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'The whole fabric must be perfect': Maria Edgeworth's *Literary Ladies* and the Representation of Ireland

CLÍONA Ó GALLCHOIR

This essay combines a stylistic analysis of the first part of Maria Edgeworth's *Letters for Literary Ladies*, entitled 'Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend, upon the Birth of a Daughter, with a reply', with a closer examination than has so far been offered of the literary-historical context of this work. Recent criticism on Edgeworth has begun to dismantle the traditional divisions between her four 'Irish Tales', *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Ennui* (1805), *The Absentee* (1812) and *Ormond* (1817), and her other writing;[1] this essay extends this re-examination of Edgeworth's representation of Ireland in the context of her work as a whole, by deriving a theory of representation from the 'Letter from a Gentleman' which can be applied to her fiction. More specifically, I argue that the strategies by which Edgeworth sought to represent Ireland (an ambitious undertaking in the development of the novel which she virtually pioneered) must be acknowledged to be historically grounded in her position as a woman writer in post-revolutionary culture. The 'Letter from a Gentleman', based on an incident in 1782, was eventually published in 1795, thus spanning the chasm which the French Revolution created in European history, and providing a perspective on Edgeworth's engagement with history which has not yet been examined.

I

Letters for Literary Ladies was Maria Edgeworth's first published work.[2] This is highly ironic, given that 'Letter from a Gentleman' is based on an exchange of letters between Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and his friend,

1 W. J. McCormack rejects as 'self-obscuring' the 'relentless, if unconscious classification of Edgeworth's fiction into mutually exclusive categories'; see W. J. McCormack, 'The Tedium of History: An Approach to Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage*' in Ciarán Brady (ed.), *Ideology and the Historians* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 77–98, p. 84. See also Siobhán Kilfeather, '"Strangers at Home": Political Fictions by Women in Eighteenth-Century Ireland' (PhD thesis, University of Princeton, 1989); Kilfeather advances important political readings of Edgeworth and earlier fictions by women, notably Frances Sheridan. 2 Marilyn Butler notes that the 1795 edition of *Letters for Literary Ladies* carries an advertisement stating that *The Parent's Assistant*, a collection of stories for children by Maria Edgeworth, had already been published, but no copies of a 1795 *Parent's Assistant* have been located – the earliest date from 1796: Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*, (Oxford, 1972), p. 159n.

Thomas Day, in which Day expresses his opposition to R. L. Edgeworth's plans to encourage his daughter's literary career. This debate took place in 1782, when plans were made to publish Maria Edgeworth's translation of Mme de Genlis's *Adèle et Théodore*. In this same year, the Edgeworth family returned to Ireland and legislative independence was granted to the Irish Parliament.

The subject of 'Letter from a Gentleman' is a defence of women's right to education and to literary activity. In the initial letter, the 'Gentleman' in question congratulates a friend on the birth of a daughter, but warns him of the undesirable consequences of his plan to educate his daughter to the same high standards as men, with the possibility that she may prove an intellectual, a 'literary lady', with the ability to write and publish. This is followed by a reply from the progressive father which rebuts his friend's criticism, maintaining that the education of women does not necessarily result in the collapse of the social order, and may indeed help to sustain it. Most criticism and commentary on the composite *Letters for Literary Ladies* has come from feminist criticism and from feminist literary history, rather than from Irish critics and literary historians, and most of it has damned with faint praise. It is commonly included somewhere in the roll-call of eighteenth-century works by women which advocated high standards in the education of girls and women, but it appears to be a text incapable of generating enthusiasm in readers. Marilyn Butler describes it as 'earnest and stiff', while Jane Rendall calls it a 'modest argument', and, in fact, most feminist critics and literary historians of women's writing prefer to focus on more easily categorised figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More.[3] Claire Connolly, a recent editor of the text, has gone beyond this polite but ultimately unhelpful commentary to declare that 'the argument has no real impact' due to the fact that the text 'addresses its readers in the plain style revered by Enlightenment thinkers. It does not deign to offer anecdote or example'.[4] Connolly's analysis of the text's lack of persuasiveness focuses on the inadequacy of Enlightenment itself, which she says is characterised by a 'fear and distrust of women', of which Edgeworth was at some level aware.[5] I would however like to focus on the text itself, which, contrary to Connolly's assertion, offers a large number of anecdotes and examples. It is worth asking why they have somehow faded into oblivion. These take the form of literary anecdotes and learned or scientific references, as well as phrases and attitudes which exemplify national manners and modes of behaviour. On the whole these illustrative references are characterised by disparity and a certain eclecticism, ranging from the accounts of the volcano watcher Sir William Hamilton to observations on exotic plants and animals. It is therefore necessary

