

HISTORIOGRAPHY BY INCONGRUITY

In the spring of 1932 Burke traded letters with Elizabeth Parker, the widow of Dr. George M. Parker, a well-regarded New York psychiatrist who for a time served as the psychiatric examiner for the Prison Association of New York and who became an outspoken opponent of prison overcrowding.¹ Burke had been recommended to Mrs. Parker as a good candidate to complete her husband's unfinished manuscript, a treatise on psychology. According to the letters that remain, Mrs. Parker paid Burke at least two installments for the work he agreed to do and sent him about a dozen books from Dr. Parker's collection, including Russell's *Analysis of the Mind* and Rivers's *Instinct and the Unconscious* (EP to KB May 23, 1932). By October, though, none of the work had been done. Burke wrote to Mrs. Parker that he had been "worrying for a considerable length of time over the book of my own which I was trying to write this summer," and now that he had "hammered out a fair copy" he was "free to begin work on the chapters of Dr. Parker" (KB to EP October 3, 1932).² In December Burke sent Mrs. Parker an annotated outline, for which she sent him \$150, the second installment.

From that point the archives bear not a trace of any progress on the posthumous book that Burke was to have completed, and not a word between Burke and Mrs. Parker for nearly seven years. And then in 1939 they apparently traded correspondence again, though what appears to be the final letter between the two is all that remains in the archive. Earlier that year Mrs. Parker had telegraphed Burke to "keep the manuscript" (EP to KB September 11, 1939). Either this telegraph or an additional letter from Mrs. Parker put Burke on the defensive, for his reply, quoted in Parker's reply, protested that he was not "the sort of writer who needs to pilfer" (qtd. in EP to KB September 11, 1939). What apparently set Burke off is an intriguing hint that Parker noticed Burke's use of the term "chart" (most likely in *Attitudes toward History*, which Burke had published subsequent to their initial exchanges). Chart is a term Mrs. Parker's husband had apparently developed in the notes toward his own manuscript. Mrs. Parker's follow-up letter is quite amicable, and she notes with regret that the intervening years since their original agreement have not been kind and that she is no longer able to "keep to the original financial agreement" (EP to KB September 11, 1939). Nevertheless Parker expresses hope that Burke will write

some sort of “In Memoriam” article someday if he sees fit, and that he really ought to keep the manuscript, because, as she writes, “if it came back into my hands, what could I do but eventually burn it up?”

With that final extant letter, the archive falls silent on the matter. I discovered this exchange when I was in the middle of researching Burke’s bodily theories, theories that he frequently developed while performing odd jobs much like this contractual one.³ *Permanence and Change*, which I argue is Burke’s “most bodily book” (*Moving* 167), is obviously engaged with psychological theories, some of which Burke discusses with names attached. Others are less easily identifiable. The letters from Dr. Parker’s widow provided, I thought, a considerable lead. I spent months trying to fill in the archival silences, searching for information about Dr. Parker’s theories, even attempting to recover the manuscript that Mrs. Parker left with Burke, to find out more about what this book had to say, and how specifically Dr. Parker’s work might have seeped into Burke’s methods and his thinking on bodies and language. How did Dr. Parker use the term “chart”? What was his take on W. H. R. Rivers, whose book Mrs. Parker promised to lend Burke, and whose work with soldiers and trauma Burke discusses in *Permanence and Change*?⁴ Having done some productive work with Burke’s other ghostwriting, I was hopeful that I could fill out that picture by locating the Parker book. I searched the Library of Congress for a posthumously published book by George M. Parker to no avail. In the end I was left with a smattering of *New York Times* articles from the 1910s in which Parker is consulted as a trial lawyer; a 1902 book edited and partially authored by Boris Sidis to which Parker contributed several chapters on mental dissociation; an obituary; and six letters chronicling the agreement between Burke and Mrs. Parker, an agreement that never came to fruition. This material, promising as it seemed when I first discovered it, never made it into my published work, but the unanswered questions it prompts still remain with me.

