

Reading Hutcheon Reading Badly.

Linda Hutcheon, Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 160 pages.

Political thinking concerns questions about what sort of lives human ought to live within their community, about the latitude of freedom appropriate to a human being, about justice—broadly, about the Good as it is embodied in our being-with-others. It concerns issues that humans have wondered about, no doubt, since they first gathered in groups, questions like: “Should I live by toil or theft?” “Should I submit my actions to the decisions of the group or to some person other than myself, or should I do exactly what I deem to be just?” “Does happiness consist in having wealth?” “In possessing power?” “In being virtuous?” “Should I act to please myself, other people, my rulers or government, or my god?” “What happens if my decisions about how I might please myself or others conflict with my decisions about how I might please my god? Should I strive to please other people or my god?” “What degree of loyalty can the state command?” “If I disagree with those in authority over me, have I the moral right (or even the moral responsibility) to defy them and to follow my conscience?” These are perennial questions, and they still vex thinkers. They endure because they concern those very relations through which we attain our being and become fully human, our relations with other humans.

Because they understood that in our being-with-others we realize ultimate values, the Greeks recognized that the actualizing of justice in our social relations is the way in which human beings are opened to eternity. This idea is paralleled the Christian idea that love of ones fellows is both a fragment of and a necessary propaedeutic to experiencing, even being tranfigured into, the Eternal Love. These two views combined in that early medieval synthesis that formed the foundation for Western Civilization, the one constituting the grounds for our notions on the governance of society, the other our societies antinomian pole, the one emphasizing that humans have access to truths about nature, both human and non-human, through reason, the other emphasizing the importance of revelation. This a part of the reason why the periodic recrudescences of the classical ideal in Western history have always taken the form of humanism and why, in the political realm such renaissances have produced the ideas of a human rather than quasi-sacerdotal ruler, of “common profit” and “the rule of law”, of political community of and majority opinion, of a legal system based on testimony and evidence.

It is a result of the extreme importance of questions about what sort of community is best suited to the role of opening humans to the dimension of the Good that any political thinking worthy of subject is troubled, dense, difficult, and ultimately, no matter how it expressed, serious. The wager of the political is freedom, justice and, ultimately, humans’ relation to ultimate value.

For Hutcheon, however, the Rhinoceros party is fine example of the spiky the form of irony that is the particular virtue of Canadian political thought. Clearly, we are not here dealing with deep thinker, with one whose form of intelligence is worthy of weightiness of political issues. One might suspect that I am making too much of something might be simply a predilection on Hutcheon’s part for a theatrical social style. I am not. The statement immediately preceding her extol of the Rhinoceros party for its showing that the fine irony that such characteristic virtue of Canadian thought can make a virtue out of celebrating fence-sitting and bet-hedging with humour. A splendid position to take when the very existence of the country, one of the most peaceable in the world, is threatened in very existence, racked by intercultural tensions, and tormented by the inept leadership of a treasonous government. Hutcheon doesn’t know where to stand on any issue; she waffles about, offering statements about “the difficult

doubleness in being Canadian yet North American, of being Canadian yet part of multinational, global political economy” (Preface, i) and unable to come out against even that most hideous prospect of Canada’s becoming aligned with the most reviled state on earth.

Hutcheon’s incautious statements trouble because she offers them so off-handedly. Reading Hutcheon, one can never shake the discomforting impression that the fashionable slogans of the latest critical enthusiasms run her mind, that she avoids the real work of thinking. A painstaking thinker would recognize the extensive problems posed by statements like that noted above. For their sensing that they are leading a double existence in being Canadian North Americans would suggest that something in Canadians’ way of thinking resists the powerful sources of global domination, that something in their character is at odds with the American. Why would Canadians feel a difficult double existence about being both Canadian and North American? One would not feel that one has a curious double existence for being both a Canadian and a person who likes brogue shoes, or for being a French citizen and a person alive in the last years of the twentieth century? If she were truly a political theorist of our literature, would be at pains to identify and to describe what the features the make Canadians resist domination by the U.S.A. What discrepancies between our shared values and the values shared by our North American neighbour accounts for the unease Canadians feel about identifying themselves as North Americans? These are the urgent political issues arising from this feeling that demand thought. Hutcheon doesn’t bother.

Worse, she can’t even get her ideas consistent. For surrounding this statement are the currently obligatory comments about Canada’s being pluricultural and not having an identity. It is difficult to see why one should feel uneasy about identifying oneself with the larger body of North American citizens if one didn’t possess some set of values that the character of the life in the United States of America offends. Inconsistency is only an intellectual fault, however, and Hutcheon’s faults are far graver than intellectual; they are no less than spiritual. Nowhere is this more evident in her arrogantly cavalier disregard for the extensive volume of writing that sets forth, with a cogency that sets its arguments far beyond cavil, the leading characteristics of Canadian culture.

The poverty of Hutcheon’s political intelligence would be a sad thing no matter what the context; that her current writing deals with political irony makes it all the graver. The aporiae of her political thinking are nowhere more in evidence than when she comes to summarize her views on irony in one of spin-off books that has come from her circle of followers (or should I say, to grant them the independence that they undoubtedly merit, one of the like-minded academics and graduate students that have congregated around her), Remembering Postmodernism. (Why there has been a shift from “the postmodern” to “postmodernism”—a shift that surely ought to be as signal as that from “the modern” to “modernism”—goes unexplained.) Linda Hutcheon introduces her discussion of postmodern(or is postmodernist?—Hard to say The title of piece is “Postmodernism’s ironic paradoxes” while the first words in the piece are “A Canadian postmodern scene”) in which she starts out with arch photographic work of Geoff Miles. The “analysis” is simply risible. Hutcheon simply catalogues the content of the images that make up one panel of that unfortunate work and correlates each image with a fashionable concern. There is an image of the Trans-America building in San Francisco? Oh, that means “American-ness/modernity” and “phallic power/presence.” (Note how with the last she slips in category derived from Derrida’s critique of metaphysics that really seems at best only half-appropriate. Does a picture of a building really denote (or otherwise mean) presence in any but its fashionable code-word sense, that is, have the attributes of rigidity, hardness, and generally, the attributes of objecthood—attributes that are only loosely related to the metaphysical concept of presence or, for that matter, to Derrida’s vastly more complex conception of the notion, according to which voice can create the illusion of the presence of the speaker’s ideas, i.e., of a presence that has none of the attributes suggested by the code-word use of the term.)

