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This book emerges from a number of intense encounters, over nearly two decades, with what most academics now simply call 'theory', including my doctoral studies with Geoff Benington, at The University of Sussex, which resulted in my D.Phil. thesis on Jacques Derrida (Functions of the Derrida Archive: Philosophical Receptions, 1997, published 2003); time spent at The British Library, London, researching my book on Jean Baudrillard for the Routledge Critical Thinkers Series, edited by Robert Eaglestone (Jean Baudrillard, 2009); and my brief period directing the London Network Philosophy and Theory Research Seminar, that met (informally) at The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London between 2000 and 2002. At the ICA meetings, two figures were explored most closely: Samuel Beckett and Walter Benjamin (Beckett and Philosophy, 2002 and Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing Through the Catastrophe, 2005). This slightly tangled web of interests and connections brought me to the position where I could say 'yes' to Routledge, when they suggested that I might like to tackle fifty key twentieth-century literary theorists. Of course, at that point the debates really began, concerning who the 'fifty' should actually be. Inevitably someone's favourite and important theorist has been left out of this selection, but careful consideration was given to the overall range of critics and/or theorists included here. Some biographical information is given for each thinker, but the bulk of each entry deals with key concepts and ideas that have informed literary studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The entries are selective, and student readers may wish to follow up particular theorists by turning to the Routledge Critical Thinkers Series. I also strongly recommend to student readers the relevant Gale reference publications, such as the Dictionary of Literary Biography and the Contemporary Literary Criticism series, where more extensive entries, with competing critical views, can be found. A particularly
Conrad, but also in *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (1990), a wrestling back from the postmodernists of Adorno’s ‘old-fashioned dialectical discourse’, and in *Brecht and Method* (1998), a careful recovery of ‘praxis’ from Barthes’ linguistic readings of Brecht. Thus, Jameson ends *Late Marxism* with the hope that even given the birth of an entirely postmodern society, the ‘thing itself’ or ‘objective experience of social reality’ will always emerge.

**Notes**

3. Ibid., p. 16.
5. Ibid., p. 365.
6. Ibid., p. 367.
7. Ibid., p. 415.
12. Ibid., p. 251.

**See also in this book**

Eagleton

**Major works**


**Further reading**


**Frank Kermode** (1919–)

Defender of the canon, defender of the faith in literature, and the insider’s insider, Frank Kermode has been reading, reviewing and interpreting literature for over sixty years; in his skirmishes with literary theorists, he has paved the way for the introduction of a more theoretical approach to literary studies, even if that was not the desired effect. Born in England, in 1919, Kermode was educated at Liverpool University, where he gained his BA in English in 1940, and his MA (with a thesis on the poet Abraham Cowley) in 1947; he served in the Royal Navy during 1940–1946. Kermode’s first academic posts were at Kings College Newcastle (1947–1949), and The University of Reading (1949–1958), during which time he published his first book, called *Romantic Image* (1957). In 1958, Kermode was appointed as the John Edward Taylor Chair of English Literature at The University of Manchester, and the Winterstoke Professor of English at The University of Bristol in 1965. Two more highly distinguished posts were to follow: in 1967 Kermode became the Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London, and in 1974 he became the King Edward Professor of English Literature at Cambridge. Visiting professorships included Harvard University (1961) and Columbia University (1983 and 1985). What such a list of prestigious titles and positions does not tell the reader is the extensive service Kermode has performed for the world of letters, in his reviews and editorial roles. Kermode has published hundreds of review articles in journals and magazines such as *The Listener, Encounter*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Book Review* and *The London Review of Books.*1 Key edited anthologies and
other texts include English Pastoral Poetry: From the Beginnings to Marvell (1952), Five Centuries of Shakespeare Criticism (1965), The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (with John Hollander, 1973) and The Literary Guide to the Bible (with Robert Alter, 1987), to name but a few.

While Kermode has not promulgated any particular theory, or developed a school of followers, his critical writings may be mapped according to two main phases: his publications up to and including The Sense of an Ending (1967), and his following shift, via exploration of the new French theory (especially Roland Barthes), to a more meta-textual approach apparent in texts such as The Genesis of Secrecy (1979) and The Art of Telling (1983). The early publications include Romantic Image (1957), John Donne (1957), the formative and influential Wallace Stevens (1960), William Shakespeare: The Final Plays (1963) and D.H. Lawrence (1973). Kermode’s essential humanism is given commanding force with his celebration of the poet and the importance of poetry in human life; in a lecture on Shakespeare given at the Center For Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, in 1964, Kermode argues against the notion that Shakespeare’s genius is ‘natural’, not by advocating a ‘learned’ Shakespeare in his place, but rather one of great intellect expressed through the intensity and ‘perversity’ of Shakespeare the poet. Thus, Kermode advocates a more comprehensive historical and textual understanding of Shakespeare, while still maintaining the priority of his literary identity and expression.

