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INTERVIEW: LINDA HUTCHEON (August 20, 2009)

by Radojka Vukčević

BELLS: You are the author of nine books and numerous articles, and…many projects. I would like to start my interview with the collaborative project: *Rethinking Literary History.* Could you please tell me what the result of this project is? Why and what has it shown you?

Rethinking Literary History was an immense as well as exciting project for me, with over 400 participants in two major projects that resulted in two large-scale publications: *The Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History* (3 volumes, Oxford University Press) and *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (4 volumes, Benjamins). In both cases, the "rethinking" part grew out of our realization that literary history was usually bound by nation or by national language. We wanted, instead, to work comparatively, across national and language boundaries, as well as disciplinary ones (hence the "literary cultures" in the titles). In the Latin American project, we worked with cultural geographers to map how verbal culture *moved* (rather than stayed within a country) over time. Over 300 contributors were asked to think regionally, rather than nationally, and to consider both oral and written culture produced in the Amerindian languages as well as Spanish and Portuguese. In the East-Central European project, we tried to de-emphasize national cultural myths by highlighting points of contact and analogies among literary cultures, as well as hybrid and marginal cultural phenomena that traditional *national* literary histories had ignored—or deliberately suppressed—in their national identity-forming drive. From this collective and collaborative work, I learned much about cultural interaction and interface in these particular parts of the world; but I also learned about how important it is for scholars to work

together to tackle this kind of enormous endeavor that no single one of us could ever manage alone.

BELLS: Your work has been described as a work whose common thread is the complex interrelations of theory with artistic practice. What have you found out about these interrelations? Does art teach us as much about literary theory as in reverse?

I am from one of the first generations in North America to be trained in critical theory, so it has been a part of my intellectual life almost from the start. From my doctoral dissertation onward, however, I've felt that "theory" shouldn't be something abstracted from culture or something imposed upon the reading of literature. So, whether I was studying self-reflexive fiction, parody, irony, or adaptation, I decided I would work from cultural forms outward to theory, in other words, that I would try to "theorize" from the art itself. For example, I don't think it's an accident that reader-response theory coincided with the rise of postmodern metafiction in the 1980s: they are both responses to a cultural Zeitgeist, if you will, that reacted against the critical or theoretical dominance of both authorial intentionality and textual autonomy by asserting the hermeneutic agency of the reader.

BELLS: Can we say that your theoretical interests started with narrative self-consciousness (*Narcissistic Narrative*), parody (*A Theory of Parody*), and irony (*Irony's Edge*)? Have you come to any new conclusions in these three areas?

Yes, that's certainly where I began. My dissertation work on narrative self-reflexivity meant that I was intellectually "primed", so to speak, for the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s. Because that art (in all its manifestations) was parodic and ironic, I soon realized I had to theorize those elements as well as the self-consciousness itself. In each case, I've again tried to theorize outward from art works themselves, rather than developing a theory of irony or parody and imposing it upon the works. Modern and postmodern parodic works of art taught me that parody wasn't just aimed at ridicule, as it had been, perhaps, in the eighteenth century. In our contemporary culture, on the contrary, parody has a range of aims that can run the gamut from reverence and respect to savage put-down. The need to open up that range of both irony and parody was something

that twentieth-century artworks taught me, and that I subsequently tried to theorize.

BELLS: You have contributed greatly to the possibilities of understanding Postmodernism in your books, *The Poetics of Postmodernism,* which has been translated in Serbia and is studied at some courses at the University of Belgrade, *The Politics of Postmodernism,* and *The Canadian Postmodern.* How much does Canada still live in the postmodern world? And what about its contemporary literary scene? Can you rank the first five Canadian prose authors?

I've always thought that Canada is the perfect postmodern nation: decentered (each province and each region is culturally autonomous, in many ways, without even mentioning francophone Quebec); open to ex-centricity and difference (its multiculturalism policy is law); marginal and happy with its marginality (living next to the USA, that is our fate). From the 1960s onward, there was a determined and deliberate move to define and support Canadian culture, threatened as it was by strong American institutions and customs. This was very successful, and today we have, I believe, a vibrant culture in all the arts in Canada. In fact, there are so many fine writers that I find it hard to rank them. All I can do is say that, among my personal favourites, are the canonical (Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood) and the new (Miriam Toews and George Elliott Clarke).

BELLS: Your latest book *Theory of Adaptation* illustrates your interests in adaptation as a mode of storytelling? How new is this?

My interest in adaptation likely stems from my work in parody (a form of ironic adaptation, in a sense), but was more directly provoked by my more general realization that, with the appearance of a new media of diffusion—television, film, but especially the internet—we seem to need more and more stories to fill the “content” of these media. And, what is even more interesting is that it appears that when we need more stories to tell, we tend to REtell old stories: hence, adaptation. I became fascinated by the fact that we keep recounting the same narratives, but in different media: there are ballets, operas, comic books and movies made adapting Shakespearean plays; there are videogame and graphic novel adaptations of popular films. We are dealing here, then, with both familiarity and, yet,

difference/novelty. I tried to think through the reasons for the popularity of adaptations, the forms that adaptation takes, and what happens when a story gets told across cultures—gets transculturated or indigenized. Needless to say, in the process I learned a lot about our contemporary culture!

BELLS: In your earlier years you did much editing and translation, and coined a term "crypto-ethnic." Can you discuss it?