Then there is a picture of a billboard with a Marlboro cowboy on it. Oh, that “adds . . . a sign of consumer capitalism.” There is a photograph of a man and another that Hutcheon says appears to be that of women reclining in a sensuous pose, though when I first saw I immediately spotted it as clichéd funerary monument. Well, a man and woman, that means that the power relations between the gender must be further subject matter. There is fragment of Toronto War Memorial for South Africa (Hey, two monuments man/woman, sex/death! Profound! So profound that Hutcheon even misses the connection; or, at least she fails to comment on it, just as she misses another cloyingly obviously symmetry/asymmetry in the piece. On of the two outer panels of the work shows a clearly lit man, the other a woman in silhouette. Get it? Man: visible/ woman: obscured. Simple? Well, Hutcheon missed it, as she missed yet another symmetry/asymmetry, between the detailed lighting of the funerary memorial that Hutcheon, thinks looks like a semi-reclining nude woman (perhaps she doesn’t much appreciate the difference in texture between flesh and stone) and the negative “silhouette” of the war memorial, the next to first and next to last images of the panel. The nude is clear the battle scene obscure. The relation between the clothed woman in obscurity and the “nude woman” in light suggests the conditions under which women emerge into visibility. The obscurity of the war scene, I would imagine, is meant as a comment on the media and the governmental control of information about what should be public events. Thus we have light images on the left, and dark images on the right hand of the panel. These omissions are remarkable considering that inscribed over the panel letters (no one will ever accuse Geoff Miles of subtlety any more than they will of complexity) are the words “Highlights - Shadows” — she says in capital letters, though the reproduction of the work has them just as I have presented them. She offers this obscure gloss on those words:

This is, on one level, a descriptive heading, sitting as it does atop photographs which [sic] show considerable play [sic] with chiaroscuro and thus foreground, on another level [sic] the technical mechanism of black and white photography in a very self-reflexive way [sic].

Further, there is a picture of a monument to Boer War dead? Well then, this means that “race and colonialism are covertly (really?) added to gender as implied concerns.”

The mode of thinking is clear. She takes each image in the panel discretely and treats each as though it “adds” another issue to the list, capitalism, phallic power/presence, race, gender, colonialism, etc. A thinker would ask what connections there are between the items on the list, a person aware of the issues of art would ask how the images interact with each other in a mutually reinforcing way. Hutcheon just gives us the list. She does none of the hard work and even seems unaware it needs to be done, just as she seems to overlook entirely the ponderous symmetries of this simplistic work.

Reading Hutcheon is unpalatable. Sitting down with any one of her books is like sitting down to dinner, expecting a nourishing repast and getting a plate of sawdust. At times one feels like doing just what undertook in previous paragraph, going through the work line by line and tallying up the mistakes. But mostly one feels disinclined to make even that paltry effort, for the books say next to nothing. The writing is sloppy; it simply strings together one currently received idea after another in the fashion of tired academic mouthing over and over those same words that make up the stock-in-trade of her discipline, ideas that she has heard too often before and said too often previously. (This really does seem the problem. I recall hearing a talk that Hutcheon presented to the Toronto Wagner Society; at this most unfashionable forum she was animated and insightful.) The books fritter about, now telling a joke, now quoting a French poststructuralist thinker. One leaves feeling he or she has taken away nothing.

The central thesis of Hutcheon’s recent work is thin. Her basic claim is that there is a

distinctly postmodern brand of irony. A principal failing of her writing is that she is never clear about what she means when she ascribes the adjective “postmodern” to a work of art, about what the relation of postmodern art to the broad artistic movement known as modernism is, or about what its relation to the cultural paradigm currently being debated by thinkers like Lyotard and Habermas under the sign of the “postmodern.” Sometimes she writes as though Lyotardian criteria legitimate the ascription, as though we can properly say a work of art is postmodern if it refuses all master narratives. Even this criterion presents its share of difficulties, a fact that Hutcheon overlooks. We have to ask whether the story that Hutcheon is so taken with, the story that our civilization was constructed on a hierarchy of gender, race and ethnic alliances, that it systematically discriminates against certain forms of difference, that the progressive movement of history dooms those forms of discrimination, and that progressive art allies itself with the progress of history is not itself a master narrative. Arguably, it has the institutional dynamics of a master narrative: it provides the basis of hiring practices, some of which are governmentally sanctioned and others—including the discrimination against those who find the story questionable, whether in some minor detail or as whole not compelling; it determines access to publishing and to the forums where ideas are debated; it establishes which books are to be taught and which are not, which pictures are to be exhibited in galleries and which are not, what stories are to be told, and by whom, which are not to be told by some group, and which are not to be told at all; it determines who receives government funding and who does not (and even that in saying this one is all but assured that one will broke the intolerance of the advocates of tolerance.) Anyone who has read the policy decision of the Canada council regarding “appropriation” will recognize how deep the institutional roots of this narrative go. Hutcheon’s argument raises this and many other questions that one would expect that political thinker (as opposed to political camp-follower) would want to address, but they are of no evident concern to Hutcheon. They seem simply not to occur to Prof. Hutcheon, in spite of her frequent appeals to be taken seriously an exponent of a political theory of artistic production. But, to be sure, these questions are, unfortunately, a current fashion of the right (that isn’t any more prone to than the fashionable left to deliberate on the issues of political theory) so that at present even the most stalwart advocates of liberty are afraid to be seen anywhere near their vicinity.

