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David Waterman

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Masters and Pupils: Anglo-Irish Relations in Maria Edgeworth's Ennui

Perhaps the most important question which Maria Edgeworth addresses in her novel *Ennui* (1809) is the uncertainty surrounding Anglo-Irish identity at a time in history when the labels of English and Irish seemed to be antithetical. Though *Ennui* is a work of fiction, it is a novel firmly grounded in the first-hand experience of the author, whose family received six hundred acres of land from James I, as part of a program to settle English Protestants on land confiscated from Irish Catholics (Kowaleski-Wallace 141). Maria and her father believed very strongly in controlling the tenants through benevolent reform, and *Ennui* takes this position as its thesis. Edgeworth calls into question the validity of racial origin as the sole determinant of inheritance, and suggests that the leaders of society must not only be born, but bred to lead as well. Inheritance by right of birth cannot succeed by itself; "character, education, and experience" must also enter into the equation (Colgan 37). Barry Sloan argues that Edgeworth takes up the discussion of Anglo-Irish identity without falling into stereotypes, and makes a "serious endeavour to explore certain critical aspects of Irish life without caricature or contempt" (2). While Edgeworth is charitable toward her characters, both English and Irish, one finds that in fact she makes frequent use of stereotype and caricature; though the caricatures often balance one another, *Ennui* is by no means an even-handed presentation. The novel makes an argument that is pro-Union, and presents the Irish as an appendage of the English. Ireland must be reformed following an English model. Edgeworth dismisses the notion that England and Ireland are simply binary opposites — the equation is much more complicated than that, including not only the differences between the two countries, but also their differing views of their differences as well as their

many similarities. Although Edgeworth perhaps argues for a liberal "middle way" of cooperation between the English and Irish cultures, it is still a cooperation between an English master and an Irish pupil. In fact, it is Mr. McLeod, the Scotsman who is neither English nor Irish, who is presented as the objective, dispassionate educator able to offer judgement.

Edgeworth often presents the main characters of *Ennui* as people of mixed heritage, a *mélange* of English and Irish. The most important of these characters is the hero/narrator of the tale, the Earl of Glenthorn, who was born in Ireland and nursed in an Irish cabin, because his father "had an idea that this would make me hardy" (*Ennui* 145). At the age of two, however, both father and son left Ireland for England, never intending to return. The boy, like his father, was prejudiced against Ireland, intending to "always reside in England" (145). The novel begins with Glenthorn assuming the standard, and predictable, attitude of an upper-class Englishman toward one of the colonies — that of contempt. The irony, of course, is that although Glenthorn is an Englishman by training and temperament, he is an Irishman by birth. He is reminded of his roots very early in the novel.

Glenthorn, at age twenty-one, took control of his inheritance and for the last four years has been trying to relieve boredom by eating, drinking, and gambling, all to incredible excess. In the years prior to reaching legal age, he has wasted huge sums of money travelling around Europe with his tutor, all the time learning nothing. After the celebration of his twenty-fifth birthday, Glenthorn is riding into the countryside with the intention of shooting himself when he meets Ellinor, who introduces herself as his former Irish nurse. She has come all the way to England in order to persuade the absentee landlord that he should return to Ireland. Their first meeting is a perfect example of a clash of cultures, the wealthy young aristocrat and the old Irishwoman who knows nothing of refined manners: "Heaven bless your sweet face! I'm the nurse that suckled ye when ye was a baby in Ireland" (155). The contemptuous Glenthorn

cares nothing for the old woman, and threatens to ride over her. For her part, Ellinor ignores the danger and, since she cannot reach the man, embraces the horse in order to kiss it. Ellinor is identified as lower-class Irish in at least three ways in this scene: her language gives her away, and if the reader should miss any of these dialect-clues, Edgeworth has put them in italics; Ellinor is associated with animals, and shows that she is used to living in close proximity to them; and perhaps most important, Ellinor displays genuine, unfeigned emotion, with no attention to drawing-room manners. This meeting leads to Glenthorn's fall from the horse, after which he pretends to be dead, and learns how very sincere in her affection Ellinor really is.

