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Résumé de l'article

Recent Canadian literary and cultural criticism has emphasized the view that Canadians share no single, definable national identity, other than, perhaps, an awareness of multiplicity and difference and the sense of irony that comes from the recognition of the plural, differential, discursive, and therefore unstable nature of identity itself. Such assertions (proposed particularly in the Canadian context by Linda Hutcheon and Robert Kroetsch) concerning the essentially ironic quality of a particular nation's identity is in fact a longstanding, recurring feature of the discourse of nation. In fact, to assert an ironic identity or an absence of identity may be a very traditional method of aestheticizing a particular nation's character and of privileging this people as the more universal people and the nation of the future.

Namelessness, Irony, and National Character in Contemporary Canadian Criticism and the Critical Tradition

ADAM CARTER

"Oh National Characters, what has become of you?"
— Johann Gottfried Von Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to the 1864 publication of *Selections From Canadian Poets,* Edward Hartley Dewart asserted that a "national literature is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy" (ix). While critics today would likely concur, after Benedict Anderson, that literature has indeed played a significant role in the production of nationhood, they would be less likely to assent with Dewart to the necessary virtue of this role, particularly as it validates the unifying function of a *national character.* There is an undeniably discredited, atavistic ring to the phrase "national character," as though anyone who used it might next be reaching for instruments to measure the circumference on one's cranium or the slope of one's forehead. References to national character long ago gave way to the more respectable (perhaps because more philosophical and/or psychological sounding) "national identity," although this phrase too can evoke a certain embarrassed uneasiness. The concept of *national identity,* along with interrelated concepts such as a *national* literature and, indeed, *nation* itself, have in recent decades been critically examined from a variety of perspectives. Historians have examined the relatively recent origins of "ancient nations" and their rituals. Poststructuralist theories have been suspicious of the nation's claim to a stable unitary identity and its dependence upon organic metaphors of growth and maturation. Furthermore, perspectives foreground-

ing issues of imperialism, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality have variously looked upon the concept of nation as a central means by which the conflictual and heterogenous reality of any society is falsely neutralized and homogenized.[1] Thus, while the critical study of national literatures may not be proceeding in any single direction, and while critics may otherwise find little enough to agree upon, it does seem generally agreed that the notion of literature as the expression of a unified national character seems outmoded, a legacy of the eighteenth century and, in particular, the Romantic period, of which we have now divested ourselves.

In the Canadian context, recent metacritical reflection has challenged what Frank Davey calls "metaphors of unity" (19), such as Northrop Frye's influential "garrison mentality," articulated most famously in Frye's conclusion to the 1965 edition of the *Literary History of Canada.* Such metaphors, in Jonathan Kertzer's words, implied that "all cultural expressions are shaped by the same national character" (21). One might take the concluding words of W.H. New's introduction to the fourth volume of the *Literary History of Canada,* published in 1990 and covering the period from 1972 to 1984, as definitively marking the movement away from such older critical assumptions:

> As far the 1970s and 1980s are concerned, historians essentially gave up any fixed notion of the 'whole' society; the whole was inapprehensible, in flux. Criticism, too, edged away from seeing literature as foremost an expression of a single national character. Recent research in psychology called into question a related notion about the wholeness of the self. (xxxii)

The *Zeitgeist,* it would seem, has moved beyond national character.

In keeping with the critical examination of nation and national identity, Canadian literary and cultural criticism over the last number of years has emphasized the view that Canadians have no single, definable national identity, except, perhaps, insofar as Canadians' peculiar awareness of multiplicity and difference might itself be said to constitute an identity in contrast to the more statically and totalizingly conceived identities of other nations. (Often the implicit or explicit point of reference here is the United States.) Likewise, it is asserted that Canadians share an *ironic* sense of identity, an identity characterized by doubleness and an awareness of the plural, differential, discursive and hence unstable nature of identity, be these identities of gender, race, ethnicity, or that which most problematically attempts to encompass all of these — nation.

This paper will examine the theory of Canadian identity as a name-

less, absent, or at best ironic identity, as it has been articulated by Robert Kroetsch and Linda Hutcheon, both of whom have influenced the directions of Canadian criticism over the last two decades and who may, therefore, be taken to represent broader assumptions. In what might seem a startling but I hope also an edifying juxtaposition, the paper then seeks to bring these recent statements into relation with other statements on aesthetics, irony, and national (non-)identity deriving from the mid to late eighteenth century — an era historians generally look to as a formative period of modern nationalism. My purpose is not to argue, contra Kroetsch and Hutcheon, that there is in fact a stable and unitary national identity in Canada, or elsewhere for that matter. I attempt to show, rather, that assertions concerning the essentially ironic quality of a particular nation's identity, and what I take to be parallel assertions to the effect that a nation's people possess no defining character, are in fact longstanding, recurring features of the discourses of nation. Indeed, Friedrich Schlegel's late eighteenth-century theories of irony, from which our contemporary understanding is derived, is inextricably tied to his imaginings of an emergent German national character, a character which is conceived of in terms parallel to his theory of the structure of irony. Such repetitions suggest that we need to think more critically about whether such assertions, as is often assumed, effectively critique or move *beyond* older, and supposedly more naive and rigidly totalizing conceptions of nation and national character. To assert an ironic identity or the absence of identity may indeed be one very traditional way of aestheticizing a particular nation's character and of privileging this people as the more universal people and the nation of the future.

