

Introduction

David Wyatt

A year before Jacques Derrida delivered his first lecture in the United States, Frank Kermode accepted the Mary Flexner Lectureship at Bryn Mawr College. The honor is “given to an American or foreign scholar highly distinguished in the field of the ‘Humanities,’ using the term ‘Humanities’ in its broadest connotation.”¹ In the second decade of the twenty-first century – given the current “crisis” in the Humanities – there is something almost quaint in the Bryn Mawr formulation. In his six lectures, Kermode took it as his task to reveal such crises as recurrent rather than unique. Entitled “The Long Perspectives,” the lectures were published in 1967 as *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*.

Kermode begins with the question of where we find ourselves in time. Are we nearing its promised end? The “growing sense of apocalypse in American life”² of which Norman Mailer writes in *The Armies of the Night* (1968) is not properly Kermode’s subject, but he does deal with the history of the idea of apocalypse and our many related “fictions of the End.” Within this tradition Kermode discerns a shift away from fictions imagining a literal end of the world and toward a suspicion of any paradigm proposing to impose such a shape on time. As mid-twentieth-century persons, Kermode maintains, we live in “the midst,” at best, perhaps, in an epoch “of transition,” and because “we move from transition to transition, we may suppose that we exist in no intelligible relation to the past, and no predictable relation to the future.”³

Is there anything that can deliver us from this sense of perpetual ongoing transition, of living in T. S. Eliot’s “waste sad time / Stretching before and after?”⁴ Why not break up the time into a series of decades, a convention surely artificial but one that is useful in helping us to mark out the days?

It will not do, my reader might object, to introduce a volume entitled *American Literature in Transition* by throwing into question the bounding outlines of the project. But this is precisely what is called for, especially

with the volume in the series dedicated to the 1960s. No decade in the twentieth century comes to us more shrouded in myth; the two words “The Sixties” trigger in many minds an autonomic response. Literature itself, and the study of it, Kermode argues, assists in clearing away such reflexive motions of mind – the reversion to myths about that “time” – by replacing them with more flexible and adaptive fictions.

After demonstrating how suspicious we have become of fictions of “the End,” and thereby of our corresponding fictions of “the Beginning,” Kermode proceeds to argue for the efficacy of some sort of time-reconciling fictions. They offer us a “comfort.” Here is Kermode at his best: “in ‘making sense’ of the world we still feel a need, harder than ever to satisfy because of an accumulated skepticism, to experience that concordance of beginning, middle and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions.”⁵

Words like “need,” “satisfy,” and “fiction” reveal Kermode’s debt to Wallace Stevens, and it is Stevens, more than any other modern writer, who presides over Kermode’s project. Stevens works for Kermode because he offers his fictions not for their truth but for their usefulness; as he writes in the *Necessary Angel*, poetry “helps people to live their lives.”⁶ Stevens was resolute in declaring that we must remain self-aware about the provisional status of our ongoing attempts at *poesis*, our fictive makings. We do not offer them our unquestioning assent but approach them rather by way of “the nicer knowledge of / Belief, that what it believes in is not true.”⁷ The temporary authority we may grant to our fictions is all a matter of attitude – hence the distinction, implicit in Stevens and explicit in Kermode, between myths and fictions. “Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive . . . 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.”⁸ One fiction routinely projected onto the 1960s, a fiction in some quarters degenerating into a myth, is of its having been a unique and largely unhappy interval of crisis and change.

Whether contributors to this volume began a career in the study of literature in the 1960s or belong to a younger generation, as many do, it is unlikely that any of us have been untouched by this rhetoric of crisis. Only one year after Kermode drew attention to the enduring appeal of the “concept of *crisis*,” the dynamic was given further elaboration in a lecture delivered at the University of Texas by Paul de Man.⁹ The lecture was

Introduction

3

published in 1967 and appeared as “Crisis and Criticism” in de Man’s 1971 *Blindness and Insight*.

Attempting in 1967 to account for “the crisis-aspect” of contemporary criticism, the outward symptom of which is “the incredible swiftness with which often conflicting tendencies succeed each other,” de Man concludes that there is “nothing particularly new” about the phenomenon and that again and again in the history of thought “the notion of crisis and that of criticism are very closely linked.”¹⁰ De Man is quite skilled at dehistoricizing any subject he touches: his undersong is, “It was ever thus.” And yet his felt need to address a current so-called crisis is itself a sign of something deeply embedded in the historical moment out of which he writes. It is a moment in which the old confidences and practices about the work of criticism have given way to a profound skepticism. The skepticism arises out of a newly emergent consensus about the activity we call “signification.”

