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Winter 2012

Reviewed Work: Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language by Debra Hawhee

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Recommended Citation

Mailloux, Steven. "Reviewed Work: Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language by Debra Hawhee." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2012, pp. 94–97.

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REVIEWS

Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. 215 pp. ISBN 978-1-57003-809-9

"There are only bodies and languages." Alain Badiou's proposition at the beginning of *Logics of Worlds* neatly sums up the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke as elaborated by Debra Hawhee in *Moving Bodies*. Hawhee's book is an excellent study of Burke's career-long preoccupation with humans as "bodies that learn language." Hawhee selectively tracks this preoccupation from Burke's earliest fiction through his engagements with bodily mysticism, drug research, endocrinology, constitutional medicine, and gesture-speech evolution to his final recapitulations organized around the opposition between nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action. Hawhee's multidimensional discussion presents a powerful case for Burkean explorations of the rhetorical primacy of bodies and language, what Badiou more generally labels "democratic materialism."

In her introduction Hawhee defines the transdisciplinary framework she uses to examine Burke's thinking. Distinguishing it from interdisciplinary study, Hawhee describes contemporary transdisciplinarity as an "effort to suspend—however temporarily—one's own disciplinary terms and values in favor of a broad, open, and multilevel inquiry," focusing on specific problems by drawing together radically different orientations (p. 3). Burke himself was a transdisciplinary *avant la lettre*. His early critical method of "perspective by incongruity" brought together contrasting interpretive frames to do productive explanatory work, and his synecdochic clustering approach transformed associative constellations of terms into suggestive meaningful wholes. Throughout *Moving Bodies* Hawhee provides a transdisciplinary kind of rhetorical history. She skillfully tracks Burke's interpretive accomplishments in juxtaposing radically different discourses and tropically clustering terms associated with the body/language problematic.

For example, in Chapter 1, "Bodies as Equipment for Moving," Hawhee pursues the "music-body-language cluster" through Burke's early fiction and music criticism to challenge past claims about his purported movement from aesthetics to rhetoric in the twenties. She persuasively argues instead that a distinctive rhetoric centered on bodily effects was there from the very

start. Hawhee explains how this Burkean rhetorical aesthetics arose from his fictional interest in characters' bodily rhythms and his critical interest in music's effects on audience bodies. Her account of Burkean talk about "bodies and their rhythmic/arrhythmic capacities" sets the stage for a rich rhetorical story about Burke's developing theories of language, rhetoric, and symbol-using generally. Hawhee finds one passage in *Counter-Statement* to be especially significant, returning to it at least three times in *Moving Bodies*: "The appeal of form as exemplified in rhythm enjoys a special advantage in that rhythm is more closely allied with 'bodily' processes." Rhetorical form appeals to somatic rhythms of "systole and diastole, alternation of the feet in walking, inhalation and exhalation, up and down, in and out, back and forth."

In Chapter 2, "Burke's Mystical Method," Hawhee concentrates on Burke's engagement with bodily and intellectual strands of mysticism, especially in his two books of the mid-thirties, *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes toward History*. During times of crisis and alienation, Burke suggests, mystics emerge to perceive things differently. As he puts it in *Permanence and Change*, mysticism is primarily "an attempt to define the ultimate motivation of human conduct by seeing around the corner of our accepted verbalizations." Significantly, a valuable resource of such mystical insight can be found in the human body. Writing to Allen Tate in 1933, Burke asserts that during historical periods when, as in the thirties, ethical systems fall into disrepute, mystics often seek in bodily processes an "undeniable point of reference outside the system whereby sturdier and more accurate moral exhortations could be built up." For Burke, mystical bodies move thought toward new perspectives and into unexpected meaningful associations.

Hawhee first shows how Burke makes these linkages between mysticism and bodies through the teachings of the Russian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff, especially as exhibited in the New York dance performances of students from Gurdjieff's Paris institute. The Gurdjieff system used dance and bodily exercises to break through the machinelike sleep-walking of our daily lives and create the possibility of "a radical, mystical art of transformation" (p. 42). Hawhee effectively argues that Burke was at least partly inspired by Gurdjieffian mystics to figure the body "as a variable gathering of intensities, a site of movement and change" and to carry this version of "bodily mysticism" into his theories of language and rhetoric (p. 47). Next Hawhee turns to the related but more intellectual mysticism of William James and its influence on Burke's critical method of fusing perspectives and analyzing associational clusters. Noting that *Attitudes toward History* begins with James, she describes how Burke embraces the philosopher's "mystical hankerings" in developing James's meliorism into his own "frames of acceptance." Summing up the Burkean reading of James, Hawhee writes that Burke's "recurring method . . . is a mystical one, and the mystical method works precisely by challenging and expanding the limitations of one's perspective, by invoking the as-yet-unseen, and thinking beyond the now by thinking the now in exaggerated, even grotesque terms" (p. 53).