Archives are furtive things. They blurt and withhold; they offer information that directs, redirects, perplexes. Those of us who write archival histories are well familiar with archival dead-ends such as the one I have just described, unsolvable puzzles that raise more questions than they answer. Such findings haunt us long after our studies—crafted as though such dead-ends were never encountered—are in print. Archives, that is, are records of breakdown and failure as much as they are of the intellectual activities and practices that offer the historian and her readers insight into the fully formed theories, performances, or practices by the thinkers or movements that draw historians to archives in the first place.

In this essay I explore the archive as a record of breakdown by articulating an approach to history I call “historiography by incongruity.” The method is informed by two key Burkean concepts, the well-known “perspective by incongruity” combined with his lesser-known notion of “the Beauty Clinic,” both of which I describe later in the essay. Together these terms help us to trouble the smooth narrative arcs

that often fill the pages of history (especially Burkean histories). The idea of historiography by incongruity is meant to draw out—and to encourage productive use of—the necessary unevenness of archival work. I offer historiography by incongruity not necessarily as a method for doing history, though I will describe an instance of using it as both a method and a theme later in this piece. Rather its more useful function might well be as a method for reflecting on the history we do, by which I simply mean that historiography by incongruity offers a kind of check on the tidy narratives historians end up producing, acknowledging the necessarily messy, incomplete, surprising, and often stubbornly befuddling nature of archival work.

Historiography by incongruity, with all its holes and gaps, serves as a helpful reminder of the repression involved in writing history, even as it encourages us to slow down in the archive, to consider items that do not obviously and immediately fit our narrative. The perplexing dead-ends, the falling into silence of certain correspondents, the visible dwindling of intellectual paths or social movements, the inexplicable note jotted in the margin of a manuscript, all mark the archive as a place of excess. In that excess inhere instructive stories as well, for as Burke teaches us better than just about anyone else, that which is not used forms the very contours of that which is.

“A FALLING TOGETHER OF THINGS FORMERLY APART”: ENACTING INCONGRUITY

As I mentioned, two of Burke’s concepts inform the metahistorical method I am proposing here. First and most obvious is his method of “perspective by incongruity.”⁵ The second, “the Beauty Clinic,” is more descriptive than methodological, but my aim is to try to cull a methodological stance from it. Perspective by incongruity and the Beauty Clinic have not to my knowledge been theorized together before, but this is likely because few people have noticed or written about the Beauty Clinic, given that it is buried in Burke’s lesser-known work from the 1950s and 60s, and the one self-reference Burke offers proves rather elusive.⁶ The terms come from very different points in Burke’s career, with perspective by incongruity serving as one of the core methods outlined in his 1935 *Permanence and Change*. Both terms, however, edge toward breakdown.

Perspective by incongruity breaks down existing associations between words and/or objects. Nietzsche is Burke’s model here; in Burke’s words, “Nietzsche establishes his perspectives by a constant juxtaposing of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names” (PC 90). At the heart of such a move is a rebuilding through destruction: “Nietzsche knew that probably every linkage was open to destruction by the perspectives of a planned incongruity” (PC 91). Likewise “the humorists, the satirists, the writers of the grotesque, all contributed to this work with varying degrees of systematization, giving us new insights by such deliberate misfits” (91). Burke takes scientific discourse—“scientific revelations” is his phrase—as “evidence

that Perspective by Incongruity is both needed and extensively practiced" (119). "Were we to summarize the totality of its effects," he continues, "we might say that planned incongruity should be deliberately cultivated for the purpose of experimentally wrenching apart all those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which still remain with us. It should subject language to the same 'cracking' process that chemists now use in their refining of oil" (119). The point, then, of perspective by incongruity is to wrench apart status-quo associations and to form new ones by making jarring conceptual alliances.

