict, and by subtly guiding our sympathies and antipathies, our hopes and apprehensions (in brief, by building his play into a form that induces us to take part in its unfolding)
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> (Burke 2007a: 14).

The phrase concerning the "shaping the patterns of our expectations" seems to look forward to the reader response theory, with its idea of the "horizon of ex-

pectations" developed by Hans Robert Jauss after the publication of Burke's text quoted above. In Jauss, however, the "horizon of expectations" is shaped and modified by all the "textual strategies" that a text may employ, including such, like genre or fictionality, that have little to do with the creative will of the poet or the dramatist themselves, while in Burke, the "horizon of expectations" is rather a product of the game that the author consciously plays with the reader, and it is the author that lays down the rules for that game. In this context, we find it perhaps a little easier to understand why Paul de Man, as quoted by Newstok, believed that Burke's critical writing "sounds as incomprehensible to the French as a message from Mars" (2007: xxii). Indeed, Burke's "Introduction: Shakespeare was what?" seems to have little in common with such crucial French critical text as Roland Barthes' essay "Death of the Author", published a few years later, in 1968. Instead of dethroning the author, Burke clearly prefers to emphasize the author's being in control of what is going on in the represented world,[3] even though this does not lead to any explicit cult of the author's genius. It certainly is not by chance that Eagleton mentions Burke in the same breath as Harold Bloom, a vigorous (though sometimes very "unconservative") defender of the traditional literary canon and a vociferous critic of Barthes and his ilk called by Bloom "the School of Resentment". Bloom, another great Shakespearean critic from America, was also one of Kenneth Burke's grateful disciples (together with Frederic Jameson, Susan Sontag, Edward Said and others), even though of course it would be a mistake to suggest that Burke and Bloom belong to the same school of criticism.

It would have also been a fundamental mistake if someone thought of Kenneth Burke (perhaps misled by his name sounding like that of Edmund Burke) as a conservative from whom we could expect a similar kind of Shakespearean criticism as Allan Bloom's *Shakespeare's politics*. Kenneth Burke is not impressed by the putative conservative implications of Shakespeare's plays, or by the allusions, apparently included in them, to the author's conservative worldview. The following quotation shows it, I think, clearly enough:

> And though Shakespeare beyond all doubt believed in the ubiquitous reality of a social order, or hierarchy, he seems to have believed more in its *inevitability* than in its *desirability*
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> (Burke 2007a: 19) (emphasis original).

In other words, Shakespeare, according to Burke, might have been, and would

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[3] This should not be, naturally, understood as suggesting that Kenneth Burke displays in his writings any anti-French, or generally xenophobic, trends. Burke, in fact, seems to know French literature and culture more deeply and refers to them more frequently than to any other cultures, with the obvious exception of American and English.

have been, much less conservative if he had had a chance to live in a more democratic and liberal society. When discussing a play such as Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Burke is very far from admiring, like Allan Bloom, the nobility of Coriolanus, a Roman aristocratic politician and war hero who cannot stoop to ingratiating himself with the Roman crowd. On the contrary, it seems that there is little love lost between Burke and Coriolanus:

> To the extent that Rome allusively stood for England, it was not easy to keep the audience sympathetic with a man (Coriolanus) whose conduct at this point was so close to out-and-out treason (particularly since at so many points in the play he irritates us)
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> (Burke 2007e: 137).

On the other hand, one would also be in the wrong, if one tried to construe Burke's world-view and critical method as consistently radical, or Marxist, even though he does echo Marx frequently enough. In this respect, I agree fully with Newstok's verdict: "Treating Burke as a Marxist (or treating him as a member of any school other than his own) overestimates his allegiance to strict Marxism" (2007: xxvii).

There are, to be sure, moments, in Burke's critical oeuvre, when it is perhaps his left-wing political orientation that saves him from following in the footsteps of the established Shakespearean criticism with its typical limitations, such as A. C. Bradley's so called characterological criticism based on the assumption that a character can be separated from the textual context in which he or she appears, which used to be mocked as the "how many children had Lady Macbeth?" approach.[4] Burke, instead, emphasizes that:

> No matter how well portrayed any particular character is, the fact remains that he could not be himself except by reason of the ways in which he meshes with the other characters and with the plot as a whole. Even so unique character as Hamlet, when thus examined, shades off into his dependence on Father, Uncle, Mother, Ophelia, Horatio, Polonius, etc., all of whom are necessary, ..., for Hamlet to be himself
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> (Burke 2007a: 19).

On the other hand, we may discern here the tendency to see meaning as a product of contrasting relations between various elements, the tendency associated with Ferdinand de Saussure and his relational theory of meaning, which is of course one of the cornerstones of Structuralism with which the American New

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[4] It should be remembered, at the same time, that, even though K. Burke is a very different critic from A. C. Bradley, and sometimes comments on Bradley very severely, as was rightly emphasized by Newstok (see Newstok 2007: xxx), they share a deep fascination with the psychology of Shakespearean characters.

