

# Imagining the Irish landscape in novels by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson

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In Kenneth Clarke's great work, *Landscape into Art*, it is asserted that 'landscape painting, like all forms of art, was an act of faith; and in the early nineteenth century, when more orthodox and systematic beliefs were declining, faith in nature became a form of religion. This is the Wordsworthian doctrine which underlay much of the poetry and nearly all of the painting of the century.'<sup>1</sup> I would like to propose that what Clarke identifies as the faith behind landscape painting, the creed he demonstrated, can also be found in the word paintings, the landscape described in novels where setting suggests and reinforces meaning. And, just as he found this creedal understanding manifest in nineteenth-century art, it can also be located in selected works by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan*, two leading women novelists of early nineteenth-century Ireland. These writers were Irish by lineage and birth, but cosmopolitan outsiders by upbringing and family ties, for Edgeworth's family was Anglo-Irish, and although Owenson's father was Irish, her mother was English. Nonetheless, both of them very clearly and closely identified with the land of their birth and sought through their fiction to inspire patriotic pride at home, to solicit sympathy and understanding from the 'alien' English reader and, at the last, to assert an Irish national identity in literature to the world. Moreover, many of these concerns were grounded in the Irish landscape. In particular, their Irish novels, including Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) and *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), and Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812) and *Ormond* (1817), feature travel through parts of Ireland that might well have been unfamiliar to an English readership, and all of these appeal, first, on political terms to the Protestant Ascendancy for the value of residence in situ, not in absentia; to the English nation for the rights of the Irish to their own homeland; and beyond that to the innate attraction for all to appreciate this unique and potent land.

Owenson's hero in *The Wild Irish Girl*, for instance, observes:

I left the shore and crossed the summit of a mountain that 'battled o'er the deep,' and which after an hour's ascension, I found sloped almost perpendicularly down to a bold and rocky coast, its base terminating in a peninsula, that advanced for near half a mile into the ocean. Towards the extreme western point of this peninsula, which was wildly romantic beyond all description,

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into art* (New York, 1976), p. 230.

arose a vast and grotesque pile of rocks, which at once formed the scite [sic] and fortifications of the noblest mass of ruins on which my eye ever rested. Grand even in desolation, and magnificent in decay – it was the Castle of Inismore.<sup>2</sup>

Owenson herself, in a footnote, reveals that her inspiration is Antrim's Castle Dunluce, showing thereby her efforts to be faithful to an Irish original even as she invents her 'wildly romantic' scenery, which is grand in both its natural and archaeological formations, with authority deriving from ancient settlement and local landscape. Edgeworth, for her part, offers up this picture on the first morning of the sojourns in his native Ireland, of her hero of *Ennui*:

When I awoke, I thought that I was on shipboard; for the first sound I heard was that of the sea booming against the castle walls. I arose, looked out of the window of my bedchamber, and saw that the whole prospect bore an air of savage wilderness. As I contemplated the scene, my imagination was seized with the idea of remoteness from civilized society: the melancholy feeling of solitary grandeur took possession of my soul.<sup>3</sup>

Like Owenson's Horatio, Lord Glenthorn is moved to Burkean categories of sublimity by the Irish landscape and will later find his life altered and his perspective infinitely enriched and transformed as he learns to claim his Irish identity. That is what it means to live in Ireland for these characters. It is to be reborn by the force of the land, of majestic Ireland, founded on that aforementioned Wordsworthian ideal: 'In nature and the language of the sense/ The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, /The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being'.<sup>4</sup> This is the encompassing, defining response to the landscape that several Irish novelists promote.

Owenson's two Irish novels that I wish to consider in this context bracket Edgeworth's three, chronologically, but I want to begin with Edgeworth whose novels are replete with references to the Irish countryside. In *Ormond*, for instance, she describes 'a remote old abbey-ground, marked only by some scattered trees, and a few sloping gravestones',<sup>5</sup> and in *The Absentee* several characters pay sightseeing visits 'to round-towers, to various architectural antiquities, and to the real and fabulous history of Ireland'.<sup>6</sup> But, although these references suggest that these relics of the Celtic Church dotting the terrain have merely picturesque and historical interest, in truth she finds great moral and spiritual value in the landscape itself, and her characters are transformed by their developing relationships with it.