Sometimes however, she suggests a different criterion or set of criteria authorize the ascription of the term “postmodern” to a work of art. She suggests that in calling a work of art postmodern we are claiming that it possesses features at odds with those valorized by the New Critics, that is, by the American brand of literary modernism. (Her remarks on literary modernism do not have a very broad compass, for she seems not to realize how diverse the arguments of the major modernist literary critics really are.) She never lays out in systematic fashion just features distinguish the literary phenomenon of “the postmodern” from literary modernism, nor does she ever tell us what basic form of relation between the two is—whether, for example, the literary phenomenon of “the postmodern” represents a wholesale repudiation of the ideas of literary modernism; whether it amounts to transformation of its basic ideas by extending them and radicalizing them; or whether it represents an acceptance of some of their ideas and a rejection of others. One might expect a follower of the most famous of the Young Hegelians to be well aware of questions concerning the historical relation between the two movements, but, curiously, Prof. Hutcheon seems utterly oblivious of them. Despite the obstacles that Prof. Hutcheon lays in the path of one who attempts to get a clear and precise idea of her meaning, we can form some inkling of her meaning. She seems to believe that postmodern irony differs from modernist irony in two ways. The first, predictably, is that has a political intent. The second is no less unoriginal, and probably no more true. This feature she presents by quoting William Spanos to the effect that the postmodern view of irony [Is this a supposed to be the conviction of a literary theory functioning qua literary theorist or the view of cultural critical informing us the spiritual character of age or, to put it more fashionably, the

dominant cultural paradigm?] can be contrasted “to the ‘balanced and resolving irony of modernism’ as a refusal ‘to fulfil the expectation of closure or to provide the distancing certainty the literary tradition . . . has inscribed in the collective consciousness of Western readers.” (Quoted in Splitting Images p. 11)

Whatever she may mean by modernism, her writing is both confused and badly informed about the facts of the history of literary theory, both recent and not so recent. Emphasis on the importance of irony does not distinguish the postmodernist theorist from the modernist theorist as she claims it does. Nor does the irony that the modernists valorized serve to create closure. Just the opposite is true. Cleanth Brooks’s The Well-Wrought Urn, that much reviled benchmark of modernist literary theory, is a paean to the transformative and destabilizing powers of irony, to the power of irony to invoke an endless process of semiosis. The basis of the argument against the possibility of paraphrase that Brooks offers there (in “The Heresy of Paraphrase”) is that the context of relations amongst the words in a poem—relations he describes as ironic inasmuch as they always say something other, something more, than they appear to say—give them wholly new meanings that cannot be separated from the context of the poem. Kenneth Burke accords much the same role to paradox and William Empson to ambiguity that Brooks does to irony. The very crux of modernist theory was the notion that the aesthetic interest we take in objects is distinguishable from all other interests we take in objects because art objects are different from all other sorts of objects since they alone invite a type of experience that is different in kind from any other experiences we have in our intercourse with the world. To distinguish those verbal objects in which we take aesthetic interest from those verbal objects in which we do not (journalism, advertising, business memos, letters written to purchase goods, etc.), the modernists argued, we must be able to distinguish between the form of language that we find in verbal objects that solicit aesthetic interest and the form of language we find in those that do not. The interest we take in non-aesthetic language depends upon the information it provides: we read the newspaper accounts of the goings-on in Parliament to find out whether Brian Morelooney has finally driven the fatal stake into the heart of our country and read the letters that come from lawyers representing our bankers to be informed of the possible consequences of ignoring our debt for (we hope) just one more month. For Brooks it was irony (for Burke, paradox, for Empson, ambiguity, both closely related concepts as they expound them) that is the force that cut the links which bind words to their conventional meanings and imbue them with a wholly new meanings—that depend entirely on the intra-textual ligatures that connected all the terms into a well-unified whole—and so cannot be paraphrased.

The two important philosophical influences on modernist theory were Aristotle and Kant. In The Critique of Judgement, In the first part of The Critique of Judgement, that section entitled Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Kant explains his principal thesis of aesthetics, that purposiveness can be without a purpose. The idea of purposiveness without a purpose, “Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck” may seem paradoxical, but really it actually is no more than is the assertion that the elements of some whole are mutually well-adapted to one another and to the whole to which they belong, even though that whole serves no exterior end. The claim that Kant makes here is undoubtedly the most important in the history of that truly dismal science, aesthetics. It is statutory for academics to castigate this claim on the grounds that suggests that a work of art is unaffected by the social context in which it is made, or at least does nothing to assist us in analyzing the relation between the content of a work of art and the context in which it is produced (and which, perhaps, produces it) context and that it implies, what is said to be false, that the aesthetic objects lack any ideological functions. That neither proposition is a reasonable inference from Kant’s seems hardly to matter. Yet it is simple to show that they do not follow from any of the propositions that Kant puts forth.

What gives Kant’s thesis the enormous importance it has is the fact that it is based on a phenomenologically accurate description of experience that some

people at least have—I am not sure this sort is available to all adults—and that plays a vital role in their mental and spiritual constitution. Its phenomenological cast is one difference between the more famous first critique, The Critique of Pure Reason, and the third. The first Critique revealed the conditions under which the Understanding could inform us about the world as it is presented to us (and hence can be said to be phenomenological text in the old sense of the word, that of studying appearances), and exposes these conditions using rigorously logical means to reveal aspects of unawareness with which we have no direct awareness. The third Critique is a phenomenological text in a more Husserlian sense, for it examines the nature of awareness. We can best get the gist of Kant's analysis of the aesthetic experience is best through an example.