In the following chapters Hawhee continues her transdisciplinary rhetorical history by guiding readers beyond Burke's early thinking on art and religion to his intimate work with scientific discourses. Chapter 3, "Burke on Drugs," tells of his time as a researcher for the Bureau of Social Hygiene and his ghost-writing a book on drug use, experiences that became resources for Burke's further thinking about the body as "generator of belief" and producer of habit, linguistic and otherwise. For example, Burke expands the notion of piety by developing the analogy with drug addiction, considering "the body's role in ritualized, habituated practices" (p. 70). In *Permanence and Change*, his reformulated definition of piety includes the creation of linkages, a developed "sense of what properly goes with what"; and "pious linkages" then get refigured as the rhetorical concept of style or custom: "a complex schema of what-goes-with-what, carried through all the subtleties of manner and attitude" (p. 269n).

This example from Hawhee's analysis is typical of her precise tracking of Burke's rhetorical paths of thought. She provides detailed biographical and historical contextualization for her careful reading of Burke's rhetoric, his style of thinking with and about bodies and language. Tracing such paths leads in and out of Burke's books and into and out of the discourses with which he thinks, producing surprising insights along the way into Burke and into a most productive method of doing rhetorical history, a transdisciplinary approach that is as much at home in the rhetorics of art and science as it is in the art and science of rhetoric. Chapter 4 illustrates these insights nicely as it examines the rhetoric of endocrinology—its troping of hormones as "chemical messengers" within a bodily system of communication—and the endocrinology in Burkean rhetoric, as Burke uses the discourse of this bodily science "to interrogate not only body-mind parallelism, but also, more specifically, the body's role in shaping interpretation—the bodily, affective processes that shape rational, and ultimately rhetorical, associations" (p. 85). Chapter 5, "Seeing 'Deviance' as Inclination," follows suit and explores constitutional morphology as a spur to Burke's claim that certain ways of differentiated thinking go along with certain ways of bodily preoccupation.

In the next two chapters on gesture-speech theory and physical biography, Hawhee establishes that Burke's rhetorical obsession with the body extended into the forties, fifties, and beyond. But, unsurprisingly, his theoretical body-fixation did not simply continue with the same conceptual coordinates or rhetorical figurations. Chapter 6, "Body Language," provides a "somatic genealogy" of Burke's best-known theories of dramatism and symbolic action, grounding those theories in an inventive appropriation of evolutionary views of speech as originating in bodily gestures. In Chapter 7, "Welcome to the Beauty Clinic," Hawhee writes a revisionist "body biography" of Burke's thinking in the fifties, reconnecting his ideas not only with his theorizing of bodily effects but perhaps more crucially with his own ailing body. This double somatic emphasis makes for a curiously compelling rhetorical history that gives equal time to Burke's thinking variously about Aristotelian

catharsis and his writing vividly about his “gasp-gag-gulp” and other persistent ailments.

Hawhee’s suggestive conclusion raps up her argument by focusing on Burke’s famous formulation of the motion/action opposition in the eighties. Not the least of Hawhee’s many accomplishments in *Moving Bodies* is her complication of this distinction, which she demonstrates is much more than a simple metaphysical opposition. Rather, the binary of nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action serves Burke as the basis of a “multidirectional theory” that, while positing an irreducible distinction between body and language, nonetheless shows the two terms to be parallel and complementary in the extreme (p. 166).

Again and again in *Moving Bodies*, Hawhee chronicles how Burke worked rhetorically through the body in different discursive fields. Burke thought literally about the body and its causal relation to language, and he thought figuratively with the body in his descriptions and explanations of cultural production and reception. Indeed, within Hawhee’s incisive rhetorical biography, the static/moving and functional/dysfunctional body emerges as the very condition of possibility for understanding Kenneth Burke as a theory-proving, symbol-using animal. *Moving Bodies* deserves praise not only for its full-bodied picture of Burke as language thinker but also for its proposal of an alternative materialist model for doing rhetorical history.

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Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 210 pp.

Peter Mack sets himself an ambitious task in this short impressive book: to compare the ways Montaigne and Shakespeare composed essay and speech, respectively, following intellectual habits and practices acquired in their humanist grammar school education—and to explain why knowing this makes a difference. He begins by reviewing the reading and composition training of the schools—topical analysis from Agricola; culling of sentences, proverbs, and figures from Erasmus to furnish copious words and matter; learning the progymnasmata from Aphthonius to build complex verbal structures—then goes on to demonstrate how this training gave the writer a formal grammar by which to register the movements of a thinking mind. Thus an artificial method of reading and writing enabled the mimesis of natural human discourse. Mack adroitly showcases this insight through a close reading of *De l’inconstance de nos actions*, whose very theme signals Montaigne’s manner of stating a position—his own or his author’s—then responding defensively or critically with historical and poetic examples,