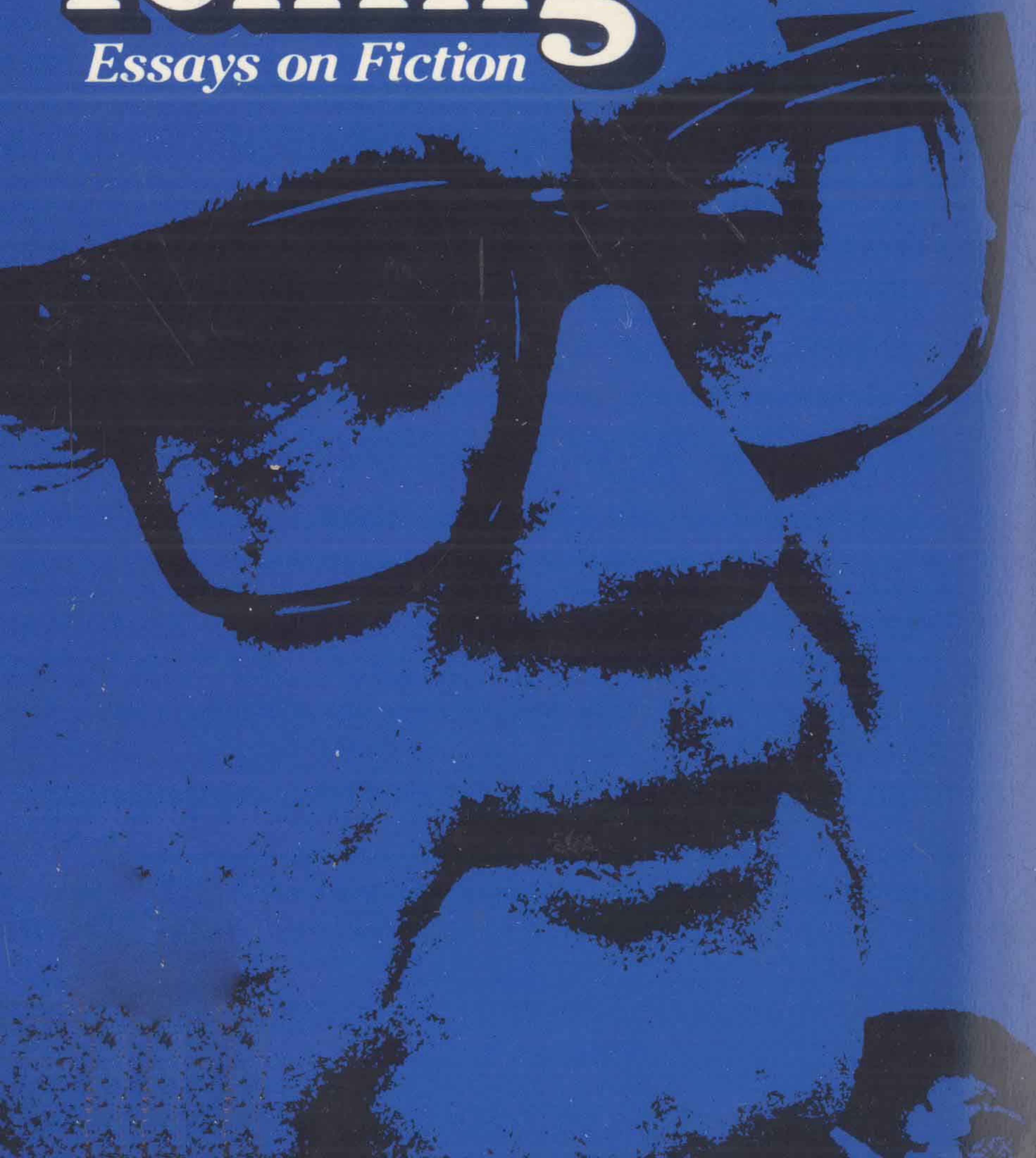


Frank Kermode

The Art of Telling

Essays on Fiction



THE ART
OF TELLING
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FRANK KERMODE



