



JOHN FRANK KERMODE

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## 1919–2010

### I

PROFESSOR SIR FRANK KERMODE WAS A DISTINGUISHED literary scholar and the pre-eminent critic of his generation. Unlike the best-known critics of a slightly earlier time—R. P. Blackmur, Lionel Trilling or William Empson, for example, all born fifteen years or so earlier than he—Kermode did not present himself as an amateur or an intellectual or a person who took a whole national canon as his material. He was an academic specialist, he had a ‘field’: the English Renaissance. He edited Shakespeare, collections of works by Donne, Marvell, Milton, Spenser and English pastoral poetry. One of his last and most frequently read books is *Shakespeare’s Language* (New York, 2000).

But he was never confined by his field; he knew when and how to set his specialised knowledge aside, or use it to understand other areas of scholarship and endeavour. All of his writing was prompted by what he himself called his love of words (‘whatever they meant—even without knowing what they meant’<sup>1</sup>)—and was full of subtle, searching thought on difficult topics. His work remains literary even when it seems to have strayed into other regions. He suggested that his book *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford, 1967) was ‘recognisable as literary criticism’, in spite of its informed attention to ‘the psychology and sociology of apocalyptic thinking’.<sup>2</sup> We may conclude that he was after all an amateur, an intellectual

<sup>1</sup>F. Kermode, *Not Entitled: a Memoir* (New York, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 220.

and someone who constantly addressed aspects of literature at large; all without ceasing to be a scholar.

Kermode was also an elegant and witty reviewer, wrote often for *The New Statesman* and *The Listener*, and with Karl Miller founded the *London Review of Books*. He was devoted to such writing in principle as well as practice. 'It is more demanding', he said, 'than most of what passes for scholarship. It calls incessantly for mental activity, fresh information, and civility into the bargain.' 'Of course', Kermode added in a characteristic note of precaution and modesty, 'I agree that they do not always come.'<sup>3</sup> We don't need to catch the quiet allusion to a famous line in Shakespeare, but it does enrich the irony and the fun. A fiery character in *Henry IV Part One* claims that he 'can call spirits from the vasty deep'. Hotspur, the man's sceptical comrade in arms, says 'But will they come when you do call for them?'

Kermode was co-editor of *Encounter* for just under two years from 1965. He created and edited the Fontana book series known as Modern Masters, a collection of short volumes about writers and thinkers who spoke to readers across different disciplines and preferences and persuasions. The first set, published in 1970–1, included works on Camus, Chomsky, Fanon, Guevara and Wittgenstein. The second set, appearing between 1971 and 1973, had books on Freud, Yeats, Gandhi and one on D. H. Lawrence by Kermode himself.

Kermode described himself 'as a historian of sorts', meaning that literary criticism and scholarship were themselves modes of history.<sup>4</sup> The tag 'of sorts' is a mild joke against himself—it would be presumptuous to suggest a critic was a historian *tout court*—but also glances at the kind of history he wanted to write. He was interested in error and chance, for example, as well as causality and final results. 'It is part of our experience of the past', he said in a book provocatively titled *The Uses of Error* (London, 1991), 'that we change it as it passes through our hands; and we may make it more puzzling in making it more our own.' 'The history of interpretation ... is to an incalculable extent a history of error.'<sup>5</sup> In *Forms of Attention* (Chicago, 1985) his chief question concerned 'the nature of the historical forces which certify some works but not others as requiring or deserving these special forms of attention': 'Botticelli became canonical not through scholarly effort but by chance, or rather by opinion.' A

<sup>3</sup>F. Kermode, *Continuities* (New York, 1968), p. viii.

