Loose Canons
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History and Value: The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcliffe Lectures 1987 by Frank Kermode

Nya by Stephen Haggard and Frank Kermode
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British Writers of the Thirties by Valentine Cunningham

Frank Kermode’s History and Value reads the literature of the Thirties as ‘a love story, almost a story of forbidden love’. The story is usually told in political terms, but the characters and actions in Kermode’s version and in the conventional version are the same: the poets and novelists who hoped to serve a proletarian revolution that would abolish their privilege and consume their class. In the received version of the ‘Thirties myth’, the middle-class writers who took up left-wing views succeeded only in deceiving themselves and betraying their gifts. In Kermode’s counter-myth, these writers braved a dangerous passage across a social and psychological frontier in the hope of offering their work and their lives to a class that, to them, was a strange and wondrous Other, the image and agent of apocalyptic power. Their border-passages were transgressions. They violated social and artistic tabus. Transgression always evokes pious horror among those who, in Auden’s words, ‘would rather be ruined than changed’. But these transgressions were acts of conscience, imagination and love.

Most of Kermode’s authors came to regret their transgressions. The ‘Thirties myth’, articulated first by Orwell, received its strongest sanction in the reproaches made by the older Auden to the younger Auden. For Kermode, their regrets do nothing to diminish their acts. His brief, he writes, does not require him to assert that his bourgeois authors were never glib or false in their politics, and he is urbanely devastating when he finds sleek condescension stalking beneath the rags of pity. But his book is a lover’s discourse. Where
others find fault he is not embarrassed to praise. He hears in the political literature of the Thirties a lucid note of awe and wonder. His authors began with a generous wish ‘to learn about and possibly love the unknown, the Other’; the consequence, more passionate than they had hoped, was a literature ‘splendid in the moment of its enforced engagement with the almost unthinkable Other’ – and ‘capable of fineness even in its moment of withdrawal’.

The love that Kermode writes about is as visionary as it is transgressive. The revolutionary virtues that the writers admired among the workers were not the virtues that the workers generally detected among themselves. Kermode recalls from his proletarian adolescence in the Thirties that the working class showed no sign of growing ripe with revolutionary transformation. Families like his own ‘managed fairly well’ on a manual worker’s £3 a week. Among those who lived as he did near the bottom of the ladder ‘animosity was reserved largely for those who were a rung lower.’ This makes the political commitment of the poets all the more admirable: ‘consciousness of the need and possibility of action was to a very considerable extent an affair of middle-class conscience. And it is surely to the credit of the intellectual left, now somewhat despised for naiveté that they were so moved, that they came to believe that they must do something about the whole system that in their view made poverty and war equally inevitable.’ If their work seems to us now a record of their failure to understand or alter the conditions of their age, ‘we need to ask in what degree it is our failure rather than theirs.’

Kermode’s theme is the virtue of transgression – virtue in its double sense of merit and power. He begins with a forgotten Thirties novel that he regards as an agreeable minor work, not a neglected masterpiece. It failed to survive because, despite its merits, it ‘mimes transgression but never crosses the boundary’. Stephen Haggard’s Nya is the story of the love between a young man and a 13-year-old girl. Readers of Lolita will imagine such a book as a hotbed of sexual and linguistic transgression. But in Nya nothing untoward happens. Sexual innocence is not even tempted into experience; the girl first plays among street-boys but returns as if by instinct to the middle class into which she was born. While the more brutal representatives of conventional morality are challenged, conventional morality itself is affirmed. The book plays it safe, and without the disturbing, unresolved energy of transgression, no book can survive. In making this argument about the way books survive Kermode focuses on transgressive love and transgressive language and form. He could equally have argued that no book can be taken seriously if someone doesn’t get murdered in it, or if someone doesn’t fall under the threat of murder.

None of this implies that the canon of remembered books constitutes more than a small fraction of the transgressive works that deserve a place in it; Kermode’s book is in part a brief for the undeservedly forgotten. Nor does it imply that everyone should commit three
transgressions before breakfast. The transgressor always stands in moral and mortal
danger. In the background of this book is Eliot’s remark that it is better to do evil than to
do nothing, because when we do evil we at least are human. Kermode prefers the irrational
hatreds and disgusts of Wyndham Lewis to the sober rationalisations of Lewis’s interpreters
who ‘smooth him out’ into a principled critic of an unruly age. But he prefers even more the
sacrificial transgressions of forbidden love. He sees in Christopher Caudwell’s conversion to
Communism a ‘loving surrender to necessity’ that could only have occurred through a
‘psychic revolution in the lover’.

