

20290 reads Preface by Julie Whitaker to *Late Poems, 1968-1993: Attitudinizings Verse-wise, While Fending for One's Selph, and in a Style Somewhat Artificially Colloquial* by Kenneth Burke. Edited by Julie Whitaker and David Blakesley. © 2005 by the University of South Carolina

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I look upon lyrics as the ideal succinct way of dancing an attitude.

Poetry is steps along the way. Every once in a while, something gets summed up in a developmental way, along with a pronounced attitude (some emotion or sentiment) and that's a poem.

—Kenneth Burke

For more than fifty years, Kenneth Burke lived in an old farmhouse in northern New Jersey, first with his second wife, Libbie, and their two sons. After her death and their departure, he carried on by himself. In his regular dress of soft shoes, corduroy trousers, a loose plaid shirt, and a sweater vest, he worked away. His crooked figure, topped with a shock of white hair and bent over a book or a paper, was a friendly picture. He had filled the space with distinctly KB ambiance. Every table or counter or shelf was covered with notes, newspapers, letters, boxes, and stacks of books piled precipitously so that to enter the kitchen where he worked was a challenge. Although one would assume that chaos reigned, KB was remarkably adept at locating a particular item when he needed it.

I knew KB from 1978 to 1993, a period when Libbie was not there to help him organize and sort, so the space in the house had diminished as all available surfaces got covered up. However, he was always accommodating and willing to move the stacks aside a bit to make room for a visitor. The kitchen was the warmest room in the winter (no central heating) and the liveliest in the summer; KB did not isolate himself but worked in the midst of all the comings and goings of the household. In the summertime, preparation of meals, visits from nieces and nephews, the running in and out of children and grandchildren all swirled around him, punctuated with occasional visits from KB scholars or students. He would stand over the end of the table and, with phenomenal concentration, peruse the newspapers, journals, or texts at his elbow, circling words or underlining phrases with a red pen; or he would sit at his typewriter, using just his index fingers to type, and answer a letter or compose an article.

Words were everywhere, in the air and on the page. Scraps of paper, old mailings, leftover envelopes would do for him to scratch down an idea or sketch a short poem in a penmanship that often required considerable expertise to decipher. He was alert to the moment, and that is what he caught in his poems. Whether he admired a grandchild or found himself waiting in line at a grocery store, that moment interested him as a subject of a poem. In an unpublished manuscript, he wrote, "In verse I should be willing to be momentary—say anything for as long as it lasts."¹ That willingness to be momentary informed the way he worked and the poetry he wrote.

KB died in November 1993 at age ninety-six. Looking at the books and boxes stacked high in the kitchen without KB at the table, I was aware of the tremendous loss. All the words were there, typed, on paper, safe for another season, but the contest, the real-life conversations were gone. The boxes appeared listless and tired, as if they needed a winter's rest. On a cold, gray day, we packed stray papers in yet more boxes, put away the typewriter, and closed up the house for the winter.

The rituals of sorting and saving, organizing and cleaning, began in the spring. When we opened up the house, the boxes greeted us, forming a fairly formidable wall. They had themselves become a presence, so it was with a hesitant hand that I opened the first one. Then the wonder of the contents began to unfold. The newspapers, advertisements for household products, and empty folders that I had expected to find alternated with letters written to students and friends, notes scrawled in the margins of news articles, or typewritten musings on sheets of paper. And there were the poems. Some were in folders, typed and obviously set aside for a purpose; some were addressed to friends and colleagues; and others were scribbled down on the backs of envelopes.

For all the apparent confusion, KB did have a particular sense of order. I began to sense categories, a design. He had already published two books of poetry, *The Book of Moments, Poems 1950-1954*, and *Collected Poems: 1915-1967*, but since the late 1960s, his poetry had not been collected and updated. Some of the poems had appeared in periodicals and journals such as the *New Republic*, *Critical Inquiry*, or *Communication*, but many of those tucked away in various folders had not yet been published. As I came across more and more poems, KB's intention to eventually publish them was increasingly clear: here was another collection in the making.

That summer I emptied most of the boxes and organized, in a rough sort of way, the papers, letters, and manuscripts I found. It was a large task, so I took time off the following winter to work specifically on the folders of poems that KB had obviously set apart for publication as well as on those poems that I found here and there interspersed among other papers. In recopying the poems, I took care to consider the context in which I found them. If there was more than one version, I selected the most recent for inclusion in the present volume. There is some repetition of stanzas, because KB rearranged their order or placed the same stanza in more than one poem. (For example, the same stanza appears among other stanzas under three different titles: "Statements of Attitude," "A Juxtaposition," and "Vietnam.")

