

THE PROTEAN NATURE OF IRISH TALE:
THE GENERIC ANALYSIS OF MARIA EDGEWORTH'S *ENNUI*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to demonstrate the derivative nature of Irish tale, a short-lived genre which thrived in the Romantic period. The analysis is based on Maria Edgeworth *Ennui* (1809), which skillfully and self-consciously combines various kinds of factual discourse (e.g. memoirs, autobiographies, travelogues) with diverse fictional modes (romance, melodrama) with a view to expose the shallowness of English stereotypes about Ireland as well as to call for the modernization of Ireland through the professionalisation of its gentry.

Maria Edgeworth's place in literary history is described in various ways. She is an inheritor of Fanny Burney's tradition of the novel of manners, in which, however, as it is widely agreed, she was surpassed by Jane Austen, as well as the author of various moral tales addressed both to her children and adult readers. However, most of all Edgeworth is remembered as a creator of the national tale,¹ which was later transformed into a historical novel² (Ferris 1991: 105). The Irish tale, however, has "only recently begun to move into critical purview" (Ferris 1996: 288) and it appears that it has not developed its own distinct generic characteristics. Ferris describes it as "a worldly and impure genre that sets out to do something with words . . . [which] makes central to its whole project the often obscured, performative notion of representation" in the sense of "the presentation of something to someone as to create a certain effect" (Ferris 1996: 288-289). The Irish tale is a medley of diverse conventions, borrowed from

¹ Sometimes the title of the creator of the national tale is ascribed to Sydney Owenson, also known as Lady Morgan. Edgeworth's Irish tales, however, directly preceded those by Lady Morgan.

² Walter Scott acknowledged his debt to Maria Edgeworth in the preface to his *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*.

historiographic and romance discourse, as well as from moral parables with a view to advance a thesis. Edgeworth thus produces fables made realistic by the use of historiographic tropes, to argue the necessity of “the professionalization of the gentry, the remaking of a social class to fit it for social leadership of the other classes in a single, ‘national’ interest” (Kelly 1989: 74). The conflation of the factual and fictional conventions frequently, however, results in the strong strain of self-consciousness in the novel, since the narrator not only evinces keen awareness of the devices he employs but also subjects the conventions he exploits to a close scrutiny to probe their usefulness to achieve the desired effect on the readers.

Nowhere is the composite nature of the Irish tale more conspicuous than in *EmmUI*, a tale written in 1804 and published in 1809. The narrative assumes the form of memoirs, a convention firmly rooted in the tradition of eighteenth-century autobiographic fiction, popularised by Daniel Defoe. The professed purpose of the story is also in keeping with Defoe’s fictional characters’ protestations of their willingness to promote virtue. Yet, if *Moll Flanders* (1722) or *Roxana* (1734) pleaded didacticism to justify the recital of various sins, which proved to be the chief attraction of their tale, in the story narrated by Lord Glenthorn, the protagonist of *EmmUI*, the assertions of the instructive value of his life have a much more genuine ring and thus his sins are devoid of the power of allurements, which Defoe’s narratives actually have. His is a story demonstrating how destructive money, hereditary title and the lack of motivation can be, since it leads to the titular ennui, or boredom. It is only after he goes to Ireland, learns the secret of his lowly birth, and renounces the title, that Lord Glenthorn is forced to some exertion that brings him the enjoyment of life. Love towards a lady provides him with a motivation to persevere in hard labour and in the end his efforts are rewarded with success. He wins the hand of his beloved and a fortune that they need. The moral of the tale is glaring and it is imposed on the readers by means of hackneyed romance tropes. Glenthorn, however, is a self-reflexive narrator, and knows they are necessary to make his moralising digestible to the readers whose tastes have been spoiled by fictions.³

Yet, it is not only the romance which Edgeworth plunders for ideas for her plot. After all she is not telling a fairy tale but a story firmly set in the reality of the nineteenth-century Ireland. If fiction helps to win the interest of the readers, the succour of historiography lends to Glenthorn’s narrative an air of credibility and makes the point more blatant. With a great deal of self-awareness as the narrator Glenthorn searches for models in other histories. When he recounts

³ Edgeworth was still quite suspicious about the influence novels may have on their readers and she expressed her fear of the harmful impact of fiction on young readers on numerous occasions, for example in her other novel, *Belinda* (1801).

