Postmodernism and its discontents

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A Politics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction
by Linda Hutcheon

The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction
by Linda Hutcheon

Whatever else one may say about her, Linda Hutcheon has to be considered a success story. Content aside, the very shape of her career marks her as one of the best strategists to come down the pike in years. Talk about being in the right place — intellectually speaking — at the right time! In 1980 this then-novice is clearly self-identified as a formalist. A scant few years later — just in time to anticipate the stampede for the bandwagon — she has managed, by dint largely of relabeling, to transform herself into the guru of Canadian postmodernism. And a worthy guru she is. Proving the old adage about the prediction of academics for the sound of their own voices, recent years have seen a veritable mushrooming of the Hutcheon oeuvre. Essays, articles, lectures, working papers, reviews, colloquia, even entire books, seem to pour off her pen at the speed of light. Judging by the products, one can only see this prolificity as wrongheaded. While one understands the desire to make hay while the sun shines, one hopes at the same time that the tempter’s judgment will be equal to his or her ambitions. Hutcheon’s, unfortunately, is not.

It isn’t, you understand, a matter of talent. Her 1980 publication, Narrativistic Narratives, both was, and was perceived as, a promising first book. But that, perhaps, was the whole problem. Taken up most enthusiastically by the very group whose concerns she had earlier ruled irrelevant to the lit-crit task proper (“most postmodern dispositions of ‘postmodernism’ are concerned primarily with the psychological, philosophical, ideological or social causes of the flourishing self-consciousness of our culture,” she wrote in Narrativistic Narratives), “this book ... makes no presence of contributing to [this debate] ... The interest here is rather on the text”), instead of questioning the rather ironical reading-into of her work, restating or clarifying her terms of reference, Hutcheon allowed the new-found notoriety to go to her head. Dropping her protestations of New Critical purism, she quickly began to play to her unexpected audience, to parrot its preferred intellectual position — in short, to remake herself in trendier terms. The shift of concern from ideas to packaging took a predictable toll on the quality of product. Succeeding years saw a recasting rather than a broadening of her vision. Succeeding books (and there have been many) have been in rapid-fire succession since that first) lost in substance what they gained in polish. The more her bibliography swelled, the less attention she gave to the concrete and painstaking explanation that informed her earlier writing. Of late, apart from replays, the spadework has been replaced almost entirely by verbal pyrotechnics.

If this judgment seems harsh, it is perhaps only fair that I pause here to declare a bias. The fact is that I believe Hutcheon to be not only a bad scholar but a dangerous one. When I said “parrot” above, I used the term advisedly. Far from simply superficial which would be grounds for complaint but hardly alarm — Hutcheon’s work is derivative in the most profound and far-reaching sense. Increasingly over the last half-decade, her modus has come to depend almost completely on recapitulation. She recapitulates herself; she recapitulates other critics; she recapitulates the ideas currently most favoured by popular wisdom. Why does this bother me? Well, it’s unfair to the individuals she appropriates, for one thing — and not just for reasons of credit. Having parachuted directly to the leading edge, she is rarely able to avoid distorting what she borrows. It’s unfair to the duller but sounder colleagues with whom she is competing for limited prestige and resources. Most of all, it’s unfair to the reader. Here is where the danger comes in. Because the Canadian lit-crit establishment came late to postmodern modes of critique, this self-proclaimed expert has been widely seized upon as a dependable guide to the term Incognita. Of far more lasting importance than the injustice she does to other scholars by her intel-
lectual cannibalism, consequently, is the extent to which she purveys an entirely inadequate picture of the fields she purports to synthesize.

