

Historical fictions: Kermode's idea of history

The critics should know their duty.

– Frank Kermode¹

Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* is recognised as a masterpiece of literary theory (or theory of literature); it is not always recognised that it was also a philosophy of history. Kermode's book is ostensibly about time, temporality, and the ways in which literature deals with the problem of how things end. Throughout the book there is an implication that in real life at least things always end badly, less with a bang than with a whimper. The hope that everything will come out all right in the end is a delusion which fosters such myths as the Apocalypse, the Millennium, Utopia, the Return to the Promised Land, and the Resurrection of the Body, not to mention Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and all the other providentialist interpretations of history in the history of thought about time. The idea that when the end comes, everything will 'light up' with meaning, Kermode consigned to the never-never land of Myth. Yet he recognised that human beings, caught up in what Paul Ricoeur called the 'aporias' of temporality,² could not avoid the problem of how to end, and in literary fictions, he found images of endings – of individuals, of projects, of civilisations, of history, of the cosmos itself – that could make the effort to live worthwhile. Like myth, fiction provided meanings useful for facing the anomalies of a life lived in the company of others. But unlike myth, fiction undercut the authority of its own meaning-giving capacity. In much the same way that the 'poetic function' in language-use diverts attention from the message to process of production, so too what might be called 'the fictive function' in literature forces awareness of the extent to which all meaning is invented rather than found and can claim authority as truth only as long as it is useful for life.³

The medievals thought that the Book of Creation manifested meaning at four levels of existence: historical, allegorical, moral, and anagogical or mystical. At the first (historical) level, things happen, events occur, conflicts arise – in an orderly space and an order of time; and their happening or *that* they happened when, where, and as they did *is* their historical meaning. At the same time, however, the events that happen

in time and space are figures or images which mask even while they manifest their substantive natures. So, at a second level, worldly events have another meaning, which is their relationship to the substance of Creation itself, figurations of their status, place, and value in God's plan for the world. An event such as a battle or a personage such as a king enjoys an individuality that derives from its place in a hierarchy of being, each stage of which possesses a value quite other than that of the individuals who occupy it. Next, the conflict among the *kinds* of authority possessed by persons and other kinds of agencies reveals a moral dimension deriving from the difficulty of assigning proper value to persons, offices, and places in worldly time and space. It is the manifestation of this moral dimension which allows us to derive lessons or principles from reflection on the conflicts and contestations of real life. And finally there is the anagogical or mystical meaning posited by Dante as ineffable because of its non-sensory and extra-rational nature, apprehendable as the necessary and sufficient causes of that relationship between things and meanings that makes love possible, hope credible, and faith authoritative. Any representation of this complex of meanings will be poetic and thus fictive insofar as it captures the form of the *whole* in images and, at the same time, forces awareness of the inadequacy of any image to the faithful presentation of its ineffable 'content'.

Now, there is a sense in which Frank Kermode's approach to the study of literature inverts this medieval schema, putting myth at the first level, fiction at the second, history at the third, and 'reality' (something like the Lacanian 'réel') at the fourth or anagogical level. 'Reality' or the cosmic slide into entropic silence and energetic slackness is, for Kermode, formless, meaningless, chaotic, and (therefore) ineffable in the way that the mystical 'Great All' or 'Great Nothing' can be held to be. At each level, however, a different kind of meaning can be discerned in or projected onto phenomena: total or totalising meaning at the level of myth; provisional, hypothetical, or practical meaning at the level of fiction; documentary or evidentiary meaning at the level of history; and the non-meaning of entropic drift at the fourth or 'anagogical' level.

I admit that I have extracted this structure from Kermode's much more subtle and slippery discussions of the fate of poetry in modernity. For Frank Kermode was not only a student but also a devotee of modernism. He identified with the project of what he called the 'first modernism' of Conrad and James, Eliot, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, Woolf, and Joyce, who had heroically faced the crisis of meaning willed to them by their Victorian progenitors. These first modernists had wrestled with this crisis by sublimating both the Romanticist and the Realist programmes of the nineteenth century for the renewal of art into a putatively new kind of *poiesis* which rejects 'history' in order to return to

the archaic origins of both art and life. Thus, although Eliot, in his famous review of *Ulysses*, wrote that his generation had rejected the 'narrative method' in favour of the 'mythic method', Kermode, viewing the first modernism from within the second one, purported to have seen what was really involved in our own modernist modernism from the beginning: namely, a dissociation of fiction from myth and rejection of myth's last avatar in literature, narrative.

