

THE BUCKNELL LECTURES IN LITERARY THEORY

Poetry, Narrative, History



Frank Kermode

*Poetry,
Narrative,
History*

Frank Kermode

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藏书章

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Preface

Fundamental and far-reaching changes in literary studies, often compared to paradigmatic shifts in the sciences, have been taking place during the last thirty years. These changes have included enlarging the literary canon not only to include novels, poems and plays by writers whose race, gender or nationality had marginalized their work, but also to include texts by philosophers, psychoanalysts, historians, anthropologists, social and religious thinkers, who previously were studied by critics merely as 'background'. The stance of the critic and student of literature is also now more in question than ever before. In 1951 it was possible for Cleanth Brooks to declare with confidence that the critic's job was to describe and evaluate literary objects, implying the relevance for criticism of the model of scientific objectivity while leaving unasked questions concerning significant issues in scientific theory, such as complementarity, indeterminacy and the use of metaphor. Now the possibility of value-free scepticism is itself in doubt as many feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic theorists have stressed the inescapability of ideology and the consequent obligation of teachers and students of literature to declare their political, axiological and aesthetic positions in order to make those positions conscious and available for examination. Such expansion and deepening of literary studies has, for many critics, revitalized their field.

Those for whom the theoretical revolution has been regenerative would readily echo, and apply to criticism, Lacan's call to revitalize psychoanalysis: 'I consider it to be an urgent task to disengage from concepts that are being deadened by routine use the meaning that they regain both from a re-examination of their history and from a reflexion on their subjective foundations. That, no doubt, is the teacher's prime function.'

Many practising writers and teachers of literature, however, see recent developments in literary theory as dangerous and anti-humanistic. They would insist that displacement of the centrality of the word, claims for the 'death of the author' emphasis upon gaps and incapacities in language, and indiscriminate opening of the canon threaten to marginalize literature itself. In this view the advance of theory is possible only because of literature's retreat in the face of aggressive moves by Marxism, feminism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, at a time of militant conservatism and the dominance of corporate values in America and Western Europe, literary theory threatens to diminish further the declining audience for literature and criticism. Theoretical books are difficult to read; they usually assume that their readers possess knowledge that few have who have received a traditional literary education; they often require massive reassessments of language, meaning and the world; they seem to draw their life from suspect branches of other disciplines: professional philosophers usually avoid Derrida; psychoanalysts dismiss Freud as unscientific; Lacan was excommunicated even by the International Psycho-Analytical Association.

The volumes in this series record part of the attempt at Bucknell University to sustain conversation about changes in literary studies, the impact of those changes on literary art and the significance of literary theory for the humanities and human sciences. A generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has made possible a five-year

series of visiting lectureships by internationally known participants in the reshaping of literary studies. Each volume includes a comprehensive introduction to the published work of the lecturer, the two Bucknell Lectures, an interview and a comprehensive bibliography.

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Introduction

In the preface to *Continuities* (1968) Frank Kermode laments that literary journalism has become a despised or neglected art. At the same time, he sustains the hope that it can be revived and its fortunes reversed. Although Kermode has himself written for a broad general audience with great success for more than thirty years, he has also had a deep impact on biblical, Renaissance and modern literary scholarship, while managing to be in the vanguard of the latest theoretical developments that have reshaped the humanities since the Second World War. Despite the fundamental theoretical differences that distinguish their work, Frank Kermode's career is closely parallel to that of Northrop Frye. They have both profoundly influenced recent criticism and scholarship on the Bible, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, the English Romantics and the classic moderns (especially Yeats, Eliot and Stevens). They have taken upon themselves the broad cultural responsibilities of literary criticism that Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot once assumed. They have made major contributions to literary theory by drawing on their extensive knowledge of sacred and secular canons, by maintaining, however modestly and ironically, a commitment to the values of liberal humanistic culture, and by promoting the intellectual and ethical freedom of the individual reader, while resisting the solipsism of bourgeois liberalism.

