

ESSAYS TOWARD



A SYMBOLIC  
OF MOTIVES



1950—1955

KENNETH BURKE



SELECTED, ARRANGED, AND EDITED BY  
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*Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, and by David Cratis Williams and I in our essays in *Unending Conversations*. Other Burke scholars, such as Robert Wess, have also discussed them. Hopefully, at some future point, all three versions will be published and we will have all the necessary texts readily available to us for study and analysis.

In *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955*, I have selected only some of the major essays Burke wrote and published in this time period while he was still working from his original conception of what *A Symbolic of Motives* should be, as he defined it in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke's grand plan for his dramatistic project was to follow Aristotle and write a modern grammar, rhetoric, poetics, and ethics. Working with a five-year schedule, Burke published *A Grammar of Motives* in 1945, *A Rhetoric of Motives* in 1950 and was ready, it seems, to publish *A Symbolic of Motives* in 1955, and, presumably, his *Ethics of Motives* by 1960, at the end of a twenty-year period of prodigious work and thought. But Burke became a victim of his own genius and his tendency to succumb to what he has called the "counter-gridlock motive." In the twenty years after *A Rhetoric of Motives* was published, which were certainly among the most productive years of Burke's long and productive life, he pursued one project after another: he finished up his work on Dramatism with his omnibus *Language as Symbolic Action* collection of essays; he began work on Logology with *The Rhetoric of Religion*; he had his books from the 1930s reissued by Hermes, he found a new publisher for *The Rhetoric of Religion* in The Beacon Press, and began his relationship with the University of California Press which, at one time in the 1970s had all of Burke's books in print at the same time; he traveled and taught and lectured all over the United States; he became famous both here and abroad. It is no wonder, then, that *A Symbolic of Motives* never got assembled and published as a book, though it certainly got finished—that is, thoroughly worked out—as Burke's dramatistic poetics. What we lack is not the dramatistic poetics, but a definitive version of it as selected and arranged by Burke. Burke was a great reviser and a careful arranger of the material that was included in his published books. But he did not leave any instructions as to how he would have put *A Symbolic of Motives* together in one or, probably, two volumes, and although he left us lists of essays written between 1950 and 1955 that were to be part of his *Symbolic of Motives*, he did not indicate how to arrange them or

even which ones would have survived and been included when final decisions had to be made.

I have arranged the material included in *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950-1955* in a logical rather than a chronological way. The essays in Part I are methodological in the sense that they represent points of departure for a dramatistic analysis. The essay on "Imitation" is common to all versions of *A Symbolic of Motives* in one form or another because Burke kept revising it when he did later versions. It is essential to Burke's dramatistic analysis because it redefines imitation to include the essential Burkean conception of entelechy—or the drive toward perfection intrinsic to language and to all forms of imitation and to literature in general. Burke loved definitions, as we can see in "Three Definitions," and always preferred to work from them, as is obvious in the individual analyses in Part II or in Burke's "Definition of Man" in *Language as Symbolic Action*. In "The Language of Poetry 'Dramatistically' Considered, Part 1," Burke uses the classic definitions for the three main functions of language (to teach, to please, to persuade) and adds a fourth, to portray, as a way of understanding what it is poetry (literature in general) does. The final methodological essays, "Fact, Inference, and Proof" defines and illustrates two of Burke's most basic analytic approaches to a text, Indexing and Joycing (pun analysis) and uses Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* to illustrate the application of these analytic techniques. Both are featured in all of Burke's dramatistic analyses of individual texts. Properly understood, Indexing is the key to Burke's theory of what a literary text is and how it works, and Joycing is one of the keys to Burke's theory that words contain multiple meanings.

Part 2 contains five essays that show Burke at work on individual texts and the work of individual authors—Roethke ("The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," 1950) and Whitman ("Policy Made Personal: Whitman's Verse and Prose-Salient Traits," 1955). Two of these essays—"The *Oresteia*," 1952, and "*Othello*: an Essay to Illustrate a Method," 1951—work out Burke's theory of tragedy as an imitation of a tension, and the other, "*Ethan Brand*: A Preparatory Investigation," 1952, is one of the best examples we have of how Burke sets up a text in order to go to work on it. All of Burke's literary criticism is characterized by an emphasis on individual texts and what he liked to call their labyrinthine internal consistency.

