MARIA EDGEWORTH AS A PRECURSOR OF REALISM

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Today the novelist Maria Edgeworth enjoys little of the popularity she knew in her own lifetime. Once widely read, her novels today are rarely familiar even to well-read and well-informed people. No revival of interest in her novels has occurred during the century which has passed since her death. This neglect suggests that there was much in her writing which was perishable, that her novels lack the universality which would make them appealing to readers of the twentieth century as well as to readers of the nineteenth century. This neglect also means that a study of her novels may now be made free from the prejudices operating during her lifetime, that today her writings may be studied against their historical background without these prejudices.

It is the purpose of this thesis to study the novels of Maria Edgeworth in an attempt to discover whether or not her novels have merit beyond their representation of the manners and morals of her historical period. This involves first an examination of her novels in the light of such criticism as has given rise to the question of their importance.
Maria Edgeworth as a Didactic Novelist

Although much has been written about Maria Edgeworth's life, comparatively little serious study has been made of her novels. Robert Gibbs Mood observed at the beginning of his doctoral dissertation, *Maria Edgeworth's Apprenticeship* (1938), that literary historians for the most part have been content with the bare mention of her historical importance. Proceeding from this observation, he uses the available biographical material to study the education, reading, and other informative influences of the early years of her life upon her craft of fiction. He states that under these early influences—the knowledge of Locke, Rousseau, and some representatives of the Utilitarians—she, along with her father, developed a rather unsystematic philosophy which was preoccupied with usefulness; furthermore, that their standard of social usefulness was somewhat narrow. Her motive for writing, he continues, emerged thus as a means of inculcating their ethical standards. For this reason her stories for children, he points out, "fall into the error of sacrificing verisimilitude to utilitarian purpose."¹

Her novels, he contends, do not show any fundamental change in her theory of fiction; rather, they show that her habits of composition were fixed, that she added no new implements

of fiction, and that all her novels were still more or less concerned, as were her stories, with proving definite moral theses or maxims. 2

Other critics of Maria Edgeworth's writings generally agree with this thesis, that her writings are pre-eminently didactic. P. H. Newby in his recent biography says,

The tone of all eighteenth century literature is moralistic, but never so nakedly so as in the hands of earnest blue-stockings in the closing decades of the century. They were usually educationists charged with the bringing up of younger brothers and sisters, great readers of Locke, Rousseau, and the more informative memoirs and travel books. 3

Maria Edgeworth began her career in precisely this manner. The crowded schoolroom at Edgeworthstown and the close supervision and interest of her father, himself an educational theorist, provided an opportunity for the expansion of her talents. Along with her father, she read Rousseau and Locke with the intent of gleaning from their philosophies educational theories which would enliven the rather dreary orthodox views of education current in her day. From Rousseau she gained and never afterwards lost a faith in education as the greatest hope for the gradual improvement of the characters and lives of men. With Locke, she envisioned the ideal of a man raised by education to the fullest of his potentialities,

2 Ibid., p. 265.

a moderate, sober, domestic man, not misled by the vagaries of undisciplined imagination. Her collaboration with her father in the formulation of these educational theories resulted in the publication of *Practical Education* (1798), the most complete expression of their pedagogical views. In its closing pages, Maria Edgeworth and her father set forth rather plainly what they thought was the highest good in life.

Parental care and anxiety, the hours devoted to the instruction of a family, will not be thrown away. If parents have the patience to wait for their reward, that reward will far surpass their most sanguine expectations; they will find in their children agreeable companions, sincere and affectionate friends. Whether they live in retirement, or in the busy world, they will feel their interest in life increase, their pleasures multiplied by sympathy with their beloved pupil; they will have a happy home. How much is compromised in that single expression! The gratitude of their pupils will continually recall the delightful felicity of a whole family in their work; and that the virtues and talents of their children are the necessary consequences of a good education.

Maria Edgeworth's chief contribution to this book was a series of illustrative anecdotes about happenings in the lives of children to prove, as if by experimentation, the worth of their educational maxims. From these efforts Maria Edgeworth learned to tell a story to enforce a single utilitarian aim.

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4 Mood, op. cit., p. 129.

Later volumes of her stories, *The Parent's Assistant, Early Lessons, and Moral Tales*, were written, Hewby says, "to exemplify the principles set forth in *Practical Education*.

It is natural that anyone possessing such a faith in education as Maria Edgeworth had would favor a didactic literature. "It had been his daughter's aim," wrote Mr. Edgeworth in the Preface to Maria Edgeworth's *Tales of the Fashionable Life*, "to promote the progress of education from the cradle to the grave." Because she had great faith that human character could be improved by education, she considered literature a tool in the educational process. The very titles of her stories for children proclaim their object: "Lazy Lawrence," "Simple Suzan," and "Waste Not, Want Not," for example. Typically these tales contrasted a good boy with a bad boy: the good boy works hard, makes his fortune, and lives happily ever after; the bad boy idles, cheats, or gambles his way to an unhappy end. It is amazing that in spite of their obvious didacticism these stories are alive.

The clear-cut character contrasts were satisfying to the child's mind: the spoilt child and the prudent child, the impetuous Rosamund and the more thoughtful Laura, the enthusiastic Helen and the wiser Emma, and yet even the good are differentiated from each other so that there is no confusing Rosamund with Helen, and Laura with Emma.

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6 Hewby, *op. cit.*, p. 31.


8 Hewby, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
The liveliness of these stories comes perhaps, as critics have suggested, from Maria Edgeworth's close acquaintance with children's minds. Emily Lawless points out that many of the stories were begun without any intent of publication, simply for the benefit of small brothers and sisters. They were written out originally on a schoolroom slate and were "approved of or summarily condemned according to the verdict of her short-petticoated judges." 9

Proof that her stories appealed to the children of the age was the extraordinary popularity which they enjoyed. Doctor Johnson had said, "Babies do not like to hear stories about babies like themselves; they require to have their imaginations raised by tales of giants and fairies, and castles and enchantment." 10 In spite of Doctor Johnson, however, the eighteenth century had set its face against fairy stories. They were, Newby says, "frowned upon by those who took most interest in the welfare of children." 11 Children of that age seemed to agree with their elders. The little girl who ran up to Maria in the middle of a crowded room and panted out, "I like Simple Susan best," before, overcome with confusion, running to hide, had made a perfectly good answer to a pronouncement in favor of ogres and fairies.

9 Emily Lawless, Maria Edgeworth (New York, 1905), p. 51.
10 P. H. Newby, op. cit., p. 24, citing Doctor Samuel Johnson.
11 Ibid.
Children liked the tales of improvement provided Maria Edgeworth wrote them, because every word she wrote was illuminated with a love and understanding of the child mind. Children liked their hard and fast distribution of reward and punishments; their resolute hold upon concrete fact; their avoidance of anything approaching the abstract. Newby says:

They have more than the magic of rectitude. They have the charm of brightly painted pictures. The Bristol streets and shops glitter in the morning sunshine and in the cathedral a robin hops and sings. Maria knew just the touch that will draw a child's attention, the green and white uniform, the colored jars in a chemist's window (in "The Purple Jar"), all bright enticing joy of the simple objects of the material world."12

Children can be the most logical and realistic of creatures, and her stories satisfied that part of their imagination which craved for the possible and the actual.

Baker concurs, "Miss Edgeworth's is so entirely the child's point of view that she merely seems to the puzzled infant mind to be making things beautifully clear and showing exactly how it is that effects are determined by causes."13

But the simplicity which is appropriate to the nursery tale, he continues, is less appropriate to the novel. A child can accept unquestioningly that world in which

12Ibid., p. 28.
naughtiness brings inevitable punishment, but novels have to deal with the actual world, a highly complex world in which the operation of causes is more obscure.

It cannot be reduced to such simple terms that the moral and aesthetic satisfaction of the reader coincide so prettily as in a fable for children. The child, we know, is father of the man; but Maria Edgeworth made too much of that truth, not when she tried to prepare young people for the ordeal of life, but when she essayed to educate their elders by the same means.\(^\text{14}\)

Other critics voice similar protest against the novels of Maria Edgeworth. Newby declares, "Life . . . is much more than this . . . even within the limits of polite society during the early years of the nineteenth century men must have been puzzled by the inconsistencies of what they took to be the workings of the moral order."\(^\text{15}\) MacCarthy in *The Female Pen* contends that to judge her novels

\[\ldots\] we must willingly abandon the standard of reality and deliberately adopt the Edgeworth outlook. We must become citizens of a world we know does not exist—a schoolroom where the good industrious child wins the prize and the naughty, selfish child stands in the corner.\(^\text{16}\)

Whether critics consider Maria Edgeworth's didacticism more or less detrimental, it appears that most of them do

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 27.

\(^{15}\)Newby, op. cit., p. 60.

agree that she was, as Walter Allen says, "essentially a didactic writer, for whom the chief virtue of the novel was that it was a particularly graphic form of tract" and that her didacticism trips her up to a greater or lesser degree as a novelist. Critics also agree generally that her Irish novels are better than her English novels, less hampered than they by her didacticism. Her propagandism is "most apparent in her English novels. In the Irish ones she is writing much more about what she knows at first hand, writing with her eye on the object." Baker concludes that Maria Edgeworth's first distinction was to stand foremost among didactic novelists; her second to write some of the finest Irish stories ever written.

Maria Edgeworth as an Irish Writer

Maria Edgeworth came to Ireland as an impressionable child "old enough to be struck by the quaintness of Irish life, and not too old to come to a good understanding of it." Her close association with her father in the management of the Edgeworth estate provided her with a varied knowledge of Irish life. Her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth,

18 Ibid.
19 Baker, op. cit., p. 32.
unlike most landowners, dispenses with the services of bailiffs and middle-men, who, by crooked dealings, frequently made more than their masters and oppressed the peasantry. He also abolished the feudal dues, the payment of duty fowls and the duty work, and insisted that all rent should be paid into his own hand. This meant that there was a great deal of business to carry out, and, as was typical of the man, he saw that the whole family understood just what he was doing. It was a part of their education. Maria Edgeworth wrote,

Not only his wife but his children knew all of his affairs. Whatever business he had to do was done in the midst of the family, usually in the common sitting room, so that we were intimately acquainted not only with his general principles of conduct, but with the most intimate details of their everyday application. I further enjoyed some peculiar advantages; he wished to give me habits of business and allowed me to assist him... 21

She rode her cob or pony "Dapple" beside him, when he went his rounds; she kept the accounts of the whole expenditure under his directions; she seems even to have acted for him as a kind of clerk or sub-agent.

That this familiarity with Irish life was of immense advantage to Maria Edgeworth as a novelist is unquestionable. The first fruit of this knowledge and experience was the publication in 1800 of Maria Edgeworth's first prose work

21Newby, op. cit., p. 23, citing Maria Edgeworth.
for adults, Castle Rackrent. Concerning this publication, Walter Allen declares,

Significant changes, new directions in literature are rarely so obliging as to coincide in their appearance with such convenient points in time as the turn of a century. The year 1800, however, is a date of the first importance in the history of English fiction, indeed, for world fiction, for in that year Maria Edgeworth published her short novel, Castle Rackrent.

The startling thing about Castle Rackrent, Mood concurs, was its originality. In other novels, he says, Maria Edgeworth was indebted to her predecessors.

In Castle Rackrent she made her own precedents and pioneered a new country for prose fiction. We have since come to call the careful representation of provincial manners, customs, and peculiarities, local color, but in Maria Edgeworth's day, both the quality and the name were unknown as far as prose fiction was concerned. . . . In Castle Rackrent . . . Maria Edgeworth gave promise of becoming a great novelist.

Allen is perhaps more emphatic in his commendation of her contribution.

Miss Edgeworth occupied new territory for the novel. Before her, except when London was the scene, the locale of our fiction had been generalized. Outside London and Bath, the eighteenth century novelist rarely had a sense of place; the background of his fiction is as bare of scenery almost as an Elizabethan play; and when landscape came in for its own sake, with Mrs Radcliffe, it

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23 Mood, op. cit., pp. 210-211.
was there, not because it was a specific landscape, but because it was a romantic one. Maria Edgeworth gave fiction a local habitation and a name. And she did more than this; she perceived the relation between the local habitation and the people who dwell in it. She invented, in other words, the regional novel, in which the very nature of the novelist's character is conditioned, receives its bias and expression, from the fact that they live in a countryside differentiated by a traditional way of life from other countrysides. . . . The region she discovered was Ireland, and with Ireland, the Irish peasant.24

Earlier studies of Maria Edgeworth's novels support this claim. In his Irish Life in Irish Fiction, Horatio Krans said that Maria Edgeworth pioneered in the description of provincial life and manners.25 Krans, however, was more interested in Irish social history than in Irish literary history. He judged prose fiction by only one standard, whether or not it was historically accurate in its pictures of Irish life. Doctor Frederick Michael in 1918 studied her Irish novels from the literary point of view. He traced Maria Edgeworth's portraiture of Irish characters and compared it with her predecessors'. His conclusion was that the Edgeworth novels were the first sincere attempt at a realistic and sympathetic depiction of Irish characters. Her predecessors in the novel had written mainly comic

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caricatures or portraits designed to cater to the prejudice which many of the English had against the Irish peasant.26

Most critics agree with Mood that Maria Edgeworth's publication of Castle Rackrent promised originality and greatness. They do not agree that this promise of greatness was fulfilled by her later works. Mood suggests that although Castle Rackrent is a novel in length, it is not really a novel in its structure. Instead, he says, it is simply a series of short sketches connected only by the character of Old Thady, the narrator. Mood claims, then, that Castle Rackrent does not demonstrate a "finished technique." It was a work, rather, which gave notice that Maria Edgeworth was learning to tell a story. Moreover, he says that, because Castle Rackrent is not followed by any work written in the same manner, any work exploiting the objectivity which was one of the excellences of Castle Rackrent, this work, promising in its originality, remains outside the main stream of her work. As proof of this contention, he calls attention to the fact that the works which followed are more serious and didactic in tone, and contain "little of that felicitous use of Irish local color which made Castle Rackrent promise so well."27


27Mood, op. cit., pp. 210-211.
Emily Lawless agrees with Mood that *Castle Rackrent* stands on a different footing from any others of Maria Edgeworth's novels.

In it alone we find her regarding life—not from any utilitarian, ethical, or dogmatic standpoint—but simply and solely objectively as it strikes, and as it ought to strike an artist. . . ."28

The novel which followed *Castle Rackrent* was *Belinda*, a novel of English life in the Burney manner. Later in the same year *Moral Tales* was published. This was a collection of seven stories written to give an insight into the way men and women go along in society, what common mistakes in social commerce lead to needless unhappiness and how these mistakes could have been avoided. These stories, like her earlier ones, are didactic instruments characterized by simplification of ethical questions, strong contrasts of good and bad conduct, and the absence of unanswered questions. In *Moral Tales* Maria Edgeworth turned from the promising material of *Castle Rackrent*, resuming the "schoolmistress role."29

When Maria Edgeworth turned again to write of Irish life it was in a publication entitled *Tales of the Fashionable Life*, a collection of stories issued in six volumes, the first three in 1809, the second three in 1812. Like her

previous collection of stories, this too was intended as a series of ethical lessons, this time emphasizing the follies of fashionable people. Newby says,

It is their misfortune and a critic's convenience that they can all too easily be pigeonholed under a number of neat labels: Learn to Say No! (Vivian), Be Alert to Avoid Boredom (Ennui), Be Prompt to Pay Your Debts (The Dun), Be Above Intriguing for Advantage (Manoeuvring), Shun Empty Ambition (Almeria), and so on... They are fairy tales that refuse to confess.