Caudwell’s commitment to the proletariat was complete. The politics of less committed
writers has plausibly been attacked as an exercise in sentimental sublimation: what they
really wanted from the workers was sex. Kermode sees the matter in a different light. The
intertwining of sex and politics is a forbidden transgression that is also a universal fact. He
draws a transgressive moral from Robert Musil: ‘The many sexual combinations exhibited
in The Man without Qualities testify to the great truth that all knowledge of the other, all
intercourse between opposites, is analogous to carnal knowledge. It is an idea ready for
political applications. The love between individuals who represent collectives, classes, is a
union of political opposites that aspires to inseparability, androgyny.’ Kermode is not alone
in noticing the ‘overtone of that sexual interest in the completely other that one often sees
in the bourgeois writing of the period’. He illustrates it with a shrewdly chosen scene from
The Road to Wigan Pier in which Orwell admires the miners’ ‘most noble bodies’. But
Kermode also notices that this transgressive interest goes both ways. The proletarian writer
Lewis Jones, whose novels portray political struggles at a Welsh mine, praises the enviably
‘magnificent body’ of the coal-owner’s son.

Kermode’s argument is built on an implicit contrast between relations of love and relations
of power, and between the languages appropriate to each. The politically-minded poets of
the Thirties used the language of love. The politically-minded critics of the Eighties use the
language of power. Kermode describes, on the one hand, a literature that found value in
personal and collective lives and, on the other, a criticism that wields power when it can
and serves power when it can’t. ‘In the Thirties,’ he writes, ‘the relation of the working class
to literature was an urgent practical issue and not merely a problem of academic Marxist
theory, as it is now.’ The question of value arises now mostly in the course of factional
academic disputes, ‘when the arguments tend to be about political power rather than about
the value of particular works’.

Kermode recognises that academic Marxist critics expend much ingenuity in justifying the
value of canonical literature whose ideology is repugnant to socialist conscience. He
observes that they do this not out of love for the Other, but in order to maintain the
privileges of their own ‘institutionalised and authoritarian view of history’. No matter how much a critic complicates the matter by claiming to perceive historical truth through the lens of the work’s ideological error, or by claiming to produce true value in the act of an ideologically correct reading of an ideologically erroneous work, ‘in the end you have to have an authoritative view of what true history is, as distinct from false ideological versions of it. Or: since only Marxists have the truth about history and the ideological base which, with whatever degree of complexity, controls the value of the text, valuation is the privilege of Marxists; and even if their valuations sometimes coincide with those of non-Marxists, they alone are properly equipped to make them.’ Political literature crosses over the border to value the Other. Political criticism sits in the seminar room and values itself.

There are problems in Kermode’s polemic. He ignores those in the Thirties to whom revolution offered high-minded reasons for beating up people they don’t like, and he prejudices the case by judging critics by standards appropriate to poets and novelists. Very little criticism has ever been transgressive. It is not the fault of the Eighties if the Thirties had the good luck to produce Empson – whose suggestion that the proletarian novel was a variety of pastoral gave Kermode the seed for this book. And Kermode’s assumption that things are getting worse ignores the problem that we have no way of knowing whether they really are worse or whether, as one grows older, one grows less willing to give high-minded nonsense the benefit of the doubt. Fifty years from now, someone may recall today’s theoretical Stalinoids as chevaliers servants, although this seems unlikely. Kermode’s view of the sorry state of criticism, in any event, is not an artifact of seniority: in the early Fifties he ended his introduction to the Arden Tempest with a rebuke to that era’s varieties of ‘mad critical pride’.

History and Value ends with a defence of the literary canon. Kermode need not defend it against most Marxist critics, for they tend to find Marxist reasons to accept the established canon. He defends it instead against those radical critics (not always Marxists) who would replace an existing authoritative canon with a more politically palatable but equally authoritative one, and against the Post-Modernists who fancy that the canon has already disintegrated into a wilderness of fragments and surfaces.