Ferdinand de Saussure may have asserted as early as 1911 the “arbitrary” relation of the signifier to the signified, but very few literary critics, either on the Continent or in the United States, were speaking about the slippage between word and thing before the 1960s. It is only literature that has always known this, as de Man proceeds to argue.

Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of the language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression. All of us know this, although we know it in the misleading way of a wishful assertion of the opposite. Yet the truth emerges in the fore-knowledge we possess of the true nature of literature when we refer to it as *fiction*.¹¹

And so we come round again to Kermode’s word, despite de Man having stripped it of Kermode’s accompanying terms, words like “comfort,” “concord,” and “need.” Whether we find ourselves drawn to Kermode’s affirmative or de Man’s deconstructive sensibility, their virtually overlapping efforts encourage us to think of crisis as more a fiction than a fact.

At the end of his life and the end of his century, John Dryden took a long look back.

Thy Chase had a Beast in View;
 Thy Wars brought nothing about;
 Thy Lovers were all untrue.
 ‘Tis well an Old Age is out,
 And time to begin a New.¹²

The fantasy being expressed is of a new and more promising start, even a clean break. As Dryden well knew, however, having lived through a monarchy, its beheading, a Restoration, and then a further Glorious Revolution, one age never goes out before another begins. When it comes to ages, all history offers, especially literary history, is a continual series of refrains and overlaps. Decades are a construction of the calendar, not indicators of distinct eras.

And yet the fiction of the determining decade can prove useful in giving a manageable shape to “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history,” a condition Eliot saw as belonging to his, the twentieth, century.¹³ Of the decades of the century, the sixties have come to occupy a uniquely seductive place in both the popular and the historical imagination; former TV anchor men compete with Pulitzer Prize-winning historians to give the interval significant form. It is a time “when America turned,” to use Lieutenant John Kerry’s words from his 1971 speech before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.¹⁴ While few might disagree that a turning did occur, the United States remains divided on the question of whether it was a turning for the better or for the worse.

The sixties were, arguably, the transitional decade of the “American Century.” Yet a transition from what to what? How does one mark out and distinguish all that came before from all that followed? Michael Herr restates the problem instead of answering the question.

You couldn’t find two people who agreed about when it began, how could you say when it began going off? Mission intellectuals like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw as far back as War II and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary. “Realists” said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flak insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin Resolution, as though all the killing that had gone before wasn’t really war. Anyway, you couldn’t use standard measures to date the doom.¹⁵

Dispatches here engages in an anguished response to the question of when the Vietnam War really began. As perhaps the crucial event of the American 1960s, the war was to offer a remarkable challenge to the story-telling imagination. Without a defining beginning point – the convenience of a Pearl Harbor – there was no way to contain the war within a convincing narrative. And as the decade wore on and the war continued, any desire for “closure” was as frustrated among those who believed in fighting the war as it was among those who fought to stop it.

For George Herring, the sixties were a mere interval in *America’s Longest War*. He dates the doom as beginning in 1950 and as ending in 1975.

Introduction

5

The sixties were certainly the heart of it, with the largest American casualty rates occurring in 1968 and 1969. Then Nixon's "Vietnamization" set in, and the troops began, slowly, to come home.

By the time he completed *Dispatches* in 1977, Herr had come to see the war as the new American ghost. Like Morrison's "rememory," it was a past the future was destined to bump into, especially when least looking for it. What Herr foresaw was that the war would remain present even when appearing to be absent, a phenomenon on evidence in a book published in the year Herr began his own. The word "Vietnam" appears only a few times in Joan Didion's 1968 *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. But the war is felt to be there in the creeping dread she feels in Death Valley on the night the diver goes down in search of a missing body and comes up raving about "underground nuclear testing," there in the sorrow she feels in the graveyard on Oahu commemorating an earlier war, and there in the very "atomization" of American society she announces at the beginning to be her subject.¹⁶ Herr and Didion sense that something has begun that is not going to stop as America chose, perhaps once and for all, to commit itself to fighting perpetual war on behalf of a perpetually receding peace, a turning Robert Lowell predicted in 1967.

peace to our children when they fall
in small war on the heels of small
war – until the end of time
to police the earth, a ghost
orbiting forever lost
in our monotonous sublime.¹⁷