Sometimes in the course of our lives, when looking at some object or another, some (if not all) of us experience an overwhelmingly strong recognition that the elements that constitute the object are splendidly adapted to one another. This sensation is just what Kant is referring to when he writes of “purposiveness of a particular whole,” in contradistinction to the purpose the particular whole serves. Kant's analysis of the experience of Beauty falls under a formal scheme familiar to readers of the first Critique as the four classes of logical forms of judgement: quality, quantity, relation and modality. Some attribute of the relation that any beautiful object has to our Understanding—something that contributes to making that object seem beautiful to us—corresponds to each of these logical forms. The attribute that corresponds to logical form that Kant terms relation is especially important. The definition of Beauty corresponding to the logical form of relation is that beauty depends on “the form of purposiveness in an object in so far as it is perceived apart from the perception of a purpose.” That is (and Kant intended the definition to be taken as incomplete), beauty consists in sensing the harmonious interrelation of the parts amongst themselves and in the constitution of the whole that they form, without any teleological considerations coming into play. To notice that the various parts of an organism are mutually adapted to one another with such a splendid intricacy as helps sustain its life is not to perceive the whole “apart from a perception of purpose.” But there is another kind of experience that humans sometimes have, on in which they set aside teleological considerations and simply enjoy the form of the interrelations amongst the parts of something. Such experience is non-conceptual. It involves suspending all mental activities except those involved in the “representational powers [that is the faculties of the mind that form a mental representation] insofar as they are determined by the presentation.” It does not involve the categories, but only “the consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the interplay of the cognitive faculties [i.e., the Imagination and the Understanding] on the occasion of the presentation.”

Kant's analysis of the experience of beauty does not entail what it is often taken to entail—that a work of art is unaffected by the social context in which it is produced and that art lacks any ideological function as nothing he says entails that our experience of beauty depends on the object we experience aesthetically not having a function. Instead, he says that such experience depends on our considering the objects in which we take aesthetic pleasure apart from any considerations of their purpose. The coffee into which I stir some cream may have a purpose, that of keeping me typing so that, when the tyranny that now prevails in our academies ends, I might get a job that will make it easier for me to pay my lab bills. Yet, if on some occasion, I notice and my attention is drawn to the beauty of the fractal trails the cream forms as I stir it into my coffee, and if the attention I pay to what I observe is pure enough, the experience I have transports me from the realm in which I consider the world as one in which an order of purposes interrelates things, objects, activities and event in an order of purposes, in which what I do I do knowingly, realizing that serves an end, and in which the objects that I use I use to that end, and carries me to one in which I take pleasure in considering the marvellously intricate and fabulously interwoven shapes apart from any utility they may have. Artworks too may have some purpose—they may educate, or they may serve to fix people in their present

class relations, or they may help to elevate the spirit. Kant does not deny this. His analysis does suggest that when we do are able to suspend consideration of utility and focus our attention on the interrelations among the elements that constitute an object, we experience it differently than we do when suspend all considerations of utility. Kant's signal realization was the magnitude of this difference. However, nothing he says entails the denial that aesthetic experience, by virtue of overwhelming character, may lead us to estimate highly objects that secretly work to fix us in our places of oppression. This is not his subject. He is interested in the experience itself.

Kant does, admittedly, distinguish between what he calls 'free beauty' and 'merely adherent beauty' on the grounds that beauty is adherent if it is referred to a purpose and free if it is not. What he intends by the former, I believe, is that perception of something rather like beauty, namely the experience a purposive formal integrity. Ordinarily the perception of such a purposive formal integrity, when it arrives, supervenes upon our common everyday experience of objects, our experience of objects as as implements, as being, as Heidegger describes it, zuhanden. But Kant's purpose for make this distinction is to point out that this not merely an attenuated experience of beauty, but an experience of a different sort from the experience of beauty. What Kant never says is that we cannot experience objects that are fitted to a purpose as though they had none. He affirms the contrary, though advanced thinkers overlook the fact, with his example of the botanist. There he points out that though, unlike most people, a botanist understands that the flower is the reproductive organ of a plant, he or she "pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty." When the botanist appreciates how well adapted to its purpose the bright colours of the flower and its pretty smell are he or she experiences merely dependent pleasure. But even the botanist who possesses a developed technical understand of the adaptation of features to purpose can suspend his consideration of the end to which the flower is fitted and accede to a pleasure of a different sort, a pleasure that is truly free. On similar grounds we can infer that, though the manner in which art objects are institutionalized accords privilege to the non-utilitarian experience of them, this does not mean that they might not have a purpose, even one in which, we should acknowledge, they might succeed exactly because we are unaware of it. Kant's analysis of aesthetic experience suggests we might use the tenets, methods, and findings of ideological criticism to describing the non-aesthetic functions of a work of art; but we still should realize that such analysis lacks aesthetic relevance.

Kant further states that aesthetic experience is pleasurable. He makes that point with a precision that, however characteristic, is nonetheless admirable. In another of his partial definitions, this one related to the logical form modality, he offers that "The Beautiful is that which, without concept, is recognized as object of a necessary pleasure." The pleasure is necessary because it is trans-subjective, Kant explains. Because the internal representation that conditions aesthetic pleasure is formed through the operations of the faculties of Imagination and Understanding, and because those faculties are constituted alike for all humans (as they make up our cognitive power and are what enable to think as human beings), these judgements do not vary from person to person. Anyone who perceives the relation of the parts to the whole, who perceives the purposiveness of the formal interrelations without bringing into play any considerations of any purpose that whole might serve, will enjoy the free play of the Imagination and the Understanding. This play is free exactly because concepts have no part to play in this experience; since the object serves no purpose external to itself, its composition is not determined by the laws of the understanding which analyze, inter alia, how means can be adjusted to serve stipulated ends.