To KB, poems were moments of thought that sprang into being and were put down without the strict editing and rewriting requirements of his prose. He talked about the difference between prose patience and verse patience:

Prose patience tries to consider all the complicating factors in a given situation. Verse patience tries to state the position as "purely" as possible. Thus, when in prose criticism, I write on death, I work out fifteen or twenty possible meanings for the term. When I write on death in verse, it's just because I suddenly get scared to death of dying, and that's all there is to it, except for a notion here and there as to how I might patch up a line or drop a line because it seemed to state the given moment or attitude inefficiently.²

True to KB's desire to express the moment, I found surprisingly little evidence of his revising the poems. Often the same version would appear in more than one folder, or he would send the same version to more than one person. Given his tendency to keep all his notes and papers, it is unlikely that he would have thrown out alternate versions. In cases such as "Eye-Crossing—from Brooklyn to Manhattan," where two versions have been published, I have included the longer and more complete version as well as KB's glosses on it.

KB took pleasure in modifying traditional spellings: "selph" instead of "self," for example, or "godam" rather than "god damn," "ecstacatic" rather than "ecstatic," "flowerishes" rather than "flourishes." This is the sort of quirkiness that can drive an editor mad, but I have maintained the original spelling or misspelling.

In this collection, the poems are arranged in approximate chronological order. Some of the poems were dated by KB, some were included in dated letters to friends, and others included personal or political references that places them in time. The folders in which some of the poems were stored and their proximity to dated documents also suggested the general time frames in which they were written. Following KB's example in *Collected Poems*, I tried to cluster the other poems around the dated poems, putting in sequence those that seemed to have ideas, images, or references in common.

I realize, of course, that this method is imperfect where strict chronology is desired, but I hope that the readers will bear with me. At one point, I had covered my worktable with copies of the poems placed in varying categories, some dated, many uncertain. The window was open on that fall day, and as I was about to leave the room for a moment, a great gust of wind came billowing through. The poems flew up into the air and then fluttered down in a different order. After a moment's reflection, I decided KB was trying out a new order from a different perspective.

The volume begins with poems from the late 1960s. The first, "Eye-Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan," was written during the last year of Libbie's life. Muscular atrophy encroached on her mobility until she was confined to a wheelchair. She and KB spent that winter at the Standish Arms Hotel in Brooklyn Heights in an apartment with a view of the East River between Brooklyn and lower Manhattan. Because of her illness, the couple's crossings to Manhattan were limited mental crossings, crossings with the eye. In this poem, KB alludes both to Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" with its exuberant salute to ferry crossings and Hart Crane's "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge" with its crossing of the bridge above the water.

Libbie's death (May 24, 1969) inspired some of his most moving poems, but when KB's feelings were too strong, he chafed against his own injunction to write poetry of the moment. After writing "One More Autumnal," he added "An Anti-Pentecostal Deposition" in 1971, about which he scrawled some notes suggesting that the former poem was a "professional conceit rather than a literal Diarism." He could not resist commenting on or adding to words that had probably come about from a strong, perhaps too painful moment.

Most of the poems that KB dated himself are from the 1970s. They vary in subject from despair at personal loss, to biographical musings on the frustrations of his lot, to comments about the Halloween trick of turning over the outhouse. While he wrote fewer poems in the 1980s, he did speak and write about being a poet, and these comments point the direction for the present volume:

Although I am not a full time poet, I do view my poetry as a basic part of my sixty-plus years devoted to the professional stating of my attitudes. I have already published *Book of Moments: 1915-1954*, which was later included in my *Collected Poems: 1915-1967*. And as soon as time permits I hope to prepare for publication my later efforts, for which I have the tentative title, "Attitudinizings Verse-wise, While Fending for One's Selph: and in a Style Somewhat Artificially Colloquial." The title is not wholly accurate, since many of the items are as orthodox in their phrasing as I could possibly make them; but several are as shaggy in their way as my plans call for.³

In the 1990s KB wrote just one poem that I know of, "A Ritual of Thanksgiving" which he read at a family Thanksgiving dinner in 1992. It appeared posthumously in the *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, whose editor, Sander Zulauf, kindly alerted me to the existence of in "In Retrospective Prospect," which the journal also published.