The moral earnestness that lay behind Tales of the Fashionable Life, Newby continues, would have crippled a lesser writer. But again the use of picturesque Irish material rescues at least two of these tales from the commonplace. He declares that it is no coincidence that the best of these Tales of the Fashionable Life should be The Absentee. Ennui is a readable novel because the very nature of its hero's cure from boredom (work, diversion, danger, and eventually the loss of his titles and estates) could so easily have gone to make a story with a less serious purpose. The Absentee, he continues,

... has all the advantages of Ennui in that a great deal of the setting is in Ireland, and it has also the advantages of Vivian (another of the Fashionable Tales) in that the demands of her moral led her to the creation of a forceful set of characters. But it is moralizing with a difference. It is doubtful if Maria realized the difference between a moral tale that sprang from an abstract idea and one which sprang from an observable situation; and we should possibly be wrong to press

30 Newby, op. cit., p. 59.
the difference, for there is no strict dividing line. But, whereas The Absentee arose from a great contemporary abuse—the Irish landowners living in London while their agents mulcted the peasantry of money that would eventually be thrown away on the gambling table—Ennui, Vivian, and so many others sprang from a Puritan system of moral precepts, and it is hard to resist the idea that this has a great deal to do with their respective merits. 31

The Absentee, together with Castle Rackrent, is generally regarded as Maria Edgeworth's best work. Walter Allen says, "... The Absentee seems to me no less remarkable than Castle Rackrent, though its weaknesses are more evident because the canvass is so much vaster."32 According to Allen and other critics, the principal weakness of The Absentee, and, to a greater degree, of Ennui and her other Irish novels is that they lack the objectivity which had made Castle Rackrent promise well.

In Castle Rackrent Maria Edgeworth transcribed the major character Thady almost directly from real life. Newby says, Castle Rackrent is such a joy to read because it was written in a spirit of unreflecting pleasure and identification with Old Thady, the narrator. The other characters exist, not in their own right, but in the mind of Thady. Because he is an authentic character, the other characters share his authenticity. 33

Occasionally in several of her other novels, characters

31 Ibid., p. 67.
33 Newby, op. cit., p. 43.
like Lady Delacour (Belinda) or King Corny (Ormond) live with the vivacity of the characters of Castle Rackrent. Maria Edgeworth's successes in characterization are frequent enough to bring tribute. "If I could," wrote Scott to James Ballantyne, "but hit Miss Edgeworth's wonderful power of vivifying all her persons and making them alive as being in your mind, I should not be afraid."34

Yet the sustained ironic detachment which is the artistic achievement of Castle Rackrent is never fully sustained in her other novels. In these other novels, even The Absentee, which is its nearest rival, the characters are never completely free from the author's attempt to teach a moral or ethical lesson. Allen says, "Maria Edgeworth dramatizes her characters, and she is especially good with the smaller ones, the peasants, the Irish gentlemen, and so on. Her failures are instructive, for they show with all her gifts that she was less than a great novelist."35 Her heroines must always in the end conform to her ethical aims, even if they must act out of character.

Conclusions

It is a misfortune, critics like Allen and Newby suggest, that Maria Edgeworth allowed her "artist's vision of life" to

34Ibid., p. 89.

35Allen, op. cit., p. 112.
be transformed by her didacticism. Because her aim was propagandistic, her stories and her characters seem best when they are transcribed directly from life; Maria Edgeworth herself doubted that "perfectly true characters absolutely taken from real life would be interesting . . . that they would be believed or that they could be useful." That her fears were groundless would have been difficult for her to believe. Her theory of the didactic aim of literature, formed in youth and nurtured by the influence of her father, was rooted in her essential philosophy of life, social usefulness. Her reading audience for the most part shared her view. Lady Ann Romilly wrote to Maria Edgeworth in 1814,

What do you think of Mansfield Park? It has been pretty generally admired here and I think all novels must be that are true to life with a good story vein of principle running thro' [sic] the whole. It has not, however, that elevation of virtue, something beyond nature, that gives the greatest charm to a novel, but it is a natural everyday life and will amuse an idle hour in spite of its faults. 37

All too often Maria Edgeworth's concern was with the "elevation of virtue," that "something beyond nature."

Yet this very attitude made her look upon the novel with different eyes than those of Jane Austen, her greater contemporary, though they had the same literary heritage, the

36 Newby, op. cit., p. 43, citing Maria Edgeworth.

37 Newby, op. cit., p. 9, citing Lady Ann Romilly's letter to Maria Edgeworth (1814).
novel of manners as it had up to that time been written by women. Jane Austen did little to extend this field. "Her chosen limitations," Newby says, "enabled her to perfect an art;"\textsuperscript{38} whereas even if Maria Edgeworth's moral purpose is conceded, she extended the range of fiction.

She took her readers not only into the country house, but also into the doctor's consulting room, to the officer's mess, to the young lawyer's rooms in one of the Inns of Court, and most important of all, she took them into the cabin of the Irish peasant, and found material that she made peculiarly her own, and, in so doing, gave dignity to the regional subject and made the regional novel possible.\textsuperscript{39}

He continues, "Maria Edgeworth enjoyed such a long and successful life that if to all this had been added the art of a Jane Austen it would have been altogether unfair. But with Jane Austen as the standard to measure her by we have, of course, demanded nothing less."\textsuperscript{40}

This attitude explains in part why the novels of Maria Edgeworth are neglected and unread.

The common reader has a way of looking at a novelist which is different from the critic's. He looks for pleasures that are more immediate than the realization that whereas Jane Austen was so much the better novelist Maria Edgeworth may be the more important. For whereas Jane Austen surveyed with the eye of a realist ground that had already

\textsuperscript{38}ibid.

\textsuperscript{39}ibid., p. 10.

\textsuperscript{40}ibid., p. 93.
been tilled and brought it to perfection, Maria struck out and subdued stretches of new territory.41

41Ibid., pp. 93-94.
CHAPTER II

THE ENGLISH NOVELS

By the time that Maria Edgeworth began writing, it appeared to many that the novel had already seen its highest fulfillment and was falling into decadence. Fielding and Richardson appeared to have achieved everything of which the novel was capable. Smollett and Sterne were regarded as marking the beginning of a period of decadence and, when they were gone, it was hard to see just where and how any fresh development was possible. As early as 1790 the Monthly Review pronounced that the novel had been so long established that it had arrived at mediocrity.¹ The novel for a period was in the hands of Grub Street hacks and aspiring lady novelists.

Maria Edgeworth's first novel, Belinda, appeared just eleven years after this pronouncement in the Monthly Review. It is against this historical background that her work must be viewed if a just appraisal of the importance of her novels is to be made. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to discuss briefly the work of her important predecessors and to study the relation which the novels of Maria Edgeworth

¹Newby, op. cit., p. 5.
bear to their works both in regard to her indebtedness and to her originality.

The Work of Defoe

Literary historians find it difficult to say who wrote the first novel, according to the modern sense of the term, but most of them agree that three men of the eighteenth century—Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding—gave the art of the novel strong impetus in the modern direction. The first of these, Defoe, did not consider himself a novelist. He wrote what he called "histories," that is, authenticated facts in an artistic setting. The secret of the uncanny verisimilitude he achieved has often been analyzed. He was the master of the literal; he produced his illusion of complete reality by employing a mass of circumstantiality. "No writer," Wagenknecht says, "has ever surpassed Defoe's skill in choosing vivifying detail ... yet for all his circumstantiality, Defoe is far from being a realist in the higher sense of the term."2 Dickens once objected that Crusoe "exhibits a man who was thirty years on that desert island with no visible effects made on his character by that experience."3 Allen suggests that the relation which Defoe bears to the artist is that of the forger, "but he was

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3 Ibid., p. 37.
forging, not works of art, but transcripts of actual experience." "We see him," Allen says, "as a novelist after the event, as it were. A novelist is the last thing he wished to appear as, and, by a paradox, it is exactly this that made him the archetypal novelist."4 We know Crusoe in the sense that we understand him thoroughly, Wagenknecht says, "but he is less an individual than he is Anglo-Saxon manhood face to face with the primal forces of nature."5 By making Crusoe the practical Englishman, Defoe forestalled such criticism as Dickens's. Crusoe appeared to do what the ordinary Englishman would have done in his circumstances. Defoe may have been little interested in the deeper springs of human character; nevertheless he was a great master at creating the illusion of reality by the use of circumstantial detail. All subsequent masters of naturalism are, consciously or not, his followers.

Richardson

Samuel Richardson had his greatest success wherein Defoe had his greatest weakness, in portraying the effect of experience on the personalities of his characters. Richardson focused his novels on the everyday experiences of men, as the middle class understood them, rather than

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5 Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 54.
the sensational experiences of men like Robinson Crusoe
or women like Moll Flanders. Retiring himself from the
stage of his novels, he made his characters appear through
their letters to be thinking about and feeling their expe-
riences. Through these letters every character, no matter
how small his part in the story, is perfectly individualized.
"What he had introduced into fiction, and therefore, into
the modes of thinking and feeling of countless readers, were
the analysis of emotion and motive, introspection in the
widest sense, and ultimately the belief in the value of
emotion and of feeling for their own sakes." Richardson
would little have appreciated the later developments of this
sentimental tendency in his writings. He himself refused to
give in to those sentimentalists who wanted Clarissa to live
happily ever after. Sin, as Richardson saw it, was a violation
of the Puritan moral virtues of industry, chastity, solemnity,
and sobriety, and "it was his feeling," Wagenknecht says,
"that sin must be punished. . . ." Yet it is from Pamela,
Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison that the masters of the
sentimental—writers like Rousseau, Dickens, and Thackeray—
derive. So great was his influence that hardly any writer
during the first generation of the novel could escape it,

6Allen, op. cit., p. 43.
7Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 54.
8Allen, op. cit., p. 43.
even if he was, like Fielding, writing consciously in reaction to him.

Fielding

These two—Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding—are the subjects of one of the great controversies among literary historians. This is not surprising since "no two writers have ever existed in one period in sharper contrast with each other." Whereas Richardson looked upon the people of his age with a penetrating eye, analyzing emotion and motive, Fielding looked upon that age with an "epic eye." He populated a whole world, Allen says, which exists, not for its own sake, but as a considered criticism of the real world. He wrote of people as he saw them in his work as magistrate in London. What he criticized in the real world was its vanity and hypocrisy. He knew people, but he never became a misanthrope. His irony is all the more effective for the reason that he accepted life and people.

Unlike Richardson, whose characters reveal themselves with intimacy and immediacy, through their letters, Fielding, "developed his characters by degrees, permitting them to reveal themselves naturally in dialogue and in action. . . ."
His characters and their action, however, exist not only in the context of the story but also in the context of the author's mind, a mind decisive in quality with strong views on human nature and behavior. Allen says,

We feel that Fielding knows everything there is to know about his characters even though he does not tell us all. They are so real to him that even though he may give us no more than a glimpse of them, they become real for us. . . . Behind every simple statement of Fielding's we feel the force of deep and varied experience of life, an experience that, however bitter it may have been, has not darkened the essential humanity of his nature.\(^\text{13}\)

Fielding creates through the inherent logic of his characters. It is not the illusion of history, as in Defoe's "histories," but that of art.\(^\text{14}\) There is little doubt that Fielding's contribution to the development of the English novel was great, especially in the matter of characterization.

Fanny Burney

Unfortunately it took many unproductive years for the influence of Fielding and Richardson to bear fruit of like merit. Then the *Evelina* appeared, written by a woman, the first woman novelist of consequence in England—Fanny Burney.

\(^\text{13}\)Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

\(^\text{14}\)Wagenknecht, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
"What Miss Burney did," Allen declares, "was to fuse part of the heritage of Richardson with that of Fielding." From Richardson came her exploration of emotional and moral impulse in the gradual development of a young girl's mind. From Fielding she derived her real strength, social comedy. Fanny Burney, of course, did not have Fielding's range. She applied with greater intensity a part of Fielding's method, a more detailed observation of society, a closer actualism, keen to detect originality and eccentricity in the familiar types. But the inner world, the deeper life of human beings, remained invisible to her, Baker says. "Fanny understood behavior, but not action. . . . When she tried to make a novel dramatic . . . she fell back on melodrama." At her best, however, she seemed to reproduce what she saw. Her impressions went almost as directly into her stories as into her diary. "Her novels were written," Baker says, "with a minimum of the simplifying, ordering, or interpreting process implied in such realism, for instance, as Fielding's."17

The Novel of Manners

The lady novelists who followed Fanny Burney learned much about the art of telling a domestic story. Yet it is

15 Allen, op. cit., p. 95.
17 Ibid., p. 156.
not true that they, even Fanny Burney, showed any deeper understanding of feminine nature than was shown by Richardson. Newby explains:

Feeling that they were in print only on sufferance under the protection of anonymity or a husband's foreword, they set about portraying women as it was thought proper for young men to know them. It would hardly be expected of young ladies who had taken to the writing of novels because, in comparison with other forms of literature, it seemed so easy, that they should have that gusto for realism which would be necessary to portray women as they really are. And the rest is satire and morality.18

The new heroine of English fiction emerged as the prudent, passive miss, a cold blue-stockings. These ladies' novels, however, were often lively, in spite of this. They passed easily from moral reflections to an uninhibited enjoyment of life. Social comedy was their field as it had been Fanny Burney's and, before her, Fielding's.

These fair authoresses came into their own with a change that took place in English society. Newby describes it:

Squire Western has given up his hounds, his drink, and his cursing, he had brought Sophia up to town where she is put in the care of an aunt who is one of the leading show-women in the great marriage circus... If convention prevented the heroine from being anything but demure there was scope for the presentation of a dragoness in her aunt and plenty of space could be devoted to the semi-military tactics of match-making. . . .19

Unfortunately, most of the lady writers just failed to take

18 Newby, op. cit., pp. 5-6.
19 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
this opportunity. All too often they saw the novel as a means to indulge themselves in fancy by way of compensating for their rather dull lives, or as a means of revenge on the features of society which had caused them humiliation.

No longer was the life of the age exposed with the epic view of a Fielding or the deeply penetrating view of a Richardson. The great wide world was appraised in a cup of tea. And the first of a long line of Cassandras prophesied the doom of the novel to mediocrity. Briefly then, this was Maria Edgeworth's literary heritage. To her fell the already developed form of the novel of manners.

