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Author(s): Kenneth Burke

Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Dec., 1978), pp. 330-335

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/357013>

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Questions and Answers about the Pentad

KENNETH BURKE

MAYBE my concern with matters of literary *theory* might be of some suggestive value to persons concerned with the teaching of literary *composition*. But what should I say? Having seen a “contemporary handbook of rhetoric, language, and literature,” *The Holt Guide to English* by William F. Irscher and having noted that it puts to good use some terms I worked with in my *Grammar of Motives*, I see a feasible point of departure there. For my relation to the terms differs somewhat from their role in the Irscher handbook, yet there would be nothing invidious in the distinction. Both uses have their place. The discussion of the terms as I use them is quite roundabout and a bit unwieldy—but that’s my reason for risking an exposition which is somewhat like a bit of narrative.

The roundaboutness figures along these lines. In the twenties, I began theorizing about the nature of literary form. Gradually such speculations developed into theories about the nature of language in general. I called these notions “Dramatistic” because they viewed language primarily as a mode of *action* rather than as a mode of *knowledge*, though the two emphases are by no means mutually exclusive. I next extended the field to include “symbolic action” in general. That is, other fields such as music, painting, dance, sculpture, the many scientificologies and the many religious, philosophical, and political “-isms” would also be treated as instances of symbolic action. And I rounded things out by considering human relations in general in terms of the human species as the typical symbol-using animal.

The original literary theories already had in germ the overall philosophic position I have ended with. They included a pronounced behaviorist strand, thoughts on the respects in which, though symbolism as such is a dimension that transcends the body, it is rooted in the body as a purely physiological organism, essentially as nonlinguistic as a fetus in the womb. Symbolic action is public, social; but we live and die as individual bodies in the realm of nonsymbolic motion, a wholly private existence in the sense that each body’s pleasures and pains and sensory representations of the environment are *immediately* its own and none other’s. The realm of the word is tiny indeed, as compared with the vast extent of wordlessness through time and space. And though our kind of animal identifies itself by emerging from infancy (that is, literally, “speechlessness”) into familiarity with some tribal idiom and the cultural realm that symbolism makes possible, no symbolic action is possible without a grounding in nonsymbolic motion.

So much by way of general orientation. Let’s come now to the terms, the “Dramatistic” pentad, that both Burke and Irscher build around: *act*, *scene*, *agent*, *agency* (for which Irscher uses the synonym, *means*), *purpose*. Burke later added “attitude,” about which more anon. In the meantime, note that Burke’s *Grammar* had a section on the term “attitude,” with particular reference to I. A. Richards’s *Principles of Literary Criticism*, George Herbert Mead’s *Philosophy of the Act*, and Alfred Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity*, all three of which have a behaviorist strand. Irscher introduces the pentad thus:

Are there ways of helping thoughts grow? Are there devices that will help us generate thoughts without limiting the capacity of the mind to range freely? Undoubtedly, there are many. Aristotle set down twenty-eight ways, but for practical purposes, most individuals find a smaller number more manageable.

The twentieth-century rhetorician Kenneth Burke has provided a simple device that applies to any situation; he calls it the *pentad*, a set of five terms, each leading logically to related questions. These terms are action, actor-agent, scene, means, purpose. Trying to answer the questions that spring from the terms becomes a way of gathering resources for writing. (*Holt Guide*, 2nd ed., pp. 29-30)

Later, in another connection, Irmscher quotes a passage from an earlier book of mine. But since the passage is also quoted in the Young-Becker-Pike volume, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, and is better presented there, I'll shift to their statement

A question arouses in the reader anticipations that, when satisfied, give him a sense of form. In *Counter-Statement*, Kenneth Burke puts it this way, "A work has form insofar as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence." Like music, a written work carries the reader through a sequence of psychological tensions and releases.