Beyond these superficial resemblances, however, the critical practices of Kermode and Frye diverge sharply. Their criticism on any common subject – such as their two editions of *The Tempest* or their recent books on the Bible – is fundamentally dissimilar in theory and method. What most clearly distinguishes Kermode's work is his theory of fiction. Unlike myths, he argues, fictions are self-consciously made, and their invention is an occasion for us to encounter ourselves and to reflect upon our ends. As a means 'for finding things out', for making sense of our lives, fictions 'change as the needs of sense-making change'. While myths work for stability, fictions promote change and call for 'conditional assent'; myths point back to a lost past, fictions to the here and now (*SE*, p. 39). By turning away from history and the presence of fictions in the here and now, Frye, in Kermode's judgement, fatally reduces the actual complexity of texts. Kermode, on the other hand, in his 1962 Warton Lecture, 'Spenser and the Allegorists', offers a bold and powerful argument for rejecting the view that 'Spenser sacrifices actuality, contemporaneity, to the archetypes'. Spenser 'does not convert event into myth, but myth into event. His mood is acceptance; he welcomes history, not seeking to lose his own time in some transhistorical pattern' (*SSD*, p. 22). The ahistoricism of Frye, Joseph Campbell, Austin Farrer, and 'the dark side' of D. H. Lawrence represented by *Apocalypse* have contributed not only to the promoting of myth but also to the 'dislodging' of Spenser from the secular canon 'with no fuss at all' (*SSD*, p. 12). At the same time, the substitution of mythic unconsciousness for self-critical fiction has unwittingly participated in 'the rebirth of the medieval eschatological fantasies' (*SSD*, p. 23) from which Nazism and anti-Semitism draw their terrible life. Kermode was to return to this point later in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967): 'Anti-Semitism is a fiction of escape which tells you nothing about death but projects it onto others. . . . In this sense anti-Semitism is a

degenerate fiction, a myth' (*SE*, p. 39).

Although he has written careful critiques of Frye's work, especially of *Anatomy of Criticism*, *A Natural Perspective* and *The Great Code*, Kermode has not formulated his theory of fiction merely in response to a worthy antagonist but has instead developed it out of his own detailed editorial work. His first book was an edition of *English Pastoral Poetry* (1952), which is still in print and remains unrivalled, the editors of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* having unfortunately ignored Kermode's warning that no genuine understanding of English pastoral is possible without acquaintance with classical and foreign poets. In his superb introduction to his edition, Kermode offers a potent theory of pastoral, building on what he calls the 'speculative and exciting inquiry' (*EPP*, p. 254) of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*:

The first condition of pastoral poetry is that there should be a sharp difference between two ways of life, the rustic and the urban. The city is an artificial product, and the pastoral poet invariably lives in it, or is the product of its schools and universities. Considerable animosity may exist between the townsman and the countryman. Thus the 'primitive' may be sceptical about the justice of a state of affairs which makes him live under rude conditions while the town-poet lives in polite society. On the other hand, the town- or court-poet has a certain contempt for the peasant (sometimes very strong); and both primitive and court-poet write verse which reflects these attitudes. Occasionally there is a certain similarity of subject. Townsman and rustic alike may consider the idea that at a remote period in history nature gave forth her fruits without the aid of man's labour and worship. Perhaps, somewhere, she still does so. This idea that the world has been a better place and that men have degenerated is remarkably widespread, and a regular feature of pastoral poetry. . . . The first condition of Pastoral is that it is an urban product. (*EPP*, p. 14)

This view of pastoral is not only an account of a poetic form; it contains within it a cultural vision that sees the literary form as vitalizing the myth of the Golden Age with the primary impulse of 'human resentment at the conditions and struggles of life . . . in almost every recorded culture from Mycenaean to American Negro' (*EPP*, pp. 14–15). Two years later, in his Arden edition of *The Tempest* (1954), which is one of the finest volumes in that series, Kermode further develops his theory of pastoral. In its concern with the opposition of nature and art, *The Tempest* brings together a literary tradition, which extends back through the Sixth Book of the *Faerie Queene*, with the Bermuda pamphlets of 1609 that gave 'an extraordinary actuality' to ancient poetic and philosophical problems (*T*, p. xxv). Kermode anticipates by thirty years the now current historically materialist considerations of the play by seeing the pamphlets, the play and Shakespeare's own extensive readings in New World travel literature as a 'somewhat sophisticated argument for the propriety of usurping the rights of native populations' (*T*, p. xxxi). The test of viable fiction is as much how it is used and the measure of self-awareness it promotes as its internal coherence.

The mutually constituting realities of art and nature, text and world are also the central concerns of *Romantic Image* (1957). Published in the same year as Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Kermode's book is concerned with the history and survival of the Romantic conception of the artist, whose vision of radiant truth isolates him from the modern industrial state and the modern middle class. Yeats is the focal point of Kermode's argument not only because of Yeats's full sense of the ecstasy and the pain of the Romantic image, but also because of Yeats's aesthetic utilitarianism, which Kermode affirms: 'Art was always made for men who habitually move in space and time, whose language is propelled onward by verbs, who cannot always be asked to respect the new enclosure laws of

poetry, or such forbidding notices as "No road through to action" (RI, p. 161). Two subordinate topics that will become central concerns in his later books rise to the surface toward the end of Kermode's argument: the relationship of critical discourse to the image or the supreme fiction; and the ways critics and poets shape the secular canon. In a detailed critique of Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility', Kermode reflects upon the historiography of poets and critics when 'they seek . . . a historical period possessing the qualities they postulate for the Image: unity, indissociability; qualities which, though passionately desired, are, they say, uniquely hard to come by in the modern world' (RI, p. 145). As often happens in Kermode's books, he argues both a positive and a negative case at once. Here the counter-argument to the thesis that the radiant image isolates the artist from the world is that the image is holistic only because it is purposefully but perversely partial, selective, cut off. Literary history is written by the poet and the critic to serve that partial image. Finally, the word must be returned to the world, for only there can a road through to action be found. *Romantic Image* ends with the prophecy both of the death of 'the Symbolist historical doctrine of dissociation of sensibility' and the recovery of Milton and especially of *Paradise Lost*, 'perhaps the richest and most intricately beautiful poem in the world' (RI, p. 165).

