Chapter 9
Secrets and Surfaces*

I

'Both art and life', says Nietzsche, directing a 'critical backward glance' at the youthful Schopenhauerianism of *The Birth of Tragedy*, 'depend wholly on the laws of optics, on perspective and illusion; both, to be blunt, depend on the necessity of error.'[1] As often with Nietzsche, it is unclear whether the implications of this thought are joyful or depressing ones. Does it redeem art by showing it to proceed on the same principles as life, or damn life by showing it to be the same kind of painted sham as art? For the late Nietzsche 'life' is too privileged a category for there to be much doubt which way the argument will go: put the same point in the hands of Frank Kermode and doubts, as chilly as they are no doubt salutary, come seeping in.

The main line of argument in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (hereinafter *GS*)[2] is easily grasped. Literary criticism, in so far as its methods involve pursuing, by means of paraphrase and explanatory gloss, the true meaning of the text ('the recovery of the real right original thing', *GS*, p. 125), shares with a long tradition of biblical hermeneutics the idea that texts have both a 'carnal' and a 'spiritual' meaning; the former accessible to any outsider who can read the language in which the text is written, the latter accessible only to insiders, who have through membership of a privileged hermeneutic community acquired knowledge of the secret relationships and correspondences constituting the true and authentic sense lying beneath, or behind, the surface of the text. Kermode has both epistemological

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and moral objections to this way of construing the enterprise of interpretation. The epistemological ones I shall get to in a moment. The moral ones often, I suspect, get passed over by readers of the book, and are worth more than a passing glance. In ascending order of seriousness they are, first, that the pursuit of spiritual sense comes at times, and perhaps always, perilously close to the kind of divination that proceeds by sticking a pin into a copy of Virgil or the Bible. Second, and more seriously, the effect if not always the conscious aim of making the distinction between the carnal and the spiritual central to the practice of interpretation is to establish 'the superiority of latent over manifest sense' (*GS*, p. 2): to exclude outsiders and to reserve to an authoritative institution the practice of hermeneutical divination. Third, and more seriously still, the hermeneutic privilege thus established 'may determine matters of life and death' (*GS*, p. 20). Thus Matthew's fiction that 'the Jews, after Pilate washed his hands, voluntarily took upon themselves the blood-guilt of the Crucifixion' (loc. cit.) helped to determine the subsequent course of European anti-Semitism.

Fourthly, finally and most seriously of all, there is the forgetfulness of the distinction between truth and meaning which is central to the hermeneutics of secrecy, and which is the chief source of the recurrent tendency of hermeneutics to breed nightmares. The moral centre of Kermode's lectures seems to me to lie here, in their espousal (*GS*, p. 119) of Spinoza's dictum that in exegesis 'we are at work not on the truth of passages but on their meaning'. This is something most of us would pay lip-service to. Whatever biblical exegesis may yield, most of us would be happy to concede, it cannot yield us knowledge of the Jews' having accepted the blood-guilt of the Crucifixion. But at the same time most of us continue to hope, or to talk as if we continued to hope, that the authors we most admire have 'something to say to us': some insight, some truth or other about 'life' to communicate, which a proper, a just reading would excavate and put on show. Kermode wants to rid us of these last vestiges of the notion that exegesis has anything to do with truth. At the same time he is conscious of the loss that this involves. 'All modern interpretation that is not merely an attempt at "re-cognition" involves some attempt to divorce meaning and truth' (*GS*, p. 122). But to the extent that it succeeds in this aim structuralist and post-structuralist criticism takes on the aspect of the doorkeeper in Kafka's parable of the Law which recurs as a leitmotiv of *The Genesis of Secrecy*. The door closes, shutting out the radiance beyond; and to prevent or delay its closing it is all too likely that we shall abandon the painful attempt to separate questions of truth from

questions of meaning and 'slip back into the old comfortable fictions of transparency, the single sense, the truth' (*GS*, p. 123).

I have dwelt at some length on the moral aspects of Kermode's argument partly as a way of measuring the distance we have travelled from the seemingly febrile Zarathustrian cheerfulness with which Nietzsche, in a late phase, greeted the thought that transparency and the single sense are unattainable, that all is 'perspective and illusion'. *The Genesis of Secrecy* is not a cheerful book. But it is a serious one, and its un-Nietzschian preference for truth over illusion is not one that can easily be laughed off. Nevertheless, I think the gloom can be mitigated a little. I want to suggest that it is possible to preserve something of what Kermode calls the 'radiance' of the text while also preserving a decent respect for Spinoza's dictum that in exegesis what is at stake is meaning, not truth. I want to suggest that it is possible to remain wholly upon the surface of the text, making no attempt to penetrate by judicious paraphrase to a hidden meaning beneath or behind that surface, but yet find on that surface more than an enigmatic shimmer of words and rhetorical devices.