Even though a passage may not begin with a question (most do not), the writer creates a similar sense of anticipation and closure by other means. The initial sentence of a paragraph usually serves to arouse the reader's anticipation of what will follow. This initial sentence, which poses a question either explicitly or implicitly, is usually called the *topic sentence* of a paragraph. (In description and narrative prose, topic sentences are often only implied.) . . . This view of paragraphs as structures that arouse and fulfill anticipations helps to clarify an important editing problem. A common, and fun-

damental, defect in many paragraphs is that they arouse anticipations that are never fulfilled. (pp. 323-4)

I shall now try to bring out, for what the demonstration might be worth, the difference between Irmscher's and Burke's relations to the five terms (in their sparseness much like the so-called "Journalistic W's,"—*who, what, where, when, why*, etc.—except that mine were chosen to accentuate the "dramatic" nature of the lot, with "act" as "foremost among the equals"). This shall be an account of how one thing led to another.

It starts with the theory of form as the arousing and fulfilling of expectations. In the early twenties, I had published several critical articles written in the aesthetic tradition, viewing art in terms of self-expression. Among my choice of models for study were the plays of Shakespeare. And in the course of trying to decide what was going on in them, I shifted from self-expression to communication as test, since it was so obvious that his dramaturgy was designed to enlist the consent, or cooperation, of the audience in both the ingenuities of every sentence and the work's overall unfoldings. Though many of the *characters* in the play were often confused, for instance, the *audience* always knew how things stood; there were many arrows pointing the direction of the plot; and the characters were so presented that the audience's attitudes toward them fitted in well with the way they fared in the play's outcome.

I still hold to my principal judgment that there are three, and only three, basic formal principles: progressive form (a structure so arranged that the audience is in tune with its development); repetitive form (the maintaining of internal consistencies, as when a given character continues to act in character); conventional form (for instance the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, a con-

vention surviving from the religious rites out of which the Attic theatre had evolved). Gratifications of this sort can, of course, be highly subtilized, as when the audience consents to the sacrifice of, say, a Desdemona. But if the work is properly formed, the consent is given. And of course there are works that deliberately flout such norms. For instance, what Aristotle called the "tragic pleasure" can be "sophisticated" by sadistic-masochistic twists.

Incidentally, in that first line-up, I actually quoted the formula that would later be the basis of the pentad (or hexad); namely, the mediaeval Latin hexameter: *quis* (who), *quid* (what), *ubi* (where), *quibus auxiliis* (by what means), *cur* (why), *quomodo* (how), *quando* (when). I could have cited, if I had known it, a related passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle says, "A man may be ignorant of who he is, what he is doing, what or whom he is acting on, and also what instrument he is doing it with, and to what end . . . how he is doing it (e.g. whether gently or violently)"—which would indicate why I would class "how" (*quomodo*) with "attitude."

But Irmischer makes one mistake in comparing the pentad with Aristotle's topics. In the *Rhetoric*, for instance, Aristotle's list is telling the writer what to *say*, but the pentad in effect is telling the writer what to *ask*. Whereas the terms may *look* positive, they are but blanks to be filled out, as Irmischer himself makes clear by his comments on each of the terms. "Action," for instance, equals "What happened?" or "What is it?"—etc. Among the neatest examples of how the topics operate in Aristotle is his statement: "For purposes of praise or blame, we must assume that qualities closely resembling a person's real qualities are identical with them. For instance, that the cautious man is cold and designing, the simpleton good-natured, the emotionless gentle." Call a cantank-

erous man frank, an arrogant man magnificent and dignified. Call a foolhardy man courageous, a spendthrift generous, and so on.

Maybe I can now make clear my particular relation to the dramatistic pentad, involving a process not quite the same as either Aristotle's or Irmischer's. My job was not to help a writer decide what he might say to produce a text. It was to help a critic perceive what was going on in a text that was already written. Irmischer uses the "dramatistic" terms as suggestions for "generating a topic." My somewhat similar expression, "generative principle," is applied quite differently. My job was to ask of the work the explicit questions to which its structure had already implicitly supplied the answers. The kind of thinking which I associate with the pentad and which needs further development should guide the framing of these questions. Insofar as the analysis did serve these ends, the work could be considered as theoretically "derived" ("generated") from the formal principles. And in that technical sense the text could be said to have been "prophesied after the event"; but not only is such a procedure the safest kind of prophecy, it also serves well as a way of demonstrating the full muscularity of the text as a symbolic act.

