

## **“Professor Burke’s Bennington Project”**

My presentation will report on Kenneth Burke’s work as a professor of literature at Bennington College from 1943 to 1961. In the acknowledgments to *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, *Language as Symbolic Action*, and *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke thanks Bennington students for their help in his development of the material for each book. Nonetheless, little is known about what and how Burke taught at the Dewey-influenced college; aside from what Burke himself says in the prefatory remarks to *LSA* (he explains that much of that book’s materials had been used in a Bennington course), the impact of Bennington on Burke’s thinking has not been elaborated. My paper addresses this gap. What kind of reading and writing did Burke ask his students to do? How, if at all, did Burke situate his courses in relation to Bennington’s pragmatist educational philosophy? Did these philosophies and/or his interactions with his students’ critical writings in any way shape his theories of language?

To pursue answers to these questions, I have inspected materials from Burke’s Bennington years that have been recently added to the Kenneth Burke Papers at Penn State University and I have visited Bennington archives. As a result, my project draws on not only Burke’s correspondence with administrators and other faculty members at Bennington, but also on a vast collection of Burke’s comments on his students’ essays.

These materials reveal that Burke, as both an educator and rhetorical theorist, created and continually revised classroom methods for putting his theories of “the language problem in general” in conversation with other contemporary educational theories, including Bennington’s own pragmatist experiment. I will show that viewing Burke’s work as a Bennington Project compels us to read *A Grammar of Motives*, *The Rhetoric of Motives*, and *Language as Symbolic Action* not simply as a collective theory of human symbol use, but rather as an extended example of the analytic method which Burke recommends for daily living: a method which creates countless individual analyses of everyday language use toward the end of cultivating an “attitude of humanistic contemplation.”