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Kenneth Burke’s Jungle Book

It might be said that Kenneth Burke himself was feral. There is certainly an untamed quality to his writings and (especially) his lectures. He roamed the disciplines, scavenging from neuroscience, religion, medical science, philology, literature, and psychology to gather together theories of language and action that could—and do—contribute to sociology, literary criticism, ecocriticism, cultural studies, and rhetorical studies. While most of Burke’s close friends lived in and around Greenwich Village and spent time in Europe, Burke lived on his brambly farm in Andover, New Jersey, shunned indoor plumbing until the 1960s, and generally thought “Buildings Should Not Be Tall,” a title he gave to a poem about the city. Growing up, Burke always had a dog (Language 73), and on the lecture circuit he sometimes referred to himself as “Kennel Bark.” He examined human motives with the awe and strangeness a biologist might display toward a newly discovered rodent-like species. He lived as long as a parrot.

Burke also wrote a fair bit about beasts. The title piece in his collection of short stories, The White Oxen and Other Stories, takes as its primary scene the Pittsburgh Zoo. His core 1930s books, Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose (1933) and Attitudes Toward History (1935), feature an astonishing number and variety of nonhuman animals. And his rather well-known “Definition of Man” contains long meditations on the distinction between human and nonhuman animals, with humans not faring as well in the comparison as one might expect. Burke’s theory of five dogs is known to legions of English and writing undergraduates whose instructors use the two-page reflection to teach structuralist theories of meaning (Language 73–74).

The recent rise of Critical Animal Studies offers a fresh way to read Burke, and the best place to begin such a reading is Burke’s 1935 book Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose, which might also be called his jungle book. Nonhuman animals serve a number of purposes for Burke in Permanence and Change: they are critics, physical communicators, living lessons in Nietzschean perspectivalism, and Aesopian moralists. Lively, noisy, nonhuman animals dash, crawl, and scurry across Burke’s theories of human action, language as symbolic action, and dramatism. An examination of animals in Burke’s writing helps reveal enduring—if at times fraught—insights about what animals can teach us about
psychology, physicality, and language. My aim here is to discuss a few of these bestial insights in hopes of adding Burke to the growing list of early animal critics.

Let’s begin, then, with a trout. Permanence and Change’s first chapter, on “Orientation,” starts off with an assertive subtitle, “All Living Things Are Critics.” To illustrate, Burke offers the trout, who, “having snatched at a hook but having had the good luck to escape with a rip in his jaw, may even show by his wiliness thereafter that he can revise his critical appraisals” (5). The opening paragraph goes on to elaborate the trout’s “new judgment,” made manifest “in his altered response” (5). “It does not matter,” Burke continues, “how conscious or unconscious one chooses to imagine this critical step—we need only note here the outward manifestation of a revised judgment” (5).

A fish also flits through Burke’s lesser known treatise of the early 1930s, “Auscultation, Creation, and Revision,” an important precursor to Permanence and Change:

If a fish were to “think,” his thought-processes might bear a close analogy to the glidings and quick flips of the tail (in which sense it is not at all hard for us to imagine him as “thinking”). It is only when we try to liken his thinking to verbal thinking that the notion of his thinking seems incongruous, suggesting the atrocious puns of the rude, extremely linguistic animals in Alice’s Wonderland. (120-121)

A number of moves persist in these fish-inspired passages. For starters, the fish help Burke reflect on fish-tools for judgment, action, and thought. These tools are largely physical and experiential; they involve pain and motion, rips and flips. Both examples also allow Burke to compare fish thought with human thought. This comparison is implicit in the passage from “Auscultation” in which the tools-for-thought shift from the tail to words. In the Permanence and Change passage, Burke draws out the analogy in this way: “our great advantage over this sophisticated trout would seem to be that we can greatly extend the scope of the critical process” (5). And yet whereas so many thinkers before Burke—Aristotle and Augustine among them—take this difference between humans and animals to indicate a hierarchy, Burke hedges, here with the word “seem.” In other words, the human “advantage” does not necessarily play out as such. Indeed, as he observes in Permanence and Change:

the very power of criticism has enabled man to build up cultural structures so complex that still greater powers of criticism are needed before he can distinguish between the food-processes and bait-processes concealed beneath his cultural tangles. His greater critical capacity has increased not only the range of
his solutions, but also the range of his problems... Consider, for instance, what conquest over the environment we have attained through our powers of abstraction, of generalization, and then consider the stupid national or racial wars which have been fought precisely because these abstractions were mistaken for realities. No slight critical ability is required for one to hate as his deepest enemy a people thousands of miles away. (5-6)