Kermode endorses the radicals’ charge that a canon is inevitably restrictive and that it is always implicated in the unjust workings of authority. But he notices that those ‘who want to be rid of what they regard as a reactionary canon can think of no way of doing so without putting a radical one in its place’. He prefers to enlarge the canon, and makes an exemplary case for a difficult outsider like Edward Upward, still loyal to the romantic communism of his youth, still a witness against the murderous power of the state. He has less patience with the Post-Modernists and their fantasy that we live at the end of an era when canons
and coherences were possible – a notion ‘so comprehensively ignorant as to defy polite correction’. Kermode argues that a literary canon is one of the inescapable instruments by which human beings make sense of their acts. The canon is a means of constructing memory out of ‘the indeterminate, disject facts of history’, and a means of finding value in lives different from our own.

Kermode has a diffident habit of leaving his readers to draw the most interesting conclusions from his arguments. It is a habit that makes his work literary – that is, usefully open to interpretation – in ways that more self-consciously literary works of critical theory are not. His defence of the canon points toward a stronger and more unsettling conclusion than anything he explicitly offers. He argues early in the book that all works that enter the literary canon are transgressive. This suggests that all canonical works contain forbidden knowledge, that they present unsettling truths that institutional authority seeks to deny. If these books confirmed the prejudices of a ruling élite they would have been forgotten centuries ago; nothing is memorable or surprising in a book that tells you what you already think you know. The works in the canon probably survive precisely because institutional authority finds them too disturbing to ignore, and seeks always to control them. Critics, teachers, and theoreticians labour to rationalise these uncontrollable works, struggle to tame them into charming social documents, pleasing formal constructions or fascinating networks of internal contradictions. But they still discomfort their readers, and they preserve the means by which the rigidifying excesses of their defenders may be judged.

From Aeschylus to Zamyatin, the canon is a record of perennially urgent, perennially unresolved problems. A new work is received into it when a powerful body of readers finds that they can no longer evade the problems that the work refuses to resolve. If, as seems likely, the once-forgotten black woman writer Zora Neale Hurston enters the canon of American literature, she will do so because she confounds more than she endorses the political pieties of those who recommend her. When readers argue over the meaning of a canonical work (or when they argue about it with themselves), they become, in effect, the ‘two accomplices’ in Auden’s ‘Vespers’ who, ‘in spite of themselves, cannot resist meeting/to remind the other (do both, at bottom, desire truth) of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget’.

In his most sustained critical argument Kermode defends Auden against what Kermode takes to be his own deliberate forgetfulness. Kermode affirms the transgressive merits of two poems that Auden excluded from the canon of his work: ‘O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless heaven’ and ‘Spain’. He reads the first as ‘a prophecy of love and its attendant terror’, and the second as a similar ‘attempt to express what it feels like to confront a great historical crisis’, a poem comparable in kind and stature to Marvell’s ‘Horatian Ode’.
Kermode believes that Auden, when he rejected these poems, must have misunderstood or forgotten what they meant. This is improbable, but it points toward a more likely explanation. A reader need not judge a work of art under the same code of conscience that its author used when judging it. Auden understood his poems perfectly well, but he judged them in terms of a sense of personal guilt so deep, so pervasive, so far in excess of his acts, that no reader could possibly share it. When he rejected a poem, he did so less for its own faults than for its expression of those aspects of himself that his guilt condemned. As is generally the case, Auden condemned himself for imaginary transgressions rather than for real ones, and a reader need not take those transgressions into account when judging the success or failure of the poems. But without that sense of transgression the poems would never have been written. And without the guilty knowledge of transgression that they provoke in their audience, they would never be read.

In defending these poems, Kermode disputes (and misquotes) some arguments I once made against them. On the whole, I should prefer to see Kermode’s arguments prevail. At a moment when theoretical criticism treats literature as a stuttering record of its own ignorance and futility, as an indictment of its own political injustice and linguistic faults, as a window that opens only on to the abyss of its own emptiness, Kermode’s reading of literature as an act of transgressive and forbidden love seems both valuable and true.

