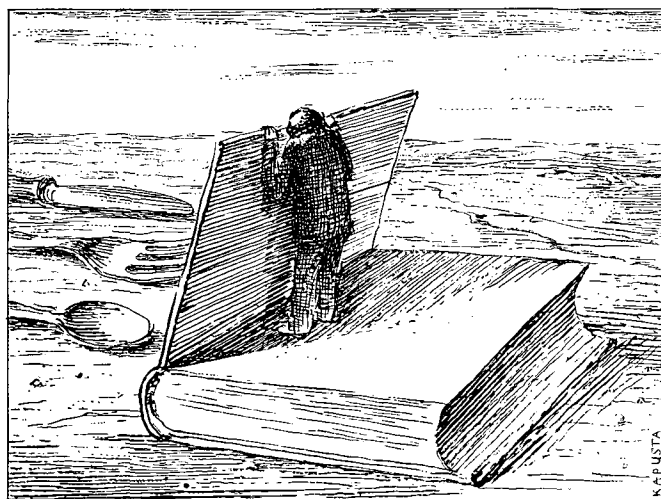


# Brave Theory Puffing

by Hugh Kenner

*"As civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines."*

—T.B. Macaulay



## An Appetite for Poetry

by Frank Kermode

Cambridge: Harvard University Press;  
242 pp., \$22.50

◆  
“Few people,” we find Frank Kermode saying by page 42 of his 46-page Prologue,—“Few people can take much pleasure in modern academic literary criticism except its practitioners, who do not mind that an intelligent outsider would surely find it both arcane and depressing.” That means, the practitioners deem “intelligent outsider” an oxymoron, like “wise fool,” for which the Greek is “sophomore.” The thing to do with sophomores (the college kind) is to pump them as rapidly as possible full of intelligence. Understanding that there is no “literature,” they will then sleep better.

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*Hugh Kenner's most recent book is Mazes, reviewed in the November issue.*

Some may hope for jobs talking about how there is no literature.

For instance, here's Robert Scholes, semiotician (a “meaning-specialist”). Scholes wants to “open up the way between the literary text and the social text in which we live”—I'm quoting Scholes, not Kermode—since “everything” cries out to be interpreted, not just what's miscalled “literature.” Scholes is, he says, “a teacher of language and literature—or, better, of textuality.”

Having set that up, with more detail, hence more fairness, than a summary can pretend to, Kermode next pulls the string of the guillotine. We now know, he says, what literature has become for Robert Scholes: “a semiotic sample, convenient because more portable than the entire social environment. On this view the redemption of the literary text seems to require its relegation to the position of one among an inexhaustible and indiscriminate array of other texts: in short, to save it is to destroy it. Such

are the contradictions in which we find ourselves when we lose confidence in the existence and value of ‘literature as such.’”

(I'm reminded of a long-ago professor whose view of Chaucer's work was this, that it provided the largest available sample of one Middle-English dialect. He was the same man who once lectured to a genteel audience on The Elizabethan Stage. It was so many feet wide, he said, so many feet deep, was fashioned of deal planking, was equipped with one or more trap doors. The lady required to move the vote of thanks found herself speechless.)

“Confidence in the existence and value of ‘literature as such’” is entailed in Kermode's title, *An Appetite for Poetry*. If you've an appetite for kumquats, kumquats must exist, and be identifiable by you. You needn't feel obliged to delimit the Essence of the Kumquat. Nor does Kermode feel obliged to demonstrate that Wallace Stevens (“poetry”) can offer richer

rewards than Gloria Steinem (non-poetry, though, yes, "text"). He simply reprints his 1980 essay on Stevens. If you've an appetite for poetry you'll find it exhilarating. If not, not.

*An Appetite for Poetry* consists of ten reprinted essays (Milton, Stevens, Eliot, Empson, other themes) prefaced by that long polemic Prologue. Polemic? Well, the temperature stays moderate; but Kermode on *The State of Criticism at the Present Time* will touch off apoplexies, if only because he's so difficult to answer. He's not vulnerable to such knee-jerk responses as that he Just Doesn't Understand. For he doesn't rest his case on rebarbative jargon; he's read the stuff widely, even finds Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida rewarding, if only for what their acolytes never notice, their engaging sense of their own limitations. And when he does take on a theoretical issue, he'll slyly let Jonathan Culler articulate it.