The blow on the head serves to wake up the Earl of Glenthorn, after he recovers consciousness, and for the first time he realizes that he cannot buy loyalty. Feigning death, with Ellinor as confederate — “she took the hint with surprising quickness” (157) —, Glenthorn eavesdrops on what his servants will have to say. The steward and the footman, ordered to stay with the body, discuss Glenthorn: “‘What a fool that Crawley made of my lord!’ said the steward. ‘What a fool my lord made of himself,’ said the footman, ‘to be ruled, and let all his people be ruled, by such an upstart!’” (156). The servants have their own interests in mind, however, and shortly run off, leaving Ellinor alone with Glenthorn. Crawley himself, after carrying the message of Glenthorn's death to Lady Glenthorn, is prepared to move into a position of command, including the appropriation of Lady Glenthorn, apparently with her permission. This appalling show of disloyalty by the servants and his wife, who clearly are interested only in money, is enough to convince Glenthorn to make his journey to Ireland. The blow on the head makes Glenthorn realize that greed is the motive of his servants, not any notion of loyalty to a master or common bond of “nationality,” if we assume the Earl is here playing the role of English aristocrat. The English servants only keep in line as long as the master is supervising, something that Glenthorn spends little time doing. Because of his inability to command, Glenthorn laments, “my servants were now my masters” (166). So far, the only servant whose loyalty can be trusted is the nurse Ellinor, and even she is guilty of a sin of omission by not revealing to Glenthorn their true relationship.

Before he leaves England, Glenthorn is asked to do a favor for a dying Irishman, the boxer Michael Noonan, namely to deliver a half-guinea and a silk handkerchief to the family home in Ireland. Glenthorn agrees, and when he arrives in Dublin he is pleasantly surprised by the quality of the hotel: "I had not conceived that such accommodation could have been found in Dublin" (169). We expect this prejudice from an English aristocrat/tourist, but the opinion of an Irish gentleman whom Glenthorn meets in the hotel is no less pessimistic:

it is too good and too fine to last; come here again in two years, and I am afraid you will see all this going to rack and ruin. This is too often the case with us in Ireland: we can project, but we can't calculate; we must have every thing upon too large a scale. We mistake a grand beginning for a good beginning. We begin like princes, and we end like beggars. (170)

On leaving Dublin, Glenthorn still finds, for a time, that his conception of Ireland as a backwater was mistaken; he is impressed with the beautiful scenery and the excellent roads (170). Edgeworth gives us a balance of opinions regarding Ireland, but in reversed form, with the Irish gentleman berating his own country and the pseudo-English snob admiring it.

If Glenthorn has been impressed with Dublin so far, he is skeptical of his first meeting with the Irish servant class and the horses and carriage with which they supply him. If the English servants were conniving, so too are the Irish servants, but they do so to the face of Glenthorn, using language as the mediator. The innkeeper Paddy has, like Ellinor, the gift for using language in a colorful manner, committing half-truths and lies along the way; Glenthorn vacillates between anger, admiration, and amusement during the coach ride. Glenthorn comments on the sorry condition of one of the horses: "And these horses!" cried I; 'why, this horse is so lame he can hardly stand.' 'Oh, plase your honour, tho' he can't stand, he'll *go* fast enough" (171). Paddy does in fact manage to get the broken-down carriage and lame horses to their destination, with a showmanship and daring which make Glenthorn

"alternately look upon him as a madman and a hero" (174), even though Paddy wants to be paid double at the end of the trip. Along the roadway, the coach is blocked by workmen asking a shilling to buy drinks — rather than berate them for impertinence, Glenthorn pays. It seems that Irish servants are much like English servants, to be trusted only while the master is about. Throughout all of these adventures with the Irish lower class, Glenthorn notices that he has never experienced "less ennui" (175). He recommends a journey to Ireland to all "wealthy hypochondriacs," saying that they will forget their nerves by exercising their limbs and faculties (176):

I can promise them, that they will not only be moved to anger often enough to make their blood circulate briskly, but they will even, in the acme of their impatience, be thrown into salutary convulsions of laughter, by the comic concomitants of their disasters: besides, if they have hearts, their best feelings cannot fail to be awakened by the warm, generous hospitality, they will receive in this country, from the cabin to the castle. (176)

Although Glenthorn has not been to any Irish castles, he hints that he may have a heart capable of feeling the full range of emotion, rather than simply boredom, and it may be this discovery which connects him to his birthplace as he pays compliment to all classes of Irish. He is perhaps more "Irish" than he had realized, though Glenthorn's Irishness does not make him welcome by everyone.