Maria Edgeworth As a Novelist of Manners

To recognize whatever original contributions Maria Edgeworth may have made in the redemption of the novel from its state of mediocrity, it is necessary to study the relation her novels bear to those of her predecessors. It may be assumed, Mood assures us, that before Maria Edgeworth began to write her own novels she was acquainted with the best of English fiction. The novels which show most clearly her indebtedness to her predecessors and—because this indebtedness is obvious, her originality, as well—are Maria Edgeworth's novels about English life.

\[20 i b i d . , p . 8 . \]
\[21 M o o d , o p . c i t . , p . 81 . \]
Belinda, the first of these, shows a striking similarity to Fanny Burney's Evelina. In both novels, a young girl goes to London, is chaperoned by a grande dame, meets with misunderstandings and adventures almost disastrous, and finally by virtue and charm wins a husband of rank and virtue. In both novels, dissipations of fashionable society are castigated; in both there is occasionally a touch of farce or low comedy. The books are similar too in that both mingle their satire on the vanities of polite society with a very circumstantial account of the details of those vanities—descriptions of balls, attention to costumes and equipages, and accounts of diversions and places of pleasure. Neither Fanny Burney nor Maria Edgeworth forgets the lesson of Defoe in the use of circumstantial detail to contribute to the realism of their stories. Mood concludes that enough resemblances are present "to make it probable that Evelina was the most closely followed model for Belinda."

On the whole Belinda is not as successful a novel as Evelina. Its fundamental defect is that the character of the heroine is not convincing enough to secure unity for the novel. Belinda does not live, because her undeviating virtue and wisdom are not credible. Whereas Fanny Burney had made Evelina a young girl who made the mistakes common to a young girl of her age, Maria Edgeworth makes Belinda a

22 Ibid., p. 232.
young girl endowed with the sober wisdom of middle age, the
"prudent heroine." Maria Edgeworth's literary heritage from
previous lady authoresses along with her essential didacticism
have a stultifying effect on the character of her heroine.
Maria herself was not pleased with the character of Belinda.
In 1809 when she was asked by Mrs. Barbauld to correct
Belinda for publication in her collection of novels, she
wrote, "... I really was so provoked with that stick or
stone Belinda, that I could have torn the page to pieces:
and really, I have not the patience to correct her. As the
hackney coachman said, 'Mend you! better make a new one.'" 23

Had Maria Edgeworth been merely a hack or merely a
didactic writer, however, what is true of the character of
Belinda, that she fails to "live," would be true also of her
minor characters. Yet Maria Edgeworth found herself "led to
the creation within the framework of the old novel of manners,
new, living women who ... thrust themselves into the
world." 24 What has been said of Fanny Burney, that she con-
tributed little to a greater understanding of feminine nature
than Richardson, cannot be said of Maria Edgeworth. The
character of Lady Delacour is living proof of this assertion.
Although she is not the heroine of Belinda, she is certainly

23 Augustus J. C. Hare, Life and Letters of Maria

24 Newby, op. cit., p. 63.
the character who compels the most interest. Newby claims that it is upon the minor characters, like Lady Delacour, that the excellence of this and others of Maria Edgeworth's novels is based. It is in this sense that he suggests that she "brought new life to the old novel of manners." The setting of *Belinda*, he agrees, is the same as a dozen novels since *Evelina*.

The great town house blazes with lights and laughter, the newspapers are full of Lady Delacour's parties, her dresses, her extravagances and her witticisms, but as soon as the party is over and the last carriage has rolled away and the servants go round putting out the lights, the animated face relaxes under its mask of paint and Lady Delacour walks up and down the empty magnificent salon, grappling her anguish in solitude. She has cancer of the breast. This, as for Proust, was Maria Edgeworth's symbol of the hidden corruption of society.25

Lady Delacour is determined to keep up the appearances of the only kind of life for which she is fitted, and she fears that the knowledge of her disease would cause her fashionable friends to desert her. She is telling Belinda the story of her life.

"Oh!--I am sometimes," resumed she, "as you see in terrible pain. For two years after I gave myself that blow with the pistol I neglected the warning twinges that I felt from time to time; at last I was terrified. Marriott was the only person to whom I mentioned my fears, and she was profoundly ignorant; she flattered me with false hopes, til, alas! it was in vain to doubt the nature of my complaint; then she urged me to consult a physician; that I would not do--I could

not—I never will consult a physician—I would not for the universe have my situation known. Your stare—you cannot enter into my feelings. Why, my dear, if I lose admiration, what have I left? Would you have me live upon pity? Consider what a dreadful thing it must be to me, who have no friends, no family, to be confined to a sick room—a sick bed; 'tis what I must come to at last, but not yet—not yet. I have fortitude; I should despise myself if I had no species of merit; besides, it is still some occupation to me to act my part in public; and bustle, noise, nonsense, if they do not amuse or interest me, yet they stifle reflection.

Lady Delacour is caught up in a destiny more powerful than herself. She has to play a role in which she does not believe and yet she fears to play another.

Lady Delacour's character is due to very much more than the skull-beneath-the-flesh twist that is supplied by her attempt to conceal the disease that is killing her. Witty, ruthless, unkind, generous, repentant, she has qualities that make her commanding as a living woman; that all this vivacity is set in the widest of all possible contexts gives her the dignity of a symbol. She is to die and the diversions and trivialities are diversions and trivialities no longer, they are a strong-minded woman's answer to the hate of the world, she is the ancien régime dying in glory and she is truly tragic.

The trouble is that she does not die. The cancer of the breast is discovered to be no more than a nasty bruise, and the hard-bitten society woman falls under the influence of the benign Belinda. Although her brilliance is never wholly dimmed, she ends as the incarnation of domestic virtue.

26 Maria Edgeworth, Belinda, Vol I (New York, 1893), p. 73.

27 Newby, op. cit., p. 50.
Unhappily Maria Edgeworth, the novelist, succumbs to the convention of the happy ending.

Despite all this, however, Belinda is still a brilliant novel. Jane Austen referred to it (together with Cecilia and Camilla) as a "work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor are conveyed in the best chosen language." 28

Maria Edgeworth and the Cult of Sentimentality

Jane Austen could easily find praise for the work of Maria Edgeworth. Their literary heritage was much the same—their attitude toward life much the same. Indeed it is somewhat difficult for modern readers to understand the community of belief which substantiates the works of such writers as these. In rare tribute, Virginia Woolf, in her essay "How It Strikes a Contemporary," says of such writers,

It is the power of their belief that impresses itself upon us. This sense of security which comes to us from their writings is firmly based. They have their judgement of conduct. They know the relations of human beings towards each other and towards the universe. And, though they may not have a word to say about this knowledge outright, everything depends on it. 29

28 Newby, op. cit., p. 54, citing Jane Austen in Northanger Abbey.

Maria Edgeworth more frequently than not has considerable to say about these standards of conduct. In this excessive didacticism lies the failure of her next two English novels following Belinda: The Modern Griselda and Leonora. These two novels are like the reverse sides of a coin. The former portrays the long-suffering husband; the latter, the long-suffering wife. In neither novel is there any character with the originality of Lady Delacour to relieve the didacticism or the deadening effect of the conventional plots, over-worked legacies from the work of Fielding. Leonora was written to please a refused suitor for Maria Edgeworth's affections, and, perhaps, its unrelieved conventionality can be explained by this fact. Nevertheless, as Miss Emily Lawless says, "Since it is far from being one of Miss Edgeworth's happiest efforts, it is impossible, in the interest of literature, to feel any regret that his influence was not destined to be a more enduring one."30

The only importance which The Modern Griselda holds for this discussion is that it is a vehicle for satirizing excessive sensibility, the growth of which among the English public Maria Edgeworth distrusted. English society, as Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen understood it, was undergoing, to their mutual distrust, a transformation. Walter Allen describes it:

30Lawless, op. cit., p. 110.
The Augustan order which had prevailed from the age of Anne until George II's reign had passed; the reading public was no longer united in a body of commonly held assumptions about man, God, and society. In religion, Methodism was emphasizing the loneliness of man, stressing the paramount importance, not of reason, but of emotion. Novelists likewise began to stress the importance of emotion and to depend more and more on sensibility. 31

He defines sensibility:

Sensibility: its primary meaning is the power of sensation or perception, the specific function of the organs of sense. This meaning became overlaid with another, that of quickness and acuteness of apprehension or feeling which, in turn, was extended during the eighteenth century, to mean the capacity for refined emotion, sensitiveness generally in the compassion for suffering, and to be moved by the pathetic. Plainly this last kind of sensibility is always in danger of becoming morbid; it may become an end in itself, valued for itself so that reality is sought only as a stimulus to the exercise of sensibility. 32

Like Jane Austen of Sense and Sensibility, Maria Edgeworth perceived this danger. Like Richardson, whose writing had introduced into English fiction the analysis of emotion and motive, she believed that sentimentality clouded moral issues and states her attitude in describing the character of Lady Millicent:

... hers was a kind of exalted sentimental morality referring everything to feeling, and to the notion of sacrifice, rather than to a sense of duty, principle, or reason. She was all for sensibility and enthusiasm—enthusiasm in particular—with her there was no virtue without it. Acting from the hope of making yourself or others

31 Allen, op. cit., p. 110.
32 Ibid.
happy or from any view of utility, was acting merely from low selfish motives. Her point of virtue was so high that ordinary mortals might well console themselves by perceiving the impos-
sibility of ever reaching it. Exalted to the clouds, she managed matters as she pleased there, and made charming confusion. When she condescended to return to earth, and attempted to define—no, not to define—definitions were death to her imag-
ination!—but to describe her notions, she was nearly unintelligible . . . her ideas of virtue were carried to such extremes that they touched the opposite vices—in truth, there was nothing to prevent them; for the line between right and wrong—that line which should be so strongly marked—was effaced; so delicately had sentiment shaded off its boundaries.33

Thus, unlike their feminine predecessors in the novel, neither Maria Edgeworth nor Jane Austen approved of senti-
mentality. Neither was interested in idealized characters who blushed or fainted their way into what were basically false predicaments. They both were moralists—Jane Austen a moralist with a satiric turn; Maria Edgeworth, with a didactic turn.

Maria Edgeworth As a Didactic Novelist

Unlike Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth had little confidence in the value of satire as a didactic tool; she had more con-
fidence in the salutary effect of the good example. "Sensible as Ormond was to the power of humour and ridicule," she declares in a late novel, "he was still more sensible as all good natures are, of the sympathy with elevated sentiments

and with generous character." Satire, then, was a word that Maria Edgeworth abhorred. "To her ear it implied malice and exaggeration." She would not have understood the comment that some of her most interesting characters were her satiric portraits. But what is to be said about such characters as, for example, Lord Glistonbury of her novel Vivian (1812). If he were placed in the twentieth century he would be something on the order of a black market operator. Though he is proud, proud of his wild oats, yet he pays deference to progressive ideas in modern education.

He lectured his son's prospective tutor:

Now my idea for Lidhurst [his son] is simply this; that he should know everything that is in all the best books in the library, but yet, that he should be the farthest possible from a bookworm—that he should never, except in a set speech in the House, have the air of having opened a book in his life—mother wit for me!—in most cases—and that easy style or originality, which shows the true gentleman. As to morals—Lidhurst, walk on my boy—as to morals, I confess I couldn't bear to see anything of the Joseph Surface about him.

Lord Glistonbury is one of several among Maria Edgeworth's minor characters who are satiric portraits. In view of her didactic turn it is not surprising that only her minor characters are thus satirized, or that these minor characters today are preferred to her strait-laced heroes and heroines.

34 Ibid., p. 59. 35 Newby, op. cit., p. 64.

36 Newby, op. cit., citing Maria Edgeworth, Vivian (New York, 1893).
The defects of this didactic method of dealing with characterization are obvious. However brightly they may wear their paint, her characters are puppets subservient to the inevitable and pat distribution of reward and punishment. Against this must be set the fact that the very exigencies of the moral novel led Maria Edgeworth into fields where, had she seen the novel as Jane Austen did, she never would have ventured. Often the very rigidity of her moral led her to the creation of living characters, like Lady Delacour of Belinda, and in Vivian, Lady Sarah, the hero's wife. Vivian, by reason of his inability to say no (which characteristic is the spring of the plot) is married to her at his father's request. Of her, he remarked that she had, during their courtship, always behaved toward him with "the same petrified and petrifying propriety." That she should be cold and forbidding is necessary to the plot.

But what is not at all necessary and what immediately becomes manifest is Maria's understanding of a fiercely inhibited nature like Lady Sarah's which has suddenly achieved the object of its desire. There is something almost frightening in her passion, Vivian was overwhelmed. For her duty and passion now had the same object: She is fiercely jealous, she is monopolistic, she can hardly bear that he should leave the house without her; and then she reproaches him with, "Ah, you would have been much happier if you hadn't married me!" Yet when Vivian makes his final mistake and sells his political integrity to save himself from bankruptcy and help her father to a new title, she falls on her knees and begs him to sell everything.

37Newby, op. cit., p. 64.
they have, plate, furniture, equipage, house, sell everything rather than his honor. It is a surprising outburst, but then Lady Sarah has developed into a surprising figure.\(^\text{38}\)

If Maria Edgeworth had been merely a didactic writer, Lady Sarah would have remained narrow-minded, a scold, perhaps a spendthrift.

As it is she is a figure with true possibilities of tragedy (the modern novelist would have built his novel around her), she is the only character in the book who really catches our sympathy, and she is real when the moral necessity for her to be otherwise has spent itself. She is the creation of a didactic exigency, the flower growing out of the up-ended drainpipe in the garden.\(^\text{39}\)

Maria Edgeworth's novel *Harrington* (1817) furnishes another example of the fact that the exigencies of the moral plot led her into new fields. In this novel the new field is the psychological study of a child's mind infected by the prejudices of its elders, against an alien race. Her study here looks forward to Dickens' studies of childhood in *Oliver Twist* and elsewhere. As this novel is an example of Maria Edgeworth's innovations, it is, as well, an example of her avoidance of deep moral questions. Her conventionality triumphs when in the last pages the Jewish heroine is turned into a Christian so that the hero can marry her without losing caste.

The morals, then, which Maria Edgeworth points out in her novels are those which are fairly obvious to modern

\(^{38}\text{Ibid.}\) \(^{39}\text{Ibid.}\)
readers. She recognized this defect. Her manner, she remarked, was too Dutch, too minute. Had she been possessed of greater gifts she would have warned humanity against greater evils. But she found comfort:

The great virtues, the great vices excite strong enthusiasm, vehement horror, but after all it is not so necessary to warn the generality of mankind against these either by precept or example, as against the lesser faults. . . . Show them the postern gates or the little breaches in their citadel of virtue and they will fly to guard these.\(^{40}\)

Helen, the last of Maria Edgeworth's novels about English life, was written toward the end of her life. She had done by this time a good deal of thinking about her craft of writing. Her basic attitude, however, had undergone no transformation. She wrote to Sir Walter Scott, "How difficult it is to introduce the moral into a story," and he replied that rats would not go into the trap if they could smell the hand of the rat catcher.\(^{41}\) One of the qualities for which she admired Scott was his ability to ease his moral into the texture of the story. Inevitably she came to regard the concealment of the moral as one of the supreme tests of the novelist's art.