For "Over the past dozen years or so it has been Culler's somewhat paradoxical merit to say with exceptional clarity exactly what he means—paradoxical because we now find him very lucidly complaining that certain persons hostile to his cause are guilty of encouraging students to succumb to 'an ideology of lucidity.'" One thing Culler is lucid about is where canons (read "curricula") come from. They come from a power structure with values (read "jobs") to hold on to, in cahoots with a still larger structure with a need to keep the masses in their place.

For Kermode, Culler is distracted by an atavistic belief that "literature" (the canonizable?) does somehow exist, though it's risky to make lists lest you abet the inert, who'll be happy when students just nod assent to those lists. But Culler, he says, "has very little idea of what a canon is, merely identifying the term with a state of affairs which his own metanarrative or cross-fiction (roughly, that of the revolutionary purge) requires him to deplore." He goes on to make five observations, each accorded a long paragraph. In summary:

(1) Canons exclude as well as include. "If you include anything and everything you naturally lose the idea of canon completely."

(2) Canons are not "enclosures full

of static monuments." They go with commentary, i.e., continuing discussion, which "gives the contents of the canon a perpetual modernity." One paradigm is Jewish scriptural commentary, and "it is as inapposite to say of someone's canon that it is irrelevant because written by white males as to say that Hebrew Bible is irrelevant because it was written by ancient Jews."

Thus (3) a canon, and only a canon, ensures a tradition of "the special forms of attention" its contents require. Kermode aptly cites Alvin Kibel: there are great works, like Newton's *Optics*, of which "the text can be otherwise formulated"; there are also great works (Plato, St. Mark, Shakespeare) "to which textual reference is always necessary," because they are "a continual source of meaning."

(4) There is "no such necessary association between canons and political oppression as it now appears common to assume." Thus in America the "academic" canon was developed "in departments whose first objective was to give immigrants a better command of English."

Finally, (5) "the false notion of aesthetic totalities" is not pertinent to the existence of a canon. That "a total and definitive statement of the relation of any 'text' to a totality of texts" is simply not possible need embarrass no one. It never embarrassed the rabbis; indeed it was "the" basis of their whole enterprise." For "partial and temporary successes are all that could ever be

expected, which is why interpretation is endless—why it can make sense to speak of texts as inexhaustible, and of the 'great' texts as calling for continued institutional inquiry."

At a lower level than Culler, de Man, or Derrida, we find political posturing, definable as a bid for group approval once a potent group can be located. Thus at one major university "the proper use of Shakespeare is to convey information, eternal truths perhaps, about the oppression of women in the seventeenth century." (I'll conceal the person that paraphrases, though the paraphrase seems to be accurate.) Next comes packaging: e.g., a book by Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties*, which is organized by "schools"—Myth Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Black Aesthetics . . . and simply omits whoever doesn't fit. I'll pause to record two of Kermode's observations, that "Hugh Kenner, for instance, cannot be accommodated," and that neither can John Hollander, to whom *An Appetite for Poetry* is fitly dedicated.

Trust your own nose, ends the Prologue. Kermode has rightly trusted his. A discussion of the ten essays would entail another and very long review. I'm grateful for them, still more grateful for the Prologue they occasioned. The silence you'll be hearing next will likely be thunderous.



## LIBERAL ARTS

### BUT ISN'T A POODLE NAMED LACY JANE JUST ASKING FOR . . .

A courageous cat in Dora, Alabama, took a flying leap and sent a pit bull running when the latter tried to beat up a poodle. Teresa Harper's 4-year-old feline, Sparky, became a local hero after saving her owner's poodle, Lacy Jane, from the jaws of the dog. As the Associated Press reported the story, Harper let her dog out and seconds later heard a commotion. She rushed to the door and was paralyzed with fear when she saw Lacy Jane at the mercy of a stray pit bull. But Sparky, perched 10 feet

