

“IT IS REQUIR’D YOU DO AWAKE YOUR FAITH”

Reader-Response and the Gospel of St Mark

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Wholly lacking in the kind of experience and expertise which the specialist theologian would possess, it is with some trepidation that a student of English (however long-term his engagement) enters into unknown territory and embarks on a literary-critical approach to the Gospel of St Mark. One may, however, take courage – and one’s cue – from Frank Kermode’s statement in the “Preface” to *The Genesis of Secrecy*, where he suggests that “the gospels need to be talked about by critics of a quite unecclesiastical formation”.¹ He later claims that literary critics, although secular, are nonetheless “the heirs of the exegetical and hermeneutic traditions”; and, as such, they “should be allowed their secular say on the cardinal texts” (Kermode 15-16).

In what follows, I shall in fact be making significant use of this fine study by Kermode, although I hope to strike out in a different direction. Much of Kermode’s concern has to do with a decoding of the Gospel of St Mark, which is primarily an *intellectual/analytic* activity, whereas the main interest here would be in the way in which the Gospel text poses challenges that are not, for the specifically Christian reader, really amenable to intellectual resolution. For example, in his second chapter, “Hoti’s Business: Why Are Narratives Obscure?”, Kermode offers us a number of possible allegorical readings of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Thus, he finds in St Augustine the following possibility:

the wounded man is Adam, who has left heaven for the world (Jericho means the moon, the sphere of mutability) and fallen into the hands of demons, who strip him of his immortality, leaving him half-dead ... the inn [is representative of] the Church, and the innkeeper is the apostle Paul (Kermode 36).

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¹ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (1979; Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1980), ix. This work will subsequently be referred to in the main text as Kermode.

But as Kermode himself observes, we are still faced with “the inexhaustibility of the text” (ibid.), which means of course that we can, with increasing exegetical ingenuity, discover more and more possible “meanings”. Yet this kind of interpretative zeal, yielding as it does an endless proliferation of meaning, does not seem to be the kind of response the parable is asking for. For, strictly speaking, the Christian does not or perhaps should not have the leisure to play endless exegetical games with the Gospel text. Correct (not multiple) interpretation is, for the Christian, of crucial importance; and it is not a matter of satisfying a God who is envisaged as a scrutineer ready to reward our interpretative ingenuity, but of generating within one’s self a valid response that may open the way to salvation. In this way, there is an *urgency* about the Christian’s response – an existential urgency – which is not present in the more speculative detachment of the hermeneut or literary critic.

Moreover, to take an even longer view, there is within the broad Christian tradition a pervasive mistrust of the intellect (recurrently associated with pride) and of intellectual sophistication. This is one of the inescapable implications in one of the best-known statements by Jesus in Mark 10:15: “Amen, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it”.²

To receive the Good News like a little child would entail, one assumes, a degree of spontaneous response; there would be little room for sophisticated analysis (or, worse still, an ironic self-withholding). And if we look for an instance of the way in which the early Christians were expected to respond to the Gospels, we may find it not, as it happens, in Mark, but in Luke, towards the end of the narrative about the disciples’ encounter with the risen Jesus on their way to Emmaus. Jesus, having been finally recognised, vanishes from their sight; and it is at this point that, retrospectively, the disciples realise that the proof of Jesus’ presence has already been given to them. “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?”³ It may be, then, that the ideal way to receive the Gospel is with a burning heart – an enthusiasm, in other words, that is generously open to whatever appeals may be present.

We can, too, spell out a further implication by reverting to Kermode. Early on in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, he comments on the way Jesus was

² “A Continuous Text of Mark’s Gospel Adapted from the RSV”, by Rev. Seamus O’Connell, 12: subsequent quotations from Mark are from this version, unless otherwise stated. – On the limited role of intellect in theological matters, one may in addition recall the tradition of *sacrificium intellectus* in the Christian approach to such mysteries as the Blessed Trinity.

³ “The Gospel According to Saint Luke” (Jerusalem Bible), 24:32.

asked by the disciples to explain the purpose of his parables. Jesus, says Kermode, described the parables as stories told "to outsiders – with the express purpose of concealing a mystery that was to be understood only by insiders" (Kermode 2). *The Genesis of Secrecy* is dedicated "To Those Outside" (the implication being that Kermode himself is an "outsider"); but the argument I am entertaining at this point suggests that the very fact of being an outsider may *preclude* you from any proper "understanding" of the Gospels (or, in Kermode's term, their "mystery") at all. It is perhaps only the burning heart, reaching for what it already anticipates (however vaguely) as imminent, that will find the treasure it seeks.