<sup>4</sup>F. Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago, IL, 1985), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>F. Kermode, *The Uses of Error* (London, 1991), pp. 429 and 431.

little later in the book Kermode turns this opposition into a possible partnership: 'it remains true that opinion can be the ally of chance'. The perspective makes 'opinion' seem a rather unsteady affair, a matter not of authority but social invention, and 'never to be observed without its shadow, ignorance'.<sup>6</sup>

Kermode's critical and theoretical stances were the reverse of dogmatic, and he could be quite militant about the idea of tolerance. He said of Helen Gardner that 'she enjoys severity for its own sake', and that her 'large historical gestures are sketched with all the authority Dame Helen habitually confers upon the commonplace, upon her own mistakes, and upon her condemnation of the mistakes, real or supposed, of others'.<sup>7</sup> Severity for its own sake is like an opinion that doesn't know the fragility of its base, has forgotten that ignorant shadow, and if Kermode's tolerance has its origin in his own temperament, it also marks an important moment in the history of criticism: the apparent shift from evaluation to extended interpretation, from the furious judgements of Leavis, say, to the multiplying meanings of Empson and his many followers.

Of course the two motions are connected; one can't exist entirely without the other. But there are no synonyms, as Flaubert used to say, and changes of emphasis do matter. From being explicitly the chief business of the critic, who interpreted in order to evaluate, judgment in Anglo-American literary culture seemed, from the 1960s onwards, to become the implied hinterland of the complicated business of how we understand what we read. It was permissible, indeed at one point almost irresistible, to take sides: you could feel that to judge insistently was merely to pontificate, or that to bury yourself in endless interpretation was a failure of nerve. Kermode believed in evaluation but didn't find it half as interesting as interpretation, and was himself a marker and agent of the change in fashion I have described. The change, I should say, was never complete, and there are signs that it has recently been to some degree reversed.

The tilt towards interpretation could be intensely local and practical, an affair of close loyalty to the text, as it is in the work of Christopher Ricks. With Kermode it almost always took a speculative turn. A. D. Nuttall said of *The Sense of an Ending* that it 'set a wholly new standard. Thereafter we had all to think or else, in a manner, to declare ourselves enemies of thought.' Kermode's response to this suggestion is at first sight more cautious than precise. Other critics, he says, including Nuttall

<sup>6</sup>Kermode, *Forms of Attention*, pp. xiii, 30, 72–3, 17.

<sup>7</sup>Kermode, *The Uses of Error*, p. 413.

himself, ‘seem to know how to think. I merely invite in such notions as occur to me as I brood over ideas more clear and distinct, such as theirs’.<sup>8</sup> ‘Seem to know’ is a little unkind, given the generosity of the compliment, but the idea that thinking is both too grand a practice for critics and not quite the right name for what they do anyway, is crucial to Kermode’s work.

Criticism was ‘mostly anarchic’, Kermode said, alluding to R. P. Blackmur, ‘dependent ... on the critic’s having a mind with useful and interesting contents’.<sup>9</sup> Having a mind with any sort of contents is not quite the same as thinking in any rigorous way, and Kermode’s glance at Descartes (‘ideas more clear and distinct’) suggests both that the philosopher may have been using the concept of thought loosely—‘I have a mind, therefore I am’ might have been a more accurate formulation of his famous phrase—and that to pursue only accessible and definable thought is to miss many of the most interesting territories of literature. In philosophy, Kermode wrote, ‘you defeat your object if you imitate the confusion inherent in an unsystematic view of your subject’, whereas in poetry ‘you must in some measure imitate what is extreme and scattering bright, or else lose touch with that feeling of bright confusion’.<sup>10</sup> The phrase ‘extreme and scattering bright’ comes from Donne’s poem ‘Air and Angels’. Critics are not poets or philosophers but they do, Kermode would say, ‘in some measure’ seek both to reduce confusion and to stay in touch with it. If poets ‘help us to make sense of our lives’, critics are ‘bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives’.<sup>11</sup> There is both modesty and ambition in the small word ‘only’.

## II

Frank Kermode was born on 29 November 1919 on the Isle of Man. He grew up and went to school there, before attending Liverpool University. By the time he graduated in 1940, the war was on. He joined the Royal

<sup>8</sup>M. Tudeau-Clayton and M. Warner (eds.), *Addressing Frank Kermode* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 22, 100.

