

Writing Ireland

Lecture 9: Beginnings of Modern Irish Fiction

While some literary critics have traced the origins of the novel back to ancient Greece, the modern novel as an access to the narratives of bourgeois modernity emerged into Western culture in the late seventeenth century. The struggle of the bourgeois towards definition and the striving to articulate its character is central to the novel and the stories it tells. Its novelty is found in a formlessness that nonetheless aspires to some idea of order and unity. Indeed, the energies of the modern novel form can be discerned in its constant assertion of narratives that enact that search for completeness while also allowing for a kind of mourning for the security that older, traditional forms allowed. Thus, novelists, then as now, revel in the possibilities that formal innovation permits, while their characters find themselves forced to acknowledge the newness of their world and their experiences in that world. [...]

And yet, as Franco Moretti argues, while traditionally tied to the codification of bourgeois values, the novel is actually a means for the pre-modern imagination to continue to inhabit the modern Capitalist world. [...]

A history of the Irish novel is, above all else, a history of Ireland's modernity. The Irish novel's emergence in the seventeenth century and thus its association with modernity, being indeed a herald of modernity, allow for a mapping of Ireland's relationship to modernisation.

(Hand 2011, 1/8)

Beginnings?

Richard Head, *The English Rogue* (1665)

Anonymous, *Virtue Rewarded; or, The Irish Princess* (1693)

Sarah Butler, *Irish Tales, or Instructive Histories for the Happy Conduct of Life* (1716)

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767)

Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766)

Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (1800)

Lady Morgan (Sidney Owenson), *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806)

Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820)

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897)

CASTLE
RACKRENT
AN
HIBERNIAN TALE
TAKEN FROM FACTS,
AND FROM
THE MANNERS OF THE IRISH SQUIRES,
BEFORE THE YEAR 1782

BY MARIA EDGEWORTH

1800

Preface

THE prevailing taste of the public for anecdote has been censured and ridiculed by critics, who aspire to the character of superior wisdom: but if we consider it in a proper point of view, this taste is an incontestible proof of the good sense and profoundly philosophic temper of the present times. Of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labors! The heroes of history are so decked out by the fine fancy of the professed historian; they talk in such measured prose, and act from such sublime or such diabolical motives, that few have sufficient taste, wickedness or heroism, to sympathize in their fate. Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated antient or modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes. We cannot judge either of the feelings or of the characters of men with perfect accuracy from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. The life of a great or of a little man written by himself, the familiar letters, the diary of any individual published by his friends, or by his enemies after his decease, are esteemed important literary curiosities. We are surely justified in this eager desire to collect the most minute facts relative to the domestic lives, not only of the great and good, but even of the worthless and insignificant, since it is only by a comparison of their actual happiness or misery in the privacy of domestic life, that we can form a just estimate of the real reward of virtue, or the real punishment of vice. That the great are not as happy as they seem, that the external circumstances of fortune and rank do not constitute felicity, is asserted by every moralist; the historian can seldom, consistently with his dignity, pause to illustrate this truth, it is therefore to the biographer we must have recourse. After we have beheld splendid characters playing their parts on the great theatre of the world, with all the advantages of stage effect and decoration, we anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses.

Some may perhaps imagine, that the value of biography depends upon the judgment and taste of the biographer; but on the contrary it may be maintained, that the merits of a biographer are inversely as the extent of his intellectual powers and of his literary talents. A plain unvarnished tale is preferable to the most highly ornamented narrative. Where we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us, and those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sacrificed to the rounding of a period or the pointing an antithesis. [...]

The author of the following memoirs has upon these grounds fair claims to the public favor and attention: he was an illiterate old steward, whose partiality to *the family* in which he was bred and born must be obvious to the reader. He tells the history of the Rackrent family in his vernacular idiom, and in the full confidence that Sir Patrick, Sir Murtagh, Sir Kit, and Sir Condy Rackrent's affairs, will be as interesting to all the world as they were to himself. Those who were acquainted with the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago, will want no evidence of the truth of honest Thady's narrative: to those who are totally unacquainted with Ireland, the following Memoirs will perhaps be scarcely intelligible, or probably they may appear perfectly incredible. For the information of the *ignorant* English reader a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had it once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English; but Thady's idiom is incapable of translation, and besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner. Several years ago he related to the editor the history of the Rackrent family, and it was with some difficulty that he was persuaded to have it committed to writing; however, his feelings for "*the honor of the family*," as he expressed himself, prevailed over his habitual laziness, and he at length completed the narrative which is now laid before the public.

The Editor hopes his readers will observe, that these are "tales of other times;" that the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age: the race of the Rackrents has long since been extinct in Ireland, and the drunken Sir Patrick, the litigious Sir Murtagh, the fighting Sir Kit, and the slovenly Sir Condy, are characters which could no more be met with at present in Ireland, than Squire Western or Parson Trulliber in England. There is a time when individuals can bear to be rallied for their past follies and absurdities, after they have acquired new habits and a new consciousness. Nations as well as individuals gradually lose attachment to their identity, and the present generation is amused rather than offended by the ridicule that is thrown upon their ancestors.

Probably we shall soon have it in our power, in a hundred instances, to verify the truth of these observations.

When Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain, she will look back with a smile of good-humoured complacency on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence.