Of Helen Maria Edgeworth wrote, "It has always been my fault to let the moral I had in view appear too soon and too clearly, and I am not surprised that my old fault, not

\(^{40}\)Ibid., pp. 89-90, citing Maria Edgeworth.

\(^{41}\)Ibid.
withstanding some pains which I took to correct, it should still abide with me.\textsuperscript{42} Her self criticism is merited. With engaging transparency she wrote in \textit{Helen},

We must take leave to pause for a moment to remark, not in the way of moralizing by any means, but simply as a matter of history that the first little fib in which Lady Cecilia, as a customary license of speech, indulged herself the moment she awoke this morning, though it seemed to answer its purpose exactly at the time, occasioned her ladyship a good deal of superfluous toil and trouble during the course of the day.\textsuperscript{43}

Lady Cecilia's fondness for fibbing her way out of difficulties is the essential core of the characterization in this novel. Here again, the hero's leading characteristic is so much the most important part of the novel that the incidents of the novel seem contrived for this purpose alone. But again, as before, Maria Edgeworth's natural exuberance came to rescue her from unpromising situations. "Though her characters are rarely anything but puppets they wear paint a little more brightly than those of say Mrs. Chapone, their jig is a little gayer, and they squeak out their parts with greater conviction."\textsuperscript{44} Though Lady Cecilia's fondness for fibbing is her essential quality, it is not the only spark of individuality she possesses. She is an agreeable, generous,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42]"Maria Edgeworth," \textit{The Nation} (February, 1895), p. 445.
\item[44]Newby, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 59.
\end{footnotes}
and high spirited girl, who, before her marriage, thought flirtation little more than a pastime. Her husband, General Clarendon, as a bachelor had vowed he would never marry a woman who had previously been in love. When his wife confesses that before their marriage she had written letters to a notorious man of the world, he shows himself a domestic tyrant of the most hateful sort. Despite Lady Cecilia's imperfections, the sympathies of the reader lie nevertheless with her. Newby suggests that to anyone with less austere views than the general, it would appear that his wife had to lie as a natural means of defense.

... So far from being alienated by her little weakness (as we are alienated from so many of Maria's walking embodiments of human perfection) she has our sympathies. We should have no reproaches but for the suspicion that General Clarendon's conduct has an unfair share of Maria's approval. One of the surest signs of a novel's "dating" is our inability to accept the characters at the author's assessment, or at the assessment of the author's contemporaries.45

It would never have occurred to Maria Edgeworth seriously to consider that her reading public would fail to share her approval or disapproval. She, like Jane Austen, wrote with definite convictions about moral and social conduct. Moreover, she was confident that her reading public shared her views. She did her writing in the midst of her family and was sustained in her efforts by the interest and encouragement

45bid., p. 91.
of her family. Her novels, like those of Jane Austen, were the expression of a class, and above all, of a family within a class, in a way that was soon to pass away.

There was nothing tentative or exploratory about her work; it was a statement. The instrument of a man's perfectibility lay within his own power, and if he was a rogue he was all the greater rogue for having had the choice of good and evil and neglected to choose wisely.46

He or she who sins against the established ethical code should be punished.

The heroine of Helen is a refreshing contrast to the self-contained heroines of Maria Edgeworth's earlier novels. She is imprudent enough to fall into debt and human enough to fall in love without the customary circumspection. Beauclerk is a real young man, intolerably so at times, with a little silliness and a share of bad manners. Nevertheless, he represents no improvement over the hero of Belinda.47

The reader cannot but wish to be given a little more of people like Lady Bearcroft. Thinking that she could enliven a dull party, she produced a packet of rather vulgar political cartoons. They were met with shocked silence.

Lady Davenant despised, the general detested, Helen turned away, and Lady Cecilia threw them under the table, that they might not be seen by the foreigners. "For the honor of England, do not let them be spread abroad, pray, Lady Bearcroft." "The world is grown mighty nice!" said Lady Bearcroft; "for my part, give me a good laugh when one is to be had."48

46Ibid., p. 63.  
47Ibid., p. 91.  
48Maria Edgeworth, Helen, pp. 37-38.
On the occasion of another dull house party, during a lapse of "awful calm" she blurted out in a loud voice,

"Amazing entertaining we are! so many clever people go together too, for what? It was worthwhile to have seen Lady Masham's face at that moment!" Lady Bearcroft saw it, and, fearing no mortal, struck with the comic of that look of Lady Masham's, burst into laughter uncontrolled ... till out of the room she ran.49

Lady Davenant is, however, the character in the novel who compels the most interest. "There had been intellectual women in fiction before, there had been wit and sparkling conversation, there had been women of powerful, even domineering character. But Lady Davenant represents one of the first attempts to put a female politician into a novel."50

She explains her position to Helen.

One morning, as Helen was sitting in Lady Davenant's room alone with her, she said suddenly; "At your age, Helen, I had as little taste for what are called politics as you have, yet you see what I am come to, and by the same road you may, you will, arrive at the same point."

"I! oh, I hope not!" cried Helen. . . .

"You hope not?" repeated her ladyship calmly. "Let us consider this matter rationally, and put our hopes, and our fears, and our prejudices out of the question, if possible. Let me observe to you, that the situation of women in society is somewhat different than it was a hundred years ago, or as it was at sixty, or I will say thirty years since. Women are now so highly cultivated, and political subjects are at present of so much importance, of such high interest, to all human

49 Ibid., p. 10.
50 Newby, op. cit., p. 92.
creatures who live together in society, you can hardly expect, Helen, that you, as a rational being, can go through the world as it now is without forming any opinions on points of public importance. You cannot, I conceive, satisfy yourself with the common namby-pamby little missy phrase, "ladies have nothing to do with politics."51

It is true that Lady Davenant had none of the power which could make or break a statesman; her ascendency is entirely moral and intellectual. Yet she, an ambassador's wife, had a political salon. Her favorite reading was the government blue book, and she was never happier than when discussing such subjects as the distress of Polish refugees. "As a character of fiction, she is new in this sense."52

Conclusions

From this discussion of Maria Edgeworth's English novels, several observations present themselves by way of summary. In plot and setting her English novels show little originality. Belinda is remarkably like Fanny Burney's Evelina in plot and setting. Leonora has the time-worn plot of the faithless husband, the long-suffering wife. Vivian and The Modern Griselda are little different from the dozens of moral tales circulating before and during Maria Edgeworth's lifetime. Only in characterization have these English novels given any glimpse of any original contribution to the art of

51 Maria Edgeworth, Helen, pp. 40-41.
52 Ibid., p. 93.
novel writing. Her heroes and heroines throughout these novels are far less interesting than her minor characters. And these minor characters frequently show their vitality only after the moral necessity form them ceases. As Walter Allen remarked, "Miss Edgeworth's characters are free up to a point, but they are still tethered to their creator." Lady Delacour must in the end be persuaded by the virtuous Belinda and become, instead of the hard-bitten society woman, the embodiment of domestic virtues.

The merely occasional creation of living characters is frail support to a claim that Maria Edgeworth was an important and original contributor to the English novel. Further and stronger support must be found elsewhere—in her novels about Irish life.

53Allen, op. cit., p. 112.
CHAPTER III

SENSE OF PLACE IN THE IRISH NOVEL

The foibles of English society provided Maria Edgeworth with a good deal of her best material, but if she ever doubted her success there, she could transfer to the other side of St. George's Channel, where her superiority was unchallenged. It is the aim of this third chapter to assess Maria Edgeworth's claim to importance by an examination of her novels about Irish life, especially the way in which these novels manifest a sense of place. Few writers before Maria Edgeworth, as the last chapter has suggested, paid very much attention to scene and locale. The country-house, holidays at Bath—these were the conventionalized settings of most novels up to her time.

The Sense of Place in Other Novels of her Period

About the time that Maria Edgeworth began to write, there occurred, as described in the preceding chapter, a revolution of taste and feeling in English society—the rise of the cult of sensibility. The cult of sensibility had its effects, among others, on the appreciation of the beauties of landscape. A conversation from Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility is a pertinent defense of the traditional point
of view concerning scenic beauty. Edward has returned from a walk through and around the village and makes his report to the ladies awaiting him at the cottage. His comments compel the attention of Marianne, a devotee of the cult of sensibility. Edward says:

You must not inquire too far, Marianne—remember, I have no knowledge in the picturesque, and I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste, if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep which ought to be bold; surfaces strange and uncouth, which ought to be irregular and rugged; and distant objects out of sight, which ought only to be indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere. You must be satisfied with such admiration as I can honestly give. I call it a very fine country—the hills are steep, the woods seem full of fine timber, and the valley looks comfortable and snug—with rich meadows and several neat farmhouses scattered here and there. It exactly answers my idea of a fine country, because it unites beauty with utility—and I daresay it is a picturesque one too, because you admire it; I can easily believe it to be full of rocks and promontories, grey moss and brushwood, but these are all lost on me. . . . I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles. I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more as they are all tall, straight and flourishing. I do not like ruined tattered cottages. I am not fond of nettles or thistles, or heath blossoms. I have more pleasure in a snug farmhouse than a watchtower—and a troop of tidy, happy villagers please me more than the finest banditti in the world. 

Jane Austen speaks convincingly for the traditional point of view. The revolutionary or romantic point of view was not, however, lacking in literary spokesmen. In 1793 Charlotte Smith published The Old Manor House. Although

1Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility (New York, 1933), pp. 57-58.
this novel lacked few of the preoccupations which distinguished earlier English fiction, its author was completely at home with the revolution in taste and feeling. Charlotte Smith was probably the first English novelist to use descriptions of scenery as a matter of course, but she does not use them merely for decoration or as backcloths; in this lies one of her greatest achievements. Her descriptions of scenery have an emotional relationship to the characters who move through them. Her story took place in a decayed manor house, and, of course, Charlotte Smith made use of the romantic properties: deserted chapels, old cellars, family portraits, tapestries and armor. All these, however, are used to further the development of the story and are subordinated to it. Her story, a good one, is relevant to the situation of the times. She is interested in the past not for its romanticism, but for the challenge of the new industrial society to the old society.

It remained for the Gothic novels to complete the revolution in taste and feeling. The heroine of Mrs. Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is to the point here. The scenic background of this novel, the reader observes, exists to feed Emily's sensibilities. Emily, the heroine, is "incarnate sensibility." As the scenery of the novel

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2 Allen, *op. cit.* p. 98.
exists to promote Emily's sensibility, so may it be regarded as existing to promote the readers' sensibilities. In Anne Radcliffe's work, "the characters are wholly subordinated to the environment; it plays upon them, invades them, almost takes them over altogether. By comparison with her Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Fanny Burney play out their actions on bare boards."\(^4\)

The fact is, of course, that the Gothic movement, of which Mrs. Radcliffe's work is representative, arose primarily in reaction to the realistic tendency which centered around such writers as Richardson and Fielding, whose works focused on the commonplace. Walpole spoke in defense of Gothic novelists like himself. He was, he said, making

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\ldots \text{an attempt to blend the two kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life.}^5
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It is not difficult to understand why staunch realists like Fielding would not meet with the approval of the Gothic novelists, for this great novelist once wrote, "I must confess that I should have honored and loved Homer more had he written a true history of his own times in humble prose than those noble poems that have so justly collected the praise

\(^4\)Ibid.

\(^5\)Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 132.
of all ages.⁶ It is common cause for disagreement to pose the question of to what extent it would have been a good or bad thing for the development of the English novel, had all novelists agreed with Fielding. It is obvious that Gothic novelists disagreed with him, and in this disagreement, lies their most important contribution, the demonstration that "reason" alone could never control English fiction.⁷

The fiction of these Gothic novelists was the first of a type which was to become very distinguished: novels like Great Expectations, the greater part of Hardy and almost any of William Faulkner's novels. These novels, Allen says,

... are characterized by a peculiarly intense relationship between the characters and their immediate environments. Character and environment are impregnated with each other. To some extent, environment is, as it were, humanized, and the character himself is as he is because of the environment and cannot be detached from it; it is a necessary element for his existence, a special kind of air—in other words, in such novels the ambience in which the characters move is as important as the characters themselves.⁸

The Use of Scenery

Maria Edgeworth—unlike most eighteenth century novelists in descent from Richardson, Fielding, and Fanny Burney—in her Irish novels, at least, chose a specific, rather than a conventionalized locale for her novels; moreover, unlike

the Gothic novelists, she was not interested in that locale for romantic reasons. She had her doubts about the effectiveness of the Gothic romanticism.

Has my aunt seen the Romance of the Forest? It has been the fashionable novel here, everybody read and talked of it; we were much interested in parts of it. It is something in the style of the Castle of Otranto, and the horrible parts are we thought well worked up, but it is very difficult to keep Horror breathless with his mouth wide open through three volumes.9

That Maria Edgeworth should be an innovator in the novel seems at first strange, for her own character, whenever she displayed her feeling, exhibited the conventions and sentiment of the eighteenth century. She did not begin her Irish novels, however, as an innovator, but as a follower of one of the fashions of her day—that of presenting to the public an edited manuscript as illustrating the customs and manners which were fast passing away.10

Her desire to make the Irish character comprehensible and sympathetic to a somewhat prejudiced English audience led her to recognize the necessity of presenting the Irish in their proper context. She had at all times to consider the landed aristocracy and gentry of England for whom she was writing. "Knowing that there are limits to what even the best disposed people will believe about creatures outside their magic circle,"11 she had to present her Irish

9Mood, op. cit., p. 79, citing Maria Edgeworth.
10Newby, op. cit., p. 40. 11Ibid., p. 83.
characters within their proper setting. Her aim led her thus to a greater stress on the literal accuracy of her novels, a closer documentation, particularly in the matter of setting.

This stress on documentation was, moreover, an outgrowth of her very early training in the writing of stories for children. What had made her children's tales popular was their stress on the concrete rather than the abstract, her attention to material detail. The interest in documentation carried over into the writing of her English stories. However, here, her subject matter, the foibles of high society, is so much the same as that of most other women writers of her period that, although the settings are well-documented, they are conventionalized. There are of course a few exceptions to this general statement. In Harrington, for example, she describes The Tower.

The walls, three hundred feet length of wall, covered with arms for 2,000 men, burnished arms, is curious. The glittering piles standing with cross points on each side of the line of ancient kings, clad in complete armour, mounted on their steeds fully caparisoned—the deathlike stiffness of the figures—the stillness—the silence of the place, altogether awe the imagination and carry memory back to the days of chivalry. . . . We passed on to dark gothic nooks of chambers, where my reverence for the beds on which kings had slept and the tables at which kings had sat much increased my early association formed at Brantefield Priory. . . .

In the same book she describes a visit to a pawn shop.

