Burke At Rice: 'The Psychology of Literary Form'

By DANIEL ALBRIGHT

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Whether Burke or not, Burke does not prove his importance as a critic, but it certainly indicates something of his extreme fame, as Lawson Taylor pointed out in his introduction of Burke at the Baker form series on Monday night.

His topic at that moderately august gathering was "The Psychology of Literary Form." I would have thought that any lecture with a title like that would be doomed from the beginning, but I was wrong; Burke can do anything; Burke has scope.

I am still not sure why Burke chose that particular title, since at one point in an essay he equated "form" and "psychology," and the title does not read well if the two words mean the same thing, but I don't care. I was entertained, and, if I can say this without being too pretentious, I learned something.

Three Forms

Burke defines form as the "arousal and fulfilment of expectation," and then divides literary form into three classifications: conventional, progressive, and repetitive. Conventional form is that aspect of a work of art which the audience has been led to expect, for instance, the poetic tradition of 18th century England which Wordsworth violated in the Lyrical Ballads.

According to Burke, a poet can never wholly escape from convention, for the syntactical structure of language, and language itself, are themselves conventions. And then, to illustrate the convention of beginnings and ends, Kenneth Burke, master critic, read to us a nursery rhyme by Mother Goose.

Progressive form falls into two categories: the first is the carrying-out of the inevitable, the step-by-step conclusions of the various syllogisms in a work of art — I suppose that Greek Tragedy would be the best examples of this type of form. Burke calls the second type "qualitative"; by this he means a progression which is not required by the structure, but nevertheless makes a pleasing progression in some manner or other.

"Goodnight, sweet ladies," from the mad scene in 'Hamlet.'

The most important division of form to Burke is repetition, which he sees as the basis of literary self-consistency. To illustrate the importance of repetition, he gave as an example of its violation a Marx Brothers movie in which Harpo talked; this event seemed unthinkable to the audience after having observed his muteness for so many years. (Don't worry, he really only had a phonograph strapped to his back.)

Falling Books

Burke also believes that his theory of form can be applied to human life in general. This argument, an outgrowth from Hume, works in the following way, if I understand it correctly. Life itself is based on expectation, not logic, because no logic can tell us that if we drop a book, then it will fall; we only know that it will fall, by our experience, because in the past we have seen that if we drop things, they fall.

Therefore we expect that the book will fall, just as we expect that a car will not drive on to the sidewalk and kill us when we are taking a walk; and thus form is seen in our daily lives,