

Maria Edgeworth and the Aesthetics of Secrecy

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One of Maria Edgeworth's earliest plays – *The Double Disguise* – tells the story of a soldier returning home from war in successive disguises to test the fidelity of his wife. The stealthy husband discovers his wife's true identity by concealing his own. In her preface to *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth rehearses this disclosure-through-disguise theme again when she comments that 'a love of truth ... necessarily implies a love of secret[s]' – an assertion that well articulates a fundamental ambivalence in her literary and social project.¹ Again and again, Edgeworth encourages Ireland to adopt Enlightenment ideals of truth, openness, and the transparent light of reason, but mediates these ideals through narratives steeped in falsehood, concealment, stealth and secrecy. At the centre of Edgeworth's novels and tales, from *Castle Rackrent* to *Helen*, lie powerful secrets – secret identity, secret illness, secret genealogy, secret letters, diaries, whispers, gossip and rumours – that on all sides threaten to pull her ideals asunder. The kind of doubleness crudely sketched in *The Double Disguise* takes on a new complexity in her later fiction, equivocating as it does between surveillance and secrecy, enlightenment and obfuscation, revelation and reticence. Edgeworth, in other words, puts secrets in service of moral lessons, but is forever concerned that such dangerous material might tear away from her reformist purpose, and end up participating in the covert culture she means to lay bare. Why does she risk writing tales that might proliferate the sort of secrets she means to dispel?

We might, as some have done, read Edgeworth's simultaneous fascination and frustration with a cryptic Ireland as that of a writer divided between reformist ideals and the real demands of fiction.² Gothic secrets feed Edgeworth's narratives – adding flesh and bones to imagination-starved didactic tales. Their persistent presence bespeaks an anxiety that enlightenment ethics, while politically potent, make rather insipid ingredients for a novel. A commitment to the light of reason, in other words, might make for a good schoolhouse, but not a good story. As one of Edgeworth's contemporaries put it, 'chemistry, mechanics, or political economy ... are all excellent things in

1 Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (London, 1992), p. 61.

2 See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London, 1995), pp. 161–77.

their way, but vile, cold-hearted trash in a novel'.³ He attributes all such trash in Edgeworth's novels to her father. Or again, in Lady Delacourt's words at the conclusion of *Belinda*, 'The secret of being boring is to tell everything'.⁴ The secret of being a good storyteller, then, is holding back the truth, partially concealing facts even in the moment of their disclosure, refusing to tear any veils rudely away. In this sense, as Frank Kermode has pointed out, secrecy is enmeshed in the very nature of literary texts and their interpretation – from the Book of Exodus to *The X-Files*.⁵

Edgeworth certainly found no scarcity of cloak-and-dagger material as she cast an artist's eye over Ireland during her lifetime, a lifetime that spanned the rise of countless conspiratorial movements – including the Defenders, United Irishmen, Whiteboys, Rightboys, Ribbonmen, and Molly Maguires. These revolutionary and agrarian societies relied on a combination of secrecy and terror to effect political rebellion. For Ascendancy reformers like the Edgeworths, Ireland was a land plagued not only with fever and famine, but with an epidemic of falsehood, secrecy, treachery and conspiracy. Nocturnal meetings, ritual oaths, millenarian slogans, coded haircuts and clothing, secret handshakes, passwords, code-names and cross-dressing, combined with threats of violence against the ruling class, created an Irish landscape of mystery and terrifying inscrutability.

It is no secret or surprise that the processes of colonial power generated a whole culture of concealment in Ireland. When the majority of a population is excluded from public means of expression and protest, those political energies move underground, creating a smouldering subterranean culture beneath a surface of submission and silence. Nineteenth-century Ireland as a whole might be called a 'secret society' – not in the sense that the majority of Irish were bound by oath to agrarian movements, and attended nocturnal meetings to plot the assassination of their landlords, but that secrecy and strategic silence became mechanisms of survival, and alternative spaces for enacting social and political power. As W.E.H. Lecky noted, 'Ireland's Catholics learned the lesson which ... rulers should dread to teach. They became [adept] in the arts of conspiracy and disguise. Secrets known to hundreds were preserved inviolable from authority'.⁶

For Maria Edgeworth, Ireland is steeped in a threatening secrecy, from Maynooth Seminary, whose 'closed doors' and 'concealment' represent 'the dangerous spirit and tendency of Catholicism';⁷ to those tenants leagued in

3 Quoted in Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1972), p. 271.

4 Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (London, 1993), p. 459.

