Literature as Symbolic Action

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ABSTRACT

For Kenneth Burke, literary texts are strategic answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. This view implies a notion of culture as a constantly changing field of symbolic interaction in which the relations between received constructs of reality and subjective experience are continually reassessed and rearranged. By transforming such ongoing processes of negotiation into the 'other world' of fiction, literature, as a deliberately tentative, playful mode of action, offers specific possibilities for testing and supplementing our social constructions of reality. In its freedom to arrange, to construct and to correct reality according to its own norms and interests, the literary text functions, in the words of P. Morales, as a multidimensional laboratory in which the writer places his theoretical premises in motion and develops the implications of his ideas and his values. The notion that literature works with the materials of a culture heuristically creates a specific interest in the complex interaction of its various levels of meaning as the logical place in which cultural and social perceptions are put to a test in the "eventfulness" of the text itself.

In the various attempts at a historical or cultural reading of literature,—including much of what has emerged as Cultural Studies or American Studies,—one point of agreement seems to be that whatever a literary text can be said to "reflect" is "mediated by its fictional nature . . ." Literary analysis, of course, "has these very mediations as its object of study, for they constitute the 'literariness' of the literary text."[1] The historical dimension of the literary text can only be recovered to the extent that its specific mode of communication is taken into account and made a subject of analysis; it is only in its specific potential as fiction that the text will yield its historical and cultural knowledge. Such reasoning refers us back to the main challenge with which all historical and cultural readings of literature have to come to terms eventually: What is this distinct mode of expression that characterizes the literary text? What are the specific functions of literary texts that reveal the ways in which history inscribes itself in the literary text?

It is at this point that it seems useful to go back to Kenneth Burke and to consider in what way his concept of literature as symbolic action might be helpful for a more precise understanding of some of the uses and functions of literary texts within culture.[2] Drawing on *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and the later essay "Literature as

[1] John Goode, "Woman and the Literary Text," *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 217.

[2] All the following quotations are taken from Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 2nd. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967). — That the American critic Fredric Jameson, working in a decidedly Marxist tradition, has recently shown a renewed interest in the concept in an article in the American journal *Critical Inquiry* lends additional emphasis to its significance and provides confirmation for my brief sketch of the genesis of the contemporary interest in the concept. Jameson's rereading of Kenneth Burke clearly finds itself at the same impasse which I have described. The concept of symbolic action is meant to stand in the service of a task which, he says, remains to be executed: ". . . the problem yet to be solved is that which frustrates all attempts at a sociology of literature, the precise relationship between the linguistic or aesthetic or conceptual fact in question and its social ground." As Jameson aptly summarizes the continuing frustrations of the attempt, "this

Equipment for Living," a brief, yet concise summary of his basic argument, the main thrust of his theory can be summarized as follows:

1. It is Burke's aim to define what he calls a sociological criticism of literature and to identify the historical substance of the literary text by means of a general theory of symbolic action.
2. What provides this attempt with continuing interest is Burke's search for categories that suggest the active nature of literature.[3]
3. One instance of verbal communication in which this active nature is quite obvious is the proverb. As Burke puts it:

> Proverbs are designed for consolation or vengeance, for admonition or exhortation, for foretelling.
> Or they name typical, recurrent situations. That is, people find a certain social relationship recurring so frequently that they must 'have a word for it'. The Eskimos have special names for many different kinds of snow (fifteen, if I remember rightly) because variations in the quality of snow greatly affect their living. Hence, they must 'size up' snow much more accurately than we do. And the same is true of social phenomena. Social structures give rise to 'type' situations, subtle subdivisions of the relationships involved in competitive and cooperative acts. (293 f.)