II

Kermode's thesis is that the hermeneutics of secrecy is founded upon an illusion, or rather upon a whole string of them, and pursues a non-existent goal. Texts have no secrets, at least of the kind that interpretation strives to unlock (studies which confine themselves to questions of 'meaning', such as philology, linguistics or structural analysis, being, of course, another matter). Kermode's arguments for this thesis seem to me to fall into three groups:

(1) Arguments which endeavour to show that any text admits of an irreducible plurality of interpretations;
(2) Arguments which endeavour to show that the elaboration of narrative is responsive to purely formal (or 'internal' or 'literary') considerations rather than to the faithful representation of reality;
(3) Arguments which endeavour to show that latent or spiritual sense is a product of interpretation.

Taken separately as types of argument against the hermeneutics of secrecy, (1)–(3) do not all seem to have the same degree of force. Arguments of type (1) seem particularly weak. It is hard to see why any determined champion of the hermeneutics of secrecy should be much disturbed by the thought that latent sense may be irreducibly plural. Texts are produced by persons, and persons, being themselves irreducibly plural, often do mean more by what they say than they appear to mean, and often more than they take themselves to have

said or meant. Arguments of type (2) seem a bit stronger, but not all that strong. Much depends here on what one might have in mind by speaking of a text as 'transparent' (something we shall come back to in a moment). If a transparent narrative is one which faithfully records an occurrence, then obviously its transparency is threatened the moment it begins to be subject to processes of literary elaboration designed to make it a more interesting story, or a more telling one from the point of view of some set of moral or institutional demands external to that of mere fidelity to the events recounted. Kermode deploys this point persuasively in Lecture V ('What Precisely are the Facts?') when he observes that Mark is 'not a simple chronicle, such as, in the days when its priority was first established, people hoped it might be, but a history with a literary structure'. But although the point sustains Kermode's immediately following comment, 'To speak so is to speak as one does of a fiction' (*GS*, p. 116), it does not altogether sustain the conclusion which that comment seems to invite, that the presence of any trace of literary elaboration in a text is sufficient to write off its claim to historicity, or more generally to transparency, *in any sense whatsoever of those terms*. There might, that is, be weaker senses of 'transparency' which allow a text to be in very large measure a literary construction while yet allowing it some bearing upon extra-textual reality.

This is precisely what is excluded by arguments of type (3), which I shall call arguments for textual solipsism. These arguments seem to me much stronger than those of types (1) and (2). Not only are they sufficient in themselves, if they can be made to stick, to demonstrate the futility and delusiveness of the hermeneutics of secrecy; they also add greatly to the force of Kermode's other two types of argument. The thesis of textual solipsism is that all latent, 'spiritual' meaning is the product of interpretation. The project of the hermeneutics of secrecy is thus rendered futile because interpretation *per se* is futile, its pretended discoveries no more than the gross, alien-seeming shadows cast by its own processes, and by the patterns of institutional expectation and assumption which motivate and direct those processes, upon the passive and inscrutable surface of words which is all that a text ultimately offers to our excited and self-deluded scrutiny. Both the argument for the irreducible plurality of latent sense and the argument from literary elaboration are probably best seen, therefore, as ways of elaborating and filling out the argument for textual solipsism. 'No doubt', says Kermode of the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'the parable has a carnal sense which does not vary materially; its spiritual sense is not so constant' (*GS*, p. 36). But his

account of the diversity of spiritual senses which Augustine and the Fathers drew from it is meant, I take it, precisely to bring into question whether this diversity is really being *discovered* in what is, after all, no more than 'a simple exemplary tale' (*GS*, p. 35), or distilled out of the very processes of interpretation, with their accompanying and directing institutional imperatives and assumptions, to which Augustine *et al.* subject it. As we read Kermode at this point, our cheerful willingness to grasp the nettle of semantic plurality in the manner I suggested a moment ago subsides within us. Similarly, the argument from literary elaboration gains in force if we take Kermode's point (p. 101: 'texts are from the beginning and sometimes indeterminately studded with interpretations'; p. 20: 'spiritual senses . . . may in their turn be treated as if they were carnal'; and *passim*) that the literary elaboration of texts passes with no clear methodological break into their interpretation and vice versa.