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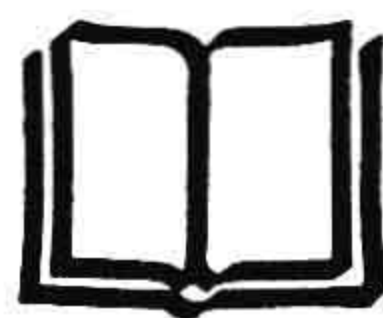
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THE ART OF TELLING

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The essays here collected were originally lectures or papers given to audiences of many different sorts, some highly professional and some general, but I have tried to avoid technical terms on all occasions, except when they seemed indispensable and could be explained as one went along. There are certainly variations of tone, some to be accounted for by the different audiences, and some by the author's own development, or, less honorifically, changes of mind. All but the last two of these pieces were written between the publication of a book called *The Sense of an Ending* in 1967, and that of *The Genesis of Secrecy* in 1979. Both of these books are studies in the theory of fiction, and so, to some considerable extent, is *The Classic* (1975). So although I wrote about many other matters in those twelve years, it would be true to say that these essays are the by-products of a more or less continuous effort to understand and contribute to a topic which, as it happens, developed quite suddenly during the same period a central importance it had not possessed since Aristotle.

For in the latter half of the 1960s there occurred a remarkable efflorescence of speculation about the way narratives work. Structuralism, in its origin a method for linguistics, had achieved very novel results in the field of social anthropology, and it appeared to many that it could be used in the analysis of narrative. It was principally a matter of elevating the methods of linguists above the

level of the sentence, which was their ceiling. The issue was complicated by the contemporaneous revolution in linguistics, which was almost entirely the work of Noam Chomsky; I remember noticing during a visit to the United States in 1969, many attempts to fit a transformational-generative component into a narrative model. But in the early days this complication attracted little notice in Paris, the centre of structuralism; there it was the linguistics of Saussure (and Hjelmslev) that ruled. The basis of French structuralism was a Saussurian semiology (for Saussure associated linguistics with a more general science of signs). It was also strongly affected by a revival, or it might be better to say a discovery, of Russian Formalism, a highly original body of literary theory that flourished in the years immediately following the Revolution. One of its most distinguished exponents, Roman Jakobson, who had influenced the anthropological method of Claude Lévi-Strauss, had survived as a source of inspiration in linguistics and indeed in the larger field which some were now calling 'poetics'.

If there is a single publication that best represents the coming-of-age of this new poetics it is the eighth issue of the Paris journal *Communications* in 1966. This 'little magazine' contained several important essays on narrative analysis (by A. J. Greimas, Claude Bremond, Umberto Eco, Christian Metz, Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette, but it led with Roland Barthes's 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits'. Barthes was already well known outside France for his short book *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), his collection *Mythologies* (1957) and his advocacy of the *nouveau roman*. Lately he had published also his *Éléments de Sémiologie* (1964) and engaged Raymond Picard of the Sorbonne in a fierce controversy about the validity of Barthes's little book on *Racine* (1963). The most important outcome of this row was Barthes's drastic and brilliant pamphlet called *Critique et Vérité* (1966), a manifesto that for some reason has never been translated into English. Barthes's adherence to the method of analysis advocated in *Communications* 8 was, as it turned out, transient, but it firmly associated structuralist analysis with a critical *avant-garde* more widely conceived, and also ensured that Barthes should at this time be regarded as the most distinguished exponent of the new method. In 1971 he produced an even more influential book, *S/Z*, a highly original semiological analysis of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*.