Pre-modernist fictions of the end are all bound up with narrative and narrative form. In the traditional narrative mode of discourse, everything is pointing to the end, to the way things come out, the way they conclude *and* the way they cast a light back over what had happened since the beginning, and *make* sense of what had happened afterward. The decline of what Eliot called 'the narrative method' in modernist modernism signalled the end of any interest in 'the end', or at least of any effort to make sense of 'the sense of an ending' in the way that myth and, in its own way, literary fictions had been doing since the invention of 'art' in Hellenic times.

The first chapter of *The Sense of an Ending* is entitled 'The End'. Men die, the (Aristotelian) tradition has it, 'because they cannot join the beginning with the end'. Kermode accepts this aphorism as a challenge and then goes on to say: 'What they, the dying men, *can* do is imagine a significance for themselves in these *unremembered but imaginable* events' (my emphases). They can and do create myths of the beginning of all things (and of the pasts from which they have sprung) and myths of the end of all things (of the future towards which they are tending), myths of genesis, on the one hand, and of apocalypse, on the other. Such myths, of 'unremembered' (and 'unknowable') but 'imaginable' events, allow us to join an *imagined* beginning with an *imagined* end which pro-retrospectively, that is to say, pre-posterously, endows the time between beginning and end with meaning.⁴ If the meaning with which the 'middle' of a life-course is endowed retrospectively is theological or metaphysical, the result is mythic or mythological. If the meaning is at once produced but is in some way indicated as being *only* imagined or feigned, as being not true but only possible, it is fictional or, as Kermode would have it, fictive.

By fictive, I take it that Kermode meant something like 'that which has been made' rather than 'found' in nature, and which bears the signs of its manufacture on its surface, at the plane of expression whereon the interaction between the form of expression and the substance of expression produces the effect of *poiesis*.⁵ It is easy, Erich Auerbach remarked,⁶ to tell the difference between legend and history: the story told in the former runs far too smoothly – its formal properties override the effort to *refer* to any reality external to itself. Kermode revises this idea of the

relation between the form and the content of the *historical* story. Every historical narrative swerves from the task of referring *only* to past reality in order to make a *story* out of what would otherwise be a senseless *series* of events, without discernible beginning and end, and therefore without the kind of meaning which is needed for humanity to imagine the possibility of making a something out of nothing.

The myth of the end of the world – apocalypse – Kermode took to be paradigmatic of the mythological version of the end of all things. But the mythic version of the end does more than tell of it; it justifies it morally. Thus, the ‘Apocalypse’ predicted in the book of Revelation depicts not only the *destruction* of all things but also the *justice* of this destruction. The mythical apocalypse foretells not only an end but an end that is at the same time a fulfilment, the *telos* towards which the whole of creation had been tending since the beginning. Thus, the mythic version of the end of all things is pre-determined: although it may be impossible to predict who or what may be redeemed at the end, that *some* will have been redeemed and some not, is already and has always been *given*.

Fiction pulls the thorn of predetermination by stressing the fundamental principle of narrative, which is to allow the events of the story to unfold from beginning to end by dialectical interplay between purposiveness and contingency, so that, as Kermode puts it, ‘the end comes as expected, but not in the manner expected’ (SE 53). Whence the peculiar satisfactions and popular appeal of histories cast in the mode of a narrative.⁷ Whence too the peculiar satisfactions and appeal – at least to an elite of modernist readers – of stories that are meant to frustrate narrativist expectations, stories that end but do not conclude. Such stories – Robbe-Grillet serves as Kermode’s exemplary writer here – take the fiction of fictivity to such length as to end in a kind of myth of the impossibility of fiction itself.

One problem for Kermode, then, was how to save the substance of narrativity, the fiction of how ends could retrospectively endow beginnings and middles with meaning, without lapsing into apocalypticism, on the one hand, or nihilism, on the other. Much of *The Sense of an Ending* is taken up with this task in its examination of the literary masterpieces of the two modernisms, first and second.

But instead of trying to summarise and analyse the ways in which Kermode goes about saving the idea of literary fiction from its association with myth and mythmaking, I want to examine what I have characterised above as the third level of Kermode’s version of the medieval fourfold hermeneutic: the historical. History was important to Kermode because it was the dimension of existence wherein humankind manifested its drive or instinct for meaning – and its recurrent failure to

achieve it definitively. This is quite a different conception of history and the historical from that of modern scientific historians. For the latter, history is simply given as the record of the things done by human beings that distinguish them from the rest of animal nature. The historian's question is: what happened? And his determination of what happened – the establishment of the facts of the matter – is the only answer to that question he requires. To go on and to ask what the facts might *mean* is to enter an ethical realm where the question of 'what can I know?' gives way to the much more uncomfortable question of 'what should I do?' Science gives way to ideology.

