In August, 1959, an anxious William Rueckert wrote Kenneth Burke to ask, "When on earth is that perpetually 'forthcoming' A Symbolic of Motives forthcoming?" Burke replied, "Holla! If you're uncomfortable, think how uncomfortable I am. But I'll do the best I can. . . ." In the course of their long correspondence, the nature of the Symbolic—Burke's much-anticipated third volume in his Motivorum trilogy—vexed both men, and they discussed its contents often. Ultimately, Burke left the job of pulling it all together to Rueckert.

Forty-eight years after they first discussed the Symbolic, Rueckert has fulfilled his end of the bargain with this book, Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955. Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955 contains the work Burke planned to include in the third book in his Motivorum trilogy, which began with A Grammar of Motives (1945) and A Rhetoric of Motives (1950). In these essays—some of which appear here in print for the first time—Burke offers his most precise and elaborated account of his dramatistic poetics, providing readers with representative analyses of such writers as Aeschylus, Goethe, Hawthorne, Roethke, Shakespeare, and Whitman. Following Rueckert's Introduction, Burke lays out his approach in essays that theorize and illustrate the method, which he considered essential for understanding language as symbolic action and human relations generally. Burke concludes with a focused account of humans as symbol-using and misusing animals and then offers his tour de force reading of Goethe's Faust.

Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) is the author of many books, including the landmark predecessors in the Motivorum trilogy: A Grammar of Motives (1945) and A Rhetoric of Motives (1950). He has been hailed as one of the most original thinkers of the twentieth century and possibly the greatest rhetorician since Cicero. Paul Jay refers to him as "the most theoretically challenging, unorthodox, and sophisticated of twentieth-century speculators on literature and culture." Geoffrey Hartman praises him as "the wild man of American criticism." According to Scott McLemee, Burke may have "accidentally create[d] cultural studies."

William H. Rueckert, the "Dean of Burke Studies," has authored or edited numerous groundbreaking books and articles on Burke, including the landmark study, Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations (1963, 1982). His most recent book is Faulkner from Within—Destructive and Generative Being in the Novels of William Faulkner (Parlor, 2004).

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Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955

Kenneth Burke

Selected, Arranged, and Edited by

William H. Rueckert

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Dedicated Burkeans 
—WHR
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Preface

The purpose of this collection is to finally make available in a single volume the essential texts, some long out of print and hard to come by, some never published, from Burke’s earliest version of *A Symbolic of Motives*. Some of the texts included here have been readily available in *Language as Symbolic Action*—such as the “Goethe’s Faust, Part I” essay—but others have not, and they include most of the rest of the material in this collection. I have briefly discussed all of these selections in the Introduction, “Versions of *A Symbolic of Motives.*”

I am a big believer in the power of books, of having things readily available in a single volume one can take off the shelf and study over and over again. I have known most of the essays for a long time, but it has always been my ambition to have them in a single book on the shelf next to Burke’s other books. Thanks to David Blakesley, Parlor Press, and my wife Barbara, I have finally realized that ambition in this, my last, Burke project.

William H. Rueckert
Fairport, NY
January, 2003
Introduction

WE KNOW OF AT LEAST THREE VERSIONS OF A SYMBOLIC OF MOTIVES: there is the one that I have assembled here, which is now called Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955. It consists of selected essays from among those Burke wrote and published between 1950 and 1955, which he clearly indicated were to be part of A Symbolic of Motives, as he originally conceived it. He has left us various lists indicating which of these essays were to be part of A Symbolic of Motives. The most complete list can be found at the end of his essay, “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education” (1955). I have included selections from that essay in this collection, as well as the list of items Burke added in a footnote at the end of the essay. The second version of A Symbolic of Motives is called Poetics, Dramatically Considered, which

