

shadow of the Great War and modernism. This is some sort of answer, but a very incomplete one. No one will deny that fascism, informed by the spirit of modernism, aestheticised politics and confused the lines between theatre and political action. Walter Benjamin, while casting a glance on the Italian Futurists, made that point very clear. But to speak broadly of modernism, as Eksteins does, without grounding the social origins of the movements in different countries, is to invite protean generalisations of little use. From the start German modernism held all the tensions of a conservative modernisation and this impelled it to move in a very different direction than either England or France. Unable to grow up in a sophisticated tradition of resistance, German modernism failed to deal with its underlying contradictions: knowing how to manage its impulse towards the subjective and the irrational without betraying its deepest political and artistic convictions of freedom. Only in Weimar Germany did an emancipatory modernist project emerge, but that was cut short by the rise of fascism which reinforced its darker aspects. It is little wonder, then, that the contemporary German critic Jürgen Habermas, argues that the emancipatory dimensions of German modernism remained not only unfulfilled but are currently under siege by antimodernist intellectual influences. Habermas has been an outspoken defender of what he calls high modernism against the aesthetic and political encroachments of postmodernism which in his view is a predominantly neo-conservative movement.

Rites of Spring is a provocative book. It took an audacious feat of imagination to sustain an argument that links the sacrificial dancer in Diaghilev's ballet with the bloody experience of the First World War and the aspirations and failures of modernism, but Eksteins's fractured and free-associative approach, which crams the likes of Josephine Baker, Isadora Duncan, Cocteau, Hitler and the music of Wagner into one portmanteau sentence also prevents him from making important critical distinctions. What is absent from his analysis are the hard comparisons, a systematic approach, and a formulation of modernism that is sensitive to nuances as well as national and social differences. What he gives us is a modernist aesthetic that is divorced from the more concrete and arguable instances of politics, economics and social movements. One would have wished that Eksteins would confront these vital issues, but perhaps that is asking too much from a historian who is the consummate German Idealist. He shares in that tradition's worship of the Idea and in its belief of the primacy of art, and, it seems, he also shares in the neo-conservative abhorrence for a modernism which unleashed "hedonistic" and "irrational" motives that were incompatible with the ordered and reliable values of a traditional world. ■

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Postmodernism and its discontents

GAILE MCGREGOR

A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction

by Linda Hutcheon

New York: Routledge, 1988, 268 pp.

The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction

by Linda Hutcheon

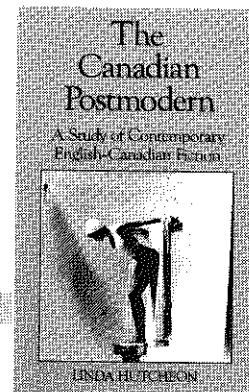
Toronto: Oxford, 1988, 230 pp.

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 relabelling, to transform herself into the guru of Canadian postmodernism. And a wordy guru she is. Proving the old adage about the predilection 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 wrong-headed. While one understands the desire to make hay while the sun shines, one hopes at the same time that the temptee'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, *Narcissistic 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-critical task proper ("most discussions of 'postmodernism' are concerned primarily with the psychological, philosophical, ideological or social causes of the flourishing self-consciousness of our culture," she writes in *Narcissistic Narratives*. "This book ... makes no pretence of contributing to [this debate] ... The interest