But Kermode was driven by the thought that literature's purpose in a universe without purpose was to interrogate the complex relation between knowing and meaning, epistemology and ethics, or more mundanely, experience and expectation, with an imaginative freedom denied to philosophy and history alike.⁸ He required an idea of history to provide both a base of human reality against which to measure the extent to which imagination might resist the hard lessons taught by experience and to provide a matrix for charting the course of literature's emergence out of myth and the development of its distinctively fictive capabilities over time. Much of Kermode's work belongs to the field of literary history (or history of literature – there is a difference) and one of the questions repeatedly asked in *The Sense of an Ending* is: how is history possible and what does the fact that literature has a history tell us about the nature of literature itself?⁹

This gesture toward the historicity of literature signalled Kermode's rejection of New Criticism's myth of the timelessness of great literature and the recently established 'archetypal' criticism of Northrop Frye, which purported to discover the 'content' of literature in sublimated versions of the forms and contents of the great myths of antiquity. Kermode was able to posit the possibility of a purely fictive content for literature by theorising literature's subject matter or ultimate referent as that 'history' which had rejected both myth and fiction in favour of accounts of the deeds of human beings whose 'meaning' was nothing other than the 'fact' of their occurrence. The fact that these deeds could be plausibly presented in the form of 'stories' argued more for the literarity of historiography than it did for the adequacy of the story form for representation of historical reality. Storytelling or narrativisation of a series of real events argued rather more for the adequacy of literature to the exigencies of realistic representation than for the fictive nature of the events being represented.

Kermode was well aware that the scientific status of historical studies had been undermined by the debate over 'historicism' and the complicity of historians of various stripes with those fascist regimes that had

sought to purify the human race by exterminating the parts of it which 'history' itself had supposedly condemned to extinction. But Kermode's idea of history had little in common with the ideology of most modern, professional historians. For professional historians of his time, historical studies has the human *past* for its object of study, the truth of fact as its aim, and the dispelling of error, lies, and fictions about the past as its purpose. Although many professional historians presented their findings in the form of stories, most of them preferred the genre of the research report, in which an event or other entity is set within its original context in order to demonstrate why and how it appeared when, where, and as it did, how it 'conformed' to or was consonant with its own time and place of occurrence, and why its development over time displayed a kind of meaning peculiarly 'historical' in kind. For this kind of historiography, the diachronic aspect was present simply as an account of how the event under study emerged in its context and changed it in order to become one with it. As thus envisaged, the whole of history is a congeries of such contextualisations, more like a satellite photograph or map of a landscape than a drama erupting on a 'scene' or Bakhtinian 'chronotope' already prefiguring the kinds of actions that can possibly occur within its confines.

Kermode, by contrast, regarded 'history' not so much as 'the past' as, rather, a domain of existence in which humanity came to consciousness of itself, fashioned itself, endowed itself with various meanings, and temporarily sustained itself, from time to time and in different places, against the general cosmic drift into entropic dispersion. It is – surprisingly to me – a very Heideggerian way of looking at history.¹⁰ On this view, 'history' is only a part of the past, that part of it manifesting the peculiar power of human kind to make something – form, pattern, meaning – out of chaos or nothing.

Kermode was fully aware that historians wished to deal in facts, eschewed grand interpretation, and contented themselves with small and regional truths rather than large and universal ones. But he also thought that the kind of order or meaning that historians purport to have found in their study of the past – an order of sequence, periodicity, and connectivity – had more in common with the kind of order found in myth and literature than with the kinds found in science or, for that matter, law. To him, historiography was a species of the genus fiction to which myth and literature also belonged. Like myth and literature, history relieves us of 'time's burden' by imposing upon the facts of reality the kinds of 'plots' found in myth but purged of dogmatism and bearing signs of both their provisional and their purely transitory nature, in the manner of literary works. These plots or plot-types not only 'defy our sense of reality', but also provide us with models or

paradigms of the kinds of responses to the human condition that alone permit us the hope without which distinctively human actions remain impossible (SE 56–7). This is why Kermode was interested more in narrative history than in its social science counterpart. And this is why he wanted to demonstrate history's similarity to literature rather than its presumed opposition to it.