4. Burke then wonders:

> Why not extend such analysis of proverbs to encompass the whole field of literature? Could the more complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately be considered somewhat as 'proverbs writ large'? (296)

Like the proverb, the literary text can be read as an "adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations":

> These strategies size up the situation, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them. (1)

This implies, for example, that

> a work like *Madame Bovary* (or its homely American translation *Babbitt*) is the strategic naming of a situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutatis mutandis*, for people to 'need a word for it' and to adopt an attitude towards it. Each work of art is the addition of a word to an informal dictionary . . . (300)

relationship is not programmed in advance, and indeed there are many strategically different ways in which such a relationship can be projected or formulated. . . ." (Fredric Jameson, "The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis," *Critical Inquiry*, 4 [1978], 510 f.). Cf. also Burke's critical response "Methodological Repression and/or Strategies of Containment," and Jameson's reply, "Ideology and Symbolic Action," in *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1978), 417—22.—The direction I want to pursue in this essay is different from the one Jameson takes in his article fot I am not, to the same extent that he is, interested in determining whether Burke's work can be reread or rewritten as a model for contemporary "ideological analysis." The problem of understanding and explaining the complex relationships between society and the literary text remains patt of the larget problem of understanding the specific status of the text itself.—Jameson, one should add, has not been the only critic referring to Burke's concept of symbolic action. In the context of the American Studies discussion there have been occasional references, especially in the work of Gene Wise. Cf. his *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, IL, 1973) and the essay "The Contemporary Crisis in Intellectual History Studies," *Clio*, 5 : 1 (1975), 55—71. Wise, however, does not pursue the implications of the concept for the analysis of literature.

[3] Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 296.

5. In Burke's view the term 'situation' is thus a crucial concept for the description of the social context of the literary text in the sense that literary texts can be said to be generated in response to culturally 'problematic' situations. This view contains as its most significant implication a deliberate fragmentation and de-plotting of the historical referent.
6. To treat literature from the standpoint of situations and strategies reveals a common functional aspect underlying various modes of symbolic expression. One of the obvious implications of this view is that it postulates a continuity between work traditionally labelled 'art' and other forms of cultural communication such as oral culture, or, indeed, any other type of symbolic expression. All of these forms share a common basis in that they function as strategic and stylized responses designed to come to terms with a specific 'problematic' situation in a fictionalized version.[4]

Symbolic Strategies: "Unending Conversations"

Critics as diverse as Armin Paul Frank and Fredric Jameson have provided detailed and painstaking exegeses of the many complexities and complications of Burke's work. We are indebted to them for a deeper understanding of his occasionally idiosyncratic critical system. The following considerations are therefore not in any way intended as a systematic discussion of Burke's elaborate and complex critical approach. Rather it is my specific interest to take the idea of symbolic action and to pursue some of its implications for the problem of a cultural reading of literary texts.

To start with, Burke's notion of literature as a form of symbolic action seems to rest on a specific theory of human communication. In order to understand how communication functions in human relations, it is first of all necessary to recall that communication is inevitably, and by definition, goal-directed. As the social psychologist Franklin Fearing puts it:

> The pathways to these various goals are never wholly free from obstacles—delays, frustrations, and detours. As the individual confronts these obstructions, he must appraise them in the light of his previous expetiences and readjust or remarshal his resources in order to surmount them.[5]

It is a basic characteristic of human communication, then, whether literary or non-literary, that the communicative act can be regarded as a symbolic strategy through which the individual seeks to come to terms with reality. The individual identifies the forces which are friendly or hostile to his course of action—whether he does so correctly or incorrectly is at this moment beside the point. When individuals do all this, they can be said to structure a situation cognitively. We may assume the basic need that individuals have to permanently structure and re-structure their 'worlds' in order to live in them. This constant re-structuring or framing of worlds has, in another context, also been called the "social construction of reality" (Berger/Luckmann).

Perceiving reality, as we all know by now, is thus not at all a merely photographic registering. Rather the world out there is perceived in terms of those values, beliefs,

[4] Cf. Armin Paul Frank, *Kenneth Burke* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 105.