here is rather on the text"), instead of questioning the rather ironical reading-into of her work, reiterating 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 (there have been four 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 explication 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 is 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 terra 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 *Poetics 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 substantive disagreement with this or that other variant — so tangled is the debate that it's hard to see any particular 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 now. In fact, let's leave aside all extrinsic 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 generalises madly while castigating all others for their lack of grounding. (To be postmodern is perhaps necessarily to eschew coherence.) No — what really concerns me here is Hutcheon's apparent incapacity to understand the implications of her own claims. She makes much, for instance, of the now commonplace notion that the essence of postmodernism is its overthrowing of precursors. She also makes much of the specifically subversive nature of this revision, the way it sets itself to reject not merely authorities but Authority. Incessantly throughout her text she harps on the linked themes of plurality, of openness, of normalised paradox and parodic destabilization. The postmodern's "deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions," she writes, "is a contesting of what Lyotard ... calls the totalising master narratives of our culture." 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 rigour of her analysis, but it's equally certain that under the skin she's still very much a closet modern. What she argues for in this book — the "idea" that comprises its sole detectable *raison d'être* — is a singular, normative postmodernism derived from mid-seventies architectural theory. Here is where the aforementioned lack of awareness becomes most palpable. Despite the rhetorical stress on strategies of delineation, Hutcheon seems utterly insensitive to how incongruous it is to privilege one version of a practice which itself challenges the very notion of privilege. Less intellectually suspect but more troublesome for the information-seeking reader, she also seems oblivious to the fact that her particular version is indefensible on either logical or historical grounds. Ignoring the almost two decades of very different usage that preceded her arbitrary point of insertion, she rules to exclude both the ludic-cum-apocalyptic mass culture element insisted upon by critics like Leslie Fiedler and the aesthetic insularity of the surfictionists. "[W]hat I want to call post-

modernism," she writes "is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (emphasis mine).

Once one gets past one's surprise that so renowned a scholar should be capable of such oversimplifications, the question that 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 them at all. It is striking that the literary form that best fits the architectural model is a form on which this author, long before she jumped on the postmodernism bandwagon, had already staked a claim. What we have here, in fact, is an absolutely classic sleight-of-mind. If "historiographic metafiction" is the epitome of postmodernism, and if Hutcheon is the recognised expert on "historiographic metafiction," then *ipso facto*, 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 subject of *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is not what the title says it is (postmodernism merely provides a suitably trendy occasion), but the writer's authority as a "talker about" the latest literary fashions.

Quite apart from her efforts to validate a particular, recognisably idiosyncratic interpretation, it is interesting, if only because of their ramifications for broader practice, to look at the means 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 parenthetical citations — at times as many as 20 to a page. This is *not*, it must be noted, deference. Nor is it consideration for the reader. (Invoked sources are more often than not of dubious or negative relevance.) What it is, is old-fashioned name-dropping. Just like her deceptively unproblematic capsule summaries of key nexes in recent intellectual history (at one point, for instance, we are offered in a single, short paragraph what purports to be an adequate summary of what Said, Rorty, Derrida, Barthes, Krauss and Todorov all thought about the issue of genre crossing; at another she actually manages to get Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Vattimo, Baudrillard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx, Freud and Toulmin into a single sentence), the main purpose of these star-studded incantations is to create the impression that Hutcheon's views are universally supported. Disagreement is obscured by the simple act of appropriation.

One might, for instance, note her treatment of Brian McHale, author of an excellent recent study — in a sense the very study that Hutcheon herself is purporting to write — called *Postmodernist Fiction*. Though she lists four of his works in her bibliography, and includes his name in her index, 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 surfiction, which she herself explicitly

disqualifies. McHale is not an exception. Even those few critics like Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton with whom, from time to time, she openly differs are tacitly drafted into the apparent chorus of approval.

Narrative strategies reinforce the sense of unanimity. By repeating key points over and over, and especially by scaffolding her argument with popular clichés about power, ideology, gender, decodings, recursiveness, multivalence, 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, Hutcheon makes her material seem so plausibly familiar that the casual reader will almost certainly take it at face value. The subject itself is warped to the same single-minded end. By normalising what is ostensibly ambivalent (her text is dotted with phrases like "typically postmodern," "distinctively postmodern"), totalising what is ostensibly diffuse ("postmodernism is..." "postmodernism always..." "postmodernism never ..."), and personalising what is ostensibly decentred ("postmodernism attempts to be ...," "postmodernism self-consciously demands ...," "postmodernism is careful not to ..."), she makes postmodernism itself into an icon of authority. So much for plurality. But it doesn't matter — the contradictions are amply offset by the inflated language and oracular tone. Even her discussion of counterviews (and it's interesting that she hardly acknowledges that there are any significant counterviews until the penultimate chapter, *after* she has subliminally established her own ascendancy) adds to the effect. 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 coherent phenomenon, thus reinforcing the modernist notion of a "good reading."