Burke's reflection on scientific processes launches him into the exhortative mode, whereby he delineates perspective by incongruity in terms of what critics "should" or ought to be doing. The excited tone of the passage as well as its concrete examples make it worth quoting at length:

An idea which commonly carries with it diminutive modifiers, for instance, should be treated by magnification, as were one to discuss the heinousness of an extra slice of beef, or the brain storm that rules when one has stumped one's toe. One should be prepared to chart the genesis, the flourishing, and decay of a family witticism, precisely as though he were concerned with the broadest processes of cultural change, basic patterns of psychology and history thus being conveniently brought within the scope of the laboratory. One should study one's dog for his *Napoleonic* qualities, or observe mosquitoes for signs of wisdom to which we are forever closed. One should discuss sneezing in the terms heretofore reserved for the analysis of a brilliant invention, as if it were a creative act, a vast synthesis uniting in its simple self a multitude of prior factors.

Conversely, where the accepted linkages have been of an imposing sort, one should establish perspective by looking through the reverse end of his glass, converting mastodons into microbes, or human beings into vermin upon the face of the earth. Or perhaps writing a history of medicine by a careful study of the quacks, one should, by the principle of the *lex continui*, extend his observations until they threw light upon the processes of a Pasteur. . . . Or by a schematic shift in the locus of judgment, supply eulogistic words to characterize events usually characterized dyslogistically, or vice versa, or supplement both eulogistic and dyslogistic by words that will be neutral, having no censorious quality whatsoever, but purely indicative of a process. (PC 119–20)

Perspective by incongruity is at once a style, an attitude, and an act. It is a style of interacting with the world, a rupturing of existing attitudes and the creation of a new one, and an act of taking existing modes of questioning and turning them sideways. It can simultaneously entail a kind of strangification—a defamiliarizing of the familiar—and deprivation; as Burke writes in the same long passage, "let us

even deliberately deprive ourselves of available knowledge in the search for new knowledge. . . . In this you will have deliberately discarded available data in the interests of a fresh point of view, the heuristic or perspective value of a planned incongruity" (121). Such incongruous methods, wholly antithetical to an approach whose aim is truth or certainty, serve as a means of invention, or what Burke calls a heuristic. As he puts it, "The doctrine of perspective would suggest that perspective is heuristic insofar as we see close at hand the things we had formerly seen from afar and vice versa" (122–23). Perspective by incongruity, then, involves a stretching, a distorting, and ultimately a breaking down of prevailing habits and attitudes, an embracing of that which would usually be discarded or ignored.

The act of revaluation also motivates Burke's use of the term "Beauty Clinic," which he conceived as something of an ironic designation for the phenomenon by which stuff—and here "stuff" can mean anything from an academic argument to clothing—is valued only when it is pristine, scrubbed of grime, cleansed of its own production. Burke offers his 1963 article "The Thinking of the Body" as a "contribution" to the Beauty Clinic (25), but only after noting: "Persons who insist on keeping the subject of the poetic imagination *salonfähig* (or, as the dictionary might put it, 'suitable for discussion in the drawing room') will resent such analysis" (25). That article—and Burke's cloacal criticism of which it is a part—might also be understood as enacting perspective by incongruity insofar as it openly flouts the Beauty Clinic's values and tendencies, discussing the excrement and rot that underlies most literature.⁷

For most of "Thinking of the Body," Burke is toying with "the possibility that, in Freudian theory, talk of a 'death-instinct' could serve stylistically as tragic dignification of an 'excretion instinct.'" He continues, "Dramatic grandeur here sneaks into the Beauty Clinic, transforming bathos into pathos . . . in the very midst of the Clinic, we find tricks of poetic 'miraculism' intruding, by the unrecognized transforming of lowly physical functions into terms quite pretentious" (65). By "transforming . . . lowly physical functions into terms quite pretentious and lovely to consider," the Beauty Clinic inspires the reversal of such incongruous perspectives—an incongruity of an incongruity—that Burke offers in "The Thinking of the Body," whereby the word "faces" morphs into faeces, the word "towards" into turds. For Burke, then, the Beauty Clinic, with its insistence on whitewashing, on sweeping misfit phrases under the carpet, ought to be broken down, exposed, and resisted in order to undo its deadening effect. It's important to note too that the Beauty Clinic does not begin and end with literature or literary criticism. Indeed, in the conclusion of "The Thinking of the Body," Burke observes several instances of this kind of thinking. Here are two: "There is, for instance, the ideal of floor wax that does not 'yellow,' when the floors are compulsively kept polished to the point where they become a major menace to life and limb (a kind of dream-life that matches the military man's ideal of fighting his dirty wars with 'clean' bombs). Or

