

50

literature ideas

you really need to know



John Sutherland

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Glossary

Introduction

Literary criticism suffers from two opposite objections. One is that the enterprise is too easy ('Anyone can read *Pride and Prejudice* intelligently'). The other is that it is mind-numbingly difficult ('What on earth does "extradiegetic analepsis in *Pride and Prejudice*" mean? And who cares?').

A first point to be made is the inherently dualistic nature of literary criticism. There is no clear dividing line between theory and practice. Many of the ideas about literature and how best to understand it originate with writers themselves. Indeed, according to T. S. Eliot it is only those who create literature who can write usefully about it. All the rest is what D. H. Lawrence calls 'critical twiddle-twaddle'.

One would not claim (to take a rather fanciful example) that it is only those who make history who can be historians. And not everyone – indeed relatively few who have thought about it – would agree with Eliot, the author of *The Waste Land* (the greatest poem of the twentieth century) and *The Sacred Wood* (one of the greatest volumes of literary criticism of the century). But ultimately those who merely write, or talk, about literature (particularly those who are paid to do so) should be humble in their judgements and prepared to defer to the comments of those who actually make the stuff. What would one not give for Shakespeare's views on his own drama? Would they not be worth more than all the reams of Shakespearian criticism ever written?

No criticism or 'theory' can explain a literary work – that is one of the perennial fascinations of great literature. We still do not wholly understand Shakespeare, even after 400 years of thinking about him. But the well-equipped reader will want to have the best toolkit currently available. This book, and the 50 'big ideas' it contains, aims to assemble just such a kit. Clearly at some point every mature reader will decide on the approaches that work best for them. A new historicist and a structuralist, for example (to take two of the 'ideas' discussed below) come at texts from wholly different directions, and the conclusions they reach may well not be compatible. But knowing the different techniques gives the reader a wider set of options – more spanners in the toolkit, so to speak.

There is one idea above all others that should be borne in mind. Namely that literature is ultimately there to give pleasure. Read intelligently, it is one of the very highest pleasures life has to offer.

01 Mimesis

Mimesis can be defined as ‘holding a mirror up to nature’. The Ancient Greek term – pronounced ‘my-meas-is’ – is preferable to the English translation, ‘imitation’, which carries with it a pejorative overtone of ‘mere copy’. Inadequate too is ‘representation’. Mimesis carries more weight than that word. ‘The concept of Mimesis,’ writes Stephen Halliwell, in a recent book on the topic, ‘lies at the core of the entire history of Western attempts to make sense of representational art and its values.’ It is both fundamental and, at the same time, fiendishly slippery.

The key to the literary door The problem mimesis raises is perennial, fascinating, and, finally, insoluble. Is literature ‘true’, or is it ‘false’? It is, of course, both. Or neither – some would argue that the question itself is a ‘category error’ (e.g. ‘What is north of the North Pole?’).

The idea of ‘mimesis’ was put into literary-critical circulation by Aristotle, in his fragmentary treatise *The Poetics*. The title does not indicate an exclusive attention to poetry, but to all literary fabrication. Aristotle was fascinated by the mysterious process by which certain black marks on a white surface or sounds in the ear become, for example, an ‘epic’ (*The Odyssey*).

In his extended defence of mimesis as the way in which that trick is performed, Aristotle was quarrelling with an even more authoritative philosopher than himself. Notoriously, in his anatomy of the ideal state, *The Republic*, Plato exiled the poets. He admired the aesthetic quality of their ‘imitations’ (they would, he decreed, go into the wilderness outside the city gates ‘garlanded’), but their creations were intrinsically superficial, subjective and untrue. The critic Mark Edmundson puts it wittily: ‘Literary criticism in the West begins with the wish that literature disappears.’

For Plato, literature was the mere shadow of reality. Truth was the province of the philosopher-king, not the artist. Worse than that, poetry inspired emotional, not rational, responses. Mimesis created ‘Beautiful Lies’. It led to bad decisions and bad living. Life requires cool heads and clear eyes.

‘Mimesis is the primary dramatic phenomenon: projecting oneself outside oneself and then acting as though one had really entered another body, another character.’

Friedrich Nietzsche

Refuting Plato Aristotle refutes the primary Platonic objection (historical untruth) elegantly – turning the dagger against its wielder. Literary art (epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric), he points out, is unfettered by the accidents and randomness of mere history and can therefore, employing that literary freedom, articulate essential, eternal or higher truths.