5 Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

6 W.E.H. Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1972), p. 50.

7 Quoted in Michael Hurst, *Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene* (London, 1969), p. 98.

'secret rebellion' who are 'so secret and cunning, that no proofs could be obtained against them ... [and] who often [give landlords] false clews, to involve them still farther in darkness and error'⁸; to 'the mass of the [Irish] people' who are 'leagued with the party or interests of the [secret] assassins, so that no information before or after the fact ... can be obtained'.⁹ Edgeworth's attitude towards her conspiratorial tenants might be best summed up by the words of the Blind Man to the Fool in Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*: 'a secret is better to you than your dinner'.¹⁰

This strange society of secrecy and concealment requires close reading by Ascendancy rulers to interpret the silence and darkness, to discover some positive shape in the negative spaces. In an 1831 letter, Edgeworth describes the need to watch constantly, for landlords know not the day nor the hour: 'the apparent present quiet of this country only lulls us treacherously ... [there are] secret societies all over Ireland'.¹¹ As David Lloyd has pointed out, secret societies like the United Irishmen, Defenders and Ribbonmen act invisibly, communicate without writing, have no visible or permanent leaders but an elaborate system of rotating authority – they are faceless or, in Nancy Curtin's description, 'hydra-headed'.¹² They leave only frustrating negative spaces for powers to interpret, create a gothic text on the Irish landscape, intricately pleated and disguised, in which nothing is as it seems. Government agents were often at a loss as to how to read these negative signs, recognising that a blank space might be interpreted several ways: as one government official reported in the United Irish-infested 1790s, 'that part of the country whence most danger is to be apprehended is apparently most quiet and peaceable'.¹³

A culture of secrecy, Sissela Bok argues, breeds a culture of paranoid over-interpretation – one that reads suspiciously between every line, seeks and suspects plots everywhere, and undertakes constant surveillance.¹⁴ 'The excess of credulity,' Edgeworth writes in *Ennui*, 'when convinced of its error, becomes the extreme of suspicion'.¹⁵ Dublin Castle during this period of unrest was the site of nervous attempts to tabulate and terminate secret societies through a blizzard of dispatches, magistrates' reports, trial minutes, and maps charting the

8 Maria Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq.*, vol. ii (reprinted Shannon, 1968), pp. 209–10.

9 Quoted in Hurst, *Edgeworth and the Public Scene*, p. 148.

10 W.B. Yeats, *On Baile's Strand*, in John P. Harrington (ed.), *Modern Irish Drama* (London, 1991), p. 15.

11 Quoted in Hurst, *Edgeworth and the Public Scene*, p. 67.

12 David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 125–62; Nancy Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791–1798* (Oxford, 1994).

13 Quoted in Curtin, *United Irishmen*, p. 68.

14 Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York, 1984).

15 Maria Edgeworth, *Ennui* (London, 1992), p. 181.

frequency of agrarian unrest county by county. What these documents illustrate is a ruling power's endless legal scrambling to wrap the law around an amorphous and slippery Irish secret, to produce an official discourse about a competing unofficial power in order to categorise and control it. They say something too about the operations of a deeply insecure authority surrounded on all sides by a secrecy of its own creation – a terrifying secrecy which may be monstrously beyond the interpretation and control of its makers.