<sup>9</sup>Kermode, *Continuities*, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup>F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford, 1967, 2000), pp. 80–1.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

Navy, and served under a series of what he called his ‘mad captains’<sup>12</sup> until his discharge in 1946—these years are vividly evoked in his memoir *Not Entitled* (New York, 1995). He returned to Liverpool to do graduate work, and quickly got a lectureship at King’s College, Newcastle, which was at that point still a part of Durham University. He stayed there for two years before moving to Reading University, where he began to find the academic style he would make his own. ‘I think of my own time in [that] department’, he later wrote, ‘as, in a slightly crazy way, the most valuable I have spent in any job.’<sup>13</sup> He brought out a book on Donne, completed the Arden edition of *The Tempest* (London, 1954) and wrote *Romantic Image* (London, 1957), his first remarkable foray beyond his field.

Kermode’s first marriage, to Maureen Eccles, lasted from 1947 to 1970—they had twins, Deborah and Mark. In 1976, Kermode married Anita Van Vactor. The marriage was later dissolved.

He held his first chair in English literature at the University of Manchester (1958–65), his second at the University of Bristol (1965–7), his third at University College London (1967–74). In these years he published books on Wallace Stevens and Edmund Spenser, several works on Shakespeare and three collections of his essays and reviews. He also wrote *The Sense of an Ending*, a work he regarded as ‘an example of literary theory as it was before it was absorbed into Theory’.<sup>14</sup>

He knew, though, that theory was what was happening in those years, and he directed a series of postgraduate seminars at University College London that made a considerable contribution to the life of literary theory in the United Kingdom. His guests included Roland Barthes, whom he called ‘the prince of modern critics’,<sup>15</sup> and there were also regular visitors from other British universities and from the United States. Theory had many meanings and coteries, but for Kermode it meant an attention to questions about literature as well as to literature itself, and it invited us to learn from neighbouring and even quite remote disciplines. He liked the word better with its small t, though, and was afraid ‘the more desperate and delirious indications’ of the capital letter had ‘in many quarters come close to eliminating the study of literature altogether’.<sup>16</sup>

In 1973 Kermode became a Fellow of the British Academy. He held the King Edward VII Chair of English Literature at Cambridge from

<sup>12</sup> Kermode, *Not Entitled*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218–19.

1974 to 1982, when he resigned in the middle of storm about the promotion of a younger colleague in the faculty, and more generally, it might be said, about the place of theory in the study of literature—since the colleague in question was strongly influenced by Structuralism. There were other things Kermode disliked about the academic arrangements at Cambridge—the practice of excluding professors from teaching undergraduates, for example—but he liked the place; remained a Fellow of King's College, and lived close by for the rest of his life. He spent quite a lot of time in the United States, however, and taught at Columbia University in New York, where he was the Julian Clarence Levi Professor from 1982 to 1984. In 1975–6 he gave the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, which later appeared in print as *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), one of his most important and most provocative books. He was knighted in 1991.

Kermode's subtle and ironic memoir *Not Entitled*, published in 1995, certainly glances at this honour, but he also knew the difference between 'titled' and 'entitled', and the more immediate source of the reference is a curious custom in the British Navy. When sailors line up for their weekly pay, they receive whatever they are entitled to, minus deductions for current fines. If the fines cancel out the pay, the sailors get nothing, and the clerk officiating at the ceremony calls out 'Not entitled'. Kermode uses the phrase and its relatives throughout the book as an expression of his diffidence and as a delicate mockery of that same posture.