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I have given what many will recognise as an extremely simplified account of a state of affairs which was historically much more complicated, but my purpose is to recall the importance in those days of Barthes, the invigorating effect of his fertile and surprising mind. As the years went by he became not less exciting but less didactic, and I am certainly not alone in my conviction that much of his finest work came after *S/Z*; but his major impact on students of narrative was felt between, say, 1967 and 1974. My own way of thinking about narrative (as in *The Sense of an Ending*) had nothing, or very little, in common with what was going on in *Communications* or *Tel Quel*, and I remember feeling rather dismally that quite a lot of work had gone into a book which became antediluvian almost on publication. But it seemed necessary to examine specimens washed in by the flood, and it was during those years that I chaired, at University College London, a seminar dedicated to that and to similar enterprises. No other phase of my academic life has given me so much pleasure and instruction. We were quite informal, but did a lot of work, some of which was eventually published; but that was not our primary aim. The constitution of the group changed over the years, and we had many visitors, including some novelists – I remember the late B. S. Johnson as particularly co-operative. Among the participants who were in one way or another exponents of *la nouvelle critique* were Christine Brooke-Rose, Jonathan Culler, the late Veronica Forrest-Thompson, Stephen Heath, Jay Kaiser, Annette Lavers, Christopher Norris, Shlomith Rimmon, Anita Van Vactor, and, on one notable occasion the late Roland Barthes himself; the opposition was in the hands of various no less formidable discussants, Barbara Hardy for one. Not the least of the qualifications of these and many other friends of the group was a willingness to express lively disagreement without rancour; another was to examine one's own prejudices as well as others' and to preserve a tone of good humour in the midst of the most serious, even the most fierce, exchanges. In those days I suppose I imagined that there was nothing unusual in this combination of opposition and civility, but I have seen very little of the kind since 1974, and can only hope that the lack is local and not general.

One important effect of our cultivating these new interests was this: the horizons of our enquiry were constantly extended beyond what would formerly have been thought usual for students of

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literature. We found ourselves reading many books we might hitherto have left to others: Foucault, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, to name only three authors. I think everybody felt a little strange but certainly liberated; the training offered by most English universities does little to encourage such 'interdisciplinary' enquiries. But there were limits to our ambition, and I doubt if more than one or two of us shared the view, then earnestly proposed by some, that a new *paideia* was in the making, perhaps with *Critique et Vérité* as its founding text. As the books and papers multiplied it became clear that there was much less common ground among structuralists than might at first have been supposed; and already in 1967 the books were published that signalled the end of this early version of it. They were the work of Jacques Derrida, and among much else they used a novel and de(con)structive method of analysis to question, in the most radical manner, the tacit assumptions on which structuralism, Saussurian semiology, Lévi-Straussian anthropology, and pretty well every other mode of enquiry, including its own, might be shown to depend. The 'post-structuralism' which ensued was a protean and eclectic affair. The idea of deconstructionism gathered momentum only slowly, but with the powerful advocacy of Paul de Man it made its way in the United States, first at Johns Hopkins and then at Yale and Cornell. The strange 'ludic' (spontaneously playful) anti-philosophy is now well established in the United States, together with the kind of interpretation that follows from it; in the UK it has never really taken root, and is still regarded with suspicion and derision by serious persons, many of whom seem to have very little idea of what it is. The career of Jonathan Culler is instructive. As late as 1975, when he was still working at Cambridge and Oxford, he was opposing Derrida in his *Structuralist Poetics*, generally thought to be the most authoritative guide to the subject; but he returned thereafter to the US and joined the Derrida party. His earlier book may well seem to him now as academically conservative as it does to such commentators as Frank Lentricchia, whose excellent book *After the New Criticism*¹ includes the observation that when the Modern Language Association awarded *Structuralist Poetics* the James Russell Lowell Prize for 1975, this on the whole conservative organisation was not so much engaged in disinterestedly applauding merit as in recognising that Culler had made structuralism safe, partly by his judicious dismissal of Derrida. The Association was

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not merely applauding, but bestowing 'an ideological nod of recognition'. Culler's conversion to deconstructionism is quite an important moment in the history of the American movement, but the distance, in this respect, between the two nations is great, for the British academic establishment offered no prizes or nods even to the conservative-structuralist Culler, and I should expect its response to his later work (if it could be bothered to have one) would be that it was well rid of him.