* * *

In the essay "No Name Is My Name," collected in *The Lovely Treachery of Words,* Kroetsch suggests that Canadian literature has long resisted and put into question assertions of a stable definable identity, whether such assertions be as specific as the identity of the self or as general as the identity of the nation. In arguing this idea he points fascinatingly to what he sees as the uncanny repetition — from the pre-confederation writings of Thomas Haliburton's Sam Slick stories, to Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*, A.M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*, Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Episode*, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* — of a *nameless* narrator: the supposed origin and centre of the narrative that refuses to name itself. He invites us to think contrastingly of that cornerstone of the American lit-

erary tradition that begins with the confident assertion of name: "Call me *Ishmael*." In the American tradition, Kroetsch argues, when nameless characters appear, as in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, their name-lessness has often been imposed upon them by oppressive social forces; in the Canadian tradition namelessness is a self-imposed and deliberate strategy (44). Such namelessness, furthermore, makes itself evident not only in a nameless narrator, but in the characteristically marginal loca-tions of much Canadian literature, such as Sinclair Ross's fictional prai-rie town of Horizon, which, as Kroetsch writes, "suggests a no-place that is tantalizingly visible but always out of reach: a version of namelessness" (44). And novels such as Klein's *The Second Scroll* and Atwood's *Surfac-ing,* in addition to having unnamed narrators, explore self-consciously the difficulties of naming — the problematic relation of sign and referent.

Kroetsch suggests toward the end of the essay that this prevalence of namelessness and problems of naming in Canadian literature may be sig-nificant for several reasons. The initial reasons he lists would regard namelessness as a negative condition that might eventually be surmounted in the positivity of an achieved identity. First, there is the problem the Ca-nadian writer in English or French confronts of writing in a language inherited from elsewhere. Kroetsch writes, "The problem then is not so much that of knowing one's identity as it is that of how to relate that newly evolving identity to its inherited or 'given' names. And the first technique might be simply to hold those names in suspension, to let the identity speak itself out of a willed namelessness" (51). Second, Kroetsch relates such namelessness to Canada's sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis the United States and what Kroetsch conceives as America's own powerfully confident "definitions of self, freedom, heroism, society, nature, happi-ness" (51). These definitions Kroetsch locates in nineteenth-century American Romanticism, which provides the informing basis of American literature. Canadian literature by contrast is largely a product of the later twentieth century when all such definitions have been placed in consid-erable doubt by pressures from historical and theoretical sources. And further to this sense of powerlessness as a source of namelessness, Kroetsch tacitly invokes Frye's garrison mentality to suggest that the enormous pressure the community has placed upon the individual in Canadian culture can lead to an erasure of self (51).

These, then, are several possible understandings of namelessness in Canadian culture as a negative condition that one might desire to sur-mount in order to achieve a positive identity. Kroetsch does not disqualify these reasons, but his points here are not particularly original and they are

not, one senses, where his interest lies. He concludes, rather, by suggesting that Canadians might look at such namelessness in a more positive light. Namelessness may indeed be a space of freedom and plurality, a generative place, just as the nameless narrators of the texts Kroetsch examines end up, despite their namelessness, and perhaps because of their namelessness, generating story. Kroetsch concludes,

> It may be the villain (namelessness) turns out to be the hero in the story of the Canadian story. The nameless figure who seems to threaten us may in fact be leading us to high ground. To avoid a name does not (as Haliburton's narrator so well realized) deprive one of an identity; indeed, it may offer a plurality of identities. Like the epic hero of old, we might even lay claim to a certain virtue in our ability to withhold and deceive. In a willful misremembering of Homer's Odysseus we might say, ambiguously, proudly, tauntingly, no name is my name! (52)

Taking this line of argument, one might regard the fact that "No Name" has become, in certain Canadian supermarkets, a successful brand-name for cheap generic groceries as a further testament to this curiously pervasive, but perhaps after all valorous, negation of identity in Canadian culture. As Kroetsch says, "we cannot name our own brands of booze with any sense of conviction" (47).

That for Kroetsch the Canadian identity should reside in a certain namelessness is in keeping with his suggestion, explored in the essay "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy," that "Canada is a postmodern country" (22). An "assumed story" or a "meta-narrative," Kroetsch asserts in this essay "has traditionally been basic to nationhood" (21). Again Kroetsch's point of reference is primarily the United States. He writes, "An obvious example [of such a metanarrative] is the persistence of The American Dream, with its assumptions about individual freedom, the importance of the frontier, the immigrant experience" (21). Traditionally, one of the functions of art, Kroetsch argues, has been the location and elaboration of such national metanarratives. Unlike Americans, however, Canadians have never been able to agree upon an overarching shared story that would encompass and unify their nationhood. We see this for example in the often commented-upon absence of national heroes in Canadian culture, those central characters in a metanarrative of nation. In its culture and its politics Canada has been characterized, rather, by debate and irresolution about its defining metanarrative, by both a search for and a resistance to metanarrative. Like the namelessness that is Canada's name, this disunity, Kroetsch suggests, is in fact Canada's unity. Like

namelessness, disunity is not a negative condition that should be be-moaned. The debate and irresolution of disunity is valorized as an open-ended Bakhtinian dialogism that permits of freedom and heterogeneity. As Kroetsch writes, "we [Canadians] survive by working with a low level of self definition and national definition. We insist on staying multiple" (28).