2 Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl*, ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (New York, 1999), pp 44–5. 3 Maria Edgeworth, *Ennui* in *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*, ed. Marilyn Butler (New York, 1992), p. 179. 4 William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', in Stephen Gill (ed.), *William Wordsworth: the Oxford authors* (New York, 1984), lines 110–12. 5 Maria Edgeworth, in Claire Connolly (ed.), *Ormond* (New York, 2000), p. 147. 6 Maria Edgeworth, in Heidi Thomson and Kim Walker (eds), *The Absentee* (New York, 2000), p. 116.

In Edgeworth's *Ennui* the protagonist learns to live a meaningful and constructive life from his engagement with the Ireland of his patrimony. For instance, we can track how Lord Glenthorn becomes changed from his first travels around Ireland, of which he reports, 'The Giants' Causeway and the Lake of Killarney, were the only things I had ever heard mentioned as worth seeing in Ireland . . . Yet I was seized with a fit of yawning, as I sat in my pleasure boat, to admire this sublime spectacle.'<sup>7</sup> The yawning, of course, denotes the ennui of the title of the book, the rich young man's tedium borne out of idleness and dissipation, though the Burkean language of the sentence's close, 'this sublime spectacle', reveals that he is heading toward a newfound appreciation for what he had previously scorned in the landscape. And toward that end, his time in Ireland is marked by his loss, for a time, of his birthright, his property, and his beloved, stripped down to essential man, at which juncture he begins his Irish reformation. Thus, when the wrongful heir, who has supplanted him, burns the ancestral house down, the rightful Lord Glenthorn is restored to his lands, with himself remade to suit its demands. Now he can find redemption, and he returns to his estate, in 'one of the wildest parts of Ireland'<sup>8</sup> no longer alienated, and he can live and prosper anew. Thus, we see this character's progress against the backdrop of Irish landscape and under its tutelage. In a word, the land and his experiences in and of it have remade the man as a responsible steward for the land and its people.

As with the more well-known *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth excoriates what truant landholders have done to the Irish lands in *The Absentee*. *The Absentee* begins with the despicable attempts of Anglo-Irish landlords to secure their position in shallow, empty English high society by bankrupting themselves and their Irish domains in the process. For as the landlord and father of the protagonist declares, blaming his wife for their absence, aspirations, and indebtedness: 'If people would but, as they ought, stay in their own country, live on their own estates, and kill their own mutton, money need never be wanting'.<sup>9</sup> And his wife is indeed culpable, for she has bragged and looked to impress the English by declaring, 'there being no living in Ireland, and expecting to see no trees nor accommodation, nor any thing but bogs all along . . .'<sup>10</sup> She is rendered as depraved and as worthless as her opinions and her social climbing by the moral calculus of the novel's philosophy. In contrast, her son, as a young man, is drawn to Ireland: 'The sun shone bright on the Wicklow mountains. He admired, he exulted in the beauty of the prospect; and all the early associations of his childhood, and the patriotic hopes of his riper years, swelled his heart as he approached the shores of his native land'.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that his Irish properties will be in good hands when he comes into his inheritance, and the novel ends with the same kind of propitious marriage of English and Irish, Protestant and Roman Catholic, that Owenson in *The Wild Irish Girl* also promotes as the resolution of centuries of conflict and chaos.

*Ormond*, Edgeworth's last Irish novel, also features what she termed the wild parts

7 Edgeworth, *Ennui*, p. 250. 8 *Ibid.*, p. 177. 9 *Ibid.*, p. 19. 10 *Ibid.*, p. 91. 11 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

of the Irish landscape, the west. The hero travels to Paris, but he can only be satisfied in his kingdom of the Irish Black Islands, which evoke his best nature. For instance, before the end, 'his visit to the Black Islands revived his generous feelings, and refreshed those traces of early virtue which had been engraven on his heart'<sup>12</sup> and, at the last, 'they were associated with all the tender recollections of his generous benefactor',<sup>13</sup> when he purchases them and dwells there. Thus the geography is itself seen as positive and sustaining of goodness; characters may wander and stray from Ireland and what it nurtures, but the good ones are drawn back and ameliorated by the experience and the connection.