The seminar came to an end in 1974, without ever (so far as I remember) taking on Derrida or deconstructionism. Although, as I have suggested, I gained much by it, I was never tempted to declare myself a structuralist, or a post-structuralist, or even a narratologist or poetician. There are doubtless many reasons for this resistance, not all of them creditable. One was, simply, inertia; I was too old, and by formation too much of an historian, to be comfortable with all the implications of structuralism; I was a diachronic sort of person, who indeed once published a book called *Continuities*. A good part of the pleasure I derived from my profession had come from finding out what texts seemed to be saying as it were voluntarily, and in conveying this information to others; and I should have felt uneasy to join a party whose sole business it was to elicit what they were saying in spite of themselves. Since I have put the matter so crudely I should add that I do not share the comfortable opinion of the English academic (and, it seems, journalistic) establishment that the critics of the new persuasion are self-evidently absurd; or, more seriously, that they are unprincipled; or, when their arguments seem persuasive, that they are, like the forces of Monostatos and the Queen of the Night, wickedly threatening the citadels of Imagination or indeed Humanity, as alarmed academics sometimes claim.

Concerning deconstructionism, the most frightening manifestation of the newer criticism, I myself have reservations. First, when deployed with a fervour no less evangelical than ludic, it can be extremely dull, and since dullness is a contravention of what I take to be the purpose of criticism – briefly, illumination – I could not join a party which did not mind about *that*. Derrida himself, ranging eccentrically over great tracts of literature and philosophy, is full of surprises and hardly ever dull; but his followers do tend to say the same thing about everything they choose to discuss – that those texts are 'always already' self-subverted, that they con-

tain, in some occulted form, that which violates their ostensible meaning. I take this to be an hyperbolic expression of a partial truth, like the confident assertion that the history of criticism is necessarily a history of error. 'Their life a general mist of error' – Webster's words might therefore serve as a motto for the tribe of literary critics. There is something, but not everything, in it, and of course it applies as much to the deconstructors as to everybody else, as Derrida has always engagingly allowed. 'Deconstruction,' says Hillis Miller, an eminent disciple of Derrida, 'is not a dismantling of a text, but a demonstration that it has already been deconstructed.'² As Suresh Raval quite fairly remarks, 'Deconstructionist practice does not merely remain bound to its governing theoretical premises; it rather ceaselessly seeks to confirm those premises. . . . The reason deconstructionists cannot help endlessly repeating the same synchronous tale in all their interpretations is that the limits of what they can say are defined by the concepts they hold . . . the concepts . . . determine the limits of their experience.'³ The method is not only monolithic, it is entirely absorbed in demonstrating its own validity. It may be argued that there is nothing very wrong in that, but the kind of criticism one does is, in the end, an ethical choice, and I myself do not believe that this kind of thing is what criticism *ought* to do.

A second, and to a teacher a more compelling argument against some advocates of deconstructionism is paedagogical. The success of the new critical philosophy has come at the very moment when, as almost every competent reporter would agree, students arrive at the universities knowing much less, having read much less, than ever before. This may be less true of the great institutions in which the new style has been most successful – Yale, Cornell, Hopkins – though I doubt it, and in any case such exceptions would make no difference to the general argument. It is natural for a man who has found the truth to wish for the most effective means of communicating it widely, and Professor Miller, with others, would make deconstruction an undergraduate subject. Yet it depends for its operation on the existence of more or less canonical texts, which have already an accepted range of constructive meanings. The leading deconstructionists are all very learned men, indeed learning is an obvious prerequisite of their practical programme; and students will always have to be conducted into some initiatory mist

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of error before they can hope to emerge on the sunlit, ludic uplands of deconstruction. *O welch ein Glück!*