My original training was in modern languages (Italian, French, German, English), so translation was a natural interest for me. But I'm also, despite my Scottish marital name, the daughter of Italian immigrants to Canada. I grew up in a very Italian culture, though I spoke English at home. When I first went to university, I studied Italian and fell in love with the language and its culture. I then did an MA in Italian at Cornell University, and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. I once jokingly used the term "crypto-ethnic" to describe a number of women of my generation (a generation of women who still, by convention, took their husbands' names upon marriage) who were actually hiding a different ethnic identity behind their married names. In my case there was a Bortolotti hiding behind the Hutcheon. Interestingly, even in multicultural Toronto, I discovered that one experiences life differently as an Italian and as an "Anglo"!

BELLS: Lately, you have been working collaboratively with Michael Hutcheon on interdisciplinary projects, such as the intersection of medical and cultural history, studied through the vehicle of opera. This resulted in three books so far: *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death; Bodily Charm: Living Opera; Opera: The Art of Dying*. How strong is the connection between the two histories?

Medical and cultural history are totally intertwined, as the work of Sander Gilman and others has argued. Medicine is practiced in a social context and always reflects it. Opera is an art form that has a long, continuous 400-year history and, because it is not terribly subtle (its plots are concentrated, because it takes longer to sing than speak a line of text), it betrays well both the desires and the anxieties of those who create it. We became interested first in moments in medical history when understanding about disease changed radically: for example, when it was discovered

that tuberculosis was not an inherited illness, but one you caught from being too close to someone. The contagiousness of TB changed medical understanding utterly. But it also changed cultural representations of it. Verdi's *La Traviata* was composed before that discovery; Puccini's *La Boheme* comes after. The difference is that in the former, Violetta thinks her disease is her mother's legacy, made worse by her lifestyle as a Parisian courtesan; in the latter, TB is finally recognized as a disease of the poor and the result of urban crowded housing. Yet, there are some very strong continuities, despite the medical shift: in both cases, the women suffering from the disease are young, beautiful (*because of* their illness) and sexually active. The linking of sexuality and disease is something that is a constant, as we learned from studying these operas. In the second book, on the operatic body, we looked at both real bodies (of singers and audience members) and represented bodies on the operatic stage. When your "instrument" is housed in your body, as it is with singers, there is a corporeal level to performing that cannot be denied. And opera is, at its best, a live, staged, embodied art form. In our third book, we tried to figure out why, if our western culture really is as death-denying as sociologists say it is, opera (an art form obsessed with love and death) should prosper in our times. We developed a theory related to the medieval devotional practice called the "ars moriendi" (art of dying), specifically one called the "contemplatio mortis": in this, one meditated upon one's own death—in great personal and dramatized detail. Its suffering, the farewell to one's loved ones, etc. were carefully and thoroughly rehearsed. Then, after this exercise, one went back to one's life with both renewed pleasure in being alive and, having rehearsed the end, more prepared for one's own demise. We decided that operas about death worked in the same way: the clear artifice of opera (everything is sung) allows the kind of distancing that makes it easier to contemplate death, but the power of the music brings home the message nonetheless.

BELLS: What are you currently studying? Is it creativity and age in the late style and late lives of opera composers, as I found out from the Internet?

That is certainly one of the two projects I'm working on. It is being undertaken with my husband, once again. We're looking at the last works of a series of opera composers who led long creative lives and left ample

testimony (in the form of letters and journals) about their feelings about aging and creativity: Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Leos Janacek, Richard Strauss, Benjamin Britten and Olivier Messiaen. We're interested in how their last works were received by audiences, then and now, in the light of the knowledge that these WERE their very last works—for we tend to give special value to these in our culture. Often these final operas marked a change in direction for the composer, either in style or subject matter. Sometimes this was received with applause; at other times, quite the contrary. It is these and other contradictions that we want to explore. The other project is a solo project that I am doing alone and it is on the ethics, politics and economics of reviewing in general—that is, reviewing in all the arts, restaurant, hotel reviewing, and so on. I think it's the right time to do this study, since we are witnessing a major shift in reviewing practices with the internet: the customer reviewer and the blogger have become competitors with the more professionalized reviewer, perhaps changing the stakes entirely.

BELLS: You are the recipient of major fellowships and awards, and numerous honorary degrees, and in 2000 you were elected the 117th President of the Modern Language Association of America, the third Canadian to hold this position, and the first Canadian woman. What has this experience told you?

That's a good question. First of all, I learned much about the profession of literary and language study in North America by having this position within the largest humanities scholarly association in the world. The MLA is *the* spokesperson for our field in this part of the world, and has been an ardent defender of what we do, both to governments and to the general public, as well as within the university setting. As a Canadian, I work in a somewhat different academic climate, so there was a lot for me to learn about the American context. What I learned most, though, was that our profession is full of dedicated teachers and scholars who really care about culture, about their students, about the kind of world we create for ourselves. This was immensely inspiring.

BELLS: Your interests are many: theory, literature, teaching, interdisciplinary projects… They have defined your position as a critic at this moment. Can you describe it?

I always joke that I am "intellectually promiscuous"—that as soon as I've finished one project, I move on to the next and am not eager to go back to talk about the last one. I am retiring early from active teaching in order to have more time to do research and write. I love teaching, but it is time to write the books that are left "in me," if that makes sense. Yet, when I write, it is always with an eye to pedagogy: I have always thought of my students as my ideal audience. Now that I am retiring, however, I think I should start to think about a larger audience, perhaps—a non-academic one. That is the new challenge for me, and I look forward to it.