Thus, in its Lyotardian incredulity toward the unifying metanarrative Canada has long been a postmodern nation — and Kroetsch finds it sig-nificant that it should have been the government of Quebec that commis-sioned this French philosopher to write *The Postmodern Condition* (22). To the extent that the world is becoming more postmodern, Canada, Kroetsch implies, is ahead of the game, further along the historical path, certainly than the United States. Canada was largely invisible in the cen-tralizing era of modernism, but now that we have entered the postmodern epoch of the margins Canada is coming into its own. And to the extent that nations have traditionally depended upon unifying metanarratives, Canada may be, in the phrase of another of Kroetsch's essays in this col-lection, "beyond nationalism" (64). Canada is, Kroetsch seems to imply, paradoxically a postnational nation.

Kroetsch's views as I have outlined them are supported by Linda Hutcheon in *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies,* which cites Kroetsch among many other writers and artists in elaborating upon a similar, and once again avowedly *postmodern*, view of Canadian culture and identity. In her preface to this work Hutcheon likewise points to the apparent problem of establishing Canadian national identity and pro-poses as "the simple, if somewhat perverse" premise of the book that "in-stead of lamenting our state and status as Canadians in search of an identity, instead of bewailing our fate in the name of some sort of collec-tive cultural inferiority complex, … we make a virtue out of the fence-sitting, bet-hedging sense of the difficult doubleness of being Canadian yet North American, of being Canadian yet part of a multinational, global political economy." "That virtue's name," Hutcheon asserts, "may well be irony" (vii).

Irony, Hutcheon elaborates, while it exists in multiple forms, is preeminently a trope of doubleness. It sets up some sort of opposition and either, as in straightforward verbal irony, avowedly says one thing while meaning the opposite or, in what Hutcheon describes as New Critical Irony, attempts a heroic synthesis of contradictory positions or, as in what she describes as postmodern irony, allows the contradictions to remain "delight[ing] in each other and their mutual provisionality" (12). While

Hutcheon allows that ironies of different sorts abound in Canada, it is clearly this postmodern irony that she takes to be the most currently significant. And Canada is fertile ground for such irony: "There certainly seems," Hutcheon writes, "little in Canada that is not (or has not been) inherently doubled and therefore at least structurally ripe for ironizing. Its history offers many a binary opposition: native/colonial, federal/provincial, not to mention English/French" (15). The "particular space of irony in Canada," she asserts, "has been mapped out over more than a century of negotiating the many dualities and multiplicities that have come to define this nation" (vii). If irony is a virtue, Canada promises to be, indeed, a virtuous nation.

Hutcheon's notion of Canada's ironic national identity is allied with Kroetsch's notion of the namelessness thatt is Canada's name and the disunity that is its unity. Irony as a trope of negation likewise refuses stable identity and resolution. Hutcheon quotes Raymond Filip as an example of the irony of Canadian identity: "I am nothing left to be but Canadian" (65). Here, in this emptying out of national identity, irony and namelessness conjoin. As with Kroetsch's validation of namelessness and disunity, Hutcheon sees in irony or non-identity a critique of older, more rigid and naive notions of nation and national identity. "The entire question of Canadian identity," Hutcheon writes, "has become a kind of playground — or battlefield — for the postmodern as well as the postcolonial defining of 'difference' and value" (84); Hutcheon asserts of various verbal and visual ironies in Canadian culture that they "deconstruct the Canadian identity" — that they subvert in the name of difference and plurality whatever might have been taken as defining Canadian identity such as its "male, Anglo-Saxon, and capitalist defining essences" (84).

* * *

While Hutcheon and Kroetsch's theories of the irony and/or namelessness of national identity present themselves, in part, as a critique of more conventional, authoritatively unifying assertions of national identity, these assertions, I would suggest, need to be understood as part of a lengthy tradition of aestheticizing *national character*: that is, of drawing an identity between aesthetic form (variously conceived within such categories as the beautiful, the sublime, and the ironic) and the character of a "national people." Benedict Anderson's influential conception of the nation as an "imagined community" suggests a fundamental homology between

the nation and the aesthetic artifact, and we frequently find aesthetic and nationalist discourses inextricably intertwined and supporting one another as each discourse attempts to comprehend and to mediate the relation of the general and the individual.[2]

Perhaps one of the most explicit and fascinating examples of the aestheticizing of national character is provided by Immanuel Kant's treatise *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* an early "pre-critical" work published in 1764, seventeen years prior to the publication of the first of his three major critiques. The fourth and final section of this treatise is devoted to a consideration of the aesthetic characteristics of different nationalities. Here Kant articulates what we might see as a paradigm in the construction and aestheticizing of national character: the representation of the privileged national character (usually the one belonging to the writer) as a beautiful synthesis, a sublime surpassing, or an ironic *hovering between* the extremes represented by the characters of other nations.[3] Thus of the German national character Kant asserts,