The letters, journals and diaries of Edgeworth's Ascendancy counterparts bespeak an unhealthy obsession with the surveillance of tenants. William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse, best known for inventing the world's largest telescope to unlock the secrets of the heavens, was also interested in keeping a close eye on his mysterious tenants. In his *Letters on the State of Ireland*, he calls for the creation of a flawless system of surveillance, involving an elaborate layering of local and central authorities, to keep an eye peeled for secret rebellion. His recommendations include the creation of a police force 'especially devoted to the detection of crime'; one with 'an accurate knowledge of locality, and of the character and habits of almost every individual in the district'; and the keeping of detailed journals by landlords.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in Co. Wicklow, Elizabeth Smith, a great fan of the Earl's giant telescope, was busy recording in her diaries that her tenants, an 'extraordinary slippery people', harbour a 'secret enmity' towards her and 'require constant watching'.¹⁷

Like many of their Ascendancy counterparts, the Edgeworths were involved in developing their own systems of surveillance in an attempt to root out Ireland's addiction to secrecy and conspiracy. Rumours of a French invasion and United Irish rebellion in 1794 moved Richard Lovell Edgeworth to perfect the invention of his 'Logograph', and publish an essay entitled 'On the Art of Swift and Secret Intelligence'. In her *Memoirs* of her father, Maria, who helped copy down the secret codes for this telegraph, comments that the 'superior advantage of his vocabulary arise[s] from its being undecipherable' and in 'defiance of detection'.¹⁸

But for the Edgeworths the Ascendancy's strongest weapon against Irish secrecy was education. The proper instruction of children and tenants could, they believed, diffuse Enlightenment ideals throughout Ireland, and turn Irish hearts of stealth to hearts of truth. The Edgeworth household, as Maria describes in her *Memoirs* of her father, was a kind of Enlightenment social experiment, committed to reason, openness and free communication, opposed to all forms of secrecy and reticence:

16 William Parsons, *Letters on the State of Ireland* (London, 1847), p. 26.

17 Elizabeth Smith, *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith, 1840-1850*, ed. David Thomson and Moyra McGusty (Oxford, 1980), 19, 28 October 1845; 13 May 1847.

18 Edgeworth, *Memoirs*, p. 168.

Some men live with their family, without letting them know their affairs. ... This was not my father's way of thinking. – On the contrary, not only his wife, but his children knew all his affairs. Whatever business he had to do was done in the midst of his 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 minute details of their every-day application.¹⁹

So when he was not developing secret telegraphic codes or inventing machines to climb walls, Mr Edgeworth was compiling with his daughter their *Guide to Practical Education*, a kind of twelve-step program for parents who wanted to become more like the Edgeworths.

Published the year of the United Irish rebellion, the guide shows the marks of its genesis in the troubled 1790s. Parents are warned that 'some secret intercourse [might] be carried on between children and servants', a danger 'lessened by [making certain] arrangements in the house'. These arrangements include 'care in a mother or governess to know exactly where children are, and what they are doing every hour of the day'; design of a house that 'make[s] it impossible for them to go without detection into any place which we forbid';²⁰ separate staircases and passageways for servants; and certainty that no passageway exists between children's and servants' chambers. The guide encourages a constant scrutiny of children's conversations: 'children who are encouraged to converse about everything ... will naturally tell their mothers if any one talks to them; ... they will never be the spies of servants, nor should they keep their secrets'.²¹ More often than not in *Practical Education*, 'education' is another word for surveillance. In the *Memoirs*, Maria Edgeworth praises her father's constant supervision of his children, which involves keeping 'a register of observations and facts, relative to his children.' Richard Lovell Edgeworth creates a kind of personal panopticon in his house, keeping 'notes of every circumstance which occurred worth recording.' And, she adds significantly, 'This he began in the year 1798'.²²

Another text being written in 1798, and also concerned with discourses of surveillance and secrecy, was *Castle Rackrent*. Thady Quirk's narrative, with its first person confessional style, its nods and winks to the reader, its diplomatic deference to the Editor, might be read as an example of the threatening Irish discourse of secrecy. His penchant for eavesdropping, his eye for confidential letters and documents, his tight-lipped posture towards his masters, and his

19 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

20 Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Guide to Practical Education* (London, 1798), p. 201.