We drove as fast as we could to Swallow street—dismissed our hackney coach, and walked up to the pawnbrokers.

Light in the shop!—all alive—and business going on. The shop was so full of people, that we stood for some minutes unnoticed. . . .

Jacob at one side, and I at the other took a careful survey of the multifarious contents of the shop; of all that was piled on the shelves; and all that lay huddled in heaps, in corners, or crammed into dark recesses. . . .

Jacob . . . was sent to the most respectable place at the counter, and promoted to the honour of dealing face to face with Mr. Baxter himself: drawers which had before been invisible, were now produced; and I stood by while Jacob looked over all the new and old trinkets. I was much surprised by the richness and value of various broaches, picture settings, watches and rings, which had come to this gate. . . .13

In Patronage Maria Edgeworth takes her readers for a visit to one of the Inns of Court.

When I went to see Mr. Gresham, I was directed to an unfashionable part of town, to one of the dark old streets of the city; and from all appearance I thought I was going to grope my way into some strange dismal den, like many of those ancient houses in that quarter of town. But to my surprise, after pressing through a court, and up an unpromising stair-case, I found myself in a spacious apartment. The darkness changed to light, the smoke and din of the city to retirement and fresh air. A rear view of the Thames appeared through large windows down to the floor, balconies filled with flowers and sweet shrubs!—It was an Arabian scene in London.14

13 Ibid., p. 211.
Such descriptions as these remain mere exceptions, however, to the general statement that the settings of Maria Edgeworth's English novels are essentially the conventionalized settings of other novels of manners, little more notable, for instance, than those of Fanny Burney's works. It is mainly, then, in Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels that there is any evidence of innovation, and here because she was interested in acquainting her English readers with the Irish people.

It is necessary for Maria Edgeworth, if she wished to make Irish character intelligible to her English audience, that she describe the background of Irish life in some detail. Tillottson in her Novels of the 1840's proposes that the novelist who writes with the purpose of revealing one nation to another must document his revelations with some exactness. "Otherwise he will hardly be believed." It is in this sense that Tillottson calls her settings "intimate." Introducing her English readers to the background of the Irish peasant, Maria Edgeworth describes a peasant's cottage.

The kettle was on the fire, tea things set, everything prepared for her guest, by the hospitable hostess, who, thinking the gentleman would take tea to his breakfast, had sent off a gossoon by the first light to Clonbrony for an ounce of tea, a quarter of sugar, and a loaf of white bread; and

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therefore was on the little table good cream, milk, butter, eggs—all the promise of an excellent breakfast. It was a fresh morning and there was a pleasant fire on the neatly swept hearth. The old woman was sitting in her chimney corner, behind a little screen of white-washed wall, built into the room for the purpose of keeping those who sat by the fire from the blast of the door. There was a loophole in this wall, to let the light in, just at the height of a person's head, who was sitting near the chimney. The rays of the morning sun now came through it, shining across the face of the old woman as she sat knitting.16

Use of Description in The Absentee

To convey to her English readers the desired impressions of Ireland, Maria Edgeworth twice employs the device of a hero, himself new to Ireland, recording his first adult impressions of the country. The first example is The Absentee, with its hero, Lord Colambre. Lord Colambre returns to his native Ireland for the purpose of undertaking first-hand the management of the family estates. To follow him with his record of his impressions of the Irish countryside is to become acquainted with the use Maria Edgeworth makes of description.

He records his first impression upon landing in Dublin.

The tide did not permit the packet to reach the Pigeonhouse, and the impatient Lord Colambre stepped into a boat and was rowed across the Bay of Dublin. It was a fine summer morning. The sun shone bright on the Wicklow Mountains. He admired, he even exulted in the beauty of the prospect. . . . But scarcely had he touched his mother earth than the whole course of his ideas

16 Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee, p. 190.
was changed; and if his heart swelled it swelled no more with pleasurable sensations, for instantly he found himself surrounded and attacked by a swarm of beggars and harpies, with strange figures and stranger tone; some craving his charity, some snatching away his luggage, and at the same time bidding him "never fear." A scramble in the boat and onshore for the bags began, and an amphibious fight betwixt men, who had one foot on sea and one on land, was seen, and long and loud the battle of trunks and portmanteaus raged. The vanquished departed, clinching their empty hands at their opponents, and swearing inextinguishable hatred: while the smiling victors stood at ease, each grasping his booty—"And your honour, where will these go? Where will we carry them all to, for your honour?"—was now the question. Without waiting for an answer, most of the goods were carried, at the discretion of the porter, to the custom-house, where, to his lordship's astonishment after this scene of confusion, he found that he had lost nothing but his patience. All his goods were safe, and a few "tinpennies" made his officious porters happy men and boys; blessings were showered upon his honour, and he was left in peace at an excellent hotel in ——— Street, Dublin.17

Lord Colambre's first impression of Ireland is that of the strangeness of the country, but he determines to acquaint himself more fully with the Irish scene. He discusses the political and economic problems of Ireland with various persons in Dublin. However, he realizes that he must himself see the countryside and visit various estates before he is properly acquainted with his native land. One of the things he has been told is that the society of Dublin has undergone a change, that society has been invaded by the nouveau riche. Since he remembers that this influx of the

17Ibid., p. 132.
bourgeoisie is one of the reasons that his mother gave for her desertion of Ireland for England, he decides to see himself what the situation is. He takes the opportunity of visiting one of the villas owned by a couple, the Raffertys, formerly grocers, now newly risen in society.

After a charming tour of the county of Wicklow, where the beauty of the natural scenery, and the taste with which those natural beauties had been cultivated, far surpassed his most sanguine expectations, Lord Colambre and his companions arrived at Tusculurum, where he found Mrs. Rafferty and her guests playing cards.

Mrs. Rafferty shows him around.

His lordship was much amused by the mixture, which was now exhibited to him of taste and incongruity, ingenuity and absurdity, genius and blunder; by the contrast between the finery and vulgarity, the affectation and ignorance, of the lady of the villa. We should be obliged to stop too long at Tusculurum were we to attempt to detail all the odd circumstances of this visit; but we may record an example or two which will give a sufficient idea of the whole. In architecture, Mrs. Rafferty has as good taste and as much skill as in painting. There had been a handsome portico in front of the house, but this interfering with the lady's desire to have a veranda, which she said could not be dispensed with, she raised the whole portico to the second story where it stood, or seemed to stand, upon a tarpaulin roof. Mrs. Rafferty explained that the pillars though they looked so substantial were really hollow and light as feather, and were supported with clamps, without "disobliging" the front wall of the house at all to signify.

Lord Colambre continues his tour with Mrs. Rafferty.

She then led the way to a little conservatory, and a little pinery, and a little aviary, and a little pheasantry, and a little cottage for ditto,

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18Ibid., p. 138.  19Ibid., pp. 138-139.
with a grotto full of shells, and a little hermitage full of earwigs, and a little ruin full of looking glass, "to enlarge and multiply the effects of the gothic." "But you could only put your head in, because it was fresh-painted, and though there had been a fire ordered in the ruin all night it only smoked." ... In all Mrs. Rafferty's buildings, whether ancient or modern, there was a studied crookedness. ... 20

On another occasion Lord Colambre is taken to visit the estate of the Kilpatricks. He takes a morning's ride with Lady Dashfort to look over the estate.

Lord and Lady Kilpatrick, who had lived always for the fashionable world, had taken little pains to improve the condition of their tenants; the few attempts they made were injudicious. They had built ornamented picturesque cottages within the view of their residence; and favorite followers of the family, people with half a century's habit of indolence and dirt, were promoted to these fine dwellings. The consequences were such as Lady Dashfort delighted to point out: everything went to ruin for want of a moment's care, or was pulled to pieces for the sake of the most surreptitious profit. ... 21

In these quotations it is obvious that Maria Edgeworth's interest was not in the beauties of nature, but in the physical proof of the ruin of the estates—proof that nobility who had always lived for the fashionable world had little concern for real improvements.

Lord Colambre is made aware during these weeks of his visiting and reacquaintance with his native land that the rise to power of the nouveau riche like the Rafferty family had driven the old nobility into seclusion in the country.

20 Ibid., pp. 138-139.  21 Ibid., p. 159.
By way of learning the background of such semi-recluses, Lord Colambre visits Halloran Castle, the home of the retired army man, Count Halloran.

They arrived at Halloran Castle—a fine old building, part of it in ruins, and part repaired with great judgement and taste. When the carriage stopped, a respectable-looking man-servant appeared on the steps at the open hall-door.

The servant invited them in, since the Count was out fishing.

On one side of the lofty and spacious hall stood the skeleton of an elk; on the other side, the perfect skeleton of a moose-deer, which, as the servant said, his master had made out with great care from the different bones of many of this curious species of deer found in the lakes of the neighborhood. . . .

The servant takes them into the reception room.

He opened the door, went in before her, and stood holding up his finger, as if making a signal of silence to someone within. Her ladyship entered and found herself in the midst of an odd assembly—an eagle, a goat, a dog, an otter, several gold and silver fish in a glass jar, and a white mouse in a cage. The eagle, quick of eye but quiet of demeanor, was perched upon his stand; the otter lay under the table perfectly harmless; the angora goat, a beautiful and remarkable little creature of its kind, with long, curling, silky hair, was walking about the room with the air of a beauty and a favorite; the dog, a tall Irish greyhound—one of the few of that fine race, which is now almost extinct—and been given to Count Halloran by an Irish nobleman, a relation of Lady Dashfort's. . . .

Having thus acquainted himself with the background of some typical Irish characters, Lord Colambre considers himself prepared to face the situation of his family estates.

22 Ibid. 23 Ibid.
He travels incognito that he may better see the situation as it actually is. He arrives first at his own village of Colambre.

He arrived at a village, or, as it was called, a town, which bore the name of Colambre. He was agreeably surprised by the air of neatness and finish in the houses and in the street, which had a nicely-swept paved footway. He slept in a small, but excellent inn—excellent perhaps, because it was small, proportioned to the situation and business of the place. Good supper, good bed, good attendance; nothing out of repair, no things pressed into services for which they were not intended by nature or art; none of what are vulgarly called make-shifts.

The object of this description of the village of Colambre is, as the following pages will show, a contrast between the villages cared for by honest and conscientious managers, and those managed by incompetent and dishonest managers. Next he visits two other villages in a different portion of the estate under different management. Nugent's Town is first.

This town consisted of one row of miserable huts, sunk beneath the side of the road, the mud walls crooked in every direction; some of them opening in wide cracks or zigzag fissures, from top to bottom, as if there had just been earthquakes. All the roofs were sunk in various places; the thatch was off, or overgrown with grass. There were no chimneys, the smoke making its way through a hole in the roof, or rising in clouds from the top of the open door. Dunghills stood before the doors, and green standing puddles; and squalid children, with scarcely rags to cover them, gazing at the carriage.

\[24\] Ibid., p. 172.
\[25\] Ibid., p. 185.
The nearby village of Clonbrony presented no more pleasant an aspect.

Clonbrony was now a melancholy scene. The houses which had been built in a better style of architecture than usual, were in a ruinous condition; no glass in the windows, and many of the roofs without slates. For the stillness of the place Lord Colambre in some measure accounted by considering that it was a holiday; therefore of course all the shops were shut up and all the people at prayers. . . . Lord Colambre walked to the church, but the church gate was locked and broken—a calf, two pigs, and an ass, in the churchyard; and several boys (with more of skin apparent than clothes) were playing at pitch-and-toss upon a tombstone, which, upon closer observation, he saw was the monument of his own family. . . .

Going from the village to the castle itself, Lord Colambre views similar results of neglect.

It was a fine castle with spacious park; but all about it, from the broken piers at the great entrance to the mossy gravel and loose steps at the hall door, had an air of desertion and melancholy. Walks overgrown, shrubberies wild, plantations run up into bare poles, fine trees cut down and lying on the ground in lots, to be sold. A hill that had been covered with an oak wood, where in his childhood our hero used to play, and which he called the Black Forest was gone. Nothing was to be seen but the white stumps of trees, for it had been freshly cut down to make up the remittances.27

Use of Description in Ennui

Lord Glenthorne of Ennui is another such character as Lord Colambre. His visit to his estates in Ireland is

26 Ibid., p. 203.
27 Ibid.
prompted by his boredom with English high society and the promptings of his Irish nurse. He arrives in Dublin.

I was detained six days by contrary winds at Holyhead, sick of that place, in my ill humour I cursed Ireland and twice resolved to return to London; but the wind changed, my carriage was on board the packet; so I sailed and landed safely in Dublin. I was surprised by the excellence of the hotel at which I was lodged. I had not conceived that such accommodations could have been found in Dublin. The house had, as I was told, belonged to a nobleman: it was fitted up and appointed with a degree of elegance, even magnificence, beyond what I had been used to in the more fashionable hotels in London.26

Impatient to see his own castle, he soon left Dublin.

I was again astonished by the beauty of the prospects, and the excellence of the roads. . . .29

On the fifth day of travel they approached the boundaries of Lord Glenthorne’s estate.

As we approached my maritime territories, the cottages were thinly scattered, and the trees had a stunted appearance; they all slanted one way, from the prevalent winds that blew from the ocean. Our road presently stretched along the beach, and I saw nothing to vary the prospect but rocks, and their huge shadows upon the water.30

The castle suddenly appeared in view.

It seemed to rise from the sea, abrupt, and insulated in all the gloomy grandeur of ancient times, with turrets and battlements, and a huge gateway, the pointed arch of which receded in perspective between the projecting towers.31


29 ibid., p. 39. 30 ibid., p. 47.

31 ibid., p. 48.
He visits the home of his old nurse.

We came to Elinor's house, a wretched-looking, low, and mud-walled cabin, at one end it was propped by a buttress of loose stones, upon which stood a goat reared on his hind legs, to browse on the grass that grew on the house-top. A dung-hill was before the only window, at the other end of the cabin a pig, a calf, a lamb, a kid, and two geese, all with their legs tied; followed by turkeys, cocks, hens, chickens, a dog, a cat, a kitten, a beggar-woman with a pipe in her mouth, children innumerable and a stout girl with a pitch fork in her hand. \(^{32}\)

The sordidness of this sight provoked Lord Glenthorne to repair matters. He determines to build a new cottage for his nurse. Despite numerous delays, he finally manages its erection and is satisfied with his worthy deed.

My benevolence, he says, was soon checked by slight disappointments. Elinor's cottage which I had taken so much pains to build, became a source of mortification to me. . . . Her ornamented farmhouse became, in a wonderfully short time, a scene of dirt, rubbish, and confusion. There was a partition between two rooms, which had been built with turf or peat, instead of bricks, by the wise economy I had employed. Of course, this was pulled down to get at the turf. The stairs were pulled down and burned, though there was no scarcity of firewood. As the walls were plastered and papered before they were quite dry, the paper grew mouldy and the plaster fell off. In the hurry of finishing, some of the woodwork had but one coat of paint . . . divers panes of glass in the windows were broken, and their places filled up with shoes, an old hat, or a bundle of rags. \(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) _Ibid._, p. 60.