My purpose in sketching an attitude to deconstruction is to emphasise that the essays in this book reflect what is called in the argot a 'recuperative' temperament. The best exponents of the new approach are at least as aware as their opponents that it cannot last for ever; indeed the people who think they possess methods and assumptions of perpetual validity are precisely these opponents; their veneration for what they take to be the directly accessible structures of past cultures, and for the historical record unsullied by intrusive modern perceptions, has never enabled them to observe that change is just as obvious as continuity in the history of interpretation. I am interested in the record of both. The history of modernism could be written as an account of the conflict between excited catastrophe theorists on one side and panic-stricken reactionaries on the other. Deconstructionism is, in part, a catastrophe theory, for behind it there is the assumption that the whole Western metaphysical tradition can be put into reverse. It is at this point that the orthodox, who dislike having to consider such unsettling propositions, man the walls with their dusty banners: principle, imagination, the human world, though the most vocal of them are manifestly unacquainted with the first, lack the second and seem to know the third only by hearsay. They are therefore unable to see that just as some of the innovations of Empson and the New Critics (who were also in their day derided by a conservative establishment) have been absorbed into their practice, so will the methods of the deconstructionists, who could perfectly well claim Empson as an ancestor. We cannot foretell the history of interpretation in detail, but we can say with some confidence that it will continue, that it will not be deconstructionist, and that contemporary polemic against the new criticism will, if anybody bothers to consider it, look foolish.

We lack a great man who might, like Eliot, hold together the new and the traditional, catastrophe and continuity; unfortunately we do not lack doctrinaire and unconsidering people on both sides of the argument. My own inadequacy as a mediator has already been adequately demonstrated. There is a war on, and he who ventures into no-man's-land brandishing cigarettes and singing carols must expect to be shot at. Christopher Norris took this point in a perceptive (by which I do not mean wholly favourable) review of

The Genesis of Secrecy,⁴ when he said that the two positions are 'in theoretical terms . . . beyond all reach of moderating judgment,' so I expect no medals for going on trying; but it seems that I can do no other, there is no possibility of retreat. It is not easy to act aggressively from a position of moderation, and I shan't try – not here, at any rate. But I will try to explain, as I look back over the essays here included, all records of various attempts to understand the new without abandoning the old, where I now stand. Sixteen years ago Christopher Ricks offered a description of 'the true reader and critic': he is 'open-minded but not vacuous; he does not surrender his own opinions, experiences, beliefs and knowledge, but neither does he clutch them desperately. He is both independent and accessible.'⁵ In pre-war 1966 these words must have seemed almost too obvious or even banal to be worth the trouble of writing down, but they are worth recalling at a time of embattled vacuity and inaccessibility; I shall try to bear them in mind, and hope against hope that they are frequently recited in the 'traditionalist' trenches, if only in the spirit of bishops blessing cannons.

UNCLE WILLIE AND THE WEDDING CAKE

I begin with what I take to be a useful historical instance of a problem in interpretation of the sort that cannot honestly be avoided by any party to the current dispute. There are, in fact, two instances, but only one problem. Let us first look at what E. M. Forster described as his 'nicest' novel, *A Room with a View*, which was published in 1908 though in large part written some years earlier. It is the story of an English girl at her moment of social and spiritual crisis, for she is in danger of permanent absorption into the darkness of middle-class manners and prejudices. Chaperoned by an older woman who has, it seems, already gone into that night, she encounters in a Florentine *pensione* two unusual souls, the Emersons, *père et fils*. Old Emerson is a rather uncouth, truth-telling, agnostic life-worshipper. Young Emerson has his own dark, and may disappear into it, but it is not the dungeon of public school refinement. They are a rather garden-city pair, but are clearly 'saved', or will be. Hearing the ladies lament the absence of a view from their rooms, they offer to exchange; bad form, but the offer is accepted. Lucy, the young woman, happens to be standing nearby when a man is stabbed to death in the Piazza

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Signoria, and she faints in young George Emerson's arms. Later, encountering her in a glade full of violets, he kisses her. This outrage is observed by Charlotte, the chaperone, and Lucy's response is modelled on Charlotte's. They leave for Rome. But the Emersons turn up again in the English village where Lucy lives; she gets kissed again, is again outraged. However, she breaks off her engagement to a truly awful man called Cecil, who, though an aesthete, was not going to save her from the dark. She does spend a little time there, but eventually elopes with George to Florence.