[main text]

AN HIBERNIAN TALE CASTLE RACKRENT

Monday Morning⁹

HAVING out of friendship for the family, upon whose estate, praised be Heaven! I and mine have lived rent free time out of mind, voluntarily undertaken to publish the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family, I think it my duty to say a few words, in the first place, concerning myself.—My real name is Thady Quirk, though in the family I have always been known by no other than "*honest Thady*"—afterwards, in the time of Sir Murtagh, deceased, I remember to hear them calling me "*old Thady*;" and now I'm come to "*poor Thady*"—for I wear a long great coat¹ winter and summer, which is very handy, as I never put my arms into the sleeves, (they are as good as new,) though, come Holantide next, I've had it these seven years; it holds on by a single button round my neck, cloak fashion—to look at me, you would hardly think "*poor Thady*" was the father of attorney Quirk; he is a high gentleman, and never minds what poor Thady says, and having better than 1500 a-year, landed estate, looks down upon honest Thady, but I wash my hands of his doings, and as I have lived so will I die, true and loyal to the family.—The family of the Rackrents is, I am proud to say, one of the most ancient in the kingdom.—Every body knows this is not the old family name, which was O'Shaughlin, related to the Kings of Ireland—but that was before my time.—My grandfather was driver to the great Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin, and I heard him, when I was a boy, telling how the Castle Rackrent estate came to Sir Patrick— Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent was cousin-german to him, and had a fine estate of his own, only never a gate upon it, it being his maxim, that a car was the best gate.—Poor gentleman! he lost a fine hunter and his life, at last, by it, all in one day's hunt.—But I ought to bless that day, for the estate came straight into *the* family, upon one condition, which Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin at the time took sadly to heart, they say, but thought better of it afterwards, seeing how large a stake depended upon it, that he should, by Act of Parliament, take and bear the surname and arms of Rackrent.
[...]

Story/Plot:

Part 1:[Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent]^m

Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin > Sir Patrick Rackrent^{t>community}

Sir Murtagh Rackrent^{m>law}

Sir Kit Stopgap > Sir Kit Rackrent^{t^m>money}

Part 2: Sir Connolly (Condy) Rackrent^{t>paternalism}

Thady Quirk

Jason Quirk^{m>money/law}

[...]

If you want to know any more, I'm not very well able to tell you; but my lady Rackrent did not die as was expected of her, but was only disfigured in the face ever after by the fall and bruises she got; and she and Jason, immediately after my poor master's death, set about going to law about that jointure; the memorandum not being on stamped paper, some say it is worth nothing, others again it may do; others say, Jason won't have the lands at any rate—many wishes it so—for my part, I'm tired wishing for any thing in this world, after all I've seen in it—but I'll say nothing; it would be a folly to be getting myself ill will in my old age. Jason did not marry, nor think of marrying Judy, as I prophesied, and I am not sorry for it—who is?—As for all I have here set down from memory and hearsay of the family, there's nothing but truth in it from beginning to end, that you may depend upon, for where's the use of telling lies about the things which every body knows as well as I do?

The Editor could have readily made the catastrophe of Sir Condy's history more dramatic and more pathetic, if he thought it allowable to varnish the plain round tale of faithful Thady. He lays it before the English reader as a specimen of manners and characters, which are perhaps unknown in England. Indeed the domestic habits of no nation in Europe were less known to the English than those of their sister country, till within these few years.

Mr. Young's picture of Ireland, in his tour through that country, was the first faithful portrait of its inhabitants. All the features in the foregoing sketch were taken from the life, and they are characteristic of that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness and blunder, which in different forms, and with various success, has been brought upon the stage or delineated in novels.

It is a problem of difficult solution to determine, whether an Union will hasten or retard the amelioration of this country. The few gentlemen of education who now reside in this country will resort to England: they are few, but they are in nothing inferior to men of the same rank in Great Britain. The best that can happen will be the introduction of British manufacturers in their places.

Did the Warwickshire militia, who were chiefly artisans, teach the Irish to drink beer, or did they learn from the Irish to drink whiskey?

ADVERTISEMENT TO THE ENGLISH READER

SOME friends who have seen Thady's history since it has been printed have suggested to the Editor, that many of the terms and idiomatic phrases with which it abounds could not be intelligible to the English reader without further explanation. The Editor has therefore furnished the following Glossary.

Discourse:

Author¹ Thady Quirk > narrator > anecdote/biography (90 pages)

[based on John Langan, Stewart on the Edgeworth family estate]

Author² Maria Edgeworth > editor (male) > Preface (5 pages)

Advertisement to the

English Reader (1 page)

Annotations

(sometimes lengthy in small print)

Glossary

(15 pages in small print)

> competing voices

Topics in Annotations and Glossary:

- Irish behaviour
- Irish traditions
- Language

e.g. first entry in glossary:

Monday morning.—Thady begins his Memoirs of the Rackrent Family by dating *Monday morning*, because no great undertaking can be auspiciously commenced in Ireland on any morning but *Monday morning*. "Oh, please God we live till Monday morning, we'll set the slater to mend the roof of the house—On Monday morning we'll fall to and cut the turf—On Monday morning we'll see and begin mowing—On Monday morning, please your honor, we'll begin and dig the potatoes," &c.

All the intermediate days between the making of such speeches and the ensuing Monday are wasted: and when Monday morning comes it is ten to one that the business is deferred to *the next* Monday morning. The Editor knew a gentleman who, to counteract this prejudice, made his workmen and laborers begin all new pieces of work upon a Saturday.

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