Criticism was closely related.

Burke's [1935] article "Antony in behalf of the play" is probably the best example, in this volume, of close reading, and, at the same time, of Burke's ability to empathize with literary characters, the ability that has of course little to do with the quasi-scientific detachment and objectivity often advocated by the New Critics. We see here Burke entering the mind of Antony, from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and speaking in his voice, which Newstok calls "ingenious ventriloquism of Mark Antony's address over Caesar's body" (2007: xvii). It seems characteristic that Burke admires the rhetorical, manipulative skill of Antony, who is capable of reversing completely the feeling of the Roman mob, presenting Antony as an alter ego, in this respect, or a metonymy of Shakespeare himself, whom he calls "our Great Demagogue" (2007b: 48):

> At this particular point in the play, however, as I rise to address you, accompanied by Caesar's corpse, Brutus has just confronted the play-mob ... They have clamored their approval. They are convinced that Caesar would have been a tyrant. And they have shouted ... "Live, Brutus, live, live!" (3.2.44). It is my task as I stand before the play-mob, to contrive a *peripety* for my audience, reversing the arrows of your expectations. When my speech is finished, we must have set you to making the preparations for Brutus' death
>
> (Burke 2007b: 42).

Burke's "ventriloquism" leads to the rise of a triangle: Burke, Antony, Shakespeare in which the living (then) critic, the dead author, and a fictional character based on a real historical figure seem all to speak in one voice, like a triad, attempting to respond to one kind of skilful political manipulation, that of Brutus, with another kind that would be even more skilful and more manipulative. Burke himself draws our attention to the problem of the triad by stressing the charm-like "threeness" of Antony's famous first words addressing the mob: "Friends, Romans, countrymen" (see Burke 2007b: 39). The Roman, the Englishman, and the American (representatives of what might be called the Old Empire, the Middle Empire, and the New Empire) may also form a potent triad capable of "reversing the arrows of our expectations" and casting a spell over the audience. It is a little strange that Burke finds it easier to identify with Antony, a representative of a monarchic principle, rather than with the republican Brutus, even though the state mythology of the U.S. is first of all anchored in the tradition of the Roman Republic. Naturally, it is not my intention to suggest that Burke assumes her some kind of triumphalist attitude about the American, or any other, Empire, or that he fully identifies with Antony, who was, at the same time, a founder, and a most ruthless one, but also one of the early victims of the nascent Roman Empire. After all, he is well aware that Antony is playing "with loaded dice" and that his soul is full of "venom" which he eventually "lets loose" in a "full-throated" way (see Burke 2007b: 42-46).

Burke's attachment to triadic patterns is visible also in "Socio-anagogic interpretation of *Venus and Adonis*" [1950], where he distinguishes, following the medieval theories of allegorical representation, between "the three spiritual senses" of the discussed poem: allegorical, moral (tropological), and anagogical, and tries to provide them with a modern and "secularized" interpretation. In this article, Burke also makes a bold move of identifying the three main acting characters of Shakespeare's poem with three social classes: Venus is associated with the upper class, Adonis with the middle class, and the boar with the lower classes as seen from the point of view of the middle class (see Burke 2007c: 59-60).

Generally speaking, the reader should be prepared for bold and surprising statements in this book. For example, in the justly famous "*Othello*: An essay to illustrate a method" [1951], we learn that the name of Othello's wife Desdemona means "moan-death" (Burke 2007d: 65). Burke, apparently, thinks of this name as being derived from "death-de-moan", that is "death of moaning". In keeping with this, rather eccentric, etymology, Desdemona, in this essay, is shown as moaning and groaning often enough:

> The scene in which she sings the willow song (4.3.38-54) casts her perfectly in the role of one preparing meekly for sacrifice. And her sorrow is in the same mode when, having been attacked by her husband, she speaks as her parting words: "Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell" (5.2.133)
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> (Burke 2007d: 80).

Burke seems indeed to ignore the correct etymology of Desdemona's name (derived from the Greek adjective "δυσδαίμων" meaning "of ill fortune" or "ill-fated"), but this does not really matter much because he emphasizes very strongly Desdemona's self definition "I am most unhappy in the loss of it" (Burke 2007d: 93), when she is talking about her loss of the fateful handkerchief, and "unhappy" in Shakespeare's language does often mean, and here it certainly means, "unlucky, ill-fated". Similarly, when talking about Coriolanus, Burke (who often uses Freud's ideas) comments: "And in the light of Freudian theories concerning the fecal nature of invective, the last two syllables of the hero's name are so 'right'" (Burke 2007e: 147), which of course does not mean that he seriously contemplates the possibility of an etymological link between "Coriolanus" and "anus", but, probably, that he is prepared to use consciously, and sometimes playfully, false etymologies when it suits his interpretative purposes.