21 Edgeworth, *Memoirs*, pp. 184–5.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

gossipy tone towards his readers, all combine to create the kind of Irish voice the Edgeworths came to fear. Notice that Thady witnesses every detail of the downfall of his masters – he is always ‘just within hearing distance’ of private conversations; or happens to catch a glimpse over his son Jason’s shoulder of secret documents – but all the while maintains a strategic silence: ‘I never said anything one way or another’; ‘I kept myself to myself’; ‘I said nothing’ is his constant refrain as the Rackrent family self-destructs. Thady, the eagle-eyed, elephant-eared presence, is every landlord’s nightmare, whatever his claims to being loyal retainer. For the tale Thady tells, the course of events he silently witnesses, is the strategic take-over of the Rackrent estate by his own son. Wrapped in his great cloak (which, the notes tell us, provides among other things concealment and anonymity to Irish rebels), Thady might be read as not too far removed from those double-dealing tenants who serve their landlords faithfully by day and plot their overthrow by night.

Kathryn Kirkpatrick has recently explored the competing discourses of the text and the glossary of *Castle Rackrent*, the former written by Maria without her father’s supervision; the latter written, or at least strongly encouraged and edited by Richard Lovell.²³ Where the original text is generally sympathetic with Thady, the glossary is patronising and suspicious. We might say that the glossary itself acts as a kind of supervisor of a potentially dangerous text, surveilling and reining in any perceived complicity with the dispossessed and secretive Irish. Thady’s extensive legal knowledge, says the glossary, aligns him with every Irish man, who, ‘staking his own wit or cunning against his neighbour’s property, feels that he has little to lose, and much to gain’.²⁴

The glossary aligns clandestine activities not only with the Irish but with women. A gloss on ‘the raking pot of tea’ disapproves of these ‘stealth[y]’ women’s meetings, ‘the joys’ of which depend ‘on its being made in secret, and at an unseasonable hour’, behind a locked door, amidst much ‘giggling and scrambling’, and involving the exchange of private letters, pocket-books and gossip about men. The gloss adds that the tradition finds its origins among the ‘washerwoman and the laundry-maid,’ or, as it puts plainly, among ‘low life’.²⁵ What the glossary bespeaks is an anxiety about unsupervised activities, particularly among the Irish lower classes and among women.

Interestingly, the writing of *Castle Rackrent* was one activity that went unsupervised by the all-seeing Richard Lovell Edgeworth. And it is this text that is perhaps most complicit with the discourse of secrecy. Maria Edgeworth, despite her reformist rampages against Ireland’s furtiveness, knew well the pleasure and power associated with a good secret. In an 1803 letter to a friend, she

23 Kathryn Kirkpatrick, ‘Putting Down the Rebellion: Notes and Glosses on *Castle Rackrent*, 1800’ in *Éire-Ireland* xxx, no. 1 (1995), pp. 77–90.

24 Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, p. 133.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

describes composing stories in secret as 'one of my greatest delights and strongest motives for writing'. Her favourite stories 'were all written whilst my father was out somewhere or other, on purpose to be read to him on his return'.²⁶ Edgeworth associates a certain freedom and delight with this secret scrawl, this activity hidden from surveilling eyes, and the succeeding disclosure to her father.

The subtexts of Edgeworth's other novels articulate a similar attraction to the power and pleasure of secrecy, all the while their texts preach against its dangers. *Ennui* is ostensibly a tale about the rewards of truth and the perils of secrecy. When Lord Glenthorn learns the truth about his identity – that his mother Ellinor swapped him with the true Lord Glenthorn when they were infants – he virtuously decides to reverse the secret, giving up his estate and title to the true lord, who has been living the life of a blacksmith. Not unlike Thady Quirk, Ellinor, through her cunning and silence, places her son in a position of property and power, and strips the upper class of its birthright. Nursing the ailing infant lord, she describes her decision to swap the babies:

I was sitting up in bed, rocking him backwards and forwards this ways: I thought with myself, what a pity it was the young lord should die, and he an only son and heir, and the estate to go out of the family and Lord knows where; ... and then I thought how happy it would be for you, if you was in the place of the little lord: and then it came into my head, just like a shot, where would be the harm to change you? ... Well, if it was a wicked thought, it was the devil himself put it in my head, to be sure; for, only for him, I should never have had the sense to think of such a thing, for I was always innocent like, and not worldly given.²⁷