The problem becomes most acute in her recently published Paradox of Postmodernism. That this should be so is hardly surprising, of course. The project she proclaims in this book is in many ways an impossible one. There are, as we all know, as many versions of “post” as there are critics to write about it. One of the most obvious shortcomings of Hutcheon’s entry, in fact, is not its sub-

stantive disagreement with this or that variant — so tangled is the debate that it’s hard to point to any party approach as the “right” one — but the extent to which she misleads the uninformed reader about the true complexity of her advertised object. But let’s leave that aside for the moment, if only in a spirit of the exac-
tic considerations. Forget that she’s a little vague on the genealogy of the term, or that her application is a little inconsistent, or that she generalizes madly while casting glib allusions for other’s lack of rigor or ground-

(To be postmodern is perhaps necessarily to eschew coherence.) No — what really concerns me here is Hutcheon’s ap-

parent incapacity to understand the impli-
cations of her own claims. She makes too much, for instance, of the now commonplace notion that the essence of postmod-

ernism is its overthrowing of precursors. She also makes much of the specifically subversive nature of this evasion, the way it sets itself to reject not merely authorities but Authority. Incessantly throughout her text she harps on the linked themes of plu-

arity, of openness, of normalized paradox and parodic destabilization. The postmod-

ern’s “deliberate refusal to resolve contra-

dictions,” she writes, “is a contesting of what Lyotard...calls the tottering master narrative of the future.” This certainly sounds different from the credo she was affirming in 1980, doesn’t it? Well, it is and it isn’t. Certainly the recent Hutcheon differs considerably from her now-discarded *New Critical* mentors in the rigor of her analysis, but it’s equally certain that under the skin her still very much a clos-

ter modern. What she argues for in this book — the “idee” that comprises its sole determinant d’ére — is a singular, norma-

lative postmodernism derived from mid-

seventies architectural theory. Here is where the aforementioned lack of aware-

ness becomes most palpable. Despite the rhetorical stress on strategies of delinea-

tion, Hornstein seems utterly inven-

tible to how incongruous it is to privilege one version of a practice which itself chal-

lenges the very notion of privilege. Less intelлектually suspect but more trouble-

some for the information-seeking reader, she also seems oblivious to the fact that her particular version is indefensible on either logical or historical grounds concern-

ing the almost two decades of very differ-

ent usage that preceded her arbitrary point of insertion, she rules to exclude both the hubbub-apolcalypsis mass culture element inspired upon by critics like Leslie Pedler and the aesthetic insularity of the sufliciousians. “[W]hat I want to call post-

modernism,” she writes “is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and in-

escapably political” (emphasis mine). One gets past one’s surprise that so reknowned a scholar should be capable of such overgeneralizations, the question arises is why Hutcheon should have fixed her boundaries just where she did. The answer to this, I think, is tied up with the answer to why — flying in the face of her own paradigm — she would want to fix anything at all. It’s sinking that the literary form that best fits the architectural model is a form on which this author, long before she jumped on the postmodernism band-

wagon, had already staked a claim. What we have here, in fact, is an absolutely classic sort of misnomer. If “historiographic metatext” is the epimeme of postmodernism, and if Hutcheon is the recognized expert on “historiographic metatext,” then it’s no surprise, Hutcheon is an expert on postmodernism. But this, of course, is what it’s all about. What becomes clear if one reads between the lines is that the real sub-
ject of *A Porter of Postmodernism* is not what the title says it is (postmodernism merely provides a suitably trendy occa-

sion), but the writer’s authority as a “talker about” the latest literary fashions.

Quite apart from her efforts to validate a particular, recognisably idiosyncratic inter-

pretation, it is interesting, if only because of their ramifications for broader practice, to look at the manner by which Hutcheon achieves this remarkable self-canonisation. One of the most striking features of her text is the dense incrustation of references. Every point, no matter how minor, has its long list of potential precedents to which times as many as 20 to a page. This is not, it must be noted, deference. Nor is it con-

sideration for the reader. (Invoked sources are more often than not of dubious or neg-

ative relevance.) What it is, is old-

fashioned name-dropping. Just like her
decisively unproblematic capsule sum-

maries of key texts in recent intellectual history (at one point, for instance, we’re offered in a single, sidelong glance the whole of what purports to be an adequate summary of what Said, Derrida, Barthes, Krauss and Todorov all thought about the genre crossing at another she actually manages to get Foucault, Derrida, Haber-

mas, Vattimo, Baudrillard, Nietzsche, Hei-
degger, Marx, Freud and Toulmin into a single sentence), the main purpose of these star-studded inclusions is to create the impres-
sion that Hutcheon’s views are uni-

versally supported. Disagreement is obscured by the simple act of appropria-

tion.