\(^{33}\) _Ibid._, pp. 78-79.
Conclusions

From this discussion of the sense of place in Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels, Ennui and The Absentee, certain conclusions can be drawn. It has been shown that English novelists before her rarely had a sense of place, the settings of their novels were conventionalized. When an interest in description of landscape for its own sake came, with the work of the Gothic novelists like Anne Radcliffe, it did so for romantic rather than realistic reasons. The sampling of descriptions from these two of Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels reveals that she was an innovator in the novel with respect to the sense of place. She was interested in a localized rather than a conventionalized setting; moreover, she was interested in descriptions of setting for realistic rather than romantic reasons. She wished to picture the real settings of Irish life in order to make the Irish people and their situation comprehensible to her English readers. Maria Edgeworth's use of localized and realistic descriptions of setting provide considerable substantiation to the claim that she has a place in the history of the novel as a precursor of the regionalist writers. Conclusive proof of this claim, however, must be found in a study of her characterization.
CHAPTER IV

REGIONALISM IN THE IRISH NOVELS

Walter Allen has defined the regional novel as one in which the very nature of the characters is conditioned, and which receives its bias and expression from the fact that the characters live in a countryside differentiated by a traditional way of life from other countrysides. The task which remains, then, in this study of Maria Edgeworth as a precursor of the realists is to examine in her Irish novels the relation which her characters bear to their particular environment; moreover, to determine whether or not her representations of Irish life are authentic. It will be necessary, then, to begin with a discussion of the Irish situation.

The Irish Situation

During the latter part of the eighteenth century the Irish question, which had long been dormant, became to the British a source of acute trouble. In the last thirty years of this century "the old bones in that valley of desolation began to stir under the winds of a new age." Opposition

1Allen, op. cit., p. 108.

began, under the Protestant liberals, to the system of
tyrranny that sacrificed Ireland to English trade interests,
and all other Irish denominations to Anglican supremacy.
During the American War for Independence, Ireland came under
the control of the Volunteers, mainly Protestants but sup-
ported by Catholic opinion. For their efforts in defending
Ireland from invasion by the French, they demanded from
England the abolition of Ireland's commercial disabilities
and the formal independence of her Parliament. Ireland got
a free market for her goods, but not political autonomy.
Catholics were still allowed no participation in Parliament,
and rotten burroughs prevented the passage of the reform
bill which would make self-government possible. But there
was some hope in the air. The worst of the penal laws
against Catholics had been repealed. The conservative re-
action to the French Revolution, however, came inauspiciously
to dampen the spirit of toleration. When the French offered
Republican liberty to Ireland, their aid was accepted by the
leaders of the United Irishmen. These leaders hoped to
unite Ireland against England, "but the actual effect of
their reliance on French aid was to set Protestant and
Catholic to kill each other in the old spirit of the
Williamite Wars."³ The Rebellion of 1798 was put down by a
combination of the hard-pressed British government with the

³Ibid., p. 120.
loyalists of Ireland, now re-converted to the anti-Catholic fears of their ancestors. In January, 1801, Pitt was able to restore order to Ireland by the passage of the Act of the Union, but only apparent order, since he was unable to get the Catholic Emancipation Act passed too.

So the Catholic Celts were again thrust down, this time with the whole weight of England on top of them, and with their fellow Irish of the North waxing in Orange enthusiasm. The two Irelands were once more face to face fighting the Boyne battle again daily with their mouths.

Economically, as well as politically, the situation in Ireland was troublesome. Trevelyan calls Ireland that "over-populated, potato-fed island of oppressed tenant farmers." The economic system of Ireland was quite different from that of England. In accordance with ancient custom, the Irish landlord could rackrent and evict his tenants, but he himself put no capital into the land, made no improvements, and left the small peasant farmer to build and maintain his cabin and everything else on the farm. This system was exploited by landlords who were divided from their tenants in race and religion, and who often resided in the neighboring island, spending there the revenues which their agents wrung from the tillers of Irish soil.

4Ibid., p. 121.
5Ibid.
As a result of these political and economic problems Ireland had more than its share of social problems. MacCarthy points out that there had existed in Ireland for centuries two separate and opposed racial traditions, two separate cultures. Time had resolved this struggle into a social system consisting of two strata, an alien system superimposed upon the native system. Irish society was sharply divided into a powerful and privileged English and Protestant nobility and a poor and oppressed Irish and Catholic peasantry. Between these two there was unfortunately no stabilizing middle class. George O'Brien in his *Economic History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* writes that "a system which divides a country into two classes must, in the course of time, produce something resembling castes, and the members of the dominant caste are as unlikely to be possessed of industrial virtues as members of the servile class."7

This then—politically, economically, and socially—was the Irish situation when Maria Edgeworth emerged as a novelist of Irish life. It has been pointed out that, as the daughter of a conscientious Irish landowner, she had a close acquaintance with these problems. She and her family even had to flee once before the rebels. It is to be expected that this

6MacCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-222.

first-hand knowledge would reveal itself in her Irish novels. Whether or not her fictional representations of Irish life were faithful to the actuality is the problem of the following discussion.

Maria Edgeworth's Picture of Irish Life in Castle Rackrent

The novel which launched Maria Edgeworth into the writing of her Irish stories was Castle Rackrent, the comic-tragic history of a family of Irish gentry. The tale is narrated by Old Thady Quirk, the family steward. He begins his narrative with an introduction of himself:

My real name is Thady Quirk, though in the family I have always been known by no other name than "Honest Thady," afterward in the time of Sir Murtagh, deceased, I remember to hear them calling me "Old Thady": and now I have come to "Poor Thady"; for I wear a long greatcoat winter and summer, which is very handy, as I never put my arms into the sleeves, they are as good as new, though come next Holantide next I' ve had it these seven years. . . .

He recounts, in succeeding pages, the downfall of the Rackrent family.

Sir Patrick, the first, is a type of the festive, convivial country gentleman, whose lavish hospitality had endeared him to all the tenants. It is with pride and enthusiasm that Thady describes the celebrations which attended his coming into the estate.

Now it was that the world was to see what was in Sir Patrick. On coming into the estate he gave

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*Maria Edgeworth, Stories of Ireland* (London, 1886), p. 11.
the finest entertainment ever was heard of in the country; not a man could stand after supper but Sir Patrick himself, who could sit out the best man in Ireland, let alone the three kingdoms itself. He had his house, from one year's end to another, as full of company as ever it would hold and fuller. . . . The whole country rang with his praises! Long life to him! . . . A few days before his death he was very merry; it being his honour's birthday, and he called my grandfather in—God bless him!—to drink the company's health, and filled a bumper himself, but could not carry it to his head on account of the great shake in his hand. Then he fell to singing the favorite song he learned from his father; for the last time, poor gentleman, he sung it that night as loud and as hearty as ever, with a chorus:

He that goes to bed, and goes to bed sober,
Falls as the leaves do, falls as the leaves do, and dies in October;
But he that goes to bed, and goes to bed mellow,
Lives as he ought to do, lives as he ought to do, and dies an honest fellow.

Sir Patrick died that night; just as the company rose to drink to his health with three cheers, he fell down in a sort of fit and was carried off; they sat it out, and were surprised, on inquiry in the morning, to find that it was all over with Sir Patrick. Never did any gentleman live and die more beloved in the country by rich and poor.9

Sir Murtagh, who succeeds to his father's estates, is a type universally unpopular in Ireland, for he is a money-grabber. So stingy is Sir Murtagh that not only did he cease to stock the cellar and to keep open house, but he even refused to give the tenants the customary whiskey when they paid their rents. Old Thady could endure many

9Ibid., p. 12.
shortcomings in the members of his beloved family, but of Sir Murtagh he was thoroughly ashamed. Of Sir Murtagh's enterprise he affirms:

As for the law, I believe no man, dead or alive, ever loved it so well as Sir Murtagh. He had once sixteen suits pending at a time, and I never saw him so much himself. . . . He used to boast that he had a lawsuit for every letter of the alphabet. . . . Out of the forty-nine suits which he had, he never lost one but seventeen; the rest he gained with costs, double costs, treble costs sometime; but even that did not pay. He was a very learned man in the law, but how it was I can't tell, these suits that he carried cost him a power of money; in the end he sold some hundreds a year of the family estate.10

Sir Kit, the younger brother, who came into the estate upon the death of Sir Murtagh, is a rake and a spendthrift, "the type of Irish gentleman-adventurer so well-known throughout Europe."11 Life in Ireland was too uneventful for the gay Sir Kit, and at an early age he had betaken himself to England where his losses at play in Bath were somewhat retrieved by his marriage to a wealthy Jewess. Thady describes the arrival of Sir Kit and his bride at the castle:

I shall never forget the day he came home; we had waited all day long till eleven o'clock at night and I was thinking of sending the boy to lock the gates, and giving them up for that night, when there came the carriage thundering up the great hall door. I got the first sight of the bride . . . and greatly shocked I was, for she was little better than a blackamoor, and seemed crippled; but that was only sitting so long in the chariot.

10 Ibid., p. 16.
11 Kelley, op. cit., p. 47.
"You're kindly welcome to Castle Rackrent, my lady," says I. "Did your honour hear of the bonfires?"

His honour never spoke a word, nor so much as lifted himself up the steps—he looked to me no more like himself than nothing at all; I know I took him for the skeleton of his honour.

"My lady," says I, as she crossed the hall, "there would have been fifty times as many, but for fear of the horses, and frightening your ladyship, Jason and I forbid them, please your honour." With that she looked a little bewildered.

"Will I have a fire lighted in the state-room tonight?" was the next question I put to her, but never a word she answered; so I concluded she could not speak a word of English, and was from foreign parts. The long and the short of it was, I couldn't tell what to make of her; so I left her to herself, and went straight down to the servant's hall to learn something for certain about her.12

It does not take Thady long to see that Sir Kit is not a happy man. As time goes on, the differences between himself and his bride become so acute that he locks her in a room and continues to keep her there for a period of no less than five years. To permit Sir Kit to be less harshly judged, Thady recounts that at the dinners which he gave for the next few years, Sir Kit always sent a servant with his compliments to Lady Rackrent to tell her that the company was drinking her health, and to ask her if there was anything at the table he might send her. Thady's verdict on Sir Kit after his death—"He was never cured of his gaming tricks, but that was the only fault he had, God bless him"13—is kinder than that which he pronounces upon the Jewish wife.

who refused to help her husband in his financial distress—
"It was a shame for her, being his wife, not to show more
duty ... especially when he all along made it no secret
that he married her for money."  

The most beloved of all the Rackrents was the next heir,
the ambitionless prodigal Sir Condy, in whom the ruin of the
family comes to completion. Descended from a lateral branch
of the old family, Sir Condy was educated for a profession;
he studied law, but, never very good at book learning, he
was found at the end of his studies unable to speak in
public. He could never be bothered by the details of busi-
ness; all he wished was to live in peace and quiet and to
have his whiskey punch in the evening. Despite his improvi-
dence, Sir Condy had many lovable qualities. He longed for
affection, and one of the most amusing anecdotes of the
narrative is that which tells how Sir Condy, desirous of
getting an idea of the regard in which he is held by the
tenants, actually arranges to see his own funeral before he
dies. He feigns a spell of sickness, which Thady describes:

So he fell into a sham disorder, which was easy
done, as he kept his bed, and no one to see him;
and I got my shister, who was old woman very
handy about the sick, and very skillful, to come
to the Lodge to nurse him; and we gave out, she
knowing no better, that he was just at his latter
end, and it answered beyond anything. . . The
house was soon full and fuller than it could hold,
and the heat, and smoke, and noise wonderfully

14 Ibid., p. 28.
great; and standing amongst them that were near
the bed, but not thinking at all of the dead, I
was startled by the sound of my master's voice
from under the greatcoats that had been thrown
all at top and I went close up, no one noticing.
"Thady," says he; "I've had enough of this.
I'm smothering, and can't hear a word of all
they're saying of the deceased."
"God bless you, and be still and quiet," say
I, "a bit longer, for my shister's afraid of ghosts,
and would die on the spot with fright she to
see you come to life all on a sudden this way with-
out the least preparation."
So he lays him still, though well-nigh stifled,
and I made all haste to tell the secret of the joke,
whispering to one and t'other, and there was a great
surprise, but not so great as we had laid out it
would. "And aren't we to have the pipes and tobacco,
after coming so far tonight?" said some; but they
were all well enough pleased when his honour got up
to drink with them, and sent for more spirits from
a shebeen house, where they very civilly let him
have it upon credit. So the night passed off very
merrily, but to my mind, Sir Condy was rather upon
the sad order in the midst of it all, not finding
there had been such a great talk about himself
after his death as he had always expected to hear.15

Next to the Rackrents themselves, the man most respon-
sible for the family's downfall is Attorney Quirk, Old Thady's
unscrupulous son, who by guile gained control of the family
estate during the absenteeeeship of Sir Kit. Thady's loyalty
to his masters is put to a test when it comes into conflict
with his love for his son, but curiously enough, he acts on
principle and remains true to his house. "I wash my hands
of his doings," says Old Thady.16 Nevertheless, it is this
very restraint on the part of Old Thady which gives the
attorney his actuality.

15Ibid., p. 55. 16Ibid., p. 11.
He has the three dimensional solidity of a figure illuminated from two sides. More is left to the imagination than is specified in Thady's chronicle of his son's scheming, only just enough to explain the catastrophe. Had the attorney been any other than Thady's son, had Thady called him a villain every time he appeared in the story, he would have lost the benefit of that second illumination which holds a character more firmly in what the imagination takes to be the real world than any amount of complex characterization. . . . At the beginning of the story the attorney is nobody; at the end he is the proud occupier of Castle Rackrent and the dispossessed owner lies dying in the lodge.17

This ironic detachment, because it is sustained throughout the novel, is its greatest artistic achievement. On the death of Sir Kit, Maria Edgeworth wrote, "He was greatly mourned at Curragh where his cattle were well-known."18 A reviewer in The Nation wrote, "A sad business, but land and lords come and go; we know them by their debts, only cattle are eternal."19 Maria Edgeworth's irony is Irish irony as differentiated from English irony. Irish irony, the reviewer continues, has been sharpened to a finer edge than the corresponding irony of English writers of the time.

Sententious, secure in the collective, educative view of their class, the English ironists regard folly from the strong point of cultivated applause and moral platitude, whereas, an Irishwoman like Maria Edgeworth has uncertainty underfoot. The folly of the death of Sir Kit is only equalled by

17Newby, op. cit., p. 44.
18Maria Edgeworth, _Stories of Ireland_, p. 27.
19"Maria Edgeworth the Aunt of the Anglo-Irish Novel," _The Nation_, XLV (December, 1887), 749.
the absurdity of the mourning, beyond both lies the hopeless disaster of the state of the "unfortunate country." 20

Behind an ironist like Fielding is assurance, courage, complacency; behind Maria Edgeworth and Irish irony lie indignation, despair, and political conscience.

