4. Dramatism

Martin Puchner

[Intro]

When I started teaching, one of my first student evaluations made fun of me for talking too much about genre. Well, the student didn’t write “genre” but used a phonetic spelling that captured the French-English-German version of the word I was delivering. The comment took me completely by surprise. Of course I didn’t want students to make fun of me for any reason, but in particular I didn’t want them to make fun of me for using an old-fashioned category such as genre. Genre was one of those things we had moved “beyond” in the nineties: and when we spoke of genres at all it was only to point out how limiting they were, celebrating moments when writers rebelled against or mixed or otherwise disregarded genres and the strictures they imposed.

Somehow this comment stayed in my mind, and over the years I gradually came to the realization that the student was right, that I had been speaking genre all along. I would like to take the occasion of this publication to look back at three case studies that I have undertaken over the years in order to tease out various ways in which genre can be used as a tool of analysis. In particular, I will highlight the relation between the individual work and its genre and the challenges of handling and representing large quantities of text, and, finally, I will test the limits of our conception of genre, derived as it is from the biological language of inheritance and genealogy. At the same time, I will relate the three case studies—the modernist closet drama; the manifesto; the Socrates play—to the general theory of genre developed by Kenneth Burke under the name of dramatism.
The Modernist Closet Drama

My first case study, the modernist closet drama, exemplifies a shift from a focus on individual works and their heroic rupture with genre conventions to an approach interested in how individual texts are embedded in genre histories. Genre bending was particularly rampant in modernist studies, and this influenced my dissertation, which focused on the relation between drama and the novel in the early twentieth century.¹ The hero of this story was, of course, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and in particular the “Circe” chapter, when Joyce interrupts the novel with a 150-page chapter written in the form of drama. At some point, however, it began to dawn on me that the story of heroic rupture was incomplete, even misleading. *Ulysses* was not the first novel to use dramatic interludes, but only an example of a tradition that included the “Midnight Forecastle” chapter of *Moby Dick* and Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*, among many other examples. Rather than treating the “Circe” chapter in isolation, I needed to see it as part of a history of similar generic entanglements.

But this was only the first step in my evolving use of genre. Increasingly I began to realize that the primary driver of the “Circe” chapter in *Ulysses* is not the history of similar dramatic interludes but yet another genre history, one coming from an entirely different quarter: the modernist closet drama. “Circe” belongs to a group of modernist texts that use the full generic resources of drama, including dramatis personae, stage directions, and setting, but not for the purpose of stage representation. (At least not immediately. Like most modernist closet dramas, “Circe” found its way to the stage in various “dramatic” adaptations that overcame the original text’s resistance to the stage.)
The closet drama’s critical relation to the stage, finally, offered a new perspective on modern drama more generally. Many modern plays were written, in one way or another, *against* theater, against the theater’s reliance on human actors and other material forms of mimesis, and this attitude was epitomized in its most radical form in the hitherto neglected genre of the modernist closet drama. The taxonomic reclassification thus was not an end in itself but allowed for a new view of modern drama, one that was attuned to the anti-theatrical dynamic within modern drama. Genre taxonomies have often been dismissed as empty exercises that do not go to the heart of literature. But the case study of the closet drama convinced me that reclassification can, in fact, offer a fresh perspective on an otherwise well-known text.

**Manifestos**

The desire to place individual works in the context of large samples, one of the strengths of genre-based analyses, also drove my second case study, a history of the manifesto in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the things that is notable about this case study is that one text turns out to have had an inordinate influence on an entire genre history: no text calling itself “manifesto” or otherwise inscribing itself into this genre can escape the *Communist Manifesto*, which casts a shadow over all subsequent manifestos. Indeed, many of these texts actually call attention to their relation to the *Communist Manifesto*, seeking to extend its generic reach quite explicitly. While in the case of *Ulysses*, I needed to move away from the individual work to a genealogical chain in which “Circe” was but one link, here, in the case of the manifesto, I was dealing with a genre that, in fact, originated, for all intents and purposes, in a single text, which
then engendered two lineages: first, a line of political manifestos, from which split off a second line, the art manifestos. My study then followed the two histories of political and artistic manifestos with their various crossings and divergences.