Kermode offers in addition to these detailed studies of hermeneutic practice a quite general and knock-down argument for textual solipsism, which is that it follows as a simple consequence of the latitude texts necessarily leave to interpreters. We may not be able to make just any interpretation square with a text (an important *caveat*, to which I shall return), but we can make enough square with it to make the choice between them depend upon supplementary principles of interpretation which are themselves determined, often below the level of consciousness, by history and cultural situation. Our 'acts of divination . . . *determine* undetected latent sense' (*GS*, p. 4, my italics). They exercise this determining role because divinatory paraphrase is in essence the art of connecting up parts and aspects of the text to reveal an occult pattern of coherence. And 'All such operations require the interpreter to practise a grandiose neglect of portions of the text' (*GS*, p. 20); so that 'every time you read *À la recherche du temps perdu* it can be a new novel, says Roland Barthes, because you skip different parts each time' (*GS*, p. 54). The movement of possible senses must be brought to a halt, Kermode suggests, because bringing it to a halt (this, I shall argue, is questionable) 'is our only means of reading until revolutionary new concepts of writing prevail' (*GS*, p. 71). But the only thing that can bring it to a halt is the constraint of some fore-understanding (Kermode's way of rendering into English the German *Vorverständnis*) which will of necessity be 'ideological and institutional' in character.

It is Kermode's awareness of the solipsistic implications of the thesis that latent sense is the product of interpretation, I think, which

gives *The Genesis of Secrecy* its pervasive atmosphere of sadness, defeat and loss. For if we accept Kermode's argument, after all, all those insights and glimpses of insight which make reading narrative fiction exciting to us become merely glimpses of our own interpretative practices and fore-understandings. The window which narrative fiction appears to open upon a world of wonders which is also our world becomes a blank sheet of opaque glass offering back nothing but a distorted image of the observer's own eye. Metaphors of screens and opaque glasses have long been familiar to us, of course, as part of the standard rhetoric of philosophical idealism. (Do you really take me, demands Philonous of Hylas, to be defending principles 'that lead us to think all the visible beauties of the creation a false imaginary glare?'[3] – and one senses that the anxiety which reverberates in the extraordinary energy of the concluding phrase, triply buttressed as it is with predicates of sensory and cognitive obstruction, is not only that of Hylas.) So one would expect to find such images cropping up in *The Genesis of Secrecy*. And on p. 125 we duly find Kermode speaking of 'our readiness to submit the show of things to the desires of our minds; of the structures of explanation which come between us and the facts like some wall of wavy glass'. The same metaphor recurs in Kermode's distinction between 'transparent' and 'opaque' texts; and in the door which, in Kafka's parable of the Law, becomes not a means of access to an Elsewhere, of escape from the airless room of the self and its obscurely conditioned fore-understandings, but one more wall closing off the – in any case fictive – radiance beyond.

We have in fact to deal in this book with two Kermodes. There is the sceptical, Lockeian Kermode, out to teach us the plain and unexceptionable truth that a story is a story, and not a message in code; and to debunk the Baconianism, the obsession with ciphers, occult meanings, covert identities such as those of the man in the macintosh in *Ulysses* or the young man in the *sindon* in Mark, Dark Ladies of all kinds, which feeds off the contrary view. And then there is the Kermode who has discovered, like Locke's philosophical heirs, that an empiricism begun in mirth and gladness all too easily ends first in idealism and then in solipsism; but who like them sees no honest way of repudiating these further steps. In the remainder of this essay I shall do my best to set an obstacle or two in the path of this literary version of the familiar philosophical slide from robust empiricism (where that involves among other things respect for the distinction between asking what 'p' means and asking whether 'p' is true) to blank misgivings about the possibility of egress from the closed world of the self.

III

Setting opacity aside for a moment, what would the transparency of a fully transparent text consist in? Kermode defines the terms 'transparent' and 'opaque' only contextually, no doubt because he does not think them particularly problematic; but the contextual clues are sufficient to yield an answer. Lecture V opens with the sentence,

> If so many causes act in concert to ensure that texts are from the beginning and sometimes indeterminately studded with interpretations; and if the texts in their very nature demand further interpretation and yet resist it, what should we expect when the document in question denies its opacity by claiming to be a transparent account of the recognizable world? (*GS*, p. 101)