> The German has a feeling *mixed* from that of an Englishman and that of a Frenchman, but appears to come nearer to the first, and any greater similarity to the latter is only affected and imitated. [The German] has a fortunate *combination* of feeling, both in that of the sublime and in that of the beautiful; and if in the first he does not equal an Englishman, nor in the second a Frenchman, he yet surpasses both in so far as he *unites* them. He displays more complaisance in society than the first, and if indeed he does not bring as much pleasant liveliness and wit into the company as the Frenchman, still he expresses more moderation and understanding. (104)

As Ian Balfour has shown in his examination of aesthetics and national character in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we see here first how "the nation of the other is construed in reductive, violent ways, whether in negative or positive terms; [and second how] one's own nation is read as *complex and heterogeneous*, and in such a way as to elevate that nation, sometimes to a height above all others."[4] Kroetsch, in his predication of a complex and heterogeneous Canadian identity that contrasts with a rather monolithically conceived American identity, is engaged in a parallel manoeuvre.

If Kant's example allows us to see very explicitly the aestheticizing of national character and the use of such an aesthetic discourse to privilege one nation over another in ways that invite comparison to Kroetsch and Hutcheon, Kant's statement differs from these contemporary theo-

rists by suggesting that the German national character is both a synthesis and a transcendence, a "uniting" and "surpassing," of the English and French national characters. We must turn to Friedrich Schlegel in the later eighteenth century, one of the key theorists of Romanticism, to find a writer who imagines the German national character, in ways more strikingly parallel to Kroetsch and Hutcheon, as a kind of non-synthetic or negative dialectic between the polarities that he contrastingly imagines as being constituted by the English and French national characters. The name Schlegel gives to this non-synthetic dialectic is *irony*.

Schlegel's concept of irony has been variously interpreted and debated by generations of Romanticists.[5] The deliberately fragmentary, aphoristic, enigmatic, and even ironic fashion in which Schlegel makes his pronouncements on irony are the stuff of which academic industries are made. Nonetheless, most discussions regard a non-synthetic alternation, or hovering, between opposing positions to be central to Schlegel's concept of irony (Eichner 63; Handwerk 15). In one influential statement Schlegel characterizes this as a fluctuation between "self-creation and self-destruction":

> Naive is what is or seems to be natural, individual, or classical to the point of irony, or else to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction. If it's simply instinctive, then it's childlike, childish, or silly; if it's merely intentional, then it gives rise to affectation. The beautiful, poetical, ideal naive must combine intention and instinct. The essence of intention is in this sense freedom, though intention isn't consciousness by a long shot. *(Athenaeum 51)*[6]

Irony, to briefly rehearse Schlegel's crucial articulation in this fragment, which draws upon a complex background of post-Kantian theory (most notably in Schiller's famous distinction between *naive* and *sentimental* poetry) is conceived of as that which combines the instinctual and the intentional, in the sense of fluctuating between them. "Instinct" is here equated with nature and the natural, instinctual forces within us. We cannot be wholly conscious of or control such forces, and thus they stand as the negation of the self understood as an at least partially autonomous agent. Therefore, that which is dominated by instinct is "merely childlike, childish, or silly." "Intention" is that which opposes such natural or instinctive forces, attempting to rework them according to some design of one's own, a process that affirms and creates the self. Thus "the essence of intention is in this sense freedom."

The dialectic of self-creation and self-destruction is played out in

the artist's movement vis-à-vis the work between the instinctive and the intentional, the natural and the willed or invented. For Schlegel, the way to achieve such a movement is to alternate between enthusiasm and skepticism, "inspiration and criticism" (*Athenaeum 116*), toward the creative artifact, alternately affirming it as natural and true and negating such a naive position by recognizing that it is invented or constructed. Thus irony, Schlegel asserts in his notebooks, is "a permanent parabasis [*eine permanente Parekbase*]" (*Kritische Ausgabe 18*: 85) — parabasis being a term for those moments in ancient Greek comedy when the chorus would speak to the audience in the name of the author, thus dispelling the illusion of the play.

The lengthier fragment *Lyceum 108*, in defining irony as "the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation," reiterates and expands upon the antinomies that irony brings into conjunction and holds in play: the "playful and serious," the "guilelessly open and deeply hidden," "*savoir vivre* and scientific spirit," a "perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy." In a crucial articulation Schlegel then indicates one of the key purposes of such a non-synthetic dialectic: "[Irony] contains and arouses a feeling of *indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative*, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (*Lyceum 108*; emphasis added). Perhaps the chief concern of Schlegel's fragments is this "indissoluble antagonism." One crucial form this takes, in the wake of Kant and German idealism, is Schlegel's concern with *system*.

A philosophical system is an attempt to construct an absolute of sorts, a totality within which each particular finds its meaning and its place. Schlegel, however, will repeatedly emphasize (in metaphors that clearly import the political concerns underlying his theoretical position) the violence that any system and its concepts must perform upon the particular in order to marshall it into a system: "The demonstrations of philosophy are simply demonstrations in the sense of military jargon. And its deductions aren't much better than those of politics; even in the sciences possession is nine-tenths of the law" (*Athenaeum 82*). The totality presented by a system is always only what Schlegel describes, in a suggestive phrase that anticipates later theories of ideology, most notably Jameson's "strategies of containment" as "polemical totality" (*Athenaeum 399*), a partial, *interested* version of the whole.