Using the same set of ‘indeterminate, disject facts’ that Kermode shaped into a love story, Valentine Cunningham constructs something very different. *British Writers of the Thirties* marshals everything there is to know about the literary Thirties into an extraordinary and indispensable resource. Cunningham has read more poems, novels, political tracts, and travel books written in the Thirties than an obsessed insomniac could possibly have read during the period itself. He has ransacked archives, and has drawn on the extraordinary learning he had earlier put to use in compiling the two best anthologies of the literature of the Spanish Civil War. Nothing Thirties is alien to him: hikers, newsreels, suburbs and revolutions find an equal welcome. The Twenties and Forties suffered agonies of envy when this book appeared. They relaxed when they started reading it. Cunningham reads the Thirties as the lowest of the dishonest decades. Its literature, in his eyes, was both histrionic and shabby, an unilluminating spectacle of utopian delusion, licentious appetite, and brutal imaginings.

Among the Thirties’ many faults, one of the worst was that it was ‘a period perpetually haphazard about theory’. The radicalism of the Thirties has now been inherited and improved by the critics of the Eighties in ‘the old schools of university English (and their successors in the polytechnics and the newer departments of cultural studies)’.

The tone in such places is ‘now more cautious, less heroising less self-romanticising than in the Thirties’
– less transgressive, in short. Today’s teachers and critics ‘have realised that the ground of
theory must be sternly besieged as part of the process of making the reading and writing of
books (and of all their textual neighbours) of more interest and pertinence to all the
people.’

Cunningham opens with a theoretical polemic. His book will be an account of ‘a literature
in a history and society’, but he will not ‘endorse the separations between “literature” on
the one hand and “society” on the other’. During the Thirties such separations were tacitly
or explicitly assumed on both sides in critical debates between Modernists and Marxists.
Today the same assumptions recur in the insults traded between deconstructionists and
everyone else (with the twist, not mentioned by Cunningham, that the beleaguered
deconstructionists have now begun to present their theories as ‘the resource for a politics’).
Cunningham proposes to dissolve these old divisions with the help of theory: ‘the language of
post-Saussurian semiotics, despite some of its more embarrassing bursts of recent
notoriety, can still help us here.’ Thanks to semiotics, ‘all texts and contexts will be thought
of here as tending to lose their separate identities, collapsing purposefully into each other
and existing rather as what we might call (con)texts.’

Kermode calls those embedded brackets ‘a fashionable device for having it both ways’, and
by the start of his second chapter Cunningham begins to question and abandon the position
he occupied in the first. Even when he illustrates his theoretical argument with an
impressively bravura social reading of Henry Green’s Party Going (a rejoinder to Kermode’s
hermeneutic reading in The Genesis of Secrecy) the text never loses its formal identity by
being treated as a disturbed and disturbing meditation on the themes of its moment. Nor
would it gain anything in recompense for losing its identity in the way Cunningham’s
polemic had proposed.

Cunningham’s reading of Party Going is the best thing in the book, because, for the first
and last time, he starts with a single complete work – something that recognisably has a
first page and a last – and reads it as an approach to the themes of the Thirties.
Throughout the rest of the book, he starts with an arbitrarily chosen theme, and treats it as
an approach to arbitrarily chosen bits and pieces of literary works.

His gargantuan book (more than five times the length of Kermode’s) consists largely of lists
of themes and images, illustrated by anything and everything that anyone in the Thirties
wrote about those themes. A chapter titled ‘In the Case’ includes three dense pages about
zoos: the zoo as a metaphor for bestiality or enclosure, the zoo as a scene of novelistic
action, the zoo as a place where a character in an Elizabeth Bowen novel recalls being given
tea by an aunt, the zoo as the subject of a book issued in the same series with a book on
aeroplanes by Christopher Caudwell, the zoo as a place where Stephen Spender thought it
worth telling Geoffrey Grigson he had spent an enjoyable Saturday with a friend in 1934.
Lists of this kind fill 13 chapters, crowded, fascinating, obsessive, with some important
themes like spies and borders turning up in two or three different places. No subject is too
various or too mean to generate a list of examples. Cunningham observes that ‘many
published Thirties authors were only slightly older than Auden. Several were exactly his age.
A number of them were actually younger.’ There follow two pages of illustrative detail.