Sidney Owenson, too, equates the connection to the land with the morality of her characters. In *The Wild Irish Girl*, her hero Mortimer must be educated and acclimatised by Ireland, and the novel begins with his sense of himself in exile to Ireland from England, from civilization to savagery. He must learn the value of Ireland and its superior merits before he can be accepted and reside permanently. Once he learns this lesson, he practically crafts a travel brochure for Ireland:

To him who derives gratification from the embellished labours of art, rather than the simple sublime operations of nature, *Irish* scenery will afford little interest; but the bold features of its varying landscape, the stupendous attitude of its 'cloud-capt' mountains, the impervious gloom of its deep embosomed glens, the savage desolation of its uncultivated heaths, and boundless bogs, with those rich veins of a picturesque champagne, thrown at intervals into gay expansion by the hand of nature, awaken in the mind of the poetic or pictorial traveler, all the pleasures of tasteful enjoyment, all the sublime emotions of a rapt imagination.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Ireland appeals to a superior and cultivated mind that belongs to one who can appreciate what is profound, irrational, original, natural and sublime, all the positive values for the aesthetically attuned spirit of this time. Owenson, as I have intimated with Edgeworth's *Ennui*, would certainly have known the work of her fellow Irishman Edmund Burke and especially his *Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which exalted the power and might in nature, leading to the infinite and the magnificent.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, what was picturesque is only for the narrow, limited, domestic and small-minded, not what Ireland might convey or teach. This response to sublime landscape is not only suggestive of Wordsworth, as Kenneth Clark would argue, but reminds us of Shelley's reaction to the Alps where he locates 'the secret strength of things/ Which governs thought',<sup>16</sup> the psychological reality and recognition of human consciousness and creativity revealed in sublime

12 Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 181. 13 *Ibid.*, p. 297. 14 Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl* (italics in original), p. 18. 15 Marilyn Gaull, *English romanticism: the human context* (New York, 1988), p. 232. 16 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Mont Blanc', in Donald H. Reiman (ed.), *Shelley's poetry and prose* (New York, 1977), lines 139-40.

natural settings: 'And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, /If to the human mind's imaginings/ Silence and solitude were vacancy?'<sup>17</sup> Thus, there can be no creativity without nature, but there can be no acknowledgment of nature without the human imagination, and both Edgeworth and Owenson, as proper Romantics, argue for the Irish landscape in keeping with this understanding and developing tradition. *The Wild Irish Girl*, as already suggested, ends with a stirring affirmation of unity and hope, as a comedy of reconciliation, with a marriage of the young, attractive, educated Anglo-Irish and Irish lovers, so that the hero's father can declaim, 'let the names of [the two] . . . be inseparably blended, and the distinctions of English and Irish, of protestant and catholic, for ever buried. And, [I] . . . look forward with hope to this family alliance being prophetically typical of a national unity of interests and affections . . .'<sup>18</sup> Hence, where there is beauty and youth, education and culture, aristocracy and wealth, there can be assimilation of some sort, trumping differences in the name of love.

In marked contrast, *The O'Briens and The O'Flahertys*, Owenson's last Irish novel, is dark and despairing, over an increasingly ruined and destitute land, foreshadowing by a mere two decades the devastation of the famine. The people, too, are alienated and estranged from the land that previously inspired them. Here is one vision of the landscape for the protagonist:

O'Brien . . . on the southside of the Liffey found himself in one of the most dreary and ruinous suburbs of the Irish capital. Swamps and wilds to the left, were edged with dilapidated buildings, the more melancholy in their aspect, when a glimmer of light, issuing from a broken pane, gave indication that there some victim of wretchedness had retired to die. To the right appeared the then neglected banks of the river, with the high walls of the various hospitals (the refuge for every infirmity, from the mental aberration, for which Swift had here provided, in a dreadfully prophetic spirit, to the most loathsome of bodily inflictions. [sic]) One dark mass, frowning and terrible above all, for a moment fixed his eye, and arrested his steps – the state prison of Kilmainham.<sup>19</sup>

Death, disease, both mental and physical, and imprisonment, are all enacted visually in the landscape. And that is just the city. In the countryside, however, some Ascendancy figures and their hangers-on venture toward a hunting lodge and, predictably perhaps, since there is to be no leadership from that quarter: 'Every trace of a road, or even of a path, was now gradually disappearing; and the horses floundered on, through rough masses of rock, rising out of the quaking swamps of a peaty vegetable soil, till the ravine terminated abruptly over one of those deep and deso-

17 Ibid., lines 142–4. 18 Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, p. 250. 19 Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys: a national tale in four volumes* (London, 1827), iii, 173–4.

late hollows, which resemble the gaping crater of an extinct volcano.<sup>20</sup> Thus, here too is to be found decay and void, despair writ in a valetudinarian Ireland, prostrate, infirm, and mortally afflicted.