Because it is not determined by any concepts, the pleasure that we take in a beautiful object is 'without any interest whatsoever.' Kant is again precise about the character of the interests to which he refers. The interest that we take in any but aesthetic objects depends upon its existence; for, unless it exist, it cannot serve an end. In aesthetic pleasure, on the other

hand, we are not concerned with the existence of an object, but only in “the mere presentation” of the object. Kant had shown in the first critique that whatever is not determined by a concept cannot have objective existence. If aesthetic experience is free of concepts, then the content of that experience cannot have that status of objects; nor can the judgements formed in that experience be objective. But they can be, and for the reason just given Kant argues, that they are, trans-subjective, in the sense that all who experience that particular pleasure agree about its nature and worth. This trans-subjectivity is the subject of the remaining definition amongst Kant’s partial descriptions of beauty, which corresponds to the logical form of quantity, namely that “that is beautiful which, without a concept, pleases universally.”

Especially important to the method of the New Critics was Kant’s belief that aesthetic pleasure derives from the free interplay of the faculties of Imagination and Understanding. A single question drove Kant’s massive philosophical endeavour the answer to which Kant pursued with a tenacity unrivalled in the history of western thought. Kant demanded to know, “What scope does Reason have?” or, equivalently given his definition of Reason, “Is the experience of freedom ever noetic?” His picture of the relationship between the Imagination and the Understanding was really a simple sketch. He viewed the Imagination as unruly and needing the efforts of the Understanding to tame it by conforming it to necessity. By the Imagination he understands a productive faculty; its modus operandi is to combine and rearrange the qualia or data presented by the senses according to laws of association. Therefore, it is determined by the laws of Nature and of empirical psychology. How then does the Imagination escape from the constrictions of the laws that govern it to gain access to realm of freedom? Kant answers the question by explaining that the Imagination remodels experience into something that escapes the laws of the Understanding and fulfils the higher laws of Reason. It presents us with images—Kant calls them aesthetic ideas—of death, love or eternity, ideas for which we have many indefinite concepts, but for which there are no precise verbal formulations:

By an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the Imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite get on level terms with or render completely intelligible . . . Such representations of the imagination may be termed ideas. This is partly because they at least strain after something lying out beyond the confines of experience. . . . no concept can be wholly adequate to them. (From the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement section 49)

As ideas they afford insight, but not insights of sort of which the Understanding can avail itself, for they transcend the Understanding’s lawful operations. They cannot be unpacked and sorted into determinate concepts. Their meaning cannot be set out in exact detail for and by the Understanding because they are the products foreign to way the Understanding operates.

Poetic metaphor is the species of aesthetic idea to which Kant, like many of the New Critics, devoted greatest attention. But it the only one. He did consider other tropes and other media, and even went as far as to suggest the idea that Suzanne Langer was to make such rich use of, that aesthetic ideas may be expressed in musical form, for music may adapt the structures and tensions of extremely complex affective states—states that can be followed and understood in music, but cannot be expressed outside music.

Similarly, the Imagination may draw from the real when constructing an image, or “figure” as Kant call it, in line and colour. But so potent is the transforming power of the Imagination that the plastic images it produces may be more suggestive and more fraught with meaning than the objects from which the figure derives. The transformative power of the Imagination enables it to

rework elements drawn from the real in so that they give us insight into the supersensible realm. This insight is foreign to concepts of the Understanding as they are indeterminate; and indeterminate concepts cannot be translated into determinate concepts. They are nonetheless genuine for that, and the human being who strives for knowledge of the supersensible realm—of death, freedom, the soul, god, and eternity—will avail himself or herself of them.

Kant's Enlightenment manner can hardly endear him to the type of academic now very much in vogue. However, there is much in Kant's work that even they should consider "recuperable." In fact, the theory of meaning of which Kant analysis of aesthetic pleasure entails is more subversive of the dominant mode of thought, that of instrumental reason, than those of the currently fashionable crop of intellectuals who take pride in the radical credentials. It should be much to their chagrin that the New Critics (most of whom positioned themselves somewhere on the right side of the political spectrum, and many very far on the right) mined Kant's theory for its radical theory of meaning. They argued that a formal integrity of a work of art so transformed the elements entering into it that they retained hardly a vestige of their everyday significance. Northrup Frye, a critic who was intimately familiar with and drew upon the same intellectual sources as the New Critics did, but fashioned the ideas he took from them into a distinctive system, point out how central place a Blake's famous remark in A Vision of the Last Judgement

"What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is Lord God Almighty."

has for all literature. As Frye notes, what distinguishes the Hallelujah Chorus perception of the sun and makes it far more real than the Guinea sun is that far more imagination has gone into perceiving it. The span of time over which he proposed it indicates the importance the idea had for him. Frye announced the conviction at least as early as Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (1947) the book that made his worldwide reputation and helped make Blake, who had long been viewed of minor English Romantic of questionable stability, understandable to community of readers. (I first read Blake's poetry in a college survey-text my father had kept, that described Blake as.....) He also made the idea the subject of his final book, The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion (1991), a work that has all the features of a valedictorian work; one gets the impression when reading it that he, still under the sway with his early homiletical training, has gathered his flock, people who knew well because of long-standing association—he might have remembered, for example, that like many undergraduates they had had a bit of a go discerning the significance of Blake's poetry, and needed to have it explained to them—and expounded, in clear, simple language the fundamental beliefs that had given his life meaning and attempted to impart the vision the Good before taking his final leave.