there are the millions of dollars spent on detergents that add disgracefully to the pollution of our waters, and all for some slight extra edge of white in our fabrics that is wholly worthless except as the obedient response to a commercially stimulated idea of purely ritual cleanliness" (67). This passage vividly details the ironic, incongruous conditions—bright clothes lead to filthy rivers, clean wars to dirty bombs—that Burke struggles against in his mid-century writings and that he folds into his critical methods under the irreverent heading "The Beauty Clinic."

So how do these two terms relate to archival research, or to research in Burke's archives in particular? How, that is, do they feed into what I'm calling historiography by incongruity? Here's how: archival research demands that we select archival materials and fashion them into a neat argument. And yet as David Gold aptly observes in reflecting on his experiences in multiple archives, "we never know where an archive will lead" (18). Anyone who has worked with the Kenneth Burke Papers similarly knows that not only is it impossible to know where the materials will lead—this element of surprise is part of the joy of such research—but there are materials in that archive that do not necessarily support a "cleaned-up" version of Burke, materials ranging from Burke's phobic emendation of Hart Crane's epistolary nickname for him ("Butter-Tail"⁸), to his lackluster response to Dewey.⁹ And then there are the incomplete tasks. So much of Burke's work, like the Parker book discussed at the beginning of this essay, did not get finished. He was busy; he overcommitted and was charmingly disorganized, a constant state captured rather humorously in an epistolary line to Cowley, "I am as busy as an abortionist six weeks after a holiday" (KB to MC October 9, 1955).

All of these conditions—the messiness, ideological and material—conspire to make it difficult indeed to extract a tidy and coherent thirty- to forty-page argument about Burke's life vis-à-vis his theoretical contributions to our discipline. Those articles and essays—prime candidates for Burke's Beauty Clinic (and I have written my fair share!)—are made possible by a hefty dose of repression. And yet my recent work in Burke's archives has prepared me to suggest that an abiding awareness of the archive as a record of breakdown might bolster archival work on Burke, forcing researchers to slow down and attend to the documents that do not immediately seem to fit. In other words, practicing historiography by incongruity encourages a recognition, and perhaps a strategic suspension, of the scholarly drive toward the Beauty Clinic. Such awareness would in turn enable researchers to pause and consider the incongruities masked by the Beauty Clinic: the stories of failure so often swept beneath the clean narrative of intellectual development. Historiography by incongruity, that is, entails both a wrangly awareness of Burke's critiques of the Beauty Clinic as well as an enactment of perspective by incongruity. Historians of Burkean rhetoric might do well to resist subjecting Burke to the Beauty Clinic, to let the archive lead to incongruous—and not tidily congruous—perspectives. In the next section I describe the archival experiences that led to an articulation of this

incongruous historiographic method, including an archivally induced revelation by which the notion of breakdown suddenly became quite central to a chapter I was researching, and to my view of Burke in general.

A TALE OF THREE BREAKDOWNS

Sometimes archival dead-ends, like the one I shared at the outset of this essay, pop up out of nowhere, demanding—but ultimately not obviously rewarding—the researcher’s attention. At other times they are presented by the archival subject itself, in this case by Burke. I turn now to an account of the process (if it can be called a process) by which I researched and composed the final chapter of my book on Burke’s bodily theories. It was a process of following Burke’s own detours, failures, and dead-ends. It was a process, in other words, of breaking down along with Burke, of having perspective by incongruity block my quest for the Beauty Clinic.

In its previous life as a tidy paragraph-long description that was tucked into book proposals, tenure files, and the like, that last chapter had nothing to do with breakdown. Instead it was going to focus mainly on Burke’s last piece of fiction, “The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell,” a sprawling work that John Crowe Ransom published in the pages of *Kenyon Review* (1957).¹⁰ The story promised to be a neat capstone to my book’s chapters on Burke’s bodily theories, for in it Burke revisits nearly every perspective considered in the book’s first six chapters. Having already visited the John Crowe Ransom papers at Vanderbilt University, I had a stack of letters the two traded about the story’s publication, and I also had extensive notes about how the perspectives were manifest in that key story. Unaware of it at the time, I had made my appointment at the Beauty Clinic, and I thought all I needed to do was show up—that is, write a tidy analysis of the story to conclude my book neatly.