The novel posits the late eighteenth century as a time of stressors of contemporary politics in the collision of Irish nationalism and Romantic idealism, figured in its hero, who begins life as the heir of one side of a Montague/Capulet, Lancastrian/Yorkist, American Scotch-Irish Hatfield/McCoy feud, here set in the west of Ireland. Says one O'Flaherty to an O'Brien, speaking perhaps for her author: 'Every thing in Connaught [...] is the sign of feuds and alliances, of hatreds and of loves, of ancient inheritances and recent usurpations. What an abridgment of the history of the land, for instance, is the story of the O'Brien and the O'Flaherty, names that to Irish ears speak volumes?'<sup>21</sup> the 'history of the land', as it were, as captured in this book. And at one point, Owenson succinctly represents this collision of family and legacy when she says her expatriate hero Murrough O'Brien returns home, 'knowing nothing of modern Ireland, but her sufferings and her wrongs; knowing little of ancient Ireland but her fables and her dreams',<sup>22</sup> which detachment renders the sensitive, idealistic O'Brien ripe for Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen. O'Brien, like Tone, a Protestant, has been greatly influenced by revolutionary France of the 1780s,<sup>23</sup> and both fail in their efforts and end their days in French exile.<sup>24</sup> In the novel, O'Brien suffers personally for his brief dalliance with the United Irishmen, for he is 'rusticated for his rebellious views' from Trinity College.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, exile for misbehavior is his natural state in this novel. His patrimony is the Aran Island's fortress Dun Aengus,<sup>26</sup> which supports his role as the avatar of, as critic Julia Wright notes, 'a nationalist prophecy. [However,] he also has a tendency to get distracted by beautiful women' and constantly needs to be rescued for his troubles.<sup>27</sup> Thus, there is ever-steady conflict and diametrical opposition, in the land, in its politics, in its people, in its religion, in the self. Previously, Ireland was a source of strength. Now it is destitute, and its heroes are victims.

Indeed, O'Brien is a fugitive from one authority after another throughout the novel, and in flight, finally, from himself, from his destiny as a 'saviour of his country'.<sup>28</sup> His ignorance of Ireland, we have seen, is destructive, not just of himself, but of all he comes into contact with, for as he seeks his father, his dilapidated, disintegrating ancestral home in Dublin literally collapses around him during a thunderstorm: 'rafter after rafter gave way, and beam after beam . . . amidst the horror and consternation of an event so fearful, bricks and tiles still falling – doors, windows, shutters rattling in the storm . . .'<sup>29</sup> The graphic depiction of the collapse of an

20 Ibid., iv, 172. 21 Ibid., 70. 22 Ibid., ii, 212. 23 Breandán Ó hEithir, *A pocket history of Ireland* (Dublin, 1996), pp 34–5. 24 R.F. Foster. 'Ascendancy and Union', in R.F. Foster (ed.), *The Oxford illustrated history of Ireland* (New York, 1996), pp 180–2. 25 Robert Welch (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish literature* (Oxford, 1996), p. 403. 26 Owenson, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, ii, 39. 27 Julia M. Wright, 'National erotics and political theory in Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*' in *European Romantic Review*, 15 (2004), pp 229–53. 28 Owenson, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, iv, 257. 29 Ibid., ii, 332.

imposing, redoubtable, and powerful family home and its inhabitants, all they are, all they have, all they stand for. Closer to home, to this novel, the doom of the Protestant Ascendancy hangs and falls with 'the fall of Arranmore House'.<sup>30</sup> And, later, association with O'Brien causes a similar catastrophe for the woman who has been his unknown guiding spirit throughout the novel, his soul-mate, scion of his family's once arch rivals, his cousin, Beavoin O'Flaherty. She loses the Abbey of Moycullen, a foundation of a new dispensation which she has begun for the sake of a new Ireland, when it similarly collapses in fire and destruction after he visits.<sup>31</sup> In some ways here O'Brien is not the saviour, but the destroyer of things Irish.