In 1960 Kermode edited *The Living Milton* as part of an effort to 'liberate' the poet from the ban imposed by a succession of Symbolist critics culminating in T. S. Eliot, who argued that Milton was in every way unlikeable, that his influence has always been for the worst, that he is fundamentally unsensual and that he is absurdly and ubiquitously revolutionary. In 'Milton II', reprinted in Kermode's edition of *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, the case against Milton reaches its climax: 'We cannot, in literature, any more than in the rest of life, live in a perpetual state

of revolution' (*SP*, p. 273). Kermode's own contribution to *The Living Milton* brilliantly refutes Eliot's case, not so much by attacking Eliot directly – or even A. J. A. Waldock, who substitutes for Eliot in Kermode's rebuttal – as by developing the argument that *Paradise Lost* embodies 'life in a great symbolic attitude' (*LM*, p. 86). Rather than banning Milton, Kermode argues, the modern reader is in the best position to read him. Equipped as we are with a taste for the primitive that has been cultivated from Herder, Rousseau and Wordsworth to Nietzsche, Cassirer and Pound; schooled in an open tradition of biblical interpretation; prepared to accept works of art that insist on the human capacity for pleasure; experienced in poetry's primary effect on the senses; chastened by a universal sense of irrecoverable loss; and enlightened by elaborate novelistic developments in the use of point of view, we should be prepared to consider 'Milton in a characteristically modern view of literature, to treat him as a living poet' (*LM*, p. ix). Although it is addressed primarily to the undifferentiated modern reader and modern poet, Kermode's 'Adam Unparadised' has had a profound impact on subsequent Milton studies, from Anne Davidson Ferry's *Milton's Epic Voice* (1963) and Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967) to Sanford Budick's *The Dividing Muse* (1985) and Christopher Kendrick's *Milton: A Study in Ideology and Form* (1986). Like his essays on Spenser and Shakespeare, his monographs on Stevens and Lawrence, and his recent biblical studies, Kermode's Milton essay is both a lucid introduction to its subject and a rich source of ideas for later critics to develop.

Although they form a small portion of his professional writings, Kermode's comments on the sixties – Vietnam, the student movement, Paris 1968 – situate his sequence of books from *Romantic Image* to *The Sense of an Ending*. As a professor, parent and critic committed to the social

use of literature, he was hit hard by those events, as were thousands of other thinkers around the world. One product of this period was his 'guru' Modern Masters Series, another was his sustained reassessment of institutional authority, which he had questioned from the beginning of his career. In his most recent book, *History and Value*, Kermode's declaration of 'the boldness to transgress, to break moulds and conventions' (*HV*, p. viii) reads like a personal manifesto.

Kermode's studies in the fifties and sixties of fiction, image and their uses led him to raise powerful theoretical questions about the survival of the classic and the pluralism of interpretation. Such questions are at the heart of his simultaneous interests in the Renaissance (which recovers and reinterprets classic and biblical texts), the modernist movement (which celebrates the artist's vision but threatens to isolate him from communities past and present) and biblical tradition (which by turns affirms vision, canon formation and institutionally sanctioned interpretation that attempts to conceal its power behind the separation of the sacred from the secular). If these theoretical issues slumbered in an uneasy latency in Kermode's earlier work, they awake to become fully manifest in his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures of 1975, *The Classic*. The argument of these four lectures takes shape against the background of Eliot's paper 'What Is a Classic?' (1944). Eliot observed that a classic can be known only by hindsight 'and in historical perspective', and it is the product of a mature mind and a mature civilization, and that 'the maturity of a literature is the reflection of that of the society in which it is produced' (*SP*, pp. 116-17). Eliot's historical and social emphasis is congenial to Kermode's thought, but the heavily privileged word 'maturity' opens Eliot up for a modernist critique in a manner similar to the subtle polemic of *Romantic Image*.