The distinctly human capacity for language functions for Burke as an elaborate process of abstraction that has a cumulative, potentially dangerous effect. What Burke finds in his comparison between fish and humans is the co-existence of "different orders of thought" ("ACR" 123), and if any ranking occurs in his discussion, it is of the seeming elegance of fish thought over the clotted complexity and stupid-making, disembodied abstractions of human thought.

When Burke discusses animals in this way, he is at his most Nietzschean. Indeed, a long discussion of his preferred method of criticism, a method he often calls "perspective by incongruity," reads as if it is channeling "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," one of Nietzsche's most critical accounts of human-centered perspectives. Nietzsche's alternative to the "fable" of humans or "clever animals" famously focuses on a gnat: "But if we communicate with the gnat, we would learn that it too swims through the air with this same pathos and feels within itself the flying center of this world" (246). The radical shift in perspective suggested by a move from a human-centered to a gnat-centered version of the universe is captured in Burke's exhortation to "study one's dog for his Napoleonic qualities, or observe mosquitoes for signs of wisdom to which we are forever closed" (Permanence 119-120). He continues, "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" (120). Such a Nietzsche-Inflected perspective by incongruity, even as it figures humans as knowledge seekers, nevertheless refuses the assumption that humans are "better off" than animals, and instead takes species difference as an opportunity to reflect on different capacities.

For Burke, nonhuman animals move at the limn of bodies and language. From an evolutionary perspective, they offer a glimpse into bodily communication more or less unfettered by spoken language. Animals therefore function, for Burke, as a way to reflect on bodily communication and bodily thought otherwise obscured by language in humans. Two passages read in tandem help illustrate this function. The first appears in the "Motives" chapter of Permanence and Change, in the section entitled "Motives Are Shorthand Terms for Situations":

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If our words for motive are in reality words for situation, we may even observe perhaps the “words” of motivation in a dog—for we may note in his typical postures his recognition of diverse situational patterns. There is one posture for greeting his master, another when a stranger passes along the road, another when threatened with a beating, a fourth when told to go home, a fifth when he has come upon a fresh scent, etc. He has, let us say, a vocabulary of twenty or thirty typical, or recurrent situations, and we soon learn to recognize his utterance of them. A sleek young terrier in the country has a vocabulary of motives considerably different from that of a fat, coddled, overfed poodle in the city, whose only adventures are confined to candy and a constitutional on hard pavements.

(31)

On careful consideration, what at first looks like a straightforward case of anthropomorphism has the potential to become a reversal, a zoomorphism, a move by which one calls attention to a human’s bestial side. The dog’s postures are figured as words, and concomitantly words are figured as postures. The opening passage of Burke’s 1941 essay “The Philosophy of Literary Form” makes plain the usefulness of considering wordless animals as fully capable of communication: doing so calls attention to the bodily, tonal, stylistic features of human communication, to communication’s animal side. The essay opens with the hypothetical situation: “Let us suppose that I ask you: ‘What did the man say?’ And that you answer: ‘He said ‘yes.’’ You still do not know what the man said” (1). Indeed one does not know fully what the man said until one knows the man’s tonalities and attitudes as revealed by gestures and vocal stress—the crucial physical side of language. As he writes later in “Philosophy of Literary Form,” “the whole body is involved in an enactment” (11). In contrast to the hypothetical man, a dog’s communicative act depends wholly on the physical: the gruff bark, the bodily bend. Animals provide a convenient way for Burke to isolate the physical side of language, and this keeps Burke returning to nonhuman animals in order to consider the tangled relation between bodies and communication.