As a rule, critical books that make loud theoretical noises in the opening chapter turn literal
and naive immediately afterward. Cunningham writes as if everything that occurs in a
literary work, unless explicitly denounced by the author or made the subject of transparent
irony, is something the author approves of. He can’t tell the difference between nightmare
and daydream. Auden’s transgressive, apocalyptic terrors in The Orators, like comparable
visions of anarchy and destruction in other writers, provoke him to sweeping
condemnations. He sees nothing but heartless cruelty in the writers he insists on calling ‘the
youthies’ or ‘the Old Boys’: ‘The youthies were emotional cripples still enmeshed in the
memories of boyish, prep-school doings, childish violences, boyish admirations for
bombing-planes and the ready-fisted cock of the school and of school-fiction.’ Cunningham
can convince himself of this because, after dissolving all borders between text and context,
he nonetheless treats every fragment of a book as if it existed in absolute isolation, as a
statement only of its local and literal meaning.

Cunningham, who has written very well on Methodism and the novel, disapproves of any
literary tone that doesn’t have a dissenter’s earnest seriousness. It is hardly news that
literary laughter can have a serious purpose. But all Cunningham can hear is the schoolboy
snicker. ‘It’s the slapstick that sticks in the mind,’ he writes of the mixed styles in a play by
MacNeice. ‘Likewise, the cabaret absurdities of The Dog Beneath the Skin rather diminish
the undoubted wisdom of its two Journalists.’ But the absurdities are part of the play’s
wisdom about the Journalists themselves.

Whenever a serious purpose gets entangled with sex, Cunningham’s anathemas grow both
nervous and orotund. He does not merely complain that homosexuality ‘helped keep the
youthies juvenile’ (‘Mrs Leavis thought this too’): he adds a long paragraph worrying over
his own complaint. ‘One is, in the first place, complaining about the way homosexual
liaisons and sympathies reinforced the Old Boys’ proneness to clique-puffery and blunted
critical standards ... In the second place, however, one is complaining about something that
may be more intrinsic to homosexual writing and not just in the Thirties. At least one must
declare a worry about the prevalence in the period’s literature of a number of specialised
attitudes that the prevalent homosexuality tended to normalise.’ And he cites the reported
testimony of Auden and Isherwood’s Dover landlady to confirm that ‘they were a pair of scamps’

Cunningham requires writers not merely to sound serious but to sound serious at exactly the right time. He suspects them of impenitent foot-dragging. If they turn serious at all, they do so because the pressure of world events won’t let them wriggle out of it, although they do their best to try. Cunningham pounces triumphantly on any writer whose bad timing causes him to write about a serious subject at a moment when that subject is not quite as serious as it had been a few months before. Auden, worst of all, combined bad timing with culpable frivolity: ‘Revealingly, he only got around to a gas-bomb fiction, and that a disconcertingly spry one, the poem “James Honeyman” ... in August 1937 when already the national gas-bomb obsession was fading and being displaced by the more realistic concern with high explosive.’ Revealingly of what? Even if a writer’s nightmares are to be judged by their exact degree of correspondence with the news of the day, Cunningham’s censorious fervour loses touch with historical reality. Poison gas didn’t disappear from public anxieties because explosives had been used in Spain. Kermode recalls that the next war ‘was expected to be like the Somme, plus aerial bombardment with gas, electric rays, civilian panic’. And the ‘national gasbomb obsession’ didn’t end in 1937. During the Sudetenland crisis in 1938 38 million gasmasks were stockpiled for quick distribution across England.

Cunningham has convincingly good words for Graham Greene’s moral intelligence (although Greene’s sense of evil ‘is too nearly Manichean and too sectarian’), for MacNeice’s cool aloofness (when he wasn’t ‘egregiously cheeky’), and for Evelyn Waugh’s dislike of everything Cunningham dislikes (‘Auden deserved Waugh’s chidings. So did Waugh’). Yet even the writers who enjoy intermittent praise in this book must find it a dizzying experience to read it on the foothills of Parnassus. One writer is likely to be praised only when another writer can be shown to be less serious by comparison; soon afterwards, the first writer turns out to be less serious than a third. Christopher Caudwell’s conversion to Communism is on one page ‘the admirable and notable exception’ to the general rule of bourgeois pink frivolity. On an earlier page Caudwell was a prophet of violence. On a later page he is a harsh purveyor of Marxist orthodoxy. Near the end of a chapter of Auden-bashing Cunningham abruptly announces that Auden ‘wasn’t so slow as sometimes might appear in growing up into adult perceptions’. But on the next page Auden ‘would still go on playing’ – unlike the ‘intellectually much tougher’ Caudwell.