Thus, in Kermode's view, far from being – as many historians believe – the *antidote* to myth and an *opponent* of literature, history is one with their therapeutic purposes. The modern historian's belief in the truth of fact and the authority of the written document keeps history grounded in a reality which myth disavows but literature sublimates into intimations of order. But the order which historians present as inhering in the facts – an order of sequence, continuity, and periodicity – derives from the same longing for meaning that inspires the great myths of genesis and apocalypse, the myths of crisis, transition, and peripeteia, the myths of creation *ex nihilo* and the myths of a final destruction in universal conflagration, flood, and plague. The historian's order may be more local, less grandiose, less metaphysical, more banal than that spectacularly presented in myth, but this historian's 'order' comes from the same province of human consciousness as myth. It is saved from full mythologisation by the historian's devotion to fact and to that part of past reality that has left evidence of its existence in the form of documents and monuments. But history remains 'mythical' in the extent to which it still aspires to an apprehension of meaning as adequately representable in a *narrative* or, more specifically, in a presentation of the human past or some part of it as a story with a *plot* which 'may relieve us of time's burden' by defying our 'sense of reality' (SE 56–7).

Kermode does not spend much time analysing historical writing in order to demonstrate the fictional element in it. But in *History and Value* (1988), he pauses long enough to explicate a passage from A. J. P. Taylor's *English History, 1914–1945*, in order to show how a certain element of fictionality is required to transform what otherwise would have been a dry chronicle of events into a proper history, an account not of how things appeared to be but of 'how things *essentially* were'.¹¹

But what is the difference between 'the way things were' and 'the way things *essentially* were'?

In his comment on the passage from Taylor's *English History, 1914–1945*, Kermode speaks of Taylor's *identification* of the union members who joined the general strike of 1926 in solidarity with the miners with those soldiers in World War I who selflessly went to war 'in defence of Belgium in 1914'. The two historical events – the strike and the war – are connected 'metaphorically' and conflated 'rhetorically', according to Kermode, in order to allow Taylor to show that the 'workers deserve

more than a passing tribute'. This metaphorical strategy, Kermode says, allows the historian to insert a suggestion of 'nobility' into the description of the facts of the matter. We do not object to this insertion of this opinion into the account of the facts, Kermode says, 'because we know very well that historians, like non-Modernist novelists, usually feel free to have opinions and even emotions . . .' Then, Kermode goes on to generalise:

just as works of fiction need not consist entirely of fictional discourse, works of history need not consist entirely of historical discourse, and may well contain expressions of opinion, compassion, distaste, etc., of the sort often to be found in works of fiction. In this case, for instance, we noted a certain wonder at the altruism of the workers, *treated in the pastoral mode* [my italics] as if they were *others*, members of an admirable but alien culture.¹²

I have emphasised 'treated in the pastoral mode' because it suggests that it is a literary and not strictly factual trope that provides a sense of 'how things *essentially* were'.

I had emphasised 'essentially' because I think that this term holds the key to much of what was at issue in the post-World War II discussion of the relation between history and literature. For historians of the era in which Kermode launched his *Sense of an Ending*, 'history' was differentiated from 'literature' on the analogy of the *difference* between fact and fiction. Fact itself was defined as either identical with 'event' (one spoke of 'study of the facts') or as a kind of statement about events (Arthur Danto: 'A fact is an event under a description.'). 'Fiction', considered as the 'substance' of literature, was thought to be a product of 'imagination' and therefore as fixed on 'imaginary' events, happenings, persons, and so on that had never existed and because of their 'fantastic' natures never could exist. This idea of fiction or the fictive has been so consolidated over the course of the twentieth century that literary scholars (such as Dorrit Cohn and Wolf Schmitt) have come to insist that a work of fiction is so removed from reality that even if there is an undeniable reference to a real historical person or event (such as, say, 'Napoleon' or 'the battle of Borodino'), the thing referred to must also be taken as *fictional*. Indeed, the principal distinction between fiction and other kinds of literature, it is held by many even nowadays, is that the work of fiction does not, because it cannot, *refer* to anything in the world beyond its confines. Such an idea of fiction would, of course, rule out *ab initio* any notion that historical discourse could legitimately contain any element of the fictional. For history is nothing if not a discourse dominated by the referential function, even though its referents are by definition no longer available to any kind of direct perception.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode opines that, in modernity, 'historiography has become a discipline more devious and dubious because of our recognition that its methods depend to an unsuspected degree on myths and fictions' (SE 36). This idea was underwritten in Kermode's mind by Popper's demonstration that history could never lay claim to the status of a genuine science. Popper had shown, or purported to have shown, that history properly practised dealt with individual events occurring in specified time-space locations, on the basis of evidence that precluded any properly scientific analysis of causation or possibility of prediction, and that historians were advised to concentrate on the telling of stories (narratives) about how things came to be in given times and places, in the way they did and not otherwise, and in the form of plausible sequences of events arranged in proper narrative (rather than a strictly chronological) order.

