

and Mobolaji Adenubi's *Splendid* (1995)—winner of the more prestigious All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Literature and a high contender for this year's Noma Award—could have enriched the palaver sauce of gender dialogue in the same brief but insightful manner that Martina Nwakoby's *A House Divided* (1985) is treated. It would be interesting to read what interpretive correlation Professor Ogunyemi would have constructed between Emecheta's "been-to" novels or Obong's *Garden House* and Segun's *The Third Dimple*, a post-civil war text with a triangular setting in Lagos, Lome, and Paris. Or imagine the critical affiliation between Emecheta's autobiographical novels and Adenubi's intimate biography of a male disabled but intelligently conversational child. Indeed, the inclusion of *The Third Dimple* (published within the temporal focus of this book) would have sutured the canonical gap which its omission might have provoked.

Without doubt, Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi has succeeded in achieving a deliberate, methodical construction of a woman-centred vernacular theory in reading the Nigerian novel by women. *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* has drawn on a series of textual stitches to create a common quilt of a womanist ideology in Nigerian women's literature at the close of the twentieth century.

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Linda Hutcheon. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. ix, 248. \$22.95 pb.

Linda Hutcheon has fashioned a career out of taking aim at moving targets. Her books have often been attempts to define and discuss terms that are so widely and indiscriminately used that they have become almost meaningless. She is certainly best known for her extensive work on postmodernism, for instance, but she has also written about parody, on narrative self-reflexivity, on satire, and even about what it means to be Canadian. In fact, perhaps the biggest surprise about this particular book from Hutcheon is that it did not appear sooner. *Irony's Edge* is as engaging, interesting, wide-ranging, and provocative as one might expect new work from Hutcheon to be; further, it proclaims its topic to be "political," as one might also expect of a book on irony by Hutcheon: in a postmodern age, after all, it is always political to be ironic, and ironic to be political.

For all of its virtues, however, *Irony's Edge* left me with a lingering impression of distance and lack of involvement, a nagging doubt about why it is, if irony is really always politically charged, if it truly always has the "edge" that Hutcheon claims, that this book is itself neither intentionally ironic nor particularly political. While *Irony's Edge* is full of sophisticated readings by Hutcheon, and absorbing discussions about why those readings legitimately detect or construct the various ironies

that they announce, the events that Hutcheon chooses to read—from a performance of a Wagner opera to an exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum entitled *Into the Heart of Africa*—are uniformly local and disconcertingly distanced (even if they can be read, finally, as “political” in some important senses).

Although I think this book is well worth reading for its theoretical sweep alone, I recommend it with some qualifications. First, Hutcheon claims that irony is always both “political” and “transideological” in nature. That is, irony potentially supports a variety of political positions. Hutcheon writes that ever “since irony as a word and concept came to the attention of ancient Greek culture, there have been arguments about how irony works and what its scope is or could be” (10). Precisely that uncertainty is what has made it possible for “irony . . . [to] function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests” (10). It may well be true that irony can support a “wide range of political positions,” but there are no readings here of texts that appear on their surface to be radical but that, ironically, are shown to be reactionary at heart. As was true of her numerous readings of postmodernist texts, while Hutcheon makes nodding acknowledgement to other positions in her readings, once ironies have been identified and decoded, they always turn out to be “subversive” in a positive sense against prevailing conservative ideologies. This tendency to identify the political positions of the text at hand with her own politics has always been a weakness of Hutcheon’s discussions of postmodernism (it has led, for example, to a far too easy use of the word “subvert”), and it is also a weakness in *Irony’s Edge*. Hutcheon essentially became an apologist for postmodernism, defending its “subversive” political stance and radical nature against all opposition, whether her opponents were diametrically opposed to her view (as was Charles Newman, who claims that postmodernism is fundamentally destructive and reactionary) or more complex and balanced (as was Hal Foster, who claims that postmodernism is a complex matrix of radical and reactionary elements). Hutcheon is in danger of becoming the same kind of apologist for irony here.

My second qualification concerns definitions. Hutcheon claims, using the analogy of explaining a joke, that irony would not be irony if it explained itself explicitly.

Irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets). Ironic meaning comes into being as the consequence of a relationship, a dynamic, performative bringing together of different meaning-makers, but also of different meanings, first, in order to create something new and, then . . . to endow it with the critical edge of judgment. (58)

At its most basic level, irony is defined in this book as a balance between the said and the unsaid. Hutcheon insists, to her credit, that

"you don't actually have to reject a 'literal' meaning in order to get at what is usually called the 'ironic' or 'real' meaning of the utterance" (60), but she does insist on the importance of the "unsaid" to render an articulation ironic. Hutcheon gives as an example the famous illustration "Rabbit or Duck?" from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: "the figure can be interpreted as either a duck or a rabbit, depending on whether you see a bird's bill or a long pair of ears in the extended shape issuing from a central mass. . . . In interpreting irony, we can and do oscillate very rapidly between the said and the unsaid" (59-60). But there is no rabbit "said" and duck "unsaid" here—there are (at least) two "sais," rabbit and duck. I would maintain (and I am not alone) that any and all discourse is precisely an oscillation and a relationship between sais and unsais (this is, after all, one of the more important elements of Derrida's *différance*); I would maintain, further, that one of the features that makes irony difficult is exactly that it comprises two (or more) sais (each of which, of course, is in turn a relationship between said and unsaid). In reading Wittgenstein's figure, there is no balance struck between said and unsaid: when I see Wittgenstein's illustration, I do not read it as a rabbit/non-duck, or as a duck/non-rabbit, but as a figure. If I were forced to pin the figure down and compelled to choose whether the figure is duck or rabbit, I might have to balance one against the other and make a choice, but outside of such constraints, why do so? It seems to me that irony is a relationship between sais; it is a refusal to choose, and a license to not choose. The figure does not have to oscillate between exclusive meanings; it is, wonderfully, both and neither. The reading of the figure that detects irony is a reading that sees neither rabbit nor duck, but an illustration in which one could detect a rabbit or a duck, and can see the possibilities of each; the fact that those sais are held in suspension is what makes the illustration a figure of irony.

My third problem with this book lies in the examples that Hutcheon chooses to read. Hutcheon announces her intention to make the subject of her book something that is composed, she says, of "public memories," that together comprise a "shared discursive context": "World War II and . . . Nazi Germany" (6). This choice certainly helps to compose a homogenous discursive community, but it seems to me that Hutcheon has stacked the deck unduly in making her choices, and in doing so has moved away from irony or ambiguity, or from any real political involvement. As Harrison Ford memorably intones as Indiana Jones, "Nazis. I hate these guys"; or as W. J. T. Mitchell writes in his provocative *Picture Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), "Fascism is a powerful word for terminating public discussion in America" (412). Hutcheon can safely assume that all "right-minded" people in her audience will deplore fascism. Further, as political as *Into the Heart of Africa* may have been in its own context, it is surely not the best example that Hutcheon could have chosen as the primary display in a book on

the edginess and political nature of irony. There is a multitude of political issues and very controversial public literary and cultural artifacts that Hutcheon could have discussed, but she has chosen instead to concentrate on a single museum display, in a single city, at several years' remove. Is Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, on the other hand, ironic in any important sense? If it is ironic, does it also carry some or all of what Hutcheon herself argues is an integral part of irony—a pejorative edge? Is it fair, then, to claim that the Muslim leaders who condemned the book could be characterized as readers who lacked a sense of irony or play, who illegitimately overstepped a number of important bounds, but who rightly detected a negative judgment of culture and religion on Rushdie's part when they saw it? *That* discussion has an edge: it is politically charged and risky ground. Hutcheon steers clear.

In her work on postmodernism, Hutcheon has never been particularly postmodern herself. Her scholarship is thorough-going, deliberate, and generally marked by a certain kind of exhaustive referential care, but by none of the flash, dash, or daring pyrotechnic wordplay displayed by any of a number of postmodernist literary theorists. She has always written about postmodernism, humour, and play in a style that seems deliberately to avoid such excesses; she does the same thing here:

this is a book *about* irony, and not an ironic book. . . . [Some] commentators . . . have written about irony in a deliberately and polemically unsystematic and ironized way. Because of both personality and what the French would call my own "déformation professionnelle," I admit that . . . I'm not terribly comfortable with that mode of writing, and so I have chosen a more systematic approach, while acknowledging throughout the artificial and even, to some extent, arbitrary separation of aspects which, in actual fact, work together simultaneously to make irony "happen." (7)

This book seems to me to be simply too safe. That safety is expressed in Hutcheon's determination not to attack any particular theory or theorist, not to be ironic, not to have the edge that she claims that irony must have. The result is an interesting, even a valuable book that could and probably should have been better.

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Jonathan Hart and Richard W. Bauman, eds. *Explorations in Difference: Law, Culture, and Politics*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996. Pp. xiv, 246. \$55.00, \$24.95 pb.

The eight essays in this wildly eclectic collection, which developed out of a conference of the same title given at the University of Alberta, are divided equally into two sections: "Theoretical Accounts" and "Instances." Ross Chambers opens the "Theoretical Accounts" section