Always ready to moralize about cause and effect in the neat 18th century ways, Maria Edgeworth was (yet) Irish enough to enjoy without shame the unreasonable climate of human temper and self-will, Irish enough to be generous about the genius for self-destruction. She was not sentimental. Her irony—and surely this is Irish from Swift to Shaw—is the exploitation of folly by a reckless gaiety. 21

Maria Edgeworth's insight into the Irish character went beyond the grasp of its peculiar spirit. She penetrated beyond the national peculiarities of the Irish to the essential elements of human nature. It is this two-fold insight into Irish character, its "differentness" and its "sameness," which prevents her from being a mere folklorist and gives her stature as a novelist. When Sir Condy, the last of the Rackrent family, dies in a drinking bout, the reader feels, says an anonymous reviewer in The Nation, "somehow or other that each man has played his natural part," that the road which the Rackrent family persisted to their destruction "is the broad path which most of us in their case would have followed ... that the Rackrents were overpowered by the force of circumstances." 22

20 Ibid., p. 750.
21 Ibid.
22 The Nation, LXIII (August, 1896), 325.
Maria Edgeworth's initial work concerning Irish life establishes certain obvious claims to her being or becoming a regional novelist, according to the modern understanding of the term. The situation set forth in the novel, that of the downfall of an Irish family through the irresponsibility of its members, was an authentic one, revealing, at least, a more than superficial insight into the special social and economic problems of the Irish people. Not only does Maria Edgeworth grasp this problem with its tragic implications, but she grasps, as well, the effect of such a situation on Irish people. To change the nationality of the characters of Old Thady or Sir Condy would be to destroy the characters and the story. To consider this possibility is to realize how truly the characters in *Castle Rackrent* are representative of the national character.

The principal difficulty, of course, in basing the claim that Maria Edgeworth was truly a regional novelist upon her work *Castle Rackrent* is that the work can scarcely be called a novel in the modern sense of the term. As has been pointed out in the initial chapter of this thesis, *Castle Rackrent* does not fully meet the usual structural requirements of a novel. It is simply a series of short sketches on Irish character, connected only by the character of Old Thady. Its events are not dramatically told. There is little effective dialogue. For this reason, that *Castle Rackrent*
does not demonstrate a finished technique, others of Maria Edgeworth's novels must be examined.

Maria Edgeworth's Depiction of Irish Life in Ormond

In Ormond (1817) Maria Edgeworth reconsiders the plight of the Irish gentry. As a story, it is hastily put together; however, many of its defects can be explained by the conditions under which it was written. Her father was dying. A fortnight before he died, Maria Edgeworth was able to place in his hands the first 160 printed pages of Ormond, which the publisher had good-naturedly hurried on for the occasion.23

The hero of the book is Ormond. He is an orphan reared by Sir Ulick O'Shane but allowed to run wild and consort with game-keepers and the like. He is what Newby calls "an Edgeworthian Tom Jones."24 Newby says,

Unlike Vivian, he knows his own mind. He holds himself back from the seduction of a servant girl because it would grieve her lover. He learns French and good manners so that when he eventually comes into unexpected fortune and turns up in Parisian society, he is a tremendous success. The theme of the book is how innate qualities will lead a man to triumph over the deficiencies of education.25

Two of the major characters of the book, Sir Ulick O'Shane and Mr. Cornelius O'Shane, are not cut to any moral pattern nor manipulated to teach any particular moral lesson.

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23 Newby, op. cit., p. 79.
24 Ibid., p. 80.
25 Ibid.
For this reason, perhaps, they must be considered among the most successful that Maria Edgeworth ever dealt with. The contrast of these two characters is one of the excellences of the novel. Cornelius O'Shane or, as he is better known, King Corny, belongs to the Catholic gentry of Ireland, and unlike Lever's O'Donoghue and Lady Morgan's O'Donnel, he is forced by the penal laws to live more or less in seclusion.

Emily Lawless says:

In him we have a figure which may fairly be set alongside of the Antiquary, or of the Baron of Brawardine. Like them he belonged to a nearly extinct type which even at the time it was painted was vanishing from the stage, and in another dozen years or so would have become an impossibility.

In his realm of the Black Islands, a number of small islands located in a lake district, King Corny rules as king, legislator, and judge. "Within his kingdom his word is law and his subjects worship him. . . . His days are spent in the administration of rough justice . . . hard drinking and hunting with hounds and horn." The story gives an admirable picture of feudal life as it must have survived in some out-of-the-way corners of Ireland. There is real affection on the part of the tenants towards their sympathetic, kind, and generous mock ruler. When Harry Ormond, the hero, comes to visit him, King Corny insists upon

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26 Lawless, op. cit., p. 143.
27 Newby, op. cit., p. 85.
receiving him in a manner becoming his station. When he arrives at the island, King Corny orders the discharge of twelve guns at his landing.

A horse decked with ribbons waited on the shore, with King Corny's compliments for Prince Harry, as the boy who held the stirrups for Ormond to mount, said he was to call him, and to proclaim "Prince Harry" throughout the island which he did by sound of horn, the whole way they proceeded to the palace very much to the annoyance of the horse, but all for the great glory of the prince who managed his steed to the admiration of the shouting, ragged multitude, and of his majesty who sat in state in his gouty chair at the palace door.28

King Corny comes to have great respect for Harry Ormond and insists upon giving him a piece of land, a gift which is made with due regard for feudal custom.

I won't have you, like that bonny English Prince or King, they named Lackland. No, you shan't lack land while I have to let or give. I called you prince, Prince of the Black Islands, and here's your principality. Call out my prime minister, Pat Moore. I sent him across the bog to meet us at Moriarty's. Here he is, and Moriarity along with him to welcome you. Patrick, give Prince Harry possession with sod and twig. Here's the key from my own hand and I give you joy.29

There is strong contrast between the character of King Corny and that of his cousin, Sir Ulick O'Shane. Where the former lived in a remote island secluded from all men except those over whom he reigned, the latter had spent his life in the world mixing with all sorts and conditions of men;

28 Maria Edgeworth, Ormond, Vol. 10, 42.
29 Ibid., p. 73.
he had been a member of Parliament at one time. Sir Ulick was a gallant, dashing Irishman, who had the rare ability of adapting his conversation to his company; he was equally adept at setting the table in a roar as in laying siege to a young lady's heart. In the course of his life he had successively won three wives, each of whom, in turn, had been desperately in love with him—"the first he loved, and married imprudently for love, at seventeen; the second he admired, and married prudently, for ambition at thirty; the third he hated, but married, from necessity, for money at five and forty."30 Sir Ulick's histrionic abilities were of a high order. When he entertained his county electioneering friends, he could suit himself to the company by acting spirits instead of swallowing them, being able with the utmost perfection to counterfeit every degree of intoxication.

Sir Ulick could act the rise, the decline, and the fall of a drunken man, marking the whole progress, from the first incipient hesitation of reason to the glorious confusion of ideas in the highest state of elevation, thence through all the declining cases of stultified paralytic ineptitude.31

There is a great deal of selfishness and of rascally dishonesty in Sir Ulick; his character is, perhaps, best summed up by one of the men who filled his grave: "There lies the making of an excellent gentleman, but the cunning of his head spoiled the goodness of his heart."32

30 Ibid., p. 4.  31 Ibid.  32 Ibid., p. 292.
In the character of Lady Shane, Sir Ulick O'Shane's wife, a problem comes up for discussion which is to be a theme for another of Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels, The Absentee. The problem is that of English prejudice against the Irish. Lady O'Shane, whom Sir Ulick married for her money, after a courtship of nine days, held everything Irish in contempt. She dreaded Irish violence very much, Irish dirt more, and was persuaded that nothing could be right, good, or gentle that was not English. Maria Edgeworth, needless to say, makes her a figure of fun; for she certainly had in mind when she wrote about her the very real problem of English prejudice against the Irish.

When she was writing about Irish life she constantly had to keep in mind a deference for her uninformed and frequently hostile English readers. This deference had its effect on her treatment of Irish character generally. For example, she tells of its effect on her treatment of the character of King Corny:

The first idea of him was taken from the facts I heard of an oddity, a man I believe like no other, who lived in a remote part of Ireland, an ingenious despot in his own family, who blasted out of the rock on which his house was built half a kitchen while he and his family and guests were living in the house; who was so passionate that children, grown-up sons, servants and all ran out of the house at once when he fell into a passion with his tangled hair; a man who used, in his impatience and rages, to call at the head of the kitchen stairs to servants "Drop whatever you have in your hand and come here and be d---d! . . ." He was generous and kindhearted, but despotic and
conceited to the most ludicrous degree; for instance, he thought he could work gobelin tapestry and play on the harp or the mandolin better than anyone living. One after another in working out King Corny, from the first wrong hint I was obliged to give up every fact except that he propped up the roof of his house and built, downwards, and to generalize all; and to make him a man of expedience, of ingenious substitutes, such as my clever Irishman in middle life is used to do.33

Maria Edgeworth had to make her Irish characters acceptable not only to her English audience, but also to her own didactic requirements. Exceptional or freakish characters may be amusing and diverting, but they are not edifying. What a didactic writer like Maria Edgeworth aims at is a situation which shall have greater validity than the merely eccentric, and is more amenable to the formulation of reasonable laws about human conduct.34 Dickens, Newby points out, would have dwelt upon the eccentricities of King Corny with delight.

We should see King Corny at breakfast, his family around him, while the house shook with subterranean explosions as the workmen blasted away in the kitchen. "Drop whatever you have in your hand and be damned" would have been heard fourteen times a day, we should have seen King Corny making his own clothes, going to a concert, and riding to the hunt cracking his great whip and cheering the dogs.35

Maria Edgeworth prided herself upon the realism of her stories, and she was not sure that she could make such material sound convincing. She says, "... the value of these

33Newby, op. cit., p. 82, citing Maria Edgeworth.
34Ibid., p. 82. 35Ibid., p. 83.
odd characters depends, I acknowledge, upon their being actually known to be true. In fiction we have not this conviction." She was probably right. Too much heard of a real happening will ruin the story that could otherwise have been constructed from a hint or suggestion. King Corny is, after all, an eccentric; he was, as Sister Mary Edith Kelley puts it, a remnant of feudal times. His kingdom is isolated from the world, and when he dies the barrier between that kingdom and the outside world breaks down. The antiquated feudal kingdom is no more. The pressures of social and economic change destroy King Corny's feudal kingdom as they destroyed the Rackrent family.

Maria Edgeworth's Depiction of Irish Life in The Absentee

The death of the feudal system in Ireland, with its special complication of opposing cultures, had its legacy of problems. The ideal relationship between the Irish landlord and his tenant was expressed fairly clearly in the old Irish proverb, "Spend me; defend me." The real fatality of the system, as time revealed, lay in its exceptional liability to abuse. Whenever the enormous power, traditional even more than legal, of an owner came to be delegated, there, without doubt, abuses grew to be the rule rather than the exception. Throughout Europe it was a symptom of the death of the manorial system that the country gentry were enticed

36 Ibid., p. 83, citing Maria Edgeworth.
from seclusion in the country by the attractions of city life and society. Their estates were left to the management of stewards of varying integrity and ability. Among the Irish gentry this was all the more acute in that many Irishmen were persuaded to prefer English society to their own and were drawn irresistibly to the center of English society, London.

Such a family were the Lord and Lady Clonbrony of another of Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels, The Absentee. Lady Clonbrony had, in fact, almost dragged her reluctant husband all the way from Ireland to England so that she could have the opportunity to break into London society. Her situation is discussed by some members of English society, Lady Langdale and Mrs. Dareville:

"Ten thousand, have they?—possibly," said her grace, I know nothing about them—have no acquaintance among the Irish. Torcaster knows something of Lady Clonbrony; she has fastened herself by some means upon him; but I charge him not to commit me. Positively, I could not for any body, and much less for that sort of person, extend the circle of my acquaintance."

"Now that is so cruel of your grace," said Mrs. Dareville, laughing, "when poor Lady Clonbrony works so hard, and pays so high to get into certain circles."

"If you knew all she endures, to look, speak, move, breathe, like an Englishwoman, you would pity her," said Lady Langdale.

"Yes, and you can't conceive the peens she teekes to talk to the teebles and cheers, and to thank Q,...
and with so much teeste to speak pure English," said Mrs. Dareville.37

Poor Lady Clonbrony, for all her trouble, succeeds only in becoming an object of ridicule to all but her family and the readers of her story. To them Maria Edgeworth appealed for sympathy for her character. She has her hero, the son, reflect, "that she [Lady Clonbrony] must surely have some great qualities or she could not have excited such strong affection."38 Then Miss Edgeworth, as the author, herself makes an appeal, "A few foibles out of the question. . . . Lady Clonbrony was really a good woman, had good principles, moral and religious, and, selfishness not immediately interfering, she was good-natured,—she really had affections which were concentrated upon a few relations."39 To whatever extent Lady Clonbrony indulged her selfish desire to be a success in London society, to that extent did she limit her natural humane impulses. Had there been less temptation for her to leave the Irish estate, had she remained there where her humanity would have had more opportunities to express itself, the present situation would not have occurred, Miss Edgeworth seems to suggest.

Allen says, "We can see why she is a figure of fun, but we are never deluded into believing that she is only a figure

38Ibid., p. 50.  
39Ibid., pp. 50-51.
of fun. She is also a suffering woman, and her sufferings are no less real because they are endured for an unworthy end.  

"In Lord Clonbrony," says Sister Mary Edith Kelly, "Miss Edgeworth individualizes a type of landlord only too well known in Ireland..." Lord Clonbrony, the heir of Clonbrony Castle, had spent the days of his youth and early manhood in Ireland. Upon his marriage to Lady Clonbrony, the English lady who brought him not only a fortune but an insatiable ambition to make a place for herself in English society, he had taken up residence in England. He had never been happy in England. He remembered Dublin as it was before the Union, warm-hearted friends in that city; and when forced to take root in a new country, in the midst of strangers, to him cold and reserved, who looked upon him with a certain disdain as an Irishman, he deteriorates. Maria Edgeworth writes:

Whilst Lady Clonbrony, in consequence of her residence in London, had become more of a fine lady, Lord Clonbrony, since he left Ireland, had become less of a gentleman. Lady Clonbrony, born an Englishwoman, disclaiming and disencumbering herself of all the Irish in town, had, by giving splendid entertainments, at an enormous expense, made her way into a certain fashionable company. But Lord Clonbrony, who was a great person in Dublin found himself nobody in England, a mere cipher in London. Looked upon by the fine people with whom his lady associated, and heartily weary

40 Allen, op. cit., pp. 110-111.
41 Kelley, op. cit., p. 50.
of them, he retreated from them altogether, and sought entertainment and self-complacency in society beneath him, indeed, in both rank and education, but in which he had the satisfaction of feeling himself the first person in the company.42

Lord Clonbrony's companion in London became the frivolous, even rascally, Sir Terence, whose detrimental influence is obvious. "The future! leave the future to posterity," he advised Lord Clonbrony. "I counsel only for the present; and when evil comes it's time to think of it."43

Sensitive to the detrimental effects of London society upon both his mother and his father, the son, soon to be heir, is made forcibly aware of the imminent tragedy in their situation by example of their friends, also absenteees, the BerryIs. Sir John Berryl suddenly died.

