

Something Up His Sleeve

By Michael Dirda

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TRICKSTER MAKES THIS WORLD: Mischief, Myth, and Art

By Lewis Hyde

Farrar Straus Giroux. 417 pp. \$26

LEWIS HYDE's celebrated first book, *The Gift* (1983), examined the creative imagination, focusing on its relationship to the marketplace. In particular, Hyde stressed that true art -- the kind that "revives our soul" -- possesses the character of a gift: "When we are moved by art we are grateful that the artist lived, grateful that he labored in the service of his gifts." Work done strictly for hire, whether commercial illustration or commercial fiction, lacks this spiritual power; it doesn't draw on a creator's deepest imagination. Blithely mixing anthropology, literary criticism and myth research, *The Gift* crackled with speculative, heartfelt ideas, and was soon recognized as one of those maverick texts, like Erving Goffmann's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* or Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, that make us see the world with fresh eyes.

Now, almost 20 years later, Hyde returns with a study of why art and culture require such boundary-breakers and mischief-makers. *Trickster Makes This World* follows the same freewheeling format as *The Gift* but takes up the mythic figure of the Trickster -- Coyote, Hermes, Loki, Eshu, Krishna, and all the other lying, thieving, con-artist gods. Along with shrewd interpretations of various myths (in particular that in *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*), Hyde considers a small handful of modern artists and thinkers who embody one or more aspects of the Trickster: Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Maxine Hong Kingston, Allen Ginsberg and, stepping back in time, Frederick Douglass. The result is a book that persuasively celebrates the need for the kind of paintings, music, books and ideas that society initially finds unpleasant, if not downright repulsive, subversive or immoral.

Hyde's arguments develop in a musical, rather than linear, fashion. In one chapter, for example, he deftly counterpoints elements from Trickster mythology with quotations from Frederick Douglass's autobiography. Like some latter-day scholiast, Hyde also likes to tease out the etymological implications of key words. Opportunity, he explains, is related to the Latin *porta*, which is an entrance way; hence "a pore, a portal, a doorway, a nick in time, a gap in the screen, a looseness in the weave -- these are all opportunities in the ancient sense," the kind of opportunities a trickster knows how to turn to his own advantage. Sometimes Hyde even employs anecdotes from his own life (the death of an infant sister, his youthful days as a hospital orderly) to give poignance and immediacy to his arguments. His societal views -- he is Luce Professor of Art and Politics at Kenyon College -- frequently echo the oft-maligned ideals of the 1960s: "Beware the social system that cannot laugh at itself, that responds to those who do not know their place by building a string of prisons." Of course, the '60s were a heyday for Tricksters.

According to Hyde, the Trickster is the god of the doorway, the threshold, the hinge. He moves between the realm of man and god, between wilderness and civilization, between life and death. In a black-and-white world Coyote or Raven shifts in the shadows, mottled, pied, hard to detect, as he wanders along, ignoring boundaries, awaiting chance opportunities. He is a liminal, sometimes androgynous creature,

neither this nor that. Hyde duly reminds us, quoting from Victor Turner's wonderful book *The Ritual Process*, that "the state of being betwixt-and-between is 'generative' and 'speculative'; the mind that enters it willingly will proliferate new structures, new symbols, new metaphors." Hence the trickster reinvigorates culture by preventing it from becoming over-structured, muscle-bound and sanctimonious. "When trickster breaks the rules we see the rules more clearly, but we also get a glimpse of everything the rules exclude."

Hyde properly emphasizes that "individuals who never sense the contradictions of their cultural inheritance run the risk of becoming little more than host bodies for stale gestures, metaphors, and received ideas, all the stereotypic likes and dislikes by which cultures perpetuate themselves. As Carl Andre once said, 'Culture is something that is done to us. Art is something we do to culture.'"

But tricksters may be more than iconoclasts. They often break down a traditional system in order to reshape it. "Whether they bring death into the world, steal fire, or embarrass a modest creator, in their first deeds tricksters upset the old cosmos and create (or reveal) the lines of demarcation that shape the new one, this world. After that, however...they may well leave those old divisions intact and turn to keeping them porous and flexible." This is crucial, as Hyde makes clear in his account of Loki's role in ushering in Ragnarok, the Norse gods' doom: "There is no way to suppress change, the story says, not even in heaven; there is only a choice between a way of living that allows constant, if gradual, alterations and a way of living that combines great control and cataclysmic upheavals. Those who panic and bind the trickster choose the latter path. It would be better to learn to play with him, better especially to develop styles (cultural, spiritual, artistic) that allow some commerce with accident, and some acceptance of the changes contingency will always engender."

LITTLE WONDER that Hyde so deeply admires those who bravely transgress familial or social strictures (Maxine Hong Kingston, Frederick Douglass) or who persistently strive to revolutionize their art. Composer John Cage, for instance, "did not cast his lot with durable structures, he cast it with perturbation." Cage realized "that there is no such thing as silence, there is only sound we intend and sound we do not intend." Thus, in his most famous piece, "4'33", a pianist plays nothing at all, merely raises and lowers the lid of the piano three times. Says Hyde, this is "not so much a 'silence' piece as a structured opportunity to listen to unintended sound, to hear the plenitude of what happens." Cage explicitly made chance the motor for his aleatory music, but all true artists recognize that "sometimes the creative spirit must abandon its own designs, the kingdom of our intentions being so cramped and predictable." When Marcel Duchamp, another hero, gambled at Monte Carlo, he would try neither to win nor to lose.

There's much more to *Trickster Makes This World* than this precis can even hint at. Hyde discusses the function of dirt in society (building on Mary Douglas's classic *Purity and Danger*), carefully analyzes why Trickster is a "hungry god," differentiates the artistic purpose of Andres Serrano's notorious "Piss Christ" from Robert Mapplethorpe's sadomasochistic photographs, explains (and modifies) the usual view of carnival as inherently conservative, and suggests why there are so few female tricksters in world mythology. Like its subject, the book is supple, flexible, limber -- and occasionally repetitive, a little elusive or New Agey at times, possibly over-subtle in some of its myth interpretations and etymologies. No matter. "Trickster," says Lewis Hyde, "speaks freshly where language has been blocked, gone dead, or lost its charm," and so does he in this hymn to the gods of mischief, who are also the gods of artistic and cultural renewal.

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