3 See Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975; reissued with a new introduction, Oxford, 1987), p. 127; Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 110; for a comparison of Wollstonecraft and More see Mitzi Myers, 'Reform or Ruin: "A Revolution in Female Manners"' in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 11 (1982), pp. 199–216. 4 Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, edited by Claire Connolly (London, 1993), p. xxiii, p. xxii. 5 Ibid., p. xvi.

to analyse these strangely inarticulate anecdotes in order to understand why, in spite of what is in fact a wealth of illustration, the argument of 'Letter from a Gentleman' has 'no real impact'.

In a letter to Charlotte Sneyd written in 1799, while Edgeworth was passing through Dublin on her way to England, she describes as a curiosity a 'political print' which she has seen, depicting 'a woman meant for Hibernia dressed in *Orange & Green* & holding a pistol in her hand to oppose the Union'.[6] The insertion of the explanatory phrase 'meant for Hibernia' indicates either an incomprehension or a desire on Edgeworth's part to distance herself from the meaning of this image, or, perhaps, from the image as conveyer of meaning. Before we can speculate on how Edgeworth might have responded to such a figure, we must decide how to name the patriotically-draped woman. An immediately appropriate term would be allegory, a system of representation in which there is a relatively simple and one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified; in this case a female figure represents the Irish nation, united in patriotic resistance to Britain and the threat of legislative union with Westminster. The allegorical representation of Ireland as a woman was by the late eighteenth century an established trope in Gaelic poetry. In *Aisling* poetry, as it is called, the young and beautiful woman who appears to the poet in a dream or vision (*aisling*) functions according to a system of absolute identification, in which her sorrows are those of Ireland, and the lover whose faithlessness she laments refers to the descendants of the Stuarts.

Twentieth-century feminism's search for foremothers has focused on women who adopted the kinds of identifications which puzzled Edgeworth in 1799. For women to make common cause with other groups excluded from power and political representation was to reject the idea that women's lives were 'naturally' conducted in a sphere which had no connection with the public and the political. Much feminist criticism, however, is guilty of constructing a continuous narrative in which women's growing consciousness of their rights is signalled by an increasing willingness to identify themselves with others whom they perceive as similarly oppressed. '[A]ll victims of prejudice and oppression found champions among women writers, but no race of mankind was so widely and commonly assigned to angry women as the slave', writes Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1978).[7] In a typical and still highly compelling example of early feminist literary criticism, Moers here excludes those women who did not adopt this self-representation, which helps us to understand why Edgeworth has received no more than dutiful acknowledgement from most twentieth-century critics. Among eighteenth-century writers, feminist critics have located Mary Wollstonecraft as a 'first feminist' precisely because her work is shaped by a series of identifications of this kind. The highly skilful and rhetorically powerful use of metaphor is

6 ME to Charlotte Sneyd, 2 April 1799, National Library of Ireland, Ms 10,166. 7 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London, 1978), p. 15.

perhaps the single most important feature of Wollstonecraft's enduringly popular *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Women in the *Vindication* are by turns, slaves, tyrants, even brutes, utterly devoid of the power of reason:

> Women it is true, obtaining power by unjust means, by practising or fostering vice, evidently lose the rank which reason would assign them, and they become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants.[8]

Metaphor operates on an underlying assumption of likeness or analogy. Throughout the *Vindication* women, or 'woman', becomes identified with a series of other groupings: the very wealthy, standing armies, Turkish bashaws, animals, corrupt ministers, and with recurring frequency, slaves and tyrants. It is this array of possible and reiterated identifications which gives Wollstonecraft's polemic much of its force and vitality. The metaphors are extended and built upon – women 'grovel' and 'patiently bite the bridle', they are 'depraved by lawless power'.