His daughters, who had lived in the highest style in London, were left totally unprovided for. His widow had mortgaged her fortune. Mr. Berryl had an estate now left to him, but without any income. He could not be so dishonest as to refuse to pay his father's just debts; he could not let his mother and sisters starve. ... The similarity between the circumstances of his friend's family and his own struck him forcibly. All this evil had arisen from Lady Berryl's passion for living in London and at watering places. She had made her husband an absentee, an absentee from his home, his affairs, his duties and his estate.44

As a result of his reflection upon the matter, Lord Colambre determined to return to Ireland, as a previous

42 Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee, p. 27.
43 Ibid., p. 81.
44 Ibid., p. 66.
chapter has shown. Soon after his arrival in Dublin, he is informed of the situation there by a friend of his father's, Sir James Brooks.

I happened to be quartered in Dublin soon after the Union took place; and I remember the great but transient change that appeared. From the removal of both Houses of Parliament, most of the nobility and many of the principal families among the Irish commoners, either hurried in high hopes to London, or retired disgusted and in despair to their homes in the country. Immediately, in Dublin, commerce rose into the vacated seats of rank; wealth rose into the place of birth. New faces and new equipages appeared; people, who had never been heard of before started into notice, pushed themselves forward, not scrupling to elbow their way even at the castle. . . .

Among these members of the commercial middle class who had elbowed their way into Dublin society were the Raffertys, discussed above in chapter three. In spite of her vulgarity, Mrs. Rafferty is not entirely a figure of ridicule. After his visit to Tusculurum, Lord Colambre reflects that the comedy of errors which the day's visit had exhibited had amused all spectators, but after smiling, he sometimes sighed.

Similar foibles and follies in persons of different rank, fortune, and manner appear to common observers so unlike, that they laugh without scruples of conscience in one case at what in another ought to touch themselves most nearly.

The plight of his mother and Mrs. Rafferty are, after all, much the same.

\[45\text{Ibid., pp. 91-92.} \quad 46\text{Ibid., p. 113.}\]
Continuing incognito on his journey, Lord Colambre comes at last to his estate. One day's observation of the situation there is sufficient to set him thinking.

And this is my father's town of Clonbrony? Is this Ireland? Let me not like most of those who forsake their native country traduce it. Let me not even to my own mind commit the injustice of taking a speck for the whole. What I have just seen is the picture only of that to which an Irish estate and Irish tenantry may be degraded in the absence of those whose duty and interest is to reside in Ireland—to uphold justice by example and authority; but who, neglecting this duty, commit power to bad hands and bad hearts—abandon their tenantry to oppression and their property to ruin.\textsuperscript{47}

Maria Edgeworth observes with the eyes of Lord Colambre that if a landlord voluntarily absents himself from his estate, if his only interest in his estate is quick money for financing his social adventures, then he is highly vulnerable to the money-grabbing steward. It is obvious from her sympathetic treatment of the Clonbrony family, who find themselves in this position, that she intends her readers to understand that not only weakness of character, but the position as well, fosters the evil.

The sub-plot of \textit{The Absentee} is, of course, the romantic entanglement of its hero. The heroine is probably Miss Edgeworth's most engaging. She is intelligent, witty, not spectacularly beautiful and with as little priggishness (the curse of such characters) as Elizabeth Bennett herself.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 199. \textsuperscript{48}\textit{Newby, op. cit.}, p. 71.
But Grace Nugent is, after all, nobody. She is the ward of Lady Clonbrony, but she has no fortune, and there is some obscurity about her birth. There had been a time when the class distinctions of society were functional. The duty and privileges of the nobility had permitted them to protect the peasant, whose freedom from the necessity of fighting permitted him, in turn, to provide the necessary sustenance for the whole society. The centralization of government and its assumption of the national defense made these distinctions essentially social, rather than economic. With the extension of education among the members of the middle class and their growing intimacy with the nobility, commercially and sometimes socially, these class distinctions became false. It seems to the modern reader a great injustice that Grace Nugent, Miss Edgeworth's heroine, despite her virtues, should have been treated with condescension by the nobility of London society. Maria Edgeworth must have thought so too, for she has Miss Nugent deliver these society ladies several telling blows. Many a lady, Maria Edgeworth tells her readers, who could be condescending and familiar to her in private, was aloof and afraid of committing herself even with a nod of recognition when in company. On such occasions Miss Nugent was crushing. She would wait until the room was quite silent and then lean forward to the great lady, screening her whisper with her hand. "Lady Langdale, you may
curtsay to me now. Nobody is looking.\textsuperscript{49} The one discordant note is Lord Colambre's conduct when he discovers that Miss Nugent, with whom he is in love, is illegitimate. "Lord Colambre had the greatest dread of marrying any woman whose mother had conducted herself ill. His reason, his prejudices, his pride, his delicacy and even his limited experience were against it.\textsuperscript{50} It is only by establishing Miss Nugent's legitimacy and great fortune that Maria Edgeworth permits him to marry her. That this was quite unjust seems to have occurred to her, later. Newby says that it seems probable that the inconsistency was pointed out to her, for when \textit{Patronage} was published the following year, she went out of her way to rectify what was admittedly an error.\textsuperscript{51}

It appears from this examination of \textit{The Absentee} that Maria Edgeworth continued her genuine portrayals of Irish character begun in \textit{Castle Rackrent}, with an even greater emphasis on the relation between Irish character and Irish environment. There is, in \textit{The Absentee}, less of the typically Irish irony. This loss is, however, compensated for by a more finished technique. Whereas \textit{Castle Rackrent} can be dismissed as a mere "stage for the presentation of Irish characters," \textit{The Absentee} indisputably possesses the structure of a novel. Moreover, the structure of the plot is determined

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Ibid.}
\item\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Newby, op. cit.}, p. 71.
\item\textsuperscript{51}\textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
by its purpose, the portrayal of characters within a special social and economic, and specifically Irish, situation. The message of this novel is not merely present as a moral, as in *Ormond*. In *Ormond* the essential interest of the novel lies in the reformation of the character of the Tom Jonesian hero. As Millhauser says,

> The economic message of this book [*The Absentee*] is not merely present as an appended moral; it dictates the development of the story and is basic to its plot. The central event of *The Absentee* is economic: a land-owner's change from one system to another. It is as though a novel were to turn upon a farmer's adoption of a three field system or an industrialist's decision to socialize his factory or water his stock.52

Even in the fully developed Victorian novel of purpose the central event of the plot is not always this closely related to the reform the book advocates; in this respect, it is not altogether fantastic to compare *The Absentee* to many of the social novels of the present century.

**Maria Edgeworth's Picture of Irish Life in *Ennui***

It has been shown in the foregoing discussion that Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels—*Castle Rackrent*, *Ormond*, and *The Absentee*—depicted the Irish social and economic problems with authenticity; moreover, that she viewed those problems, at least in part, as results of existing customs and institutions. In this latter view there is a suggestion of the

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52 Hilton Millhauser, "Maria Edgeworth As a Social Novelist," *Notes and Queries*, CLXXV (September, 1938), 205.
revolutionary spirit—the spirit which motivated Rousseau and the Philosophes, the spirit which helped to initiate the French Revolution, the shadow of which loomed large over the Europe of Maria Edgeworth's day. To what extent did she embrace this revolutionary spirit? Since Maria Edgeworth believed in the indefinite perfectibility of man, it is not unexpected that she should interpret history according to the laws of progress. She believed that existing institutions were productive of injustice; she believed in the progress of history by means of man's perfecting himself through reason; she believed, therefore, that the existing social and economic institutions would be changed. It does not follow, however, that, believing these things, she advocated revolution or the abolition of these institutions and their replacement by new ones. She believed that changes would come naturally through the progress of history, and she was willing to be patient in awaiting them.

If proof of this opinion is needed, her novel Ennui furnishes it. Lord Glenthorne, a London playboy, suffers from the terrible malady from which the book takes its name. As it develops in the early pages of the novel, "the real cause of ennui was title and estates so long as the holder regards them as the excuse for doing nothing useful with his time."\(^{53}\) The cure, of course, is the work of restoring

\(^{53}\) Newby, op. cit., p. 66.
his estates. In the progress of this work Lord Glenthorne makes many mistakes: he has the wrong ideas about encouraging local industry; he builds fine cottages for people who do not appreciate them. In the course of these events, and this is the significance of the novel, Maria Edgeworth all but tells her readers that too rapid changes in the social and economic set-up will be unsuccessful. The peasants, when they take residence in the new homes constructed by Lord Glenthorne, take with them their former modes of life, and, shortly, the model homes look almost as bad as the vacated hovels. It turns out that Lord Glenthorne is not the rightful earl at all. The old nurse had changed the babies in the cradle, and the rightful earl is honest Christy, the local blacksmith. However, melodramatic this may appear to the modern reader, Maria Edgeworth was serious. Poor Christy's honesty is not sufficient training for him in the new position to which he is so quickly elevated. The fortune is quickly spent; the castle burns. Christy and his family suffer. It is obvious that Maria Edgeworth did not believe that rapid social and economic change would eliminate injustice; she was not a revolutionary to this extent. Baker's summary is a fair one: "On the whole, she had a cleaner, more consistent view of the social order than was attained by the revolutionary school with . . . their incessant discussions of ethical and political problems in the light of soaring
but ill-defined ideals. She has a valid claim to be called a true precursor of regionalism in the novel.

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54 Baker, op. cit., p. 15.
In 1785, Clara Reeve, a novelist contemporary with Maria Edgeworth, attempted to distinguish between the realistic novel and the romance. "The novel," she said, "is a picture of real life and manners, and of the time in which it was written. The romance, in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen."\(^1\) At first glance this distinction seems obvious enough, but on further consideration particular novels do not lend themselves easily to classification. Every great writer, it appears, is both a realist and a romancer. Not even the naturalists, for all their efforts, can be said to be completely realistic. No claim is advanced here, then, that Maria Edgeworth was a completely realistic writer. To make even a partial claim that she is realistic will seem rash, no doubt, to those who think of her as the author of over-simplified didactic novels. The claim can be strongly supported that she pioneered in the regional novel, that she contributed to the international novel (Ormond, for example) and the family history chronicle (Castle Rackrent). Her importance to literary history in

these accomplishments is obvious, and, perhaps, merit more attention than her works have received.

Yet it has been the aim of this thesis to show not only that Maria Edgeworth was important in these respects, but also to show wherein she was a precursor of the realists. Turgenev is said to have stated that he was "an unconscious disciple of Maria Edgeworth in setting out on his literary career."² "To read The Absentee," Allen says, "is to appreciate how very real the effect of Maria Edgeworth may have been on Turgenev, for, in one respect at any rate, we feel, as we read it, that we are in a world surprisingly similar to that of much nineteenth-century Russian fiction."³

In what respect, then, do we feel as we read The Absentee, and others of Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels, that we are in a world much like that of nineteenth-century Russian fiction? The most obvious similarity between the work of Maria Edgeworth and that of Turgenev or Balzac lies in Maria Edgeworth's choice of subject matter—provincial life. She attempted to show, and it appears from an examination of other eighteenth century novelists, succeeded in showing, for the first time in English fiction, the interaction between character and specific localized environment. She

³Ibid., p. 109.
attempted to portray the effects of particular social and economic problems of national character.

Even in her English novels, she was concerned with social problems. Wagenknecht says, "The picture of contemporary life and morals presented in them is not unimpressive; many passages recall the study of the breakdown of established standards which the postwar novelists of the nineteen-twenties presented." Leonora excoriates fashionable sensibility; Vivian is "a rather strong, grim study of a man who had a wishbone where a backbone ought to be"; Patronage is a contrasted study of two families, one who looks to patronage for advancement while the other relies on the exertions of its members; Harrington is a study of anti-semitism (discreetly handled, of course).

But it is in Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels that her foreshadowing of the realists is most evident. Here her stories are of provincial life. She deals with the actual problems of the Irish people of her times... the prosaic, even sordid aspects of their lives. To review her Irish novels by way of summary: Castle Rackrent is the study of the downfall of an old Irish family, an authentic situation frequently occurring in real Irish life of the period; Ormond is a study of the breakdown of a surviving feudal

4Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 149.

5Ibid.
estate in the Irish "backwoods," again an authentic situation; The Absentee is a study of the evils of absenteeism, a practice widely prevalent within the economic system of Ireland; Ennui is the study of the efforts of an uninitiated Englishman to rehabilitate his badly managed estate. These stories are all well-documented with concrete detail.

In the light of this summation, Maria Edgeworth's works appear as much sociological studies as novels. The fault lies in the bareness of the summary, however, rather than in the novels themselves. Maria Edgeworth's stories had all the necessary ingredients for the novel, both in plot and characterization. The plots of her English novels, as has been pointed out, were the conventionalized plots of most of the novelists of manners. In her Irish novels, naturally, there are frequent evidences, too, of her indebtedness to her predecessors. One need only recall the melodramatic incident of the switching of babies in Ennui to recognize this. In these Irish novels, however, her plots generally are rescued from their conventionality by their involvement in social and economic problems. When her concern with the actual Irish situation is overlaid by her child-like moralizing, her works lose their appeal to the modern reader. The plots, because of her didacticism, appear to be contrived for the sole purpose of illustrating a moral maxim. As Wagenknecht
says, "I am afraid life is neither so logical nor so decent as Maria Edgeworth would have it." 6

In characterization, too, the effect of her didacticism is often deadening. She had the rare ability to create "characters in the round," as E. M. Forster calls them, memorable characters like Lady Delacour, Lady Sarah, or Old Thady. All too often, however, the only characters who escape the circumscribing effect of her didacticism are the minor characters. Her didacticism, which was rather narrowly limited to a sensible system of ethics, Mood says, "need not have produced inferior novels if she had not sacrificed the realism of her stories by making unrealistic contrasts between those who did and those who did not what she recommended." 7

It must be admitted, then, in any evaluation of Maria Edgeworth's work, that her didacticism had unfortunate consequences in regard to both plot and characterization, that it hampered the realism of both.

The recognition of these deficiencies should not, nevertheless, obscure her important contributions to the realistic movement. She brought new life to the old novel of manners by portrayals of women who were new as types in English fiction, and by extending the possibilities of the novels in regard to setting. She chose to portray provincial

6Ibid., p. 142.
7Mood, op. cit., p. 273.
life, and she was especially effective with the peasants, who before her in English fiction had been treated mostly as comic figures. Her pictures of Irish social and economic problems were for the most part both vivid and authentic. The recognition of her deficiencies, due mostly to her didacticism, must not, then, obscure the recognition that Maria Edgeworth foreshadowed the work of the realists of the nineteenth century.
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