It might be argued that Ellinor is not so innocent or free of worldly thoughts as she insists. What she recognises in a flash is the power of the secret to change her son's future, and so change history. For an Irish tenant locked into an unjust system, honesty is perhaps not the best policy. This positive power of secrecy – its offer of a liberation from one's 'honest' identity and boundaries – is a power the novel detects and explores. When Glenthorn becomes the target of a tenant conspiracy, he himself becomes adept at the arts of secrecy, writing coded letters, making secret signs, keeping tight-lipped in the presence of his Irish servants. Secrecy actually awakens Glenthorn's faculties, moves him to define himself, cures him of his *ennui*, moving his agent to comment, 'Tis a pity, my Lord ... but that there was a conspiracy against you every day of your life, it seems to do you so much good'.²⁸ Secrecy breathes life into Glenthorn,

²⁶ Quoted in Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 288.

²⁷ Edgeworth, *Ennui*, pp. 274–5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

just as it does into Edgeworth's novels themselves. The power of secrecy is not so easily laid to rest by the novel's preaching against it – for in the end the effect of Ellinor's dark secret prevails. Her son, marrying the Glenthorn heiress (a position he could never have hoped to be in without Ellinor's scheming), is restored to his estate; while the true Lord Glenthorn, ruined and miserable, retreats to the forge in which he was raised.

Sissela Bok has argued that secrecy is bound up with identity, with the opacity of human subjects, and can be a source of creative power.²⁹ Just as the initiation rites of secret societies mean to transform the identity of their members, individual secrets can allow a transcending of one's ordinary boundaries and subjectivity. 'In occupying two places at once,' writes Homi Bhabha, 'the depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally, difficult to place'.³⁰ Maria Edgeworth detected this liberating power when she wrote stories in secret; and this same creative power rears its head in her writing – from Harriet Freke in *Belinda* whose secret cross-dressing allows her to participate in the male world of politics and power (she swears that 'it was charming fun to equip herself at night with man's clothes and to sally forth');³¹ to Lord Colambre in *The Absentee*, whose disguise allows him to speak and move freely among his tenants and agents, gathering the truth about his estate through a secret identity. The subtext of all these novels is that secrecy empowers and liberates as often, if not more often, than it destroys. What the novels suggests at some subconscious level is, perhaps, that in certain situations it is altogether *reasonable* to be clandestine and secretive. Nineteenth-century Ireland might be one place where survival depends on being reticent and double-dealing, on shifting identity to meet the situation, on telling and keeping secrets. To this extent, the light of reason and the darkness of Irish hearts might not be so far apart as the Edgeworth Enlightenment experiment would like to insist.

So the question I began this essay by asking remains – why all this secrecy in a novelist committed to dispelling it? Edgeworth's obsession with Ireland's culture of concealment may go beyond the desire simply to spin a good yarn. It may more interestingly have to do with her location in that culture – among an Ascendancy power that, as Edmund Burke never tired of pointing out, lacked a *politics* of secrecy. For Burke, as for Foucault, secrecy is indispensable to the operations of power: a ruling class operates most effectively that conceals the violent sources of its power, cloaking them in the pleasing veils of custom and tradition. That power is strongest that achieves a sublime inscrutability, that

29 Bok, *Secrets*, p. 46.

30 Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York, 1994), p. 121.

31 Edgeworth, *Belinda*, p. 293.

ruling class most stable whose violent sources have been worn smooth by the passage of time, naturalised and made part of the very landscape and horizon of our lives. Indeed, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, a great fan of Burke's, recognised too the power invested in custom and tradition: 'in such establishments ... there is always to be found a *power*, what the workmen call a *purchase*, of which the skilful legislator can ... apply to useful purposes'.³² In this doctrine of prescription, we might say that Burke writes a politics of secrecy: like the structure of a secret, power maintains itself by an elaborate operation of concealment and revelation, hiding and unfolding, absence and presence. Even the glossary to *Castle Rackrent*, that text so opposed to clandestine activities, admits the power that secrecy has to protect property. The entry on 'fairy-mounts' explains that the sources of these supernatural mounds are actually quite mundane. Really 'artificial caves' constructed near churches, they were used as 'secret granaries, magazines, or places of retreat in times of danger. ... The persons who had property concealed there very willingly countenanced every wonderful relation that tended to make these places objects of sacred awe or superstitious terror'.³³ Scratch a gothic tale and you find someone protecting his property from the barbarians. Secrecy, in this sense, becomes a kind of insurance policy for the men of property.