The images in 'Letter from a Gentleman', by contrast, although frequently arresting when considered individually, do not when taken together acquire rhetorical force. Ignorant women are compared to Italian nuns who haven't the wit to flee an erupting volcano, but warm themselves instead in the glow of the lava, and to frogs who swallow burning charcoal – 'deceived by resemblances, they mistake poison for food'.[9] In spite of (or perhaps because of) the odd aptness of these illustrative examples, they do not lend the argument additional force and persuasiveness. Each is independent of the other, serving its purpose of illustrating and underlining the author's particular point (the necessity of cultivating the reasoning faculty, the transient nature of custom and customary belief and so on); they certainly do not act in concert to create a sense of women's group identity. The reasons for which women writers like Edgeworth avoided the type of identification found in Wollstonecraft and endorsed as feminist by Moers are of course not ideologically innocent. The politics of identification are very clear: an identification of the kind found in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* tears down the wall which divides the public from the private sphere, and the rational man who defends women's right to education in 'Letter from a Gentleman' makes very clear that this is wholly undesirable. The role proposed for educated and rational women is strictly defined: 'their influence must be private'.[10] The sense of delimitation is reflected in the manner in which Edgeworth isolates the text's examples and anecdotes within their immediate context, as if to prove that the education of women does not imply the transformation, destruction or revolutionising of the social order.

In place of revolutionary metaphor Edgeworth offers a metonymic system of representation. Rewriting Mandeville on the relationship between private and public she asserts:

8 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; Harmondsworth, 1992), p. 133. 9 Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, p. 23. 10 Ibid., p. 31.

> Private *virtues* are public benefits: if each bee were content in his cell, there could be no grumbling hive; and if each cell were complete, the whole fabric must be perfect.[11]

In spite of Edgeworth's unwillingness to place women in the public sphere, and her support for the idea that 'their influence must be private', she here seems to suggest that there is no public sphere independent of the numerous private spaces which make it up. The 'whole fabric' of society cannot be understood without reference to its constituent parts. Edgeworth, therefore, although often portrayed as a cautious adherent to the status quo, in fact challenges the whole notion of separate spheres. Her rejection of metaphorical representations, while clearly indicating her refusal to claim for her writing a direct political role, does however allow her a potentially authoritative voice without breaking with decorum. Metonymy is not a hierarchical relationship: the part may stand for the whole and *vice versa*. This lack of an original term captures perfectly the elusive nature of Edgeworth's representation of the relationship between public and private, as illustrated in the image of the hive, above: the public is no more than the sum of its domestic parts, yet the domestic is in its turn a perfect microcosm of the larger fabric. Having asserted that women's influence must be private, it is added that 'human affairs are chained together': 'female influence is a necessary and important link, which you cannot break without destroying the whole'.[12]

Aside from the flexibility offered by representation based on the image of the interconnected hive or chain, the very lack of identification which might seem to render Edgeworth's work utterly incapable of political engagement can function to facilitate the investigation of difference. Umberto Eco suggests that metonymy is best understood as representation in the form of an encyclopaedia, which indicates a system midway between the classical linear tree structure and the total interconnectedness of the rhizome.[13] Referring to D'Alembert's prefatory remarks to the *Encyclopaedia*, Eco elaborates:

> D'Alembert says with great clarity that what an encyclopaedia represents has no centre. The encyclopaedia is a pseudotree, which assumes the aspect of a local map, in order to represent, always transitorily and locally, what in fact is not representable because it is a rhizome – an inconceivable globality.[14]

Eco's 'inconceivable globality' can be sensed in the resolute localness of Edgeworth's text and the refusal to assimilate difference. From the evidence of 'Letter to a Gentleman' it is clear that Edgeworth is unable or unwilling to identify women

11 Ibid., p. 37. **12** Ibid., p. 31. **13** Eco derives the image of the rhizome (a 'tangle of bulbs and tubers') from Deleuze and Guattari. In their work, the rhizome represents a structure in which 'every point can and must be connected with every other point'. See Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, 1986), p. 81. **14** Ibid., p. 83.

with other groups she is even unwilling to identify modern European women with women of other cultures, because of her acute perception of difference:

> The changes that are made in the opinion of our [the male] sex as to female beauty, according to the different situations in which women are placed, and the different qualities on which we fix their ideas of excellence, are curious and striking. Ask a northern Indian, says a traveller who has lately visited them, ask a northern Indian, what is beauty, and he will answer, a broad flat face, small eyes, high cheek bones, three or four broad black lines across each cheek, a low forehead, a clumsy hook nose &c. These beauties are greatly heightened, or at least rendered more valuable, when the possessor is capable of dressing all kinds of skins, converting them into the different parts of their clothing, and able to carry eight or ten stone in summer, or haul a much greater weight in winter.[15]

Marilyn Butler's account of Edgeworth's method of composition bears out the theory that the technique of representation evident in 'Letter from a Gentleman' anticipates the manner in which she wrote her later and more successful fictions. Butler describes the way in which Edgeworth collected striking character sketches and solicited anecdotes, examples and facts from friends and family, and made notes of anything she came across in her reading, to use as sources for her writing. Maria's father encouraged her to regard her writing as compendious and miscellaneous, predicting for instance that *Professional Education* (1811) would 'be an admirable vehicle for anything we can say on any subject'.[16] Butler remarks that although 'an objective interest in human nature and the way it manifests itself in social custom no doubt lies behind Maria Edgeworth's liking for facts', Edgeworth 'never makes a general declaration of this kind'.[17] However, the plain style of 'Letter from a Gentleman', in which carefully collected facts and anecdotes are not transformed into a fictional narrative, but retain their sometimes awkward difference, can, I suggest, be read as a 'general declaration'. Edgeworth's ability to represent Ireland in the genre which came to be known as the national tale relies fundamentally on the principle that the claim to representation at the national level, through metonymy, did not represent a challenge to the public sphere as then established. Her success as a novelist of local circumstances and manners is plainly based on the belief in the reality of difference which is also a feature of this, her earliest published text.

II

The insistence on the interconnectedness of distinct spheres which is most clearly and, indeed, plainly expressed in 'Letter from a Gentleman' can therefore be argued

15 Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, p. 37. This passage is close to the entry on 'Beauty' in Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*; see *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Theodore Besterman (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 63–4. 16 Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1972), p. 245. 17 Ibid., pp. 239–240.

to be a characteristic feature of Edgeworth's technique of representation. It was a belief that she shared with the most notorious admirer of her novels, Jeremy Bentham.[18] Here is Bentham's own unequivocal statement of the distinctions to be made between the private matter of education and the public activity of government:

> Human creatures, considered with respect to the maturity of their faculties, are either in an adult, or in a non-adult state. The art of government, in so far as it concerns the direction of persons in a non-adult state, may be termed education.[19]

Bentham's method rests, like Edgeworth's, in the first instance on a theory of individual psychology: this accounts for his beginning his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* with a list of thirty-two 'circumstances influencing sensibility'. Bentham's determination to fix the contours of difference is married with a boundless faith in the translatability of method: Bentham's reforming zeal extended itself in many directions – he wrote on penal reform, civil and criminal law reform, education, and for Arthur Young's *Annals of Agriculture*. Bentham's most enduring legacy, the Panopticon, acts as an image of this translatability. The full text of the title runs as follows: *Panopticon*, 'or, The Inspection House; containing the idea of a new principle of construction applicable to any sort of establishment in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection; and in particular to penitentiary-houses; prisons, houses of industry, work-houses, mad-houses, lazarettos, hospitals and schools'.[20] A belief in 'translatability' is equally evident in the curious examples of 'Letter from a Gentleman': nowhere is likeness between the subject and its illustration suggested, but the assumption that *method* is translatable is undeniable.

Bentham's most consistent interest was the formulation of legislative systems, which he hoped to form according to a rational plan that would be validated by their geographical translatability. The successful transplantation of laws cannot however be achieved without the provision of a mass of documentation, as follows:

> a general table of the circumstances influencing sensibility; tables or short accounts of the moral, religious, sympathetic and antipathetic biases of the

18 Edgeworth came into contact with Benthamite ideas through her translator, Etienne Dumont, who edited and translated several of Bentham's works. For specific comments by Bentham on Edgeworth, see J. R. Dinwiddy, 'Jeremy Bentham as a Pupil of Miss Edgeworth's' in *Notes and Queries*, 29 (1982), pp. 208–11. 19 *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* in *Works of Jeremy Bentham*, edited by Sir John Bowring (11 vols; Edinburgh, 1843), i, p. 143. An edition of Bentham's works to replace that edited by Bowring is in progress, but as it is not yet complete I have for the sake of consistency referred here to the earlier edition of the works. 20 Bentham, *Panopticon; or, The Inspection House* in *Works*, iv.

