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0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

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NARRATIVE, RELIGION AND SCIENCE

An increasing number of contemporary scientists, philosophers and theologians downplay their professional authority and describe their work as simply 'telling stories about the world'. If this is so, Stephen Prickett argues, literary criticism can (and should) be applied to all these fields.

Such new-found modesty is not necessarily postmodernist scepticism towards all grand narratives, but it often conceals a widespread confusion and naïvety about what 'telling stories', 'description' or 'narrative' actually involve. While postmodernists define 'narrative' in opposition to the experimental 'knowledge' of science (Lyotard), some scientists insist that science is itself story-telling (Gould); certain philosophers and theologians even see all knowledge simply as stories created by language (Rorty; Cupitt). Yet story-telling is neither innocent nor empty-handed. Register, rhetoric and imagery all manipulate in their own ways; above all, irony emerges as the natural mode of our modern fragmented culture. Prickett argues that since the eighteenth century there have been only two possible ways of understanding the world: the fundamentalist, and the ironic.

STEPHEN PRICKETT is Regius Professor Emeritus of English at Glasgow University. He has published one novel, thirteen monographs, and some seventy-five articles on Romanticism, Victorian Studies and related topics, especially on literature and theology. His books include *Coleridge and Wordsworth* (1970), *Romanticism and Religion* (1976), *Words and the Word* (1986), *The Bible* (Landmarks of World Literature, 1991), and *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (1996), all published by Cambridge University Press.

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Anonymous print of the tomb of Napoleon, now in the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

Kierkegaard knew this image and took it as a metaphor of irony:

“Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. Once the eye has seen him, it goes on seeing him with almost alarming necessity.”

The picture is also a metaphor of presence. As Stephen Prickett shows in this book, through detailed attention to notions of ‘irony’ and ‘presence’, once the ‘empty space’ has been interrupted it is impossible *not* to see the figure that haunts the picture.

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