As a fugitive, O'Brien, who cannot save himself much less anyone else, is therefore estranged from his land, but potential sources of sanctuary loom, and as the novel approaches them in his flight, the reader encounters moments of the affirmation of the landscape that were so apparent in Edgeworth's novels, and in *The Wild Irish Girl*. We read: 'The mountains, the lakes, the Abbey, all the sublime objects, on which his senses had dwelt in the dim, mysterious light of a waning moon, and under the influence of a dreaming fancy, were now spread before him, in the full reality of form and colour.'<sup>32</sup> Burkean sublime is therefore available, but muted, hushed by political ferment and inhuman injustice and oppression, and it will not prevail against the forces rampant in the novel. Eluding his pursuers, O'Brien finds occasional temporary refuges, once in a familial shelter with his elderly maiden aunts,<sup>33</sup> and once in a haven with one of two secluded religious orders depicted in the novel. I have already mentioned the Abbey of Moycullen for women, described as 'a confraternity of no particular religious order',<sup>34</sup> and there is another 'confraternity'<sup>35</sup> for men, where O'Brien is himself nursed back to health at one low point in his manifold getaways.<sup>36</sup> This is a place 'known only by the good they did; for they were charitable and almsgiving, and being of all professions, they applied their skill and acquirements to relieve the various ills to which the unaccommodated wretchedness of the Irish peasant stands every where exposed'.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the brothers, like the women of Moycullen, undertake good works, serving the community, ministering to the afflicted of which, clearly, is Ireland itself. Both Moycullen and the men's foundation are isolated; the Abbess even likens hers to a 'desert',<sup>38</sup> a significant word in Celtic religious orders connoting retreat from the hurly-burly to a pilgrimage destination.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Owenson identifies an actual location for the men's foundation, a rebuilt Abbey of Cong, which inspires a rare landscape rapture: 'the ruins of its ancient abbey, that bathes its delicate reflections of gable and tower in the beautiful river, which runs in liquid silver beneath its walls ... [a] magnificent monastery ... one of the most beautiful of the ecclesiastical establishments in the island of the Saints'.<sup>40</sup> But like his aunts' home, this site affords only transient solace for the man on the run. These are oases of sanctuary, but they cannot, finally, save the country.

30 Ibid., iii, 188. 31 Ibid., iv, 302-3. 32 Ibid., p. 275. 33 Ibid., iii, 3-4. 34 Ibid., iv, 208. 35 Ibid., iii, 201-2. 36 Ibid., p. 206. 37 Ibid., p. 198. 38 Ibid., iv, 265. 39 Marcus Losack, 'The Bible, the desert and the Celtic tradition', in Pdraigín Clancy (ed.), *Celtic threads: exploring the wisdom of our heritage* (Dublin, 1999), pp 56-8. 40 Owenson, *The*

The sisterhood, under the direction of the Abbess of Moycullen, falls, as we have seen, though not before Owenson has tried to uphold it as a kind of religious compromise for Ireland similar to the interfaith marriage at the end of *The Wild Irish Girl*, although that was when she was feeling more optimistic about the fate of her land. Here, the O'Flaherty heir declares, '*I will live in Ireland*'<sup>41</sup> and the italics of the original indicate how profound her connection to the land is, even as she urges O'Brien, 'for your sake, for both our sakes, you must leave this country'.<sup>42</sup> However, he is equally adamant to stay and for once face his accusers and persecutors, which he does, and which leads to his conviction.<sup>43</sup> However, with Beavoin's connivance, he flees, and the novel ends with both of them in exile and married. Thus, salutary life is possible only away from the land of Ireland, and the country remains unredeemed. *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* ends, then, with a reconciliation of the feuding families, but their disaffection from the land is complete. Where sublimity, and unity and transcendence once beckoned, now all that is left in Ireland is sundered and alienated. Not until the political and religious differences are resolved can the spirit of the land be rediscovered and bestow the sublimity its landscapes, its earth and water and sky, pledge.