

Respect and Revolution

Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (The Berkeley Tanner Lectures) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

"I am close enough to Frank Kermode's generation to share both its early excitement and later discontent," Geoffrey Hartman opens his response to Frank Kermode's two lectures, *Pleasure and Change* given in the course of the 2001 Tanner lecture series. And as a (silent) definition of a critical state of mind or position, Kermode calls out well in the opening of his first lecture, "The great turning point [*in criticism*], as most would agree, occurred in the sixties, when I was already in my forties, an age at which it is . . . difficult to change one's whole way of thinking about literature or anything else."

These apparently contradicting, even slightly disturbing lines perhaps well illustrate the delicate tension (and the unquestionable respect) lurking behind the tone of the contributions appearing in the printed version of the discussions: a tension partly caused by the lack of more recent theoretical viewpoints and analogies in the volume – which is perhaps one of its weak points – yet the discussants' arguments also display a shocking similarity with the discontent in the views of younger generations of critics: the newer approaches, like the

essays in the *New Aestheticism* project, seek to find the way out of the same dead end that the modernist generation of critics had to face in their time: though this book both in terminology and in references apparently presents the views of a classical hero of literary theory, ironically enough, the reader has the impression that no matter how distant Kermode remains from the present day status quo, regardless of this or that generation, the aesthetic baby is being thrown out with the bathwater of various new, but still collapsing (counter-) theories. Perhaps the reader of the discussions and the commentators to Kermode's lectures at times (even implicitly) rightly demand a more cautious treatment of the contemporary theoretical conditions, yet this will not solve any of the aesthetical problems rekindled into critical discourse with the thorough contribution of the young Frank Kermode. Ironically, Professor Kermode – who is, one can be sure, well aware of the intellectual currents appearing ever since the *great turning point*, need not make digressions into these waters, as the war of aesthetics is still raging about the basics of the discipline, and not surprisingly, centring around the problem of aesthetic value and aesthetic experience, be it termed pleasure, experience or something else. And quite obviously to these dilemmas, the post-1960s (and especially contemporary) theories have given but shaky answers. And these

shaky answers (let this be a generalizing term here) clearly legitimize the presence of a critical discourse that is explicitly negligent about the so-called latest developments, the present day polemics being as uncomfortable about basic aesthetic notions, like *canonicity* and *aesthetic pleasure*, as were the masterminds of the postwar generation of new critics and early structuralists.

For instance, the young Kermode's counterelitist project is strikingly similar to the recent struggles to "save" aesthetics from other textual and ideological litter, or to bring it back to its spring by simplifying the terminology and demystifying the speculations about the aesthetic experience. Read *this way*, Kermode - who talks about the classics while having grown into a classic himself, is freed from the invisible "charge" of being over-current, even if he casts a blind eye on post-1960s theory. "Take what theoretical help you fancy, but follow your nose," he states in his closing remark.

Also, these talks invite us to a gesture of respect towards the work of Frank Kermode.

This is perhaps best learned from his oeuvre of books, especially *History and Value*, *Forms of Attention* and *The Classics*, to which - due to the limited time of the lectures and the commentaries - but a series of episodic side-notes are made in these two transcripts. (As due to the necessarily hasty argument and spo-

radic information, *Pleasure and Change* may only be adequate for an invitation to the further study of Kermode and the other discussants' works, as the transcripts do not, cannot represent the theoretical arsenal of the lecturers.) Still, even in this unfortunate form of interaction, an inspiring debate is formed on the above-highlighted problems.

Both in terms of aesthetic pleasure and the change of canons, Kermode is seen by the discussants, especially Thomas Guillory, as trying to form his own 'touchstones' - let us remember again, ideas already elaborated on in his other texts. Yet even from this collage of ideas the major arguments of Kermode's work on canonicity and aesthetic pleasure flashes up. As regards pleasure (which he explicitly uses as a critical term), more or less in line with well-known theories by Plato, Freud, and Barthes, Kermode comes to the discussion of the source of literary experience in terms of the "juxtaposition of pleasure and dismay," as presented through the discussion of Wordsworth's *The Leech Gatherer* and the *Immortality Ode*. Though - as ardently criticised, and perhaps partly misunderstood by the discussants, - he even brings up Arnold, Kermode clearly opposes the fin de siècle pseudo-religious, elitist concept of aesthetic pleasure, and facilitates the personal element in the poetic experience. As explained through examples of Wordsworth's correspondence, the "key to

canonicity" is an effect of the amalgamation of "pleasure and the possibility of its repeated disappointment," both an end – "the principal theme of poetry" – and a critical necessity. And about *change* in literary canons, instead of far-fetched theorizing, Kermode calls attention to the element of *chance* (the recent rise of forgotten Monteverdi operas), and more importantly, the personal drives to create and modify a canon. "What is important may be [is] a line or two," he writes. The transcript – which flows from one example to the other, brought to an end with unfortunately chipped summaries – comes at its best when Kermode explains the alterations of canon by psychoanalyzing the great canonizers, highlighting sexual archetypal patterns in their attitudes to canon: Arnold's *plaisir* of passages displaying "pathos" and "ever-increasing, irremediable pain," and Eliot's take on texts of "education, ruin, damnation, and the pains of purgatory." Steering dangerously close to "equating high literature with [*a little bit more and less than*] sexual pleasure," Kermode concludes by claiming responsible the pleasures of interpretive communities as well, who – from mostly inexplicable personal motives – keep the flow of texts alive.

The discussants' contributions (besides passages of praise) slightly criticize and refine the theory sketched above. John Guillory rushes to invite Kermode to speak about the abstract, distilled

nature of aesthetic pleasure, while Geoffrey Hartman joins him in calling the pleasure of the text vital in the survival of the genre. Hartman even welcomes Kermode's idea about the rise of the personal canon as one way for the "renewal of the critical spirit," thus (surprisingly) bridging the gap between the self-imposed exile of Kermode from post 1960s stretches of criticism, recognizing the Professor's ideas as similar to the currents revolving around the wake of the postmodern wilderness.

Perhaps unwanted, in his remark on Kermode Hartman mingles the promise of an unintended revolution.

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