> people for whose use the alterations [in legislation] are to be made; a set of maps as particular as possible; a table of the productions of the country.[21]

It will be clear that Bentham's programme for rational legislation is crucially dependent on new forms of knowledge and knowledge-gathering, which at the time he was writing were still being developed. The rational and translatable legislation he proposes is therefore contingent on historical progress. In Bentham's view, the crucial shift in cultural description took place with Montesquieu:

> Before Montesquieu, a man who had a distant country given him to make laws for, would have made short work of it. 'Name to me the people', he would have said; 'reach me down my Bible, and the business is done at once.' ... Since Montesquieu, the number of documents which a legislator would require is considerably enlarged. 'Send the people,' he will say, 'to me, or me to the people; lay open to me the whole tenor of their life and conversation; paint to me the face and geography of the country; give me as close and minute a view as possible of their present laws, their manners, and their religion.'[22]

Bentham's method may at first sight seem completely concerned with the present, specifically with the documenting and control of present circumstances. As his last remark makes clear however, it is a method firmly rooted in a historical mentality. Given that Edgeworth and Bentham shared certain beliefs and principles, it is of particular interest to consider this assertion of confident historical progression in relation to Edgeworth's representations of Ireland, most strikingly in *Castle Rackrent*. The time 'before Montesquieu' to which Bentham refers was in the case of Ireland not a hypothetical case, but a historical reality, and one of which Edgeworth, for instance, was fully aware. In his *True Causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued* (1612), a work which Edgeworth read at least twice, John Davies states that 'to give Lawes to a conquered people is the principalle marke and effect of a perfect Conquest'.[23] Davies' notion of 'giving laws' has the same uncompromising ring as Bentham's 'reach me down my Bible'. What remains in doubt is whether, in the case of Ireland, it is possible to assert, with the same degree of certainty displayed by Bentham, that the time 'before Montesquieu' is in fact past. Edgeworth acknowledges that Ireland has experienced the pre-Montesquieuvian type of administration in the first note to *Castle Rackrent*, in which she quotes Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), a view notable for its marked lack of interest in the present laws, manners and religion of the Gaelic Irish who were to be governed. This citation is clearly ironic, and is therefore of a piece with the editorial insistence that Thady's narrative is to be understood as historical. The embattled intention of the editorial voice centres on the reiterated use of the word 'formerly' in the preface, notes and glossary to *Castle Rackrent*. The

21 Bentham, *Of the Influence of Time and Place in Matters of Legislation* in *Works*, i, p. 175.
22 Ibid., p. 173n. 23 John Davies, *The True Causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued* (1612, facsimile reprint, Shannon, 1969), p. 100.

enduring fascination of *Castle Rackrent*, however, lies in its failure to maintain the separation of these two times, the barbaric past and the enlightened present. The title suggests that the past is defined by the date of 1782, which as remarked above was the year in which the return of the Edgeworth family to Longford coincided with the removal of the more obvious obstacles to Irish legislative independence; the 'Introduction', however, is dated 1800 and proposes the imminent union between Great Britain and Ireland as the moment from which Ireland's progress can be dated. Whereas the title suggests that barbarism lies before 1782, the 'Introduction' nervously suggests that Ireland's entry into a history of progress did not in fact take place as anticipated in the optimistic 1780s, thus throwing into doubt all such assertions of new beginnings, including the 'Editor's' own.

III

At the outset, I noted that 'Letter from a Gentleman' spans the historical chasm of the French Revolution, and that the text is marked by the need to uphold the principle of historical progression. As in *Castle Rackrent*, the problem of persuasive chronology lies at the heart of this short text. As noted earlier, the incident on which 'Letter from a Gentleman' is based took place in 1782, while Edgeworth was translating *Adèle et Théodore*. The specifics of the period of composition are unknown, but it was published in 1795, by which time Revolution in France had turned to Terror, followed by war with England, and the optimism of the drive for constitutional reform in Ireland via the Volunteer movement had been replaced by a polarisation of society as the United Irishmen prepared, with French help, for armed rebellion.