Schlegel will also affirm, however, that concepts and indeed system are both inescapable and necessary: "Since people are always so much against hypotheses, they should try sometime to begin studying history without

one. It's impossible to say that a thing is, without saying what it is. In the very process of thinking of facts, one relates them to concepts, and, surely, it is not a matter of indifference to which" (*Athenaeum 226*). "Formal logic and empirical psychology," Schlegel elsewhere maintains, "are philosophical grotesques. For whatever is interesting in an arithmetic of the four elements or in an experimental physics of the spirit can surely only derive from *a contrast of form and content*" (*Athenaeum 75*; emphasis added).

Given Schlegel's emphasis upon both the violence *and* the necessity of the concept, his philosophical position is best summed up in his famous dictum, "It's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two" (*Athenaeum 53*). Irony, as Schlegel's term for the dialectical interplay of such antinomies, for the "indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (*Lyceum 108*), and for the "contrast of form and content," best describes his aesthetic and philosophical ideal. In a manner that strongly attests to the interconnections between discourses of aesthetics and nationalism, Schlegel constructs the German national character in ways that parallel this philosophical and aesthetic ideal.

Among Schlegel's fragments that theorize about irony and Romantic poetry are numerous others, largely forgotten, devoted to, among other things, *national character*, particularly the characters of the French, English, and German peoples. Schlegel conceives of the German national character as fluctuating between the totalizingly conceived identities of the French and English: between the "strange and rather tasteless universality" (*Athenaeum 423*) of French political and philosophical radicalism on the one hand, a sort of French will-to-system, and the "pathological history of common sense" (*Athenaeum 61*) provided by English empiricism on the other hand. Like the ironic aesthetic artifact, the German national character fluctuates between and mediates the universal and the particular, the body and the head, the ordered and the spontaneous, system and its absence.

Athenaeum 360 critiques the overly systematic character of French thought:

> If any art exists that could be called the black art, then it must be the art of making nonsense fluent, clear, and flexible, and of organizing it into a mass. The French possess masterpieces of this kind. Every great calamity is at its deepest root a serious grimace, a *mauvaise plaisanterie*. Therefore, all hail and honor to those heroes who never tire of struggling against a folly that often carries in its most trivial aspects

the germ of an endless succession of horrible devastations! Lessing and
Fichte are the princes of peace of future centuries. (*Athenaeum 360*)

Schlegel's thought, as we have seen, represents an attempt to negotiate
between system and its pretensions to totality on the one hand and, on
the other hand, the "equally fatal" (*Athenaeum 53*) predicament of hav-
ing no system, no perspective upon the whole. *Athenaeum 360* clearly
indicates the political motivation for the initial moment of this dialectic
movement — the critique of system. French thought is here represented
as propounding facile systems, constructed too hastily, whose apparent
truths and worldly applications are too easily grasped by too many, result-
ing in this "endless succession of horrible devastations." Following the
logic of the contrast Schlegel establishes between French and German
thought the latter, here represented by the predominantly aesthetic and
philosophical writers Lessing and Fichte, is valorized for being, by impli-
cation, complex, esoteric, non-instrumental, and thus lacking any dan-
gerous revolutionary applications.

    If Schlegel's French with their "strange and rather tasteless univer-
sality" are represented as overly abstract, rational, and systematic, his
English are represented as the binary opposite of this polarity. They are
persistently associated with a vulgar materiality and a dull "common
sense" (*Athenaeum 61)* empiricism. Thus the French and English are
rather arbitrarily placed within the overall structure of Schlegel's philo-
sophical/aesthetic problematic with its attempt to negotiate between the
universal and the particular, system and non-system.

    The picture of a peculiarly English materialism is repeatedly empha-
sized in Schlegel's *Fragments*. Schlegel refers to Gibbon's love of the Ro-
man's "materialistic pomp" and suggests snidely that "a country divided
between mercantilism and mathematics [i.e., England]" can only respect
a "quantitative nobility" (*Athenaeum 219*). In Schlegel's *Fragments*, then,
the English stand in for the object world, materiality itself. In terms of a
"national mind set," the association of the English with the material ob-
ject is consistent with associating them with an *atheoretical* empiricism,
a way of thinking that remains fixated upon the merely particular and
thus fails to achieve any generalized, theoretical understanding. Thus
"English criticism," Schlegel asserts, "consists of nothing but applying the
philosophy of common sense (which is itself only a permutation of the
natural and scholastic philosophies) to poetry without any understanding
for poetry" (*Athenaeum 389*). *Athenaeum 61* also derides the merely
"common sense" attitude of the "English mind," but even more signifi-

cantly it does so in a manner explicitly articulating a nationalist struggle between English and German thought. This fragment thus forms a counterpart to *Athenaeum 360*, which, as discussed above, contrasts French and German thought. In its entirety the fragment reads: "The few attacks against Kantian philosophy which exist are the most important documents for *a pathological history of common sense*. This epidemic, which started in England, even threatened for a while to infect German philosophy" (*Athenaeum 61*; emphasis added). In direct contrast to French thought which in its excessive universalizing is "strongly hostile to instinct" (*Athenaeum 296*), divorced from the body, the figuration of English common sense as a "pathological" disease threatening to "infect" German thought confirms its material bodily status but as an equally unhealthy excess.