He writes that as King Edward VII Professor at Cambridge he felt he had 'become a sort of nobody, yet a nobody with a title, with a carnival crown'. His book ends with a thought of his house and garden, where he 'will belong ... or be as close to belonging as I am entitled to be, for as long as I am entitled to be'.<sup>17</sup> The implied mood here is complicated. It's not that Kermode feels he hasn't earned his honours or his home. But he does feel that these assets are too stable, too conventional for a man whose life has been 'a sort of one-man diaspora', who said he was always 'glad to abandon one exile for another', and whose upbringing on the Isle of Man taught him that life in England was going to involve settling 'for a permanent condition of mild alienation'.<sup>18</sup> He learned from his father that we can't always be what we want and from his mother that deference is almost always the proper social attitude—proper, if not at all the right one on many occasions. In his memoir Kermode describes his 'tendency to

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 260, 263.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 19, 199, 262.

irrational and premature compliance with the expectations of anybody who assumed the right to demand it' as a 'troublesome survival' from his childhood.<sup>19</sup> For this very reason the clean slate of non-entitlement—no wages but our dues are paid—offers a form of mental freedom, and there is much to be said for wearing titles, like learning, not only lightly but with a touch of scepticism.

In his Edward Said Memorial Lecture at Columbia University in 2006, Kermode added another touch to this autobiography. Speaking of the hyphen in the definition of W. B. Yeats as Anglo-Irish, and of Yeats's absence from Dublin at the time of the Easter Rising of 1916, Kermode said that 'I myself, if I may intrude for a moment, am hyphenated Anglo-Manx with strong Irish sympathies, but I too was absent, not having been born for another three years.'<sup>20</sup> Time and accident become a witty metaphor for displacement. We can't help our hyphenation, of course, it is in no way our fault. But the hyphen means we shall often fail to show up for appointments at the right symbolic time.

Kermode continued to publish essays, reviews and books right up to his death, on 17 August 2010. The volumes called *Shakespeare's Language* (New York, 2000), *Pleasing Myself: from Beowulf to Philip Roth* (London, 2001), *Pieces of My Mind: Writings 1958–2002* (London, 2004), *The Age of Shakespeare* (London, 2004) and *Pleasure, Change, and Canon* (New York, 2004) all came out between 2000 and 2004. The Clark Lectures in Cambridge, given in 2007, resulted in *Concerning E. M. Forster* (London, 2009), and *Bury Place Papers* (London, 2009), a collection of his *London Review of Books* pieces, appeared in 2009.

### III

'We cannot emigrate from our historical moment', Kermode wrote in *The Genesis of Secrecy*.<sup>21</sup> This is a fine phrase, and the metaphor hints at a complementary truth: we often wish to emigrate, even feel we must, and our failed attempts at escape are part of our history too. It is because we cannot emigrate that we need to make accommodations with our historical

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> F. Kermode, 'The Anglo-Irish hyphen', *The Hopkins Review*, 1 (1998), 100.

<sup>21</sup> F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: on the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), p. viii.



moment, rearrange it, edit it, provide it with shapes that the moment itself may not offer.

One way of tracing the development and consistency of Kermode's critical thinking is to look at his accounts of some of these accommodations—in Shakespeare and his contemporaries, in the theory and practice of modern poetry, in large stretches of literature from the Middle Ages to the present moment, in the history of interpretation itself, where theology often anticipates literary arguments.

Introducing his edition of *The Tempest*, Kermode writes that Caliban 'is a measure of the incredible superiority of the world of Art, but also a measure of its corruption', and suggests that the play's resolution relies on 'the mercy of a providence which gives new life when the old is scarred by sin or lost in folly'.<sup>22</sup> 'Art' here involves magic and the temptations of power, and 'providence' looks like another name for hope against hope. In a brilliant interpretation of *Macbeth*, Kermode says that 'all plots have something in common with prophecy', and that when the hero asks the three witches what they are, 'their answer is to tell him what *will be*'.<sup>23</sup> Their announcement is a little like the gift of providence in *The Tempest*; however, the arrangement it declares may be more unstable than it looks. The witches were right about what Macbeth would become, and even, ambiguously, about how he would die. But none of this would have happened if Macbeth had not already heard in his head what the witches came to tell him. He thought he knew how to emigrate from his historical moment, and his fantasy became his history. 'Nothing is/But what is not' was his own desperately accurate formulation of this state of affairs. Kermode's attentive gloss on the phrase reads 'the present is no longer present, the unacted future has occupied its place'.<sup>24</sup>