The fact that both types of manifesto originated in a single text, the *Communist Manifesto*, meant that by tracking this text’s reception through its publication history, its editions and translations, I could create something like the matrix on which all other manifestos were located. For advice as to handle the large amount of data emerging from this publication history, I turned to Franco Moretti, a strong advocate of studying large samples of data, and he uses both genealogical trees and maps to organize this data. In trying to represent the publication history of the *Communist Manifesto*, I created a graph that shows all attempted and completed editions and translations of the *Communist Manifesto* until 1918. The graph captures the delayed beginning, when the *Communist Manifesto* was threatening to go under after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, and its gradual but increasingly rapid expansion in the 1880s and 1890s, with the constitution of the Second International, and then its meteoric rise in the early twentieth century, especially after the October Revolution.

The second dimension according to which I wanted to organize these data was space. The geography of the *Communist Manifesto* was of particular interest to me: where it was written and published, translated, and distributed. My first impulse was to follow Moretti’s other great passion: maps. In the course of trying to figure out what kinds of maps I wanted, however, Princeton University Press suggested I consult an expert, who quickly diagnosed that what I really wanted to show did not require maps at all. People know where London or Geneva is located on a map of Europe, more or less. And if they
don’t, it doesn’t really matter, he said. What you really want to convey is something else, namely, the incongruity of the place and the language of publication, the fact that so many editions of the *Communist Manifesto* were produced in exile. For that I needed, not a map, but a chart showing the time and language of publication. I was disappointed at first and felt I was betraying the spirit of literary geography. But the expert was right. In the end, I needed a combination of a graph and a chart to capture what was noteworthy about this individual text and the two subgenres it engendered. The particular generic configuration I was confronted with required a kind of analysis that zeroed in on a single text, which was then shown to act on a large set of subsequent works.

The heart of this case study was not so much a generic reclassification, as had been the case with the closet drama. Manifestos, after all, openly and aggressively announce their participation in their genre all the time. And the type of genre history, with a double genealogy deriving from a single text, was different from the earlier history of the closet drama as well. Here the focus was the formation and then rivalry between two subgenres: the political manifesto and the art manifesto. More generally, the manifesto also opened a line of inquiry into the political fantasies of avant-garde art. In addition, one could use the manifesto to measure the changing attitudes toward revolution, a concept with which the manifesto continued to be intimately aligned, within the sphere of both politics and art. Just as the closet drama had lent itself to an analysis of modernist antitheatricalism, so the manifesto lent itself to an analysis of revolutionary fantasies. In both cases, genre-based analysis could be used for what Kenneth Burke would call a philosophy of literary form, an attention to the attitudes and values encoded in specific genres.
The Socrates Play

My third case study also focuses on a single, genre-producing text, or corpus of
texts, but it also serves to cast a critical eye on the very concept of genre, in particular its
biological valence. As has often been observed, the root gen in Greek, and janas in
Sanskrit, is originally at home in the world of biological species, in terms of kinship,
gender, reproduction, and inherited traits. The applicability of this language to literature,
however, is an open question. To some extent, it is true, we can organize genres into
evolutionary trees, showing how they evolve over time, adapting to new historical
circumstances and, more important, to new locales, entering new territories and habitats.
This is where Moretti’s approach is especially strong. He also uses a particularly
sophisticated form of evolutionary theory, one mindful of Stephen J. Gould’s warning
against the implied teleology of many forms of evolutionary thinking. But are there
limits to this notion of genre?

I will use my last example as such a limit case of biological evolution in the
domain of literary genre. This third case study focuses on the relation between
philosophy and theater. It takes its point of departure from a reading of Plato’s dialogues
as drama, and it extracts from them a specifically Platonic dramaturgy, by which I mean a
set of strategies for integrating philosophy with drama by relating arguments to actions,
ideas to characters, and plots to insights. In developing this dramaturgy, Plato drew on
many available genres, but, in particular, on tragedy and comedy, combining the two into
a hitherto unknown third.
What I want to single out for our purposes here is the subsequent history of this original Platonic impulse to combine drama and philosophy: the little known and quite minor history of dramatic adaptations of Plato’s dialogues, what I call the Socrates play. In Plato’s wake, philosophically minded dramatists and dramatically minded philosophers kept writing plays with the philosopher Socrates as their main character. One can trace the genre back to the Renaissance, even to Aristophanes’s *The Clouds*, but the Socrates play, of which I have found over one hundred examples, doesn’t fully emerge until the seventeenth century and reaches a first peak in the late eighteenth century, only to experience a second peak in the twentieth century. Most of these plays were written by minor authors, although some notable writers and philosophers also tried their hand at it. Diderot, Voltaire, and Strindberg wrote Socrates plays, and the expressionist Georg Kaiser even declared Plato to be the greatest dramatist. A number of those plays were written as closet dramas, meant for reading only, but others appeared on the prime stages of their time, including the Théâtre Français and, believe it or not, Broadway, where Lotte Lenya, wife of Kurt Weill, appeared as Xantippe in Maxwell Anderson’s midcentury Socrates play, *Barefoot in Athens*.