One might, for instance, note her treat-

ment of Brian McHale, author of an excel-

lenrecent study — in a sense the very study that Hutcheon herself is purporting to write — called *Postmodern Fiction.* Though she lists four of his works in her bibliography, and includes his name in her inc. v, and cites him in her text, Hutcheon never once acknowledges that McHale’s definition of postmodernism is much broader than hers, incorporating — indeed, emphasising — types of material, like surjiction, which she herself explicitly

disqualifies. McHale is not an exception. Even those few critics like Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton with, from time to time, she openly differs are tacitly draft-

ed into the approved chorus of approval.

“Negative strategies reinforce the sense of unfamiliarity. By repeating key points over and over, and especially by sacrificing her argument with popular cliches about power, ideology, genetics, decoding, recurr-

ence, the social construction of reality, the reader’s construction of the text, the ironic marking of difference, the subversion of convention, the recuperation of marginality, and so on and so forth, had already established what is so pleasurable that the casual reader will almost certainly take it at face value. The subject itself is warped to the same single-minded end. By normalizing what is ostensibly antimodern, her text is decorated with phrases like “typically postmodern,” “distractively postmodern,” totalizing what is ostensibly diffuse (“postmodernism is...” “postmodernism always...” “post- postmodernism...”)...”

“postmodernism...”...”

“postmodernism self-consciously demands postmodernism is careful not to...”

nothing postmodernism is itself into an icon of anxiety. For much for plurality.

But it doesn’t matter — the contradictions are amply offset by the inflated language...”

For her discussion of counterpoints (and it’s interesting that she hardly acknowledges that there are any significant counterpoints until the penul-

mate chapter) after she has subliminally forewarned her own audience of the efect. Far from opening up the debate to alternative possibilities, she implies that what she is dealing with are simply better or worse interpretations of a single coher-

ent phenomenon, thus reinforcing that modernist notion of a “good reading.”

All this considered, it is clear that Hutcheon fails signally in this book to propose, or even to understand, what she purports to preach. Again the question arises as to why this should concern me so much. Insofar as they almost automatically de-legitimise themselves, such texts must surely provide their own safeguards against a discourse being taken too serious-

ly. This, unfortunately, is to make insuffi-

cient allowance for the context of recep-

tion. Given the general old-fashions of the Canadian lit estab establishment — given the text, indeed, that many on this side of the fence will find the covertly modernist stance of this book not problem-

atic but reassuring — it is all too likely that much of Hutcheon’s readership is all too familiar with the same two, with what, for our purposes.

may be called postmodern postmodernism, literal sec-

In her recently published *Postmodernism, *volume 2 — What is a short story in a novel? If it is a piece of a novel, is it the same for all novelists? Is he an enframed chunk or a celebrated example of the

review
may be initiated. And not merely because it fosters a misunderstanding of postmodernism. Hutchison herself provides the best possible example of the potentially detrimental secondary effects of this kind of practice. In the same year as A Poetics of Postmodernism, she published a slender volume entitled The Canadian Postmodern. What we are given in this book, essentially, is a shorthand version of its companion piece (the same themes, the same ritual incantations of names and sources, the same familiar catch-phrases) chopped into bits and disposed as a kind of legitimizing framework around and between huge chunks of relatively conventional (despite the interlarding of jaunty thematized and theselect analyses of selected Canadian novels. To put it another way, of course — regeneration does tend to fall apart a while. It’s also, however, in a subtle but important sense, a betrayal of its subject matter. What Hutchison does in this book — and the key here is that he is the heirarchically taciturnly implied by her format — is to take the “special knowledge” normalized so persuasively in A Poetics of Postmodernism and transform it in turn into an agent of normalization. Invoked this time as a fait accompli, and validated through the simple device of prioritization, the discourse of postmodernism, no longer the subject but the arbiter of questions, now serves itself as a kind of alternative “is,” for it is from the viewpoint from which the author can legitimate not only her own work (owning the narrative marks one immediately as an authority) but also — and this far as the real problem — the body of literature she herself has tended to bring under the fashionable umbrella. As if it has no significant pre-history of its own, no claims on our consideration except through the undeniable way in which it can be shown to resemble an international model, Canadian fiction, divested of its Canadianness, is suddenly “discovered” to be interesting. What’s ironic about this is that there was really very little to discover. Despite her attempts to downplay the fact (only big-name sources get more than passing mention in Hutchison’s work), virtually every feature singled out for comment in this study, from recursiveness to an obsession with history, has already been amply documented by other critics. Where this writer departs from her predecessors is in labelling these things as postmodern. Far from momentous, in fact, the substantive contribution made by the book is at best a trivial one. Its positive value, on the other hand, are far from trivial. Again Hutchison Cheat her readers. Labelling aside, in failing to acknowledge that many of the supposedly unique features of the “new” literature can be traced to or derived from the practice of earlier writers, she creates the entirely misleading impression that recent developments signal a radical departure for Canadians. They don’t. Canadian literature was recursive, historical, evasive, subversive, ironic, collective, parodic, poetic, and feminist long before such features became fashionable.