Thus, "until the end of time," Lowell writes, as if the consequences of the present crisis are to prove infinite. Vietnam is only the most salient example of an experience associated with the sixties that had an end as hard to imagine as its beginning was difficult to locate. To cite another example: the civil rights movement began, of course, well before Rosa Parks refused in 1955 to give up her seat on the bus and could be said to have its beginnings in the first slave revolts in the New World. Cresting during the midsixties in the great marches and speeches and acts of legislation occurring in 1964 and 1965, the movement promised to deliver the United States to a postracial future. Then that future unfolded into one in which, fifty years later, the same old battles still needed to be fought, at least in the hearts of men, as the nation suffered through the killings of its black citizens in Sanford, Florida, in Ferguson, Missouri, in Baltimore, Maryland, and at a church in Charleston, South Carolina.

It is a difficult thing to believe in the reality of change when faced with the persistence of hardened attitudes. And yet a number of the essays in this book argue that because of the sixties, real change did happen. To those who continue to view the period as a hapless regression or a turning gone wrong, Toni Morrison has made an eloquent rejoinder: “Killing the Sixties, turning that decade into an aberration, an exotic malady ripe with excess, drugs and disobedience is designed to bury its central features – emancipation, generosity, acute political awareness and a sense of shared and mutually responsible society.”¹⁸ By contrast, historian Gerard J. DeGroot can dismiss the sixth decade of the twentieth century as “an era of magnificent futility.”¹⁹ Only the sixth decade of the previous century – and they were both decades of civil war – continues to evoke equally passionate disagreements.

The decade of the sixties is unlikely any time soon to disentangle itself from metaphors of crisis. For Didion, it was the time of the “Second Coming,” and she turned to Yeats’s poem – itself written in response to the Russian Revolution – for guiding inspiration. Mailer, marching in 1967 across the Potomac, smells wood smoke in the air, the smell of the old, true America, and senses himself to be stepping “through some crossing in the reaches of space between this moment, the French Revolution, and the Civil War.”²⁰ In his very choice of title James Baldwin calls down a biblical apocalypse in *The Fire Next Time*.

In searching for adequate fictions about the past, for the words “crisis” and “apocalypse,” we might consider substituting words like “endings” and “beginnings.” These, at least, can sometimes be pinned down. By the end of the sixties, the great moderns, except for Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, had departed the scene. Hemingway and Loy died in 1961, Faulkner in 1962, Frost and Williams in 1963, Eliot in 1965, and Hughes and Toomer in 1967. Even the word “modern” itself experienced a kind of death. While working toward my Ph.D. at UC Berkeley, I befriended a fellow graduate student who devoted considerable effort searching for a term with which to label the new writing by Barth, Barthelme, Heller, Pynchon, and Vonnegut. She decided to go with “black humor.” It would be a decade before work combining extreme verbal effects with flattened affect became widely spoken of as “postmodern.”

Other important endings occurring in the sixties include the legal end of Jim Crow, the legal end of an old quota immigration system and its replacement in 1965 by a more inclusive arrangement, the beginning of the end of most, although not all, non-coeducational colleges and universities, the end of the dominance of the city with the out-movement to

Introduction

7

the suburbs, the end of the postwar economic boom and the peaking of the value of the minimum wage in real terms in 1968, and the end of the canonical and its diffusion into the multicultural.

As for beginnings, in literature, one might point to the efflorescence of the hyphenated literatures: Asian-American, Native-American, Mexican-American. None of these traditions began in the sixties, but the willingness to attend to them and to move them into the curriculum did. In 1968, a group of scholars launched an enterprise resulting in *The Heath Anthology*, offering a new configuration of writers meant “to reconnect literature and its study with the society and culture of which it is fundamentally a part.”²¹ “Context” became the new watchword.

Other beginnings, sometimes described as liberations, were more strictly political. Supreme Court decisions in 1965, 1967, and 1973, along with the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, opened new possibilities in the lives of women. Gay liberation can trace a dramatic moment of inception to the Stonewall riots of 1969. Even the natural world required liberating, and the modern environmental movement, with roots reaching back to the founding of the Sierra Club in 1892 and the Audubon Society in 1905, can be dated not only to the passage of the Water Quality Act of 1963 but to the publication of a book, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, in 1962.