Transparency, it seems, consists in what philosophical discussions of the nature of truth call correspondence: a match, in other words, between a true sentence and a fact; in this case between a true narrative sentence and what it asserts to have taken place. The trouble with transparency in this sense is that, as anti-foundationalist philosophers, such as W. V. Quine, or Paul Feyerabend, or Thomas Kühn, or Richard Rorty, have fairly plausibly argued (Kermode employs some related arguments himself), it is simply not available for any discourse sufficiently elaborated to be interesting. Observation is always and irremediably theory-laden. What we recognize and record as a fact is always relative to the current state of scientific and common-sense construal of how things *in general* stand in the world: is already saturated, as Kermode would have it, with fore-understandings. Taking this anti-foundationalist line, however, only commits one to denying guaranteed correctness or finality, in the sense of incorrigibility, to any of our descriptions of Reality. Anti-foundationalism, that is, while it no doubt is incompatible with some forms of philosophical Realism, certainly does not, and cannot, commit us to the view that reality is a 'linguistic construction' in the sense of being made *in principle inaccessible* by the theory-ladenness of our concepts and descriptive schemes – 'shut off from us behind an opaque screen of words', or something of the sort – because to assert *that* would be precisely to assert that whatever concepts or styles of description we happen to dispose of at any given moment, say the present one, are in principle incorrigible: to assert, that is, exactly what anti-foundationalism denies. To hold that all our descriptions are theory-laden is to hold that no scheme of descriptive concepts

occupies a place in our language guaranteed by its simply corresponding to reality. But the assertion of the existence of a gap of that kind between reality and our ways of describing it would be vacuous unless there were a real possibility of the displacement of such a scheme coming about because of the discovery of relevant natural possibilities exceeding the capacity of that scheme to handle, or to handle fruitfully or naturally. The answer to someone who says, 'But couldn't we have a pair of competing conceptual schemes of equivalent capacity to handle all observable differences in a given area, so that choosing between them would be a matter of purely social or institutional agreement?' is Wittgenstein's: 'In such a case, since *ex hypothesi* there could be no difference in use, and so no detectable difference in meaning, between the two sets of terms, what would be the force of the hypothesis that we dispose of *two* sets of terms belonging to *two* different conceptual schemes?'

Anti-foundationalism, plausibly and consistently construed, then, presupposes some more or less Popperian picture of disconfirmation as constituting the interface between Reality and our never finally adequate attempts to describe it. The thought which I now wish to pursue is that that picture may have some bearing on the problems which Kermode raises concerning the interpretation of narrative fiction.

The obvious objection which such a proposal invites, of course, is that encounters with narrative fictions cannot reveal defects in our fore-understandings of how things stand in the world, in the way that, say, encounters with awkward experimental data can, because narrative fictions are (no prizes for guessing) fictions. But this objection is not as strong as it looks. The web of fore-understandings from within which each of us confronts the world is not just made up of beliefs, which only experiment or observation could reveal to be mistaken, about specific, discrete matters of fact. Much more importantly it is made up of preconceptions about the limits of natural possibility. Such fore-understandings tell us that Reality divides up into contrasted types of fact which conjointly, as we confidently suppose, exhaust the possibilities of nature or human life. Let us call these *structural fore-understandings*. Such fore-understandings can, certainly, come under pressure from direct experience, as when we come across an apparently undeniable case of Lamarckian inheritance, or meet a man whose acts and personality cannot be satisfactorily classified according to any of the short list of stereotypes we customarily apply to persons of his class, nation or race. But structural fore-understandings can also find themselves under threat from an argument, from a mathematical model; or for that matter from a fiction. For all that need be shown,

to put such a preconception under stress, is that commonplace facts about nature or human life can be reordered or transformed, by appeal to principles which we already know to operate in relevant cases, in such a way as to generate a possibility incapable of being brought easily under any of the alternative descriptive rubrics which the structural fore-understanding in question asserts to be conjointly exhaustive of natural possibility.

It is, in fact, because mere fictions can pose substantial challenges to our structural fore-understandings that scandal has always been a main motive of interpretation. Kermode notes this principle in operation:

> An unfamiliar foreign expression, or the interpretation of a difficult part of the Law, or a story which, in the course of time, had come to seem ambiguous or even indecent, such as Sarah's sojourn in the harem of the Pharaoh, might prompt midrash . . . how did it happen that Joseph married the daughter of Potiphar, an Egyptian? An Alexandrian romance maintains that the daughter was first converted; a rabbinical explanation has it that she was really the daughter of Dinah, reared by the wife of Pharaoh, but a born Jew. Thus discrepancies, or indecencies, are eliminated by the invention of romantic narrative. (*GS*, p. 82)

The issues raised here, it seems to me, go deeper. Our structural fore-understandings make us what we are: Marxists or Methodists, for instance, mechanists or vitalists. We cannot surrender them without undergoing the pains of insecurity, loss and amputation, that personal change entails. We want knowledge, of course, since knowledge not only satisfies curiosity but is, in both the engineer's and the Foucaultian's senses, power. But we hope very much that our knowledge, as it advances, will compose itself submissively into an orderly array of facts of the types sanctioned by our most cherished structural fore-understandings, not only posing no threat to their integrity but showing how well chosen they were in the first place, and that no mockers or hecklers will intervene to force upon our attention facts, or possible facts, of which we can gain nothing by taking cognizance.