All this considered, it is clear that Hutcheon fails signally in this book to practise, 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 at source, such faults surely provide their own safeguards against a discourse being taken too seriously. This, unfortunately, is to make insufficient allowance for the context of reception. Given the general old-fangledness of the Canadian lit crit establishment — given the fact, indeed, that many on this side of the fence will find the covertly modernist stance of this book not problematic but reassuring — it is all too likely that much of Hutcheon's readership (these are the same folks, after all, who — judging by conference gossip — think that critical theory is any kind of theoretical criticism) are going to take Hutcheon's practice, warts and all, as epitomising the "new" paradigm. The discourse that I see so palpably deconstructing itself, in other words, is not necessarily the discourse to which Hutcheon's respondents will be attending. This brings us back to the charges I made earlier. That Hutcheon has written a bad book is not important. That her modus

may be imitated *is*. And not merely because it fosters a misunderstanding of postmodernism.

Hutcheon 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 slimmer 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 legitimising framework around and between long chunks of relatively conventional (despite the interlarding of jargon) thematic-cum-formalist analyses of selected Canadian novels. To what effect? Well it's boring, of course — regurgitation does tend to pall after a while. It's also, however, in a subtle but important sense, a betrayal of its subject matter. What Hutcheon does in this book — and the key here is the hierarchy tacitly implied by her format — is to take the "special knowledge" normalised so persuasively in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and transform it in turn into an agent of normalisation. Invoked this time as a *fait accompli*, and validated through the simple device of prioritisation, the discourse of postmodernism, no longer the subject but the arbiter of questions, now serves itself as a kind of alternative "master narrative" by which the author can legitimise not only her own work ("owning" the narrative marks one immediately as an authority) but also — and this for me is the real problem — the body of literature she has managed to bring under the fashionable umbrella. As if it has no significant pre-history of its own, no claims on our consideration except insofar as 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 Hutcheon'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 only 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 flaws, on the other hand, are far from trivial. Again Hutcheon cheats her readers. Labels 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, Hutcheon 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 recognises *nor* rebuts) the possibility that the "explanation" for current practice 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 Hutcheon's own simplemindedness, 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. Much of *The Canadian Postmodern* was published previously, and little to my knowledge has ever been seriously challenged. So the question remains: how does Hutcheon get away with it? Much is undoubtedly due — once again — to her facility 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 defensive about 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 *qua* Canadian is necessarily to be inferior. This, to my mind, 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, jargonised, Hutcheon-style "think" pieces being privileged above all other modes of critique. Incantation of the correct (imported) legitimising sources has, in fact, recently become the badge of belonging. The in-groupiness of this movement makes these new practitioners seem both arrogant and elitist. Underneath, though, things may not be exactly what they seem. Take Hutcheon herself, for example. When one notes that her atypical definition of postmodernism in fact "fits" Canadian literature much better than it does the international oeuvre 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.

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A shorter version of this review was published as "The Mainstreaming of Postmodernism" in *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1989).

Where is here? and other travels through the Canadian psyche

DANIEL JONES

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

Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989,
240 pp.

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

Ottawa: Steel Rail, 1988, 132 pp.

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

Despite the often illusory nature of essays on the psychology of a nation, it seems to me there is 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 survival of the Canadian nation-state, and it is to this market that these two books attempt to appeal — albeit from widely divergent ideological perspectives. *The Secret Kingdom*, based on Dominique Clift's *Le pays insouçonné: essai* (Montréal: Libre Expression, 1987), epitomises a liberal, *laissez-faire* attitude to politics; indeed, its author acknowledges the financial support of Imasco Ltd., Alcan and Steinberg Inc. *Canadian Identity*, on the other hand, invokes a conservative Marxist approach to Canadian history and is published by Steel 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 Fait anglais au Québec* in 1978 — *Canadian Identity* is poorly documented,