And yet even before I began to write that chapter, something happened to it. The first precipitating event occurred during the fall of 2006 in my graduate seminar on bodies and rhetoric. For that seminar I had planned a day that I titled “figural studies,” in which seminar participants would read a handful of studies focusing on the bodily conditions of important historical figures, studies I would later group under the term “body biography” (a term discussed later in this essay). The figures under consideration in the pieces I assigned were Kant, Darwin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Burke. The first four readings take the form of scholarly considerations of these figures’ health vis-à-vis their theories, work, and/or rhetorical performance, but for Burke I settled on the aforementioned short story.¹¹ The fictional piece is rather incongruous when set against the four scholarly examinations of biographical details. And yet given that the story is quasi-autobiographical—Burke himself endured a botched hernia operation with the same details as those attributed to his story’s main character—it fit rather well, and it offered seminarians a way to imagine writing about Burke in the same vein as the other writers wrote about their subjects.

Four things emerged from this set of readings. One, men's bodies seem only to become apparent—to themselves and to others—in moments of breakdown, disability, or illness. Two, breakdown can be productive. As an example, Janet Browne's piece on Charles Darwin's well-known poor health, what she calls his "very public life of the shawl" (318), demonstrates how Darwin's ailing body served as something of what Browne calls a "professional resource" (319), enabling him to avoid extensive social engagements and otherwise cultivate his life of the mind. Three, Browne and the other authors could not arrive at these conclusions about their subjects without access to life narratives offered only by archives. No genre of writing chronicles bodily maladies like letters, diaries, and personal notes, the very stuff of archives. And finally, in order to engage Burke's story sufficiently, to compose a body biography of my own, I had to get myself back into the archive. Together all these observations set both my hypothesis and my research agenda for the coming year, and while both were still on track for the Beauty Clinic, they were nevertheless coming under the influence of scholars who were not afraid to engage the incongruity of unhealthy bodies sporting otherwise seemingly healthy minds. These scholars were effectively resisting the ultimate call of the scholarly Beauty Clinic, which is to disentangle ideas from messy, broken down bodies.¹² They were resisting, that is, a pristine narrative of intellectual development and scientific, intellectual, or rhetorical discovery and success. After reading and discussing these body biographies, I realized I could no longer rely on the wispy snippets of bodily breakdown found in Paul Jay's necessarily truncated version of the Burke-Cowley letters. I had to explore the full record further, in order to fill out my account of the hernia operation on which the Herone Liddell story was based. The most suitable destination would be the Newberry Library in Chicago.

As many Burke scholars know, Burke and his lifelong friend Malcolm Cowley traded letters from the 1910s up until Cowley's death in 1981. Cowley's papers are held in the Newberry's Midwest Manuscript Collection, a collection that contains an impressive eighty-two cubic feet of papers, correspondence, and news clippings that Cowley accumulated during his long and productive intellectual-literary life. The collection is neatly organized into series, and series 5, called "The Kenneth Burke Files," is where my research focused.¹³ This subcollection is crucial because it contains both sides of correspondence between the lifelong friends, four boxes in all, and it is therefore the most complete record of extant letters between the two thinkers. A few hours in the collection was enough to make me appreciate the enormous feat accomplished by Jay, when he edited his collection on Burke and Cowley correspondence.

I went to the archive intent on filling out some of the details of Burke's own hernia operation. Still in pursuit of that Beauty-Clinic-worthy conclusion for the book, I presumed that the archive could help fill in any gaps in my research and scrub clean any imperfections. I had a clear hunch going in, based on a mention in Jay's

selection of the Cowley-Burke correspondence (MC to KB 1956), that the archive would have more to say about the relationship between Burke's operation and the development of his theories. Archives can sometimes exceed our wildest hunches, and the Newberry guided me to a new level of historiographical incongruity. The letters at the Newberry revealed an astonishing chronicle of spurts and sputters, a decade-long record of Burke's struggles to keep things going both health-wise and work-wise, and a chapter plan (my own) in shambles.