Much serious narrative fiction has, I would suggest, as one of the more important of its many functions, that of thwarting this modest and entirely understandable hope. It adds insult to injury, in a way, that not one of the torrent of sentences of which it consists expresses a single factual, empirical truth. It makes no attempt to sweeten the bitter pill of its contumacy with any admixture of useful knowledge. It confines itself, as Aristotle taught us, to sketching possibilities;[4] but possibilities which, while they may seem sometimes merely

fantastic, are even in those cases often too fully and sharply realized, too much in accordance with what we know very well to be the case when we come, or are forced, to think about it, to be easily kept from threatening our structural fore-understandings. Hence the venom which great narrative fictions often attract before interpretation has revealed ways of allowing them modest and discreet entrance into the canon whose gates they rudely assault. And hence also the rage to interpret itself. We interpret often enough, as Kermode suggests, because we *are* scandalized. But that in itself must mean: because we are very far from taking fictional narratives to be mere stories, pipe-dreams without power to challenge our sense of how life itself is organized into structures of possibilities. Being scandalized we trust we have misheard or misread: that, to use one of Kermode's most telling examples, when Jesus says that the true sense of parables is concealed fron the wicked *in order that* (*hina*) they might not turn and be saved he must mean not *hina* but *hoti* ('because'). Being conscious of the presence of a power to disturb we wish to appropriate that power to the support of the very fore-understandings it appears to challenge, by equipping the text with some wholly benign sense. We hope, to use Kermode's chillingly felicitous phrase (*GS*, p. 54) to 'process the text into coherence'. Thus hoping, we become Insiders.

I agree with Kermode, for his reasons among others, that the Insider's enterprise is doomed to failure. My concern is with what ways of reading remain for the rest of us, for Those Outside to whom *The Genesis of Secrecy* is after all dedicated. Certainly we should accept Spinoza's principle that in exegesis 'we are at work not on the truth of passages but on their meaning'. But should we also accept the two further premisses which Kermode in effect adds to Spinoza's principle; namely, (1) that to 'work on the meaning of a text' in any sense other than a purely structural or philological one is necessarily to attempt to make it cohere in the interests of some paraphrase, and (2) that many paraphrases, at best distinct from one another and at worst in conflict, can be grounded in any text? Premisses (1) and (2), taken together with Spinoza's principle, yield textual solipsism: the thesis that undiscovered latent sense is the product of interpretation; or, to spell it out more dismally still, that no cognitive gains may be expected to accrue from reading narrative fiction save those of disillusion with such reading; that while the theoretical reflections which break the spell of reading may have some bearing upon real life, nothing that we do or think while under that spell can have. If we accept Spinoza's principle plus (1) and (2) then, it seems, we must choose between the rather drab options which Kermode offers

us. We must embrace disappointment as our lot, allowing the door to close finally upon the fictive radiance of the text, and betake ourselves either to structuralist hermeneutics of the type practised by Jean Starobinski, which Kermode admires in Lecture IV for its austere taking to heart of Spinoza's dictum, combining it, perhaps, with some form of reductive criticism of the Marxist or the Foucaultian variety; or else to the celebration of incoherence and fortuitousness, as offering a release from slavery to 'codes implanted in our minds by the arbitrary fiat of a culture or an institution', which Kermode fastidiously refrains from endorsing on p. 54 ('There are current at present much bolder opinions than this one . . .').

Is there no other option? I think there is one.[5] The instructed Outsider should reject what I have called Kermode's second premiss, for the excellent reason that it is false. The meaning of a text need not be sought by endeavouring to 'process it into coherence' with some explanatory paraphrase or other. On the contrary it may equally well be sought by investigating the points at which, and attempting to understand the reasons why, a text resists specific attempts at paraphrase. Textual solipsists will want to argue, of course, that 'the meaning of a text' cannot be sought in this way either. Their position is that the whole notion of 'the meaning of a text' is defective, and should be discarded, because meaning, or latent sense, is a product of interpretation. But Kermode's arguments for textual solipsism, because they work by raising doubts about whether constraints internal to the text can determine a unique paraphrase, can only work against an opponent who is committed to the Insider's strategy of trying to discover a latent sense capable of being expressed as a paraphrase or 'reading'. They can have no force, that is, against an Outsider who has discarded what I have called Kermode's second premiss. In order to block *that* move the textual solipsist needs to shift his ground and argue for a far stronger and hence less plausible claim. He needs to argue that the Outsider's project of investigating the points at which texts resist specific attempts at explanatory paraphrase is as inevitably doomed to failure as the Insider's, although for different reasons, because there just are no such points: that *all* the constraints upon interpretation emanate from sources 'external to the text' in the sense of being freely variable from interpreter to interpreter; from 'culturally-imposed codes', 'institutional requirements', 'fore-understandings' and the like.