how he tried to relieve his ennui by indulging in eating he compares himself to “Lewis the Fourteenth” and Roman emperor Clodius Albinus, “one of the most moderate of those imperial gluttons, *took* for his breakfast, 500 figs, 100 peaches, 10 melons, 100 beccaficoes, and 400 oysters”, which is only to illustrate that “[e]picureism was scarcely more prevalent during the decline of the Roman empire than it is at this day amongst some of the wealthy and noble youths of Britain” (Edgeworth 1893: 224). His appetite for power is again described by references to the mighty of the world: he speaks “with as haughty a tone as Louis XIV” (Edgeworth 1893: 257) and manages his Irish estate “[l]ike the King of Prussia, who was said to be so jealous of power, that he wanted to regulate all the mousetraps in his dominions” (Edgeworth 1893: 258). When he describes a scene where his servants think him dead and desert him, for fear of incurring disbelief he sends a reader in a footnote to historical sources, which recorded similar scenes. “If any one should think it impossible that a man of Lord Glenthorn’s consequence should, at the supposed moment of his death, thus be neglected, let them recollect the scenes that followed the death of Tiberius – of Henry the Fourth of France – of William Rufus, and of George the Second” (Edgeworth 1893: 227). The allusions to memoirs of emperors and kings on the one hand increase the scale of the protagonist’s vices, which Edgeworth chooses to stigmatise in the English nobility. On the other, they produce the effect of self-detachment and self-reflexivity: a conscious creation of a life-narrative for the edification of its readers.

Edgeworth does not capitalise, however, only on the popularity and credibility of memoirs. The crux of the narrative is Glenthorn’s journey to Ireland, undertaken at the request of Ellinor, Glenthorn’s Irish nurse, who “would die *content*” (Edgeworth 1893: 232), if she could see him in his own estates. Yet, although the passage to Ireland will have an obvious and easy-to-predict therapeutic effect on the protagonist, Edgeworth employs the motif of travel in numerous and diverse ways, which reflects the uses of travel in various more or less fictional genres. At first it seems that the travelling section of Glenthorn’s memoirs will be just an occasion for comic anecdotes about the backwardness of Ireland, common in English travelogues depicting the country. Glenthorn himself graphically describes the inconveniences of his travel in an Irish post-chaise. The editor of the memoirs in a footnote adds some juicy stories received “from the east, west, north, and south of Ireland . . . vouched by indisputable authority” about one gentleman nailed in a coach for fear of doors going off the hinges, about another advised to “get out and *set* behind the carriage” if he wanted to avoid “storm pelting in his face” through broken windows, and yet another who saw how a horse from his hackney was shod with a shoe taken from a horse in the field (Edgeworth 1893: 248). And yet, although as an Englishman in Ireland Lord Glenthorn, as well as his editor, do not spare criticism

to the Irishmen, they are both aware of how superficial a newcomer's view on the reality can prove to be.

A warning against rash judgements and uncritical credit given to all the anecdotes, which travellers hear is included in the scenes where Lady Geraldine, whom Glenthorn meets in Ormsby Villa, makes fun of Lord Craiglethorpe, who is "an English traveller, full of English prejudices against Ireland and every thing Irish" (Edgeworth 1893: 285). Lady Geraldine finds out that the lord "had in contemplation to publish a Tour through Ireland, or a View of Ireland, or something of that nature" (Edgeworth 1893: 286), and is quite convinced that becoming acquainted with Irish gentry, which is not much different from the English, and being unwilling and unable to communicate with the lower classes, his understanding of the Irish will be wide of the mark, rather like that of "the cockney who has never been out of London, and who has never, in all his born years, seen an Irishman but on the English stage; where the representations are usually as like the originals, as the Chinese pictures of lions, drawn from description, are to the real animal" (Edgeworth 1893: 287). In order to demonstrate the poor informational value of travelogues scribbled by gullible Englishmen on their grander or lesser tours, Lady Geraldine provided him with "the most absurd anecdotes, incredible *facts*, stale jests, and blunders, such as were never made by true born Irishmen; all which my Lord Craiglethorpe took down with an industrious sobriety, at which the spectators could scarcely refrain from laughing" (Edgeworth 1893: 288). She explained:

I am doing him and public the greatest possible service. Just when he is going to leave us, when the writing book is packed, I will step up to him, and tell him the truth. I will show him what a farrago of nonsense he has collected as materials for his quarto; and convince him at once how utterly unfit he is to write a book on Irish affairs

(Edgeworth 1893: 288).

