



Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915–1931 (Wisconsin Project on American Writers)

Jack Selzer

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Capturing the lively modernist milieu of Kenneth Burke's early career in Greenwich Village, where Burke arrived in 1915 fresh from high school in Pittsburgh, this book discovers him as an intellectual apprentice conversing with "the moderns." Burke found himself in the midst of an avant-garde peopled by Malcolm Cowley, Marianne Moore, Jean Toomer, Katherine Anne Porter, William Carlos Williams, Allen Tate, Hart Crane, Alfred Stieglitz, and a host of other fascinating figures.

Burke himself, who died in 1993 at the age of 96, has been hailed as America's most brilliant and suggestive critic and the most significant theorist of rhetoric since Cicero. Many schools of thought have claimed him as their own, but Burke has defied classification and indeed has often been considered a solitary, eccentric genius immune to intellectual fashions. But Burke's formative work of the 1920s, when he first defined himself and his work in the context of the modernist conversation, has gone relatively unexamined.

Here we see Burke living and working with the crowd of poets, painters, and dramatists affiliated with *Others* magazine, Stieglitz's "291" gallery, and Eugene O'Neill's Provincetown Players; the leftists associated with the magazines *The Masses* and *Seven Arts*; the Dadaists; and the modernist writers working on literary journals like *The Dial*, where Burke in his capacity as an associate editor saw T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" into print for the first time and provided other editorial services for Thomas Mann, e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound, and many other writers of note. Burke also met the iconoclasts of the older generation represented by Theodore Dreiser and H. L. Mencken, the New Humanists, and the literary nationalists who founded *Contact* and *The New Republic*. Jack Selzer shows how Burke's own early poems, fiction, and essays emerged from and contributed to the modernist conversation in Greenwich Village. He draws on a wonderfully rich array of letters between Burke and his modernist friends and on the memoirs of his associates to create a vibrant portrait of the young Burke's transformation from aesthete to social critic.

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