1 At the end of “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education” (1955), Burke writes:

A work now in preparation, A Symbolic of Motives, will deal with poetics and the technique of “indexing” literary works. Meanwhile, among articles by the present author already published on this subject are: “The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke” (Sewanee Review, Winter 1950); “Three Definitions” (Kenyon Review, Spring, 1951); “Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method” (Hudson Review, Summer, 1951); “Form and Persecution in the Oresteia” (Sewanee Review, Summer, 1952); “Imitation” (Accent, Autumn, 1952); “Ethan Brand: A Preparatory Investigation” (Hopkins Review, Winter, 1952); “Mysticism as a Solution to the Poet’s Dilemma” (in collaboration with Stanley Romaine Hopper (Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature, edited by Stanley Romaine Hopper, published by Institute for Religious and Social Studies, distributed by Harper & Bros., 1952); “Fact, Inference, and Proof in the Analysis of Literary Symbolism” (paper presented at Thirteen Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion, and published in a volume distributed by Harper & Bros., 1954).
Burke wrote and assembled from published and unpublished material from 1957 to 1958, during the year he spent as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Burke sent me a copy of this manuscript in 1959, after I first wrote to him. He also sent it to others and distributed it in multi-lithographed form to his classes at the Indiana School of Letters. Many Burke scholars are familiar with this manuscript. David Cratis Williams has written a long, comprehensive essay on this manuscript, which he included in *Unending Conversations*, the volume of Burke studies and writings that he edited with Greig Henderson in 2001. The third version of *A Symbolic of Motives* is actually called *A Symbolic of Motives*. I first saw this manuscript when Anthony Burke sent me a copy after he discovered it among Burke’s papers in the house at Andover after Burke’s death in 1993. As far as we can now tell from Burke’s letters to me and others, Burke put this version of *A Symbolic of Motives* together from published and unpublished material around 1963. We know that Burke gave copies of it to others, like Trevor Melia when he was at Pittsburgh, long before I ever saw it, but that nobody ever did anything with it until I sent a copy to David Cratis Williams while he and Greig Henderson were choosing the material that would go into *Unending Conversations*. This was Burke’s last serious attempt to prepare a coherent, sustained version of *A Symbolic of Motives*. He abandoned this manuscript midway through Part 2 while he was revising and shortening his long essay entitled “The Thinking of the Body.” This essay must have been written sometime after 1955. Burke included a long version of it in *Poetics, Dramatically Considered*, published it separately in *The Psychoanalytic Review* in 1963, and included a shortened version of it in *Language as Symbolic Action*. Although there are references to a Part 3 in this third version of *A Symbolic of Motives*, there is no indication anywhere of what Burke intended to include in Part 3. We know from his letters that Burke was still struggling with *A Symbolic of Motives* in 1969 after Libbie died when he spent some time at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs. Burke finally abandoned his attempts to put any kind of version of *A Symbolic of Motives* together in the late 1970s.

What we have, then, are three versions of *A Symbolic of Motives* and more than twenty years of struggle on Burke’s part while whatever *A Symbolic of Motives* was to be underwent a whole series of transformations in his mind and in his published and unpublished work.
Burke began work on *A Symbolic of Motives* as soon as he finished *A Rhetoric of Motives* in 1950. His intention from the very beginning was to write a dramatistic poetics to go with his dramatistic *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives*. By 1955, he clearly had enough written and published on this project to make a book called *A Symbolic of Motives*. But there were some problems that must have stopped him. He did not like Prentice-Hall and did not want to go on with them as his publisher. He had begun his relationship with Hermes in 1951 and was engaged, with them, in reissuing all of his books from the 1930s, plus his first book of poetry, *A Book of Moments*. His work on the poetics also was bogged down in his attempt to work out the physiological counterparts of his theory of catharsis—the central concept in his poetics. He began to do this in an essay called “The Thinking of the Body” in which he tries to show that the pity, fear, and pride that were purged in tragedy, according to Aristotle, had their physiological counterparts in the sexual, urinal, and fecal purges of the body, which Burke had identified as the “demonic trinity” in his *A Grammar of Motives*. Burke began to insist that no catharsis was complete until these bodily purges had been expressed in the imagery of a given work. Burke’s long essay “The Thinking of the Body” is an attempt to prove this thesis and involves him in some of the most tortured and absurd analyses he ever wrote, most of which are dependent upon the analysis of what he takes to be puns and hidden references to what he liked to call the no-no realm of the three bodily functions mentioned above. The absurdities to which proving this thesis led Burke can be clearly seen in the final pages of the third version of *A Symbolic of Motives* in which he revises and shortens “The Thinking of the Body” essay and offers us long lists of the many kinds of references that could be functioning as puns and hidden references to various kinds of bodily purgative functions.