For example: there never was a woman called Anna Karenina who committed adultery, abandoned her family and killed herself at a railway station. She is fiction. But the proposition with which Tolstoy's novel opens – 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way' – has the status of what another novelist, in *her* opening sentence, called 'a truth universally acknowledged'. Fiction, in this line of argument, can be truer than fact. It can, in Graham Greene's phrase, get to 'the heart of the matter'. Society needs literature's truths.

Aristotle's defence against Plato's second objection – that mimetic art and literature overstimulates the emotions (our eyes moisten at the death of Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*, but we pass by, hard-eyed, the beggar outside the cinema) – is less convincing. Aristotle concedes that art does indeed move us: that is one of its primary reasons for existence. Athenian women, he records, had been known to miscarry and boys to faint when watching tragedy. But the emotion that literature generates, he goes on to argue, is 'cathartic'.

'Catharsis', like 'mimesis', is a word that does not yield easily to translation. It can imply 'purge', or 'laxative'. Or, more relevantly here, a medicinal *tempering* of the emotions. The lines from Milton's hyper-Aristotelian verse drama, *Samson Agonistes*, are often quoted in this context: 'calm of mind, *all passion spent*'. Paradoxically (Aristotle loved paradoxes), art works us up, but leaves us less, not more, emotional, and better able to make rational decisions. Plato, in other words, should welcome literature as something that clears the mind.

Shakespeare versus Aristotle

Shakespeare was as fascinated by the idea of mimesis as all great writers are. In the instruction Hamlet gives the players visiting Elsinore, he tells them to 'hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature'. The idea of the mirror is a favourite with those explaining the relationship of literature to the 'real' world ('nature'). Stendhal described the novel as a 'mirror in the roadway'. But, as any fairground 'hall of fun' testifies, mirrors do not always reflect true.

Shakespeare himself has fun with the 'realism paradox' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the more the mechanicals try to depict their play realistically – having a character with a lamp portray the moon, etc. – the less realistic their performance becomes. Elsewhere in the same play, Shakespeare says, 'the lover, the lunatic and the poet/Are of imagination all compact'. In other words, mimesis is realism plus a bit of moonshine.

The problem of the catharsis theory It's an elegant riposte but it has something of the sleight of hand about it. A recurrent objection against the 'cathartic' line of defence

is that it necessarily overvalues literature for its ‘affective’ quality: how we respond to it. Taken to its logical extreme, ‘catharsis’ could be thought to imply that the art that moves us most must be the best literature. Which, on the basis of the teardrops it generates, would make some Mills and Boon ‘weepies’ better novels than *Pride and Prejudice*.

‘No serious person has the time to be a great writer. The serious person produces propaganda, party pamphlets, not “works of art”.’

E. M. Forster – not, one presumes, entirely seriously

Controversy has raged for centuries around Aristotle’s theory of mimesis and what it means for literature and society. Plato, as has been said, booted the poet out of the Republic; Aristotle wishes to keep him/her as an honoured citizen within the city walls. George Orwell, in his essay ‘Outside the Whale’, argued that exile is, ideally, where the writer should be. Society (particularly totalitarian society) swallows up the domesticated writer, as Leviathan does Jonah. Better Solzhenitsyn, kicked into exile in 1973, than those hacks who stayed as privileged members of the Soviet ‘Writers’ Union’.

Strategically, Orwell argued, the place to be is outside the beast, harpoon in hand, not in its belly. James Joyce, with a more modernist outlook, believed the writer should create in a condition of ‘silence, *exile*, and cunning’.

The Marxist writer Bertolt Brecht founded his aesthetic on contradiction of Aristotle’s mimesis and literature or drama that is so ‘magnetically’ real that we are sucked in and ‘carried away’. We should sternly resist the lure of mimesis, Brecht insisted. It is the drug of literature. The quarrels go on, and will do as long as there is literature.

the condensed idea

It’s not real, but it can be true

timeline

- c.429 BC** Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (Aristotle’s perfect tragedy)
- c.380 BC** Plato’s *Republic* (the poet is exiled for his ‘imitations’)
- c.335 BC** Aristotle’s *Poetics* defends concept of mimesis as central to art and literature
- 1581** Sir Philip Sidney’s *The Defence of Poetry* offers pro-Aristotelian ‘apology’ for mimesis

- 1872** Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* echoes Aristotle's view about mimesis as basis of dramatic art
- 1946** Publication of Erich Auerbach's authoritative *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*

02 Ambiguity

‘When I use a word,’ says Humpty Dumpty, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ The question is, retorts Alice, ‘whether you CAN make words mean so many different things’. Alice, the most sensible of girls, is right, of course. But nowhere do words mean more things more ways than in literature. Put another way, literature is ambiguity raised to the highest degree. The aim, at its noblest, is not to confuse, but to capture the irreducible complexity of things and of language.

