

Transcendence in the Barnyard  
or, From the Barnyard to the Elysian Fields

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Kenneth Burke is perhaps most famous for his characterization of the political sphere as “the human barnyard.” “The *Rhetoric*,” he writes in *Grammar of Motives*, “would study the ‘competitive use of the cooperative,’ would be designed to help us take delight in the Human Barnyard, with its addiction to the Scramble, an area that would cause us great unhappiness could we not transcend it by appreciation, classifying and tracing back to their beginnings in Edenic simplicity those linguistic modes of suasion that often seem little better than malice and the lie.” (442) There are an incredible number of cues here that say much about politics. Beginning at the end, we encounter politics as “malice and the lie.” Certainly, this is the image that has controlled our perspective on political rhetoric for the last third of a century. But Burke warns that these only “seem” to be the character of politics. He promises an Eden beyond the “great unhappiness” of this construction, in which we can actually “take delight.” The key is to “transcend [the barnyard] by appreciation” – probably in both senses of that word – finding the simplicity of suasion. Carefully, this is not “persuasion,” for although the *Rhetoric* is elsewhere called a handbook of rhetorical devices (Burke 1945/1969, xvii-xviii), the introduction to the *Rhetoric* immediately reveals the irony that while “moving in on” the shared identity of a community, an individual rhetor may, in fact, play both games, seeking self-interest but seeing that self-interest as doing good for the community. Indeed, the reference to Eden reminds us that

the original sin of humanity was the conceit of individual judgment. As *Rhetoric of Religion* (1961/1970) will assure us, the compensation for the estrangement born in the garden, Babel after the fall, is the gift of naming, of language.

Where shall we find this “Edenic simplicity” that will transcend the scramble of the barnyard? The answer is that to Burke the “human barnyard” is in a dialectic relationship with another image: courtship. *Rhetoric of Motives* (1950/1969) begins in killing and emerges with “identification” as its key term. The striving for identification is elaborated in the metaphor of courtship. My argument today is that we stewards of public discourse need to bring the courtship metaphor to bear on our understanding of the political process. We need to identify and elucidate the historical moments when the achievements of courtship have been significant. We need to explain the processes through which leaders and ordinary citizens have danced the intricacies of political courtship. We must instruct, criticize, cajole, as our powers will permit to turn the dominance of the barnyard into a more balanced understanding of the productive texture of discourse in guiding our political lives. To do so we must read discourse with the sensitivity that the courtship metaphor will foster. How did the patrician Franklin Roosevelt become the darling of the dispossessed of the depression? How did our parents and grandparents (and probably now great-grandparents) of post-World War II America build a society with such a broad consensus of productivity that it gave us a functioning government that promoted wealth and health in unprecedented numbers? And, yes, how was the courtship malignant, that it could not without great difficulty overcome its failure to bridge gaps of race and gender and issues of justice? And, how did our powers of courtship finally bridge those gaps to the degree that they have today?

So, let me talk about my vision of fruitfully using the courtship metaphor. I would begin by observing that “courtship” is a root metaphor: that is, it represents a generative route to understanding. This is not merely a expressive device for the critic to explain politics. This is not a “theory” of politics. Politics and Courtship: certainly that is a *perspective by incongruity*. The resources are considerable to intertwine the social performance of courtship into the political art of creating a productive, democratic peace. Courtship, like politics, is charged through with estrangement. “By the ‘principle of courtship’ in rhetoric,” Burke writes, “we mean the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement” (208). This is the realm of mystery in which estrangement becomes identification, and identification becomes consubstantiality. And where else in human relations is the overcoming of estrangement so accompanied by delight as in courtship? Where else might we find the emotions that transcend the “great unhappiness” of estrangement? Burke describes courtship in terms that emphasize the abridgement of sexual difference, and social standing. In the exploring of these intimate and socio-economic spheres, the strategies that transform difference into oneness become vivid.

Now, I have warned away from thinking of courtship as a “tool kit” for viewing politics. I have urged a pursuit of the rhetoric of courtship as a source of *perspective* on politics. But there are keys to seeing the mysteries of courtship. In fact, I have elaborated these in an essay that I hope Bryan Crable will be publishing soon entitled, “Transcendence in the Barnyard: Thoughts on Strategic Approaches to the Political Art.” I do not have the time to fully explore these today. But let me highlight that I believe the key is in that term I stressed earlier: dialectic. Burke’s linguistic dialectic is about the human power to organize life with the facility of language. Words work in the service of joining us with others in the great dance of cooperative

enterprise. Their power to transform our differences into a life joined in cooperative pursuit is what we need to focus upon.

There is so much left for us to bring from the Burkean corpus to make a more productive understanding of rhetoric. And here is an excellent example. We need to work on the other side of politics. The human capacity to create cooperative enterprise that achieves far more than humans can accomplish apart. Community requires our mastering the rhetorical skills that achieve such courtship. And, our task as students of rhetoric, is to turn our eyes and our powers of understanding toward working this side of the dialectics of politics.