BURKE’S CONCEPT OF IDENTIFICATION

Kenneth Burke was a literary critic who, over a 50-year period, elaborated an intricate, extensive and recurrently perplexing system of ideas that he dubbed ‘dramatism’. He defines rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (1969: 41–43). Burke differentiates the ‘new rhetoric’ from the ‘old rhetoric’, by suggesting that the latter focuses on ‘persuasion’ while the key term for the former is ‘identification’. Thus, rhetoric for Burke becomes various models of achieving identification (Corbett, 1990).

Burke argues that rhetoric is “rooted in an essential function of language itself, the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing co-operation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (1966: 16). This is based on the idea that Burke’s human being is a ‘symbol creating, symbol-using and symbol-misusing animal’. While the key term for Burke’s rhetoric is ‘identification’, his concept of identification is rooted in the notion of ‘substance’.

According to Burke, human beings form selves or identities through the various properties of substance’ such as physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs and values. We can understand that, when one identifies, associates or allies with the ‘other’, it is because the ‘self’ and the other share the ‘substance’ (Burke, 1950). In this way, identifying with the ‘other’ for Burke is nothing more than being ‘united in substance’ through common ideas, attitudes, material possessions, or other properties, that is, to be ‘consubstantial’ with the ‘other’ (Foss et al., 1985: 158).

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