Kermode appears at times to flirt with a position as radical as this. It is certainly strongly hinted at by his suggestion (p. 143) that we 'know' (my inverted commas) that we cannot read the Gospel of Mark 'as a work of irony or a confidence trick' only because 'We

have acquired fore-understandings which exclude such readings'. And it seems overt in his later remark (p. 145) that narratives 'may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermeneutic tricks'. But elsewhere in the text the externality of the constraints upon interpretation is not so strongly insisted upon. Thus on p. 13 we find Kermode making room for what I suppose is the basic hunch I am defending here, by granting that 'texts interpret, or deceive, their interpreters, who should know they do and make allowances for it'. And on p. 36, dealing with what Augustine and the Fathers made of the parable of the Samaritan, we find, 'No doubt the parable has a carnal sense which does not vary materially; its spiritual sense is not so constant.' To admit that carnal senses do not vary materially is to admit that there are some constraints upon interpretation which are not variable from interpreter to interpreter; constraints to which an interpreter does not force the text to submit at the behest of a 'hermeneutic community' or his own 'fore-understandings', but rather constraints to which he himself must submit, in common with every other would-be interpreter, as the price of finding himself confronted with *a text*, rather than a string of enigmatic marks. Of course these constraints too are founded in *social conventions*, and recent critics do sometimes write as if they thought that the mere fact that natural languages are *conventional* systems of communication were sufficient in itself to establish the textual solipsist's contention that all constraints upon interpretation are external to the text in the sense of being freely variable from interpreter to interpreter. However, a moment's thought is sufficient to show that this cannot be right. A system of constraints upon interpretation (however conventional in character) which was not, at some level, invariant from interpreter to interpreter would simply not serve to constitute a natural language (there would be no way of ensuring that any sentence of the language would express the same proposition to different speakers, for instance). All talk of 'language', or 'texts', or 'interpretation' in such a context, indeed, would be nugatory, because it would be vacuous.

Kermode is clearly right, therefore, to grant the community and the invariance of the carnal: the contrary view is incoherent. The question is, though, at what level, exactly, does the carnal end and the spiritual begin? Is it just *the meaning of the* (English or Greek) *words* that is carnal, that defeats all attempts by pious Insiders to meddle with them (as Kermode thinks is the case with all attempts to change *hina* to *hoti* at Mark 4:11–12). Or does the autonomy of the text, its power to send our impertinent suggestions packing, extend to higher levels of textual organization than that? The answer, I

think, is pretty clearly going to be a matter of degree and of arguing out the pros and cons for particular cases and levels of discourse. My own feeling is that while emblem, metonymy, symbol, upon which quite a lot of Kermode's argument in Lectures I and III focuses and depends, shade off into the spiritual, the structure of narrative and things like the relationship between plot, action and character (despite the very interesting and telling things which Kermode has to say about this, which would open up another chapter of argument) remain rather solidly carnal. But if anything at all in narrative is impervious to our 'hermeneutic tricks' then it remains permanently possible that our hermeneutic endeavours and the fore-understandings which motivate and direct them may find themselves running into a brick wall. Such an experience, while painful and in one way negative, may not, as Karl Popper has argued in other contexts, be entirely devoid of cognitive gains. My suggestion, in short, is that in literature as in science we escape from the limpid darkness of solipsism not at the point at which the triumphal chariots of theory rumble to final victory over the phenomena or the text, but rather precisely at the point of failure, of confusion, of silence and falling short.

IV

By way of conclusion I shall offer a necessarily brief and sketchy example of how a resolutely Outsiderish approach to reading narrative might develop in an actual case. The text I shall choose is a notoriously scandalous one, *The Taming of the Shrew*. The *Shrew* is nowadays considered a difficult play to come to grips with, because on the face of it it tramples upon our century's new-found moral belief in the equality of the sexes. Katherine's final speech in particular, in which as we tend to see it she knuckles under, strikes many people as profoundly shocking. It would be nice, therefore, if we could simply dismiss the play as propaganda for an outmoded and wrong conception of relationships between the sexes; if we could get it out of our minds and finish with it by exposing the power relations it serves and propagates. Unfortunately the play will not altogether play ball with this vision of what it is about. For a start Petruchio does not take the obvious step of simply beating Katherine into silence and submission. Instead he chooses to behave like a lunatic: in effect to outmatch her at her own game of revolt against the ordered structures of society which she sees, rightly, as demanding (at least the appearance of) silence and submission of her. Certainly his strategy disorients her, removing from life the least scrap of rational structure and