Kermode begins by showing that Eliot's view of the

classic is inseparable from his notion of empire that leads to secular canon formation in terms of doctrine, style and choices of authority. Such chosen authorities were called *classics* by Aulus Gellius in the second century, who argued that a classic writer is distinguished from the rabble and that classics need to be of some antiquity, thus anticipating two of Eliot's principal points. Kermode, however, emphasizes the idea that the doctrine of the classic assumes that the ancient can be made contemporaneous with the modern by 'strategies of accommodation'. Indeed, the word *modern*, apparently introduced in the sixth century, made it possible to claim two centuries later that Charlemagne had instituted a *saeculum modernum*, a renovation of classical models. The classic as a meeting point of ancient authority and modern accommodation is of major importance in the criticism of Sainte-Beuve, who sees in Virgil the ability to make an ancient subject relevant to his own historical moment. Matthew Arnold disagrees with Sainte-Beuve's view of Virgil, arguing that a classic should enable us to think of its age and our own together. T. S. Eliot develops his idea of the classic out of Sainte-Beuve and Arnold, seeing the modern as a renovation of the classic instead of something totally new. Having traced the dialectic of classic and modern from Sainte-Beuve to Eliot, Kermode concludes with the observation, 'The books we call classics possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions' (C, p. 44). The processes of canon formation and of hermeneutics are inextricably related, as the rest of these lectures and most of Kermode's writing since 1975 demonstrate.

The second lecture in this volume traces the history of the imperial classic and the myth of Augustanism into the poems of Marvell, who amends the imperial classic with secular, modern wit, and of Milton, who abandons them for the alternatives of Hebraic scripture. For Milton, Israel is the *figura* of the British Empire and the Scriptures are

its classic. English Augustanism, however, is the exfoliation of Marvell's modernism; and in Addison the new historiography of the eighteenth century generates an ideal way with the classic: the reader is to get as close as possible to reading the classic as its contemporaries did. Although contemporary hermeneutical theory is more likely to claim its descent from Schleiermacher, Kermode makes a convincing case for the continued vitality of Addison's distinction between *hermeneutics* on the one hand, which regards the classic as a closed book waiting to be pried open by learning and thinks of meaning as contemporary with the author, and *accommodation*, on the other hand, which regards the classic as an open text generating new readings and thinks of meaning as contemporary with the reader. In his third and fourth lectures Kermode sustains these distinctions through detailed readings of Hawthorne's major novels and through a careful investigation of alternative readings of *Wuthering Heights*. He concludes by affirming the secularization and pluralization of the classic. Its essence, he argues, remains 'available to us under our dispositions, in the aspect of time' (C, p. 141). For the modern critic, Addison's hermeneutics and accommodation are both essential.

Having redeemed the secular classic for modernism in his Eliot Lectures, Kermode turns directly to the Bible in his Norton Lectures, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979). He argues that hermeneutics, the art or philosophy of interpretation, recognizes not only the distinction between manifest and latent sense but also claims the superiority of the latent. Within New Testament Christianity and the Gospel of Mark especially, this means that the insiders know or have access to the latent sense, while the outsiders know only the manifest. To forsake the manifest or the carnal for the latent or the spiritual is to become involved in hermeneutics. In this tradition the highest form of interpretation is the most intuitive, the most free of theory or doctrine. 'Carnal readings are much the same. Spiritual

readings are all different' (GS, p. 9). Interpretation involves, first of all, selection and emphasis, which includes also exclusion. The Gospels are a sequence of such interpretive acts: Mark interprets the earliest oral traditions concerning Jesus; Matthew and Luke interpret Mark. Tradition, then, can be seen as a 'productive encounter between a text and a reader' (GS, p. 40) and interpretation as 'the linking of a new discourse to the discourse of the text' (GS, p. 44). Midrash is an interpretive tradition (and a body of texts) that works by augmenting narrative in order to embody the interpretation of a prior text in a form other than commentary. One manifestation of midrashic interpretation is typology, the conviction that the earlier text holds in disguised form promises that are fulfilled in a later text. The New Testament, then, may be thought of as midrash on Hebrew scripture, but in an extreme sense: 'The entire Jewish Bible was to be sacrificed to the validation of the historicity of the Gospels; yet its whole authority was needed to establish that historicity' (GS, p. 107). Given such processes of the generation of texts from acts of interpretation, the historical truth of the narrative comes not from the text but from the institution that validates a given interpretation of the text. Kermode affirms Spinoza's observation of critical differences between the meaning and the truth of a text. 'All modern interpretation . . . involves some effort to divorce meaning and truth' (GS, p. 122).

Kermode's argument seems impishly designed to send shock waves through literary and biblical studies simultaneously. Although a few apostates had abandoned the formalist doctrines of American New Criticism by 1979, literary study was accepted almost without question as a secular enterprise in which scepticism was the primary article of faith. Even students of medieval English literature approached religious topics warily, as the continuing controversial reception of D. W. Robertson's *A Preface to Chaucer* (1962) indicates. At the same time that he labours