And yet thought experiments guided by a made-up trout or a hypothetical yay-sayer were not the only way for Burke to hover at the distinction between wordy and non-wordy animals. Scientific psychological experiments yielded anecdotes for critical reflection as well. Behaviorism, the strand of experimental psychology that Burke would struggle with in short spurts throughout his long career, poses for Burke the general problem that forms the very core of his lifelong intellectual commitment: the question of human
motive, and the role of (on the one hand) language and sociality, and (on the other) biology and physicality in shaping those motives. And behaviorist conclusions often, and famously, derive from experiments on nonhuman animals. As has been detailed elsewhere, Burke's part-time work at John D. Rockefeller's Bureau for Social Hygiene during the late 1920s and early 1930s placed him in contact with the country's leading endocrinologists, criminologists, and drug researchers, and he no doubt came across behaviorists there as well. It is no surprise, then, that Burke uses behaviorist experiments on animals to consider meaning-making processes more generally. Shortly after the trout example in Permanence and Change, designed to support Burke's titular suggestion that "All Living Things Are Critics," Burke continues this line of argument by describing an early and by now rather commonplace behaviorist experiment:

Pavlov's dog had acquired a meaning for bells when conditioned to salivate at the sound of one. Other experiments have shown that such meanings can be made still more accurate: chickens can be taught that only one specific pitch is a food-signal, and they will allow bells of other pitches to ring unheeded. But people never tremble enough at the thought of how flimsy such interpreting of characters is. If one rings the bell next time, not to feed the chickens, but to assemble them for chopping off their heads, they come faithfully running, on the strength of the character which a ringing bell possesses for them. Chickens not so well educated would have acted more wisely. (6)

The key line in this passage is the one about the flimsiness of such interpretations; with this, Burke is moving from chicken interpretations to human ones. The move from chickens to humans is for Burke as easy as it was for many behaviorists, as evidenced by his immediate jump in the next sentence from the chickens to a "we": "Thus it will be seen that the devices by which we arrive at a correct orientation may be quite the same as those involved in an incorrect one" (6-7). People, indeed, never tremble enough.

Underwriting these examples is of course more than a passing interest in behaviorism, as Burke writes early on in Permanence and Change: "We not only interpret the character of events (manifesting in our responses all the gradations of fear, apprehension, misgiving, expectation, assurance for which there are rough behavioristic counterparts in animals)—we may also interpret our interpretations" (6). Behaviorist experiments of the early twentieth century serve as a guide for Burke's initial reflections on meaning making and orientation; he devotes a three-page section to a review of "Pavlov, Watson, and Gestalt Experiments in Meaning," offering the "now
classic" stimulus and response experiments as illustrating "orientation by linkage" (11):

First, we have the work of Pavlov, who gave the vague associationist doctrines of speculative psychology a precise empirical grounding by his experimental establishment of the conditioned reflex. By ringing bells when feeding dogs, he conditioned the dogs to salivate at the sound of the bells as they might the smell of food. Watson, repeating similar experiments, noted the "transference" aspect of such conditioning. Having found that the violent striking of an iron bar produced fear in an infant, he noted that he could give a "fear" character some hitherto neutral object, such as a rabbit, by placing it before the child each time the iron bar was struck; he next demonstrated that this conditioned fear of the rabbit was transferred with varying degrees of intensity to other things having similar properties (such as fur coats or cotton blankets). (11-12)

Burke then translates such experiments into a commentary on "how orientation, means-selecting, and 'trained incapacity'"—the term Burke gleaned from Veblen—"become intermingled" (13-14). For Burke, the lesson of Pavlov's dogs and Watson's infant is a definitional one: "Orientation is thus a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be" (14).