No wonder the sixties were the decade in which the study of literature became openly politicized. When Toni Morrison said, “All good art is political,” she appeared to be voicing support for this way of looking at things. But, as she added, art has to be “beautiful and political at the same time.”²² Morrison’s “and” speaks to the abiding tension in literary studies between the celebration of form and the unpacking of content.

In her 1964 “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag argued for this divide as an inevitable consequence of a mimetic theory of art. The theory, as Sontag understands it, places art “in need of defense” against the charges that it is either a lie (Plato) or merely therapeutic (Aristotle). It is the need to produce a defense of art from these charges, Sontag continues, “which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content,’ and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory.”²³

For Sontag, interpretation has become the villain of the story. “What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*. And, conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the

fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work or art.” In order to counter the “open aggressiveness” of interpretation toward the literary work, Sontag calls for a criticism “that dissolves considerations of content into those of form.” As practitioners of such an approach, she recommends Erwin Panofsky, Northrop Frye, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and the “best essays” in Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis*.²⁴

Sontag’s essay anticipates the explosive growth of interpretative communities occurring during the closing decades of the twentieth century and may even seem to presage the publication, in 2015, of a volume entitled, *The Limits of Critique*. We have even been recently admonished that “Context Stinks!”²⁵ Despite such objections, the content-oriented and contextualizing critics appear to have prevailed, if one can judge from the syllabi in major departments of English as well as the titles of most works of academic criticism. Many of the chapter titles in this volume are content driven; to approach literature as if it is *about* some historical issue, social practice, or political institution has become almost habitual.

The sixties were the decade in which the contextualizing began. To speak of women’s literature or black literature or gay literature was immediately to evoke some sort of ground out of which the imagination had sprung. But in the sixties the desire to assert such defining and constraining categories of value was passionately expressed rather than theoretically sophisticated. The theory came later and assumed the name of the “New Historicism.” Now the limits of this approach have themselves been put into question. Such turnings upon prevailing critical practice are not only familiar but also necessary; any long perspective on the history of how we read will reveal a continual swinging between the attending to content and the attending to form.

The question remains: which novels and plays and poems and works of nonfiction deserve to make their way onto anyone’s reading list? In answering this question, content alone will not serve us; only when its content has been rendered “beautiful,” to use Morrison’s word, does a piece of writing call forth our lasting attention and vie for inclusion in the canon. As Eliot argued in 1919, it is only the “new (the really new) work of art” that permanently enters tradition and, in entering, alters it.²⁶ And the “new,” Eliot believes, can only be new if it marks an innovation in literary form.

I have divided the chapters in this volume into three sections: Modes, Forces, and Movements. The opening chapters on recognized kinds of utterances draw attention to the power of literary forms to persist and to renew themselves. Once it has been established that writers in the sixties

Introduction

9

succeeded in making it new, the volume then takes a more topical approach, one in which the shaping power of events and institutions is given greater attention. The volume ends by turning to questions of how writers succeed in grouping themselves together in order to achieve social change.

Contributors to this volume come to the form-content debate from their own unique angles of vision. As the general editor of the volume, I have made my position clear but have not sought to achieve consensus on the question of just what was, in the American 1960s, truly new. The result is a gathering of essays indicative of the possible range of responses to the question of what constitutes a compelling and enduring work of art.

Notes

1. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford University Press, 1967), v.
2. Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (Penguin Books, 1968), 224.
3. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 5, 7, 102.
4. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 122.
5. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 35–36.
6. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (Knopf, 1951), 29.
7. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, (Knopf, 1954), 332.
8. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 39.
9. *Ibid.*, 25.
10. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 3, 5, 8.
11. *Ibid.*, 17.
12. John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 16 (University of California Press, 1996), 293.
13. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 177.
14. John Kerry, “Vietnam Veterans against the War Statement,” in *Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to “A Television History,”* ed. Steven Cohen (Knopf, 1983), 368.
15. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (Random House, 1977), 49–50.
16. Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 123, 160.
17. Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 386.
18. Toni Morrison, *What Moves at the Margins: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 175–76.

19. Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 448.
20. Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*, 113.
21. Paul Lauter et al. (eds.), *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. vol. 1. (D. C. Heath, 1990), xxxvi.
22. Kevin Nance, “The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison,” *Poets & Writers Magazine* (November–December 2008), 46–54.
23. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 4.
24. *Ibid.*, 5, 6, 12.
25. Rita Felski, “Context Stinks!,” in *New Literary History* 42(4) (Autumn 2011), 573.
26. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 38.