The most basic interest of the New Critics' was in how the intratextual relations into which a word or an element of an image entered could strip that element or that word of its conventional meaning and give it a wholly new significance, in how that new meaning defied paraphrase (that is, in Kant's terminology, translation into determinate concepts), and in how the very indeterminacy of the concepts allowed in more of the imagination and permitted the poet to speak of the realms where ordinary language breaks off. When inserted into a new network of relations, the same lexeme that we use everyday language is no longer the same sememe. When the lexeme enters into an articulated composition, it is affected by the entirety of the composition, by the whole surface of network relations of which it becomes a part. At their most radical, New Critics considered this reworking to be ceaseless; the network of relations is of such complexity that each reading or reconsideration of the text in memory reveals new figures and new relations that once again transform the lexeme, creating a new sememe that is then re-

incorporated into the network, thus altering the network itself, and this change reworks the lexeme . . . So the unending process begins.

Each major New Critic described some figure the use of which made words indeterminate. This was the role that irony served in Cleanth Brooks' theory, that paradox has in Burke's, that ambiguity plays in Empson's. These are all forms of indeterminacy and they all, accordingly, refuse translation into determinate concepts.

Hutcheon claims that the insight that literary language is unstable, that its meaning refuses to be fixed, is a postmodern insight, but the claim is untrue. It is easy to see from my description of the endless transformation of the lexeme just how much Derrida, a writer whom she fashionably approves of, owes to the New Critics. For Derrida, like them, has dipped into the wellspring of modern aesthetics, Kant's Critique of Judgement, and in La Vérité en peinture and especially 'Economimesis' tried to show that Kant's entire epistemology is affected by the recognition of the instability, the endless transformation, of meaning that his work on The Critique of Judgement revealed to him.

These filiations are pretty well-known. Most critics now recognize the idea that aesthetic experience involves a play of figural substitutions and that such figural substitutions are intractable to any form of de jure conceptual closure is an idea that has its origin in Kant's magnificent text and influenced the New Critics and Derrida alike. Irene Harvey has already pointed out, in Derrida and the Economy of Différance how profoundly the legacy of transcendental philosophy affected Derrida. Christopher Norris has traced some of these lines of connection in his writing on Derrida and stressed the important similarities between Derrida and New Critics. All this makes Derrida a poor choice to supply the weapons with which one might launch an attack on modernism. Hutcheon seems oblivious of these ideas.

What is more, a wholesale denial of the claims the New Critics made for irony, and a wholesale repudiation of Derrida's thesis that meaning is unstable and endlessly deferred is the first requirement of a politicized aesthetic. This is not a new idea either. Gerald Graff has pointed out how any aesthetic or literary theory that has the effect of severing the connection between poetic meaning and everyday use (which at least has the virtue of invoking the virtues of rational critique) leads straight to a mystification of social and political thinking. A similar conviction is at the heart of Christopher Norris' very elegant essay, Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory. In fact, the argument goes right back to William Empson himself. Empson became dismayed over the misuse of the ideas he propounded in Seven Types of Ambiguity to promote what he considered a retrogressive religiosity and irrationalism and published The Structure of Complex Words that sets out a theory of multiple meaning that he believes avoids the dangers of mystification. Even Jonathan Culler, in Framing the Sign, has argued that in adopting a conceptual framework founded on the notions of irony, paradox, instability of meaning and endless deferral, literary theorists have fallen into a crypto-religious language and abandoned the traditional role of intellectual and academics of combatting superstition, encouraging critical debate and fighting religious dogmatism and its consequences.

I find these arguments cogent. If you are going to think hard about the real issues of justice, you had better have a language whose duplicities won't betray your cause, a language that can do the work of representing social reality, one that is amenable to the claims of reason and is not always undone by the work of the imagination (as Spinoza long ago pointed out language so often is.) It no surprise then, given her "theory" of language (if we can apply such a grand epithet of such a paltry structure of ideas) that Hutcheon's political ideas are simply . . . what can one say? . . . juvenile.

There is a high ratio, a ratio that approaches an infinite magnitude, of reworked ideas to new ideas in Hutcheon's writing. Though there are few, if any, new ideas in her writing, there is something new in it. What is new in Hutcheon writing is the abysmal level to which she has reduced rich ideas rich ideas, how completely she has transformed complex ideas to a

simplistic, political slogans and how spectacularly bad her applications of them are. No first year literature student should be allowed to get away with her trivializing interpretations. Take Hutcheon's comments on Al Purdy's comment that "Certainty of nationality and personality is an illusion, since there is no permanence in anything, anything at all. And yet we cling to this shifting and uncertain self, this rag of aging bone, this handful of dust which we've given a loved name."

The richness of the comment reveals much about the complexity poet's thought process, even when he applies it only in dealing with current affairs—though, of course, the currently fashionable critical methods espoused by Hutcheon want to narrow the gap that separates the mind of the poet from that of ordinary intellectual piece-workers like myself. A critical method based on Kant's analysis of beauty helps us to indicate in what that richness consists. Seen in the light of reason, what Purdy refers to as a "rag of aging bone, this handful of dust" is really in neither a rag of aging bone or a handful of dust; in fact it is made up largely of water. Scientific fact has little weight against the metaphors, for we are here not dealing with a realm in which humans are made of so much hydrogen, so much oxygen, so much nitrogen and so much phosphorus. We are dealing with the realm of imagination, a realm in which the perception of the human being as made up of bone and dust is more real than perception of the human being as constituted of set proportions of some subset of the one hundred and three chemical elements. Furthermore, the term dust imports connotations of mortality through the phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The term "bone" bolsters the association, as does the term aging. Both terms, moreover, suggest aridity, even acedia. The relation between the term "handful of dust" and "rag of aging bone" helps explain the latter, rather curious, phrase, for we are not generally accustomed to speak of "rags of bones." Of course, one thing the phrase suggests is that the mortal frame we occupy falls into shabby disarray as it ages. Another, reinforced by the phrase "a handful of dust" is that stuff we are made of is utterly worthless. But I think that there is another, less overt and vastly less demonstrable sense intended by this lexeme. The image of human life as nothing more than dust suggests that our substance is a transient collocation of loosely associated elements, gathered together briefly and then blown away in the winds of time. The reference "rag of bone" picks up this association, as though even bone were something transitory, something that can be blown away in the wind. The term "rag" indicates how flimsy and transient even this seemingly solid thing actually is. The paradoxical relation between "rag" and "bone" points out a truth more real for the imagination than the truths of science.