The most intriguing thing about Burke's documenting of his health problems, which mostly stemmed from his difficulty catching his breath, what he repeatedly called his "gulpo-gaspo-gaggo," is how details of his bodily struggle were interspersed with details of his struggle to complete the book he was working on during the 1950s, what he called his "Symbolic," the planned completion of the *Motives* trilogy. The bodily and theoretical ailments at times themselves muddle together in the letters, presenting an even more direct tie between Burke's body and his work than Browne offers of Darwin. For example, as I note in the book, Burke directly connects the breathing problem with a problem of writing (134). His struggle with completing the "Symbolic" also drives him to a bizarre cocktail of Aristotle and alcohol, which I pursue at some length (135–36). The image of Liddell/Burke, pinned and wriggling on the operating table, powerful as it is, could no longer lie at the core of this chapter. Instead the chapter needed to be about Burke's own practice of embodied theorizing, and about the utterly crucial role played by physical breakdown itself. In other words, this chapter could not merely be about the neat correlation between Burke's body and his ideas. And though I did not realize it in the haze of the archival research, the chapter ultimately needed to be about failure; it needed to use the archive as a record of breakdown to disrupt its own pull toward the perfection of the Beauty Clinic. And not unlike the unfinished project of George Parker's posthumous book, Burke's own unfinished project, "The Symbolic of Motives," became the new puzzle.

A CONTROVERSY

Away from the archive and back home, now in search of a way to put things back together again, I began to reread the existing arguments about what exactly happened with Burke's "Symbolic of Motives," a book that Burke was hammering away on during the 1950s, the same decade in which he developed his bilateral hernia and a host of other physical ailments, and during which he published "The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell." For the past several years, scholars have been trying to reconstruct what would have been published under this title, to finish the book that Burke toiled over for nearly two decades. He reportedly generated close to a thousand manuscript pages for the "Symbolic," and a good deal of that was published in article-form or delivered as lectures.¹⁴ Some scholars, working in the biographical mode, blame the declining health and death in 1968 of Burke's wife, Libbie. A letter to Malcolm Cowley in 1975 supports this angle. Here Burke writes,

"The thing is, Malcolm, since Libbie cleared out, I have quit putting out my books" (KB to MC June 9, 1975).

William Rueckert and Richard Thames, however, make a different argument. They believe that Burke never finished his "Symbolic" because, as they both put it, he was a "victim of his own genius" (Thames " Gordian" part 2; Rueckert, *Essays* xv). These recuperative efforts tend to take a somewhat mournful approach, insisting on salvaging Burke's "lost" work, on saving Burke, as it were, from himself. To be sure, both of these scholars know Burke and his work rather thoroughly. Even so, the time I had spent in the archive, reading anguished letters about an ailing body and an ailing book, had convinced me that the issue was not Burke's genius.¹⁵ Instead my reading of the archival material from that period suggested that the lessons his ailing body was teaching him about the abiding relationship between body and thought, and ultimately between body and language, undermined Burke's effort to isolate a theory of symbolic language from rhetoric and ultimately from bodies. In other words, I began to suspect that Burke deliberately abandoned the project simply because it was no longer a fruitful or even theoretically tenable direction. It might be that he had said all there was to say about motives in the *Grammar* and the *Rhetoric*, and that beginning the "Symbolic" was a mistake. Such a claim—that Burke's own movement toward the Beauty Clinic, his plan for a tidy trilogy, imploded in the face of his theory and his physical state—is incongruous at best, irreverent at worst. Mobilizing such a claim, that is, required a suspension of the Beauty Clinic on at least two levels: first, on the level of my own chapter, which was no longer this neat and easily summarizable set of claims, and—more riskily—on the level of Burke himself. My new argument required a layering of the archive over the preexisting, loric speculations that depend so much on reverence for Burke's program.

