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Here’s what you won’t find in Dana Anderson’s recent monograph: strong assertions about what identity is (or is not); efforts to insist on foundational axioms or grounding assumptions; critical legerdemain designed surreptitiously or openly to swap “identity” for “performance”; bald insistence that we accept identity as the grounding for a politics of sameness, difference, or play. In fact, Anderson’s effort to see identity as strategy, as “interplay between the individual and the world,” insists upon something “more ambitious” (32-33). He explicates what identity does. In doing so, he asks us to look for specific moments when human symbol use constitutes identities to persuasive ends. Freed from the shackles of axial certainty, we can explore the terrain of rhetorical purpose and effect. Such an effort is welcome at least insofar as it sidesteps some pernicious wrangling over the stakes, the manners, and the importance of representation. We can thus avoid the derision heaped upon “identity politics.” Surely, Anderson contends, identity is political. Better that we focus on how it’s political. Better that we acknowledge the indelibility of identity, its rhetorical necessity, its vast possibility, and its myriad social uses. Toward such an acknowledgement, Anderson counsels us to closely regard Kenneth Burke’s comments on the dialectic of constitutions.

Following a range of contemporary scholarship on Burke (not to mention Burke himself), Anderson contends that the most important part of Burke’s Grammar of Motives is not the second section on the Pentad, but the third section on the dialectic. Read with this emphasis, Burke answers two nettling questions: “what conceptual equipment can rhetoric employ towards analyzing identity as strategic self-constitution, and how can it do so without implying a self that is free to constitute and strategize as it pleases?” (38) It is beyond the scope of this review to explore the complexity of Anderson’s (and Burke’s) rhetorical approach to identity. To recapitulate this book’s most theory-heavy chapter would require every word allotted here, and then some. Suffice it to say that chapter 3 weaves many of Burke’s most challenging ideas (“circumference,” “god-term,” “dialectic,” “substance,” and “constitution,” to name a few) into a coherent and complex understanding of how a set of rhetorical actions constructs a purposive and particularly functional stance.

Anderson helps us to understand why a Burkean vocabulary is best suited to the effort at understanding identity as suasion. We leave with a dynamic view of what is required by and what is possible in the construction of identity. As he deftly explicates Burke, Anderson continually reminds us that “identity is a strategy, a way of addressing a situation in order to transform it” (56). Such a reminder is welcome as writing instructors revisit the personal essay and the autoethnography. In one critical vocabulary, such writing exercises appear emotionally expressive, intellectually uncritical, and apolitically private. Anderson’s vocabulary helps us to see that identity is always rhetorically achieved, publicly affected, and civically engaged. Moreover, Anderson provides us with a vocabulary to discuss the strategies of rhetorically constructing identities. One can easily imagine a pedagogy that teaches students to deploy and to be critical of these strategies.

The first three chapters of Anderson’s study will probably be cited most, since they offer the clearest statement of his theoretic apparatus. Nevertheless, the analytic chapters of Identity’s Strategy deserve close attention, for each body chapter expands and applies the theory in a virtuoso analysis. While exploring Dorothy Day’s The Long Loneliness, Anderson is able to explain how differing rhetorical constructions of circumference (the accepted boundaries in which Day’s identity was constituted) strategically negotiated volunteeristic and necessitarian principles set in conflict throughout her conversion narrative. We see that the rhetorical elements of Day’s identity did not change, though she synthesized them in different ways before and after her conversion, thus allowing for variant rhetorical effects, new motivations, and new suasive efforts at motivating her readers. While traversing David Brock’s narrative, we are also treated to a careful parsing among ethos (the inclusion of character as part of a discourse), identity (an audience’s sense of who a person is), and character (the audience’s sense of how a person acts). Identity, the more “idiosyncratic” and “trans-situational” (99) element, disrupts Brock’s efforts at presenting a conversion narrative, when his audience infers from his character (his behavior as manifested in the
rhetorical style of *Blinded by the Right*) a stable person no different from the duplicitous gossip-monger whom Brock claims to have left behind. As we move across Dierdre McCloskey’s physical conversion from man to woman, we are treated to a close examination of several rhetorically constructed “circumferences” or “substances,” each setting the foundational terms for the identity that McCloskey inhabits. Treated substantively as “sex,” McCloskey’s cross-dressing appears to be a prudential choice, but when treated as “identity,” her trans-gendered behaviors appear necessary. Substantively treated as “identity,” trans-gendered behavior (even sex-change surgery) seems less a matter of prudence and more a matter of necessity. Finally, as we learn about the various receptions of Black Elk’s biography (narrated through John G. Neihardt), we realize the importance of relating a persuasive effort to its circumstances. The Black Elk who spoke in the early 20th century becomes quite different from the Black Elk speaking in the 1980s in part because of new textual evidence but also because of a new social circumstance set in dialectical interaction with the narrative. In light of the new textual evidence and the new social reception of Black Elk’s narrative, Anderson is able to revisit the initial “speaking.” Rather than an “authentic” but misrepresented figure, we see someone who “strategized about his own identity . . . to accomplish purposes of his own choosing” (155).

In all, through his complex theoretic adventures and his insightful analytic forays, Anderson offers us a new application of Burke as well as a novel approach to identity. In light of Anderson’s emphasis on suasive function, I can’t help but speculate about the rhetorical purposes of *Identity’s Strategy*, this book’s dialectical relation to its own rhetorical situation. Here we are: academics driven by debates about identity politics and culture wars; citizens torn by allegiances to “substantive” categories such as “race” and “gender”; writing instructors concerned about the discursive negotiation of difference in the classroom; individuals tortured by our own inability to synthesize a discontinuity among impressions, desires, and moral imperatives into a naturalized understanding of self. The Burkean analysis of identity explains how we got here and what we can do to continue our disagreements without exacerbating our divisions. Such an approach, to borrow Burke’s vocabulary, establishes a rhetorical circumference to a set of motivations behind a healing program of skeptical criticism and reflective advocacy. It also sets the stage for an interesting pedagogy that requires analysis of identity as a rhetorical strategy in the writing classroom. Students’ socioeconomic class, race, and their differences of gender suddenly become ripe for the pedagogical plucking. Expressive writing no longer seems to be an easy first assignment but rather becomes the apotheosis of our and our students’ rhetorical expertise. Though Anderson never explicitly mentions James Kinneavy’s work, I can’t help but recall chapter 6 in *A Theory of Discourse*, which builds a different theoretical foundation for a civically- and rhetorically-minded pedagogy of expressive writing. Anderson’s study makes a similar contribution to writing studies and thus deserves our attention, even though he may offer no explicit directions about how to teach the personal essay. Failure to live up to the pedagogical imperative should not remove *Identity’s Strategy* from composition’s purview, though such an exclusion may disappoint some readers.

If I am right, then Anderson’s argument is a suitable (even decorous) dialectical response to some of today’s most deleterious conflicts, a step, as Burke would have it, towards the purification of war. It is also a preparatory study for a renewed pedagogy of autobiographical writing. Anderson’s rhetorical approach to identity can bridge our intellectual divisions, mitigate our political conflicts, alleviate our psychological traumas, and enhance our pedagogical efforts at helping students to deal with all of these dynamics in their own writing and in their own narrativized selves.

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