KB continued to write flowerishes, wry observations graphically designed, which constitute the next section of this volume. *Book of Moments* and *Collected Poems* each include five and four pages respectively of flowerishes graphically designed by his wife Libbie. In this volume, ninety-six written ones. David Blakesley, the coeditor of this volume, and Michael Burke have created the graphic designs for some of them

The final section is titled "Quinquains," a form that KB found particularly congenial. The five-line iambic pentameter stanza has an extra foot added to the final line, which, I suspect, allowed him to have the last word and drive home the point. The first poem in this section, "Quinquains: Quequessi, Quaint, Quinquains" is an apostrophe to the form. According to those that bear dates, he began to experiment with quinquains in the late 1960s and continued well into the 1970s, commenting on any number of personal, social, political, and philosophical subjects.

It is my hope that this collection of the late poems of Kenneth Burke will help to bring his "dancing an attitude" and "attitudinizings verse-wise" up to date.

Notes

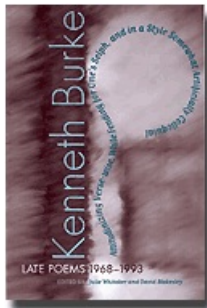
The daughter-in-law of Kenneth Burke, Julie Whitaker brings firsthand knowledge of the author to the editing of this volume. She teaches literature and writing at the Nightingale-Bamford School in New York. Once a dancer with the New York company of Alwin Nikolai, she has also written scripts from language tapes in French and German and taught English in Paris.

Epigraphs come from Kenneth Burke, "Three Sessions, Boulder, Colorado" (draft of manuscript for lecture, February 25–27, 1987), 29, and from the draft of the untitled manuscript, [1980s?].

1. Kenneth Burke, "Extraduction" (unpublished manuscript, [1980s?]), 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Kenneth Burke, "Poetry as Symbolic Action," in *What Is a Poet?* ed. Hank Lazar (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 167-68.

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Late Poems, 1968–1993



Attitudinizings Verse-wise, While Fending for One's Selph, and in a Style Somewhat Artificially Colloquial

Kenneth Burke

Edited by Julie Whitaker and David Blakesley

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The first publication of over 150 poems from Burke's final decades

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That waft one way of doing it. Another was to buy from a Health Food shop a heavy slab of some mysterious nut sandwich for about threepence, arid wash it down with plenty of water. This nut stuff neither tickled nor satisfied the appetite, it merely destroyed the appetite, murdered it with a blunt instrument. Out of what I saved, I bought books, and most of these books belonged to the old shilling Everyman series. August 1968. Moon Landing. River Profile. A New Year Greeting. In certain poems the audio version differs from the published text. -- W. h. auden. (from a preface by J. D. McClatchy). When he arrived at Oxford as an undergraduate, W. H. Auden went to see his tutor in literature, who asked the young man what he meant to do in later life. "I am going to be a poet," Auden answered. "Ah, yes," replied the tutor, and began a small lecture on verse exercises improving one's prose. Auden scowled. "You don't understand at all," he interrupted. Centuries later George Bernard Shaw captured the magic of this legend in his _ romantic play "Pygmalion". Pygmalion became Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, his statue Eliza Doolittle, a common flower girl from the streets of London, and the barrier between them the _ in their stations in life. "My Fair Lady" is a _ based upon George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" with lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner and music by Frederick Loewe. The show's 1956 Broadway _ was a smash hit. An Oscar winning film version was made in 1964 starring Audrey Hepburn (Eliza Doolittle) and Rex Harrison (Professor Higgins) Julie invited man -The doctor was sick. I wanted to see the doctor -The accountant was arrested. The accountant Works for my father's company -I wrote to the friend. You met the friend last week -The mobile phone can't be fixed. The mobile phone is broken -Jonh made a copy of the photo. I took the photo. Ver respuesta. In a poem "Read Shoes" Julie. Oh (1996) defined Miss Julie as a frustrated romantic written by Anne Sexton, the act of dancing represents female comedy where Julie's love cannot be achieved (p. 126). In subjectivity (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 2032). Dancing Julie, her view, Julie is controlled and dominated by Strindberg to exerting her desire, toward her sexuality or/and identity, is kill herself which, as a result, defeats her (Oh, 1996, p. 140). incomprehensible in his perspective. More explicitly, Julie's Likewise, Hong (2010) concluded that Julie's choice is an mother who commits arso