It has to be said that, in the 1960s and 1970s, philosophers and historians interested in the problem of historical explanation brought to the discussion of this topic rather primitive notions of both stories and narrative. A narrative was considered to be a *form* of discourse peculiarly suitable to the representation of series of events of the kind called 'historical' (rather than 'natural' or 'supernatural'). Historical events were supposed to differ from natural events by virtue of their predominantly diachronic (rather than synchronic) nature. Historical events, as Aristotle had taught, were either earlier or later in a series or came before or after some 'crisis' in a system that changed, reversed, or inverted its 'natural' order. As thus envisaged, sets of historical events could be realistically represented as having the form of stories, the 'followability' of which provided an 'explanatory effect' (an effect of 'comprehension' or 'understanding') in lieu of a properly scientific or causal explanation. It was not recognised that if a story produced an explanatory effect, it was because the events presented as describing the form of a story had been removed from the domain of reality and endowed with the form of myth or, as Kermode argued, fiction.

To be sure, there was plenty of opposition to the idea of explanation by storytelling, and not only because historical stories shared with myth a common form and mode of presentation. Stories were regarded as a substitute for a properly scientific mode of explanation, represented by the so-called nomothetic-deductive model prevailing in the modern natural sciences. Moreover, both the rise in historical studies of the so-called social history, which borrowed its methods from the social sciences, and the idea of historical causation as a long, impersonal, and serial process amenable to description by statistical correlations were inherently hostile to storytelling. The leader of the *Annales* group, Fernand Braudel, famously attacked the use of stories to represent

historical processes because, in his view, stories aestheticised reality or substituted an attractive *form* for the reality it purported to present to view. And in a brilliant essay on 'The Discourse of History' ('Le Discours de l'histoire', 1967), Roland Barthes dismissed the old-fashioned narrative history as manifestly mythifying reality by virtue of its form alone.¹³ But more was at issue than the fate of narrative historiography; the attack on narrative and narrativity extended to literature in general and the idea of the cognitive authority of *poiesis* or poetic utterance itself. The idea was that literature, poetry, and art in general should restrict themselves to fantasy and entertainment and leave reality to the sciences.

Already in the early 1960s, a debate was taking shape over the proper modes and models to be used in the representation of such ethically fraught events as the Holocaust and other 'crimes against humanity'. To treat such events as occasions for artistic performances threatened them with aestheticisation, relativisation, and even trivialisation.¹⁴ And thus insofar as storytelling had to be considered an art or at least a craft, then it had to be eliminated from any putatively realistic and/or ethically responsible representation of events that had caused a kind and degree of suffering hitherto unknown to history.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode referred to the Holocaust a number of times (SE 38–41). He used the Holocaust mostly as an example of the dangers of taking a myth such as anti-Semitism literally and then launching programmes designed to test the 'truth' of its propositions in such 'scientific' milieux as the gas chambers of Auschwitz (SE 38). Citing Hannah Arendt, Kermode opines that 'the philosophical or anti-philosophical assumptions of the Nazis were not generically different from those of the scientist, or indeed of any of us in an age "where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself"'. He then poses the question, 'How, in such a situation, can our paradigms of concord, our beginnings and ends, our humanly ordered picture of the world satisfy us, make sense? How can apocalypse or tragedy make sense, or more sense than any arbitrary nonsense can be made to make sense?' And answers it by juxtaposing *King Lear* against 'the Third Reich' in order to distinguish between two kinds of fiction which, although superficially alike in their fictiveness, produce different orders of effect: 'anti-Semitism is a fiction of escape which tells you nothing about death but projects it onto others; whereas *King Lear* is a fiction that inescapably involves an encounter with oneself, and the image of one's [own] end' (SE 39). But there is another difference as well, a difference in the degree of self-consciousness with which myth and fiction hold to the 'lies' they tell as if they were 'truths'.

Kermode gets from Wallace Stevens, Ortega y Gasset, and Vaihinger (SE 39–40) the idea of myths and fictions as 'consciously false'

constructions – lies that not only know themselves to be such but send out signals of their 'pretend' nature along with suggestions of their purely practical utility. But, Kermode maintains, myth presupposes the truthfulness of its constructions, whereas fictions – or at least, literary fictions – sustain and constantly force us to remember that they are only constructions, products of our imaginations, and are to be taken as neither true nor false, but instruments for multiplying the possibilities of ways we can have of relating to our world. Hence, Kermode's dictum: 'Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not *consciously* held to be fictive.'