[5] Franklin Fearing, "Human Communication," *People, Society and Mass Communications*, ed. Lewis A. Dexter and David M. White (New York, 1964), p. 43.

and attitudes which we have acquired in an ongoing process of socialization. This is not to say, of course, that perception is completely subjective and that symbolic strategies can be chosen at random. There are obvious limits to our own projections, for the world 'out there' has its own organization which resists and constantly undermines our own construction of it. Communication in this sense always implies a process of re-adjustment. We orient ourselves in the world so that we act in accordance with our own needs, on the one hand, and its structural limits on the other. In brief, whenever we communicate we establish very complicated, interdependent negotiations and compromises between the world out there and ourselves as organisms with needs, values and intentions.

The term 'symbolic strategy,' it seems, manages to capture the interdependent and interactive nature of this never-ending process quite adequately. By definition it presupposes a moment of tension or dissonance in which our stock of knowledge is no longer experienced as sufficient for the purpose of 'sizing up' a situation. Consequently, the term suggests a view of communication as a constant process of reviewing and reassessing received forms of social knowledge on the basis of ever-new situations which put a strain on existing constructions of reality and require a new response. Quite suggestively, Burke himself uses the image of an "unending conversation" in which the individual is placed within a culture.[6] The concept of symbolic action thus implies a view of culture not as a more or less static realm, but as a living, constantly changing field of interaction in which the relations between received constructs of reality and subjective experience are continually reassessed and symbolically rearranged.

What it also implies, however,—and this seems an even more pointed consequence—is that we must understand this process of constant reassessment and active interaction of meanings as inherently purposeful and goal-directed. Culture in this sense is more than just a realm of ever renegotiated meanings, values and beliefs. By definition it also implies that we attempt to gain some measure of control over a situation by imposing a description that is most consistent with our own needs and interests. Seeing culture as a realm of contending symbolic strategies involves the notion of a struggle for cultural control or dominance between competing groups and their definitions of reality. Tracing, and intervening into, these symbolic struggles remains one of the main responsibilities and tasks of the cultural critic.

The Uses and Functions of Literary Texts

What are the specific uses and functions of literary texts in the "unending conversation" of a culture? Is literature just one mode of symbolic action among others, or is it characterized by a specific potential for "sizing things up"? Burke himself is hard to size up in this respect; and yet, I feel, that it is one of the merits of his concept that it contains not only a general theory of communication, but also suggests specific possibilities of the literary text within the broader field of communication.

Literary texts are distinguished from other forms of communication by their status as fictions. Simply put, they respond to reality by inventing stories. This seemingly playful use of reality has often given rise to charges of irrelevance and to "all the

[6] Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 110 f.

implications of gratuitousness, of baseless creativity and lie, involved in the word 'fiction'"—as Hillis Miller reminds us in his essay on "Narrative and History."[7] But it can hardly be overlooked that this very quality of invention also provides a unique possibility and advantage in the spectrum of possible symbolic actions within a culture —an advantage which Dieter Wellershoff has tried to capture and express with the word "Simulationsraum,"—that is, with the concept of literature as a kind of testing-ground. In its freedom to arrange, to construct and to correct reality according to our own norms and interests, fiction permits us tentatively to reformulate, complement or oppose the social and cultural constructions of reality, and it is exactly in this tentative, playful nature that one unique value of literature as a symbolic strategy can be found.[8] If communication in general may be classified as symbolic action, literary communication as a distinct form of symbolic expression might, in other words, be conceived as a deliberately experimental mode of action with its own potential for modifying and redefining, for unfolding and testing cultural perceptions.[9]

The choice of fiction as a medium for such tentative acts of re-ordering our construction of reality is suggested by two characteristic advantages. The first lies in the fact that in fiction we are making sense of experience without having to confront the immediate consequences of our assessment. The experimental, tentative modification of reality can be enjoyed in relative safety because of the fictional situation of communication. In one way, this lack of direct, immediate consequences seems to be a major shortcoming of literature as a mode of action. From another perspective, however, this apparent weakness can also be regarded as a source of special potential.