Here in turn, however, is a major problem for the literary critic. We critics, in approaching a literary work, are not supposed to have a pre-existent attitude, a pre-disposition towards the text we undertake to interpret or evaluate. One model for our procedure derives from a reliance on the long-established notion of the "hermeneutic circle" (whereby we cannot understand the whole without understanding the parts, but – here's the catch – we cannot understand the parts without understanding the whole).⁴ Taking our cue from this source, we might then proceed as follows. From our local, piecemeal perceptions of possible meanings we begin to sketch a possible inclusive meaning; than from that provisional and shifting inclusivity we refer back to the individual perceptions; and so on in a constant dialectic between our changing sense of the details and our changing sense of the whole – until, after many adjustments and re-adjustments, we can claim (always with limited certainty, or with a sense of provisionality) to have provided a valid interpretation. My reason for providing the details of this procedure is to highlight its advocacy of objectivity: the major exchange or transaction is between the perceived parts of the text and the putative whole of the text, and *not* between the text and the interpreter.

We seem at this point to have arrived at an impasse: if the critic is to be objective, how then is s/he to respond to a text (the Gospel) which can yield its significance only on the basis of subjective investment by that same critic? But hold on: there *is* a way out of such an impasse. For there is an alternative critical approach which may be said to possess its own intellectual (or professional) respectability. In his second chapter, Frank Kermode refers to the hermeneutic approach of the great contemporary

⁴ The term *the hermeneutic circle* "was given by Wilhelm Dilthey [1833-1911] to an oscillation or 'circling' between study of a work's parts and its totality, an investigative procedure that had earlier been described by Friedrich Schleiermacher [1768-1834]" (Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London, etc.: Hodder Arnold, 1992), 104).

French thinker, Paul Ricoeur, and he summarises Ricoeur's belief as follows: "that meaning arises from a kind of conversation between the interpreter and the text" (Kermode 45). This does, in fact, open up a critical path that may lead us away from the objectivity advocated earlier (and out of the enclosure of the "hermeneutic circle"); so that, instead of being tied to a transaction between the parts of the text and the text as a whole, we now possess the possibility of a transaction between the text and the interpreter.

The idea of a subjective input on the part of the interpreter can be further vindicated if we refer to two further schools of criticism, one German, one Swiss. The German one is associated with Wolfgang Iser (and the University of Constance) and is known as "reader-response" theory (or *rezeptionästhetik*); the French one is linked to Georges Poulet and the so-called "Geneva School" or the "criticism of consciousness". The survival of the latter theoretical approach is, at the moment, doubtful or precarious. But certainly reader-response theory (or for that matter the related approach found in Ricoeur) has not disappeared. A brief summary of what is found in Iser may here suffice.⁵ Iser argues that, in the very nature of the literary text, there are indeterminacies, or (to hazard an ungainly term) "incompletenesses" – "gaps", so to speak, which can only be "filled" by the active reader. Thus, to take one obvious example, we arrive at our own image of a character in a novel, "filling in" the sketch the text provides: hence one source of our recurrent disappointment with cinematic versions, or television adaptations, of novels ("that is not how I envisaged X ...").

Indeterminacies are clearly to be found in the Gospels, although the most compelling example is to be found not in Mark but in John, in the episode of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3-11). On two occasions Jesus is described as writing on the ground with his finger; and the "gap" in the text arises because we are not told (and have no clues in the matter) what it is he writes. The reader in his/her response may be tempted to fill that gap and supplement the given text by *imagining* what Jesus might have written.

But the Gospel of St Mark as a whole also invites the reader into the text in this way, if only because of its notorious concern with secrecy (including the "messianic secret": see for instance Kermode 138-140, and 162 n. 18, where he refers to William Wrede's *The Messianic Secret in the*

⁵ See, e.g., Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (first published in German c1976; English translation published Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

Gospels). Kermode, noting the "enigmatic" nature of Mark's Gospel, finds that it leaves "a good deal unexplained; nor (he adds) is the theme of secrecy the only mystery in Mark" (Kermode 33). In order to remain consistent with my earlier argument, it is necessary here to keep the focus not on enigma or puzzle (something we may work out by applied ingenuity) but on that word "mystery", which draws us into a more intimate and "feelingful" engagement.

If we speak of indeterminacy or incompleteness in Mark, then the most signal example of this occurs at the end (or non-end) of that Gospel. If we ignore the tidy ending appended later (16:9-20), then the original point of termination in Mark is extraordinarily open-ended. The two Marys arrive at the tomb, encounter the young man robed in white, and are "distressed". The young man tells them that Jesus the Nazarene "has been raised". He further tells them not to be distressed. Yet the very last sentence leaves the two Marys in a state that seems to *prolong* their initial distress: "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had caught hold of them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8, in O'Connell: the Jerusalem Bible version of Mark describes the women even more vividly as "frightened out of their wits").