'A passage may be too well known to be well known,' Kermode says aphoristically of a famous moment in *The Tempest*.<sup>25</sup> We are too sure we know what Shakespeare—and not just Prospero—means when the character says 'Our revels now are ended' and tells us that 'we are such stuff/As dreams are made on'. Returning to Shakespeare's language, in his book of that name, Kermode suggests that as critics we rush too eagerly into paraphrase, that we have exchanged a close attention to the text for the comfort of convenient and fashionable allegories. This is why it is

<sup>22</sup> F. Kermode, *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare: The Tempest* (London, 1954), pp. xlii, lxi.

<sup>23</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, pp. 84, 85.

<sup>24</sup> F. Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York, 2000), p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

worth remembering that equivocation is ‘an idea central to the entire play’ of *Macbeth*, and perhaps to Shakespeare’s entire oeuvre. Kermode’s conclusion to his chapter takes us well beyond this individual play:

In these echoing words and themes, these repetitions that are so unlike the formal repetitions of an earlier rhetoric, we come close to what were Shakespeare’s deepest interests. We cannot assign them any limited significance. All may be said to equivocate, and on their equivocal variety we impose our limited interpretations.<sup>26</sup>

It is no longer only a matter of criticism’s making sense of the way literature makes sense. Interpretation itself is a necessarily limited affair, but it has a double use: it isolates meanings among the profusion and reminds us how much profusion there is.

Writing of the words of an imaginary poet, Wallace Stevens says:

It was not important that they survive.  
What mattered was that they should bear  
Some lineament or character,  
  
Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
In the poverty of their words,  
Of the planet of which they were part.

Stevens was an important figure for Kermode, early and late, from his 1961 book on the poet to his 1998 Library of America edition of the works. He found an ‘almost incredible gaiety’ in Stevens, but also an incomparable bleakness. Of the poem ‘The Snow Man’ Kermode wrote that reality has become ‘so purged’ in that short piece that it ‘has no human meaning, nor has a man’.<sup>27</sup> The attraction for Kermode was in the many conjugations of lightness and austerity. He also encountered in Stevens a poet who could teach theory to critics—as long as they weren’t too theoretical about it. Kermode wrote in a 1977 review of a book by Harold Bloom that ‘the assumption that this philosophical-sounding body of poetry must have inside it a truly philosophical skeleton has indeed proved disastrous to crude anatomists’. Stevens was a philosopher much as Kermode himself was a historian: ‘of sorts’. He didn’t merely sound philosophical, but he wasn’t Descartes either. A phrase Kermode uses of Shakespeare is very helpful here. His ‘treatment of the theme [of Nature] has ... a richly analytical approach to ideas, which never reaches

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 216.

<sup>27</sup> F. Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 26, 33.

after a naked opinion of true or false'.<sup>28</sup> Stevens too is an analyst without opinions, and he can always surprise us with his relapses into immediacy. In 'Of Mere Being', a late poem by Stevens, we are placed 'beyond the last thought' and a bird sings 'without human meaning, without human feeling, a foreign song'. But then just as the bird and its song (and the poem) are about to disappear into abstraction, the writer brings us back to the world and our own senses with a gaudy alliterating and rhyming metaphor: 'The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.'

To suggest that Kermode's more general works of criticism and theory—*Romantic Image*, *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Genesis of Secrecy*—are those of his writings which continue to have the most influence is not to diminish the importance of his specialised scholarly labours. It is rather to suggest the continuity of his interests and domains of knowledge, and to point to his graceful ability to talk to several audiences at once. In each case the failed emigration from history is important.