The two selections in Part 3 are intended to explain, in different ways, what Burke means by “socioanagogic” and why he selected whole texts as his representative anecdotes. The selections from “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education,” 1955, is probably Burke’s most concise and articulate discursive explanation of why he analyzes texts the way he does; and the analysis of “Goethe’s *Faust*, Part 1,” 1955, is probably Burke’s most brilliant and comprehensive dramatic analysis of a single text we have. Only his analysis of “*Othello*: an Essay to Illustrate a Method” can really be compared to it for what it tells us about Burke’s dramatic poetics and what it reveals to us about Burke as a literary critic.

I have deliberately minimized my commentary on these selections because, for one thing, I have discussed this material before in *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* and because I want readers to encounter Burke’s analyses directly and experience the full force of his encounters with these great texts and, to use his own terminology, to “earn” them for themselves. These early essays that Burke wrote for *A Symbolic of Motives* are among the most concentrated and most detailed analyses of individual texts that Burke ever wrote in his long involvement with literature. They reveal Burke at the height of his powers as a reader (analyzer and interpreter) of texts, fulfilling his own definition that the original *A Symbolic of Motives* should be devoted to the study of individual, self-contained symbolic actions and structures.

If we take the list of essays that I have included in *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955*, all of which are on Burke’s 1955 list of what was to be included in *A Symbolic of Motives*, and compare it to the contents of *Poetics, Dramatically Considered*, his second version of *A Symbolic of Motives*, which he wrote and assembled in 1957 and 1958, we have a ready way to see what transformations occurred in Burke’s conception of *A Symbolic of Motives* between the first and second versions. It is easy to do this by noting, what, based on version one, has been included, excluded, and added in version two.

*Poetics, Dramatically Considered*

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1. Poetics,” “Aesthetic,” and Artistic
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11. Platonic Transcendence
12. The Poetic Motive

Still to come, Burke says in a note, are a section on comic catharsis, further references to individual works, footnotes indicating other developments, and an appendix reprinting various related essays.

First of all, note that the only individual text left for analysis in this list is the *Orestes* trilogy and that all of the other individual texts and individual author analysis have been excluded. What has been added is all of the new material on catharsis: “Catharsis, First View,” “Pity, Fear and Pride,” “The Thinking of the Body,” “Beyond Catharsis” and “Catharsis, Second View.” It is true that there are many references to individual texts in all this new material on catharsis, but there are no sustained analyses like the one of “*Ethan Brand: A Preparatory Investigation*,” “*Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method*,” and “*Goethe’s Faust, Part I*” nor any analyses like those of Roethke and Whitman. Also gone is most of the material I included in *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955*, Part 1, especially items 2, 3, and 4. What is left or still included is the essay on “A ‘Dramatistic’ View of Imitation” and multiple references to Aristotle, drama, and tragedy. Most of *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* works out a theory of drama, tragedy, and literature in general as symbolic action. The major emphasis in *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* is on catharsis, both as Aristotle defines it and as Burke redefines it, adding pride to pity and fear, and adding the whole concept of body thinking (the demonic trinity, the physiological counterparts of pity, fear and pride—the sexual, urinal, and fecal—to the cathartic process. Catharsis—the purgative redemptive motive—has been at the center of Burke’s thinking about literature since *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, but what is added in *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* is what Burke describes as his great



“breakthrough” in his thinking about his dramatistic poetics, which is “The Thinking of the Body” essay, and Burke’s insistence in that essay that, to be complete, all cathartic experiences must also express the three major bodily motives, or Freud’s cloacal motive, the whole realm of privacy. As Burke says in his note on this essay, once this idea occurred to him about the thinking of the body, it ran away with him and he used his considerable intellectual powers and ingenuity to work the idea out and to apply it, with his usual thoroughness, to a great variety of most unlikely texts. The original version of this essay in *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* is 104 typescript pages. All the later, revised versions are much shorter.

