

Prefaces, Fairy Tales, Bead Games and Epilogues - But It's More Complicated than That (7 June, 2023)

Having recently survived, at the age of 82, a feverish suffocating near-death Covid experience, the most frightening experience of my life (in no way a blissful white light NDE and, to whom it may concern: all my shots and boosters up to date), I find myself now at a sort of loose ends — trying to follow doctors' orders and rest but what's left unfried of my brain unusually restless, not in the sense of avidly looking for something to engage but more in the sense of restless leg syndrome, nothing interesting enough to hold my attention or fire my imagination or overcome the PTSD memories of gasping for breath on the verge of blackout.

I scroll through my usual web feeds with half a mind, skim the headlines not with disdain but disinterest, regard all subjects with an eye not jaundiced or critical but glazed, a what else can you show me attitude, this topic and that book of concern before, more or less cold potatoes now as I go on autopilot about the normal chores and routines of my bachelor life. Even the notion of working on my own more-or-less absorbing works-in-progress now somewhere between pointless and absurd.

A couple of mornings ago in the search for something to focus on, I picked up from the piles of to-be-read books by my reading chair Hesse's *Fairy Tales* and found some distraction in spending the day with them. I was reminded then of his *Glass Bead Game* which I'd read back in the 70s. Taking it from the shelf again, I found the premise of the game itself and Hesse's ironic wit in the preface promising enough that I decided to try reading all 500 pages of it again, this time fortified with all the wisdom and so forth I'd accumulated in the past 50 or so years.

But this evening as I settled down under the lamp to begin I noticed another book on the pile, Edward O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*, and in reading the "New Preface" of that 2004 edition and Preface to the 1978 original, I was caught up by Wilson's enthusiasm for a science that would "embrace both the *how* (neuroscience) and *why* (evolutionary biology) of brain action" (his italics) to "facilitate a bridging discipline between the great branches of learning [natural and social sciences, arts and humanities, etc.]" — a goal, in fact, not all that different from the great synthesis sought by practitioners of the Glass Bead Game, and by O-so-many hippies and other malcontents back in the day looking for alternatives to the war-torn, racist, money-hungry necktie strictures of the late capitalist sixties and seventies.

Wilson's concluding prefatory remark that his purpose in writing *On Human Nature* was to focus on the "main objections [to *Sociobiology*, his previous book] that had arisen and might yet arise from political ideology and religious belief," reminded me of another text that I've read more than once and now am about to read again, namely, "Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven," the concluding fifty or so pages of Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (1970).

It's always a privilege to meet a person of genius and as I've told many people over the years, it was my special privilege and a deeply humbling experience to have met and to have been in a graduate seminar with Kenneth Burke. The man's work and the man himself changed my life, in many ways taught me what it means to think and what the topics of adult thought are.

The Epilogue to his *Rhetoric of Religion* is a text that for me best presents both the wit and temper of its author and the incisiveness and inclusiveness of his thought, and to my mind suggests the same qualities to be found in Hesse and his masterpiece (as well as, of course, those of Goethe's "Prologue" in *Faust* that Burke is riffing on). Great minds looking at Mind itself and its eternal questions.

The word "great" is used indiscriminately in today's parlance, applied as a compliment to anything and anybody, deserving or not on whatever undisclosed criteria and as a pseudo-enthusiastic substitute for the less rah-rah "ok" that served before the recent ascendance of self-help psychobabble and neoliberal self-approval culture.

In more considered speech, we shy away from such superlatives these days, hip as we are to political and corporate hype, embarrassed by overstatement that smacks of flattery and the grandiose or pompous. But I don't think it's over the top in this case, and seems, at my age, having via Covid just "walked away from another one" (as per Neal Cassady), a simple statement of truth.

I haven't been able to find Burke's Epilogue in pdf format online, so am attaching here links to the Scribd and Internet Archive copies of the whole *Rhetoric of Religion*. The Epilogue starts on p. 273.

<https://archive.org/details/rhetoricofreligi0000burk>

<https://www.scribd.com/document/358271059/Kenneth-Burke-The-Rhetoric-of-Religion>

Btw, I should note for those of you not acquainted with the lingo, that the term 'rhetoric' in the book's title is not, as is common these days, a simple dismissive, as in "empty rhetoric," but is used in the historically correct sense of verbal analysis.

Defined by Aristotle as "the power of perceiving in every thing that which is capable of producing persuasion," rhetoric was one of the three subjects of the basic classical curriculum in pre-Socratic Greece (i.e., what became the Romans' *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric and deductive logic), and was principally concerned with the arts of oratory and legal argument.

Burke's previous use of the term in the title to his *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) is in this long pedagogical tradition (as is his pairing of that book with his earlier *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) to form his two-volume opus major). The term is not only technically correct for the subject matter of *A Rhetoric of Religion* but is particularly appropriate because that book is, among other things, a detailed and a more than a little parodic rehearsal of the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo (better known as St. Augustine) who was himself a rhetorician by training and whose enormously influential works on religion are themselves works of rhetoric.

In the Middle Ages rhetoric was often associated with logic, and the combined field came to be called dialectic. By the early modern period, a fourth method of language study, poetics, began to

dissociate itself from the traditional *trivium*. Though introduced by Aristotle as an analytic of dramatic verse and theater, poetics did not come into its own until the 19th and 20th centuries when students of the language arts (in the broad sense of *trivium*, literature, history, philosophy, etc.) developed what is generally known among literate classes today as continental theory or postmodernist critique.

At the time of his death in 1993, Burke had not quite pulled into book form the work he had hoped would make his Grammar-Rhetoric pair into a trilogy, the third volume to be called *A Symbolic of Motives*. He had been developing for decades the details of the *Symbolic* in his work on what he called dramatism or, later, logology, work which is sometimes seen as a precursor or variant of contemporary theory/critique. It is work that Hesse undoubtedly would have, and Wilson perhaps did, find cogent to their own sweeping interests.

Since this introduction has already meandered (not to say wobbled) more than a little, I'm encouraged to add this little bit of serendipity: this morning, out of quarantine, browsing through the Friends of Sierra Vista Library Bookstore, I was happily surprised to find a copy of the first volume of the Harvard bilingual edition of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the oldest Latin treatise (first century B.C.) on the art of rhetoric, long but no longer attributed to Cicero. Not a book I would have expected to find there but fitting.