Authors of Socrates plays invariably took Plato’s strangely mixed genre and adapted it to more successful contemporary genres. A majority of those adaptations synthesize the four Socrates plays Plato had written surrounding the immediate sentencing and death of Socrates—*Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*, and *Phaedo*, thus casting the death of Socrates in various forms of tragedy, including Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Miltonian tragedy, classicist tragedy, bourgeois tragedy, or modern tragedy. At the same time, a second group of playwrights found in Plato’s plays ample material to furnish
various styles of comedy, from opera buffa to twentieth-century Broadway comedy. Often, the relation between Socrates and his wife, or several wives (based on Diogenes Lateritus’s biography), is a source of domestic comedy, even as many modern authors of Socratic comedies wrest Xantippe from the role of shrew traditionally accorded to her. Tragedy and comedy are only the most common genres, however. There are also philosophical or educational dialogues, closet dramas, various forms of opera and melodrama, and many other different subforms and subgenres.

In terms of genre, this case study is an example of discovering a subgenre. A reading of Plato’s philosophical dialogues in terms of drama led me to expect that dramatists should have picked up on this admittedly unusual dramatic form and followed suit. Once I started to look around, I indeed found that this was the case, and the discovery of scores of such Socrates plays in turn confirmed my dramatic reading of Plato. Furthermore, when seen from the perspective of the philosophy of literary form encoded in the Socrates play, these Socrates plays strongly argue for a combination of philosophy and theater, for the use of drama in thought, that became the ultimate goal of my study.

This was all well and good, but the more I contemplate this genre of the Socrates play, the more doubts I have about the adequacy of using the category of genre in this case. At first glance, the Socrates play can be described quite easily in terms of evolution and its operative term, adaptation: the adaptation of the Socrates play to the tastes of seventeenth-century London, eighteenth-century Paris, nineteenth-century Berlin, or twentieth-century New York. But the closer one looks at this history, the more it becomes doubtful as to whether evolutionary trees and branches will work here. The main reason
lies precisely in how minor and obscure the genre is; for this obscurity means that many of the authors did not know about their predecessors, whose works had often received little or no public attention and subsequently languished in archives. This has important consequences for the genre’s development because it means that most of these authors had to reinvent this genre continually from scratch. Quite frequently they will claim to be the first to have attempted a dramatization of Plato. Each individual instance of the genre, each Socrates play, that was not directly linked to its predecessor was therefore not begot by it; there is no continuous evolutionary line, as there had been for the manifesto. The Socrates play thus constantly starts over again, disappears and reappears whenever playwrights are touched, against all odds, by the dramatic impulse they sense in Plato’s dialogues, or when philosophers, against all odds, feel compelled to write drama in Plato’s vein. Plato acts across time, in a way that is perhaps reminiscent of Wai Chee Dimock’s notion of deep time. These plays pop up announced, as if through spontaneous generation, and disappear again only to reappear somewhere else. The Socrates play is a phenomenon located at the outer edge of genre.

The three case studies show a developing notion of genre. First, a move away from a focus on individual works and toward an account of different types of genealogies and their internal mechanisms. Such genealogies are generated through reference to a source text—the Communist Manifesto; Plato’s philosophical dialogues—and result in one or several genre traditions. Furthermore, these case studies offer different philosophies of literary form, showing how genre-based perspectives can become finely tuned tools for analyzing cultural values, fantasies, and practices. They are genre taxonomies, to be sure, but taxonomies placed in the service of cultural history. Indeed, I
have come to the conviction that genre-based analysis is one of the most useful things literary studies can contribute to cultural history.