I want at this point to go on to consider the implications for Kermode's understanding of history of his idea that historiography needs fiction and fiction, in turn, is to be taken as 'conscious falsehood' or in any case not to be taken as 'true'. In order to do this I need to digress for a moment into a consideration of the ways in which the mapping out of problems in terms of antithetical conceptual poles generates a semantic field capable of explicating the structures of mixed cases, such as the psychoanalytical case of 'madness in insanity' or 'insanity in madness'. So it is with the polar isotopes, 'true' and 'false'. Kermode challenges us to see such fictions as *Lear* or Stevens's 'Man on the Dump' as 'consciously false' when he might be said to have wanted to characterise them as neither true nor false (the traditional view of fictions) but as 'not untrue' in the sense that they present a vision of the world that is more virtually than actually true.

No world-image, no imagined cosmos or cosmos presented as real, can meet the test of truthfulness required by a semantics which presupposes the true to be the *opposite* of the false, the false to be the *contradictory* of the not-false, and the not-true to be *implicandum* of everything that is in the least bit false. Out of the opposition of true (+) to false (-) we can thus generate a hierarchy comprised of true (+) at the top, the not-false (- -) following, the not-true (- +) below that, and the false (-) at the bottom. The two middle terms (the not-false and the not-true) can be instantiated by the glass containing a liquid of half of its whole volume. Whether we choose to call the glass half-full or half-empty determines the value to be placed on the volume of water in the glass. Everyone knows that anything that is half-full is better than its half-empty twin, because fullness is everywhere valued more highly than emptiness.

And so it is, I believe, with Kermode's efforts in *The Sense of an Ending* to present literary fiction as superior to the fictions of science, religion, philosophy, and history by virtue of its hybridisation of the true and the false in such a way as to permit without contradiction the imagination of an element of the false in any putatively true representation of reality, on

the one hand, and an element of truthfulness in any figment of the artistic imagination, on the other. As Freud taught us to see the element of sanity in every kind of madness and a kind of madness in any putatively perfect sanity, so too Kermode grasped the 'secret' of modernist literature in its search for the real in the illusory and the illusory in the real.¹⁵ Thus, in a crucial passage in chapter 2 of *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode sets fictions in opposition to myth only to proceed to assert that they are capable of mutating one into the other.

We have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. In this sense anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth; and *Lear* is a fiction. Myth operates with the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, *illud tempus*; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now, *hoc tempus*. (SE 39)

Thus, although they would appear to be mutually exclusive concepts, myth and fiction might also seem on this description to constitute the poles of a continuum or the isotopes of a chiasmus in which each pole is at once the necessary presupposition of and at the same time the irredeemable negation of the other. Any interplay between the positive and negative poles of this relationship could be emplotted dialectically or (after the manner of Kenneth Burke) 'dramatically'. In any event, Kermode uses this dialectical or chiasmatic structure to generate 'places' in a semantic field in which the mixed cases of truth and falsity, real and imaginary, fact and fiction, and so on can be cleared for occupancy by 'history' and 'science' respectively.

In the elaboration of his theory, Kermode needed a notion of a dimension of human being which, while 'real' in the sense of 'really existing', does not wear the mask of 'ultimate being'. This turns out to be 'history', which, so it seems to me, has the virtue of being able to mediate between the chaos of ultimate being and the fictions of literature. But this 'history' is not that of the professional historians; rather, it is a hybrid of the raw experience of temporality, on the one hand, and the narrativised versions provided by historians and literary writers, on the other. Kermode puts it this way:

we don't in fact like history to be what Acton said it ought to be, critical and colourless; we accept without much question a measure of mythmaking, the intrusion of personal feeling, or, it may be, nationalist or class

feeling. Of course there are different kinds of history, each with its own peculiar conditions, but we would expect most of these general provisions to obtain for all: there will be patterns, causes, events rather than mere facts, opinions rather than flat chronicles, clothes for Clio.¹⁶

Kermode wanted 'patterns, causes, events, rather than mere facts, opinions rather than flat chronicles' in his histories, and he wanted these because only a history thus construed could contribute to the 'making of a usable past, a past which is not simply past but also always new'.¹⁷ This idea of making the past new was central to modernism, Kermode thought, and it was central to the kind of history that he hypothesised as a justification for regarding history itself as a kind useful fiction.

But this idea of history was not unique to Kermode. In the very years in which Frank Kermode, on the basis of his distinction between literary fictions and historical fictions, was working out his theory of fictional history, the philosopher Michael Oakeshott was working towards a similar conception. In a collection of essays written in the early 1970s, entitled *On History*, Oakeshott distinguished between the *historical* past – the past as it is constructed by historians – and the *practical* past – the past which ordinary people carry around with them in the form of memories, both accessible and repressed, and to which they have recourse when they find themselves in situations in which they must act without fully adequate knowledge of where they are or sufficient certitude of who they are.¹⁸ For Oakeshott, such situations were practical in two senses: first, they are practical in the sense of raising the ethical question 'What *should* I do?' (in the sense of Kant's Second Critique) and, secondly, they are practical in the sense of raising a utilitarian question, 'What *can* I do?'