Kermode worried about the supposed slightness of his more general works: 'I have not much time for that book now', he said in 1981 of *Romantic Image*.<sup>29</sup> He was saddened when Graham Hough said in a BBC broadcast that *The Sense of an Ending* was 'just another essay'. 'At the time I felt rueful about this, though my view now is that we could do with more essays and many fewer larger books.'<sup>30</sup> 'Now' in this case was 1989. Hough had said that Kermode 'began his literary career by writing a brilliant essay, and he is still writing brilliant essays'. The trouble for Hough was that he thought this practice—a form of literary dandyism was the implication—kept Kermode from 'the thorough and radical critical work that more than anyone in England he is capable of writing'. Kermode did plenty of this work over time, but it may be that his gift for the 'brilliant essay' was even more exceptional, and he was surely right to get over his initial rue.

*Romantic Image* is a calm title that carries quite a bit of turbulence beneath its surface. The word 'Romantic', Kermode tells us, 'is applicable to the literature of one epoch, beginning in the late years of the eighteenth century and not yet finished'. It also includes within it an assumption about the poetic image, since Kermode is using it 'as referring to the high valuation placed during this period upon the image-making powers of the

<sup>28</sup> Kermode, *The Arden Edition*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>29</sup> Kermode, *The Uses of Error*, p. 404.

<sup>30</sup> Tudeau-Clayton and Warner, *Addressing Frank Kermode*, p. 92.

mind at the expense of its rational powers'.<sup>31</sup> A little later Kermode says 'the Image [now capitalised] is never for long dissociated from the consideration of its cost'.<sup>32</sup> He insists that he is taking the word Romantic 'in a restricted sense', but the restriction itself is part of an unsettled argument. If Romanticism is 'not yet finished', are we to think of Modernism as its tail-end or just another twist? Is the supposed revolt of Modernism really another family quarrel? What are we to make of the recurring, rather tendentious economic metaphors: valuation, expense, cost?

Kermode points to the debt Yeats clearly owed to Blake, and says with a characteristic sly reasonableness that "'movements" are never as new as they look: it is one of the duller laws of literary history'.<sup>33</sup> His work doesn't actually suggest though that the cost of the image is always counted—he says it is distinctly not counted in the 'paradise life' of Yeats's poems, for example, and Yeats is the book's primary image-maker. Pound and Eliot did not calculate their image-expenses very carefully either, and if T. E. Hulme did the sums he decided the price was right. So Kermode's 'is never for long' in the quotation above means something like 'really ought not to be at all'. One of the most subtle arguments of *Romantic Image* concerns not the poetic escape from reason but the baffled attempt to get around it. Much depends on the interesting ambiguity of the topic: is it the poetic image or the image of poetry? Kermode suggests that in Modernism the two pictures become the same, and he uses both phrases to highlight his subject. If art for Pater was to aspire to the condition of music, for Mallarmé and Yeats it consistently yearned to be dance or, more precisely perhaps, a composite icon of dance and dancer. This is where Mallarmé's wonderful essay on the dancer Loie Fuller leads us, as does Yeats's poem 'Among School Children', with its much quoted last lines:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Here again Kermode reminds us of the cost. Thinking of the many writers and artists fixated at the nineteenth century's end on the figure of Salome, he writes that she 'is the Dancer in the special role of the Image that costs the artist personal happiness, indeed life itself'.<sup>34</sup> The Image, or art constructed as an image rather than any kind of assertion or discursive

<sup>31</sup> F. Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London, 1957), p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73

description, puts the constructor ‘seriously at odds with the society in which he has to live’.<sup>35</sup> This is a way of saying that poetry seeks to take language ‘beyond the common indication’, in Wordsworth’s phrase, and that the common indication is likely to fight back. ‘Words are the means of a very different sort of communication; they are so used to being discursive that it is almost impossible to stop them from discoursing.’<sup>36</sup> This stoppage was the dream of much modern poetry and poetics, and was essential to what Kermode calls ‘the difference of the artist’<sup>37</sup>—his or her difference from the rest of us, that is. Isn’t this idea obsolete, and wasn’t it already so in 1958? Kermode considers the possibility, and grants that ‘it is a common complaint that poets look like bank clerks’. But then he concludes with great eloquence:

This has nothing to do with the truth that poets continue to conceive of themselves as different, isolated, as a necessary preliminary to the achievement of a truth which, though it must use the dialect of the tribe, yet fanatically purifies it.<sup>38</sup>

The dialect of the tribe is a phrase borrowed from Mallarmé via Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’. Kermode’s claim is that this quest for purification continues to dominate the romantic image poetry has of itself.