The inherent slipperiness of literature Literature is, of its very nature, polyvalent – it can mean different things at the same time. Historically it can also mean different things at different times (think of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1864, during the Civil War, and in 1964, on the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, when the term ‘Uncle Tom’ had become a deadly insult between African Americans). Biographically too, a work of literature can mean different things at different times of one’s life. Jack Kerouac’s ‘Beat Bible’ *On the Road* is a different novel for me now than it was for the 17-year-old, romantically footloose, writer of this book.

This multi-meaningfulness operates from the level of whole text to the single word. Take the work T. S. Eliot called the ‘Mona Lisa of Literature’, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Every age interprets the play’s enigmas differently, sometimes wildly so (is Hamlet mad, enquired Oscar Wilde; or merely the critics of *Hamlet*?). The nineteenth century saw the Prince of Denmark as a noble philosopher. Coleridge hazarded, proudly, that he had a ‘smack of Hamlet’ in himself. In the twentieth century, it’s not unusual for Hamlet to be seen by feminist critics as a homicidal, sexually predatory brute, spouting stale truisms and obnoxious self-pity.

Has anyone, over the centuries, got *Hamlet* (or Hamlet) right, or has everyone? Can anyone? *Tot homines, quot sententiae*, the Latin proverb says. There are as many opinions as there are people.

Does the view that Hamlet is a cross-dressed woman (an interpretation that has been seriously advanced), or that he is gay, or that he is the victim of an unresolved Oedipus complex have the same legitimacy as T. S. Eliot’s sage deliberations about the Mona Lisa of literature?

‘So far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, *Hamlet* is most certainly an artistic failure.’

T. S. Eliot

Verbal ambiguity Moving down the scale, one can discover polyvalence at the micro-level of the simplest of words. Sticking with *Hamlet*, there is an early exchange between Claudius and his new stepson (whose father Claudius has murdered, although

Hamlet does not yet know it) in which the King politely enquires why the dark clouds hang over him. Hamlet replies, cuttingly: ‘Not so, my Lord. I am too much i’ the *sun*.’ It’s a homophonic pun: son/sun. Puns (‘puncpts’, as some modern commentators call them) embody ‘ambiguity’ in its most crystalline form.

Ambiguity became the buzziest of buzzwords in the 1930s, with William Empson’s monograph *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) leading the way. The book was a version of the 22-year-old Empson’s PhD thesis (it actually began as a fortnightly undergraduate essay. He was very smart).

Of the multitude (many more than seven) of ambiguities Empson discerns, consider a particularly brilliant example, from Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, *The Windhover*. The bird (a falcon) closes its wings when it drops down on its prey, falling like a stone. For Hopkins, the bird is a metaphor for Christ, whose arms were extended like wings on the cross, and folded in the tomb:

‘Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!’

‘Buckle’, Empson observed, here means two contrary things. One is ‘girding’, pulling oneself together, as one *buckles* a belt, or *buckles* on armour. The other is ‘bend-to-breaking’ – as in a *buckled* or crumpled bicycle wheel. Which is it in *The Windhover*? Both. Why? Because it’s poetry.

Ambiguity and the headless Frenchman

Literature explores, with its unrivalled subtlety, the linguistic ambiguities that we happily live with in our everyday lives. Consider, for example, the statements: ‘Coke refreshes’, ‘coke ruins lives’ and ‘coke burns’. What do you picture in those three statements? English, it has been observed, is unusually rich in ambiguity, and English literature is all the better for it. One reason that French (‘lingua franca’) is the preferred language of diplomacy is because it is inherently unambiguous, the least prone to *double entendre*. Picture a Frenchman leaning towards an open train window, unaware that a tunnel is coming up. ‘Look out!’ warns the Englishman alongside him. The Frenchman duly looks out and gets his head knocked off. The shouted instruction ‘*Attention, monsieur!*’ would forestall Gallic decapitation.

Psychoanalytic ambiguities There was another exciting doctrine abroad in the 1930s – psychoanalysis. One of the more daring suppositions among ambiguity hunters (who liked to hang their big game up on imaginary walls, like so many trophies) was that

there could be Freudian ambiguities ('slips', or what Freud called 'parapraxes') in texts of which the authors themselves were unconscious. Consider what Hamlet mutters to himself before going into his climactic tête-à-tête with his mother, in her 'closet' (bedchamber):

'O heart, lose not thy nature, let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,
Let me be cruel not unnatural.'