But there is more to the argument than simply refuting Thames and Rueckert. Indeed, to me, their blaming of Burke's genius presents a compelling case of what can go wrong with archival research when it focuses on a single figure: researchers can become so devoted to their subjects that it is impossible to notice, let alone write about, that subject's breakdowns and failures. Spending hours of every day immersed in Burke's words, his worldviews, his charming, self-deprecating (and other-deprecating) remarks, and his spirited arguments with close friends, makes it difficult, if not impossible, not to become affectively attached to the quirky character behind all those words. And yet such intense devotion as many Burkeans have for Burke might lead to lopsided, overly worshipful scholarship about him. Such emotive screens tend to filter out the failures and failings that dot the archives. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to say a word about Burke that might be construed as critical.

And so beneath the question about whether or not scholars should revive the book that was to be Burke's "Symbolic of Motives" lies a potentially more serious controversy: the possibility that a profound admiration for Burke and the insistence

that anything he was doing is worth pursuing—what I call “Burkophilia”—is undermining the field of Burke studies itself.¹⁶ Here it is worth noting that the archives do not provide all the answers; my own conclusions about Burke’s “Symbolic,” much like the others mine resists, began as a hunch, and a certain way of encountering archival evidence—an attitude or perspective informed by the archival materials with which I was working.

BACK TO METHOD

Such is the gnawing controversy that ultimately drew me to “the Beauty Clinic,” a term I end up foregrounding in that chapter’s title. My hunch was that there is something important to be gleaned from this rather underdeveloped concept, something about academic discourse and its insistence on weaving together pristine, disembodied ideas. Burke scholars have tended to ignore Burke’s ailments, to include them as—at most—spare footnotes or asides about his love for the bottle. Doing so disarticulates Burke’s theories from the material, embodied conditions that helped form them. My main task in the chapter, then, became a re-embodiment effort, one built around bodily breakdown and its effects on Burke’s work. The result was this idea of “body biography,” which took me back to that initial cluster of readings about individual thinkers and their ill health. Body biography, too, can be called something of a method, given that it is modeled after existing work (that of Browne, Benbow, and Houck and Kiewe), and that it ended up being one of the main ideas of the chapter.

And yet I could have never gotten there if not for the incongruous approach I ended up taking vis-à-vis the archive. The basic incongruity here is pairing Burke with breakdown, resisting the lure of the hero, and looking to the archive as a record of failures and not just—or in addition to—a positive record of productivity, a lively index to a great thinker. As I have discussed, such an incongruous approach might be deemed irreverent. It might also lead to frustrating dead-ends. But in this instance, when followed through the archive, the cumulative stallings of the 1950s added up to something: a Burke with a renewed reverence for bodily processes and their role in communication and thought. But getting to that point took about nine months of sputtering and stalling of my own, multiple visits to archives, and uneven toggling between archival material, Burke’s published work, and existing scholarship on this period of Burke’s life and work.

Once the chapter came this far, I could finally include a brief reading of “The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell,” the story that was originally supposed to fill the entire chapter. In that story, the main character’s body, immobilized from prematurely administered anaesthesia, nevertheless tries to speak. The character’s body approximates language (or so Herone observes) by forming knots in its sinews and muscles, by building up such frustration that it finally forces its vocal chords into a tangle of jibberish. “The Anaesthetic Revelation” became something other than the tidy capstone of the book’s previous chapters. Instead this story became

one of revelation-through-breakdown, just exactly the kind of thing I'd been after all along, without fully realizing it. The chapter I thought would take me seven or eight weeks ended up taking ten months. The most salient lesson from those months is this: the archive does not make scholarly works, it remakes them.

As most archival researchers know too well, archives offer a surplus of narrative possibilities that can be overwhelming, contradictory, and impossibly stumping. The idea of historiography by incongruity might help researchers to suspend their preexisting hopes and hunches, their wills-to-perfection, encouraging instead an openness to the violent breakdown of archival preconceptions. Even tales of breakdown themselves offered by the archive, while typically left to the side, pursued briefly and then abandoned, or (most often) skimmed over, might render moot the researcher's prearchival conclusions. The result might be work that is less trim or prim, even less clinical. Such work would take seriously Burke's scattered criticisms of the Beauty Clinic and linger more comfortably, more lastingly, in the delightfully incongruous world of archives.