But my stress is less upon the terms themselves than upon what I would call the "ratios" among the terms. Maybe the quickest way to make that point would be by a quotation from my article on "Dramatism" in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*:

Inssofar as men's actions are to be interpreted in terms of the circumstances in which they are acting, their behavior would fall under the heading of a "scene-act ratio." But inssofar as their acts reveal their different characters, their behavior would fall under the heading of an "agent-act ratio." For instance, in a time of great crisis, such

as a shipwreck, the conduct of all persons involved in that crisis could be expected to manifest in some way the motivating influence of the crisis. Yet, within such a "scene-act ratio," there would be a range of "agent-act ratios," insofar as one man was "proved" to be cowardly, another bold, another resourceful, and so on.

A further very important consideration here is "circumference." For instance, what is the overall scene in terms of which we are to discuss the nature of human conduct and human relations? The "human condition" has been conceived against a background of many gods quarreling among themselves, in terms of a contract with one god, or of godless nature, or of different periods in history, etc. Aquinas formulated as circumference of widest scope a God who moves all creatures, but each according to its particular nature. In the article I mentioned on "Dramatism," I argue that the question of the human animal's relation to an ultimate circumference must be a philosophic issue rather than a scientific one; even a scene of limited empirical scope resists scientific determination. For exactly how many terms are needed to specify the motivating nature of a scene? The issue seems to involve the adoption of an attitude towards an unquantifiable Quantity X (the term "attitude" here being used in the sense of *Weltanschauung*, "attitude towards life").

In my next book, *Permanence and Change*, I ran into a concern with stylistic devices that exemplify the expectation principles in paradoxical reverse. My term for it, "perspective by incongruity," is perhaps most radically exemplified in Nietzsche's brilliant, sometimes half-mad devotion to a "transvaluation of all values," though I try to show that the term also covers many milder forms of intellectual challenge, for which the overall formula might be: "an insight got by wrenching a term from contexts in which it was felt to be-

long and applying it to contexts from which it had been excluded as a matter of course."

Then, next, the theme of "attitudes" took over, in a book surveying a spectrum of personal, poetic, and rhetorical adjustments and maladjustments to the yes-no swinging of history's pendulum between acceptances and rejections.

Next, I should state my debt to the anthropologist, Malinowski, who proposed "context of situation" as his word for "scene." In these abstruse days of hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism, deconstructionism, and transformational grammar—though all of them are in their ways quite noteworthy—it's helpful to recall Malinowski's prime representative anecdote for the study of symbolic action: a group of illiterate savages using language as a tool in the cooperative act of catching fish. Introducing that into my constant concern with poetical and rhetorical devices now seen as primitively exemplified in proverbs, I summed up our ways with words as strategies in situations, the term "strategy" having *attitudinal* connotations.

When thoughts on communication were thus reduced to terms of "strategies" in "situations," the pattern became expanded to plans for a book "On the Imputing of Motives" (asking itself what's going on when anybody says why anybody does anything). In revision, that project became my *Grammar of Motives*. The revised version was such that *Grammar begins* with the pentad that my first draft had *ended up* with—and that's probably why the use of the pentad in the *Irmscher Handbook* differs from its use in Burke's *Grammar*, so that in one case the procedure *leads to* a text; in the other, it *starts from* a text. Fortunately, limitations of space require me to spare us the saga of what all was involved in my getting that first draft turned around. But maybe I can now offer a fairly clear consideration of the different outcomes.

At one stage in the first draft, when trying to choose a "representative anecdote" such as Malinowski's fish catch) as a generative model for the study of language as symbolic action, I settled on our Constitution. It was an enactment in the fullest sense of the term. At the same time, its scope (circumference) as an *act* was so comprehensive that it set up and defined the over-all motivational *scene*, in terms of which countless personal acts of its citizens would be both performed and judged. In this respect, the citizens (co-agents) are related to it and to the legal authorities who pronounce what acts are or are not permitted by the Constitution, much as, in the Biblical dispensation, all humans are variously related to the judgments of God, as determined by prophets or priests. Similarly, on this basis, our Supreme Court pronounces what *legislative* acts are "Constitutional," what "un-Constitutional."