Nero, of course, is reported to have killed his mother, Agrippina. This is the primary meaning. Other, more scurrilous accounts record an incestuous relationship between the Emperor (when 'heated with wine') and his mother. A bedroom scene is imminent. Has Hamlet resolved his Oedipal complex – or is some awful 'unnatural' coupling in prospect? It's hard to think that Shakespeare means us to wonder, but does the text unconsciously prompt us in that direction, implying what its author dare not?

Reverence for the irreducible ambiguity of great literature was codified in a teaching technique labelled 'practical criticism' in the UK, and 'new criticism' in the US. Educationally it was immensely refreshing, sweeping away the previously reigning orthodoxies of philology. Practical criticism placed the 'contextless' literary text in clinical isolation, where it could be subjected to the scalpel-like investigations of 'close reading'.

But what was this endless hunt for meanings – lemon squeezing, the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton calls it – *for*? Young Empson likened the ambiguity virtuoso to a conjuror pulling rabbits out of a hat. Discovering hitherto undiscovered ambiguities proved you were cleverer than other readers.

But ultimately all this close reading by clever readers did, it was felt, go somewhere important. It validated the best texts, creating, as you went, a canon – the curriculum of worthwhile literature. Ambiguity was the criterion. The more pliant literary texts were – the more lemon juice you could squeeze out of them – the better they were. Some forms and ages of literature lent themselves to the close-reading method better than others: notably 'the School of Donne' and 'moderns' (like Hopkins). As Empson himself observed, some historical periods – notably the Augustans – were by nature disambiguators. Those periods became unfashionable in the decades when practical criticism was riding high – as, just at the moment, it no longer does.

the condensed idea

Literature speaks with a forked tongue

timeline

- 1755** Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* establishes that words can mean different things in different contexts
- 1929** I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* founds new school of criticism, based on centrality of literary ambiguity
- 1930** William Empson publishes *Seven Types of Ambiguity*
- 1947** Cleanth Brooks' *Well Wrought Urn* does for 'new criticism' what Empson did for 'practical criticism'
- 1967** Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* argues that 'difference' is the essence of literary expression

03 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is not a word that falls easily from the mouths of most ordinary readers of literature. It translates – inadequately – as ‘interpretation’: the extraction of meaning(s) from words on the page. Hermeneutics adds to that process of extraction a focus on exactly how the meaning is communicated, and how, once communicated, we on our side ‘make sense’ of it.

One plausible origin of the term is relevant – and witty. Hermes was the messenger of the gods, charged with making divine utterance comprehensible to the less than divine human intelligence. But he is also the mythic patron of liars (don’t believe a word this winged-heeled fellow says). Is fiction a pretty pack of lies or higher truth?

What does the literary work mean, and how does it mean? Where, hermeneutics enquires, is meaning located? In the concept-framing mind (this is what the philosophical school called phenomenology suggests)? Or is it embedded in the text (a central tenet of such classroom doctrines as practical criticism and fundamentalist religion)? Is it fused into the medium (as Marshall McLuhan argued)? Or is meaning something created consensually, by social groups – like juries coming, exhaustedly, to a majority verdict that none of them wholeheartedly agrees with?

Is there a single meaning, or as many meanings as there are minds to make or receive them? Is meaning, in itself, stable? How does one account for the fact that works such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* are interpreted as so poisonously obscene at one period of history (1930–1959) that it is a criminal offence to possess them, yet so innocuous at another period (1983) that they can be broadcast in the UK as a BBC ‘Book at Bedtime’ (American radio rather lags behind)?

‘There are meanings within the meanings of H. G. Wells’s stories.’

V. S. Pritchett

Does time make us more, or less knowledgeable? Consider the following conundrum. If you were given just one return ride on H. G. Wells’ Time Machine, and told that you must use it to understand *Hamlet* better, would you:

1. Put the machine into forward gear, and hurtle yourself millennia into the future, when the last Shakespearian critic has spoken her/his last word on the play?
2. Put the machine into reverse gear, and travel back to the first performance, at the Globe Theatre on the London South Bank in 1601 – taking in the bustle, the smells, the Jacobean staging, lighting and props, the spectacle of Richard Burbage speaking, for the first time, those lines barely dry on the manuscript? But all this before a single word of criticism existed.