For it is the fact of a *tentative* scenario that may invite our imaginary participation in experiences we have not undergone yet or are afraid or hesitant to undergo. Fiction sanctions the expression of our wishes and hopes, our fears or anxieties; it allows the anticipation of concepts and ideas which in reality have not yet found another means of expression or which could only be expressed under danger. The very marginality of literature as a mode of action is in other words one precondition for its specific cultural possibilities. As Wolfgang Iser points out:

> All thought systems are bound to exclude certain possibilities, thus automatically giving rise to deficiencies, and it is to these deficiencies that literature applies itself. . . . The fact that literature supplies those possibilities which have been excluded by the prevalent system, may be the reason why many people regard 'fiction' as the opposite of 'reality'; it is, in fact, not the opposite, but the complement.[10]

[7] J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative and History," *Journal of English Literary History*, 41 (1974), 457.

[8] 'Tentative' not in the sense of a hesitant commitment to 'real' action, but in the sense of something that has still to be clarified and tested in the narrative process of formulating it.

[9] Cf. Karlheinz Stierle: "Fictional representation ... is not representation of the world but representation of possible forms of organization for experience." "The Reading of Fictional Texts," *The Reader in the Text*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 103.

[10] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), p. 73. Cf. also Edward Said who says: "Therefore novels are aesthetic objects that fill gaps in an incomplete world, they satisfy a human urge to add to reality." "Molestation and Authority in Narrative Fiction," *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971), p. 48, and Karlheinz Stierle: "By definition, fiction means difference from and not congruity with a given state of affairs." *The Reader in the Text*, p. 83.

By testing and supplementing our definitions of the world, fiction reveals what is problematic or deficient about them. For certain impulses or visions that cannot yet find any other form of expression within a society, the literary text may even provide the first or the only entry into a culture. Once these ideas have been made communicable and have been inscribed within a culture as possible models they may eventually inspire a more direct course of action or practice. Simulation becomes stimulation in this case. To stress the tentative, seemingly 'non-serious' nature of fictional texts, therefore, is not to say that they are without social functions. However, one might claim that, ironically enough, their social function can only be fulfilled in drawing on their potential as playful action.

The tentative reassessment of certain conflicts and deficiencies which the fictional text allows is facilitated by a second crucial characteristic of fictional representation: its freedom to express dissonant or disturbing experiences by using personal symbols, a personal vocabulary and a whole array of narrative strategies. Responses to specific situations can be translated into stylized and often disguised configurations, very often the only way they can be voiced at all in certain social contexts. Such responses can draw, among other devices, on those possibilities of projection, condensation, displacement, overdetermination, splitting and visualization which fictional texts share with other forms of fantasy activity. Specific formal choices, as psychological readings have shown, can serve as a defensive and distancing device to handle a recurrent fantasy in order to make it intellectually, morally and socially acceptable. The analogy between dream work and the work through which the writer constructs his or her meanings, however, only describes one instance among a whole repertoire of narrative and stylistic possibilities of transformation that writers have at their disposal. The analogy is not meant to imply that the perception of the 'transformative' potential of fiction should be restricted to the dream analogy whose adequacy for literary studies remains contested. But the obvious family resemblances to other forms of fantasy activity are an important reminder that many fictional texts contain historical substance exactly in those aspects in which 'reality' is transformed and transcended by fantasy—that is in their seemingly most 'unrealistic' moments.

Culture as a realm of contending forces

On a first and quite obvious level, the concept of symbolic action and its view of reality as a constantly restructured and renegotiated map entails a retreat from a convenient heuristic tool of cultural history: the assumption of a certain period, such as the 'Gilded Age,' as a historical—and thus an ideological—entity.

The complex processes of mediation involved in the idea of symbolic action provide their own argument for the fact that the ways in which social structure, cultural constructs of reality and lived experiences interrelate will inevitably vary in any given period, depending on different social and biographical circumstances but also on the stock of knowledge which is available to the individual for the definition of a situation. Thus, despite a body of shared traditions and values, a constant process of reformulation, readjustment and renegotiation of existing versions of reality can result in an exceedingly wide variety of responses to a similar moment of historical change; in fact, a faithful reconstruction of the variety of cultural responses must be seen as indispensible for a fair assessment of the possible range of symbolic actions within a given moment of history.