The post-revolutionary context of 'Letter from a Gentleman' is trumpeted in the opening pages, in which the Rousseau-worshipping Thomas Day has been transformed into an unmistakably Burkean figure, who remarks that the days of chivalry are past and warns of the dreadful consequences of abandoning custom and precedent. We might wonder why a progressive such as Day is fictionalised by Edgeworth along the lines of Burke, who was in the vanguard of reaction, but we need look no further than Day's ideas on the proper place of women for an answer. Day's objections to female authorship were based on a view of female nature and character whose debt to Rousseau is clear. He believed that women's 'weakness of body, and imbecility of mind, can only entitle them to our compassion and indulgence'.[24] In fact, he was such an admirer of Rousseau's theories on women that he pursued the plan of raising two foundling girls in seclusion in order to produce a creature as much like Rousseau's Sophie as possible, and from the two to choose a wife. When this plan failed to produce a suitable spouse he proposed to Honora Sneyd, who later became R.L. Edgeworth's second wife,

24 Letter to RLE, quoted in Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (2 vols, 1820; Shannon, 1969), i, p. 224.

but she refused him on the grounds that she 'would not admit of the unqualified control of a husband over all her actions'.[25] Edgeworth subsequently fictionalised Day's extraordinary behaviour in *Belinda*. Day's admiration for Rousseau's ideas implied a similar view of the corrupting effeminacy of French society: he was, he wrote to R.L. Edgeworth, disgusted to see that, in France, women 'regulat[ed] the customs, the manners, the lives and the opinions of the other sex, by their own caprices, weaknesses and ignorance'.[26]

In the aftermath of the upheavals which struck Europe between 1782 and 1795, conservative reaction tended to claim that Rousseau's critique of the corrupting feminisation of society had been effectively proven by the course of the French Revolution. Just as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is only half-understood without reference to its revolutionary origin, Edgeworth's 'Letter from a Gentleman' is in part a contribution to the Revolution controversy, with a distinct gender inflection. The damage done to progressive ideas after the events of 1792 in France had, as Edgeworth suggests here, particular consequences for women, who were threatened with the withdrawal of the opportunity which Enlightenment philosophy had held out to them. This is made explicit in the references to the corrupting effects of female leadership, specifically in relation to France:

> Trace the history of female nature, from the court of Augustus to the court of Louis XVI, and tell me whether you can hesitate to acknowledge that the influence, the liberty and the *power* of women have been the constant concomitants of the moral and political decline of empires; – I say the concomitants: where the events are thus invariably connected I might be justified in saying they were *causes* – you would call them *effects*: but we need not dispute about the momentary precedence of evils, which are found to be inseparable companions: – they may be alternately cause and effect, – the reality of the connexion is established.[27]

Edgeworth answers the post-revolutionary conservatism of the first letter with the restrained rationality of the reply. In her own life and in the immediate past the reverse was true: optimistic rationalism had been replaced by a reaction which eschewed reason in favour of custom and the maintenance of the status quo. Historical chronology is thus reversed in Edgeworth's rewriting of the 1782–1795 period in 'Letter from a Gentleman', and therein, I suggest, lies its lack of persuasiveness. Looking, for instance, at some of the most obvious sources for the two pieces, Edgeworth responds to Burke with reference to Voltaire. Recent criticism, in its polite acknowledgement of Edgeworth's only explicit contribution to the debate on women's roles, has judged her particular brand of rationality inadequate to counter the power of post-revolutionary conservative rhetoric. 'Letter from a

25 Ibid., i, p. 250. 26 Ibid., i, p. 224. 27 Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, p. 4.

Gentleman' has a value outside this context, however. It sheds light on Edgeworth's response to a post-revolutionary crisis that affected women who wished to challenge custom, in her own case by the adoption of a writing self. It also indicates that Edgeworth favoured a system of representation based on metonymy in order to facilitate her position as a woman writing in a post-revolutionary world, in which women were threatened with the withdrawal of freedoms and opportunities, based on the claim that feminine power was intimately bound up with the corruption which preceded Revolution.