Most readers of literature to whom I’ve put this puzzle would go back rather than forward. But why?

The un-literary origins of hermeneutics Hermeneutics is, by origin, a philosophical rather than a literary-critical term. The topic was of burning interest to learned German commentators on the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Was the sacred text to be interpreted literally, or figuratively? Were its meanings debatable? Salman Rushdie found, to his cost (that cost being protective incarceration in the novelist's equivalent of Death Row), that the question is even today a life-and-death matter where divinely authored texts are involved.

Hermeneutical paradoxes Hermeneutics throws up many paradoxes, of which the best known is the so-called 'hermeneutic circle' – a kind of hamster-in-a-wheel situation. The root of the problem is as follows: I cannot understand any part of *Hamlet*, unless I understand what the whole play is about (e.g. 'a man who cannot make up his mind' – as the voice-over slogan puts it at the beginning of Laurence Olivier's film). But I cannot understand the play as a whole unless I first understand the parts singly (e.g. the centrality of the 'to be, or not to be' soliloquy to everything that happens). Ergo, I shall never understand the play, any more than the hamster will escape its treadmill.

'The task is not to interpret, but to interpret interpretation.'

Jonathan Culler

There are other paradoxes and puzzles. If a work like Dickens' last novel, *Edwin Drood*, or Nabokov's last novel, *The Original of Laura*, is cut short, halfway (or earlier), by the author's death, can one understand any part of what survives? If a Martian picked up a carburettor, could he (she/it) reconstruct a Ford Fiesta from it?

Another hermeneutic puzzle, which leads to a solution of kinds, is posed by Roland Barthes. If I am reading a crime novel for the second time, and know, this time round, that the butler did it, is the whodunnit better or worse for my improved interpretation of clues that are buried in the text? Clues, that is, which were overlooked on the first reading when I was certain that it was the chambermaid who actually did it.

Following up this paradox, Barthes suggests a rule of first and second (and, thereafter, infinitely other) readings. On the first reading we are primarily attentive to what he calls 'the hermeneutic code' (i.e. what happens next, with relation to what has gone before). We are gathering data – open-mindedly, unsure of what will be important. In the second reading our response is more situational – we will, for example, pay more attention to what Barthes calls the 'symbolic code'. His analysis of Balzac's story 'Sarrasine' opens with a striking demonstration of the symbolic code. The narrative begins with the narrator sitting on a windowsill, contemplating the natural world of the garden behind him and, at the same time, the artificial world of a sumptuous Parisian ball in front of him. The story that follows is about the sculptor, Sarrasine, who falls in love with an opera singer, La Zambinella. What Sarrasine does not realize – until tragically late – is that 'she' is a 'he', a castrato. Neither, so cunningly is the tale told, does the reader realize it – on the first reading.

On that first reading the window is neutral scenery. On a second reading the window –

the transparent membrane between inside and outside worlds – takes on new significance with what we now know about the sexual ambiguity of the hero/heroine, perched between two sexes.

The attraction of the Barthesian scheme is obvious where canonical literature is involved. We read great works of literature over and over again; or come, the first time, to them having seen TV/film adaptations or with other kinds of plot foreknowledge. Few, nowadays, approach *Pride and Prejudice* – the most widely read classical novel of our age – not knowing, from the opening sentence, that despite all those misunderstandings at the Longbourn ball, Elizabeth will get her Darcy.

Sexing up hermeneutics

‘In place of a hermeneutics we need an *erotics* of art.’ So declared Susan Sontag, in her influential 1966 manifesto, *Against Interpretation*. In a decade in which universities, and their disciplines, were being rocked to their foundations by student rebellion, Sontag argued, with eloquent radicalism, that hermeneutics (by which she meant the professionalized *academic* study of literary texts) was not merely obsolete, but as pointless as Swift’s scientists labouring to extract sunbeams from cucumbers in *Gulliver’s Travels*. What was required, she proclaimed, was a full-bodied, whole-minded engagement with literature. Don’t read it, make love to it. Force was added to her injunction by the fact that Sontag was a ravishingly beautiful young woman – epithets not appropriate to the massed and spectacularly unerotic ranks of the tweedy, pipe-smoking, male-dominated Anglo-American professoriate at the time.

the condensed idea

Reading literature and understanding literature are two different things

timeline

c.315 BC Aristotle’s ‘On Interpretation’, the earliest surviving commentary on hermeneutics