There are problems here that can be critically highlighted: e.g., the curious contradiction that, shortly after the young man has instructed the women that they should "go, tell the disciples and Peter", the women "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid". In addition, however, that proclamation, stifled *in* the women in the text, is also, it seems, stifled by the text itself, creating a textual void that stops us in our tracks. So that what we are left trying to cope with (or cling to) in this moment of sudden textual arrest is the emotional or psychological condition in the women, which we cannot hope to analyse, but can perhaps urge ourselves to empathise with. (It is perhaps relevant at this point to recall, if only for the critical authority it confers on the notion of empathic involvement, the telling phrase of the classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who assigns an important revelatory role to "the cognitive guidance of emotion".⁶) What it is we end up with, interpretatively, is hard to say: possibly we begin to engage with a nexus of various emotions, among them shock and, possibly, awe. This would make of the Resurrection a radically disruptive event, traumatic in its sheer unexpectedness.

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (New York/Oxford: OUP, 1992), 186. Cf. *ibid.* 180, the advocacy of "the responsive activity of the emotions and the imagination, working closely together".

There is another moment of indeterminacy in Mark which might be felt to have its own singular appeal, and it is found in the sequence describing the death of Jesus: "And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last" (15:37). We might reflect that such an inarticulate cry of pain or anguish is more inviting of empathic response than the deliberate reminiscence of Psalm 22, attributed to the dying Jesus, in "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Perhaps, indeed, the so-called Seven Last Words, fully freighted with overt meaning, have less appeal to the imagination than that all-too-human cry: and into that inarticulacy, that indeterminacy, we are invited to enter on a deeper level of existential identification.

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At one point in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, Frank Kermode reminds us of a significant distinction between, on the one hand, "seeing and hearing", and, on the other, "perceiving and understanding" (Kermode 3). What the Gospels seem to require is a deep understanding or comprehension, rather than any superficial knowing. I want to conclude by referring to a statement by St Augustine that I luckily came across and subsequently quoted in an article I wrote over a quarter of a century ago on Shakespeare's wonderful late play, *The Winter's Tale*. For it is in fact from that great play that I have derived the title of this essay: "It is requir'd/You do awake your faith" (V.iii.94-95). The king Leontes, believing his wife Hermione to have died (in large part through his own immoral and destructive behaviour), is invited to see a marvellous statue of the dead woman. Hermione, however, has not died, and the apparent "statue" is, miraculously, the woman herself. But the miracle is made manifest only after the injunction (spoken by the character Paulina) that we must "awake our faith". Leontes' state of mind, following immediately on this injunction – poised as he then is for a brief but momentous interim between the insistent desire to believe that Hermione is after all not dead, and the fulfilment in reality of that desire – might be characterised as "an intuition of inexplicable hope" (to use the phrase one commentator has applied to the vision of the medieval mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich).⁷ The hope proves true; and so, in a mesmerising climax to the drama, music plays, and Leontes receives the living Hermione back into his arms, in what for him is nothing short of a miraculous restoration.

⁷ E.I. Watkins, "Dame Julian of Norwich", in *The English Way*, ed. Maisie Ward (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933), 151.

The spectators in the theatre are also intimately implicated in this deeply moving moment; and the entire theatrical event at the climax of Shakespeare's play invites deep, empathic participation (or, if you prefer, imaginative assent) rather than (spectacle though it may be) mere spectation. And it is this which leads me, finally, to that quotation from Augustine:

Let human voices fall silent, and human thoughts rest; they should not apply themselves to incomprehensible things as if to *understand* them, but rather in order to *participate in* them [emphases added].⁸

Is this also the spirit in which we should read parts at least of St Mark's Gospel? If so, then I may finally have undermined my own profession. The article on Shakespeare's play carried the title, "*The Winter's Tale* and the Limits of Criticism"⁹; and it may be that the act of criticism and the role of the critical interpreter are even more limited as one approaches the Gospels.

⁸ "Conticescant humanae voces, requiescant humanae cogitationes; ad incomprehensibilia non se extendant quasi comprehensuri, sed tanquam participaturi", in "Enarratio in Psalmum CXLVI"; quoted, in slightly different form, in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, transl. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 155.

⁹ The article appeared in *Studies* (Summer/Autumn 1977), 176-187.