When trying to find some middle ground between the extremes of English and Irish stereotypes, Glenthorn's agent, the Scotsman Mr. McLeod, becomes the go-between. McLeod is presented as an objective man who comes straight to the point without any sugar coating: "hard-featured, strong-built . . . with a remarkable quietness of deportment: he spoke with deliberate directness . . . [his eyes] had an expression of slow, but determined good sense" (180). Glenthorn does not at first like the Scotsman, quite simply because the wealthy Earl is not used to the company of someone who very capably goes about his business without flattering him and without wanting anything extra in return. Asked by Glenthorn to speak his mind, McLeod advises: "I *doubt* whether the best way of encouraging the industrious is to give premiums to the idle . . . the difficulty is, to relieve present misery, without creating more in future"

(189). McLeod does not believe that simply giving money to the poor will solve anything; education and slow, patient work is the way to best aid the lower class, and as a result, the country as a whole. In this regard, Edgeworth sets up McLeod as the middle man between the profligate laziness of Glenthorn, who just throws money at problems, and the slave-driver approach of Hardcastle, who has no long-term goals of reform.

Hardcastle, an Irishman, is of the opinion that "the way to ruin the poor of Ireland would be to educate them" (193); what Ireland needs is for poor men to pick up shovels rather than books. Hardcastle, addressing the Scotsman McLeod and the Irish-born but English-bred Glenthorn, bases his argument on the fact that he is Irish by birth: "I know the people of this country, sir; I have a good right to know them, sir, being born amongst them, and bred amongst them; so I think I may speak with some confidence on these matters" (192-93). Like the Irish gentleman from the Dublin hotel, it appears that no one can abuse Ireland and its people quite like an Irishman. Hardcastle goes on to question the morality of the Irish: "as to morality, that's out of the question: [the Irish] know nothing about it, my dear sir" (194). Hardcastle, in expressing his negative view of the morality of the Irish servant class, shows that he has not met the Noonans. Glenthorn soon meets them, in order to deliver the half-guinea and the silk handkerchief, as he promised Michael he would. He finds a poor but loving family; the son who wrote home and sent money, the father who lets the money fall forgotten in the dirt as he grieves for his son, and a pretty daughter who refuses to marry yet, in order to care for her old father. Unlike Glenthorn's English servants, or the Irish tenants forever demanding favors, each of the Noonans has more than self-interest in mind. Hardcastle believes his argument to be infallible because he is both an Irishman by birth and an experienced estate manager, but his method of persuasion is based on shouting down his opponent; he does not like to listen, and he never reads books. Even Glenthorn and McLeod both realize the narrowness of Hardcastle's intellectual grasp:

[Mr. Hardcastle] knew every blade of grass within the reach of his tether, but could not reach an inch beyond. Any thing like an appeal to benevolent feelings was lost upon him; for he was so frank in his selfishness, that he did not even pretend to be generous. (194)

Hardcastle is described in terms of an ignorant old goat on a leash; he lacks both education and generosity. Though his opinion later changes, at this point Glenthorn thinks more highly of Hardcastle than of McLeod, but later a visit to McLeod's estate shows Glenthorn the soundness of the Scotsman's opinions. Glenthorn finds himself "pleased and interested" when he tours McLeod's estate, finding

nothing wonderful . . . but there was such an air of neatness and comfort, order and activity, in the people and in their cottages, that I almost thought myself in England; and I could not forbear exclaiming, — "How could all this be brought about in Ireland!" (215)