Glenthorn-the narrator is aware of how little he knew and thus could understand Ireland although Glenthorn-the character was quite convinced that he "knew all that could be known of Irish character" (Edgeworth 1893: 332). By way of illustration of his ignorance of the Irish ways he tells a story of how he rallied Irish "labourers at work in a bog, on a very hot day, with a fire lighted close to them" (Edgeworth 1893: 332). What he has considered as an excellent instance of an Irish bull turns out to be a method of repelling flies which, but for the fire, would make work unbearable. The stories of Craiglethorpe's and Glenthorn's superficial observations of the Irish life demonstrate the true value of such travelogues.

Had I been sufficiently active during my journey to pen a journal, I should certainly, without further inquiry, have noted down, that the Irish labourers *always* light fires in the hottest weather to cool themselves; and thus I should have added one more to the number of cursory travellers, who expose their own ignorance, whilst they attempt to ridicule local customs, of which they have not inquired the cause, or discovered the utility

(Edgeworth 1893: 332).

Edgeworth naturally would never miss an opportunity to smuggle a moral and self-criticism. The ridicule of the English travelogues through Ireland cannot but lead to hammering out a lesson:

I had travelled through my own country without making even a single remark upon the various degrees of industry and civilization visible in different parts of the kingdom. In fact it had never occurred to me that it became a British nobleman to have some notion of the general state of that empire, in the legislation of which he has a share; nor had I the slightest suspicion that political economy was a study requisite or suitable to my rank in life or situation in society

(Edgeworth 1893: 333).

Edgeworth, however is not entirely unaware of the fact that her didactic pills have to be sweetened if they are to be swallowed easier. That is why she does not hesitate to take advantage of all the attractions that fictional narratives have to offer. When she introduces some historical material into her narrative she makes sure to inscribe it into the life story of the protagonist. The description of a rebellion, modelled on the events in 1798, which Edgeworth herself witnessed, serves as a perfect context for the sensational motif of the intended conspiracy against Lord Glenthorn, which Edgeworth dexterously develops into a melodramatic plot, in the style of true Greek tragedy, leading to an obvious moral. The rebels are planning to capture Glenthorn, which he finds out thanks to a mysterious letter, and make him into his leader, or, should he object, kill him. Fortunately, their conspiracy is thwarted, and the rebels are captured and tried. Ellinor, the nurse, however, believes that her son, Owen, was one of the rebels and begs for mercy. Glenthorn refuses, which forces out of the poor, distressed mother a terrible, long-guarded secret that in fact she is his natural mother, Owen is his brother, and she changed children at nurse. The story of her motivation is quite long and convoluted: the genuine Lord Glenthorn was weak and sickly and Ellinor thought he would not live long. In this situation changing children seemed a good idea: Lord Glenthorn would still have an heir and her own son a good life. Naturally there has to be a proof that Ellinor did not invent the whole story to save her son's skin and, conveniently enough, there is one, in a manner of true anagnorisis, the genuine Lord Glenthorn has a scar "got by a fall on the fender from the nurse's arm, that was drunk, three days after he was born" (Edgeworth 1893: 354). Glenthorn

verifies the whole story with a witness, renounces his title to the rightful owner, which transforms his life beyond recognition.

It is quite interesting to observe how uneasy Edgeworth becomes about her use of the obviously sensational and melodramatic devices. Right after the climactic twist in the plot, the narrator endeavours to justify it by suggesting that in fact the events which are larger than life, paradoxically, make a tale more true to life: "The romance of real life certainly goes beyond all other romances; and there are facts which few writers would dare to put in a book, as there are skies which few painters would venture to put in a picture" (Edgeworth 1893: 354). This remark seems to be a distinct echo of the eighteenth-century debate on the distinction between history and fiction, known for instance from *Tom Jones* (1749). Historians, claims Fielding in Book VIII, are at liberty to describe things that are not only probable but also possible. "He will often raise the wonder and surprise of his reader, but never that incredulous hatred mentioned by Horace". Novelists, in turn, who have "no public notoriety, no concurrent testimony, no records to support and corroborate what we deliver, it becomes us [i.e. novelists] not only to keep within the limits of possibility but of probability too..." (Fielding 1994: 338). Edgeworth, thus, exercises the privilege of a historian introducing to the narrative a not-too-probable event, and by doing so claims to have brought the story closer to the truth.