Genre Theory

In the second part of this essay, I will relate my three genres—the closet drama, the manifesto, the Socrates play—to what Gérard Genette calls “archi-genres,” more specifically to the archi-genre of drama; for the three case studies—closet drama, manifesto, Socrates play—participate to some extent in drama. In the case of the closet drama, for example, we can use a notion of drama that includes plays not written for performance. Expanding the notion of drama in this direction is possible even though it requires abandoning the direct relation between dramatic text and theatrical performance that organizes at least some notions of what drama is or should be. The case of the Socrates play is no less complicated. By harkening back to Plato’s philosophical dialogues, it too is located at the very margin of drama and theater; indeed a good number of Socrates plays seem to belong to philosophy rather than to theater. Of the three, the manifesto is more distantly related to drama. It is usually not written in dialogue form, although the Communist Manifesto was supposed to contain dialogue and the published version still shows traces of this original plan. And yet, it has something to do with drama as well. Many avant-garde manifestos were performed, and all manifestos participate in the fantasy of spoken—or shouted—address to a live audience.

If we want to relate the three case studies to the archi-genre of drama, what is required is an expanded notion of drama, one that goes beyond a purely taxonomic
approach. In order to arrive at such a notion, I now turn to Kenneth Burke and his notion of dramatism.

Before delving into Burke’s dramatism, one more prefatory remark that speaks to the stakes of arguing for an expanded, even expansive, notion of drama. The simplest way of putting this is by mentioning the name of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin is responsible for a distortion in the relation between the novel and the drama. Bakhtin took many of his terms from drama, including “dialogism” and “heteroglossia”: drama, after all, is the genre most fully built on dialogue, and only performed drama gives us literally different tongues on the stage. But then, Bakhtin ascribed these dramatic terms, not to drama, but to the novel. To be sure, there are some good reasons for ascribing these dramatic terms to the novel rather than to drama. Many traditions of drama have tended to restrict the multiplicity of discourses in a given play, and misapplied conceptions of Aristotle have further decreased, rather than increased, heteroglossia in a number of dramatic traditions. But these are not good enough reasons for playing a dramatic theory of the novel off against actual drama. I, thus, want to argue against this theory that describes the novel as endlessly expansive and the drama as restricted by proposing a notion of drama that is even more expansive than Bakhtin’s conception of the novel. It is only by resisting Bakhtin that we can arrive at an expanded notion of drama that will capture such far-flung dramatic phenomena as closet dramas, manifestos, and Socrates plays.

Kenneth Burke’s Dramatism

Burke, for one, would not have hesitated to extend drama in this direction; he was a great believer in drama in all of its forms. With considerable frequency he discussed the
three great periods of Western drama: fifth-century Athenian drama, Renaissance drama, and modern drama. Scott Newstock has just gathered Burke’s writings on Shakespeare in a single volume; similar projects could be undertaken with Burke’s writings on Greek and on modern drama. Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Ibsen—there is nothing surprising about Burke’s frame of reference; Burke here is in the good company of drama critics of the thirties and forties, the period of his life I will focus on.

But Burke was not content with celebrating these three great periods of drama. Encouraged by a very different type of intellectual project, he started to think about drama in an ever-expanding sense. One expansion might well be compared to Genette’s notion of archi-genre, for Burke initially traced different forms of drama back to a single origin, what he called ritual drama. In this undertaking, Burke was inspired by anthropologists such as James Frazer, who were seeking to understand drama in ritualistic terms as an organizing category for all types of performance. Having started with the high-water marks of Western drama, Burke thus followed the anthropological turn, analyzing all types of drama in terms of the ritual drama from which they were said to have emerged in the first place.

So far, Burke follows the spirit of the times. But then he starts to do something unusual: ritual drama becomes a generalized term that is used to analyze increasingly far-flung phenomena. He writes, ‘We propose to take ritual drama as the Ur-form, the ‘hub,’ with all other aspects of human action treated as spokes radiating from this hub.’

Several things are remarkable in this statement. First, Burke here considers ritual drama, not as one of several archi-genres, but as the archi genre, a single ur-form. Second, this ur-form is meant to explain not only all other forms of drama, as one might expect, but
also “all other aspects of human action.” We are beginning to see here that Burke is interested less in theories of origin than in using origin to legitimize an expanded, formal notion of drama.