Glenthorn is obviously still of the opinion that Ireland is beyond hope of repair. McLeod tells Glenthorn that the school-house is the most important place on the estate, because all hope for improvement rests with the children; the old were already set in their ways. Change must proceed in small doses, and takes a great deal of patience. McLeod has been working on his project of educating the poor for twenty-six years, resulting in "a race of our own training" (216), which seems to be quite a success. Absenteeism does not work; a benevolent teacher, based on an English model, is needed to direct the Irish lower class. Religious instruction is handled fairly in McLeod's plan too; he understands that "Religion . . . is the great difficulty in Ireland" (216). Protestants and Catholics are given equal time, and the school avoids any role as proselytizer. This religious ambivalence perhaps illustrates Edgeworth's own uncertainty about how best to deal with "the great difficulty in Ireland." Her family supported Catholic emancipation, but also supported Union (at least in theory) in the belief that Union would better secure the position of the Protestant minority. McLeod and Edgeworth share the belief that a master of some kind is necessary to lead and reform the Irish; the option of just leaving them alone to fend for themselves is never considered. The ideal form of Ireland would be just like an extension of England.

Glenthorn is at heart a benevolent man, but his simplistic ideas of welfare payments as a means of bettering the situation of the Irish lower class does not work. Payments in cash and land, long leases, and army commissions based on political patronage are all very easy for the wealthy Glenthorn to bestow, and indeed these gifts fit his lazy personality quite well, because he thinks that the problems have been solved, and will just go away. McLeod has begun to show Glenthorn that the way to improve the lot of the poor Irish, and thereby of the aristocracy, is not nearly so painless. Improvement takes planning, years of hard work, and patience. Glenthorn learns this, at least in part, when he builds a house for Ellinor. Glenthorn sees her house, and describes it as "wretched looking" (186), made of mud with a thatched roof, filled with smoke, and occupied not only by the entire family but all of the farm animals as well, including the pig. He decides to build her a new house, "in the most elegant style of English cottages" (189), but he has not counted on the work habits of the Irish men or on the tastes of Ellinor herself. "The slaves of Aladdin's lamp were not Irishmen" (188), Glenthorn laments as he tries to rush the workers, but they prefer a more methodical approach to the task, with plenty of holidays and funerals in the schedule. Glenthorn pushes them to completion, and the result is a poorly-built house. Ellinor does not seem to appreciate her new house, either, and quickly transforms it into a house much like her old one, including a thatched roof to replace the slate, because she "was *kilt* with the *cowl*" (200). The problem is clarified in Ellinor's song of the pig who had a silver trough. At first, Glenthorn is angry and looks on Ellinor as a pig, calling her "a savage, an Irishwoman, and an ungrateful fool" (200). In his anger, Glenthorn concludes that "it was in vain to attempt to improve and civilize such people as the Irish" (200), but he quickly comes to realize that McLeod's advice is correct: "In the impatience of my zeal for improvement, I expected to do the work of two hundred years in a few months... as if any people could be civilized in a moment, and at the word of command of ignorant pride or despotic benevolence" (201). Benevolent is a good word to describe Glenthorn, although he looks upon the Irish as overgrown children in need of a wise English tutor. By following McLeod's

advice, and considering his own roots, Glenthorn is no longer the practitioner of English contempt toward the Irish that Lord Craiglethorpe is.

Craiglethorpe, we are told, is “very stiff, cold, and *high*. His manners were in the extreme of English reserve, and his ill-bred show of contempt for the Irish” provokes ridicule from his cousin Lady Geraldine (209). Irish-born Lady Geraldine makes a fool of Craiglethorpe, not only with her ridicule, but by providing all sorts of false stories for inclusion in Craiglethorpe’s book about the Irish, a book which he is singularly unqualified to write. Craiglethorpe, the “caricature of ‘*the English fire-side*’” (209), never does discover that he can learn nothing of the Irish unless he leaves the drawing room. Glenthorn, on the other hand, does make that discovery: “I could now boast that I had travelled all over Ireland, from north to south; but, in fact, I had seen nothing of the country or of its inhabitants . . . I fancied that I knew all that could be known of the Irish character” (253). Edgeworth has shown that upper class prejudice against the Irish is not dependent on nationality. Both the Englishman Craiglethorpe and the Irishman Hardcastle share an under-informed view of the Irish, and together they perhaps represent what Glenthorn used to be, before he gained some common-sense education and experience. Because of his education by McLeod and by the Irish people themselves, Glenthorn is no longer an English caricature like Craiglethorpe, or like the rich English society ladies.