The uneasiness about the implausibility of the plot construction produces echoes throughout the rest of the narrative. It is not only the narrator who finds it extraordinary but his fellow-characters, as if even in their fictional world this went beyond their belief:

My dear Lady Y-, have you heard the extraordinary news? the most incredible news that ever was heard! . . . Changed at nurse! One hears such things in novels, but in real life, I absolutely cannot believe it. Yet, here, in this letter from Lady Ormsby, are all particulars . . .

(Edgeworth 1893: 381).

The melodramatic twist in the plot is only an occasion to insert a didactic section, in which Lord Glenthorn learns the value and indispensability of work and which, on the narrator's own admission, lacks the charms of fictional stories:

If, among those who may be tempted to peruse my history, there should be any mere novel readers, let me advise them to throw the book aside at the commencement of this chapter; for I have no more wonderful incidents to relate, no more changes at nurse, no more sudden turns of fortune. I am now become a plodding man of business, poring over law-books from morning till night, and leading a most monotonous life . . .

(Edgeworth 1893: 388-389).

And yet, this is but a beginning of the disentanglement of a neatly constructed plot. Edgeworth is very careful and does not leave any threads loose. No character is introduced that would not reappear later to fulfil poetic justice. The story of Lord Glenthorn's transformation assumes the shape of a fairy tale with Lord Y-, an Irish nobleman, with whom the protagonist conveniently strikes an acquaintance right after he has renounced his title, in the role a fairy godfather. His task is to put his ward on the right track. "I hold that we are the artificers of our own fortune ... In our country, you know, the highest offices of the state are open to talents and perseverance" (Edgeworth 1893: 387), he says. The former Lord Glenthorn thus for five long years studies hard and when he proves his diligence and wins his first cause, Lord Y- announces: "Your trial is over - successfully over-you have convinced me of your powers and your perseverance ... there can be no doubt, that by pursuing your profession, you can secure, in a few years, ... honours of your own earning. How far superior to any hereditary title!" (Edgeworth 1893: 404). And then the "enchantment of indolence was dissolved, and the demon of ennui was cast out forever" (Edgeworth 1893: 388). The open employment of the discourse of a fairy tale as well as the meticulous employment of the tale, in which after the true Aristotelian fashion, "the transposition or removal of any one section [would] dislocate and change the whole" (Aristotle 1996: 15) only highlights the constructedness of the whole narrative with a moral purpose.

The meticulous construction of the plot serves also a didactic function. In the end, the narrative poetic justice is administered to all characters. No good deed remains without due reward, no culprit escapes punishment. Lord Glenthorn, while still in possession of money and estate, fell in love with Lady Geraldina, but found out that she was in love with a man too poor to be her match. He overcame his own affection and helped the rival to gain a position that would make his union with the lady possible. After years the lucky man helped to introduce former Glenthorn into legal circles, which proved very helpful in his career. Lady Glenthorn, who had eloped from her husband with Mr. Crawley, died in poverty, which Glenthorn found out by accident. His decision to cover his wife's funeral expenses was immediately rewarded since the clergyman conducting the funeral service introduced him to his "eminent brother who had been an excellent pleader preparing students to the bar" (Edgeworth 1893: 398).

The readers, however, can hardly find poetic justice in the story of the genuine Lord Glenthorn, who was a decent blacksmith before he found out about his true origin. He decided to accept the title and move to the Glenthorn Castle for the sake of his son, but the riches were soon squandered by his wife and his son took to drinking and eventually burnt the castle. By the violation of the rule of the poetic justice Edgeworth puts forward a moral. Ireland requires a social transformation: the power of the upper classes should not be legitimised by hereditary rights (Christie to whom Glenthorn Castle belongs by the right of

birth is not able to fulfil his social role properly) but by the acquisition of the professional business skills, which would guarantee a proper management of Ireland (Glenthorn Castle finally goes back to Glenthorn). Edgeworth's viewpoint is thus moderately revolutionary.

The Irish national tale proved to be an ephemeral and amorphous phenomenon. The reason may be its clearly pragmatic mode of representation: the national tale, as Ferris argued, was "a scene of public speaking necessarily attached to a particular voice and body" (Ferris 1996: 291). The use of the conventions of factual discourse, memoirs or travelogues, carefully emplotted in fairy tale like plots leading to all too obvious morals resulted in the uneasy coexistence of the real and unreal, manifesting itself in the heightened self-consciousness and volatility of the genre. Thus, the place of the national tale in the history of literature is now determined by its relation to the historical novel, which reconciled historiography and fiction better and diluted the forceful didacticism of its antecedent.

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