I want to leave aside the staggering bold claim about ur-drama explaining all forms of human action and consider its consequences for one particular domain: literature. Indeed, the statement above comes not from a work of anthropology or sociology, as one might expect, but from Burke’s book *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), and it is literary form that Burke wants to consider through the ur-form of ritual drama. Drama, for Burke, means primarily action, and consequently he considers literature as a form of action, namely symbolic action. But symbolic action is still too static a term. Burke’s approach is closer to what I would call a gestural reading of literature. Inspired by R. P. Blackmur and others, he speaks of a given work of literature as the “dancing of an attitude,” just as he wants to capture the “attitudinizing of the poem” in which “the whole body” may finally become involved. Burke thus analyzes poetry through a vocabulary of different types of acts, attitudes, and dances, but he always relates this vocabulary back to drama, the genre that is most explicitly and fully concerned with the human body in purposive motion. This dramatic reading can be applied to a number of other genres as well; for example, declarations of independence and constitutions, genres strong on attitude. Very compellingly, Burke captures their foundational gesture, their declarative or what we would now call their performative force. Indeed, Burke relates declarations to one of its heirs: political manifestos. We can see here that, via Burke’s notion of drama, we can in fact read the manifesto, which at first glance seems to have little to do with drama, back to a dramatic analysis. Having
taken his point of departure from ritual drama, Burke has arrived at a dramatic reading of
the manifesto.

We have seemingly traveled far from drama, even from ritual drama. There is
clearly a danger here of finding some form of action, and hence some form of drama,
everywhere, and if everything is drama, then what do we gain from such an analysis?
Some of these worries may be alleviated by looking at Burke’s emerging notion of
dramatism, the term that increasingly organizes his analysis. Dramatism revolves around
a set of five terms: act, agent, agency, purpose, and scene. Burke then uses these terms to
analyze an array of phenomena, starting, in his first book based on this method, with the
history of ideas. Grammar of Motives translates different systems of thought into
dramatistic terms. Materialism, as a philosophy based on the shaping power of material
conditions, is identified as a philosophy based on the “scene,” whereas pragmatism
privileges “agency.” In addition, the dramatistic pentad can be used to measure the
relation between the five terms; for example, Burke measures the “agent-scene” ratio in
various philosophies. In this way the dramatistic lens is directed toward the entire history
of thought from Plato to Santanyana.

Once again, we seem to have traveled far from drama, but once again we have not
abandoned it entirely, for in the course of this abstract dramatistic analysis, Burke
discovers a kind of dramatic substrate within philosophy, moments when philosophy
itself veers toward drama. It does so, for example, in the case of Plato, of whom Burke
states, “Plato’s dialectic was appropriately written in the mode of ritual drama.” Where
Bakhtin appropriates the Socratic dialogues as a precursor of the novel, once more
incorporating dramatic genres into his history of the novel at the expense of drama, Burke
recognizes Plato’s dialogues as part of drama’s history. Once again Burke has arrived at one of my three genres, the Socrates play, via an expanded notion of drama.

With his dramatism Burke has taken an archi-genre, or what he himself called an ur-form, and turned it into a formal tool. Formalism always implies a process of abstraction, that is, identifying in everything from poetry to philosophy a shared dramatic substrate. But at the same time, it is important that even an extreme formalism such as Burke’s does not abandon the archi-genre of drama entirely. So it is not the case that Burke simply calls everything “drama”; rather he relates admittedly far-flung phenomena back to actual drama. About philosophy, for example, he says this: “Every philosophy is in some respect or other a step away from drama. But to understand its structure, we must remember always that it is, by the same token, a step away from drama.” Burke’s dramatism is a peculiar type of formalism, one invested in concrete action, gestures, dances, and attitudes, a formalism that actually counteracts abstraction by relating it back to drama, thus demonstrating that even the most abstract of human endeavors, philosophy, is, in fact, nothing but one small step away from drama.

I want to conclude with some remarks on the advantages of dramatism. First, when I use Burke’s dramatism as a lens through which to look at my three case studies, what I notice is that they are all interested in the situation of address: the relation between a speaker and an addressee. The withdrawal of the closet drama from the theater also implies a withdrawal from an assembled audience, for example. The direct relation between speaker and audience is thus interrupted, mediated, or displaced. In the case of the manifesto, the relation between speaker and audience is modeled on a rallying cry, the agitating speech that is immediately translated into the actions of listeners. This, of
course, is nothing but a fantasy, which reveals the genre’s palpable anxiety about the effects it wants to have on its addressees. In the case of the Socrates play, and the philosophical drama more generally, the relation between speaker and audience is a matter of inducting the audience into a philosophical frame of mind. The prototype here is the Platonic dialogue, in which we see Socrates coax bystanders into philosophical discussions. This, too, is a fantasy, or at least a project that is prone to failure. Many Socratic dialogues exhibit heightened anxiety when members of the target audience get angry or threaten to leave, thus threatening to undermine the dialogue’s pedagogical mission. Dramatism, which is attuned to this dimension of what one might call the dramatic speech situation, allows us to perceive this situation as a common dimension in all three genres.