This is certainly not meant to say that it would be impossible to work out something like a dominant semantic or ideological structure within a historical period. The far-reaching influence of Victorianism in the 'Gilded Age' could serve as just one example. Yet such a system neither exhausts nor adequately describes the variety of cultural responses to an age. What it particularly fails to do is to point out the specific nature of the individual response within this cultural space which each single work presents and which Burke's concept of 'situation' as the crucial reference to a set of 'multiple realities' manages to capture quite adequately. Burke's purpose in 'deplotting' the historical referent, it seems, is not to evade questions of social context, but to focus more precisely on the specific historical and cultural moment to which the text responds. For literary texts, to be quite precise, do not respond to social contexts, but to specific situations within these contexts. The shift of emphasis, slight as it may appear at first sight, is essential nevertheless; for it marks the difference between a view of the literary text as manifestation of a certain historical and cultural period and an interpretation that stresses the text's constant—but also constantly frustrated—attempt to restructure and renegotiate the materials of a culture.

The literary text as a site of conflict

It is, however, Burke's aim not only to embed literature in a general theory of communication, but also, by this very act, to learn more about how the literary text itself operates. He assumes "that the poem is designed to 'do something' for the poet and his readers, and that we can make the most relevant observations about its design by considering the poem as the embodiment of this act."[11] The fact that literature, by definition, captures a moment of cognitive and emotional challenge draws our attention to certain recurring structural aspects of fictional texts which are, very briefly, characterized by the terms conflict, negotiation and "eventfulness."

1. Conflict

Treating literature from the standpoint of situations and strategies implies that the existence of fiction reveals an inadequacy in the existing construction of reality and in the explanatory value of received meanings. Fiction, we said, becomes necessary when the perception of certain aspects of reality is no longer shared or has become problematic or contested. This need arises from the fact that received social constructs are always—although to varying degrees—outrun by experience. There will always be a rivalry between the spontaneous experience of a situation by the individual and the definitions which culture has provided for him. What the concept of literature as symbolic action thus emphasizes is the tension of experiencing, and coming to terms with, conflicting perceptions of the world. The fictional text will inevitably be generated by a conflict, for without such conflicting or even contradictory perceptions, which can rise alternately or exist side by side in the text, there would be no reason for restructuring the world in fiction. In this situation the text becomes a kind of

[11] Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 89.

internal conversation in which alternate and conflicting lines of action can be rehearsed.[12]

2. Negotiation

As a rule the tension that underlies the narrative energy is constituted by a conflict between opposing forces that cannot both prevail, between alternatives that appear incompatible. Literary texts respond to situations in which the need for a decision creates a dilemma—for example, between giving expression to a disruptive impulse and yet remaining within the very social context that restrains it. The narrative as symbolic strategy can thus, as a second consequence, be conceived as a project to dramatize these opposing demands and to negotiate a path between them. Its very nature is that of compromise. Because the movements of history never stop, but generate new experiences at any given moment and because the narrative negotiation of the literary text is by definition tentative, ever new negotiations are needed and tried out in order to reconcile more effectively the impulses, real or imagined, with the demands, also real or imagined, of the cultural environment. As reception aesthetics has shown such dilemmas are actualized in a final 'negotiation' between textual codes and the perception of the reader. Culture, Jurij Lotman has suggested in a useful image, is a mechanism for organizing and preserving information in the consciousness of the community. Fictional discourse can then be said to preserve a series of symbolic strategies for specific situations of conflict so that they can be compared, drawn upon, and used for the reader's own formation of sense, sensibility and the 'non-sense' of the world of fantasy.[13]

3. "Eventfulness"