Renaissance decorum which she might use as a basis for a revolt of her own, but beyond making her hungry, tired, uncomfortable and infuriated he does not physically harm her. Secondly, the obedience in which he schools her serves her ends as well as his. Petruchio's yoke is easy: all he demands of her is that she fall in trustingly and unquestioningly with his nonsense. Having finally paid that modest price she finds herself delivered from the oppression of her family, presiding at a feast instead of kept in confinement as something approaching a madwoman, and herself beating her superior sister Bianca at Bianca's own chosen social game of being the good, socially acceptable daughter. She has, it might almost seem, been led by Petruchio (whom we are beginning to be tempted to see as the practitioner of a crazy kind of therapy) back into life, from a fatally self-destructive strategy of living to one in which she has a real chance of formulating and achieving some goals of her own.

A perfectly possible reaction to this, of course, would be to say: All right, *The Taming of the Shrew* is a *cunning and subtle* defence of a Renaissance view of male supremacy. But even if one admits its subtlety it is still *false to life*: in real life a fortune-hunter of the kind Petruchio advertises himself to be, having got hold of Katherine's dowry, *would* simply have beaten her into submission, and the story would have ended much sooner. So saying we take a stand precisely upon the question of what options exhaust the possibilities of 'real life': either a strict equality between the sexes, as our theory-laden self-image, not our ambiguous and constantly shifting practice, defines that, or else male domination founded upon brutality. The whole trouble is that the play persuasively elaborates a further possibility which questions and undermines the putative exhaustiveness of those very options, which is why we dislike the play, feel uncomfortable with it, and fear it.

All this is very summary, no doubt. But suppose an exceptionally generous opponent were to find it persuasive, and were to say by way of conceding: All right; I grant that *The Taming of the Shrew* is not merely a subtle but a convincing defence of a Renaissance conception of how relationships between the sexes should be ordered. Would this be any truer? Wouldn't, that is, any imaginable defender of anything one could plausibly represent as 'a Renaissance conception of' the proper subordination of wives to husbands, see just as much scandal in the play, see in it just as much of an attempt to question self-evident proprieties and decencies, as feminists do today?[6] The 'good daughter', the model of Renaissance feminine propriety, is surely Bianca. But equally surely the message of the sub-plot and the wager scene is the familiar comic one that the conventional

proprieties she represents are hollow: Bianca is obedient neither to her father nor to her husband. Then again Petruchio is a poor paradigm of that Adamic paternal authority which according to Filmer invests the King and should reign also in the household. He does not behave with the distance, the sure and authoritative wielding of a divinely and legally constituted right, which that conception of paternal authority entails. Instead he enters into a duel of riot and misrule with Katherine: a duel conducted on her ground, played out according to strategies she has determined, his frenzies following and matching hers fit for fit. As he says, this is how a falconer tames a hawk; but as we know from T. H. White's personal account of that process, it is a painful one for the falconer as well as for the falcon. He must sit up all night if need be with his bird, for if he sleeps he has lost her. There is love and self-denial in it as well as mastery: it is as if the magistrate, instead of merely sitting in judgement upon the criminal and sentencing him to a whipping or the wheel, were to go alone into his cell and wrestle with him.

Finally, what emerges from the duel between them is less like the humility and submission proper to the wife of *bien-pensant* Renaissance theory than a collusive and unholy alliance of one enemy of conventional decorum with another. Katherine's ringing defence of meekness and submissiveness in woman is not faltering enough by half, is altogether too flamboyant, in fact, for its sentiments not to give rise to some suspicion of conscious parody; especially when one remembers that the thicker she lays it on the more she triumphs over a sister at whose hands she has doubtless endured much, and even more so when one recalls the immediate grounds she has for appropriating these conventional sentiments as a convenient means of expressing self-approval of a type wholly foreign to their overt content: after all, as a direct result of her new-found willingness to engage in parodically operatic flights of submission the Katherine–Petruchio gang has just taken the table, as it were, for twenty crowns and Bianca's reputation, not to mention the further twenty thousand which has just been added to the original wager by the marvelling Baptista. Has Katherine seen the light she preaches, or has she just decided that Petruchio's apparent nonsense and clowning, daft and excessive as it may seem to more conventional souls, may be trusted in general to conceal some sound calculation which will not leave her own interests out of account? And how far does that thought itself have the seeds of love and trust as well as calculation in it? Are they not, after all, two of a kind? In any event the magical zone from within which Katherine and Petruchio confront their dumbfounded fellow feasters does seem to

have something that one might want to call radiance about it: the radiance of an Elsewhere very remote from those conventional moral pieties about submission and paternal rule in whose breakdown into recrimination, loss and disorder the other characters stand at this point enmeshed.