In the early pages of Permanence and Change, Burke moves behaviorism's conclusions from animals to infants to adult humans, and for him they illustrate that associations—between bells and food, people and ideas—can be as tenacious as they are misguided. The implications, for Burke, stretch to such issues as religion or philosophy—"A good Catholic may feel that priests and guides are alike; a good Marxist may feel that priests and deceivers are alike" (13). He even uses behaviorism to discuss the misguided linkages that lead to lynchings in the American South. Of lynching, Burke writes, "that this is a case of faculty means-selecting, we must agree with a shiver" (15). The difference, though, between the chickens who run to their death and Southern whites who call for the lynching of another human is something Burke, following Freud, calls "rationalization": humans must verbalize their orientations and interpretations, linking their associations, not through like responses but by naming their responses. Burke sums it up as follows: "Whereas all organisms are critical, man seeks by verbalization to perfect a methodology of criticism" (18). Lest we read in the verb "perfect" a higher-order activity, it is worth remembering that this particular meditation on behaviorism constitutes an early draft of Burke's 1963 "Definition of Man," which begins "Being animals that learn language" and ends "rotten with perfection" (507). Indeed, Burke
finds the animal subjects in behaviorism to be almost sweetly simple in their faulty orientation: “If people persist longer than chickens in faulty orientation despite punishment, it is because the greater complexity of their problems, the vast network of mutually sustained values and judgments, makes it more difficult for them to perceive the nature of the re-orientation required, and to select their means accordingly” (23).

Apart from the morally inflected meditations on behaviorist experiments, animals at times inhabit a peculiar “as-if” logic in Permanence and Change. The “Occupational Psychosis” chapter begins in this way:

It is not hard to imagine that if a grasshopper could speak he would be much more readily interested in what you had to tell him about “Birds that Eat Grasshoppers” than in a more scholarly and better presented talk on “Mating Habits of the Australian Auk.” The factor of interest plays a large part in the business of communication. (37)

Here, the as-if logic replicates Nietzsche’s gnat in that it comments on the idea of interest, even as it turns on hypothetical language to indicate that interest. The same is the case with a flock of birds Burke conjures in a discussion of style. Burke asks readers to imagine a flock of birds that developed a kind of “cultural mongrelism” by introducing variety into their lives and diets. He continues:

Suppose them at this point endowed with speech. Would they not immediately begin insisting upon definitions, in order that they might get this muddle cleared away? Words for danger, safety, food, etc., would not be enough. A scrupulously critical vocabulary would have to be introduced: danger under what conditions, food for which members of the flock, etc. Their old poetic methods of flapping their wings and crying out would lose prestige among the flock. Only the demagogues or the imbeciles would still resort to such procedures. The most intelligent birds would insist upon the perfection of a strict and unambiguous nomenclature. (55-56)

The flock of birds here is, of course, human, and yet the scenario’s main point has to do with the questionable privileging of words over bodies—nomenclature over the flapping of wings, as well as language’s necessity to characterize and account for difference. These hypothetically speaking animals help Burke to more clearly describe the complex shifts in communication, even as they contain hints (as evidenced in the flock passage above) of a nostalgia for the physical aspects of communication.

As Burke argues in Permanence and Change, the scientific perspective is complemented by a poetic perspective’s emphasis on
creation and criticism, and so Burke's reflections on animals do not stop with thought experiments or scientific experiments, but extend to his critical method as well. While the behaviorist perspective leads Burke to comment on animal acts of interpretation (human and nonhuman), when he writes about animals outside of Watson's and Pavlov's experiments, Burke folds animals into key poetic categories delineated in *Attitudes Toward History*, categories that Burke believes critics ought to recognize. Here, animals appear most prominently when Burke discusses the poetic category of "the grotesque" (57 ff). For Burke, the grotesque is a mystical concept, "the cult of incongruity without the laughter" (*Attitudes* 58). His discussion of the grotesque's severe earnestness appears alongside his discussion of his critical method of "charting," whereby critics are meant to make note of the grotesque fusions that occur in the work of a particular writer. "By charting these clusters," Burke writes, "and noting how many of them a writer or thinker works with, we may be surprised to find that even a lyric poet embodies in his work several characters, maybe as many as there are in a novel by Dickens" (64-65). He goes on to note certain characters' manners of speaking: "There may be a character that shouts...a conversationalist...a whisperer, an utterer of asides, and so forth" (65). This meditation on voices and communicative styles of human characters is laid next to one on nonhuman animal thoughts. Burke continues:

And there may even be animals among them, a latent jungle book, with lion-thoughts, dog-thoughts, horse-thoughts, cow-thoughts, jackal-thoughts, old-hen thoughts, and the like, revealing (by the use of imagery that is felt to be akin) the quality that such animals possess for him (as when, in the citation from James already given, we find James associating pessimism in Schopenhauer with a dog's bark—and in the paintings of Chirico strange horses play an important part, being presumably related to oddities of perspective, unusual juxtapositions of light and shade, and deathlike statues-in-place-of-people). (65-66)

Burke goes on to mention towns and voiced places and machines—"the airplane spoke stridently for Marinetti" (67)—and finally ends the reflection on voice/thought imagery with this: "Capitalism shouted to Marx until the annoyance gave him a diseased liver, but it seems to sing a cradle song for some" (68).