A year before *A Room with a View* Forster had published a much more complicated novel, *The Longest Journey*. In it Agnes, the darkling wife of the hero Rickie, complains at one point about the kind of stories he writes, and asks, 'Couldn't you make your stories more obvious? I don't see any harm in that. Uncle Willie floundered helplessly. . . .' When Edward Garnett reviewed *A Room with a View* he quoted this passage, and commented, 'In truth it is not easy to explain the subtle quality of Mr. Forster's brilliant novel to Uncle Willie and his kinsfolk. . . . How can the art of telling, this network woven of a succession of tiny touches, be brought home to Uncle Willie?' Garnett, a most enlightened publisher's reader, was at the time the principal mediator between writers who thought of the novel as art, and a public which as a whole cared nothing about that but wanted a good read. Among the writers he tried to bring home to Uncle Willie were Conrad and Lawrence. Forster, not surprisingly, was much gratified by the review; he wrote that it 'gave me tremendous pleasure for the Uncle Willies are encompassing me sorely.'⁶

For a number of reasons the position of writers who wanted to practise the art of the novel was, at this time, both difficult and promising. The sudden death of the three-decker in the 1890s had changed the pattern of fiction and fiction publishing. Novels could be shorter and cheaper, and with luck they commanded very large sales. Freed of the constraints lamented by Gissing, they enjoyed new formal freedoms, though Uncle Willie still held the purse-strings. The artists were under two powerful influences: Meredith's, but it was fading; and James's. The Prefaces to the New York edition were appearing in these years. What followed was new – an intense concern for the potentialities of the instrument itself, for the latent and neglected capacities of narrative fiction. The 'art of telling' underwent the sort of critique that was being applied, in

these same years, to music and painting, but also to philosophy and physics, and to technology in general.

This passion for technique, for a new novel that might escape the constraints of conventional narrative, was by no means confined to Britain. In France, where the revered ancestor was Flaubert, it already seemed by the turn of the century that the Novel was more interesting than novels; that fiction could be less *récit* than *recherche*. By 1913, the year of *Les Caves du Vatican* and *Du Côté de chez Swann*, it was commonplace to decry mere story. The Symbolist horror of the accidental and the quotidian passed over into fiction, and Valéry deplored the 'absence of necessity' in novels. About this time there also developed a sense that many of the old tasks of novels could be left to the cinema; but the first appearance of symptoms of 'une crise de l'affabulation' were evident at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ The rest of this history is more familiar: Sartre, Camus, Queneau, Butor, and above all Robbe-Grillet with his fully fledged manifesto of a *nouveau roman*; and then, before long, the *nouveau nouveau roman*.

What happened in England was, as usual, less bold and less a matter of manifestos and proclamations; and even Ford frequently insisted that the novel of technique should not reject the more popular tradition. And it would certainly be possible to maintain that the technicians were not so much inventing a new novel as developing features already in the tradition; for example (but the development of the theme must await another occasion) the deeply excogitated time-shifts of Conrad and Ford are merely a conscious extension of quite ordinary expository devices to be found in most novels. (Hardy presumably did not think of himself as using new techniques in the opening paragraphs of *Jude the Obscure*, though they can be shown to use a quite elaborate set of time-shifts.) Nevertheless, Conrad and Ford were among the writers who failed to please Uncle Willie any more than James did. Forster's correspondent Garnett understood their art, but belonged to the world of commercial publishing and wanted for them the huge rewards achieved by the popular yet still 'serious' novelists like Galsworthy, Wells and Bennett. It may not seem credible, but I calculate that Bennett's income in 1913, expressed in terms of our money in 1982, amounted to something over £800,000.

