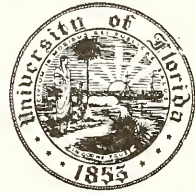



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THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF LITERARY FORM





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THE  
PHILOSOPHY  
OF  
LITERARY FORM

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC ACTION

BY KENNETH BURKE

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1941

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TO J. S. WATSON, JR.

Out of these several years  
Since the days of *The Dial*  
Amicably indeed



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## FOREWORD

THESE pieces are selections from work done in the Thirties, a decade so changeable that I at first thought of assembling them under the title, "While Everything Flows."

Their primary interest is in speculation on the nature of linguistic, or symbolic, or literary action—and in a search for more precise ways of locating or defining such action.

Words are aspects of a much wider communicative context, most of which is not verbal at all. Yet words also have a nature peculiarly their own. And when discussing them as modes of action, we must consider *both* this nature as words in themselves *and* the nature they get from the non-verbal scenes that support their acts. I shall be happy if the reader can say of this book that, while always considering words as acts upon a scene, it avoids the *excess* of environmentalist schools which are usually so eager to trace the relationships between act and scene that they neglect to trace the structure of the act itself.

However, it is not my intention here to discuss the internalities of a work's structure in the sense of a reporter who would inform about a work's subject, plot, background, the relationships among its characters, etc. I am more concerned with the general problems of internal structure and act-scene relationships—and I introduce reference to particular poems, novels, or dramas as illustrative material rather than as central theme. Thus the reader who wants the specific criticism of books might be more disappointed than

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## FOREWORD

the reader who wants a theory of the criticism of books (a theory that should be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to any specific cases).

As for analysis focused upon one work, probably my article on Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is the most complete example in these pages, with the references to the writings of Coleridge (whom I hope to treat later at greater length in a separate volume) probably coming next. The study of *Julius Caesar* as a device for the arousing and fulfilling of expectations in an audience, might fall within this class, if the reader is not led by its tone to assign it the quality of a *tour de force*. And I have included in an appendix some reviews that, while selected because in my opinion they clarified some aspect or other of my position, are by the nature of the case centered about some one formal object.

I might give an illustration as to the way in which the two modes of literary substance (the substance of a literary act as placed upon a scene, and the substance of the act within itself) would be related. Think of some philosophic school whose members were using a given set of identical or synonymous terms. Now, upon analysis, we should find that there are certain purely internal relationships prevailing among these terms. By reason of such purely internal relationships, it is logically possible to make certain recombinations among the terms, or to reduce certain of the terms to others, or by reason of certain ambiguities or overlaps among the terms to so manipulate them as to derive many important changes of emphasis or conclusion from them. To discuss the intrinsic nature of such philosophies, and to do so in a penetrating way and not as a mere reporter, one should have to discuss these technical possibilities and relate the given phi-

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osopher's strategy to them. Such considerations would provide an active way of treating the work's nature in itself. However, on considering the work as placed in biological or historical contexts, we might well find that the given philosopher, by manipulating the possibilities of emphasis in one way rather than another, was able symbolically to enroll himself in one social alliance, with its peculiar set of expectancies, rather than another. Here we should see what participation in a Cause caused his work, by what Movement it was motivated, on what substance it made its stand. The act being an act upon a scene, its placing by reference to scene would be needed for a complete substantiation of this philosophy as an act.

However, an act may be placed in many contexts, and when the character of the context changes, the character of the act changes accordingly. Thus, the same book may be in a supply-and-demand context for a bookseller, a morality-immorality context for a censor, a classicism-romanticism context for a literary historian, the "substance" of the book changing in accordance with the point of view from which we would consider it. Ideally, the substance of the work, "in itself," would probably require a statement that would fit the characterization of the book in any and every context. But in actuality there is a tendency for writers to feel that they have characterized a work intrinsically when they apply epithets of approval or disapproval to it (appreciation), or refer to it in tonalities meant to be in tune with the tonalities of the book itself (impressionism), or tell what it's about (reviewing), or classify it (bibliography). All of these ways have value—but the way primarily tried here, more explicitly in the pieces written towards the end of the decade (they are not arranged in chronological order) is this: To identify the

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## FOREWORD

substance of a particular literary act by a theory of literary action in general.

The quickest way to sloganize this theory is to say that it is got by treating the terms “dramatic” and “dialectical” as synonymous. So it is, as you prefer, to be called either “dialectical criticism” or “dramatic criticism methodized” (i. e., a reasoned method for treating art as act). I invite the reader, at this point in our exposition, to accept whichever of the two terms he feels more at home with, and to reserve until later his decision as to whether the proposed labels are just, and whether they can legitimately be treated as synonymous.

Wherever an author would use an example to illustrate a general statement, the best manufacturing arrangement would probably be a kind of loose-leaf volume. For since the only purpose of illustrations is to make things seem clear, and since those topics seem clearest which are foremost in the public’s attention at the moment, one might hope to seem clearest by “opportunistically” changing his illustrations in accordance with the shifts of public attention. Some speculators may get around this by analyzing human acts in terms of animals, mechanisms, or picturable designs. Which is effective so far as it goes. For if you build your generalization about a chicken, people tend to feel that it is eternally valid; but if you build your generalization about some topic or controversy, they tend to feel that the generalization dies as the topic or controversy drops out of focus. Yet a “dramatic” or “dialectical” perspective would vow one to hold that generalizations getting their cues from animals, mechanisms, or picturable designs are not using examples sufficiently complex to be representative of human acts and meanings. And so far as I am concerned, I find nothing more



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“contemporary” than the records of heresies, sects, and schisms that flourished centuries ago, which are by no means gone with their times, but are *mutatis mutandis* all vigorous today.