Then there is the term "loved name." Its relationship with, firstly, the term "identity" and secondly the phrase "handful of dust" suggests the Hebrew concept of naming, according to which the uttering of a name (and this particularly true of proper nouns, the subject of Purdy's comment) actually confers its identity onto an object or person. Thus Purdy suggests that, in the teeth of time, we create our identities by calling ourselves by our names. But the name is a loved name. Why "loved," considering, again, that we do not usually speak of names as being loved? For one thing the term invokes the paradox that, as shabby as "this rag of aging bone" is, as worthless as "this handful of dust," we still accord it what is of ultimate spiritual value, our love. Furthermore, if the terms "dust" and "bone" invoke death, then "love" invokes life. We are told that giving the handful of dust a loved name confers an identity on it, and we can picture how this occurs by imagining life (love) being breathed into it (for speaking involves inhalation and exhalation.) This dust is animated by that breath of life which is a loved name just as it much as it is blown away by the winds of death. This is the paradox of wind/breath; it gives life, and destroys it. There is even the suggestion this effort to sustain life in the face of death is an absurd task. For in the end death will have its victory; we are no more dust, no more substantial than "a rag of bone." Thus the phrase figures an agonistic relation between identity and death and the unresolvable absurdity involved in recognizing that being lies on the side of identity. Yet

though this relation be absurd, it is nonetheless real for the imagination for that.

I could go on, for like any genuinely poetic pronouncement, the statement is one of endless richness. How Hutcheon handles it is the real issue, the real test of her methodology. She handles it simply as a statement of the familiar “postmodernist” idea that the self is labile, is nothing substantial, is nothing more than a fiction.

Again, to see to how horribly limited her criticism is we could consider her remarks on Michael Snow. Michael Snow is an extremely witty, and ironic, artist. One might expect Hutcheon to make his work one of the major subjects of her book. He is not; she treats him instead with haughty condescension and for the most part curt dismissal. One needn't dig very far to find out why. This is how she summarizes the legendary Walking Woman series.

Multiply reproduced (in various media), this [Walking Woman motif] becomes the ironic repetition of the loss of individuality, of the unmasking of subjectivity, by mass reproductive technology . . . Read from a feminist perspective, the irony does tend to rebound back on Snow as a male artist for using such reductive techniques on the female form, no matter how aware he might be of that irony. (Splitting Images pp. 142–143.)

I can't imagine any issues that are farther from Snow's concerns than those that Hutcheon attributes to the series. (Nor can I refrain from pointing out that in the very next sentence after those quoted above concern “a work of art” that Hutcheon approves of: “Dave Buchan's 1984 performance ‘Menswear: A Brief History’ offers a more overtly politicized use of irony [than Snow's work]). The Walking Woman is series of works in which Snow created the same shape, that of woman, of what Snow referred to as “the nearest other” for a male artist, in a variety of media a variety of contexts to find out what would happen when it was realized in these different media and contexts. The relationship to the Kantian/New Critical enterprise of considering how a common form is transformed when inserted into different sets of relations should be obvious. (Hutcheon still misses it, though.) What is striking, and impressively original in Snow's approach was how systematically he approached dealing with familiar power and how rigorously he proposed to examine it. Others artists had spoken of the transforming power of aesthetic relations; Snow isolated the problem and undertook a prolonged, systematic, and witty demonstration of this power and it doing so turned art toward self-reflexive inquiry in its methods and powers.

She does consider Snow work in extenso, if we can use that term of an eight line description of a work, that is almost as long as any in her text. Here is her description of the piece:

Another example [of what she calls verbal/visual ironic play] is Michael Snow's Venetian Blind, a series of ‘snapshot’-effect photographs of Snow (apparently [Is there any doubt, or is this adverb just redundant?]) taken by himself, holding the camera in front at arm's length), usually blurred but recognizable, with various tourist sights of Venice in the background. The multiple images are lined up and layered like venetian blinds, but the real ironic play comes from the fact that each image shows Snow with his eyes closed and in Venice: hence Venetian Blind. (Splitting Images p. 27)

Though Hutcheon, in a fashion now familiar, reduces the work to single irony, what is fascinating in Snow's work is the insight after insight after irony follow one another in a chain. Take just the trope she has singled out and deal only with the verbal/visual ironies it offers, though to do even this is to do the work injustice. Yes, the pictures do show Snow in Venice with his eyes closed,