Glenthorn meets Mrs. Norton and Lady Hauton at Ormsby Villa; they are apparently the classic tale of big fish in a small pond: these two English ladies, whom [Glenthorn] had never met in any of the higher circles in London, who were persons of no consequence and of no marked character in their own country, made, it seems, a prodigious *sensation* when they came over to Ireland, and turned the heads of half Dublin by the extravagance of their dress, the impertinence of their airs, and the audacity of their conduct. (222)

Of all of the Irish society people, the only one who pays them no attention is Lady Geraldine; she realizes that their influence is all show and no substance, and that Ireland is better off without English society, at least the pompous type. “Lady Geraldine,” says Mrs. O’Connor, “is too proud to take pattern from any body” (223). Glenthorn then confirms Lady

Geraldine's assertion that these are two women of no consequence putting on airs in Ireland. Between the two of them, Lady Geraldine and Glenthorn have plenty of Irish birth and foreign breeding, and their word is enough to destroy the reputations of Mrs. Norton and Lady Hauton. Even the Irish upper class seems willing, for a time, to place itself under the influence of English high society.

Glenthorn's re-association with high society begins again to result in *ennui*; he doesn't read the papers, and when McLeod tries to warn him of the coming rebellions in the country, Glenthorn insists that they discuss "something more diverting" (245). As before in England, it takes an event which nearly kills him to awaken him, and he learns that his servants' loyalty, whether English or Irish, cannot be trusted. Joe Kelly is Glenthorn's Irish servant, and he uses language in much the same way that the innkeeper did, as a means of evasion. Kelly also pretends to be half-witted in order to take "more liberties than his companions" (241). Once again, Glenthorn makes the mistake of assuming "that attachment can be purchased, and that gratitude can be secured, by favours disproportioned to deserts" (255). Glenthorn then receives a message warning him that his life is in danger from the rebels, and that Joe Kelly is not to be trusted. Glenthorn tries to brush the warning aside, acknowledging that while Joe Kelly may not be honest, "[the Irish] are none of them honest" (257). Once again, it is McLeod's objective advice which turns out to be correct; certainly some of them are honest, like Ellinor, the Noonans, and Christy, but heed the warning that Joe Kelly, entertaining and ingratiating as he may be, is not to be trusted. Joe Kelly is in fact involved with the rebellion and the plot against Glenthorn's life. Whether because Kelly is a member of the servant class or because he is an Irishman, Glenthorn is not disposed, for the moment, to trust anyone of the same stock, including his nurse Ellinor. Trust is in short supply; Ellinor does not even trust her own son, believing him to be a participant of the rebellion against Glenthorn. She is not persuaded of the truth until she sees for herself.

Glenthorn is by now familiar with the half-truths and evasions of the Irish servants, so it is not surprising that he requires proof before he will believe the shocking story told by Ellinor, that she is really his mother, and that Christy, the blacksmith, is his brother. The story of Glenthorn and Christy being switched at birth is true, however, and is confirmed by the details of the cicatrice on Christy's head and by the recollections of the doctor who attended him at the time. When Glenthorn offers Christy the title of Earl of Glenthorn, he shows a generosity which is ridiculed by the upper classes and cheered by the lower. Christy initially refuses the offer, knowing full well that even though the title is his by birthright, he has not been bred to that lifestyle and will not know how to properly manage huge sums of money and fame; of course, neither did Glenthorn. He finally accepts, ostensibly for his son's sake, but his predictions of disaster come true; his wife and son and all of his opportunistic friends make short work of the estate, literally destroying it, and burning the heir to death. This is a warning about what happens when an unqualified person is allowed to assume a position of power. Christy has the birthright without any education. It is not enough to be born to something; as McLeod says, education is also necessary. Now that he is a pauper, Glenthorn too must become educated, in order to make his way in the world.