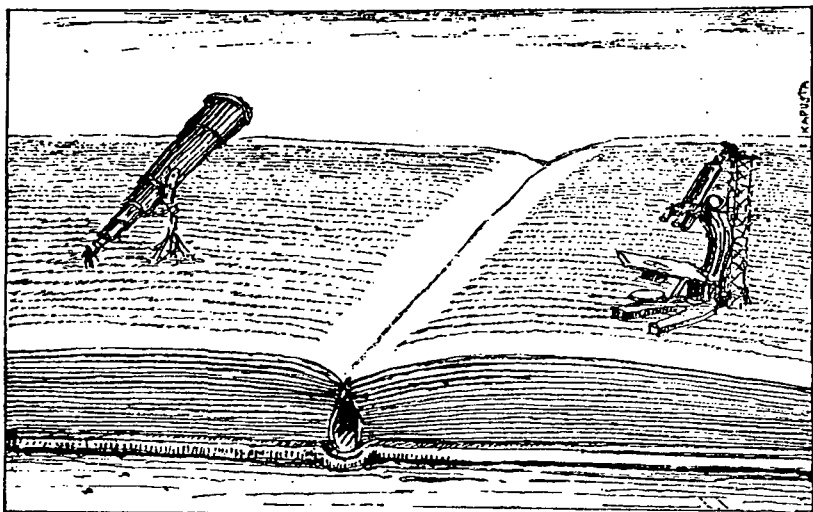
above the fray, flew into action. "She made a flying leap, just as pretty as you please, and she landed right on that dog's head," said her owner. "She just clawed and scratched and clawed and scratched."

The pit bull ran for cover. "The poodle had a puncture wound on the right side," said Vicky Moorehead, an employee at the animal clinic where the poodle was taken. "It would have been killed if it hadn't been for that cat."

# Space Art

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

*"The land of the heart is the land of the West."*



## New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon

by A. Carl Bredahl

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press; 192 pp., \$24.95

Catholic readers of American literature have always recognized that the difference between Eastern and Western fiction is the difference between New Canaan, Connecticut, and Tuba City, Arizona. A. Carl Bredahl's book is a comprehensive as well as original attempt at defining the nature of that difference, which has appeared so obvious as to require no definition at all.

Professor Bredahl states his thesis forthrightly: "[M]y argument . . . is that the effort to stretch language, subject, and form characterize many of the works created by America's western writers. As individuals who value surface, these writers create works that offer a corrective and a balance to

postmodern despair. If we mistakenly assume that the traditional canon, as maintained in college reading lists and anthologies from the major eastern publishers, fully describes the American imagination, we miss a significant aspect of our culture"—as represented by such writers as Mary Austin, Sherwood Andersen, Ernest Hemingway, A.B. Guthrie, Jr., Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Harvey Fergusson, Wright Morris, and Ivan Deig. The extent to which these artists have been neglected or condescended to by the sodality exactly measures the degree to which American academics have yet to discover America.

The American literary tradition—"Edenic in the South, nationalistic in the North"—is signally concerned with questions of "enclosure"—that is to say, with "the problems and possibilities inherent in the act of intellectually enclosing wilderness." Charles Olsen, in *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), began with the statement: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here, Large, and without mercy." In spite—or perhaps because of—that fact, American writers (Bredahl claims) historically have been distrustful of space,

made nervous by the continental wilderness lying about and beyond them. The act of literary enclosure has served as their defense against that wilderness, using mind to wall off ideas and social institutions transplanted from the Old World against threatening New World forces: "While a troubled fascination with enclosure generated many of America's greatest works, its assumptions came so to dominate our expectations that we frequently fail to appreciate literary expressions that do not define themselves through enclosure. These other works, it seems to me, develop out of fascination rather than discomfort with space and therefore present significantly different narrative and structural demands."

Although the Southern tradition in American letters has usually been regarded as the representation of physicality over intellect, and nature over urbanization, Bredahl makes the case for both Northern and Southern literature holding in common the idea of the New World as a "physical and spiritual haven" in which Old World ideas on the one hand, and gentility on the other, require defense against native chaos. It was only with the settlement of the Great Plains and, later, of

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Chilton Williamson, Jr. is the senior editor for books at *Chronicles*. His latest novel, *Homestead*, will be published by Grove Weidenfeld in March.