In the absence of any religious, metaphysical, or otherwise transcendental source of authority for answering these questions, our only resource is to our own past experience and/or that of the community to which we belong. It might be thought that in such situations, the past to which we would have recourse would be that past resurrected, reconstructed, or restored by the professional historians of our community. But nothing could be further from the case. First, professional historians are for the most part interested only in that part of the past which they can restore to perception on the basis of the kinds of evidence that they take to be relevant to a specifically 'historical' way of grasping the past. Moreover, secondly, professional historians are or profess to be interested in the past in itself or the past for itself alone, and not as an object useful for understanding the present or anticipating the future. Third, the historical past, which is written from the standpoint of someone who knows how events of a specific present turned out, is a past which no

one living in the past could ever have experienced. The historical past exists and can only have existed in the books and articles in which historians have distilled it. Thus, the historical past has no ethical or utilitarian importance. If anything, the historicity of the historical past consists of its distance, difference and irrelevance to the existential present. Such a past, it could be said, is of only *theoretical* interest. Oakeshott wanted to justify another kind of past, a past that could serve the 'practical' purpose of suggesting possible ways that human beings in an aoretic present, could imagine a kind of sea anchor to give them provisional orientation in the ocean of time.

From his first work until his last, Frank Kermode demonstrated an 'appetite' for history.¹⁹ For Kermode, history is a kind of degree zero of human actuality against which all of the grand narratives of human development and the myths of ultimate meaning can be measured, their ideological content identified, and their authority as guides to the future definitively dispelled. Although short-range historical narratives provided history with a provisional meaningfulness, which is to say, evidence of a potentiality for meaning, their overriding interest in particular facts saved them from any tendency to holism. Kermode followed Karl Popper in the conviction that history could never become a predictive (nomothetic-deductive) science nor serve as the raw material of a religious or metaphysical vision of human destiny. And, like Popper, Kermode believed that historians did their work or played their game properly only when they told stories about human beings trying to live meaningful lives in specific times and places and under specific conditions of existence.

But stories about sets or series of real events do not possess the truth-value of factuality. This is because stories do not inhere in sets of real events. At best a given series of real events may provide intimations of elements of stories: extraordinary happenings, grand actions, felicitous outcomes of conflicts, elevations of the humble or humiliations of the great. When historians seize upon these intimations, enfigure them as story-types, and cast them as stories with well-marked beginnings, middles, and ends; endow them with plots, peripeties, and pathos; and provide endings that 'fulfil' what had appeared to be aoretic beginnings, then historians are engaging in an activity much older than the practice of 'historical research' itself. They are, according to Kermode (and this is his radical move), engaging in *fiction*. That is to say, Kermode rejects the idea that historians 'find' the stories they tell in the events they study. No set of events occurring in a given time and place, even if arranged in the temporal order of their occurrence, would ever manifest the formal coherence of a story. They could at best take on the meaning of a 'chronicle'. In order for a history to be made out of a

chronicle, the events of the latter must be restructured, rearranged, and represented as having the form (and content) of a story. This is to say that, in order to be turned into a plausible story, the events of a chronicle must be 'narrated' or, as I would have it, 'narrativised'. As thus envisaged, historical stories have a twofold referent: the events of which they speak, on the one hand, and the plot-type by reference to which a story is endowed with a generic meaning or paradigm of sense-giving inherent in the culture of which the storyteller is a member. This set of paradigms exists in the myths, religions, ideologies, dogmas, doctrines, and conventions of a culture. They also exist in 'literature', but here they exist in a peculiar condition of stable instability. In literature or, as I would prefer, literary writing, the paradigms of meaning-giving of a culture are subjected to a range of uses and experimentations that effectively make manifest their implicit idea that meaning equals (is worth, or is equivalent to) form.