but he is not a Venetian, so why is the subject of a picture a Venetian blind. Well because in the first place, his back is to the Venetian subjects that he is depicting. So he is, so to speak, Venetian blind, i.e., blind to Venice. Furthermore, he is depicted photographing without looking through the camera; one might say that he is photographing blind. And why is he taking the picture, “blind” Well, in the first place by so doing he alludes to is the familiar tourists’ desire to be in the picture, to authenticate that one actually was in the place the photograph depicts. The gesture of demonstrating that we are in a particular place sometimes interferes with our observation of the place, with “our really being there,” so to speak. Does the work succeed in showing Snow in Venice. Of course not; it exists in Toronto at Art Gallery of Ontario (or anywhere else it happens to be shown). Venice remains intractably absent. This absence parallels Snow’s not seeing Venice, and our not seeing Venice in the photograph. Furthermore, the gesture of making the photography by this means suggests that self-absorption hinders his being able to see Venice. Snow’s work has frequently suggested the sadness of the self’s being unable to merge with the external world; this work emphasizes the inability by the exaggerated perspective the results from holding the camera close to human subject and relatively far from the background. (In other writings I have pointed out reasons why the relations between self and world, between consciousness and nature, has been so important in Canadian art.) This odd method of making a photograph also results in an exaggeration of linear perspective, and Venice was a centre of quattrocento painting. Furthermore, the relation of subject to background, figure and landscape is one of central issues of quattrocento painting (consequent upon perspective, to be sure) and through this method of photographing, that issue was incorporated into Venetian Blind. And of course it is a series, and so is involved with time. It literally shows Snow passing through Venice. But in rushing through our experiences, we become closed—one might say blind—to what they might disclose if only we could learn to abide with them in their full presence. Or again, one could say that the gesture points up that one’s self-knowledge remains a constant will the things of the external world undergo change; because they change, constantly and quickly, we are blind to them. Or again . . . one could go on and on, if one doesn’t submit to Hutcheon’s proclivity to reduce a work to a single (usually political) irony.

But Hutcheon’s failure to understand the connections between the Derridean view of irony which she expounds and New Criticism is not the least of her confusions. Nor is her failure to understand the role of irony in modernist literary theory. Nor is her failure to understand the political implications of her Derridean view of irony or the reasons why those who advocate a critical role for literature and for art in general feel compelled to acknowledge the claims of reason. Her most basic confusion concerns nothing less than the nature of irony. For it is not irony, but cynicism that is Hutcheon’s real topic. A signal comment appears in the first few pages of Splitting Images, pages in which she lays out the fundamentals that undergird her analysis of “ironic” figures in specific pieces of art. She has to acknowledge that many other authors have recognized that irony plays a prominent role in Canadian writing and visual art. Among them is Gaile MacGregor whose commentary is far richer than Hutcheon’s. (Perhaps this is the reason Hutcheon offers an embarrassingly catty, though admittedly uncharacteristic, aside that MacGregor comes to the topic “quite late in book,” with the dishonest implication that the topic is an afterthought. A reader more experienced with insight and a little more practised in the skills of writing extended tracts than Hutcheon would realize that not all give their thoughts away completely in the first twenty pages of their book; some save their best insights for last). To distinguish her position, the “more current position” from MacGregor’s woefully traditional position, Hutcheon distinguishes between the high mode of irony which MacGregor narrowly focuses on—a mode of irony which depends upon the discrepancy between an ideal or norm and the tawdry actual—and other forms, for example Irony Humorous (emphases hers), which she characterizes by example:

the fun Canadian artists have had with 'Artistamps', poking fun at familiar icons, both local and international, on playful 'Canadada' or 'Femail' art postage stamps.

Evidently, she is distinguishing between a high and a low mode of irony; that latter mode slides steadily towards cynicism.

Here is another example of the sort of work that Hutcheon admires, to cinch the point concerning her lofty poetic standards:

Carrots are fucking
the earth. A permanent
erection, they push deeper
into the damp and dark.
All summer long
they try so hard to please.
Was it good for you,
was it good.

A poem for the centuries, I am sure. Or another, by the same poet, apparently one of Hutcheon's favourites. That poem is introduced with the note that in Lady Chatterley's Lover, the hero's penis is called John Thomas and, as Hutcheon points out solemnly, the poet realizes that she had 'never come across a penis with a name.' This strikes me as evidence that she hasn't much acquaintance with the personal lives of her friends, for I doubt that there are many couples who have not a name for the man's penis. This shortcoming notwithstanding, she is a fine poet, as the following lines, concerning what name a man (Why assume the name belongs to the man rather than the couple?) might indicate about him:

I mean,
What if he named it after his mother?
What if he called it Long John Silver?
What if he called it Moby Dick?

Yes, certainly, lines for the ages. I am glad that there are critics to serve the function of preserving the best of tradition and handing it down through the ages. How deeply I admire Prof. Hutcheon's high-minded seriousness. How completely I respect her political commitments.

The most conspicuous mark of cynicism is smugness. I wish it could have gone without saying that smugness authorizes refusing to think, but it could not as it is far too obvious a reason for the shallowness of Hutcheon's writing. Cynicism considers itself smart for seeing what it perceives as the vanity of others gravest concerns. Others may fret over questions about justice, or freedom, or the form of social organizations best suited to the constitution of human being, but the cynic sees through all those issues to realize that politics is all a crock. The superior smug and the cynical (read "ironic") quip places one well beyond the reach of trivial concerns. Smugness is also a characteristic of many of the quotations Splitting Images contains about Canada. Given the sort of comment about Canada she finds humour in, no one need mistake Hutcheon for a nationalist. The delight of cynicism has pride of place. Little wonder then that she cannot understand the values that strengthen Canadians in their resistance to American imperialism.

But why are the questions which the long tradition of political theory held to be so important deemed pointless? Whatever value these books have they have by virtue of their

providing the basis of symptomatic analysis of the malaise that “ironic” (read cynical) intellect. The expanding circle of camp followers hanging on the pronouncements that Hutcheon offers in the too numerous, too slim, too repetitious volumes of recycled ideas that make up her output are all-too-cogent evidence of the appeal that Hutcheon mode of thinking has among the recently institutionalized. The influence that Hutcheon possesses within academies, and the considerable esteem that her shabby, and worsening, output has garnered for her must tell use something about the malaise of the institutionally successful intellectual in our time.

This is the real interest that Hutcheon’s book will have for thinkers. That is a topic for another time.