

Culture



The Spirit, The Code, and Critical Interpretation / Northrop FRYE, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Don Mills: Academic Press Canada, 1982. 261 pp., \$19.50 (cloth) / Frank KERMODE, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1979. 169 pp., US \$4.95 (paper)

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Period Three (1865-1910): Haida Sense. There is a dramatic shift back to traditional carving conventions and iconography that almost seems to remove argillite carving from the souvenir realm and establish it now as art for the Haida people. Carvers depict crest animals and myth episodes on argillite boxes and feast dishes, in figure groupings, and, increasingly, on miniature representations of the wooden crest poles.

Period Four (1910-1981): Haida Sense II. As its designation indicates, Period Four represents a continuation of the characteristics of Period Three, but there was at first, to Duff's eye, a decline in artistic standards. Later experimentation saw carvers conscientious in observing customs of style and, at the same time, innovative in selection of theme and presentation of form.

When the products of Haida argillite carvers are arranged in chronological order it is obvious that stylistic changes occurred. By and large, the stages outlined above represent recognizable divisions of the continuum, although I believe a good case could be made for tacking most of Period Four onto Period Three and considering only the post-1960 carvings as representing a distinctive stage (*Haida Renaissance?*).

Less convincing than the stage divisions are the explanations for style shifts. During the first two periods, Haida carvers produce souvenirs that more and more obviously parody the white man and his ways. The change in emphasis from native to western subjects is seen as a response to the greater familiarity with Euro-American culture that accompanied establishment of fur trade posts in the 1830's and 1840's and the development of commercial whaling. The secure base for Haida culture was then profoundly shaken by the disastrous epidemics of the early 1860's, by missionary activity, and, later, by attempts to ban the potlatch. "Significantly, the subject matter of the carvings shifted dramatically [in Period Three] from poking fun at a foreign culture to recording aspects of their own vanishing traditions" (p. 96). The final vital change appears during Period Four with the rise in the 1960's of the Pan-Indian movement.

The trouble with such explanations, plausible though they may be, is that they are not proven by simple association. Although the study has provided historical context, we must recognize how subjective is the selection of causal factors from that rich setting. Style shifts may be related to fairly local historical events or they may make greater sense when viewed more broadly. Only additional study can provide the answer. It could, for example, be very instructive to place the style changes in the context of changing markets for trade art. Whatever results might be anticipated from such enquiry, we cannot help but feel that Sheehan and Duff have already brought us very close to an understanding of Haida argillite sculpture.

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Two goals of our discipline are served by these books: the attempt at greater excellence of literary form in our exchanges of ideas or "thick descriptions", and the attempt to take seriously Evans-Pritchard's suggestion that the study of belief will benefit from a better understanding of our own religious traditions. Frye and Kermode have brought the discipline of literary criticism to bear upon the interpretation of Biblical narrative. Most anthropologists, as well as most literary critics, have regarded the Bible and Christian doctrine with manifest diffidence or passive disinterest, and thereby have avoided the intellectually obvious value of making critical inquiry into this rich domain of cultural significance.

Frye and Kermode have now given us a corrective without succumbing to visible pollution or doctrinal adhesions as a result of their efforts. Both authors have the interest and the skills for such a major scholarly task, and they provide us with sustained and clear argument, each set in two parts. The first is a general discussion of problems of interpretation and the identification of a specific approach used by the author. The second is the application of the approach to Biblical narrative. Frye surveys the whole, while Kermode restricts himself to the four gospel books, with emphasis on Mark. Kermode is at once less general and abstract in his discussion of problems of

interpretation, and more constrained in his own interpretation. Frye is more than a lecturer; he excites our admiration as he pushes us to the need for a second reading, a better understanding. Kermode impresses us as the competent scholar examining a valuable and challenging problem. Frye has gone beyond competence, and invites us to follow him, with scholarly imagination. He casts his net widely; we have the first volume, with a second promised. The first has a great deal to say to us.

Structuralism, semiology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and related specialties have made their way into anthropology with the force of words that also have relevance to his topic. But Frye has a clarity and scope of synthesis that compares well with the best in anthropology and speaks directly to us. In the first hundred pages he provides a theory of words, in which a primary position is that "all language is permeated by metaphor simply because words are juxtaposed" (p. 59). Language has three major phases: the metaphoric (poetic or literary), the metonymic ("existential" writing) and descriptive (his term is *demotic*, "ordinary" language). But he is not setting up a three stage unilineal system here; rather, he is differentiating modes that are most certainly not irreversible in sequence. Furthermore, the Bible does not fit any of these phases; it is a fourth form of expression, *proclamation*, which draws upon the other three but is not a near enough approximation to these to be characterized with them. But the three phases have a great deal to do with a better understanding of what is intended in the narratives of proclamation. Kermode demonstrates that the gospel parables were not riddles with an answer to be discerned so much as allegories with many possible answers, embodying a significant principle. Frye makes the larger point that understanding the meaning of words requires that we know *how* words were intended and juxtaposed to indicate the point to be made. We may be making the serious-minded mistake of asking "What should I have seen if I had

been there?" when the gospels (or myth, or poetry) carry the message (if only we could discern it), "This may not be what you would have seen if you had been there, but what you would have seen would have missed the whole point of what was really going on" (p. 48). Secrecy may be our deliberate mistake instead of an author's intention to conceal from all the foolish in his audience while reserving revelation for his initiated elite. Kermode explains this for his specific case in clear detail; Frye makes the general case intelligible and provides a theoretical statement for his and our application to whatever cultural materials we may encounter.

Perhaps it is because Frye's interests range so broadly that he speaks directly to anthropologists. Perhaps criticism, as he embodies the skill, is a major part of the ethnography of ourselves. But Frye also shares with us a view of man and culture (clarified in his introduction and developed in subsequent chapters), and he sets this into a wider context of western (and non-western) thought and imagination. Suppose we were to reassess Plato with the view that his myths were not there as illustrative material for his dialogues, but rather were the primary meaning for which the dialogues are merely commentary. How are we to understand the problem of myth as a powerful instrument of social authority and coercion? In what ways is it useful to compare the revolutionary mythology of Plato, the Bible, and Marx, which "use the same metaphors of merging and individual subservience" (p. 100)? In two pages' discussion of the relation of society and the individual, we are given ideas from Paul, Simone Weil, and T.S. Eliot. Other pages, other coherences.

Obviously, I admire this book enormously. I expect to return to it many times, and to find more each time. I urge you to read it. Kermode is for those who want to pursue the detailed criticism of the gospels, but Frye is for a large audience. If they will make the effort for a competent reading the rewards will be refreshing and excellent.