*The Sense of an Ending* explores with great finesse the idea of fiction and its lurking ubiquity in an uncertain world. Fictions are not necessarily false—sometimes the facts obligingly correspond to our designs for them, fictions may ‘find out about the changing world on our behalf’<sup>39</sup>—but we can’t count on their truth either. They are ‘not subject to proof or disconfirmation’, Kermode says, ‘only to neglect’.<sup>40</sup> And yet we can scarcely do without them, dangerous as they may frequently be—there are fictions, Kermode says, which have ‘helped to shape the disastrous history of our time’.<sup>41</sup>

We find ourselves, in Kermode’s view, ‘asserting a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact, as indeed we must’.<sup>42</sup> The logic of the claim trembles with that last clause. The main meaning is presumably that we must make this assertion of need; but it is also true that we must

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

live by the fact, whatever else we manage to do: 'Men ... make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns ... but they also, when awake and sane, feel the need to show a marked respect for things as they are.'<sup>43</sup> French theorists, Kermode says in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 'intend to change what is the case. Perhaps the case needs changing; but it is the case.'<sup>44</sup>

If we put together the uses of the concept of 'need' here (need to live, need to show, needs changing) we see how a critic who is also a stylist—not just in love with words, but attuned to the discreetly complicated work they do for us—can multiply his implications without being in any way unclear. 'Reason not the need' is the lesson King Lear learns: to need is to lack and to be unable to do without, and we live with this apparent contradiction every day. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, always a wonderful resource when it comes to equivocation, offers the following formulation among its definitions of need as a verb: 'To require (something) essential or very important (rather than merely desirable).' To require is not quite to get, and if we lack the essentials the very important will hardly matter.

Throughout his career Kermode reverted to a famous declaration by Yeats as an aid to negotiating these oscillating possibilities. Asked if he believed in 'the actual existence' of the divisions of history proposed to him by the spirits who spoke to him, Yeats was loyal both to his otherworldly vision and to his sense of the facts. 'To such a question', he said, 'I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience ... They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice.' As Kermode very well says in *Romantic Image*, Yeats 'did not walk out of his dream, but simply extended it to include everything'.<sup>45</sup> Yeats saw the resolution of contradiction as a matter of style rather than of fact, but style still took account of the fact.

Sometimes Kermode tilts his thought towards the fact. 'The critic's first qualification', he says, is 'a scepticism, an interest in things as they are in inhuman reality as well as in human justice.'<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere he seems to stress our tendency to fantasy: 'justice is a manner of thinking about the

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, p. 72.

<sup>45</sup> Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 64.

world that is congenial to the thinker, and likely to sustain his project when reality of itself is not'.<sup>47</sup> And in *The Sense of an Ending* again, he says, 'Reality is ... the sense we have of a world irreducible to human plot and human desire for order; justice is the human order we find or impose upon it.'<sup>48</sup> The logic of the latter formulation comes directly from Stevens's poem 'Notes towards a supreme fiction':

He imposes orders as he thinks of them,  
As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair...  
But to impose is not  
To discover...

It is not, and in spite of his recurring use of Yeats's notions of reality and justice, Kermode cannot hold them in a single thought, and it is significant that he regards reality as inhuman. This stance confers an almost poetic pathos on the prose of *The Sense of an Ending*. There was once a literature that believed in its own fictions, Kermode suggests, one which 'assumed that it was imitating an order', but we have only 'a literature which assumes that it has to create an order'.<sup>49</sup> 'We' are the inhabitants of the Romantic/Modern world that began at the end of the eighteenth century, but our doubts and fears are already adumbrated in Shakespeare:

Beyond the apparent worst there is a worse suffering, and when the end comes it is not only more appalling than anybody expected, but a mere image of that horror, not the thing itself... when the end comes it is not an end, and both suffering and the need for patience are perpetual.<sup>50</sup>

Shakespeare's tragedies are 'researches into death in an age too late for apocalypse, too critical for prophecy; an age more aware that its fictions are themselves models of the human design upon the world'.<sup>51</sup> As these sentences progress, the old world becomes more and more modern, and the created order of our fictions more transparently fictional. Kermode is keen to distinguish fiction from myth, and repeatedly uses terms like 'regress' to describe the slippage from one to the other.<sup>52</sup> 'Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive.'<sup>53</sup> 'Fictions ... turn easily into myths; people will live by that which

<sup>47</sup> Kermode, *Forms of Attention*, p. 87.

<sup>48</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 176.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

was designed only to know by.<sup>54</sup> This is an eloquent and moving gesture of precaution, but surely unavailing. The boundaries between myth and fiction, like those between living and knowing, are not so easily patrolled.

A sense of melancholy, of the always-expected mischance, is never far from Kermode's work, and the word that dominates *The Genesis of Secrecy*, his study of old and new arts of interpretation, is disappointment. 'In all works of interpretation', he says, 'there are insiders and outsiders.'<sup>55</sup> 'Outsiders see but do not perceive. Insiders read and perceive, but always in a different sense.'<sup>56</sup> Each in a different sense from the other, Kermode implies, and the advantage insiders seem to have in this game becomes rather slender. 'Insiders can hope to achieve correct interpretations, though their hope may be frequently, perhaps always, disappointed, whereas those outside cannot.'<sup>57</sup> 'Perhaps always' is devastating, and Kermode later uses the phrase again to the same effect. 'Spes hermeneutica', hermeneutic hope, 'is usually, even perhaps always disappointed, wherever one stands.'<sup>58</sup> The grandest claim of the book, curiously, is the one that most confidently excludes hope:

One may be sure of one thing [in interpretation], and that is disappointment. It has sometimes been said, and in my opinion rightly, that the world is also like that; or that we are like that in respect of the world.<sup>59</sup>

The thought seems final and is pretty gloomy, and the immediate question is why the book itself is not as dark as the thought suggests it ought to be. The answer is in the writing, of course, and in the agility of the mind so intelligently considering the work of Franz Kafka, James Joyce and an array of texts from the Old Testament and the Gospels.

But then what of the claim itself? Can we be sure of disappointment in interpretation? Yes, if we harbour deluded ambitions, if we seek readings that will be infallibly correct and exclude all others. They would no longer be readings. We can also be fairly sure, if not absolutely certain, of some disappointment in interpretation as in other areas of life, and we shouldn't expect to find joy on every occasion. But disappointment is not inevitable; just possible or even probable, according to our temperament and luck. And in interpretation, as in so many forms of investigation,

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>55</sup> Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, p. xi.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.



what matters is the ingenuity and patience of the practice rather than the result. And this is why Kermode, for all his insistence on disappointment, can also write of interpretation as a form of love, indeed as the construction of a loved object:

For the world is our beloved codex. We may not see it, as Dante did, in perfect order, gathered by love into one volume; but we do, living as reading, like to think of it as a place where we can travel back and forth at all, divining congruences, conjunctions, opposites; extracting secrets from its secrecy, making understood relations, an appropriate algebra.<sup>60</sup>

Even here, after these words, Kermode will not let go of his disappointment ('world and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing') but that, I think, is because he continues to want the world to be a better, more integrated book than it is likely to be. He modestly refuses to insist on how much richer his writing has made it for us. Earlier in *The Genesis of Secrecy* he suggests that 'most of us will find the task [of interpretation] too hard, or simply repugnant; and then, abandoning meaning, we slip back into the old comfortable fictions of transparency, the single sense, the truth'.<sup>61</sup> Kermode never slipped back; was never likely to do what 'most of us' do; never abandoned meaning to anyone's authoritarian devices.

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 123.