In the essay on *Othello*, we may also be startled in a more fundamental way, for example by the statement:

> In sum, Desdemona, Othello, and Iago are all partners of a single conspiracy. There were the Enclosure Acts, whereby the common lands were made private;

> here is the analogue, in the realm of human affinity, an act of spiritual enclosure (Burke 2007d: 69).

We have here another of, apparently beloved of Burke, threesomes, but the underlying idea, though not so easy to fathom when the above sentence is taken out of its context, is relatively simple. The supposed "conspiracy" of Desdemona, Othello, and Iago is based on their allegedly shared attitude towards private property, they are all enslaved by what might be called proprietorial thinking, and their inability to rise above it, Othello as an archetypal proprietor, Desdemona as a passive object of appropriation, and Iago as, what perhaps should be called, an agent of the fear of losing a property.[5] All this is placed in the context of the well known Proudhon's revolutionary maxim *La propriété c'est le vol*, or, as Burke puts it: "Property fears theft because it is theft" (Burke 2007d: 67). Thus, the tragedy of Othello should not perhaps be seen as a result Othello's dangerous and criminal naivety, and Iago's diabolical malice, but rather as a product of social forces and conservative prejudices that led to the rise of modern capitalism. This is, I must say, a rather controversial idea, but it is clear enough that many readers and commentators will find it very attractive.

There is no doubt that we have, in Kenneth Burke, to do with a thinker of great originality whose ideas may be sometimes difficult to digest, but they are also difficult to forget. Let me give one more example. When discussing *King Lear*, in "*King Lear*: Its form and psychosis" [1969], he says the following:

> Experimentally attempting ... to translate a theological proposition (Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum*) into terms of an aesthetic analogue, I'd propose that a corresponding motivational tangle of this sort may operate in the appeal of *King Lear*. ... And similarly, I submit, it is *precisely by straining our credulity to the limits* that this tragedy can produce in us an attitude of complete surrender (Burke 2007f: 153) (emphasis original).

This is very strong rhetoric, and it goes a long way towards making the phenomenon of *King Lear* look more striking in the eyes of the modern reader. It also seems to echo, very creatively, the theory of the so called theatre of the absurd. Specifically it echoes of course Jan Kott's interpretation of Shakespeare's plays, and particularly of *King Lear*, as foreshadowing the theatre of the absurd. This is what Kott [1965] says about *King Lear* in his *Shakespeare our contemporary*:

> The attitude of modern criticism to *King Lear* is ambiguous and somehow embarrassed. Doubtless *King Lear* is still recognized as masterpiece, beside which even *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* seem tame and pedestrian. ... But at the same time *King Lear* gives one the impression of a high mountain that everyone admires,

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[5] Burke calls him "an agent acting to provoke apprehension" (Burke 2007d: 66).

> yet no one particularly wishes to climb
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> (Kott quoted in Hopkins 2005: 32).

Burke seems to have responded to this challenge, he certainly is not afraid of climbing this "high mountain", even though the air near its summit may be rarefied and the abysses may be vertiginous. Naturally both Kott and Burke interpret *King Lear* following the way it, so to speak, interprets itself. Needless to say I mean the Scene 6 in Act 4 of the play, where Edgar, commenting on Lear's paradoxical ravings, exclaims on the high cliffs of Dover: "O, matter and impertinency mixed! Reason in madness!" (4.6.169). It should not, however, escape our attention that, unlike Kott, Burke thinks of *King Lear* as a work that, in spite of its rather obvious absurdities, inspires faith, though not necessarily in the religious sense of the word, and familiarizes us with the sublime (see Burke 2007f: 155).

In the same essay, and in some other places, Burke foreshadows the method of approaching Shakespeare represented by Girard's (1991) *A theater of envy* where the notions of sacrifice and sacrificial crisis are so important. We may have such an impression when reading what follows:

> In my *Rhetoric of religion* (1961), I have attempted to show how and why the incentives to modes of expression embodying to "tragic pleasure" center in the nature of Order, implicit in which is a *sacrificial* principle. And tragedy involves a solemn way of utilizing this sacrificial principle to dramatic ends
>
> (Burke 2007f: 163).

Thus, the play's "entelechial principle" (one of Burke's favorite terms) seems to consist in embodying, as fully as possible, the logic of sacrifice, with a number of scapegoats, the most important of them being Lear and Cordelia, so as to achieve a quasi-Aristotelian catharsis, or rather a fleeting reconciliation with the rather ruthless forces that seem to be governing our world.

To recapitulate, there is no denying that the book *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare* offers a lot of excellent food for thought, and contains ideas, and glimpses of ideas, that contain in a nutshell the most important problems of modern Shakespeare studies, and of literary studies in general. It must also be emphasized that the book represents, with its ample and precise comments, notes, explanations, and exhaustive indexes, a very high level of editorship.

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