It is now that Glenthorn makes the acquaintance of the Irish nobleman Lord Y, who is to assist him in many important ways. Lord Y, who has both birth and education, is the opposite of the English Craiglethorpe in temperament; the Irishman's politeness is "founded on those general principles of good taste, good sense, and good nature, which must succeed in all times, places, and seasons" (295). In order to succeed, Glenthorn must imitate, following an English model, men like the Irishman Lord Y and the Scot McLeod. Lord Y tells Glenthorn that he should study law and prepare to earn his own living, because Ireland is a place of opportunity: "In our country, you know, the highest offices of the state are open to talents and perseverance; a man of abilities and application cannot fail to secure independence, and obtain distinction" (304); noble birth, though helpful, is really not necessary. Not only will Glenthorn be able to earn a paycheck, but by proving "intellectual energy

and ability" (317), he may also win the hand of Miss Delamere, the heir to the Glenthorn estate. Glenthorn, or O'Donoghoe, now that he is nearly penniless and has to spend long hours in study, finds himself falling in love, an affliction which has not much troubled him in the past. Glenthorn's *ennui* seems to be cured.

In his role as a poor student, the former Earl of Glenthorn discovers that he has friends, some Irish, some not, some rich, some poor. Although many of the high society circle have abandoned him, Lord Y treats him quite well, and arranges to help him with his studies. Christy sends him the books which were left behind at the estate, and Riley, who married Noonan's pretty daughter, brings him a gift of cheese. Riley also confides in Glenthorn that it was his cousin who brought the note warning him of the plot against his life, with no expectation of reward. McLeod too sends some useful gifts to Glenthorn, anonymously. Now that Glenthorn is making his way in the world, people respect him. He is no longer a fool to be taken advantage of.

Toward the end of the novel, the former Earl of Glenthorn tells us that "Glenthorn Castle is now rebuilding" (323), but its future occupant will not be Christy O'Donoghoe; he has abdicated and returned to his blacksmith's forge, where he knows he belongs. Lord Glenthorn himself will return to his estate by virtue of his own industry and a convenient marriage to Miss Delamere. Glenthorn is no longer an absentee landlord or the son of an Irish peasant, but "the exemplary embodiment of a newly empowered professional class of patriarchs, a class of men who rule by law and reason . . . true authority must issue from a superior sense of self-discipline" (Kowaleski-Wallace 165). *Ennui* defends the position of the Anglo-Irish landlord, an Irish Protestant who is both a conqueror and a colonial (Kowaleski-Wallace 145). Edgeworth's support for Union is clear, and it is presented as a natural, evolutionary change for the better, as Colgan says: "[if these landlords] are prepared to be efficient and honest politically and economically, and prepared to drop their anti-Catholic prejudices, they can win the hearts of the people and become

the natural leaders of the nation" (42). The Irish subject is in effect an English child, dependent on the guidance and discipline of the English tutor. Ireland is an appendage or extension of England, like a lost sheep who just needs to be brought back into the fold. Edgeworth is benevolent in her ideas of reform, especially in her wish to eradicate religious persecution, and she sees no reason to doubt that the Irish really will improve their lot by following the English model. Still, the image of the schoolhouse is there, the apparatus of education and reform, and besides reading, writing, and arithmetic, perhaps another lesson is to teach the pig how to appreciate the silver trough. The students are quiet and well-mannered, but like the diplomat Andrews, they are confused about their identity. One is tempted to say, because of Glenthorn's industry and perseverance, that everything has come out right in the end, but we know from history that the Anglo-Irish question is still unsettled.

David WATERMAN ¹

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¹ Université de Poitiers. 50, Boulevard de l'Etang, 17200 Royan (France). Email: david.waterman@wanadoo.fr.