Theater Studies Today

But dramatism is not just a fruitful way of looking at marginally dramatic genres such as these three and teasing out their dramatic substrate. It also offers an alternative to theater and performance studies as it is practiced today. Burke’s interest in ritual theater, in anthropology as well as in the project of a dramatic sociology of human action, resonates with the current fascination with ritual, the body and the anthropological aspirations of performance studies as well as its ambition to study human behavior more generally. At the same time, Burke avoided several of the methodological blind spots that mar current methods. Most important, his interest in ritual drama and human action did not come at the expense of the literary text, which is too easily rejected by theater and performance studies today, in part because they have been embroiled in a struggle of
emancipation from English departments. No doubt, Burke’s position as a public intellectual, which meant that he was relatively unencumbered by disciplinary politics, was at least partially responsible for his ability to avoid this particular blind spot.

Another set of advantages concerns the expanded scope of dramatism itself. Burke’s dramatism demonstrates the ways in which a genre can become a lens through which to analyze a wide range of phenomena, from literature to philosophy. Among them I would include the category of language itself. Burke’s analysis of literary language in terms of gestures, dances, and attitudes anticipates the work of figures such as J. L. Austin, whose notion of performativity occupies an important place in literary method. At the same time, Austin’s theory of performativity has caused no end of problems due to its rejection of theatricality. In the 1970s and 1980s, Austin’s distinction between an efficacious use of speech acts and their mere “theatrical” mention became an object of critique, especially from approaches inspired by deconstruction, beginning with those of Jacques Derrida himself. The 1993 English Institute conference devoted to this topic belongs to this history as well. These types of deconstructive critique, however, did not put the distinction itself to rest. Indeed, Judith Butler distanced herself explicitly from “theatrical” readings of her theory of performativity, and theater studies scholars continued to find their domain tacitly or explicitly marginalized in discussions of literary speech acts. At the same time, the dichotomy between efficacy and theatricality was adapted by performance studies, which tried to distinguish itself from the study of “mere” theater. One might say that the marker “theatrical” just kept moving: first, it was excluded from Austin’s speech acts; then, it was excluded from Butler’s notion of
performativity, only to be excised from performance (as theorized by performance studies) as well.

While not unproductive, the debate between performativity and theatricality could not, and cannot, be resolved. Rather than dismantling Austin’s distinction, the debate merely led to proliferating versions of it. Here Burke’s dramatism can open an alternative by offering a specifically dramatic theory of language. Such a theory can recuperate a whole genealogy of thinking about language in the expanded terms of dramatism, namely, as symbolic action derived from drama, the art form that captures language as spoken by a specific character in concrete situations. One important episode in such a dramatic theory of language could be Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose notion of “language game” (Sprachspiel) can also be translated as “language play,” and who included the act of playing theater as one of the principal examples of such language games (or language plays). Wittgenstein’s own texts, of course, revolve around carefully constructed scenes, which some playwrights, including Tom Stoppard, have translated into actual drama. A dramatic or, to speak with Burke, dramatistic theory of language can escape the distinction between performativity and theatricality that has given us so much grief.

But I am getting ahead of myself as one is wont to do when in the thrall of a formalism such as Burke’s notion of dramatism. We are all familiar with the arguments against formalism: that it abstracts from context and tends toward a Platonic universalism; that it becomes schematic and its results, predictable. All this is true. It seems to me, though, that these dangers are also part of the strength of formalism. In any case, these dangers are under control in Burke’s dramatism, whose main point is to connect relatively abstract phenomena such as literature and philosophy back to dramatic
embodiments. This, finally, is the real strength of dramatism, a dialectic between abstraction and embodiment that never lets us forget that even rarified endeavors such as philosophy are part of some kind of human drama.
Notes


10. One of the few theater scholars to have taken Bakhtin to task for his instrumentalization of dramatic categories for his theory of the novel is Marvin Carlson,


20. This happened, for example, in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993). On this debate, see William B.