If it looks postmodern, therefore, it is for uniquely Canadian reasons. Had she examined these reasons, Hutchison could have written a much more important book. In her determination to present her thesis as a monolithic and seamless construction, however, she ignores totally (that is, neither recognizes nor explores) the possibility that the “explanation” for current practices might lie anywhere else than with her master narrative. In doing so — and this is my real beef — she implicitly denies that Canadians have anything more to congratulate themselves for than their cleverness at finally catching on to international trends.

What amazes me most about all this is not Hutchison’s own simplicialness, but the willingness of her Canadian readers to accept what can only be seen as a demeaning distortion. That it has been accepted can, I think, be taken as given. The Canadian Postmodern was published previously, and little to my knowledge has ever been seriously challenged. So the question remains: how does Hutchison get away with it? Much is undoubtedly due — once again — to her faculty for radiating authority. With respect at least to this particular book, however, I don’t think that’s the whole of it. Canadians have always tended to be more sensitive to their differentness. Judging from the concerted and recurrent attempts we have made over the years (this is only the latest version) to align ourselves with — prove ourselves indistinguishable from — imported models and fashions, there is clearly a feeling among Canadian artists and intellectuals that to be distinctive is necessary at the edge. This, I think, casts a rather different light on recent developments in literary criticism. More and more now in Canadian journals and conferences and colloquia we see name-studded, jargonized, Hutchison-style “think” pieces being privileged above all other modes of critique. Incarnation of the correct (imported) legitimising sources has, in fact, recently become the badge of belonging. The in-groupness of this movement makes these new practitioners seem both arrogant and elitist. Undoubtedly, though, things may not be exactly what they seem. Take Hutchison herself, for example. When one notes that her atypical definition of postmodernism in fact “fits” Canadian literature much better than it does the international ore from which it was ostensibly derived, it seems reasonable to suspect that she picked up her sense of normativity subliminally from her own cultural environment, projecting it on the broader ambience out of an unconscious desire, born of insecurity, to make it, and herself, seem more important.

The Secret Kingdom: Interpretations of the Canadian Character
by Dominique Clift

Canadian Identity: Major Forces Shaping the Life of a People
by Robin Mathews

All of us, at some moment, have had a vision of our existence as something uniquely, untransferrable and very precious. This revelation almost always takes place during adolescence...

Despite the often illusory nature of these visions, on the psychology of a nation, it seems to me to be something revealing in the insistence with which a people will question itself during certain periods of its growth.

(Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, 1950)

The desire to define a national identity or character is peculiar neither to Canada nor to the rhetoric which has recently informed the debate surrounding free trade with the United States. The latter, however, has generated renewed interest in the nature and state of the Canadian nation-state, and it is to this market that these two books attempt to appeal — albeit from widely divergent ideological perspec- tives. The Secret Kingdom, based on Dominique Clift’s Le pays brossage: essai (Montreal: Libre Expression, 1987), epitomizes a liberal, laissez-faire attitude to politics; indeed, its author acknowledges the financial support of Innsco Ltd., Acan and Steinberg Inc.

Canadian Identity, on the other hand, invokes a conservative Marxist approach to Canadian history and is published by Stock Rail, a press dedicated to socialism and nationalism in culture. However, while The Secret Kingdom is an extensively researched and extremely readable history of national character in Canada — Clift won the Governor General’s Award for Le Filt anglais au Québec in 1978 — Canadian Identity is poorly documented.