The model of the German national character in Schlegel's *Fragments* is determined, by its carefully constructed interplay between the French and English national characters, between the "philosophical grotesques" of "formal logic and empirical psychology" (*Athenaeum 75*). The ideal national character is epitomized in the figures of the critic/intellectual and the artist, or most ideally (as Schlegel fashioned himself and romantic poetry as a whole), in that which is at once both creative and self-reflectively critical, which is to say by one of the several senses of the term one can trace in the *Fragments*, that which is ironic.

In *Ideas 120* Friedrich Schlegel most emphatically posits the German artist and intellectual's character as an ideal type:

> The spirit of the old heroes of German art and science will remain ours for as long as we are Germans. The German artist either has *no character at all* [*keinen Charakter*] or else that of an Albrecht Dürer, Kepler, Hans Sachs, or of a Luther and Jacob Böhme. *Righteous, guileless, thorough, precise, and profound is this character, but also innocent and somewhat clumsy.* (*Ideas 120*; emphasis added)

This account of the German artist's character, and by extension the German national character of which it is the ideal type, are consistent with Schlegel's theorization of irony in *Athenaeum 51* as discussed above. In "combin[ing] intention and instinct," the German national character will either have "no character at all" as one cancels out the other in a dialectic of "self-creation and self-destruction" (*Athenaeum 51)*, or it will have a character that hovers between both, that is "righteous, guileless, thorough, precise, and profound … but also innocent and somewhat clumsy."

Irony here is the aesthetic mode that privileges the German over the French and the English. In his *namelessness* the German is the more complex, heterogenous, and open-ended national character.

* * *

While it is Hutcheon who most overtly names the Canadian identity as an ironic one, it is Kroetsch who most perfectly rehearses Schlegel's privileging of a national character in terms of an ironic fluctuation between system, or order, and its absence — polarities figured as the national characteristics of two other nations. With respect to the nameless narrator in Thomas Haliburton's Sam Slick stories, Kroetsch maintains that despite the pre-Confederation publication date of the work, we can find in this narrator a kind of paradigm of the Canadian national character. Haliburton's unnamed Squire is both attracted to the carnivalesque energy of the Yankee Sam Slick, a plain-speaking "destroyer of hierarchies" (43), and simultaneously attracted to the order and law of his British heritage. "We see here," Kroetsch asserts, "an early manifestation of the Canadian personality. The man who exploits social hierarchy by being falsely named into it wants also to be free of it. *He wants to have a system that gives him identity and stature, but he wants to be free of that system*" (42; emphasis added). In yet more generalizing terms Kroetsch writes in "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue" that "Canadians seek the lost and everlasting moment when chaos and order were synonymous. They seek that timeless split second in time when the one, in the process of becoming the other, was itself the other" (68). As with Schlegel's more overtly nationalistic discourse, Kroetsch's avowedly postmodern and even postnational discourse figures the privileged Canadian national character as existing in a complex tension between system and non-system, conceived as the contrasting national characters of two other nations. In this non-synthetic, or negative, dialectic between two polarities, the nameless Canadian, much as Schlegel asserts of the German artist, may have "*keinen Charakter*," but such an absence, rather than being conceived of as a shortcoming, is a space of freedom and generation. Kroetsch explicitly associates this process with irony in asserting that Haliburton remains *self-conscious* of his strategy and what he could achieve with it. "But Haliburton, in his first 'refusing to name' scene, was brilliantly aware of the *ironies* of his posture" (44; emphasis added).

I will consider three final examples to further establish a tradition of predicating an absence of national character as a strategy of privileging a

particular national character, the first from the mid-eighteenth century, the second from the later eighteenth century, and the third from the twentieth century just prior to Kroetsch's and Hutcheon's assertions but often regarded as representing critical assumptions that contemporary critics have put into question.

David Hume's essay "Of National Characters," published 1748, is in many respects a sensitive, Enlightenment-era argument against the "climate theory" of national characteristics proposed by Charles Montesquieu, among others (Richards 142) — the idea that national character might be based upon what Hume calls "physical causes" (200) such as soil or climate, an idea that would have a dangerous trajectory over the next two centuries of European and world history. National character, Hume argues, is, rather, the product of what he calls "*moral* causes" which include "the nature of the government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbors, and such like circumstances" (198). As such, Hume points out, national character is subject to change and evolution rather than being some organic quiddity that springs from the unique character of climate and soil. This admirable position does not preclude Hume, however, from reducing various nations of Europe to single characteristics. "The ARABIC is uncouth and disagreeable: The MUSCOVITE soft and musical" (209). When Hume arrives at the English, however, such reduction strikes him as being no longer possible, and he asserts, "the ENGLISH of any people in the universe, have *the least of a national character*; unless this very singularity may pass for such" (207; emphasis added). For Hume such an absence of national character among the English is a testament to the freedom afforded by English society and its mixture of monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic institutions, which produce what Defoe likewise praised as "that Het'rogenous Thing, *An Englishman*" (qtd. in Anderson x). Again, one's own nation is the complex and heterogenous, even to the point of having "*keinen Charakter.*"