One further consequence of the theory of symbolic action for a cultural reading of literary texts is that the common classifications based on either/or oppositions such as progressive/reactionary, or affirmative/negative, fail to take account of the specific process character of literary communication. Rather than merely reflecting ideology or a conflict, the literary text, in the words of Peter Morales, emerges as a "multidimensional laboratory . . . in which the writer places his theoretical constructs in motion and develops the implications of his ideas and his values."[14] What this entails is a particular emphasis on the dynamic quality of the text, its specific potential as a testing-ground. Borrowing a term from *The Philosophy of Literary Form* one might speak of its "eventfulness." Literary texts, we said, can never completely coincide with received traditions nor will they be able to disregard the existing constructs of

[12] The symbolic-interactionist view of consciousness seems to me suggestive in this respect. For Mead thinking always involves two components of the self: the I, the spontaneous and impulsive aspect of the self and the Me, a set of internalized standpoints of others. Thinking, and by analogy writing, unfolds as dialogue between these aspects of the self. The idea seems most useful in suggesting a view of fiction as being inherently grounded, and moved by, conflicting impulses.—For a recent summary of the state of the discussion, cf. *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology*, ed. by Jerome G. Manis and Bernhard N. Meltzer, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978).

[13] Yurij M. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," *New Literary History*, 9 (1977—78), 211—232.

[14] Peter Morales, "The Novel as Social Theory: Models, Explanation and Values in Henry James and William Dean Howells," *Clio*, 5: 3 (1976), 343.

reality altogether. They will always have to find a way between conflicting claims. Thus, because it is itself the space for the developing and working out of a tentative response, the text's structure can be conceived as a dynamic relationship of the various codes and inter-textual references at work within a text. Semiotic and post-structuralist approaches have shown how this view of the text as a space where different meanings and levels of discourse collide turns historical and cultural reading into an enterprise which shifts emphasis from considerations of thematic and ideological transparency to the interaction of a multiplicity of codes and meanings operative in the structure of the text itself.[15]

It seems especially important to note, however, that these levels of meaning do not just (co-)exist, but interact and thereby 'test' each other in their innertextual relationship—a test that will inevitably develop its often unanticipated and unexpected logic. Meaning thus becomes an unpredictable emergent that is constantly regenerated by the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the text. In this sense, the historical significance of the literary work does not reside in a single meaning, but in the conflict and incompatibility of its different levels of meaning. For the process of narration as the negotiation of conflicting lines of 'symbolic action' literally sets the meaning free to 'work' its way through a whole variety of perspectives and it is in this process of constant interaction and the ensuing conscious or unconscious comment on the project at hand that a specific cultural accomplishment of the literary text can be found. In such a view the literary text emerges as a test of a culture's perception of reality—a test that adds new meaning to our constructions of reality in the process of unfolding them as fiction.

'*Disparate Texts*'

One special interest in the concept of symbolic action is its promise to find new ways of coming to terms with a central challenge of cultural studies: that of outlining effective ways of describing the historical and cultural significance of a text without resorting to either an epistemological realism, naive or refined, or to the concept of myth as a mysterious collective entity. Hence this discussion, although aiming at an understanding of literature's social and cultural function, has to a large extent been guided by considerations of its cognitive dimension as an instrument for establishing a symbolic construction of reality. The social and cultural knowledge which the literary text produces can only be adequately captured by grasping its specific mode of cognition—its fictional and thereby 'eventful' construction, transforming and testing of social experiences and cultural meanings.

The theory of symbolic action, then, can be used to draw attention to the experimental and self-reflexive potential of the literary text, but it does not restrict this quality to those overtly experimental texts which pursue such a program actively and self-consciously. Structuralist and post-structuralist approaches have habitually drawn on a distinction between the classical 'realistic' text, as the naive embodiment of an

[15] It is interesting to note in this context that Burke himself stresses the composite, multi-layered character of the fictional text when in his own somewhat idiosyncratic terminology he introduces the terms dream, prayer and chart to describe three different subdivisions of the text.