After *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* in 1957 and 1958, Burke was preoccupied with other matters than *A Symbolic of Motives*—chiefly with logology and *The Rhetoric of Religion*, which he had begun writing, and with the Hermes editions of his works of the 1930s. Burke did not go back to his *A Symbolic of Motives* until the early 1960s after *The Rhetoric of Religion* was published in 1961 and he had written the final chapter for it, his masterful dialogue between TL (The Lord) and S (Satan), “Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven.” When he did go back to *A Symbolic of Motives*, probably in 1963, he wrote and assembled what I have called the third version of *A Symbolic of Motives*, the manuscript that was actually called *A Symbolic of Motives* and was more about 270 pages long and clearly a sustained and coherent effort to rethink his *A Symbolic of Motives* by choosing a different point of departure (*A Symbolic of Motives*, third version, begins where *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* ends, with an essay called “The Poetic Motive” (see the table of contents for this manuscript in *Unending Conversations*) and proceeding in a very orderly fashion in Part 1 from language in general, to poetry in particular, and then to imitation, catharsis, examples from many different kinds of literary works, tragedy, and finally his breakthrough in the much-revised “Thinking of the Body” material in Part 2, where the manuscript abruptly ends.

The history of *A Symbolic of Motives* after this point gets very complicated because of the essays Burke decided to write in the 1960s and because of what he decided to include in *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966 from his earlier versions of *A Symbolic of Motives* and from the many essays he wrote in the early 1960s. From the earlier version of *A Symbolic of Motives*, Burke included the Roethke essay (1950), a revised and shortened version of his *Oresteia* essay (1952), the whole of the

“Goethe’s *Faust*, Part I” essay (1955) which was originally published as parts 2 and 3 of “The Language of Poetry Dramatistically Considered,” “The Poetic Motive” (1958), “The Thinking of the Body” (1957–1958) in a shortened, revised version, which first appeared in full in *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered*, various versions of essays on language in general and poetry in particular that were part of *A Symbolic of Motives*, version three, and *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered*. Burke also included all of the literary essays he wrote in the early 1960s in Part 2 of *Language as Symbolic Action*, which really completed work on his dramatistic poetics when combined or added to what we have in the three earlier versions of *A Symbolic of Motives* and the long essay on St. Augustine’s *Confessions* that he included in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. Burke seldom wrote about literary texts after 1966, one of the few exceptions being his 1969 essay on *King Lear* (“Form and Psychosis in *King Lear*”). He was done with his dramatistic poetics and focused his mind and energy on logology, which was his successor to dramatism. *Language as Symbolic Action* is really the culmination of Burke’s long involvement with dramatism, which began after *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) and lasted for the next twenty-five years.

Burke maybe showed more sense than most of the critics who kept asking him when he was going to finish his Symbolic—or, as he referred to it in his years with one of his wonderful puns, his Sin Ballix. He kept insisting that it was done and that all of it had been published or was available in manuscripts so why make a fuss about getting it out in a single book. Yes and no to that. Much of it had been published, but going back over the documents as I have done here, one realizes that by 1993 when Burke died, much of what had been published was out-of-print or that Burke had revised and shortened many of the original essays so that it was not really possible to get a sense of the nature of Burke’s achievement in his mature years as a literary critic. In fact, Burke has sort of been forgotten as a literary critic as scholars have become absorbed in working out dramatism or logology or Burke’s comic perspective or his rhetoric and his language theory and the place of all this in the whole movement toward explaining everything in terms of language that has prevailed in recent years. Burke, of course, encouraged this because of the centrality of language in both dramatism and logology and the emphasis on rhetoric throughout his work and his insistence that his work is really primarily about the drama of human relations (*On Human Nature*) rather than literature.

My purpose here in collecting some of the early essays Burke wrote for his *A Symbolic of Motives* is to reclaim a little of Burke for literary criticism. I first encountered Burke in his capacity as a literary critic and it was with his literary criticism that I did my first serious work on him way back when. I have been down a lot of different roads with Burke since then, so I suppose it is most appropriate that I end up where I began in this attempt to reclaim some of him for literature and literary criticism, which after all were my own fields for all my years of teaching and writing. It seems ironic to me now that when I began writing on Burke in the late 1950s, all of the essays that I have collected here were available for study, but what eventually happened to his *A Symbolic of Motives* over the years through 1966 was not, and it is only after Burke died and finally let go of all this material (because he would not agree to any arrangement of it while he was alive), that it became possible to finally study the unpublished manuscripts as well as all of the published material and begin to make sense out of it and see it for what it is and rediscover the power and resourcefulness of Burke's dramatistic poetics.

Hopefully, another scholar will do for the third version of *A Symbolic of Motives* what David Cratis Williams has done for *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* and then someone will come along and put all these dramatistic poetics texts into their appropriate place in relation to Burke's other books and dramatism as a whole and establish or re-establish Burke's proper place in the history of modern American literary criticism.

—William H. Rueckert