Kant in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* — a work published in 1797, late in his career, although based upon popular lectures he had delivered for decades (Gregor ix) — returns to his earlier concerns with national character and takes particular issue with Hume. Kant perceived clearly that Hume was attempting to privilege the English by refusing to attribute any fixed national character to the nation, and he would have none of it. He countered — in what can be read as an anthropological and nationalistic application of his philosophical argument with Hume concerning the status of the *a priori* — that Hume "is mistaken. … England

and France," he writes, "are perhaps the only nations to which we can assign a definite and … unchangeable inborn character, which is the source of their acquired and conventional character" (*Anthropology* 174). As concerns the English, "this character is *arrogant rudeness,* as opposed to the courtesy that lends itself to easy familiarity" (174). On the other hand, Kant asserts that the German is a "a man of all countries and climes" (179). Germans furthermore "have *no national pride* and are too cosmopolitan to be deeply attached to their homeland" (180; emphasis added). Clearly what is at stake in Kant's argument with Hume is, once again, the negation of national character as a means of privileging a particular nation over others.

In its negation of national character, contemporary Canadian criticism conceives of itself, as I suggested at the outset, in opposition to a previous generation of critics. Scholars such as Northrop Frye are said to have provided "metaphors of unity" (Davey 19) through which they suggested that "all cultural expressions are shaped by the same national character" (Kertzer 21). In "Disunity as Unity" Kroetsch explicitly situates his argument against Frye, noting that "the writers of stories and poems nowadays, in Canada, are not terribly sympathetic to Frye and his unifying sense of what a mythic vision is" (24).

Furthermore, in recent work on multicultural writing in Canada the perceived construction of stable and homogenous notions of national identity in earlier Canadian culture and criticism is a central target of critique. In her introduction to her 1996 anthology of multicultural Canadian writers, Smaro Kamboureli argues the "presumed uniqueness of Canadian identity is only that — a presumption. *Making a Difference* is testimony to the fact that we can no longer harbour the conceit that Canadian identity is homogenous" (10). When Robert Lecker characterizes Frye's attempt to theorize Canadian identity as being "characteristically mythopoeic, formal, centralist, Protestant, male-centred, and overwhelmingly English" (284), we can see that, at least for some, Frye stands in as the central figure for the positing of a unified and homogeneous national character. Yet an attentive reading of Frye's Canadian literary and cultural theory, at least, would show that it is marked by a similar negation of national character and assertion of heterogeneity such as I have been tracing here.[7]

At various points in his essays on Canadian culture, Frye juxtaposes the Canadian identity with American identity. The American, Frye maintains, has a "deductive or *a priori*" (*Bush* 218) attitude that tends to impose a rigid and unified pattern on cultural life. This is the result of "being founded on a revolution and a written constitution" (218), a constitution

that provides the blue print it then imposes on society. One of the first principles of such an outlook Frye asserts is that "violence pays" (*Divisions* 46). Canada on the other hand, from its British, Burkean heritage, "adheres more to the inductive and the expedient" (*Bush* 218-19). By virtue of having a less rigid *a priori* mind, the Canadian, Frye asserts, has a much more fragmented and heterogeneous national identity. Indeed, anticipating the postmodern assertions of Hutcheon and Kroetsch, Frye asserts that Canadian identity is the absence of identity: "Canada never defined itself as a unified society in the [American] way: there is no Canadian way of life, no hundred per cent Canadian, no ancestral figures corresponding to Washington or Franklin or Jefferson, no eighteenth-century self-evident certainties about human rights, no symmetrically laid out country" (*Divisions* 48). Frye here follows the paradigm in the construction of national character that I have been tracing. The nation of the other is rigid and unified, one's own is complex and heterogeneous even to the point of having "*keinen Charakter*." The Americans stand in here for Frye as the rigidly and uniformly structured people as do the English for Kroetsch and Kant, the French for Schlegel, and various nations for Hume — the names change but the structure and purpose of the model remains the same.[8]

In theorizing the irony or namelessness of Canadian identity, Kroetsch and Hutcheon draw on a longstanding relation between aesthetic form, the ironic, negating art works they discuss, and national character. The aesthetic forms of these works, they suggest, are characteristic of "us." One might counter that the trope of irony gets these theorists off the hook in terms of aestheticizing national character in so far as irony at its most vertiginous posits no specific content but resists all naming. But such an empty space, devoid of all determinate content but pregnant with the possibilities of the multiple identities it might become, is in some respects, as theorized for example in Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*, the very definition of the aesthetic in its desired purity and freedom.[9] And although it lies beyond the purview of this paper to explore the issue in detail, there may be troubling and unexamined intersections between the negation of national identity in the critical tradition and the construction of whiteness in the discourses of race and ethnicity of the last two centuries and more. Characterizing the arguments of a body of contemporary critical inquiry on issues of race, ethnicity, and gender, Daniel Coleman has written, "the power of dominant cultural groups is characterized by their freedom from naming and scrutiny, … whites avoid nomination as subjects of race, Anglo-Celts as subjects of ethnicity, and men as subjects of

gender" (85). To which list one might add nations as subjects of national character. Certainly Kant who, as we have seen, privileged the German as being beyond nationality, also maintained in an early and influential body of race theory, as Mark Larrimore has recently explored, that whites were not a race (105).