But there is a notable difference. By the sheer dialectics of the case, the scene in which the Constitution was enacted had to be "un-Constitutional" in the sense that conditions *outside* the Constitution provided the "context of situation" in which the document was enacted. The Constitution, being verbal, is in the realm of symbolic action. The natural resources (land, minerals, forests, bodies of water, etc.) under its jurisdiction were in the realm of sheer nonsymbolic motion. The Constitution is in itself a verbal *enactment*. But in defining a realm of motives for the citizens' acts with regard to the nation's material resources, it constitutes a socio-political *scene* for those acts. Yet all such resources in themselves constitute a non-verbal kind of Constitution-Behind-the-Constitution. And in the course of time, this scene-behind-the-scene has been undergoing constant demographic, environmental changes, many due to technological innovations, many reflecting altered "global" relationships.

By the logic of the scene-act ratio, insofar as situations to which Constitutional clauses were addressed have changed, to that extent they became functions of a different scene and, to that extent, different acts.

I cannot here summarize the details of my discussion (which, by the way, was done without benefit of two books ideal for my purposes, but published later: *An Introduction to Legal Reasoning*, by Edward H. Levi, and *The Supreme Court and Social Science*, by Paul L. Rosen). My point is simply to indicate the different drift of my concern with the schematic potentialities of the "Dramatistic" nomenclature.

Presumably the realm of nonsymbolic motion was all that prevailed on this earth before our kind of symbol-using organism evolved, and will go on sloshing about after we have gone. In the meantime, note that, for better or worse, by evolving our kind of organism, the wordless Universe of nonsymbolic motion is able to comment on itself. But we do not grow over-arrogant at the thought. For our very ability thus to exercise is by the same token disposed to tell us that, in all likelihood, throughout the Universal Infinity, there are other countless spots where meetings like this are in session. How can I admonish these sessions? Perhaps by saying, "Not just the pentad. But the ratios and circumference."

But in closing I should say: Although the logic (or logologic) of the hexed pentad (with its many twists and corresponding functions in terms of ratios and circumference) affords a serviceably over-all structure for the analysis of both literary texts in particular and human relations in general, I usually begin with more direct ways of sizing up a text. Here is one major shortcut:

First, whether explicitly or implicitly, the nomenclature of every text embodies "equations." For instance, "reason" may be equated with *deference* to authority

or *distrust* of authority. Images often function here, as with an expression like Churchill's "iron curtain." Second, there are "implications." Implicit in the idea of an *act* there is the idea of an *agent*; and for an agent to act there must be a *scene*. Or there are polar terms, as "order" and "disorder" imply each other. Third, whereas "equations" and "implications" are nontemporally related, there are "transformations" whereby a narrative goes *from one to another* (as *from order to disorder*, or vice versa). Or polar terms can become reversed, as when a former disruptive principle of resistance to authority takes over and frowns on the principle of resistance.

Current technology's various specialized nomenclatures (of physics, chemistry, biology, and the like) imply the possibilities of further development. Thus

any effort to track down such implications is as though guided by the technical equivalent of a vision; and every such effort, when "implemented," transforms nontemporal relationships into developmental processes.

We can build countless complicated variations on those themes, which are close replicas of the three formal principles I began with. There are the makings of conventional form in the setting-up of equations (as per the use of Churchill's "iron curtain"). There is repetitive form inasmuch as implication inherent in one term is explicitly duplicated in another. And any unfolding of transformations is by the same token an example of progressive form.

KENNETH BURKE
Andover, NJ



While Writing a Poem

I sit gazing at the
stupid little things
gnatting against windows
like so many thoughts
nattering against words.
Some find the freeing fissure.
Others lie dead upon the sill.

JOYCE CARROLL
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