Cunningham is so consistently angry with his authors that he accuses them of crimes they never committed under names they never used. Isherwood twice takes the rap for MacNeice’s share in Letters from Iceland. MacNeice himself, for all his upright
heterosexuality, is charged with transvestite camping in his ‘Hetty to Nancy’ chapter in the same book. Edward Upward’s autobiographical trilogy *The Spiral Ascent* is booked under the egocentric title *The Upward Spiral* – and Cunningham exclaims of the misnamed book that it ‘simply bores you’. (It doesn’t bore Kermode, who speaks of ‘the beauty of Upward’s slowly developing design’ that finally reconciles Communism and poetry.) Cunningham is quick to expose guilty aliases: ‘in this period the choice of name reflects a deliberate effort to disguise a bourgeois identity ... So many bourgeois Christian names got dropped, it was like jackpot-time on a socially alert fruit machine.’ If someone doesn’t drop a Christian name, Cunningham does it for him. Georg Groddeck appears four times as Walther or Walter Groddeck, only once as Georg.

What is missing from this cornucopia of detail is any sense of even the most partial and tentative integrity of individual works and lives. Everything is an illustration of a type, usually a guilty one. Where Kermode praises a Thirties Marxist for ‘putting in all the pedestrian detail and giving it a relation to the whole work (a criterion of value despised, I’m afraid, by modern Marxists)’, Cunningham’s method requires him to reduce literary works to scraps and fragments. It is perhaps to his credit that he recoils from the resulting spectacle.

The work that Cunningham praises most from the Thirties is an essay by Tom Harrisson which attacks the writers of the time in terms that anticipate Cunningham’s. Harrisson’s essay is acerbic but irrelevant. He is angry at the poets for their refusal to record people’s lives in the manner of Mass-Observation. There are too many deaths in his representative sample of Thirties poetry, and not enough dinners. ‘Three meals are eaten: all breakfasts.’ There is ‘no attempt to present the majority facts, or any facts in a way that the majority can understand them.’ Cunningham calls this article ‘one of the period’s best pieces of literary criticism’, and he quotes it at greater length than almost anything else in the book. But alas for Harrisson, the moment he stops debunking poets and turns to other matters, Cunningham finds that his work rings ‘as gratingly and as bogus’ as the poets he attacks.

Cunningham’s passion for seriousness may have a lot to do with his preference for critics – especially those stern beseigers of the ground of theory who never crack a smile. Unfortunately those stern warriors of the theoretical Eighties are as chimerical as the noble workers of the political Thirties. The dialectic ensures that unrelenting seriousness turns into something more frivolous than anything it disfavours. Cunningham’s relentless habit of sneering at authors under derisive collective labels – the youthies, the Old Boys, Auden and Co, Isherwood and Co, the Bright Young Baedekers – finally sounds callous and shallow to a degree unequalled by anything in the authors themselves.
Cunningham knows that suffering is a serious matter. It stops being serious when Cunningham doesn’t care for the sufferer. He writes of the anthropologist John Layard, who had been psychoanalysed by Homer Lane in an attempt to overcome a nervous breakdown so severe that it at first caused physical paralysis: ‘annoyed by Auden’s refusal to love him and by Lane’s dying half-way through his analysis, Layard shot himself in the mouth.’ Something seems badly awry when Cunningham attacks dozens of writers for the heartless frivolity he finds in their treatment of fictional characters, only to write of a real historical character that he was ‘annoyed’ into trying to kill himself.

A convincing contrast is offered by Kermode’s sense of the complex integrity of individual lives, of the choices available within the constraints of social class and literary form, of the ethical value that can be learned among the injustices of history. And although Kermode knows his way about the airless heights of literary theory, this latest and finest of his books is also his most personal.