Doubtless such riches were somewhat beyond the hope, perhaps beyond the desire, of Forster; unlike Conrad, Ford and Bennett he

had a decent private income. But it was his character Cecil Vyse and not Forster himself who sweepingly condemned success: 'all modern books are bad . . . Everyone writes for money these days.' And Garnett usually found the younger, unestablished writers quite willing to let him help them find a compromise between art and Uncle Willie. He would have argued that in doing so he was not only attending to their material needs but maintaining contact between their work and the history of the novel, which was created for a bourgeois audience not ordinarily very interested in art, and quite ready to judge fiction by standards that might seem, to those engaged in technical research, tediously or even lethally conventional. The response to *A Room with a View*, so far as it may be judged from the reviews collected in the *Critical Heritage* volume,⁸ gives one some idea of how a rather unorthodox new novel might be received. The word that recurs in almost all of them is 'clever', which probably enticed some readers but scared off Uncle Willie. The *Times Literary Supplement* added to 'cleverness' both 'sheer fun' and 'occasional beauty'. The *Morning Post* headed its review 'A Clever Novel' and affirmed that Forster had 'one aim only: he sets out to make clear the limitations of the cultured middle-class.' Elsewhere he is commended for 'sighting the comedy of ordinary social intercourse'. A Chicago paper complained of Forster's 'irritating desire to be clever' and called the book 'a would-be difficult and would-be novel trick in the gymnastics of psychology'. On the whole it seems that everything in the least unusual or disquieting about Forster's procedures could be dismissed with the one word 'clever', while the remainder was assigned to standard categories, whether eulogistically or dismissively. There is no reason to suppose that modern reviewers would do the job any better.

It is true that some contemporaries alluded to the 'symbolism' of the book – to the not wholly naturalistic use of rooms, views, various Italian painters and so forth – as giving the work a penumbra of inexplicit senses. Later commentators, unhampered by deadlines and also benefiting by changes in critical fashion, have deepened these perceptions. More is going on than meets, or is intended to meet, Uncle Willie's eye. Twenty years later Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel*, gave some attention to this conflict between the art of the novel and 'the grossness of its material'; this was after he had written his most complex and, as it turned out, his last novel, *A Passage to India*. Meditating the quarrel between

James and Wells, which turned on this very issue, he says that he is on Wells's side in that he 'gives the preference to life' over art. But he also meditates upon the device he calls 'rhythm'. 'Rhythm' is not obvious symbolism of the Meredithian kind, as when, in *The Egoist*, a cherry tree follows Clara Middleton around; it is more like the 'phrase de Vinteuil' in Proust, itself a musical phrase, deriving its meaning not from reference but from repetition in different contexts. These 'rhythms' are not as simple as the *Leit-motive* of Wagner, as Forster conceived them – that is, as referring quite straightforwardly each time they occur to ring, sword, Valhalla, and so forth. A rhythm is something that recurs less obviously, yet gives the work its wholeness, its 'expansion', its closing on a conviction that something rather mysterious, probably unnameable, has been added, so that the novel 'has a larger existence than was possible at the time', and when it is over may seem not to have been 'completed', not rounded off but rather opened out.⁹

This is an important idea, and Forster was not alone in his day when he shunned the thumping dominant-tonic endings expected by Uncle Willie. They had been derided by Henry James, deplored by Conrad. That 'relations stop nowhere' but must appear to do so is a point made by James in his Preface to *Roderick Hudson*; and he would have maintained that what enables them to continue in 'a larger existence' after the apparent completion of the story is composition, the discovery, by the delighted novelist, of the occult elements in his theme, elements which resound together and are in their nature not consumable by Uncle Willie as simple story. For, as the Preface to *The Ambassadors* puts it, 'There is the story of one's hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connexion of things, the story of one's story itself.' It was by means of such 'intimate connexions' that Forster, albeit more timidly than James, sought to prolong his novels beyond the time of their ending. In 1906, lecturing to a Working Men's College Old Students' Club, he said that the modern author 'wants to end his book on a note of permanence, but where shall he find it? . . . Where shall such a man find rest with honour? Scarcely in a happy ending.'¹⁰ Scarcely, indeed, in any conventional ending at all. To 'find rest with honour' entails providing a plausible stopping place but allowing the story, or some compositional essence of it, to live on; giving its quietus to the gross material while conferring liberty on its rhythms, its Ariel, which must survive in a different order of time. Thus the