But with a loose-leaf arrangement, I might, at this precise moment, for instance, seek to “point up” my distinction between realism and naturalism (as discussed in my section on “Ritual Drama as ‘Hub’”) by trying to show how it might be applied in considering Archibald MacLeish’s attack upon the war novelists. For I think that this distinction lies blurred beneath the altercation—and that, had it been made, much fury, unnecessary and off the subject, could have been avoided by both the outraged and the outrager. (My reference to MacLeish here, however, is not to be confused with my reference to him in the essay, “War, Response, and Contradiction,” concerning an article on the subject written by MacLeish in 1933.)

I would also, in a loose-leaf arrangement, have wanted to weave in references to Richard Wright’s disturbingly impressive novel, *Native Son*, a book that offers a whole new avenue to follow in developing my remarks on the ambiguities of power. Indeed, as I have spoken briefly of what might be called the “Stance” family (terms for location, support, placing, “substance”), so I might note this other major clan, the “Power” family. It is composed of many members: social power, sexual, physical, political, military, commercial, monetary, mental, moral, stylistic (powers of grace, grandeur, vituperation, precision)—powers of emancipation, liberalization, separation (“loosing”), powers of fascination and fascization (“binding,” as in Mann’s “Mario and the Magician”)—and powers of wisdom, understanding, knowledge. There are ways whereby, owing to the nature of synecdoche,

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## FOREWORD

any member of this family may come to do vicarious service for any other member, or for the family as a whole—so that one may marry or rape by politics, wage war in argument, be mentally superior by the insignia of social privilege, bind or loose by knowledge, show one's muscle or enhance one's stature by financial income, etc., in whatever permutations and combinations one cares to contrive. In particular, in *Native Son*, I should have liked to discuss the author's treatment of the interrelationships among the powers: physical, sexual, social, and monetary—with at the end a transcendence into the powers of understanding.

However, there is no end to the possibilities of such "loose-leafing." So, through wanting to change, or to make last-minute comment upon, nearly everything, I found it easy to compromise by changing almost nothing, and confining my additions to a few references in the hitherto unpublished matter, and in cases where the "pointing up" could be done briefly. Accordingly, the reader may encounter the same formulations put forward with a different attitude, or used for different purposes, at different points in our text. He may treat this as mere inconsistency (to be forgiven, in so far as it can be forgiven, on the grounds that the years were changeable and that the development of one's thought might be expected to change somewhat with them). For the most part, however, I should prefer not to be "forgiven" these "inconsistencies." For we may properly expect a form to function differently when it is a part of one context than when it is a part of some other context—and often, on closer inspection, the different functions will be found not to "refute" one another, but simply to be modified by their difference in position.

All of these items have been previously published, except

## FOREWORD

the first and longest, of which only a small excerpt appeared before (in *The Southern Review*). The publications in which the others appeared are listed herewith:

"Semantic and Poetic Meaning," *The Southern Review*;  
"The Virtues and Limitations of Debunking," *The Southern Review*;  
"The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" *The Southern Review*;  
"The Calling of the Tune," *The Kenyon Review*;  
"War, Response, and Contradiction," *The Symposium*;  
"Freud—and the Analysis of Poetry," *The American Journal of Sociology*.

"Literature as Equipment for Living," *Direction*;  
"Twelve Propositions on the Relation Between Economics and Psychology," *Science & Society*;  
"The Nature of Art Under Capitalism," *The Nation*;  
"Reading While You Run," *The New Republic*;  
"Antony in Behalf of the Play," *The Southern Review*;  
"Trial Translation (From *Twelfth Night*)," *The New Age Weekly*;  
"Caldwell: Maker of Grotesques," *The New Republic*;  
"The Negro's Pattern of Life," *The Saturday Review of Literature*;  
"On Musicality in Verse," *Poetry*.

"George Herbert Mead," *The New Republic*;  
"Intelligence as a Good," *The New Republic*;  
"Liberalism's Family Tree," *The New Republic*;  
"Monads—on the Make," *The New Republic*;  
"Quantity and Quality," *The New Republic*;  
"Semantics in Demotic," *The New Republic*;  
"Corrosive Without Corrective," *The New Masses*;  
"The Constants of Social Relativity," *The Nation*;  
"The Second Study of Middletown," *The New Masses*;  
"A Recipe for Worship," *The Nation*.

"Hypergelasticism Exposed," *Hound and Horn*;  
"Mainsprings of Character," *The New Republic*;  
"Exceptional Improvisation," *Poetry*;  
"Exceptional Book," *The New Re-*  
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*public*; "Permanence and Change," *The New Republic*; "By Ice, Fire, or Decay?" *The New Republic*; "Fearing's New Poems," *The New Masses*; "Growth Among the Ruins," *The New Republic*; "Letters to the Editor—On Psychology," *The American Journal of Sociology*; "Letters to the Editor—On Dialectic," *The American Teacher*; "Dialectician's Hymn," *The University Review*.

Above all, I wish to state here publicly my great debt of gratitude to Professor Leonard Brown, of the Department of English at Syracuse University, who obligingly and ingeniously found time in the midst of many activities to prepare the index of this volume. And I do regret that the state of the proofs at the time when these far too inadequate words were inserted required my acknowledgment to come at the end, rather than the beginning, of my Foreword. The titular monograph in the book was reworked from material I originally presented as a visiting lecturer in connection with a course conducted by Professor Brown at Syracuse.

KENNETH BURKE

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