IV

Metonymic schemes and problematic chronologies are a feature of Edgeworth's other work from this period, *Practical Education*, published jointly with her father in 1798. In a chapter entitled 'On Rewards and Punishments', although the theme is the education of young children, the Edgeworths characteristically draw their examples from the writings of Voltaire, Blackstone and Beccaria on law and penal systems. Chronology becomes an issue of importance when deciding whether or not punishment is effective. Punishment as revenge on the past is, the Edgeworths appear to say, of absolutely no utility: 'The past is irrevocable; all that remains is to provide for the future'.[28] Characteristically post-revolutionary caution becomes apparent however when the Edgeworths qualify this radical statement:

> It would be vain to plead the necessitarian's doctrine of an unavoidable connexion between the past and the future in all human actions; the same necessity compels the punishment, that compelled the crime; nor could, nor ought, the most eloquent advocate, in a court of justice, obtain a criminal's acquittal by entering into a minute history of the errors of his education ... It is the business of education to prevent crimes.[29]

In both *Castle Rackrent* and 'Letter from a Gentleman' Maria Edgeworth proposes that humanity is both largely the product of environment and susceptible of change and improvement. These positions were central to her commitment to the continued improvement in women's lives, and her belief in the necessity of governing Ireland rationally and justly. This optimistic idealism is exemplified by the reforming zeal of Bentham. However, Bentham's writings indicate that the implementation of rational systems depends crucially on the definition of irrational, or more precisely non-utilitarian belief and practice, as conclusively 'past', whereas 'Letter from a Gentleman', in its rhetorical inadequacy, acknowledges implicitly that rationality itself has been superseded by reaction. Bentham's confident assurance that irrationality has become past is thrown into doubt both by the

28 Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (2 vols; London, 1798), i, 228. **29** Ibid.

post-revolutionary, anti-feminist reaction, and by the continued political upheaval in Ireland; the contradictory claims of *Practical Education* indicate that the past continues to exercise influence on the present through the search for cause and the felt need to apportion blame and punish accordingly.

Castle Rackrent's narrator, Thady Quirk, has been described the embodiment of 'colonial man',[30] but for Edgeworth, he is incomplete without reference to the society which produced him, the 'whole fabric' of which he is a part. The editorial apparatus which so many readers find irritating, patronising or intrusive, is, in addition to its function as apologist for the leadership of the ruling class, an attempt to supply what Edgeworth saw as a necessary referent in representation, and a deliberate obstacle to symbolic interpretation. Marilyn Butler has suggested that, in the tension between the 'Englishness' of the editorial voice and the 'Irishness' of the narrative voice, it is possible to locate the 'split cultural personality of the coloniser';[31] one could also suggest that the 'split' evinces a profound ambiguity on Edgeworth's part as to the more fundamental question of the location of 'personality' in any circumstance, in particular as a response to the historical crisis of the 1790s. In Edgeworth, the categories of gender and race or ethnicity can thus be said to overlap, though not in any metaphorical sense. Woman cannot *be* the nation, since the source of being lies always in some supra-individual force that is not susceptible to representation. The best Edgeworth can do is to indicate that her representation is partial; hence the extra-narrative voice of *Castle Rackrent's* 'Editor'. Ultimately this serves not to generate an impression of totality, though this controlling motive has been ascribed to Edgeworth, but to underline the partiality of the narrative voice and to fragment the representation. Based on a reading of Edgeworth's early work from the 1790s it is possible to characterise Edgeworth's narrative technique as sharing the qualities of the learned examples from 'Letter from a Gentleman', in that her plots and scenarios tend towards translatability and internationalism, but function through delimitation and contraction. The use of this method of representation is conditioned partly by Edgeworth's experience of the obstacles to women writers in post-revolutionary Britain and Ireland, an experience which undermines the apparent confidence in progress which her works propose.

30 P. F. Sheeran, 'Some Aspects of Anglo-Irish Literature from Swift to Joyce' in *Yearbook of English Studies*, 13 (1983), p. 102. 31 *Castle Rackrent* and *Ennui*, edited and with an introduction by Marilyn Butler (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 16.