It should be stressed that Frank Kermode in no way wished to be taken as an authoritative contributor to the debates over the nature of history, historiography, and philosophy of history that were raging in the 1960s. His thought on these topics appears to have been derived from a reading of Popper, Arthur Danto, and Morton White, and later on E. H. Gombrich and Thomas Kuhn. What Kermode was trying to do was save the idea of literary fiction as a mode of cognition, as the essence of literature, and as an antidote to mythical thinking in any form. The notion of literary fiction allows Kermode to argue that history (or, as it is said, historical reality) is the defining referent not only of 'literature' but of modernist literature in particular – indeed, it is the pole star which keeps the great modernists (including Eliot, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, etc.) from declining into myth.²⁰ But fiction can have this function because, in Kermode's formulation of the topic, it is also the essence of a specifically historiological way of thinking about the enigmas of being's relation to time.²¹

Notes

- 1 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 124. Hereafter I will cite this book in the text as *SE*, followed by page numbers of quotations, in parentheses.
- 2 The aporias (enigmas or 'undecidables') of temporality is the subject of Ricoeur's discussion of three kinds of time (chronological, historical, and ontological) in *Time and Narrative*, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), a work heavily indebted to Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*.
- 3 I feel that I must draw attention to the most hostile review of *The Sense of an Ending* that I know, the late Richard Webster's 'New Ends for Old: Frank

Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*' (*Critical Quarterly*, Winter, 1974). Webster seems to think that Kermode wished to convince us that 'only by a "theory of fiction" could the enigmas of the universe be unlocked'. There are many other critical reviews of this and other of Kermode's work; its status as a classic is not uncontested.

- 4 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). This book argues for the possibility of 'reversing' history – or at least the history of art – insofar as the present can change the *historical* past by rewriting it. To be sure, this is to suggest that the only 'history' we can have is that found in books and scholarly articles. Bal's book is inspired or at least sustained by the work of Patricia Parker on the rhetorical figure of *hysteron proteron* or the trope of *metalepsis*, by which one can quite plausibly 'put the cart before the horse' or the post- before the pre- by the simple device of spatialising a temporal relationship. See Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 5 This is jargonistic, I know. But I needed a way to suggest that for Kermode the 'fictive' is produced by 'poiesis'. See Kermode, *An Appetite for Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), where the ideas of the fictive, the poetic, and the aesthetic are all run together.
- 6 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 19.
- 7 I am not clear whether Kermode, when speaking about history, means the thing itself (i.e. a mode of human being, comprised of the whole past, present, future continuum which we take to be completed insofar as it is past, still happening insofar as it is present, or still yet to come insofar as it is future) OR the accounts given of the past by modern professional historians. It is obvious that he does NOT mean those metahistorical or mythical accounts of history of the kind produced by Hegel, Marx, Spengler, or Toynbee. It is from such mythical accounts of history that modern historiography saves us. But Kermode's adoption of Karl Popper's criticism of historicism, of both the scientific and the philosophicist kind, suggests that he (Kermode) prefers his history in the old-fashioned, narrative mode of presentation. Certainly, Kermode respects the work of analytical historical researchers who produce reports (of archival findings) rather than stories with beginnings, middles, and ends. Kermode expects his historians to respect the research findings of their peers, but prefers them to bring together the facts into a coherent story with a plot which consonates an ending with a beginning. This bringing together of the facts into a coherent story is the work of narrative or, as I would prefer, narrativisation (by which I mean the endowment of a series of events with story-meaning). Narration, narrative, and narrativisation are the subjects of the semiotic subject of narratology.
- 8 Here I allude to a fundamental text of modernist philosophy of history, Reinhart Koselleck's *Future's Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), which proposes a 'semantics of historical

time' focused on the dialectical relation between a society's 'space of experience' and its projected 'horizon of expectations'.

- 9 Again, I allude to the similar project of E. H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*. Gombrich stresses that his book is not a 'history of art' (he had already written such a work, entitled, significantly, 'The Story of Art') but rather a consideration of how it is that art can be said to *have* a history.
- 10 See Kermode's discussion of Heidegger in *An Appetite for Poetry*.
- 11 Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 111; my emphases).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', trans. Stephen Bann, in *Comparative Criticism*, 3 (1981), 7–20.
- 14 For a discussion of the ethics of using the Holocaust as the subject of a fiction or indeed any kind of artistic performance, see Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). The discussion has been carried much further today, especially by Berel Lang and Friedlander himself.
- 15 T/his dependency of 'realistic' art on illusion was the thesis advanced by E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1960) which effectively argued that the realism of Western art depended on the discovery of the necessity of illusionary techniques if objects depicted on a two-dimensional surface were to 'appear' as three-dimensional to the viewer. The same thing applied to the production of the effect of proportion in perspective, in which the relative sizes of objects were discernible at different depths in the picture plane.
- 16 Kermode, *History and Value*, 112.
- 17 Ibid., 116.
- 18 Michael Oakshott, *On History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), ch. 1.
- 19 I allude to *An Appetite for Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 20 Kermode, *History and Value*, 119.
- 21 The allusion is to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which Kermode reflected on in reference to Stevens's interest in the German philosopher. *The Sense of an Ending* is, as the title indicates, about how things end and, more specifically, how human beings try to come to terms with the awareness that all things must end, how they might make endings more than mere terminations.

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