After the publication of The Sense of an Ending, Kermode starts to comment more substantially on literary theory. Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in his comments concerning ‘the canon’, comments that are also indicative of a humanist approach. How does Kermode define the canon, and why is he so keen to defend it? In an essay published in 1988 based on a lecture delivered that year at the Free University, Amsterdam, Kermode opposes the ‘mnemonic’ notion of canon with that of the ‘regulative’ notion. In this opposition, cultural preservation and memorialization is opposed to that of a power-based notion of canon; with the former, Kermode insists that canon is a mnemonic device for handling information in the face of an ‘overwhelming mass of data’; in other words, something is worth selecting and preserving from the ‘mass’ cultural matrix. Shifting to Christian history, Kermode points out that canon initially meant ‘the rule of faith or truth’ and then this same sense was applied to the Scriptures; the point being obliquely made is that canon becomes normative, but also an expression of institutional rules that are worth following. While Kermode thus concedes that those opposed to canons are justified in connecting them with expressions of institutional power, he does not accept that such attacks are being truthful, in that he suggests that rather than destroy canons, they would rather take them over. Further, Kermode argues that the canon is not brought into existence by any one ‘party in power’, rather, it comes into existence through time, and through informed consent. Why must the canon be defended? To understand this, the role of the critic must be brought into the equation; as Christopher J. Knight argues: ‘The critic, for Kermode, is a facilitator who helps the work find and hold an audience, principally by pointing to those places within it where value . . . may be found.’ The critic is thus a secondary figure commenting upon the primary literary text that has been produced by an artist of great insight or genius. The humanist task, then, becomes sorting the wheat from the chaff (reviewing) and maintaining the modernity or relevance of the canon (interpretation). Who is attacking the canon? Kermode suggests that it is ‘minorities’: feminists, African-Americans, postmodernists, postcolonialists, and so on. Kermode’s position here is complex: he argues that those who regard canon as no more than an expression of power also do not wish to ‘remember the past in any orderly way’. The key word here is ‘orderly’ suggesting that the canon brings order, while its dismantling will bring chaos. For Kermode, a canon is a coherent ‘totality’ and those who recognize this and cherish this have a duty to protect the canon through expressing to others precisely why they value canon. So Kermode perceives the attackers of canon to be inconsistent and contradictory in their demands: they wish to expand the canon at the same time as they wish to entirely dismantle it; they bemoan the exclusion of minority writers, while arguing that the canon was responsible for holding back minorities from writing in the first place; they wish to gain canonical status for minority writing without gaining the concomitant institutional power-knowledge status that they were previously suspicious of, and so on. Responding in An Appetite for Poetry (1989) to criticisms made of Kermode’s position on canon by the deconstructionist Jonathan Culler, Kermode offers five elucidating criticisms of Culler’s approach that help with an overall understanding of the subject:

First, despite wishes to the contrary, ‘canons are formed by exclusions as well as inclusions’ . . . Second, ‘canons are not . . . enclosures full of static monuments’ (AP, 15). Rather, they are texts plus commentary, giving ‘the contents of the canon
a perpetual modernity' (ibid.). Third, 'without canon there would be no tradition ensuring what can be thought of as the special forms of attention elicited by canonical texts'. Fourth, 'there is, indeed, no ... necessary association between canons and political oppression'. [and Fifth] it is not true that canons are predicated on the notion of aesthetic totality. The relation of a text 'to a totality of texts' is always a problematic matter, and this is why interpretation is endless — why it can make sense to speak of texts as inexhaustible, and of the 'great' texts as calling for continual institutional inquiry (AP, 18). 7

Perhaps ironically, it is the very theories produced by those Kermode calls 'minorities' that are providing new ways of interpreting canonical texts. However, this still leaves the underlying fact that the founding contract between canon and critic — that the latter values, defends and therefore maintains the 'perpetual modernity' of the former — has now been broken.