There, then, are the animals, in a sprawling sentence between the muttering humans, jabbering machines, and shrieking ideologies. Spanning two pages, and appended to the end of the excerpted quotation above, is a long, nine-paragraph footnote about animals that is worth examining for the multiple ways Burke engages
what he calls this "latent jungle book." The footnote moves from Darwinianism to Ibsen to behaviorism to Aesop, touching on four major interventions vis-à-vis animals and humans. The footnote begins with a speculative assertion: "Perhaps our scientists take their Jungle Book much more seriously than do our poets and novelists.... We refer to the century's extreme emphasis upon genesis, origin" (fn 66). He continues:

Those who applied the Darwinian formula of the 'descent of man' as their cue for the charting of human motives might thus be said to have preserved a feudal mode of thought at the core of a philosophy nominally the opposite of feudalism. They analyzed what man is by reference to his parentage: what he was. Hence, he is an animal because he comes of animal progenitors. (fn 66)

In this passage, it is worth noting that the logic of Darwinian ancestral ontology applies to Burke's own logic as well. This logic is perhaps most evident in his discussion of language acquisition both in an ontogenetic and phylogenetic sense, as in his late essay "Questions and Answers about the Pentad," where Burke discusses language acquisition in both an evolutionary and individual sense. Burke invokes evolution to offer a broad view of the distinction between nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action—physical movement and language—and to stress the minimal importance of symbolic action to that view: "Presumably the realm of nonsymbolic motion was all that prevailed on this earth before our kind of symbolizing organism evolved, and will go on sloshing about after we have gone" (334). Earlier in the essay, Burke discusses the same distinction on the individual level by noting the etymology of infancy, from the Latin infantia, the inability to speak, in order to stress the transformation an individual organism undergoes when "emerging...into familiarity with some tribal idiom and cultural realm that symbolism makes possible" (330). Both passages show Burke drafting the final version of his famous definition of humans in the 1980s as "Bodies That Learn Language" (see Coe, "Definition").

The point here is that a long, evolutionary view of the distinctions—and similarities—between human and nonhuman animals ushers bodies and physicality into the picture. For Burke, language and bodies can't be so easily separated, and the bodily communication practices of nonhuman animals serve as a stark reminder of the crucial sensual and physical dimensions of communication. Indeed, the productive work of the body-language relationship is evident in the fish thought experiment in "Auscultation" discussed earlier, in which Burke notes that a fish thinks through movements of its tail, whereas humans think
primarily with words—or at least it is often assumed. A zoomorphic approach goes a long way toward challenging this assumption.

Animals therefore serve multiple functions in Burke’s early work: they offer him an easy way to analogize human communication; they allow him to alternatively bracket language in order to focus on the physical side of communication, or, conversely, to hypothetically add language back in, as is the case with the moments when Burke wonders how things would be different if animals could speak. Nonhuman animals appear in Burke’s more philosophical meditations, in his consideration of scientific experiments, and in his approach to literary criticism. As Burke presents it, a critic must be attuned to how and when animals appear in literature and what, exactly, those animals are doing there. Burke writes about animals with something akin to reverence, with real curiosity, and always as a way to think differently about the human condition. As theorists of the many subjects Burke engaged, we ought to pay more attention to how and when animals appear in his work in relation to those subjects. His jungle book can serve as something of a field guide.

Note
1. Of these, rhetorical studies has perhaps embraced Burke most enthusiastically. Notable recent titles on Burke include Anderson’s Identity’s Strategy and George and Selzer’s Kenneth Burke in the 1930s. For a discussion of Burke’s transdisciplinarity, see my Moving Bodies, 5-11. For sociology, see Gusfield’s introduction to On Symbols and Society; for ecocriticism, see Coupe, Seigel, Wolfe, and Wess.

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