It is just this elaborate veiling of the sources of power in age-old custom and tradition that the Ascendancy lacks – a lack detected by countless writers of that class, not least Edmund Burke, whose condemnation of Ascendancy rule finds its epicentre in this absence. The memory of a violent confiscation of Irish land and lives is too recent for any sublime inscrutability, for any mystifying or seductive veils to be draped around Protestant authority. The unlawful origins of its power and property are too recent to be a secret to anyone – least of all themselves. For here is a power without any secrets, a power exposed, naked and vulnerable to the watchful eyes of its subjects. To discover the nakedness of the prince, says Louis Adrian Montrose, is to demystify the secrets of the state.³⁴ In Edgeworth's Ireland the prince never had any clothes to begin with. Both ruler and exposed enemy, inspector and inmate, the Ascendancy is in a situation of being inside and outside the operations of power, a supervisor of secrets that is itself an open secret, exposed and surveilled. Edgeworth's Ireland complicates the panopticon model – Foucault's architectural emblem for the operations of power – for it is difficult to know who is watcher and who watched. 'The lower Irish are such acute observers,' Edgeworth comments in her *Memoirs*, 'that there is no deceiving them of the real feelings of

32 Edgeworth, *Memoirs*, p. 465.

33 Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 129–30.

34 Louis Adrian Montrose, 'The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text' in Patricia Parker and David Quint (eds), *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts* (Baltimore and London, 1986), p. 328.

their superiors. They know the signs of what passes within, more perfectly than any physiognomist'.³⁵ The point here is not so much some native Irish gift for clairvoyance but the Ascendancy anxiety over being exposed.

The great secret of the Ascendancy, in other words, is that they have no secret. 'Looking behind the mask of things,' says Foucault, 'one finds not a timeless essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence'.³⁶ This nothing-behind-the-veil theme crops up again and again in Edgeworth's novels, from *Lady Delacourt*, whose elaborate secret staircase, secret boudoir, and secret vials all conceal a secret breast cancer that, in fact, doesn't exist. The secret lock on her cabinet is a fitting emblem for this lack: 'How in the devil's name can you expect me to open a secret lock when I do not know the secret?' Lord Delacourt asks his wife. 'Then I will tell you the secret, Lord Delacourt,' she responds, 'that there is no secret at all in the lock'. In the end, Lady Delacourt's great secret is that 'she had no secret to keep'.³⁷ This lack of any secret among the Ascendancy might help explain the endless fascination with secret birth and genealogy in Edgeworth's novels. Grace Nugent's illegitimate birth in *The Absentee* is shrouded in a mystery involving a ruined convent school girl and a dying soldier. Stories of children who discover they aren't the blood of those claiming to be their parents might be particularly attractive to a class who knew its genealogy only too well. In colonial Ireland there is at once too much secrecy and not enough – too much among the Irish tenants for Ascendancy rulers to unmask; and not enough for the Ascendancy itself to hide behind. To an anxious and exposed Ascendancy, Ireland is at once a deeply opaque and painfully transparent place.

The kind of simultaneous rejection of and attraction to secrecy articulated in Edgeworth's novels, then, might say something about Ascendancy anxieties and desires. They may have detested their tenants' furtiveness; but they were certainly in need of a few good secrets themselves. It is this doubleness that Edgeworth's discourse embodies – desirous of the concealment it claims to detest, proliferating secrets it means to dispel. 'All who are governed by any species of fear,' she writes, 'are disposed to equivocation'.³⁸ A comment on the sources of Irish reticence and double-dealing, this statement might also be taken as a fitting account of Edgeworth's own precarious project, equivocating as it does between truth and secrecy, revelation and concealment, and spoken by a deeply insecure – and frightened – Ascendancy voice.

35 Edgeworth, *Memoirs*, p. 241.

36 Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (eds), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 139–64.

37 Edgeworth, *Belinda*, pp. 266, 298.

38 Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, p. 209.