Burke was very busy with a variety of projects between 1950 and 1961 when *The Rhetoric of Religion* was published and then again in the early and mid-1960s when he resolved his problems about a publisher and began his happy relationship with the University of California Press—thanks largely to the work of Bob Zachary. *A Symbolic of Motives* got lost in all of this because Burke still could not decide what to do with it or how to put together what he had written to make a book. The closest he came to presenting us with a coherent version of his dramatistic poetics was in *Poetics, Dramatically Considered*.
which, although it seems complete as it stands, Burke never seemed inclined to have published as a book but let circulate as a manuscript for all of those years. Burke did include material that was clearly part of all three versions of *A Symbolic of Motives* in *Language as Symbolic Action*, and although he did occasionally try to work on *A Symbolic of Motives* after that, he had really abandoned the project because in most ways, his dramatistic poetics was all written in one form or another and complete for anyone who wanted to take the trouble to assemble the different essays and manuscripts and work the theory and methodology out. As usual, Burke was ready to move on to new projects, and did, after *Language as Symbolic Action*. Libbie Burke’s death in 1969, after her long terminal illness, was a devastation to Burke. Libbie Burke was always a great champion of *A Symbolic of Motives*. We know that she typed the third version and that she kept at Burke to finish this grand project. Had she stayed well and lived, he might have brought it to closure. As it was, Burke lost his drive to make books, although he never lost his drive to keep writing, to keep working out his latest project, which was logology. He worked on with great energy and intellectual vigor until 1984 when he finally completed the two new afterwords for *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes toward History*. But he never resumed work on his *Symbolic of Motives* after 1969, even though he refers to it in notes for some of his essays in the 1970s.

If we want to know what Burke’s never-published *A Symbolic of Motives* is all about, what his dramatistic poetics consisted of, we have to work our way through all three of his versions of it and sort them out to try to determine the transformations that the original conception of it went through and why, as David Cratis Williams has argued, Burke was never able to settle on any single conception of what *A Symbolic of Motives* was to be. Here, then, is a brief summary of what we have in the three versions that Burke left us between 1950, when he first began writing the essays that were to go into *A Symbolic of Motives* and what he took out of these different versions to include in *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966. The three versions have the following titles in what follows: *Essays Toward A Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955*, *Poetics, Dramatically Considered* (1957–1958), and *A Symbolic of Motives* (1963–1964), and, finally, *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966). All of these versions of what might have been in *A Symbolic of Motives* had Burke ever decided to make a book or books of it have been discussed at some length in my book, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human*
Relations, 2nd 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 ‘Dramatically’ 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 dramatistic 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 dramatistic 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, Dramatistically 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, Dramatistically Considered

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9. Beyond Catharsis  
10. Catharsis, Second View  
   Vagaries of Love and Pity  
   Fragmentation  
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, Dramatically Considered is 104 typescript pages. All the later, revised versions are much shorter.

After Poetics, Dramatically 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, Dramatically 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 Dramatically Considered,” “The Poetic Motive” (1958), “The Thinking of the Body” (1957–1958) in a shortened, revised version, which first appeared in full in *Poetics, Dramatically 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, Dramatically 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, Dramatically 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