ideology of stability and order, and the self-reflexive free-play of modernism and postmodernism. As is customary in cultural disputes the strict dichotomy has served polemical purposes, but it has also, in its attempt to deconstruct the illusions of realism, unwittingly helped to gain a deeper insight into the working principles of the classical text itself. The notion of symbolic action suggests—and in this it can serve as somewhat unexpected link between cultural studies and postmodernist thought—that the textual model of a decentered multiplicity or complexity might thus be usefully applied to the pre-modernist, nonexperimental text as well. For although the classical, 'readable' and thus, in the terminology of postmodernism, 'realistic' text, is not supposed to confess itself to be fiction, it cannot abstain from doing so simply by submitting its own model of reality to a test in what we have called the eventfulness of the text itself, thereby constituting an unending conversation about the usefulness and applicability of the premises of its own project. The story of American realism, for example, is only on one level that of the consolidation of certain rational models of perception. It also contains a test of these models, thereby generating its own internal criticism and eventual subversion. While Howells was still elaborating on a particular theory of American realism, many works by American realists, in their constant dialogue with ever new situations that had to be sized up and restructured, had already begun to subvert its premises.

Such a perspective obviously puts heavy emphasis on the notions of conflict and contradiction as the source of the particular knowledge which the fictional text produces. Since Richard Chase's seminal assertion that American literature rests in contradictions—a view that informed and still informs a whole body of writing on American literature—this view should not be necessarily surprising. And yet, it may evoke concerns about the criteria on which our perception and evaluation of literary texts should be based. Interpretation, after all, is not only the description of a text's compositional choices, but also implies their problematization and evaluation by the reader. Are we to direct our attention to those works as culturally most instructive and interesting that are the most flawed and 'ruptured,' because they may provide the most telling pieces of cultural information? To what extent can the model of the literary text as a testing-ground serve as a source of cultural and literary insight and value?

To arrive at a satisfactory answer, one has to keep in mind that the ways in which conflict and disparity manifest themselves in fictional texts can vary considerably. Although each single text may be generated by conflicting impulses, it is affected and shaped by them in different ways and degrees—ranging from forms of controlled complexity to unwilling betrayals through structural flaws. The general awareness, however, that conflicts can be said to exist on different levels of control within the text should not be turned into an easy evaluative formula—for example, along the lines of criteria such as 'controlled' or 'uncontrolled.' In many cases, formally 'controlled' works can exercise control only because they rest on principles of exclusion and closure; whereas seemingly 'formless' and formally badly disciplined works, on the other hand, often lack a governing formal order precisely because they use fiction's full potential to open up towards culturally new, otherwise not accessible experiences. The reevaluation of structurally 'flawed' texts such as Melville's *Pierre* and Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* or our changed awareness of disturbing elements of structural

'formlessness' and a decentered complexity in a novel like *Huck Finn* attest to the intricacy of the problem and show that strong degrees of 'formal' control should not be considered sufficient criteria in themselves, to be applied in every case as a ready-made set of preconceived notions of literary structure. In fact, such an application would stand in obvious contrast to our changed notions of the literary text as an eventful, dynamic process which thrives on semantic multiplicity and unpredictability.

The question of fiction's cultural and literary significance and value, then, has to rest on a more complex and difficult evaluation of the role which the various compositional choices of the text play in expressing and testing its own perception of the world. To what extent a fictional text can be said to have drawn successfully and with imaginative resourcefulness on its own potential as a testing-ground cannot be determined in advance by resorting to certain fixed compositional principles. It can only be decided in the process of a detailed reading and discussion of the text itself. In this sense, the concept of literature as symbolic action leads straight back to the text itself, for it creates a renewed interest in the complex interaction of its thematic and formal strategies as the logical place in which the symbolic materials of a culture, its theoretical claims and constructs are put to a test, so that an altogether new dimension of exploration and experimentation can be added in writing. It is this addition to and extension of reality by means of fiction, this—to use a somewhat dangerous phrase—shaping and changing of reality by rhetoric which suggests the usefulness of the concept of symbolic action as a tool for literary and cultural analysis.