The possibilities which the play explores, that is, can equally well be seen as undermining a paternalist conception of how the world divides up exhaustively into possibilities – either the copy-book proprieties of paternal rule or else shrewish incivility and domestic disorder – which complements and confronts the feminist construal of the possible options I mentioned earlier. Of course the second half of what I have just said about the play might be taken as a way of 'recuperating' it, as people say, for feminism, just as the first half might be taken as a way of recuperating it for paternalism. The point is, though, that a feminism or a paternalism capable of accepting these as recuperations would have had to have moved a little from earlier and cruder stances.

My thought is, in effect, that the text – the carnal text – stays where it is, unmoving, while readers turn it about, or turn about it, each trying to subdue it to his or her way of looking at things, and each finding in it a meaning which is 'new', and specific to that particular reader, only in the sense that it expresses the commerce of the unmoving carnal text with the special set of fore-understandings which he or she has addressed to it. This, as Gabriel Josipovici pointed out to me, is rather reminiscent of a verse in the *Pirkhe Avot (Sayings of the Fathers)* 5:25: 'Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.' But this again suggests a different understanding from Kermode's of the point of Midrash in general: not to impose closure on the text in the interests of the particular type of coherence required by some set of institutional requirements, but to leave it, precisely, stonily and carnally open in order to leave it its power to astonish and confute: to see what it will illuminate next. I have a suspicion that some deep division between Jewish and (at least some kinds of) Christian religious sensibility may lie at the root of these two ways of looking at the business of interpretation.[7]

This brings me to my conclusion, and for one last time to Nietzsche's enthusiasm for 'perspective and illusion'. In my role as self-appointed Outsider I have been content to remain brooding upon the surface of Shakespeare's text. In accordance with Keats's excellent advice to avoid irritable grasping after fact and certainty I have foregone any attempt to grope beneath that surface for a paraphrasable 'meaning' or 'message'. All I have done is to examine in some detail (though for

reasons of space not all that much) some of the obstacles which the text, as it presents itself on the most superficial level to any callow Outsider with a seat in the pit but without a hermeneutic key to bless himself with, sets in the path of attempts to equip it with a 'message', either a paternalist or a feminist one. And I have tried to show that such a purely negative, purely on-the-surface enterprise, besides giving the play, and ourselves, room to breathe, permits us to enter into a relationship with the play which allows it to criticize us, to elicit from us some saving modesty before it; some sense that the fore-understandings in terms of which we endeavour to shape it to our liking might themselves come to appear defective under a light – a radiance if you like – which it has power to shed upon them. Such knowledge as narrative fictions can grant us, knowledge of the incapacity of our fore-understandings to exhaust, as they claim to do, the possibilities of things, may not as I said earlier feel much like knowledge, but is knowledge all the same.

Now for a parting glance at Nietzsche. Half the time Nietzsche talks as if he has dispensed with the notion of truth; it is a 'mobile army of metaphors', and so on. The other half he displays a touching faith in the continued availability of the familiar concept of truth as correspondence between what is asserted and what is the case. The reason, I think, is this. Nietzsche wants to say that no human theory, or vision of how things stand in general, comes with a transcendent guarantee. The cheerfulness, in such contrast to Kermode's prevailing mood of disappointment, with which Nietzsche embraces 'the necessity of error' comes of course from that thought: no transcendent reality constrains us; we are free, we can create. But Nietzsche also wants to say that the construction of any habitable human order involves *work*, and work of a more than merely practical and physical kind: that the exercise of the Will to Power is not *effortless* because arbitrary, in the way it would be if the choice of a set of values and social arrangements were simply insulated in principle from all contact with reality. There is a kind of sadness, from which the eighteenth century suffered a good deal, which comes from too strong a conviction that the world is transparent to reductive reason; that nothing can stop the spade of theory from exposing the roots of both human and natural reality. And there is another, contrary kind, which comes from the suspicion, nourished by philosophical scepticism and relativism, that we can make *just anything we like* of reality, that as creators of the human order we operate in a vacuum. One of the enduring merits of Nietzsche, as in related ways of Keats and Blake, is that he offers, patchily but on the whole effectively, defences against both these ways of depressing art and

ourselves. One of the worrying things about a good deal of current critical theory is that it seems at times anxious to reanimate both of them at once. But then, one of the things that gives such philosophical bugbears their perennial power is that they can easily appear to be entailed by very much more interesting and substantial lines of thought from which, in fact, they do not necessarily follow at all.