NOTES

1. For prison overcrowding, see "Overcrowding in the Tombs"; for a discussion of Parker as an expert on criminal psychology, see Marshall and "To Test Belling's Sanity."

2. The book he's referring to having completed is most likely *Auscultation, Creation, and Revision*, which he wrote that summer.

3. For instance his work as a ghostwriter at John D. Rockefeller's Bureau for Social Hygiene yielded a number of lengthy arguments about why hormones and endocrine glands might matter for a theory of communication (see Hawhee, *Moving Bodies* 79–83). Jordynn Jack has also demonstrated how that part-time job led Burke to develop theories of what he terms "constabulary function" ("Kenneth Burke's Constabulary Rhetoric"). Burke's work as a translator also appears to have formed a longstanding interest in bodily constitutions. See *Moving Bodies* 94–97 for a discussion of that job.

4. See pages 136–39 of *Permanence and Change* for Burke's discussion of some of Rivers's theories with special attention to his use of Freud's notion of "active forgetting" (137).

5. The title of this section is quoted from *PC* 158.

6. The most explicit reference appears in Burke's 1963 essay "The Thinking of the Body," also reprinted in *Language as Symbolic Action*. Burke also mentions the Beauty Clinic in a letter to John Crowe Ransom when, after a nearly four-page engagement with Ransom's book *The World's Body*, in relation to his own views on the human body, Burke concludes abruptly, "So much for the Beauty Clinic at present" (KB to JCR January–February 1957, 4)

7. The readings Burke offers here are performed in the Freudian vein, as established by Ellen Quandahl.

8. In the early sixties when Burke's wife, Libbie, was gathering his materials together, Burke emended this letter to say, "To save my honor I must make haste to explain the epithet. Bill Brown used to write me as "Beurre-que" a kind of "French" for "Burke." From

that the joke developed in bilingual punning to 'butter-that.' And Hart added the further development, as per the epithet. K.B." (Thanks to Michael Faris for the sleuthing on the question of when the explanatory note was added.)

9. He writes to Cowley: "I am progressing steadily with Dewey, the first half of whose book has not greatly thrilled me. He seems too external to his subject, so far at least" (KB to MC March 30, 1934).

10. For an extensive treatment of that story, see Nicotra, this volume.

11. Written by Benbow, Browne, and Houck and Kiewe respectively. (The Houck and Kiewe reading was an excerpted chapter from their book on FDR.)

12. See my discussion of this phenomenon in *Moving Bodies*, 126–27.

13. The Cowley papers are helpfully inventoried online at <<http://www.newberry.org/collections/FindingAids/cowley/Cowley.html>>.

14. For Rueckert's reconstruction of the Symbolic, see *Essays toward a Symbolic of Motives*. Williams, too, proposes a table of contents in his "Toward Rounding Out the *Motivorum Trilogy*." Additional commentary can be found in Rueckert's "Kenneth Burke's 'Symbolic of Motives' and 'Poetics, Dramatistically Considered,'" as well as Thames's "The Gordian Not" and Wess's "Looking for the Figure."

15. For details, see my discussion of the letters in *Moving Bodies*, 129–36. One powerful instance occurs in a November 16, 1950, letter to Cowley:

All this [the "Symbolic"] has been written, while I squirm and gasp, nearly below the surface of the mud, at one moment my legs heavy; at another, pains in my left arm; again and again and again, my lungs only half as ample as they should be—and then, lo! Ecstatically, a full breath incipit vita nova. O, on the edge of the abyss. O, by the seashore at night, the waves ripping. (KB to MC November 11, 1950)

16. The Burkophilia argument didn't make it into my chapter, but it formed the teeth of at least one part of that chapter, and they gnawed at me, so much so that I presented a polemic about Burkophilia at the 2007 Rhetoric Society of America meeting.

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