Even though Kermode has not founded a school of criticism, he has still contributed greatly to critical thinking in Anglo-American literary criticism. Commentators sometimes call Kermode a 'religious' or 'theological' thinker, which he has, perhaps disingenuously, denied. In an essay called 'Institutional Control of Interpretation' (1979), for example, Kermode speaks 'about the institution of literary and critical scholarship' via 'analogy with ecclesiastical and other institutions'. 8 In this essay, Kermode's analogy between Church and secular school, merely foregrounds a pattern and a relationship that critics perceive in his work as a whole. For Kermode, in a post-Christendom world, the arts are where true value now resides; yet the canon, being 'texts plus commentaries', needs not just defence per se, i.e. defence of the list of great books or the books themselves, but also regulation of those who are permitted into the institution of literary criticism to write the commentaries in the first place: in other words, the 'licensed' exegetes or insiders, who can access the 'latent' meaning of aesthetic texts. Observing an MLA program, Kermode calls the manifestation of feminist and black studies 'marginal innovation and unrest' describing this as a 'total license in regard to canon' which will necessarily be ameliorated and controlled. 9 In other words, the institution — the MLA — allows for a temporary carnivalesque, a letting-off steam, but in the process maintains previously held values, standards and order. Since Kermode wrote these words, it has become apparent that the carnivalesque in some ways now reigns. In 'The

Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative (1979), Kermode traces the authority of interpretive insiders to no less a figure than Jesus Christ, in Mark 4:11–12, summarized with the statement 'Only the insiders can have access to the true sense of these stories.' Insiders are in this schema 'good' readers, while outsiders are beyond the pale, and need guidance and education by the insiders. Kermode is a canny reader, it goes without saying, and he tempers this hard-and-fast distinction or binary opposition with an aside that this Scriptural statement occurs when Jesus is frustrated by the inability of his disciples (the ultimate insiders) to understand that which they should already know. The opposition is thus not set in stone, and a controlled chiasmus how the binary actually functions in Kermode's work. In The Genesis of Secrecy, Kermode is the insider par excellence with his new reading of Henry Green's Party Going, but he is an outsider when it comes to his readings of the New Testament. These readings are knowledgeable, intriguing and quite brilliant; in the process, while still not being a theologian, Kermode crosses from outside to inside, having in a sense authorized his own passage (the book is now standard reading on many religious studies courses or courses that study religion and literature). Kermode's theory of reading can also be seen most clearly in The Genesis of Secrecy where interpretive insight is akin to Dilthey's 'impression-point', that is to say, a moment of perception that 'gives sense and structure to the whole' be that whole life, or a text or a canon. Such a moment Kermode calls 'divination' and a text may have several such divinations in its total gestalt. Digging around in texts in search of these moments of divination, thus uncovering the latent meaning, may sound analogous to psychoanalytical methodologies, and indeed in his prologue to The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction (1983), Kermode argues that our 'era of interpretation might be said ... to have begun when Freud published The Interpretation of Dreams'. 10 But even more tellingly, Kermode ends his prologue not with the implications of Freud, but rather the notion of earning as critics 'the privilege of access to that kingdom of the larger existence which is in our time the secular surrogate of another Kingdom whose horizon is no longer within our range'. 11

Notes
1 Christopher J. Knight, Uncommon Readers: Denis Donoghue, Frank Kermode, George Steiner, and the Tradition of the Common Reader, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003, p. 162.
4 Ibid., p. 265.
8 Frank Kermode, ‘Institutional Control of Interpretation’, *Salmagundi*, 43 (1979): 72–86; p. 84.
9 Ibid., p. 82.
11 Ibid., p. 16.
12 Ibid., p. 30.
13 Ibid., pp. 31–32.

**Major works**


**Further reading**


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**JULIA KRISTeva (1941–)**

A confluence of the new radical French thinkers took place in the 1960s, their mouthpiece being the journal *Tel Quel* (1960–1983). One of the most exciting contributors to the journal was Julia Kristeva, whose re-readings of semiotics, structuralism, linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis transformed the thought of her contemporaries. Born in Bulgaria in 1941, Kristeva was educated at the University of Sofia, and emigrated to France in 1965, studying at The University of Paris VII in Paris. She was soon immersed in the heady world of theory, attending seminars by Roland Barthes, Lucien Goldmann and Jacques Lacan. She defended her thesis in 1973, published the following year as *La Révolution du langage poétique: L’Avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle* (translated a decade later as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984). Kristeva already had a significant presence among the Parisian intelligentsia; prior to her thesis defence she had published many critical essays in academic journals and two books, *Sémiosis: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969) and *Le Texte du roman: Appare semiologique d’une structure discursive transformationelle* (1970). She became Professor of Linguistics at Paris VII in 1974, and in addition to this post became a practising psychoanalyst.

*Sémiosis: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* is a crucial book in the development of semiotics, expanded upon significantly in *La Révolution du langage poétique: L’Avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle*. In these texts Kristeva advances a number of key concepts: sémanalyse, the gene-text and pheno-text, paragram, chora and intertextuality. Sémanalyse is a critique of the scientific basis of structuralist linguistics, in particular, the notion that poetic or literary texts can be reduced to (or explained by) language itself; in other words, Sémanalyse rejects the approach that argues that the tools used for linguistic analysis are also the very words under study. Kristeva argues instead that poetic texts function translinguistically, that