Assertions of the irony, namelessness, or absence of national character have, then, a curious and lengthy history of repetitions, one which seems to be commensurate with modern nationalist discourses themselves. As the epigraph to this paper suggests, even Herder, often cited a central source of Romantic notions of a unified national character expressed organically through a nation's entire way of life, self-consciously confronts national character as an absence in apostrophizing, "Oh National Characters, what has become of you?" If, as Marc Redfield has recently argued, the nation like the "imagination" is an "aesthetic, unstable figure that tropes anonymity as identity, and difference as homogeneity" (66), then this makes anonymity and/or heterogeneity and difference structurally necessary in the dialectic of the nation — an ongoing dialectic of (to bastardize Schlegel) "[national] creation and [national] destruction." Furthermore, the negation of national identity, or the assertion of an ironic sense of national identity, appears to be one of the very old strategies by which a nationalist discourse validates a particular nation over other nations as being the more universal people and the people of the future, as in that paradoxical assertion, which one can trace from the eighteenth century to the postmodern era, that one's own nation is the *postnational nation*. The delineation of such a history makes it more difficult to say that such assertions provide a critique of more rigid and totalizing conceptions of national identity — indeed they must always invoke them — and much less that they move us "beyond nationalism."

Notes

[1] The essays collected in Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* have been influential in arguing that the putatively ancient rituals of many nations are of relatively recent invention. With respect to poststructuralists' perspective on the nation, one could trace a critique of nationalism in Jacques Derrida's writing from such early essays as "The Ends of Man" to the more recent *Specters of Marx*. As Pheng Cheah has argued, for Derrida "nationalism is without promise. It can promise nothing and has no future to-come" (177). The most forceful theoretical critique of nationalism from a postcolonial perspective has been provided by Partha Chatterjee in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. On nationalism and class in the British context see Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*. On nationalism, gender, and

sexuality see the essays collected in Andrew Parker's *Nationalism and Sexuality.* An excellent overview of the problematic of nation in the context of the study of Canadian literature is provided by Jonathan Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada.*

[2] As Earl Jeffrey Richards notes, Ernst Cassier's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* [1932] long ago asserted the interconnection of aesthetic theory and nationalism (Richards 137-38). In a Canadian context, Dermot McCarthy has argued suggestively that there is a "(con)fusing of aesthetic form and national coherence" (33) in Canadian literary histories from the nineteenth century well into the twentieth. In the context of German literature the implicit or explicit homologies between aesthetic form and national identity have been explored by David Morgan.

[3] See Earl Jeffrey Richards's "The Axiomatization of National Differences and National Character in the European Enlightenment" for an exploration of the construction of national character as a dialectic synthesis of other nations conceived as static polarities (152 and passim).

[4] The quotation derives from "The Sublime of the Nation," a paper delivered at McMaster University in 1996. A revised and expanded version of the paper will appear as a chapter in Balfour's forthcoming book on the sublime.

[5] The characterization of Schlegel's theory of irony that follows draws upon the lengthy history of scholarship that interprets and debates the meaning of Schlegel's concept of irony. To see Schegel's theory of irony as being homologous to his construction of German national identity is, however, my own approach, which I am exploring at greater length in a book-length manuscript on the development of the theory of irony. For several key statements on Schlegelian irony, see Immerwahr, Eichner (69-74), Szondi, and Handwerk (18-43).

[6] My quotations from Schlegel are taken from *Philosophical Fragments,* translated by Peter Firchow.

The fragments are referred to by the title and number given to separately titled and numbered series. In this respect the collection follows the standard critical edition of Schlegel's work, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel-Ausgabe.* The fragment series are known — respectively in the order that they appear in *Philosophical Fragments* — as the *Lyceum Fragments* (or *Critical Fragments*) *Athenaeum Fragments*, and *Ideas.*

[7] Tara Palmer Seiler's "Multi-Vocality and National Literature" tries suggestively to think through the ways in which the traditionally unifying, national-character-positing function of a Canadian national literature (as Seiler sees its role to have been) might be conceived in conjunction with, rather than opposition to, the current emphasis upon diversity and plurality. In this respect she draws upon Charles Taylor's argument for a sense deep diversity *and* belonging within the nation (62-63 and passim).

[8] In *Romanticism, Nationalism and the Revolt Against Theory*, David Simpson likewise traces how the English have long defined themselves as a "culture of commonsense" mediation in opposition to broadly circulated images of the French and the Germans; both peoples are capable of being represented for the purposes of such a privileged English synthesis as being characterized by either an excess of bodily passion or theoretical abstraction (40-103).

[9] For an analysis of Schiller's aesthetic as a nothingness of pure potentiality and the ideological implications of such a conception, see Terry Eagleton's *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (102-19, esp.107-08). For a compelling critique of the recuperative aspects of Kroetsch's postmodern negativity, see David L. Clark, "Forget Heidegger; or, Why I am Such a Clever Postmodernist."

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