1850s German theologians pioneer ‘Higher Criticism’ of the Bible

- 1900** Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophical-theological essay 'The Rise of Hermeneutics'
- 1950** Archibald Macleish's 'Ars Poetica' asserts that 'A poem should not mean/But be'
- 1960** Susan Sontag's radical manifesto *Against Interpretation* opposes classic hermeneutic theory
- 1970** Roland Barthes' analysis of Balzac argues for 'the hermeneutic code' as the main stem of literary narrative

04 The Classic

When he addressed the Virgil Society on the subject in 1944 – as European society was consumed in the fires of world war – T. S. Eliot, while defining ‘classic’ – evinced some mild concern at current abuse of the term. ‘There is a very interesting book,’ he mused, ‘called *A Guide to the Classics*, which tells you how to pick the Derby winner.’ This was not what he had in mind as his subject (the Derby winner the following year was, ironically, Dante – who was, along with Virgil, Eliot’s example of the incontestably classic writer).

‘Classic’ – a debased term? Eliot’s question (what is a classic?) remains tantalizing; and the abuses of the term he joked about are still everywhere. ‘Classic comedy’ is more likely to mean *Carry On Up the Khyber* than Aristophanes. Football matches, rock-and-roll and tea cakes are all given honorific ‘classic’ status (cigars are also labelled ‘Hamlet’ – but that, like nags called Dante, is something else).

Overused and abused as the term is, literature still needs it. Properly applied, the idea of ‘classic’ points towards something that we hold to be centrally important – although defining that something is tricky.

Eliot saw classics as fruit of the society in which they happened. ‘A classic,’ he told his Virgilian audience, ‘can only occur when a civilization is mature; when a language and a literature are mature. And it must be the work of a mature mind.’ He doubtless made this lofty statement in an auditorium where the blackout blinds were pulled down, as part of the protective measures against German bombers aiming to blast the assembled classicists to pieces. Whatever epithet one chose in 1944 for the civilization that had produced Virgil (currently under the heel of Mussolini), ‘mature’ would not be it.

‘What is a classic? ... A delicate question ...’

Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve

Frank Kermode’s redefinition Frank Kermode addressed himself to the same problem (what is a classic?) in his Eliot lectures (the dead poet being a classic now himself) at the University of Kent in 1975. It was another period of social collapse in Britain. The American withdrawal from Vietnam the year before was accompanied by the OPEC ‘Oil Shock’, which in turn triggered UK inflation rates of 20 per cent or more. There were no blinds, but the rolling blackouts produced by the 1973 miners’ strike were a painful recent memory. The ‘winter of discontent’ (more electricity cuts) was imminent. We ponder the meaning of the classic most thoughtfully, one may safely assume, when civilization is itself threatened. ‘Classic’ is a category that defines what we regard as culturally important; what, when all else goes under, must be preserved – even, in extreme cases, what we choose to die for.

‘Classics? – Old Books which People still Read.’

Frank Kermode

Both Eliot and Kermode set aside the narrow, but useful, applications of the term: ‘classical music’, or the easy opposition between ‘classic’ and ‘romantic’ writing (what separates Alexander Pope’s heroic couplets from William Wordsworth’s lyrical ballads).

Refining some of Eliot’s ideas, Kermode isolated three key elements in the idea of the classic: imperialism; civilization; antiquity. Classics cross time and transcend national borders. Shakespeare is accepted as a transnational ‘classic’ in Germany, Goethe in England. The huge majority of books do not outlast the period that gave them birth, nor do they migrate to find homes in other languages.

Kermode concurred with Eliot that classics incarnate the highest human standards of mind and morality – they are both civilized and civilizing. And even in a dead language (like the Latin hexameters of the *Aeneid*) they live.

Shakespeare speaks to us, although no one today speaks Elizabethan English, and blank verse is no longer the standard stage medium.

Slippery classicisms

Question: What do the following have in common?

The classic work of science fiction: *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury)

The classic Western: *Riders of the Purple Sage* (Zane Grey)

The classic romance: *Rebecca* (Daphne Du Maurier)

The classic whodunnit: *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (Agatha Christie)

The classic thriller: *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (John Buchan)

Answer: The only thing these classics have in common is that they have all outlived their authors, are still read, and constitute the standard by which other works of the same kind are judged.

The classic and empire Kermode was sharper in his sociology than Eliot. It was not a civilization but an *empire* – with all the temporal (and, if necessary, brutal) cultural power imperialism implies – that supplied the foundation for the classic. If a language is, as linguists like to joke, a dialect with an army behind it, then classic literature is writing with an *imperium* behind it. This is easily enough tested with reference to the